

# 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:

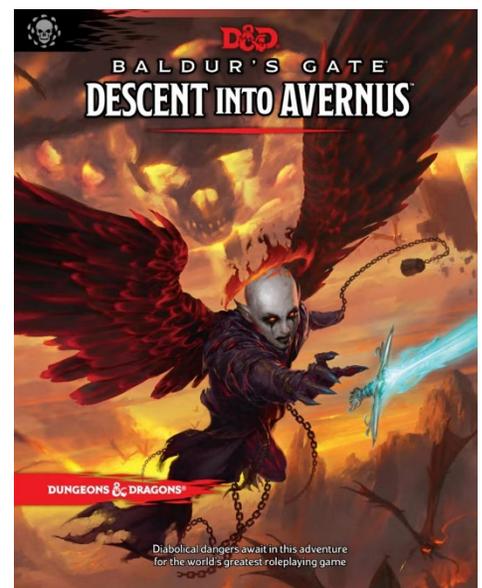
- Expansive remixes, like I did for [Eternal Lies](#), where I'm primarily creating lots of cool new stuff (props, dioramas, new spin-off scenarios) to enhance an already great experience.
- Design remixes, like the one I did for [Keep on the Shadowfell](#), in which I'm primarily focused on fixing the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

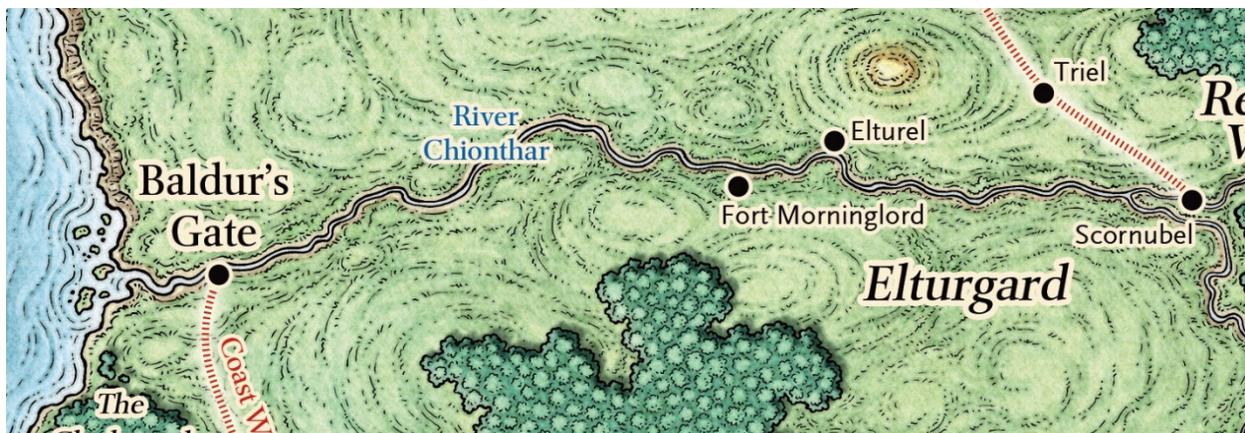
(Designing the scenario hook so that it motivates the PCs in *multiple* ways is also pure gold if you can pull it off. Or, alternatively, simply align multiple hooks to all point in the same direction.)

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 29th, 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 east 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, Belynn 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 Elturel 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 Elturel, 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 Elturel 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 Elturel — 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 Elturian refugees, however, whisper that it is Baldur's Gate itself which is responsible! It's no coincidence that Grand Duke Ravengard was in Elturel 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 god who was slain by Cyric at the site where the fort stands. (See [Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide](#), page 73.)

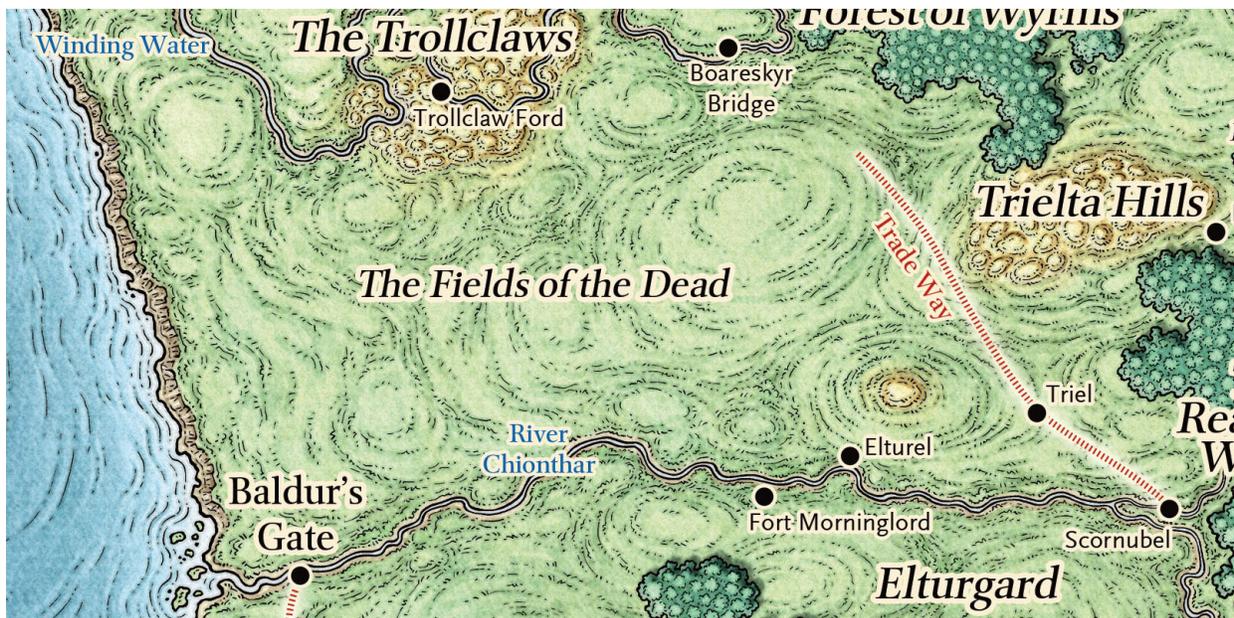
## 11. THE SECOND CITY

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 along 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 to 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 or 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,

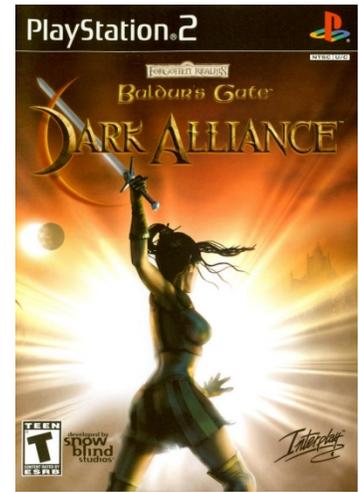
and who is behind a locked door on the second floor of the tavern. (Remember: The PCs have no reason to ever leave the common room of the tavern.)

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.

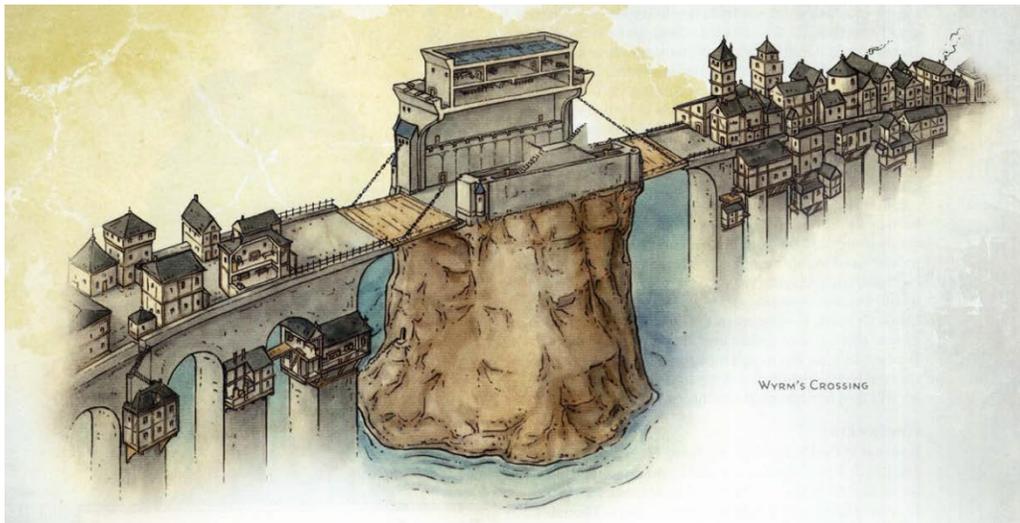
(This leverages Oshalla so that the PCs will actually interact with her. It also reinforces their new role as members of the Flaming Fist.)

# 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 patriar 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.

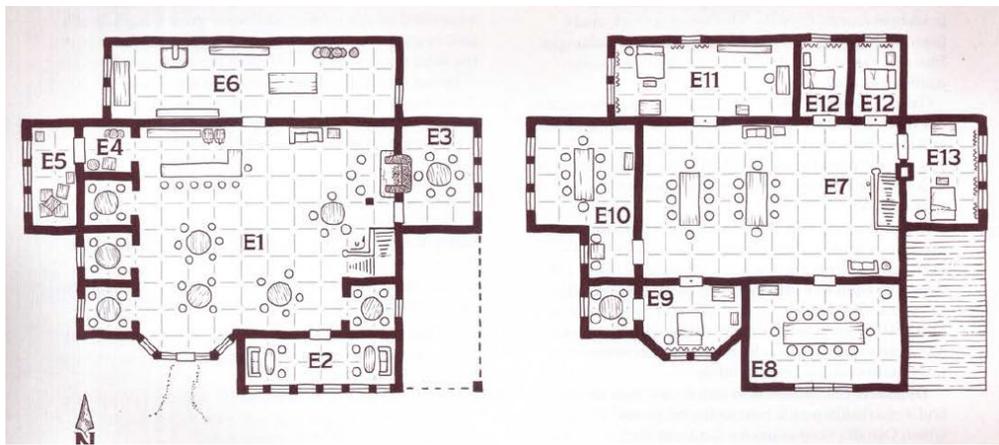
(If, as I've suggested, you've either run the refugee caravan scenario or simply had the players create 2<sup>nd</sup> level characters, then this is completely unnecessary.)

**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 Bel, who was then in charge of the Dock of Fallen Cities (see Part 5; the charge has since passed to Zariel). He cast Gargauth out onto the Material Plane, and Gargauth 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. 143) [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).*

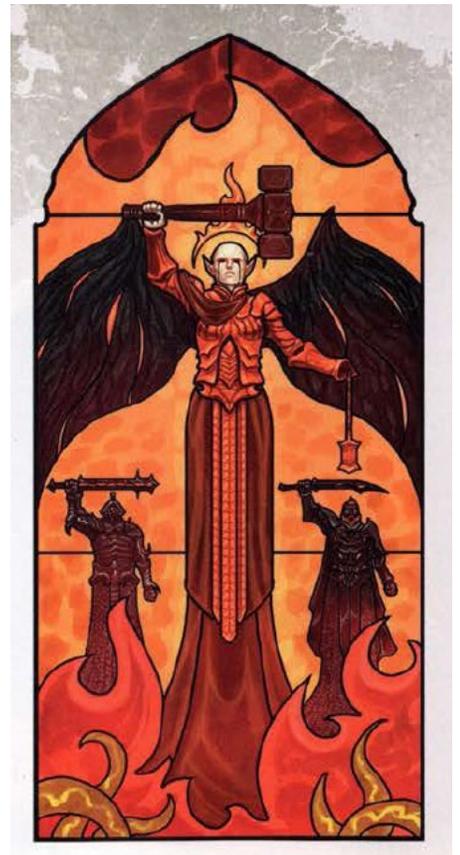
# THE CULT OF ZARIEL

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

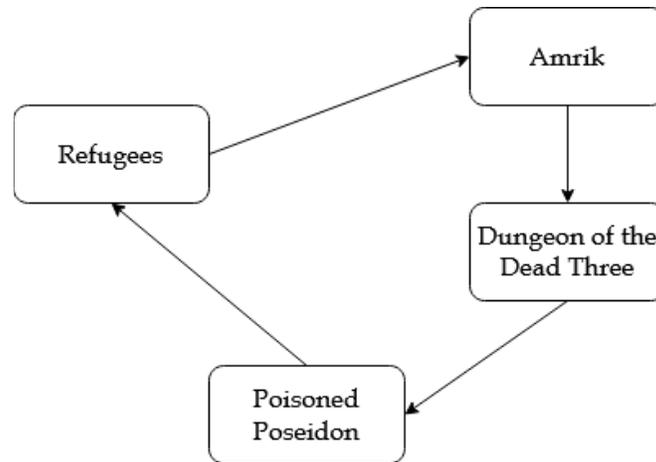
There's a million and one ways to create a thing, but generally the first thing I do when designing an adventure or campaign is to simply brainstorm ideas. (I describe a quick version of this in [5 Node Mystery](#).) We're remixing the raw material from *Descent Into Avernus* here, so we can largely 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 Mortuarium (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 Propheies 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 alchymical 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 alchymical 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, Eduarda 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 Eduarda, 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 18<sup>th</sup>, 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):

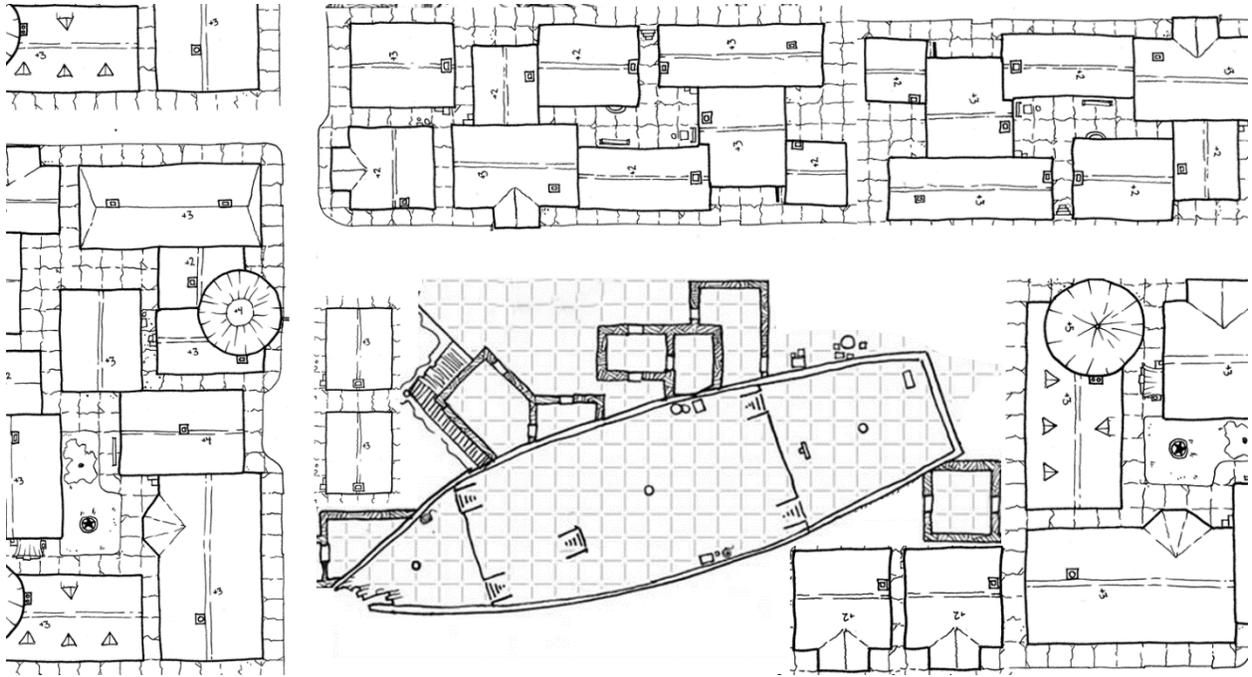


You can buy the high-resolution [isometric map](#) and [top-down map](#) from Mike Schley's web store. The image above is a relatively tiny section of the isometric view, but I've maintained the same resolution so if you buy the map you should be able to add it seamlessly using any image manipulation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

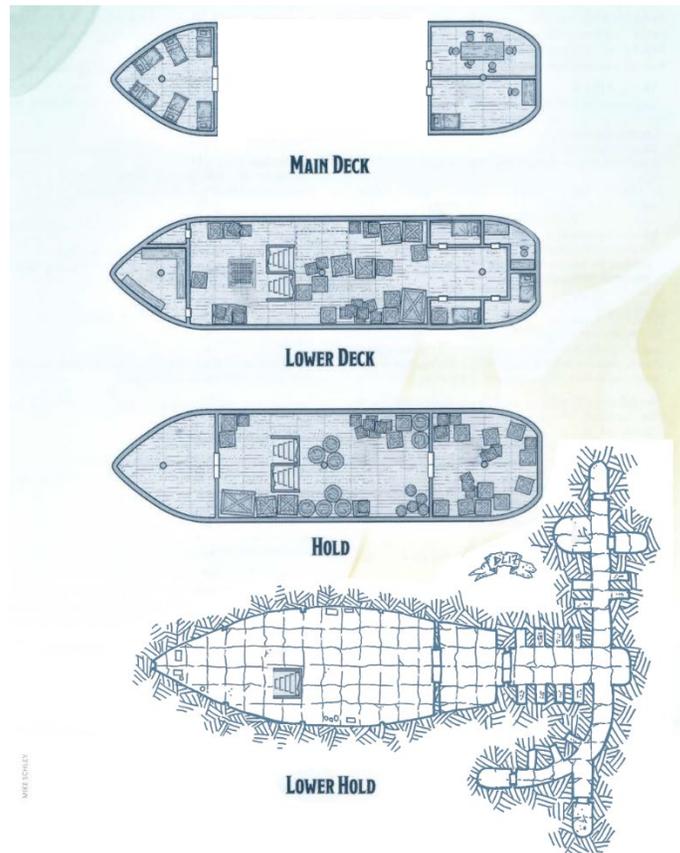
**REFUGEES ON THE DOCKS:** One of the reasons for using the *Poisoned Poseidon* and placing it on the Docks, is to provide an opportunity to the Elturian refugee crisis from a different angle. The docks just to the east are crowded with refugees trying to find passage on already overbooked ships. Where 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*

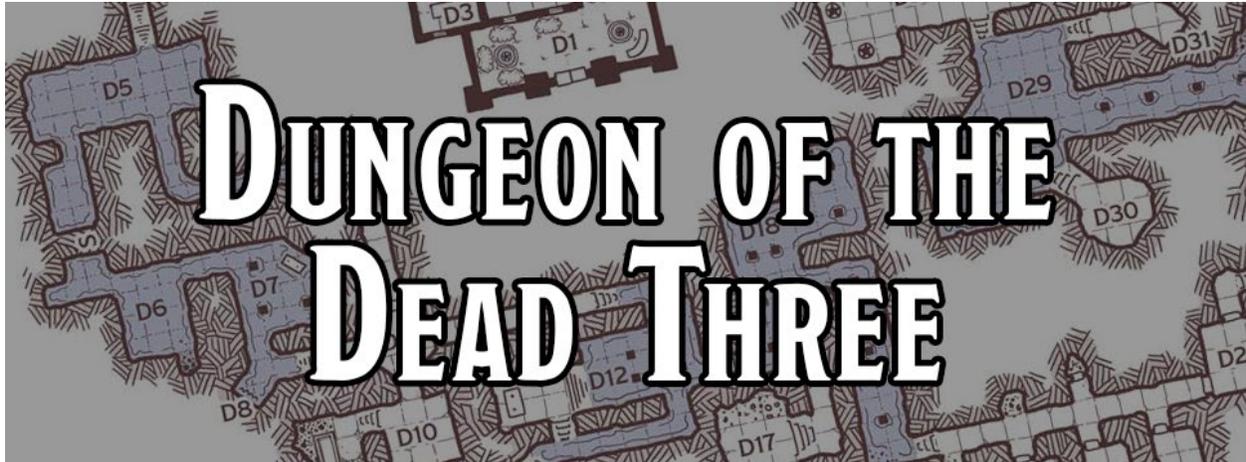
*She lives near the Frolicking Nymph. An abduction squad or observers could be sent from the bathhouse if it would be easier.*

**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:

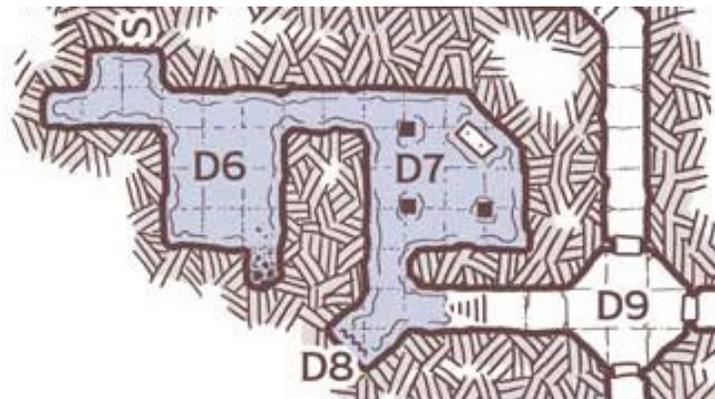
- He sends an imp to barter with the PCs. (He'd probably like them to kill one or both of his brothers. If he's feeling daring, or if the PCs have already succeeded at eliminating his brothers, he might even ask them to kill his mother so that he can take her place at the head of the family. If the PCs 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

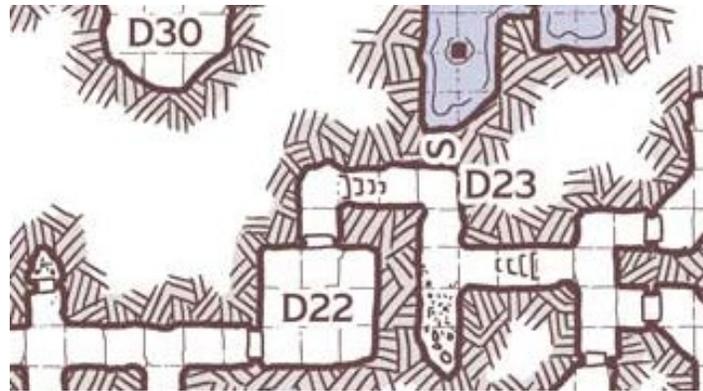
There are several text-to-map mismatches in the dungeon, but the most significant are those related to the flooding in the dungeon.

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



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

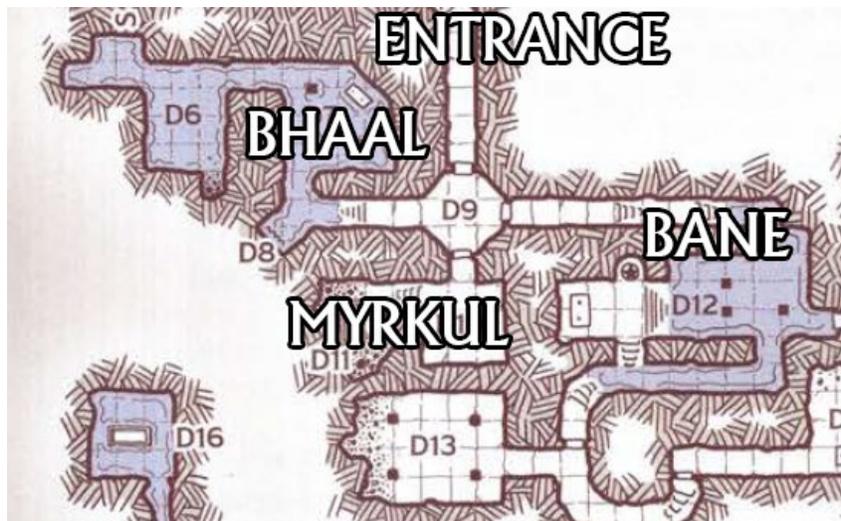
The design of the dungeon actually does a good job of having the flooded portions of the dungeon consistently lower than the rest of the dungeon. Which is why the failure to color in Area D23 (which is correctly described as flooded in the text) is also an error:



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

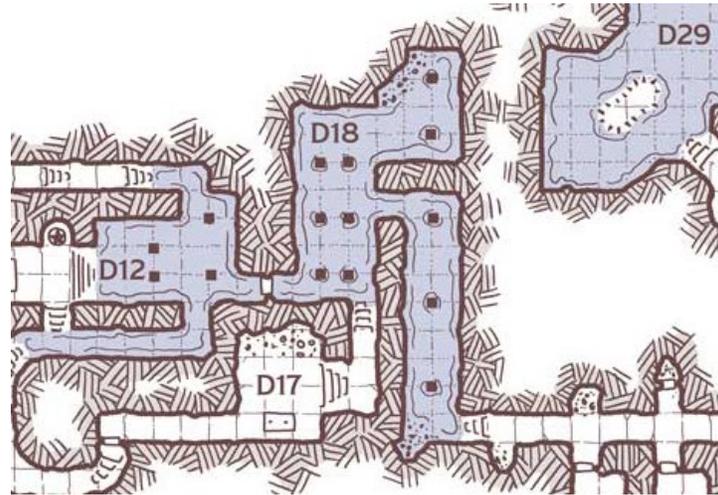
Am I crazy or should the door to the north actually be to the west so that all of the themed doors match the themed content behind them?

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)

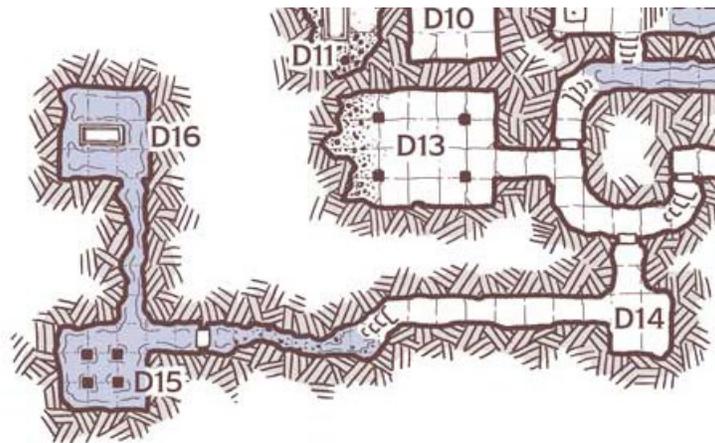
In researching safety lamps I discovered that the word *dampf*, in German, means "vapour." In England, the term became used to describe a variety of gases encountered during mining:

- **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).

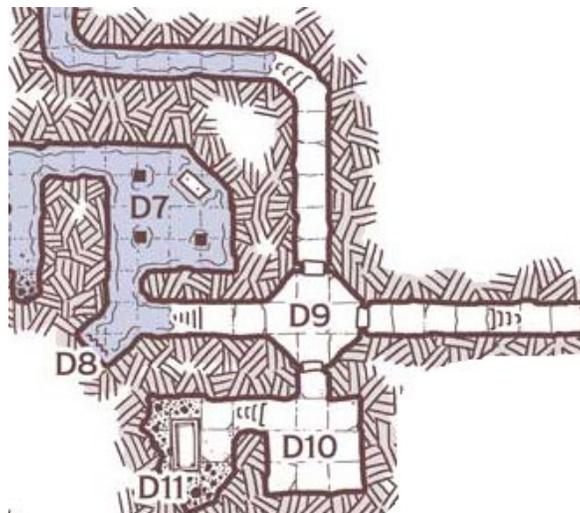
With that being said, to make a dungeon like the Dungeon of the Dead Three really come alive, you need to break the preconception (that's been subconsciously ground into you by dozens, hundreds, or thousands of encounters from published scenarios) that fights "belong" to a particular keyed room.

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.

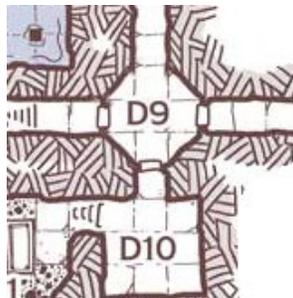
## D7. BHAAL'S ALTAR

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

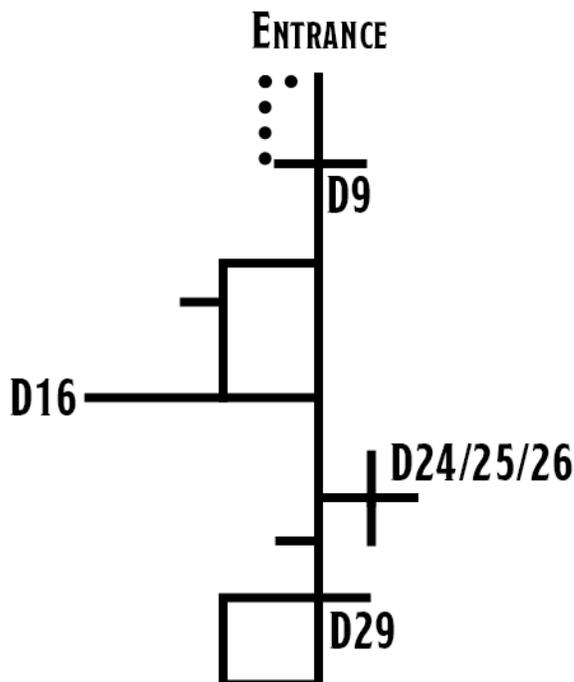
by [Justin Alexander](#) – April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2020

“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 allows 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.

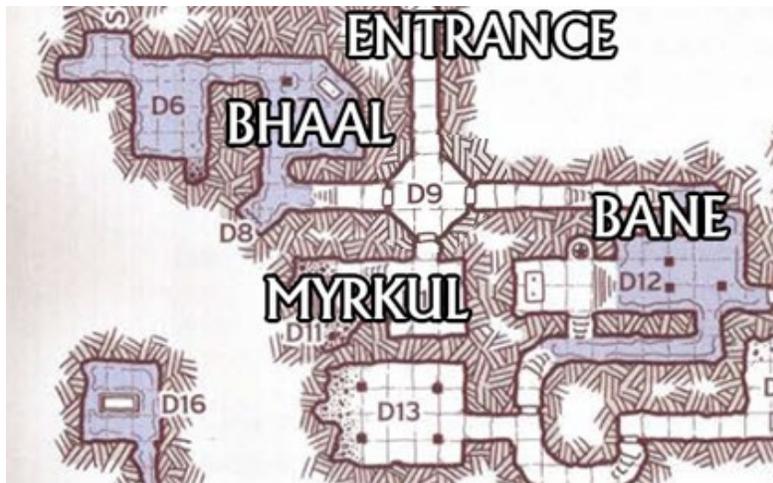
(Even moreso than other installments, this one will probably benefit from directly cross-referencing the module. The map for the Dungeon of the Dead Three is located on p. 21 of *Descent Into Avernus*.)

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).

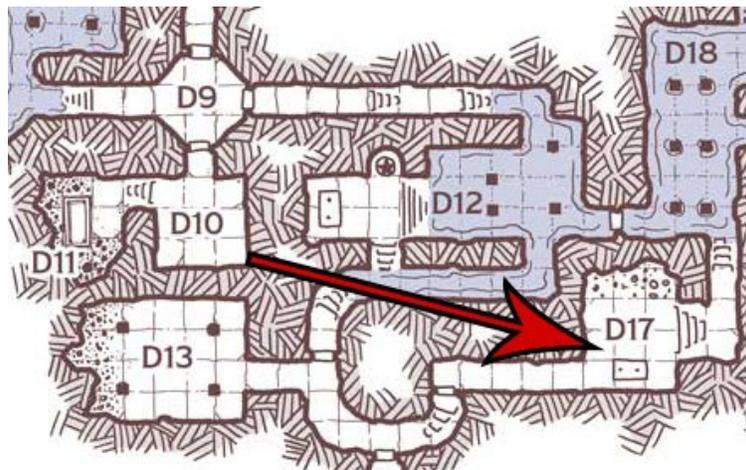
But as I was reading *Descent Into Avernus*, I couldn't shake the feeling that the Dungeon of the Dead Three was calling out to be jaquayed.

## 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:

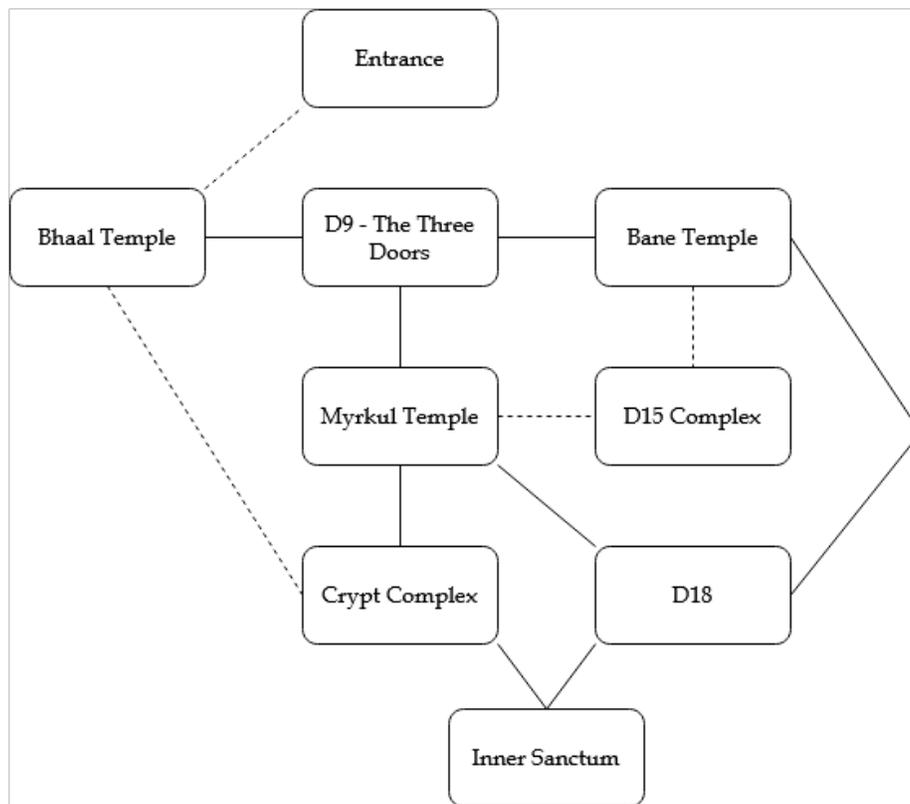
- The temple complexes could all connect to Area D18, and then the crypt complex and inner sanctum could branch off from there.
- The temple complexes could all independently connect to the crypt complex (temples connected to shared living quarters makes sense), and then the inner sanctum lies beyond 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.

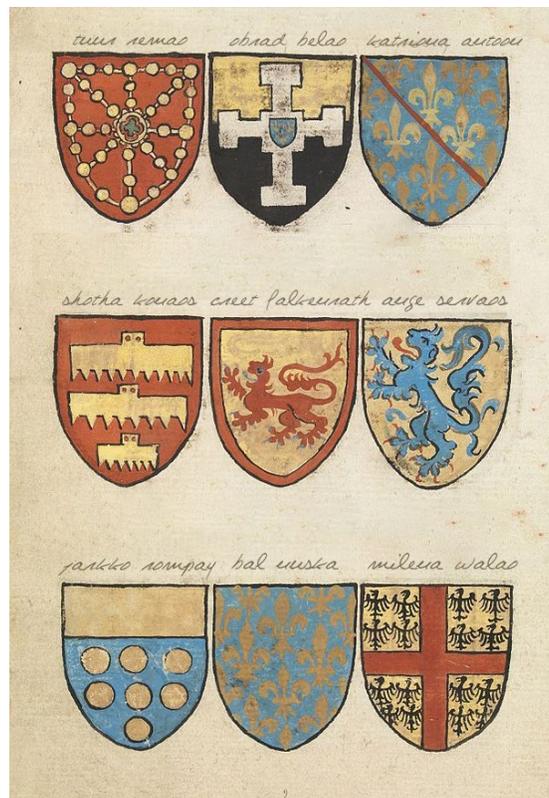
## AMRIK'S PAPERWORK

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.*

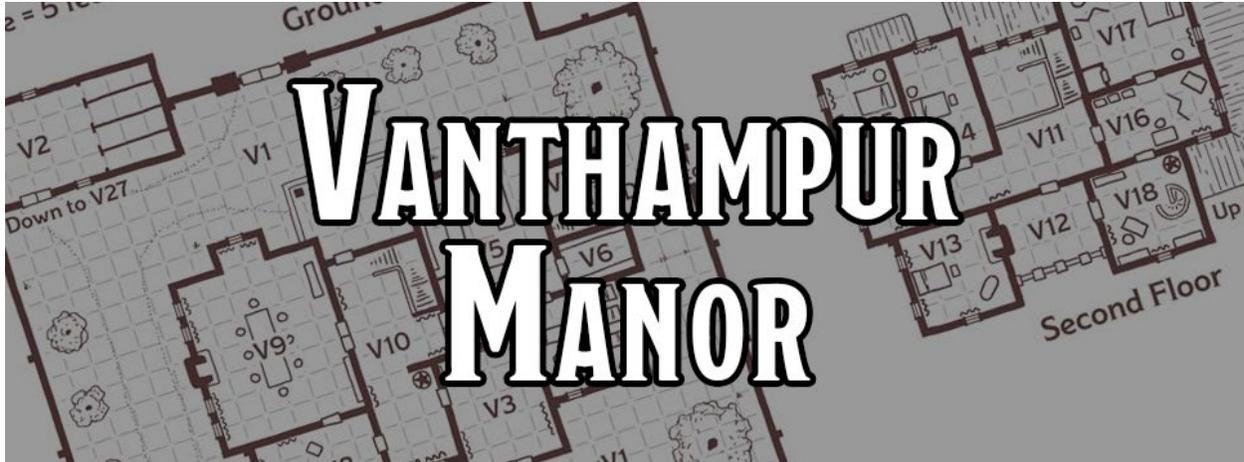
*There will be no need for you to send any of your agents to the bathhouse. Not only do I have things well in hand here, but you know as well as I do that mother had good reasons for keeping your operations separate from those of our allies.*

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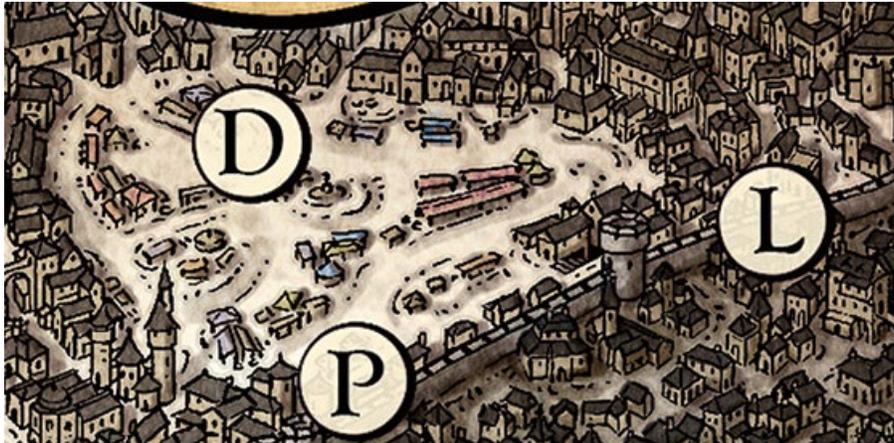
by [Justin Alexander](#) – May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2020

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 slippery 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.*

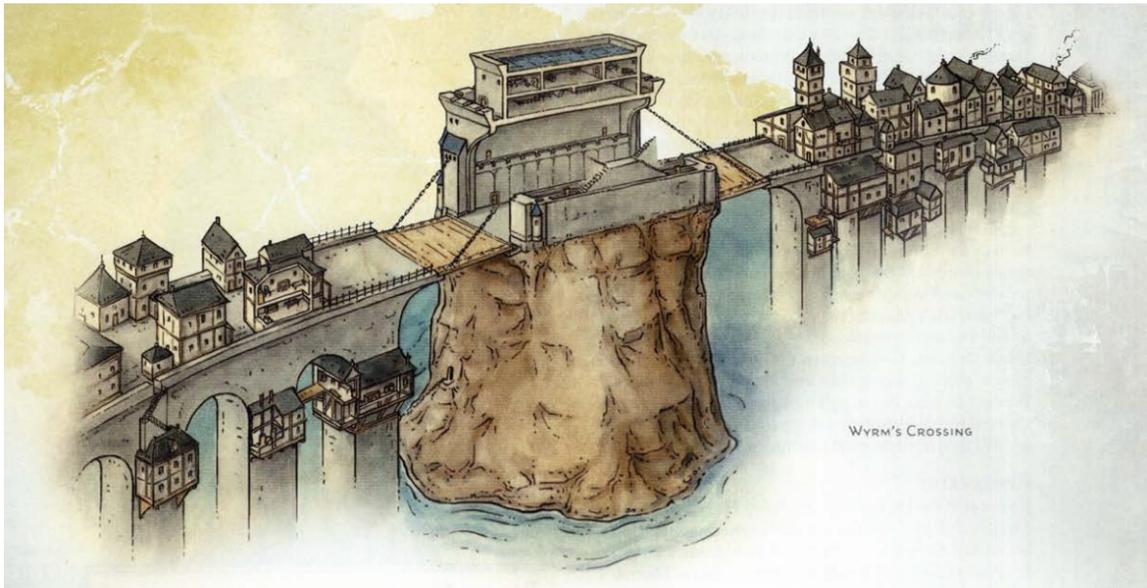
(Tangentially: If you want to randomly pick one of the PCs, [just roll a die on your side of the screen](#). Asking the whole table to roll d20s, then collecting and comparing that data is a terrible technique. You're wasting your players' time with busy work.)

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).

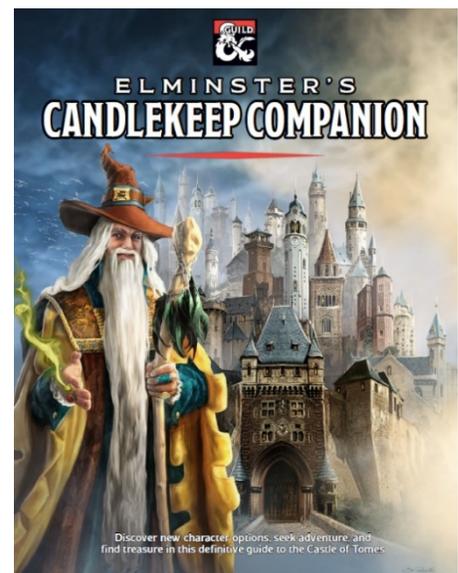
## ARRIVING AT CANDLEKEEP

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 high 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 Resolute 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, having 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 singing 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

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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 consist 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.)

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 (just "High Observer"). 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 the 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 as 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.



THE CREST  
OF ELTURGARD

- 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 city 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.

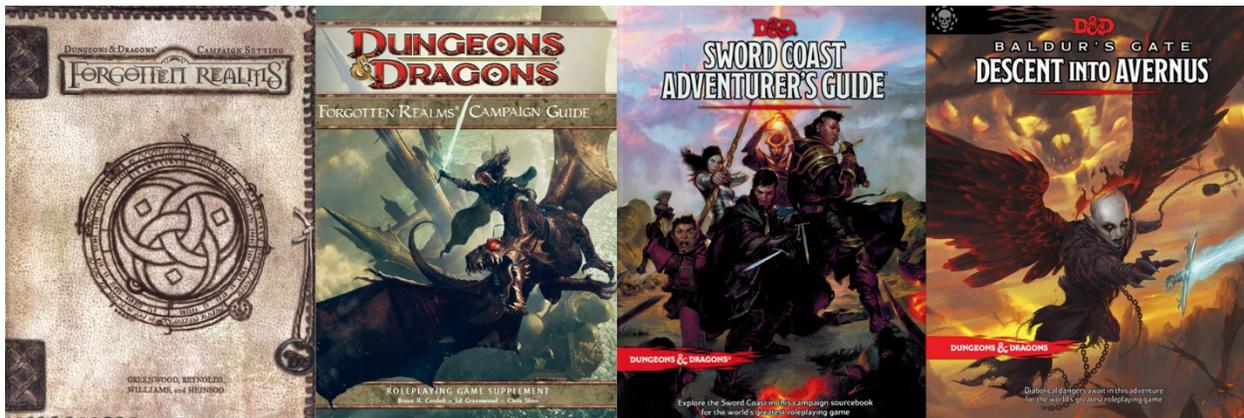
*Note: None of this, of course, makes any goddamn sense.*

**THE COMPANION:**

- Is actually a Solar Insidiator, 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 in 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. They 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 these 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), others 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 were 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 just interested in 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 where 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.

# PART 5B: STREETCRAWL IN ELTUREL

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

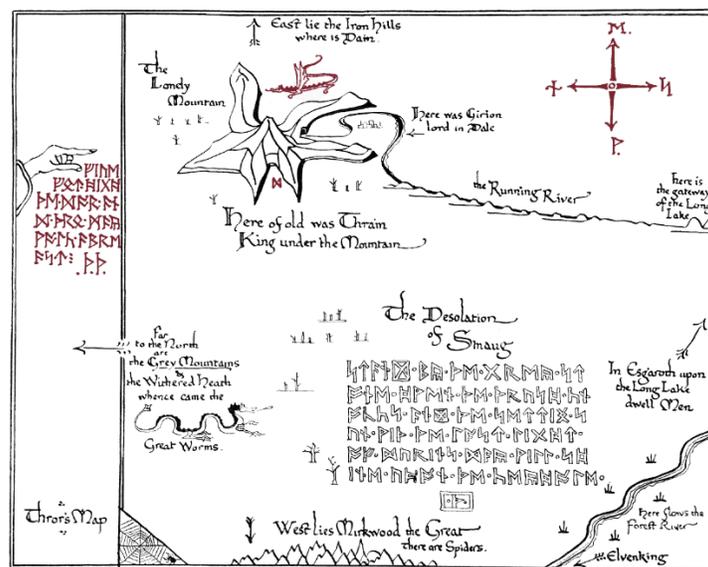


The PCs are plane shifting into Elturel blind: They know the city has been sent to Hell, but they have no way of really knowing what the situation on the ground is (so to speak).

Let's talk about the use of maps in RPGs. Actually, that's too broad a topic. Let's talk about the use of city maps in RPGs. Broadly speaking, there are two scenarios: First, you have **diegetic maps**. Like the map of pre-Fall Elturel that I mentioned the PCs might want to grab in [Part 4C](#), diegetic maps are those actually possessed by the characters. They can be:

- Not represented in the real world. (The map is something your character possesses and references, presumably to some effect, but you, as the player, cannot see it.)
- Given as a prop in the real world which attempts to accurately represent exactly what the map would look like to your character.
- Given as a prop in the real world which is analogous to what your character would see, but not the same thing they're actually looking at.

In practice, this is more of a spectrum than distinct categories. For example, even Thrór's Map from [The Hobbit](#) ultimately makes concessions to the reader by being an English "translation" of the diegetic map:



Second, there are **non-diegetic maps**. These are maps which the players can see, but not their characters. For example, when I was running *Dragon Heist* I put a huge map of Waterdeep up on the wall. This didn't represent a map that the characters were carrying around with them; it was a reference that existed purely in the physical game space (along with a Harptos calendar and a map of Faerûn).

Non-diegetic maps may represent character knowledge (i.e., the map they have in their head). But they can also simply be a concession for easy reference. In much the same manner that handing the players a picture of an NPC can be the quickest way to distinguish them (even though their characters don't have a pocket portrait of them in hand), so, too, have I found that the most efficient way to conjure up a cross-town trek in the minds of the players is to simply point the laser pointer at the poster map on the wall and trace the route with brief descriptions.

Which, finally, brings us to the poster map of Hellturel included in *Descent Into Avernus*. When should you give this map to the players?

## ARRIVING IN ELTUREL

First, a brief digression. By and large, we are not going to be changing the initial beats of what happens in Elturel:

- The PCs arrive.
- They get a first impression of the city.
- The person who brought them to Avernus (probably Traxigor) panics and abandons them.
- A woman with two toddlers comes running around the corner, pursued by a couple of bearded devils.

But we are going to finesse them a bit.

Let's start with this chunk of boxed text from the book:

A hot, stinging air assaults your senses. The city street in which you stand is lined with buildings that are crumbling, if not already collapsed. The ground shudders beneath your feet. In the red, smoky sky, a 400-foot-diameter sphere of darkness discharges strokes of bluish-white lightning that strike the city at irregular intervals. Perched atop a distant bluff, overlooking the rest of the city, is a crumbled fortress.

Traxigor gazes up at the black orb nervously, utters a few arcane syllables, and disappears in the blink of an eye.

When looking at a BIG MOMENT like this, it can be tempting as a GM to just pile the whole thing up on the players. That can work, but I've found that it's often more effective to break the BIG MOMENT into its distinct parts — each major detail, each revelation, each meaningful moment — and then space them out (even if only a little).

This is partly about pacing, but it's also about slowly building up a mental image for the players over time. By layering in additional details sequentially over time, in my experience, it's easier for the players to really immerse into the environment. You get more buy-in.

I've been doing this long enough that I kind of do this instinctively. But in breaking down the arrival in Elturel, I identified these moments:

- Arriving in the street. Hot air. Crumbling buildings. The sky of Hell and the transformed Companion above you.
- Traxigor is nervous.
- Spotting the High Hall on a distant bluff.
- Huge clouds of smoke to the east; the city is on fire.
- DEVILS!
- Traxigor panics and flees.
- The first earthquake.
- WE ARE FLOATING IN THE GODDAMN AIR!

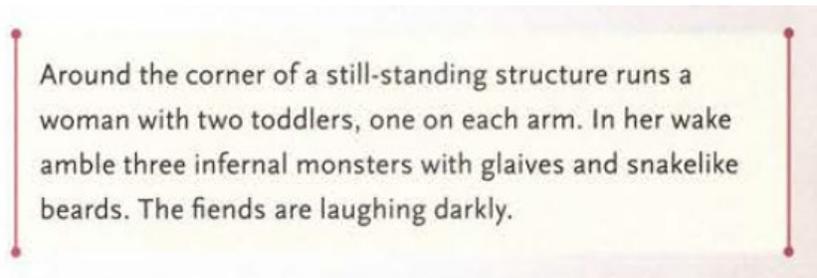
(That last beat probably happens much later. We'll come back to it.)

Note that there's nothing sacred about this sequence. For example, you could easily rearrange and remix the middle beats:

- Spotting the High Hall on a distant bluff.
- DISTANT EXPLOSION! to the east. There's huge clouds of smoke. The city is on fire. Traxigor panics and flees.
- DEVILS!

And in actual play the players could easily shift these things around. For example, if they immediately look up into the sky and try to get their bearings you can immediately mention them seeing the High Hall and the huge clouds of smoke to the east before mentioning Traxigor getting nervous or triggering the distant explosion. The basic idea, in fact, is to give the players at least a couple of beats to react to what's happening.

This might be even clearer if we look at the next block of boxed text (which actually happens in the middle of this sequence):



Around the corner of a still-standing structure runs a woman with two toddlers, one on each arm. In her wake amble three infernal monsters with glaives and snakelike beards. The fiends are laughing darkly.

Although all glommed up as one moment here, imagine it lightly restructured as:

- You hear a scream from around the corner.
- [Players have a chance to quickly declare one thing they do in response.]
- A woman with two toddlers runs around the corner.
- [Players have another chance to quickly declare their response to this. Maybe the woman can shout out something to them in response.]
- Devils come around the corner.
- [Ask the players to roll for initiative.]
- Traxigor panics and flees.

I think you can see how this draws the players into the scene: By the time the devils actually show up, they're already involved and invested in the actions that are playing out.

Here's the key thing: When the PCs arrive in Elturel they are confused, disoriented, and need to get their bearings. Traxigor abandoning them should escalate that feeling, isolating and trapping them. They should feel simultaneously claustrophobic and overwhelmed by the vast unknown which surrounds them.

The take-away here is that simply whipping out the Hellturel map as soon as they arrive would cause most or all of these distinct moments to collapse into each other, simultaneously undercutting the emotional tension of the situation.

## GETTING THEIR BEARINGS

So when should they get the Hellturel map?

First, this is obviously a non-diegetic map. (Nobody is doing cartographical surveys in the middle of the apocalypse.) Second, we've framed the PCs into a situation where they're effectively lost and need to get their bearings. So the real question is: What is the meaning of the map? And the meaning of the map is that the PCs have gotten their bearings.

So when the PCs have gotten their bearings, you should give the players the map.

How can they do that? Well, I can think of a few options (and your players might come up with something else):

- They could seek out a tall building and climb to its top, allowing them to look out over the city.
- They could use magic to similar effect (a *clairvoyance* spell, for example).
- They could question NPCs in Elturel. (The initial woman they run into is clueless about the wider state of the city, but others might be well-informed enough to give them a briefing on the current situation.)
- They could use their diegetic map of Elturel (if they have one) to attempt to figure out where they are in the city.

What constitutes enough knowledge for them to be considered to have gotten their bearings? Well, it probably depends on their approach. On the one hand, we want to look at the type of information the map is giving them: Have they gotten that information in-character? On the other hand, while the map does contain information on every single block in the city, it's overkill to withhold the map until they've somehow gained that block-by-block knowledge.

What I would do is look at the key revelation: Remember how "WE ARE FLOATING IN THE GODDAMNED AIR!" was the final moment we identified above? Well, the map is going to reveal that. So we want to make sure that the characters have experienced that moment before revealing the map. (And that could happen by them climbing a building and seeing out over the edge of the city, being told the situation by an NPC, etc.) That moment might be simultaneous with them getting their bearings, or it might happen before they get their bearings (so they don't get the map until later) depending on how it plays out.

## STREETCRAWLING

We're going to use a [game structure](#) called streetcrawling. You rarely want to track movement in an urban environment street by street (see [The Art of Pacing](#)), but there are occasions where the city is perilous, confusing, difficult, and/or treacherous enough that the PCs have to crawl through the streets (in much the same way that they might crawl through a dungeon or explore a hexcrawl). Lost in a post-apocalyptic city trapped in Hell definitely counts.

**STEP 1 - SET GOAL:** Establish the goal the PCs are trying to reach. This goal can be either specific (e.g., Helm's Shieldhall) or generic (e.g., 'someone who knows what's going on' or 'a source of clean water').

**STEP 2 - GENERATE STREETS:** Use the Street Generator (below) to determine the local street layout and the relationship between where the PCs are and where their goal is located.

**STEP 3 - ORIENT:** The PCs need to figure out how to go to where their goal is located. Options include:

- Their goal can be spotted from a distance. (For example, if they look around for a high tower to climb, they'll probably be able to spot one.)
- They can ask the locals for directions.
- They can attempt an appropriate skill check to make an educated guess.
- They could use magic (like a *locate object* spell).
- They know the city (or have a map) and they know where their goal is.

If they can't figure out how to go to their goal, then their first goal is actually going some place where they CAN figure that out. Or they're randomly wandering (see below) and just hoping to stumble across something that will point them in the right direction.

**STEP 4 - RANDOM ENCOUNTER:** Check for a random encounter (see below).

**STEP 5 - ARRIVAL:** The PCs arrive at their goal.

If their goal was figuring out a way to get their bearings, then this will likely conclude the streetcrawling and transition to pointcrawling (see *Part 5C: Pointcrawl in Elturel*).

*Design Note: What if the players don't make orienting themselves a priority? What if they want to achieve some other goal? That's fine. Use the streetcrawl structure to resolve whatever goal or goals they set for themselves.*

*In the process of pursuing other goals, they may unintentionally get their bearings. (For example, one of them might fly up into the air for some completely unrelated reason and see the city spread out below them.) That's great. An equally likely outcome is that they'll get frustrated trying to navigate the city when they really don't know where they're going and eventually figure out that they need to do something to get their bearings.*

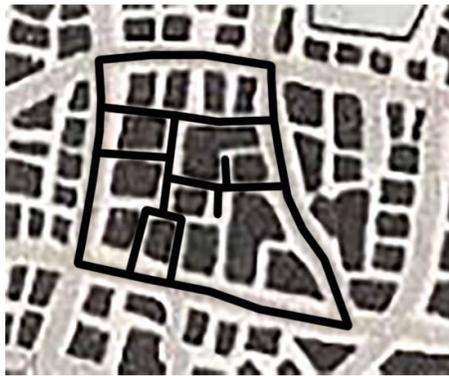
## STREET GENERATOR

If you have a highly detailed map of your city, you can just grab a chunk of the streets depicted on the map and use those for your crawl. If you don't have a map of the city or if that map is not particularly detailed, however, you can use this simple system to generate local street maps. (For a lengthier discussion of this, check out [Random GM Tip: Visualizing City Block Maps](#).)

In the case of Elturel, the maps we have for the city arguably straddle the line between these two types of depiction. For example, look at this chunk of map:

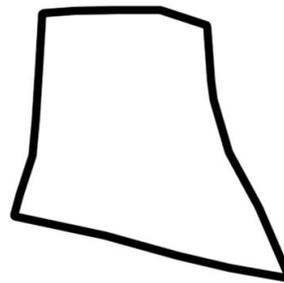


You might look at that and clearly see streets, like this:



If you do, great. You can just sketch those local streets out on a sheet of paper and use that for your crawl.

For the sake of argument, however, I'm going to instead focus on the shape of the major streets which define the borders of this particular locality and sketch that onto a sheet of paper:



If you don't have a city map at all to base these outlines on, you can either arbitrarily sketch the major streets bordering the area or just treat the edges of the current sheet of paper as the locality's edge.

**ROLLING THE DICE:** This is a tablemat system, so you are now going to take a handful of **street dice** and **location dice** and roll them directly onto the sheet of paper. The locations where these dice land on the paper are as important (or more important) than the numbers they roll. If a die rolls off the paper, you can either re-roll it or ignore it.

*Tip: You generally want to have the dice spread out across the available space, not clustered together.*

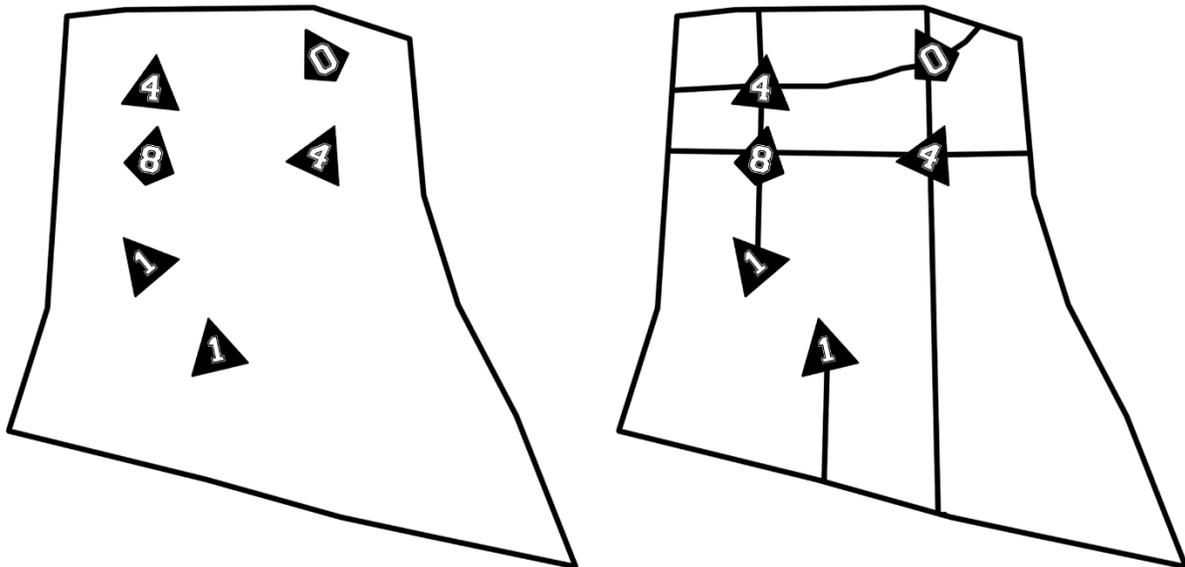
**STREET DICE:** Take an arbitrary number of d4's to be street dice. The larger the number of street dice, the larger the number of streets and the more convoluted the street plan you'll generate. I've generally found that rolling 4d4 produces a good result.

The location where each die lands is an **intersection** and the number of streets attached to that intersection is equal to the number rolled on the die.

**LOCATION DICE:** Location dice are d10's. You roll a number of location dice equal to the number of locations where the PCs' goal can be achieved in the current locality. If this is the beginning of the streetcrawl, add an additional location die (and the lowest die rolled will be the PCs' starting location).

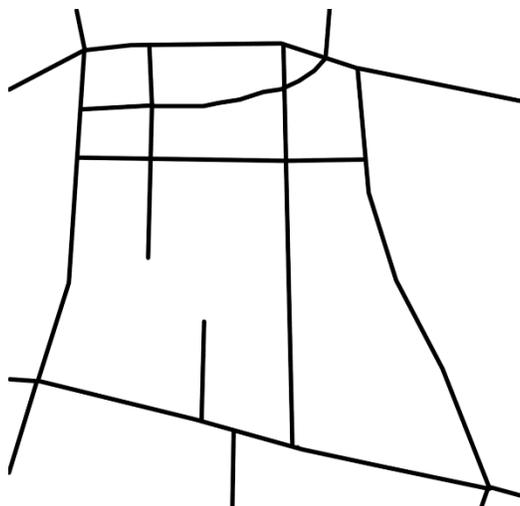
*Tip: Streets can curve. Adding a curve when one is necessary for a street to intersect with a location die is a good prompt for adding a little variety to your street map.*

For example, using the block outline from above to start our streetcrawl, we're going to roll four street dice and two location dice (one for a goal location and one for the PCs' starting location):



That's not the only set of streets that could have been generated from that particular die roll. There is no "right answer." The point is to be able to very quickly generate local street maps during the session by tossing some dice on the table and sketching out a few lines.

Here's what the final locality map looks like with the dice swept aside (and surrounding streets added for context):



## RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

If you're familiar with using random encounters in dungeons, you'll want to make a mental adjustment for streetcrawls for several reasons:

- Cities are usually filled with a lot more activity and encounters should be more common.
- Navigational choices in the city are usually trivial or random, which makes them less inherently interesting.
- There are no rooms keyed with interesting content in a streetcrawl; the encounters need to carry more of the weight.

For example, in an old school dungeon a random encounter often happens 1 in 6 times per check. In a streetcrawl, you might want to have encounters 1 in 4, 1 in 2, or even 2 in 3 times.

*Tip: For a short, simple streetcrawl like the one we're most likely using for the PCs' arrival in Elturel, I'd recommend just automatically slotting in an encounter. You might actually want to take the initial "woman running from devils" encounter (DEVILS!) and use it as the encounter for their initial streetcrawling move.*

**ELTUREL RANDOM ENCOUNTERS:** I'm going to discuss the random encounters we'll be using for Elturel in more detail in Part 5C.

## DISTANT GOALS

If the goal the PCs are trying to reach is not local, then the immediate goal is actually 'move one chunk of city closer to the goal.' When generating streets, only roll one location die to determine the PCs' starting location. Their immediate goal can obviously be achieved by reaching the appropriate edge of the current crawl map. (You'll want to determine the number of chunks necessary to reach the locality of their goal.)

*Note: When dealing with distant goals it will often be more appropriate to exit the streetcrawling structure while the PCs travel to the general vicinity of their goal and then resume crawling. (Imagine the PCs in a city they're familiar with. If they're in Oldtown and know that Old Tom is hiding somewhere down by the Docks, they don't need to crawl their way across the whole city: They can just go to the Docks and then start crawling to find Old Tom.) In the case of Elturel, the point where this would become appropriate is likely also the point where we'll be switching to a pointcrawl structure (see Part 5C). But it is possible for the PCs to*

*strike out before getting their bearings (for example, they might head straight towards the High Hall after spotting it towering above the city).*

## CRAWLING WITHOUT A GOAL

If the PCs don't have a goal:

**STEP 1:** Use the street generator to determine the local street layout, rolling a location die only to determine the PCs' starting location.

**STEP 2:** The PCs choose a direction to walk. (Presumably at random.)

**STEP 3:** Check for a random encounter on each street they walk down.

If they reach the edge of the local map, use the street generator again to extend the map and continue crawling.

Generally speaking, this style of play should not persist for long. Context should prompt the PCs to begin setting goals. (Even if they're just "wandering around looking for something to do," the random encounters or street descriptions should eventually give them something to do or become interested in pursuing.)

## RANDOM WANDERING

If the PCs are hoping to find something but have no idea where it might be or how they might get there, they are randomly wandering. Follow the same procedure as crawling without a goal, but roll location dice normally to determine the location(s) of what they're looking for.

At any time, of course, they may be able to figure out how to orient themselves (running into an NPC they can ask for directions, etc.), at which point they'll no longer be randomly wandering.

*Note: Wandering randomly is generally a terrible way of finding a specific location. (Since you can easily go in completely the wrong direction and never find it.) It works better if they're looking for a generic type of thing, since even if they miss one such thing they can stumble across another. (For example, there are any number of hardware stores you could hit up for supplies during a zombie apocalypse.)*

**WANDERING THE CITY:** Some goals can be found almost anywhere you look in a city (e.g., someone to talk to). Other goals might be rare or found in only certain locations of the city. As the GM you can arbitrarily decide this based on your understanding and knowledge of the city (there's one local alchemist nearby; the alchemists are over in the Dewberry neighborhood and they'll have to crawl there; etc.). Alternatively, you can make a ruling for how likely they are to find the thing they're looking for in a particular chunk of city and then roll to randomly determine if there's one local to them. Examples include:

- 1 in 100 chance (for perhaps a specific location that they know is somewhere in the city, but have no idea where or if they're even close to it).
- 1 in 6 chance (for something that is known to be "around here somewhere"; or that's relatively rare in the city)
- 1 in 4 chance (for something that's fairly common in the city, like a public fountain)
- 1d4-1 per locality (for something that can be found almost anywhere in the city, like bodegas in Manhattan)

And so forth.

# CONCLUSION

I've dropped an entirely new scenario structure on you. That may be a lot to process, so let's take a step back and do a quick recap on how this is likely to work out in play:

- The PCs show up in Elturel.
- They look around for a high place to get their bearings from.
- You generate a local street map.
- As they walk from their current location to the location of the tower they've spotted, you trigger the "woman running from devils" encounter (contextualizing the encounter based on the street map you've generated).
- After that (likely a fight) scene, they continue on their way, reach the tower, climb the tower, look around (WE ARE FLOATING IN THE GODDAMN AIR!), receive the poster map, and transition to pointcrawling (see Part 5C).

That's it.

So what's the deal with the whole streetcrawling structure? Isn't it overkill? Couldn't we just prep a locality street map of the area where the PCs appear with the location of the tower indicated? Possibly. But the reason we want the structure is because this might NOT be the way it goes in play: Players are fickle and unpredictable generators of random chaos. As we've already discussed, they might go in any number of unexpected directions.

This structure can easily generate the likely outcome described above, but it can just as easily handle anything that the players choose to throw your way.

Without this kind of structure (either formal or informal), your only option would be to have a GMPC tell the PCs what to do. (And then get frustrated when they don't.)

# ADDENDUM: STREETCRAWLING TOOLS

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



These tools are designed to augment the streetcrawling scenario structure used in [Part 5B](#) of the Remix. Most of them are procedural content generators that will help you fill in details of the city as the PCs crawl through it.

## RANDOM BUSINESSES

The *Random Businesses* table is not designed to generate every single building in the city. Instead, roll on the table once per street and use the result to contextualize the street as the PCs move down it (e.g., “You turn right at the corner. On the next street you see the remains of a goldsmith’s shop on the right. A fire has gutted it.”). You might interpret the result as a single notable business, or as characterizing the type of business done on the street (e.g., a street with several blacksmiths).

Make sure to record the results on your map, in case the PCs double back.

The table found here is a fairly crude tool. It most notably excludes businesses likely to be found in specific areas of the city (like the Docks) that the PCs aren’t starting out in. (You won’t find chandlers or fishermen here.) You could also improve it by:

- Expanding the table to include more types of businesses.
- Customizing the results by neighborhood.
- Adjusting the results to more accurately model the likelihood of encountering different types of businesses.
- Perhaps biasing the results of your next roll by the previous roll. (So that, for example, the tanneries are less likely to be crowded in right next to the perfumers.)

I recommend checking out Midkemia Press' [Cities](#) or Chaosium's [Thieves' World](#) as premiere resources if you want more sophisticated tables while having someone else do the work for you.

d%	Business
01-20	No Businesses
21-25	Baker
26-30	Tavern/Inn
31-35	Butcher
36-40	Market
41-43	Blacksmith
44-46	Cartwright
47-49	Public Bath
50-52	Weaver
53-55	Cobbler
56-58	Dyer
59-61	Fishmonger
62-64	Potter
65-67	Rope/Net-Maker
68-70	Stable
71-72	Stonecutter
73-74	Miller
75-76	Chiurgeon
77-78	Bowyer/Fletcher
79-80	Tannery
81-82	Scribe/Notary
83-84	Carpenter
85-86	Glassblower
87-88	Tinker
89	Scholarium
90	Alchemist
91	Theater
92	Painter/Sculptor
93	Goldsmith/Silversmith
94	Jeweler
95	Spice Merchant
96	Cartographer
97	Perfumer
98	Religious Chapel
99	Distiller
00	Moneylender

**No Businesses:** This usually means a purely residential street. It could also mean a green space of some kind.

*Alternative: For a busier and more cosmopolitan feel, continue rolling on the table until you generate a "No Businesses" result.*

**BUILDING DAMAGE:** Roll on the *Building Damage* table to determine the condition of a building. You can roll on a table whenever the PCs enter or inspect a particular building. You should also roll on the table when generating a street.

d8	Building Damage
1-4	No Damage
5-6	Fire
7	Looted
8	Boarded Up / Fortified

When generating a street, you can additionally roll a d6 to determine if the damage generated on the *Building Damage* table applies to the specific business you generated, a separate building on the street, or if the entire street has been effected. (If the original building generation roll resulted in a residential street with no businesses, then any result of 1-5 means that a specific residence has been damaged.)

d6	Extent of Damage
1-3	Specific Business
4-5	A residence on the street
6	The entire street

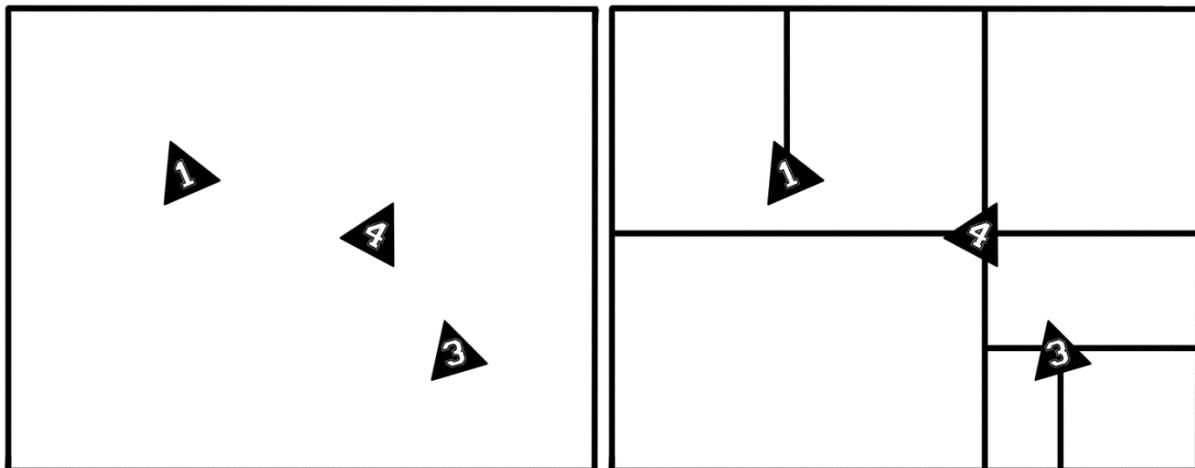
*Tip: I specifically designed these tables to use different types of dice. This makes it easy to generate an entire street in a single throw of the dice: Simply roll a d%, d8, and d6 simultaneously and then walk through the results using the appropriate die type for each table.*

## RANDOM FLOORPLANS

One of the challenges of running a streetcrawl is that the PCs may decide at any time to enter a random building. Here's a quick method for generating simple floorplans on the fly.

**ROLLING THE DICE:** As with the street generator, this is a tablemat system. Take a handful of d4's and roll them onto a sheet of paper. Most buildings are square, so you can just consider the edges of the paper to be the outer walls of the building.

The location where each die lands is a **corner** with a number of walls extending from that corner equal to the number rolled on the dice. The more dice you roll, the more complicated the interior of the building will be (and complexity generally equates to size). For simple cottages, a single d4 is often sufficient. Here's an example using 3d4:





Here you can see how the same randomly generated walls can just as easily give us a shopfront with a door leading into a private residence at the back of the building. The master suite remains in the upper left, but here we find a bedroom with a large closet in the lower right. (Or maybe your imagination might make that a kitchen with attached larder.)

**STAIR DICE:** Roll a six-sided die as a d3 in addition to the intersection dice to determine the number of floors in the building. If there are multiple floors, where the die lands can be treated as the location of the staircase. If the raw number on the d6 is odd, then the building has a basement (included in the total number of floors). If it is even, then it does not.

You can increase the maximum number of floors, of course, by increasing the size of the die used and interpreting the results in the same way. (Rolling a d8 as a d4, a d10 as a d5, a d12 as a d6, and so forth.)

Rolling 2d3-1 produces a nice bell curve for the number of floors and a building with multiple stairs. (You can limit the number of buildings with multiple stairs by including multiple stairs only if the dice roll doubles, and otherwise placing the stairs at whichever die rolled higher.)

Rolling 2d3-2 (min. 1) produces the homes found in a mid-20<sup>th</sup> century American suburb if you assume there's always a basement.

## RANDOM NPCs

If you need a random NPC:

1. Roll on the *Random Businesses* table to generate their profession.
2. If you get a result of "No Businesses," roll on the *Other Jobs* table below.
3. Pull a name from the [Elturian Names list](#).

<b>d20</b>	<b>Other Jobs</b>
1-4	Farmer
5-7	Servant
8-9	Fisherman
10-11	Street Vendor
12-13	Beggar
14	Sailor
15	Soldier
16	Spy
17	Assassin
18	Thief
19	Courtier
20	Lawyer

*Tip: This is, once again, a fairly crude tool. If you want the gold standard for this sort of thing, try to track down a copy of [Central Casting: Heroes of Legend](#) by Jennell Jaquays.*

**GENERATING A CRISIS:** Roll on the *NPC Crisis* table below to see what type of crisis the NPC is facing (if any) due to Elturel's fall into Hell. If the PCs run into an entire group of NPCs, you can probably just roll once to determine the entire group's need.

<b>d12</b>	<b>Crisis</b>
1-4	No Current Need
5	Food
6	Water
7	Injured
8	Trapped
9	Escort
10	Under Attack
11-12	Roll Again Twice

**No Current Need:** The NPC probably isn't happy, but they have a place of safety and they're well-supplied.

**Food & Water:** Self-explanatory.

**Injured:** The NPC has been injured by collapsing structures, fires, looters, devils, or some other form of misadventure.

**Trapped:** Most likely due to a building collapsing on or around them.

**Escort:** The NPC needs to get some place (a place of sanctuary, to rejoin their family, etc.) and needs the PCs to escort them there safely. If in doubt, use one of the locations in Part 5C (the NPC effectively becomes a hook for that location).

**Under Attack:** The NPC is currently being attacked (or hunted) by criminals, devils, or something else.

**Roll Again Twice:** I'd recommend against stacking this result.

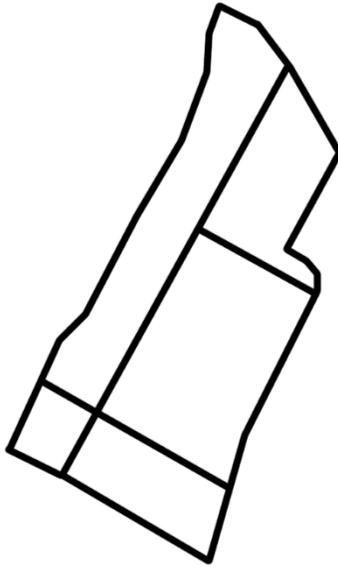
*Tip: Structurally, these crises are a way of drawing the PCs deeper into the city. The more need they see, the more important what they're doing becomes. The more people they help, the more emotionally invested they become. And the act of solving these problems will force them to explore the city and draw them towards the major locations.*

## FRACTAL STREET LAYOUT

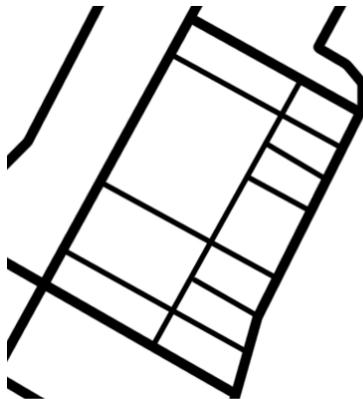
An advanced technique while streetcrawling is to treat the system as having fractal complexity.

By default, you can just think of the system as generating and navigating specific streets. But you could also use it to generate the "major streets" of a larger neighborhood. (For example, this could be useful when the PCs are navigating towards a Distant Goal, as described in Part 5B.) Within each of these "major blocks" you can imagine myriad side streets, and, in fact, you can drill in and generate those side streets by treating each major block as the boundaries of a locality.

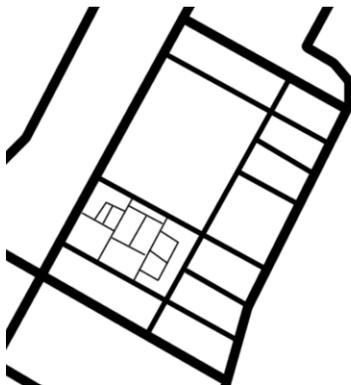
For example, you might start by generating a street map that looks like this:



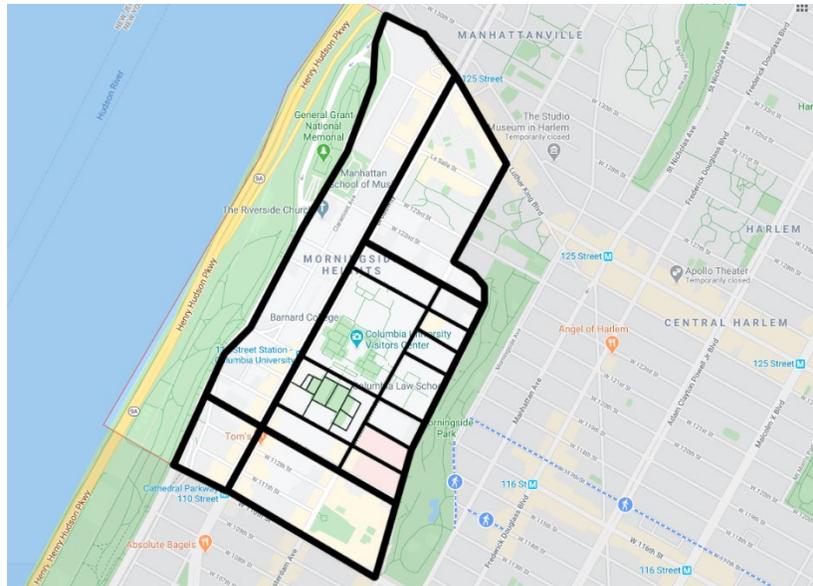
You could then select one of those major blocks and generate the local side streets:



And you can take this even further, using the same system to generate footpaths, alleys, or even the outlines of specific buildings on an individual block. (The latter is a great way of getting non-standard building outlines that you can then use as a seed for random floor plans.) If you did that here, it might look like this:



When I demonstrate this system for new GMs, I'm sometimes told that this fractal approach isn't realistic. "Cities don't work like this," one gentleman told me. If you're feeling the same way reading this, then you might want to know that I pulled a fast one here. Although these are street layouts which could be trivially created using the street generator, in this case I didn't actually use the generator: I just traced the streets for Morningside Heights in Manhattan.



And you can see, looking at that map, how the other individual blocks have similar levels of detail hidden away inside of them. (And that's even before we crack open the satellite view and street views and *really* start looking at the details.) This is a good reminder that the real world is always an endless font of inspiration, even for our most audaciously fantastical creations.

# PART 5C: POINTCRAWL IN ELTUREL

by Justin Alexander – June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020



Now that the PCs have gotten their bearings and received the map of fallen Elturel, we'll switch from streetcrawling (as described in [Part 5B](#)) and begin navigating the city using a **pointcrawl structure**.

Pointcrawls are fairly straightforward. You can see how the point-map above has a number of keyed locations (points), connected in a node-map. PCs at one of the points can travel to any connected point.

The most literal application of a pointcrawl system is to model wilderness travel along a **trail system** (i.e., the connections between points are literally wilderness trails running between those locations). You might find similar utility if you were running a *Neverwhere*-style adventure set amidst a fantastical subway system. In either case, the pointcrawl is a [player-known structure](#). Trivially so, in fact, because the point-map has a one-to-one correspondence with the game world: The characters can see the wilderness trails or subway tunnel that they're following.

In the city, however, the pointcrawl system is an abstraction. It attempts to capture conceptual navigation – the way we *think* about traveling through a city – in a way that's useful for the GM prepping and running the material. I believe that it can best succeed at this as a *player-unknown* structure. In other words, the point-map above is NOT the map of Elturel seen by the players: They interact with the city naturalistically; they don't see the points and may not even know that a pointcrawl structure is being used.

So how does that work?

When the players indicate a navigational intention, the GM basically acts as an “interpreter” who translates that intention into the pointcrawl system, uses the pointcrawl system to resolve it, and then describes the outcome to them in terms of the fiction.

This works because we naturally think of navigating a city in broad terms. “We need to head west to Lyndale Avenue and then take that south into Edina.” What was the exact route we took west to Lyndale? Did we take 36<sup>th</sup> or 38<sup>th</sup> or 42<sup>nd</sup> or 46<sup>th</sup>? We don’t really care. (And, if we did, we’d probably still be using the streetcrawl system, right?) Particularly in a pre-GPS era, navigation was even more likely to funnel into landmarks and major thoroughfares: Cross the river at such-and-such a bridge, head east to the cathedral, and then cut south through Littlehut... and so forth.

The points of the pointcrawl match the mental model we use to navigate through a city.

If you’re still struggling to grok this, you can see the effect perhaps most clearly in Elturel at Torm’s Bridges. Here the conceptual and literal geographical navigation of the city are basically unified; the funnel effect is as literal as possible: If you want to cross the gorge between the western and eastern halves of the city, you’re going to pass through the bridges.

This conceptually remains true even when the literal geographical funnel is not so precise: If the PCs decide to head south from their arrival point to the Docks, they’re going to pass through Shierra’s Market. Yes, it’s *technically possible* to take a different route that avoids the market, but in the absence of intentionality the point-map represents the general “flow” of the city.

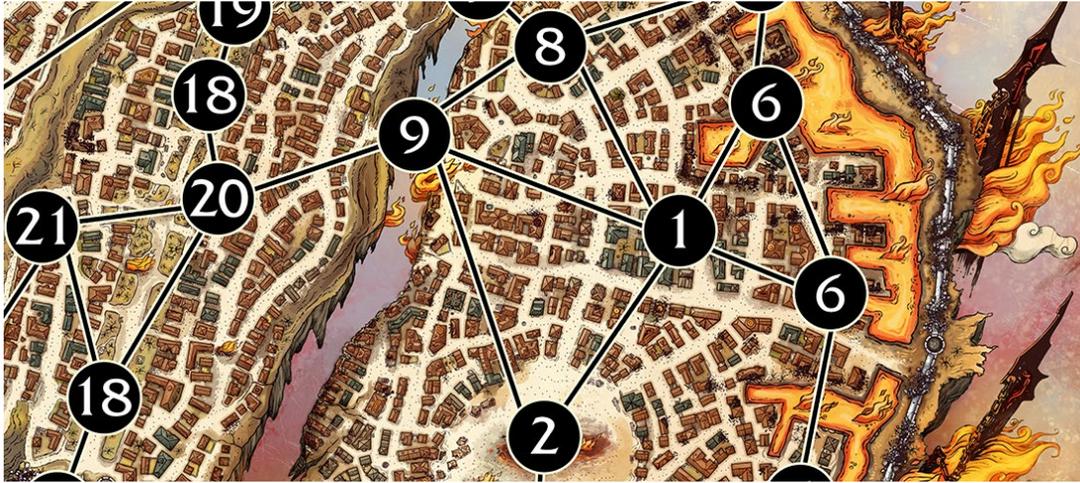
(And in the case of intentionality, check out “Shortcuts & Side Routes,” below.)

Things you’re likely to say while running an urban pointcrawl:

- “Crossing Waterloo Bridge, you head south past the London Eye to Lambeth Palace.” (The PCs are leaving a vampire den somewhere near Covent Garden. Waterloo Bridge, the London Eye, and Lambeth Palace are all points on the point-map.)
- “You leave Delver’s Square and head up towards Oldtown. You pass Emerald Hill on your right, and you see the dawn hawks circling above it. Then you climb the ramp up into Oldtown and head down to the Administration Building.” (Delver’s Square, Emerald Hill, the Oldtown ramp, and the Administration building are all points. Oldtown is a neighborhood that contains many points.)
- “You leave Trollskull Alley, head south through the City of the Dead, and enter the Trade Ward. You take Nephranter’s Street through the Court of the White Bull and then south to the Caravan Court.” (The PCs are very familiar with the city here, so the GM summarizes by neighborhood – City of the Dead, Trade District – until they’re close to the target. The Court of the White Bull and Caravan Court are the nodes here; Nephranter Street is simply a way of contextualizing the journey. The GM could just as easily say, “...and enter the Trade Ward near the Court of the White Bull, taking Salabar Street down to the Caravan Court.” or “...and enter the Trade Ward, passing through the Court of the White Bull and crossing through the bustling crowds of River Street before reaching Caravan Court.”)

In all of these examples we’re assuming that the PCs already have some familiarity (or perhaps a great deal of familiarity) with the city. When they’re exploring a city for the first time – particularly a hazardous city filled with dangers like hell-bound Elturel – you’ll want to devote more attention to (and most likely have the PCs meaningfully interact with) each point as they encounter it for the first time.

# BASIC POINTCRAWL PROCEDURES



The basic procedures for a pointcrawl are very simple.

**STEP 1 - MOVE TO POINT:** Assume moving to another point takes 10-15 minutes.

*Design Note: Obviously you'd want to vary this for pointcrawls at different scales. You can also have connections of different lengths, indicating the travel time along a particular route by writing a small number next to the route, but this is probably overkill for Elturel.*

**STEP 2 - RANDOM ENCOUNTER:** Check for a random encounter (see below).

*Design Note: I recommend using a fairly high probability, much like the encounter checks for a streetcrawl described in [Part 5B](#). Descent Into Avernus recommends a 1 in 2 chance of an encounter and that's probably pretty solid.*

*If you were using a pointcrawl system in a less adventuresome city and/or one that the PCs have become more familiar with, you can either step down either the frequency or intensity of encounters. (Encounters in a typical city can often just be a bit of local street color; they don't always have to be meaty interactions. [In this post](#) I discuss how I would handle encounters in Waterdeep, triggering an encounter for whatever neighborhood the PCs were going to.)*

**STEP 3 - ARRIVAL:** The PCs arrive at the next node.

If the PCs are in a point on the point-map, you can simply follow this procedure. If for some reason they've slipped "off" the point-map, simply funnel them logically into the point-map and continue from there. (You might be able to just assume they're "at" the nearest point on the map; e.g., they may not be at the cathedral, but they're close enough that they're basically coming "from the cathedral" as far as other points are concerned. Alternatively, if you want to get all formal with it, you can think of their current location as a "temporary node" and think about how it would attach to the point-map.)

# ADVANCED POINTCRAWL PROCEDURES

Here are a couple of advanced pointcrawl techniques that you may find useful in Elturel. (You can probably also ignore them entirely.) Their use may be more immediately obvious in player-known pointcrawls (where players can directly invoke them), but they can also be useful tools for GMs looking to interpret PC actions into a player-unknown pointcrawl.

## SHORTCUTS & SIDE ROUTES

The PCs want to move from one point to another without moving through the points inbetween. (For example, they want to go south to the Docks without passing through Shiarra's Market.) What happens?

In some pointcrawls this might not be possible; in the wilderness it probably requires trailblazing. In a city, though, it usually just means getting off the major thoroughfares and circling around on side streets. In a safe city where time isn't a factor, this probably just happens. Otherwise, use these guidelines:

### **Simple Side Routes:**

- Determine an appropriate base time. (If they're trying to go the long way around to bypass something, you can probably set this to whatever the travel time would have been going the normal way. If they're trying to save time by using an unorthodox shortcut, eyeball the best case scenario.)
- Make a random encounter check.
- Make an appropriate skill check (probably Wisdom, possibly Wisdom (Stealth) if their goal is to avoid attention). Each check they make adds an extra chunk of time (probably 5 minutes in Elturel).
- If the check is a success, they arrive at their intended node.
- If the check is a failure, then they're lost and will need to make another check. If they were trying to avoid trouble, the trouble finds them. Either way, they'll need to repeat the random encounter check and the skill check until they succeed.

**Detailed Side Routes:** Alternatively, you can run this process using the streetcrawling rules. Their goal is charting out the alternate route, and this is probably a distant goal (requiring them to crawl through multiple chunks of the map).

This is probably overkill, and in a player-unknown pointcrawl like Elturel it may be difficult to smoothly transition between the streetcrawl and pointcrawl structures. But this approach may prove useful.

## HIDDEN ROUTES

A **hidden route** in a pointcrawl is simply a connection between two points that is not immediately obvious; i.e., the PCs have find the route before they can use it. In a wilderness it might be the illusory druid paths. In a city it might be linked teleportation circles or perhaps the sewers.

Hidden routes are often discovered as part of a scenario or while exploring a particular point (i.e., you're poking around the crypts beneath the cathedral and discover a tunnel heading to the harbor). In some cases it might be as easy as making an Intelligence (Investigation) or Wisdom (Perception) check to find the route.

If the PCs go looking for hidden routes in Elturel, I recommend pointing them in the direction of the Maze — the subterranean tunnels and storehouses that lie beneath the streets. Although it is possible to include hidden routes on a point-map (I recommend a dotted line), in this case you can probably just improvise if it comes up in play.

# RANDOM ENCOUNTERS

For random encounters in Elturel (whether streetcrawling or pointcrawling), we're going to use the encounters from *Descent Into Avernus* and also [Encounters in Avernus](#) (from the DMs Guild). Here's a unified encounter table, which I've fleshed out with a few encounters with various factions in the city:

d30	Encounter
1	Collapsed Building (DIA, p. 55)
2	Cry for Help (DIA, p. 55)
3	Ghastly Meal (DIA, p. 55)
4	Ghoul Pack (DIA, p. 55)
5	Hateful Patrol (DIA, p. 55)
6	Imp Sales Pitch (DIA, p. 55)
7	Narzugon Cavalier (DIA, p. 56)
8	Spouts of Hellfire (p. 56)
9	Vrock Philosophy (DIA, p. 56)
10	Zombie Horde (DIA, p. 56)
11	A River Ran Through It (EIA, p. 16)
12	Abandoned Trunk (EIA, p. 17)
13	Alchemist Shop (EIA, p. 17)
14	Fiendish Trap (EIA, p. 17)
15	Forbidden Delights (EIA, p. 17)
16	Hellrider Uprising (EIA, p. 18)
17	Injured Knight (EIA, p. 18)
18	Keeper of the Keys (EIA, p. 18)
19	Kid Warlock (EIA, p. 19)
20	Mad Cultists (EIA, p. 19)
21	Nasty Weather (EIA, p. 19)
22	Nycaloth Thugs (EIA, p. 20)
23	Obsessed Avenger (EIA, p. 20)
24	Priestess of Lathander (EIA, p. 20)
25	Rakshasa Hustler (EIA, p. 20)
26	Skeleton Bonfire (EIA, p. 20)
27	Necromantic Mist
28	Encounter with a Faction
29	Encounter with a Faction
30	Roll Again Twice & Combine

**NECROMANTIC MIST:** See DIA p. 68. In this encounter necromantic mist has filled a street and/or building, transforming the corpses within it into undead creations.

Because we've implemented some significant changes to the lore of Elturel (see [Part 5](#)), you'll want to re-contextualize many of these encounters to be consistent with the new vision of the city. For example:

- In "Hellrider Uprising," swap out the generic demons for Hell Knights fighting their former comrades.
- In "Keeper of the Keys," make the chain devil a devil raider (who's come to town to loot the plentiful source of new keys for his collection).
- The dead master or parent of the "Kid Warlock" could have been a victim of the Zarielite purge of Elturian wizards.

- The vrock from “Vrock Philosophy” can pontificate on the metaphysics of Elturel’s current predicament: He loves watching cities sink into the Dock of Fallen Cities. The moment when the souls are quenched *en masse* in the waters of the Styx is a rare wonder of ultimate beauty.

I think these changes would be fairly easy to make on the fly, but your mileage may vary and it wouldn’t take much effort to preflight these. Either way, I recommend frequently thinking about how the encounters could potentially feature one or more of the factions active in the city. These are described at the beginning of Part 5, but a pertinent review:

- **Devil Raiders:** Opportunistic, independent devils raiding Elturel before its ultimate destruction could be independent operators (like the chain devil described above) or used as foreshadowing of the Avernian Warlords (see Part 6).
- **Hell Knights:** These encounters can establish that the High Knights transformed into the Hell Knights; the destruction of high-level spellcasters; and/or the continued corruption of the Hellriders and Order of the Companion.
- **Zarielite Cultists:** Highlight that many of these cultists came to Elturel as a sort of pilgrimage AND that the Elturian government has been riddled with Zarielites for decades. They’re mostly just reveling now, but questioning them can fill in a lot of gaps about how Elturel fell and also what’s been happening here since the city arrived in Hell.
- **Ikaia’s Followers:** Not all of whom need be his Sons or Daughters; there are a number of humans who have more less pledged fealty to someone who they feel can protect them in the midst of all this insanity. These encounters are most likely to happen in the east side of the city.
- **Ravengard’s Peacekeepers:** Should probably give the sense that they are overwhelmed, but trying hard. More likely to be encountered in the west side of the city, but more likely to be overwhelmed in the east (cut off from their comrades when Torm’s Bridges were taken).
- **Liashandra’s Demons:** This faction primarily exists to justify using demon stat blocks in Hell, but you do have some opportunity to establish the larger planar-political situation of the Blood War and the motives behind Zariel’s Elturian recruitment drive. There’s also a slim opportunity for some enemy-of-my-enemy action, as Liashandra’s primary mission is to sabotage the Fall of Elturel, so feel free to tack in that direction for demonic encounters.

*Tip: You can use the street generator, random business table, and floor plan generator from the [Streetcrawling Tools](#) to quickly contextualize these encounters as needed. Try not to pause the action for this. Frequently you can start the encounter and then multitask, using the generators in the background.*

## ELTUREL – A BRIEF GAZETTE

### NEIGHBORHOODS

**High District:** Located on the bluff above the city, stretching away from the High Hall. Filled with tall, narrow houses festooned with balconies. There was a time when only nobles were allowed to live in the High District. This prohibition was long ago weakened and then abolished entirely, but the High District remains the demesne of Elturgard’s richest citizens.

**Dock District:** Below the bluff, the east side of Elturel is the Dock District. This was the oldest part of the lower city, the edge of which was once marked by the Short Loop River (which began from the spring beneath High Hall and ran down the length of the bluff before plunging over the Maiden’s Leap to an incredibly short river that looped around to the Chionthar). The river is now more or less gone, having been transformed into the modern canal system which radically expanded the Elturian docks.

In the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the Dock District was “all dirt, business, and utilitarian buildings” (*Forgotten Realms Adventures*). The businesses are still here, but a century of empire-building has brought great wealth into

the city and classed the joint up a bit. Most notably, all the streets have been cobbled with the same pale cream stone as the High District. (Despite this, the lower class in Elturel is still known as “mucksuckers,” a nickname which originally referred to their boots getting stuck in the thick mud of the Dock District streets.)

**Westerly:** The west side of the city began gentrifying in the late-14<sup>th</sup> century and became home to Elturel’s burgeoning middle class. It has more two- and three-story houses than the Dock District, and it tends to eschew the “smellier” businesses (like tanneries) the remain east of the gorge. The small West Docks became slightly preferred by travelers and this was even briefly ensconced into Elturian law, resulting in a lot of inns and travelhouses sprouting up in the southern end of Westerly.

## THE MAZE

The bluff on which the High Hall stands is basically a honeycomb of subterranean passages and vaults. This vast labyrinth extends under the streets of the lower city, too. Parts of this complex consist of natural caverns (the full extent of which have never been mapped and which most likely connected to the Underdark before the city was scooped into Hell), but there’s also been extensive tunneling and construction over the last few hundred years.

Stuff down here includes:

- **Warehouses** hewn out of the solid rock, holding food and supplies that would Elturel’s population to swell to more than half a million and nevertheless support them for at least three months in the case of a siege.
- **Armories**, some of them secret.
- The **Dungeon of the Inquisitor**, a subterranean maze which served as Elturgard’s prison.
- **Mines**, most of which were worked by prisoners from the Dungeon of the Inquisitor.
- **Behemoth’s Run**, a deep section of the Maze beneath the Dock District which appears to have been tunneled out by huge creatures. Some prisoners claim that you can sometimes hear the vicious roars of the behemoths echoing.
- **Smugglers dens**, some of which originally had tunnels running out the city (and which would now abruptly open out in mid-air about the Dock of Fallen Cities).



## LOCAL COLOR

**Unity Tributes**, as described in Part 4B, are small sculptures of the Companion or depictions of the twin sun heraldry of the Order of the Companion. Many of these shrines are now surrounded by effigies as Elturians leave small idols depicting themselves in the hope of receiving good fortune.

**Driftglobes** are small, glowing ball of magical light that float through the air. They are referred to as “little companions,” although their use in Elturel actually predates the Companion by at least a century. They’re relatively expensive, but rather popular with Elturians. They also basically last forever, so Elturel has slowly accumulated a lot of them over the year. They can be found lighting homes, businesses, and so forth. PCs might find them drifting forlornly in the middle of the street or floating in the middle of burnt wreckage. Or they might pop out surprisingly intact as they’re digging through rubble.

**Gallops, Canters, and Trots.** Elturians often use these riding terms as synonyms for “street.” So rather than, say, Dockside Way or Market Road, there’s the Dockside Trot and Market Gallop. Most thoroughfares still use “street” (like Maidensbridge Street), but here and there you’ll see this bit of local color.

**“Recall the Creed.”** Even Elturians who haven’t sworn the oath to uphold the Creed Resolute will often say things like “recall the Creed” to invoke actions that ethically or morally right (even if they’re difficult).

**Taverns and Inns.** By ancient statute, no inn was allowed to serve food or drink in Elturel. Nor could they share the same building as a tavern.

## ELTUREL LOCATIONS

This is a brief overview of the points on our point-map. As indicated, some of these are sourced from [Hellturl](#) by James Introcaso and [The Hellriders’ Keep](#) by Carter VanHuss from the Dungeon Masters Guild.

You'll want to flesh these out or, as with the random encounters, adapt them to the new lore of Elturel. (This is one of the places in the remix where, as I mentioned at the beginning, a little homework is required.)

As you're fleshing these locations out, I recommend adding **leads** that point to other locations. I've indicated a few of these below, but as you're fleshing out the locations look for opportunities to add more. Keep in mind that this is 'crawl, so just like you don't need [three clues](#) pointing to every room in a dungeon, you don't need three clues pointing to every point in a pointcrawl. Basic navigation carries some of the load here. This also means that leads to locations that are multiple points away pack more punch than adjacent points, because the PCs will travel through multiple points to get there.

You'll also want to think about stocking the pointcrawl with **clues** to the current situation in Elturel. Your revelation list here is going to be largely congruent to the list of factions (above), and I'd probably add the Creed Resolute, too. And for these, you *will* want to adhere to the Three Clue Rule.

**1. ARRIVAL POINT:** The PCs arrive at a nondescript point in the Dock District. Streetcrawling will flesh out this area.

**2. SHIARRA'S MARKET:** Shiarra was the near-legendary first High Rider of Elturel. It's said that the market is located on the very spot where she called a concord of the local lordlings after driving the Ogre Lord out of the crude stone bastion which then stood atop the tor. (Some tales tell that the Ogre had taken her son. Others that it had stolen her sword.) These lordlings pledged fealty to each other and formed the Riders of Elturel (they wouldn't become the Hellriders for many more years).

Shiarra's Market is lined by marble-faced banks and austere slate-gray trading houses and, before the city's fall, was crammed with busy market stalls. Below the Market there's access to subterranean storehouses that are part of the Maze.

The market is now where High Rider Ikaia holds court. He's able to bring supplies up through the Market's access to the Maze and distribute them. There's a soup kitchen running more or less 24/7, and the market stalls are slowly being converted into a tent city for those who have nowhere else to go. Ikaia is also beginning to organize armed patrols (most accompanied by a vampiric Son or Daughter) to distribute supplies to those who can't reach the Market.



**3. DRAGONEYE DOCKS:** The main docks of Elturel. In addition to the Dragoneye Coster that the docks take their names from (see below), there were a number of other costers active here, including the Thousand-heads Trading Coster and a regional house maintained by the Seven Suns Coster (which is based out of Baldur's Gate). One of the six-wagon ferries that used to cross the river here was flipped upside down onto the Dockside Trot when Elturel was sucked into Hell.

**4. DRAGONEYE DEALING COSTER.** The Dragoneye Coster has dominated trade in Elturel for centuries. They have an entire walled compound in the city's docks, which has been commandeered by Liashandra's demon platoon.

**5. THE DOCK HOUSE.** The estate of Marisima Rathanda, a former Hellrider and the harbormaster who ran the Dragoneye Docks. This location is described in *Helltural*.

**6. LAVA DOCKS.** A river of lava pours through the canals on the east side of town. Most of the Canal Docks have been destroyed by fire.

**7. KEEP OF THE TWIN SUNS.** The Dusk Road, which runs northeast from Elturel to Triel, entered the city through the Dusk Gate. The stronghold of the Keep of the Twin Suns was built directly on the opposite side of the canal from Dusk Gate, and actually arched above the Dusk Road, acting almost like a second gatehouse.

The Keep was badly damaged during the initial fighting after Elturel's fall (when Hell Knights erupted and began slaughtering their comrades) and by the canal-side fires that followed. A small band of knights from the Order of the Companion have holed up inside the west tower. They're scared, confused, and leaderless.

**8. A PAIR OF BLACK ANTLERS.** Located on the west side of Maidensbridge Street, just south of where it swings westward to cross first Torm's Bridges and then the Maidens Bridge. This was the best-known of Elturel's taverns. A dimly lit, wood-paneled place adorned with a pair of stag's antlers fully twenty feet across, along with many adventurers' relics and paraphernalia.

The tavern was described in [Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast](#). There's also a version in *Helltural*, in which a group of besieging devils have trapped a group of demons inside. If you use this version, I recommend making the devils outside Hell Knights. The demons inside belong to Liashandra's mission and were out scouting when they got cornered here.

**9. TORM'S BRIDGES.** These bridges are described in *Descent Into Avernus* (p. 58). The ravine which they cross was created during the Spellplague.

Your choice whether the devils here are Hell Knights (seeking to keep the city divided) or a group of Avernian devil raiders (charging a steep toll; perhaps even demanding soul coins). Or both. Different factions could control each bridge. The factions controlling each bridge could even change over time (perhaps with assistance from the PCs).

Note that Torm's Blade goes from the Dock Districts directly to the top of the bluff, so the angle of the bridge must be incredibly steep.

**10. MAIDEN'S BRIDGE:** Not far from where the waters of Maidens' Leap plunge into the canals of the Dock District, the Maiden's Bridge crosses the canal. The canal is now filled with lava, but the bridge still stands, joining the western and eastern halves of the city.

*Note: Although this is visually confusing on the *Helltural* poster map, you can't simply walk up into the Gardens from the north. You have to cross at Torm's Blade from the east or work your way up the switchback in the west.*

**11. HELM'S SHIELDHALL:** Helm's Shieldhall is a fortress temple dedicated to the god Helm and the citadel of the Hellriders. It has been completely taken over by the Hell Knights and serves as their base of operations in Elturel.

The Shieldhall is also another opportunity to highlight the history of the city and, importantly, the Hellriders themselves. Much of this will be the publicly known history of the famous hellride (see the tale told in [Part 4A: The Road to Candlekeep](#)), but you can build on that knowledge now with more specifics.

(For example, you might include a few statues of famous knights known to have perished on the ride — i.e., those they'll meet later who are now damned to Hell.) Hiding away a *Secret History of the Knights of Elturel* that confirms Lulu's memories of Zariel leading the knights is also an option.



**12. WEST GATE:** The West Gate used to lead to Skulbask Road, heading northwest into the Fields of the Dead. Now it looks out almost directly onto one of the chains dragging Elturel down towards the Styx.

**13. OWLBEAR BUTCHER SHOP:** Cultists of Zariel have taken over an exotic meats butcher shop. This location is detailed in [Hellturel](#).

**14. TOWER OF BÈR NÖLMIEN:** This is a ruined wizard's tower that belonged to Bèr Nölmien. Iolanthe Oshrat — whose brother, Wembra Oshrat, was murdered in Baldur's Gate — was Nölmien's apprentice. The remains of the *teleportation circle* Nölmien was using to evacuate people during Elturel's fall can still be found in the ruins. Nölmien's body can also be found here. Hell Knights assaulted the tower and killed him.

This is one of several sites where powerful spellcasters were targeted and killed. It also provides the other side of Iolanthe's story if the PCs spoke with her.

**15. GRAND CEMETARY:** Described in *Descent Into Avernus* (p. 64) and Part 5D.

**16. WEST DOCKS:** The West Docks are smaller and separately managed from the Dragoneye Docks. As noted above, most travelers arriving at the city via the river came in through the West Docks, so they're surrounded by a lot of inns and travelhouses. The Redeye Costers unofficially ran the West Docks. They weren't actually a proper coster; it's an ironic name for an organized crime group. The docks themselves were almost completely destroyed, having split off from the mass of Elturel and plummeted into the Dock of Fallen Cities below.

**17. WESTERN SWITCHBACK:** To reach the High District from Westerly, you have to take a switchback road up the western face of the tor.

**18. THE GARDENS:** As you can see on the map, the Gardens run the entire length of the bluff. Their design emphasizes dark-leafed bowers; a touch of the natural in the heart of the city. At night, the soft glimmer of glow-lilies that curl liana-like around the tree-trunks filled the Gardens. A stream erupted from the cliff-face beneath the High Hall, sending a bubbling brook down the middle of the Gardens to eventually plunge over the Maiden's Leap.

All of that is gone now: The spring beneath High Hall has been transformed by the trip to Hell and now belches forth a stream of lava. The natural growth has wilted beneath the strange skies of Avernus or been burnt away by the lava.

There is a procession of statues dedicated to the High Observers through the park:

- Naja Bellandi's statue stands near the Maiden's Leap (at the spot where she leapt on the Night of the Red Coup).

- Cathasach Restat's statue is found near the midpoint of the Gardens.
- Thavius Kreeg's statue stands on a rocky outcropping in the middle of the stream near the spring of its headwaters. Now it's surrounded by lava, its features basking in a demonic red light.

**19. MAIDEN'S LEAP:** The Maidens' Leap is a cascade at the north end of the Gardens atop the bluff. A spectacular series of falls that plunge down the face of the bluff and into the canals below. Both the cascade and the canals are now lava.

**20. SYMBRIL'S HOUSE:** A small, cozy inn near Maidens' Leap in the High District. It overlooks (and opens into) the Garden. A Zarielite cult had rented rooms here to ride Elturel into Hell, and now they've taken over the joint. They might waylay travelers in the Gardens and/or be plotting to sabotage Ravengard's efforts in the High Hall in some way.

*Note: This location is taken from Forgotten Realms Adventures, but it's a very brief entry and there's no additional details beyond what I've provided here.*



**21. OLD HIGH HARVEST HOME:** High Harvest Home was once a temple dedicated to Chauntea. During the High Harvest Slaughter, High Rider Ikaia's vampires broke into the temple and murdered the entire congregation which had taken refuge there. Hundreds were killed and Chauntea worship in the city was virtually wiped out.

Old High Harvest Home was converted into administrative offices, eventually housing the Imperial Commission (which managed the administration of the other cities of Elturgard). The old sanctuary, however, became a memorial to the Slaughter. It contains hundreds of featureless, life-size statues of white ash, each representing one of those killed here.

Every floor of the building has a huge balcony/patio looking on the western face of the building, looking out over the lower city.

There are currently a number of dead bodies in the upstairs offices: A Hell Knight erupted here and killed a number of people in the initial chaos.



**22. THE HIGH HALL:** Described in *Descent Into Avernus* (p. 58) and Part 5D.



## UNUSED LOCATIONS

These are canonical locations in Elturel that I chose not to use for the pointcrawl. Most of these locations were last described in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (in 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition products) and there's no particular reason to think that they'd still exist. But they might!

- Hondarkar's House, a large inn in the heart of the High District. (*Forgotten Realms Adventures*)
- Gallowglar's Inn, a warm but well-worn, low-beamed place that sprawls amid the aromatic stockyards. ([Forgotten Realms Adventures](#))
- The Oar and Wagon Wheel Inn, a raucous, drafty barn of a place, always crowded and never quiet. ([Forgotten Realms Adventures](#))
- The Bent Helm, a dockside establishment favored by smugglers and other shady sorts, and often visited by 20-strong Hellrider foot patrols, called in to quell yet another brawl. (*Forgotten Realms Adventures* / [Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast](#))
- Gallowgar's Inn, a ramshackle, well-worn inn in the middle of the dockside stockyards. ([Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast](#))
- Phontyr's Unicorn, a converted former factory, which is ramshackle, eccentric, and friendly, the scene of shady deals and much late-night business. (*Forgotten Realms Adventures*) Or a pleasure palace built on the site where Phontyr's house burned down and dedicated to a unicorn who was once Phontyr's companion and is now seen in furtive sightings around the inn. ([Volo's Guide to the Sword Coast](#))
- There used to be shrines to Ilmater, Tempus, Tymora, and Lliira in the city, and these may or may not still exist. (*Forgotten Realms Adventures*) More recently the city has venerated Lathander, Torm, Helm, Tyr, and (possibly) Amaunator. ([Forgotten Realms Campaign Guide](#))

# PART 5D: THE HIGH HALL

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[by Justin Alexander - July 27th, 2020](#)



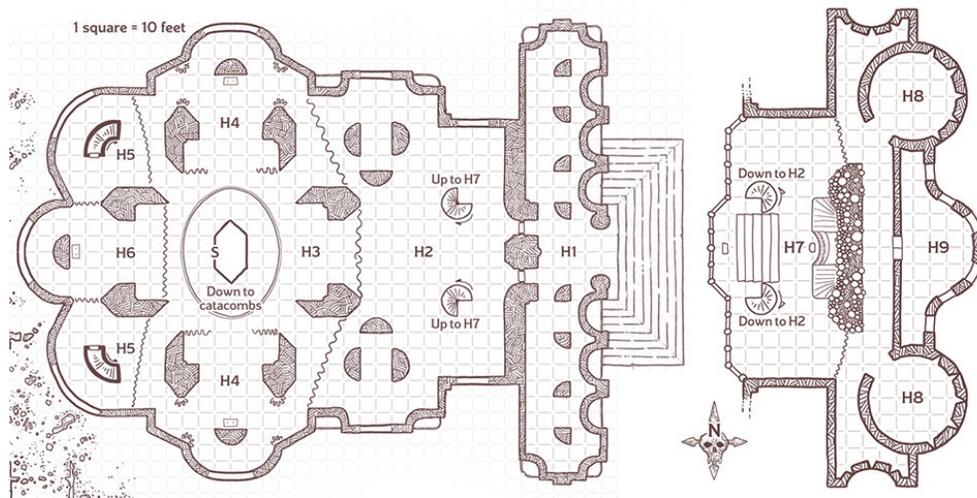
There are three different versions of the High Hall depicted in *Descent Into Avernus*. The first is the fantastic graphical image above.

The second is depicted on the city map of Eturel:



You can immediately see that the map and image don't line up.

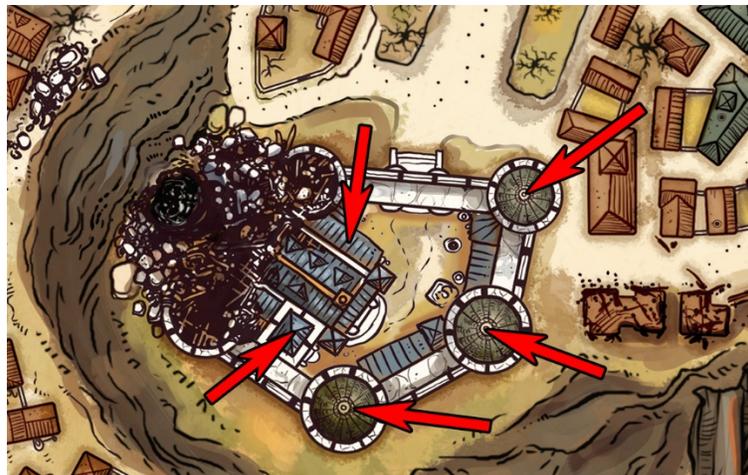
The third version of High Hall is the one mapped on p. 61-62 of the book:



Now, if you kind of squint (and ignore the windows and compass rose), you could probably make the map of High Hall roughly match this bit of the Etlurel city map:



But if that's the case, then what's going on with these bits:



What's going on in those towers?

For me, personally, the most interesting version of High Hall is almost certainly the image: All those floating bits of wreckage held aloft by some strange magical interaction between the holy temple, the meteor, the ritual, and possibly just the strange nature of Avernus itself are tantalizing and unique.

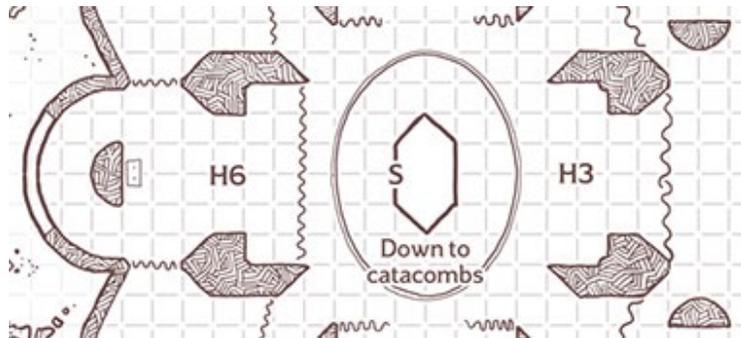
I bring this up mostly because we're going to be talking, in part, about stuff we'd like to add to the High Hall, and you can seize any or all of this inconsistency as opportunity, inspiration, or both when figuring out how to slot that stuff in.

## ABUSING SECRET DOORS

In [Part 3F](#) of the Remix, we talked about why putting a Must Have Encounter™ on the opposite side of a secret door is a bad idea.

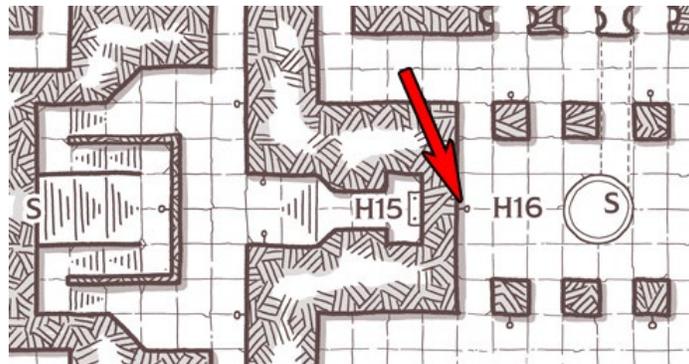
The basic structure of the scenario here is that the PCs need to go to High Hall and, once there, speak with Pherria Jynks, who will send them on a quest to find Grand Duke Ravengard (who has gone to the Grand Cemetery to retrieve the Helm of Torm's Sight).

And, yup, they've got Pherria behind another secret door:



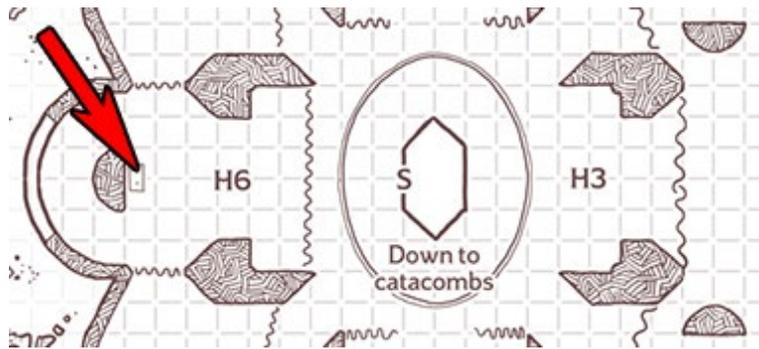
I thought this secret door might exist because the designer were trying to justify why Jynks and the refugees she's protecting haven't been killed by devils yet (because the devils haven't found the secret door yet), but that's not it: The catacombs are already crawling with devils.

As we discussed in Part 3F, the easiest solution for this sort of thing is usually to just remove the secret door. I'd basically do the same thing here, but with a twist: We're going to leave the existing secret door in place, but have it lead directly to Area H16 where Jynks and the refugees are:

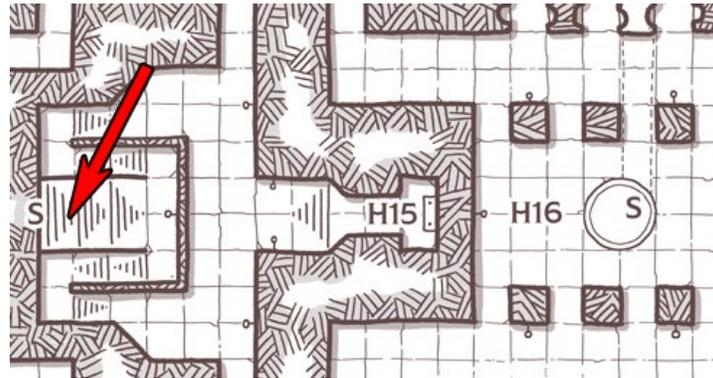


Finding the secret door is now a reward for the PCs: If you find it, you can skip the devil-infested catacombs.

Meanwhile, back up on the top level there are actually TWO altars: The one in H6 has been desecrated by devils.



So what we can do is make “stairways hidden in altars” a design feature of the High Hall. The secret door in the desecrated altar has been ripped open by the devils (it’s no longer secret and actually serves as a clue that there might be stairs hidden in the other altar) and leads down to the ORIGINAL stairs on the map of the catacombs:



We now know how the devils got into the catacombs and we’ve eliminated the secret door chokepoint.

#### FIXING SECRET DOORS:

- Secret door at H3 leads to H16.
- Add “secret” door (ripped open) to H6, leading to the stairs west of H15.

## GRAND DUKE RAVENGARD

As noted, in the adventure as published Grand Duke Ravengard has left the High Hall and gone to the Grand Cemetery to retrieve the Helm of Torm’s Sight. Pherria Jynks tells them where he’s gone. They follow him and find him having a metaphysical fit with the helmet on his head. They bring him back to Pherria, she performs a ritual which cures the metaphysical ailment, and Ravengard tells them about the cool vision the helmet gave him.

The net effect of all this is to needlessly deprotagonize the PCs: Instead of getting to be the awesome heroes who fetch the artifact and receive a cool divine vision, they’re the ones who get to go pick up the hero and then hear about the cool vision he got.

This can be fixed by simply NOT having Ravengard go to get the Helm of Torm’s Sight. Instead, Ravengard is still in the High Hall when the PCs arrive. He and/or Pherria Jynks know about the Helm of Torm’s Sight, but they haven’t been able to spare the resources to retrieve it. Oh, hey! PCs!

(This notably requires almost no changes to the Grand Cemetery except to ignore the descriptions of Ravengard and his men.)

**THE RAVENGARD SITUATION:** Ravengard came to Elturel on a diplomatic mission to discuss the rise of cultists in the Fields of the Dead. (This includes the Cult of the Dead Three and Tiamat's Cult of the Dragon.) When Elturel was sucked into Hell, the wary Ravengard managed to rally his men and cut his way out of an ambush by the newly erupted Hell Knights. Gathering a motley band of lower-ranking hellriders and paladins who had not been immediately transformed, Ravengard managed to secure the High Hall in the confusion following a meteor strike that wiped out a third of the fortress.

Ravengard came to Elturel with twenty men. Only twelve of them survive, but his ranks have been strengthened with Elturian knights. His current force - which has come to be known as Ravengard's Peacekeepers - numbers slightly over forty, but most of them are out in the city (gathering supplies, seeking additional allies, trying to secure the city and bring succor its citizens). At the moment only six other knights are with him here in the High Hall.

Ravengard actually stretched his forces too thinly. When a group of devils assaulted the High Hall, he realized he didn't have the strength to repel them and retreated into the crypts (Area H16). He's waiting for some of the peacekeepers out in the city to return in enough strength to drive the devils out... but, hey, the PCs work, too.

*Design Note: The devils can be either a force of Hell Knights or a surprisingly large group of Avernian raiders. Mechanically, it doesn't make any difference.*

*Alternatively, skip the whole thing and just have Ravengard and his peacekeepers firmly in control of the High Hall when the PCs arrive.*

**RAVENGARD'S COUNCIL:** Ravengard has rallied what local leadership he can (although between the meteor and the eruption of the Hell Knights, it's pretty thin):

- **Pherria Jynks** is effectively the highest ranking member of the Church of Torm in Elturel. She's the spiritual bedrock for her people right now. Some have talked about making her High Observer, but she's quashed those discussions. She knows that High Observer Kreeg had left the city shortly before its fall and hopes that he will somehow return to them with aid. (Note that Pherria carries the Tome of the Creed Resolute, as described in [Part 4B](#), with her everywhere she goes. "Recall the Creed," she says, as a bedrock of certainty in horrifically uncertain times.)
- **Wöbaer Triest** was an undersecretary of the Elturian treasury. Now self-billed as the Acting Secretary, he's more or less the civilian government of Elturel.
- **Lor Ryken** was the Elturian ambassador for Iriaebor. He'd returned to Elturel deliver a recently negotiated trade treaty. Ryken has been handling a lot of the logistics in terms of supplies for the peacekeepers.
- **Hilde Kaas** is the highest ranking Elturian knight to have survived the cataclysm. There are some who question why Ravengard, a foreigner, should be in charge. Hilde isn't one of them, and her staunch, unwavering support helps to hold the peacekeepers together.

#### WHAT THEY KNOW:

- The High Knights became the Hell Knights when the Companion was transformed. They also know that when Elturian knights are killed, they transform into devils, but that Ravengard's men do not. (Many of them actually saw the knights erupt into devils. They don't know why.)
- Elturel is hovering above the Styx and seems to be slowly sinking. There are huge chains attached around the perimeter of the city. (However, they don't know the full truth of how or why Elturel fell.)
- There's somebody organizing supplies in the east out of Shiarra's Market. (They don't know it's High Rider Ikaia, or even that it's vampiric.)

- There are devils wandering the streets, but they don't seem particularly organized.
- Ravengard has gotten enough reports of Zarielite cultists that he suspects a vast fifth column has infiltrated the city and is probably somehow responsible for their current predicament.

They do NOT know about Liashandra's Demons.

**DEVILS AT THE BARRICADES:** Add barricades to the two hallways leading in to Area H16. If the PCs didn't wipe out all the devils on their way in, have them launch an assault on the barricades while the PCs are in the middle of speaking with Ravengard and his council.

**ZARIEL CULTIST IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING:** One of the refugees is actually a Zarielite cultist. Choose an opportune/dramatic moment for them to reveal themselves. Options include:

- When the devils attack the barricades, they take advantage of the confusion to attempt to assassinate Ravengard.
- They secretly poison the water supplies. Refugees get sick, but between Pherria and the PCs it's likely no one dies. However, they need to secure a new supply of water.
- They attempt to steal or destroy the Helm of Torm's Sight. Or perhaps seek to disrupt the ritual to free the wearer.

## NEW LOCATIONS

As you're fleshing out your version of the High Hall, here are a few things you might think about adding.

**The Secret Exit.** Area H17 of the High Hall is an escape tunnel that goes... nowhere. It currently dead ends at the edge of the earthmote that Elturel is floating on. Couple thoughts:

- You could re-characterize this as having originally lead down into the Maze.
- It could *still* lead into the Maze.
- It could be a legitimate escape tunnel leading down to a secret entrance near the West Docks. This would add a hidden route to the Elturel point-crawl.

**Thavius Kreeg's Office.** Kreeg probably destroyed or took with him anything meaningful or incriminating here. But perhaps not if there's a revelation that the PCs are still struggling to figure out. Either way, this will provide a nice bit of direct connection to the Baldur's Gate portion of the adventure. Details might include Kreeg's portrait on the wall, perhaps arrayed with portraits of the previous High Observers.

**Sanctum of the Cult of the Companion.** It would be nice to have a secret sanctum where Zarielites in Elturel's government held secret religious rites. I recommend adding secret doors to Area H14 and putting it there. (Move the Council Chambers upstairs or to one of the surviving outer towers.)

**Supply Cache.** The peacekeepers have been collecting supplies, both for the refugees housed at the High Hall and for distribution throughout the city. They may have converted one of the surviving towers to this purpose, in which case it would be demesne of Ambassador Ryken.

**Floating Shrine.** Going back to the picture of High Hall, I'm drawn to the idea of having a shrine to Torm located in the floating cupola. (Perhaps that's *why* it's floating! The holiness of Torm's shrine resisting the corruption and draw of Avernus.) You could place another holy artifact of Torm up here to reward PCs who go exploring. (And if it *is* the holiness of the shrine + artifact that's keeping the place afloat, as soon as the PCs grab the artifact the whole thing is going to come crashing down!)

# PART 5E: THE GRAND CEMETERY

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



We only have a few minor tweaks for the Grand Cemetery.

## THE ABYSSAL PORTAL

The abyssal portal in Area G12 (described on page 65 of *Descent Into Avernus*) is how Liashandra's Demons were inserted into Elturel.

## GIDEON LIGHTWARD

Lightward serves Zariel and he wants the demonic incursion stopped. He may be quite willing to negotiate with the PCs and use them as his pawns to do so.

If the PCs don't destroy Lightward, then he could develop into an emerging faction in Elturel on future visits: They return to find that his undead have laid siege to the High Hall. Or that the Zariel cults have unified under his leadership. The PCs might discover that Ravengard's forces have been pushed up into the High District (where they are starving from lack of supplies), while the lower city is divided between the undead horde of Westerly and the vampiric servants of the Dock District.

## THREE CLUE RULE TO THE CEMETERY

In the adventure as written, the PCs are funneled towards the High Hall and from there are directed to the Grand Cemetery. But this isn't a necessary structure. In addition to the PCs simply navigating to the Grand Cemetery on their own through the Elturel point-crawl, you could seed the scenario with additional clues that could pull them in that direction independently.

Any or all of the following could be used:

- Grand Duke Ravengard sends them.
- Liashandra's demons come from here. Other factions may know that, or clues could be followed from the Dragoneye Dealing Coster.
- Alternatively, a random encounter with Liashandra's demons could be a new group of reinforcements traveling from the cemetery to the coster. Perhaps they are carrying a map drawn by Ophurkh (DIA, p. 69) to show them the way?
- A group of Hell Knights the PCs wipe out are carrying written orders to destroy the portal beneath the chapel.
- Before they leave for Elturel, Traxigor mentions that he once worked with a priest of Lathander named Gideon Lightward who now works at the chapel in the Grand Cemetery there.

## REMOVING RAVENGARD

As noted in Part 5D, Ravengard never mounts an expedition to retrieve the Helm of Torm's Sight. Removing all traces of this expedition has surprisingly little effect on the location and can probably be done on-the-fly. But here's a quick guide to the changes:

- **Area G7:** Remove tracks.
- **Area G11:** Remove tracks. The golden Helm of Torm's Sight still rests on the statue here.
- **Area G12:** Remove Ravengard and the bodies of the fallen guards. (I also like the imagery of the portal being placed under the rotating pool with demons emerging up through its surface, their bodies gleaming with steaming water. But I digress.)

**RITUAL OF RETURNING:** If a PC puts on the Helm of Torm's Sight, they'll be afflicted just as Ravengard is in the adventure. As written, the group will need to return to Pherria to perform the Ritual of Returning. Ophurkh might suggest Liashandra could also help them. (Which may or may not be true.)

We'll discuss the precise vision the PC wearing the helm receives as part of the general discussion of Lulu's memories in Part 8.

## THE COLLAPSED TUNNEL



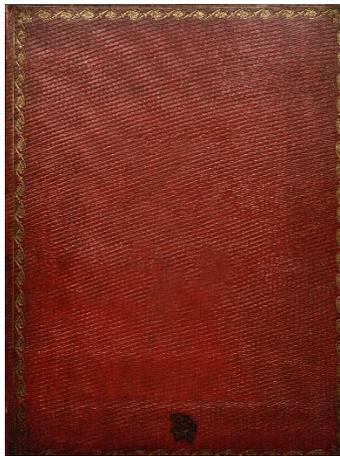
In the ossuary beneath the chapel, there is a secret, collapsed tunnel described as going "To the Cathedral." This is odd because:

- (a) There is no matching tunnel at the High Hall Cathedral.
- (b) The High Hall Cathedral is nowhere nearby and also in the opposite direction.

I think this is actually an abortive attempt at a video game-style quick exit from the dungeon. (The text now separately recommends that you don't have any encounters back to High Hall, which is advice I recommend ignoring.) Or possibly they originally intended for the cemetery (which did not previously appear in maps of Elturel) to be placed directly next to the High Hall, but changed their minds at the last minute?

My recommendation is that this tunnel provides a potential exit from the city: It leads west, under the wall, and hits the edge of the earthmote that Elturel is floating on. Directly in front of the tunnel's end, one of the large chains descends to the Dock of Fallen Cities below.

## GIDEON'S TESTAMENT



This book is a testament written by a man named Gideon Lightward. It is written in three overlapping parts. The first part describes a series of holy visions sent to him from "a divinity beyond divinity." The second part is a series of transcribed dialogues between Gideon and another individual called the Woman in White. In the beginning, it seems as if the woman is a pupil who has come to Gideon for religious guidance. Over time, however, their roles seem to invert and now it is Gideon who seems to be seeking guidance from her regarding the visions he has been receiving and, eventually, deeper questions of metaphysical and philosophical import. The third part of the text is Gideon's own philosophical ruminations upon his experiences and the conclusions he has drawn.

The overwhelming theme of the book regards the evils of demons:

*The Woman: Tell me, O Master, of what is the greatest evil.*

*Gideon: It is that of the Abyss. It is the teemless horde of chaos which seeks to rip down civilization.*

*The Woman: And why should civilization be not destroyed?*

*Gideon: Civilization is that which gives life meaning. It is the font of morality and thought. Of art and of science.*

Great praises are heaped upon those divinities which stand stalwart against this demonic threat.

*It is the gods' place to stand between Man and Chaos. It is their aegis which is their ultimate purpose, for behind their shield we create greatness and dedicate it to their honor.*

One night, however, Gideon awakens from a strange and formless dream and sees a disturbing vision in his bedchamber:

*There I beheld her. Her beauty was so great it seemed to burn my eyes. And yet through my blindness I could see her with greater clarity than any other sight that I have ever beheld.*

*Two great wings of white she had. And a sword of celestial steel so sharp that I could hear the hum of its edge. A weapon made to cleave the division between soul and mind.*

*But then I saw this essence of perfection cast away her sword. Her wings turned black. Her eyes turned to pits of fire. And a great and terrible purpose furrowed her brow.*

The next day he speaks with the Woman in White, who tells him that she, too, has had a vision of this angelic being, and that its name is Zariel.

*Gideon: But why should she have turned from the light?*

*The Woman: She turned from the light because it blinded her.*

*Gideon: Does not the light let us see?*

*The Woman: That is the lie of the light. We think only of what it illuminates, but not of what it conceals from us.*

Gideon realizes that the Great Blindness – the Great Lie – is that the gods protect man from chaos.

*... but it is not so! Helm? Torm? Tyr? Lathander? None of them battle the Abyss. They claim the glory of that war, but shed no blood in it!*

*This is why Zariel turned from Heaven. She saw the truth of her holy purpose; the Great Need to stand against Chaos. And she saw that her "holy" power was powerless because her gods had willed it so. Thus she allied herself with Hell! For it is Hell who fights chaos! It is Hell which sacrifices itself in the Blood War! Hell which fights eternal so that we poor mortals may eke out a few years of freedom upon the mortal plane!*

Zariel is, thus, the inordinate exemplar of both sacrifice and surface. Gideon has nothing but praise for her, for the choice she made, and for the great work which she does in the service not only of the mortal races, but for the balance of the entire multiverse.

*Without her, all would become Chaos. And all those who do not stand with her are servants and abettors of Chaos, though they know it not.*



# 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: HELLTUREL MAP PATCHES

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

When you're remixing published material you are, of course, deviating from the original version of the material: Some stuff will be thrown out. Some stuff will be changed. Some stuff will be added.

In addition to changes in the text (which are easy enough to do), this can also impact the graphical elements of the scenario. For example, the [Alexandrian Remix of Dragon Heist](#) added the idea that the Stone of Golorr would be missing its three eyes when the PCs discover it. Since this wasn't the case in the original adventure, all the published images of the Stone naturally featured it [having all three of its Eyes](#).

This can, obviously, also affect maps: Once you start adding new locations or moving locations around, the map is, *ipso facto*, changing.

When this is GM-facing material, this is relatively trivial to deal with: Just jot a quick note or scribble something onto the map to remind yourself of the change. For example, when I sketched up [the point-map of Elturel](#), I didn't worry too much about places where the published map had minor deviations from the Remix material. It was close enough for the GM to use it without any confusion.

When it comes to player-facing material, on the other hand, you may want to make a greater effort to seamlessly align what they're seeing with what you're describing. For example, you might [Photoshop the image of the Stone of Golorr](#) to show it in its blinded state so that you can use it as a handout for the players without having to say, "It looks like this, except it's missing these bits."

## THE MAP OF ELTUREL

In the case of Elturel, we're planning on handing the PCs a beautiful poster map of Elturel. We're also adding a bunch of new material to the city. How can we align those things?

First, when adding locations to the city you can scan the map and try to identify existing buildings that are close enough to the location you're adding. For example, I knew that Symbriil's House fronted the Garden, so I just looked along the edge of the Garden until I found a building that "fit" my image of Symbriil's House. Similarly, I wanted Helm's Shieldhall to be located in the northwest section of the city. So I scanned the whole region until I found a compound that I felt was close enough to what I wanted.

Finding buildings on a beautifully detailed map like Jared Blando's map of Elturel can also feedback into the location itself. For example, the look and location of the building I identified for the Old High Harvest Home inspired my vision of the old temple having a huge balcony/patio on every floor looking out over the lower city.

But sometimes that can only take you so far. That's when you either need to:

- Simply say something like, "You won't see this on the map, but..." or "This is a little bit different than what the map shows..." (And this is frequently just fine. Players are flexible and they recognize that the map is not the territory.)
- Or fire up good ol' Photoshop.

If you recall, we did this previously with the [Poisoned Poseidon](#) in Baldur's Gate. Now we're going to do it again with a handful of locations in Elturel.

## USING THE PATCHES

For obvious ethical and legal reasons, I'm not going to present a high-resolution version of the full Elturel map with these changes made to it. Instead, I'm going to offer small patches that can be easily added to your copy of the map using any image manipulation program.

To make this process as seamless as possible, you should [buy a digital copy of Jared Blando's map from his online store](#). The patches I present below maintain the same resolution, so you should be able to align them onto the image with just a few seconds of work.

(You can get versions of the map at considerably lower resolutions through various VTT packages, but it will be harder to seamlessly apply the patch.)

## KEEP OF THE TWIN SUNS



Let's start with the Keep of the Twin Suns. I placed this just inside the Dusk Gate on the east side of the city and described it as arching above the street to act almost like a second gatehouse.

You can see here how I simply expanded the existing buildings to make structure more explicit.

## MAIDENS' LEAP



If you look at [the older reference material for Elturel](#), you'll discover references to the Maidens' Leap or Maiden's Leap: A waterfall at the north end of the High District that cascades down into a lake below that flow into the city's canals. I thought this was cool and actually worked that image of High Watcher Bellandi leaping from the Maiden's Leap as part of the [Night of the Red Coup](#) before belatedly noticing that the cliff face had been eliminated from the new map.

If you look at the digital version of the map WotC scanned from *Forgotten Realms Adventures*, it's pretty easy to see how this happened:



Although the falls are keyed (#3), it does sort of look as if you could just walk around the lake and up into the Gardens. The *Forgotten Realms Interactive Atlas* makes it clear, however, that this is not the case:



(A version of Elturel where the Gardens actually DO slope down through the High District bluff, with cliff walls to either side of the Gardens getting higher and higher the farther north you go is also potentially cool. But the Hellturel map doesn't really depict that, either.)

In any case, this patch should be sufficient to make it clear to the players that their PCs can't just walk up into the High District from the north side (without climbing a sheer cliff).

## THE CANAL



A key question for me looking at the map of Hellturel was, "Where is the lava coming from?" I decided to answer that question by postulating that the spring beneath the High Hall had been fiendishly transformed by the transition to Avernus so that it now spewed lava instead.

However, the original map depicted lava pouring into the rift from both sides, thus negating the explanation for how lava was reaching the east side of the city.

This was my solution: The rift must have been created during the Spellplague (for reasons previously discussed), and it follows logically that the Elturians must have built a canal bridge spanning the rift in order to keep water flowing into the canals. Ergo, the lava could just cross this same canal bridge and continue into the Dock District canals.

Someone with better Photoshop skills than I could probably make this idea more explicitly clear on the map itself. But this patch is enough for my purposes.

## THE RIVER OF FIRE



Speaking of the lava spring beneath the High Hall, I wanted to add the river of lava running down the center of the Garden because... well... it's awesome.

The Maidens' Leap is included in this patch. I present it separately above for anyone who wants to keep the cliff face but is indifferent to the river of fire.

## THE DOCK WALLS

Finally, here's something that I decided to just leave alone.

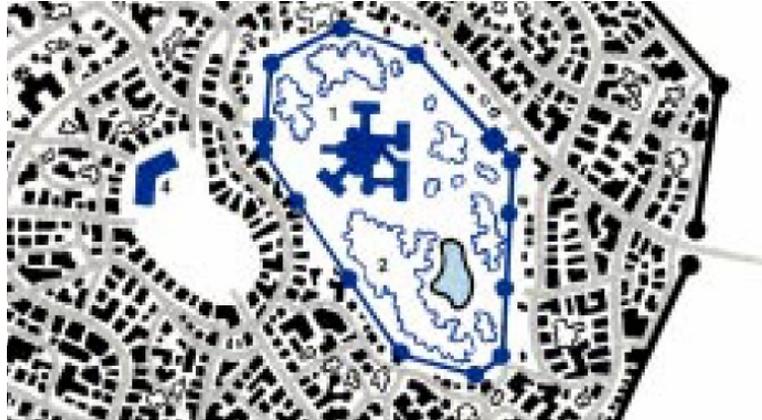


See those rivers of lava? They really shouldn't be rivers of lava.

If you look at the original maps of Elturel, it's once again not hard to see what happened:



Those blue lines were interpreted as water. But they're not: Those are the walls around the Dragoneye Dealing Coster. That bright blue color is used throughout the *Forgotten Realms Adventures* to denote walled compounds and major structures (that's why the buildings are also bright blue). You can see a similar example on the map of Daerlun a few pages earlier, for example:



Why not fix it?

Several reasons:

- I felt the amount of work required to revise the map outweighed any potential gain.
- I don't think my Photoshop skills are good enough to make the alteration aesthetically seamless. (I would compromise the quality of the map.)
- I don't think it matters that much. Whether it's lava canals or a wall, the place is geographically distinct and somewhat fortified. This isn't a major focus of the scenario for me.
- I, personally, think the walled Dragoneye Coster compound is probably about two times larger than it should be compared to the rest of the docks. (I want room for there to be some other coster companies, too, plus some independent operators.) I'd be happier with something like this (where the Dragoneye still have personal access to the Market, but they don't chew up the entire dock front):



Your mileage might vary on any of these, of course.

# PART 6: THE REST OF THE REMIX

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[by Justin Alexander – August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2020](#)



As the PCs leave Elturel, I think the time has come to take a step back and look at the big picture: They're in Avernus now. So what are they trying to do, exactly?

This post takes a close look at how the adventure is currently structured (and the problems I have with that structure). Then the rest of Part 6 is going to present the big picture of how we're going to remix this structure. We'll want this big picture to keep us oriented in *Part 7: Exploring Avernus* and keep us pointed in the right direction as we wrap things up in *Part 8: The End*.

## QUICK SUMMARY

1. The PCs get a vision from Torm which reveals that (a) Lulu helped hide the Sword of Zariel before she lost her memories and (b) she talked to a couple of kenku at some point after doing so. (The NPCs are all convinced the Sword of Zariel will save Elturel, although it is not explained how or why.)
2. Lulu remembers that she met the kenku at Fort Knucklebones, so the PCs go there.
3. Lulu remembers that the Sword of Zariel was at Haruman's Hill, so the PCs go there. (It isn't.)
4. Lulu remembers two other locations that will lead to the Sword of Zariel, so the PCs choose one of them and go there.
5. Each location is the starting point of a different linear railroad. If the PCs follow the railroad they've selected, they eventually get the Sword of Zariel.

# THE PROBLEM WITH LULU'S MEMORIES

As you can see above, recovering/following Lulu's memories is the key to the entire adventure.

When the PCs first meet Lulu and she starts tagging along with them, we're given the back story of what actually happened (DIA, p. 51) and a little table of random memories that she can intermittently recover during the adventure. This is clever, giving the DM a simple tool for keeping this central theme/plot gimmick consistently in focus as the campaign progresses.

Having made Lulu's memories the central plot gimmick of *Descent Into Avernus*, however, you might conclude that the designers would make sure that her back story is crystal clear to the DM, ensuring that this absolutely vital continuity is easily handled without error.

You would be wrong.

In fact, Lulu's back story doesn't even make sense. For example, the vision from Torm says, "The elephant knows! After hiding the Sword she met some kenku!" And Lulu says: "I remember! The kenku live at Fort Knucklebones! Let's go!"

But:

1. If you flip back to the summary of Lulu's story (DIA, p. 51), neither the kenku nor Fort Knucklebones appears. This is an egregious oversight. However, you can eventually conclude that her visit there **MUST** have happened when "Lulu wandered Avernus for months" after Zariel's fall.
2. Those kenku, although still alive, should definitely be dead. Zariel's fall happened in 1354 DR and Lulu "wandered Avernus for months." That means she met the kenku 140 years ago. Kenku only live for 60 years.
3. The kenku are at Fort Knucklebones because they work for Mad Maggie. But when Mad Maggie first came to Avernus (and before going to Knucklebones), "she "found pieces of a beautiful tapestry that chronicled the fall of Zariel."



So within a few months of Zariel's fall:

- (a) Someone made a tapestry;
- (b) The tapestry was ripped to shreds;
- (c) Mad Maggie found the tapestry;
- (d) Mad Maggie founded Fort Knucklebones; and then
- (e) Lulu came to Fort Knucklebones (meeting some kenku who are, I guess immortal).

You can kind of shuffle things around so that this makes sense (change it so that Maggie didn't find the tapestry and become interested in Zariel lore until recently, long after founding Fort Knucklebones; which also explains why she didn't pump Lulu for all the information she knows about Zariel the **FIRST** time she met Lulu), but it's still a massive continuity glitch sitting right in the middle of a crucial scenario hook in the middle of the campaign.

And this is just one example! Lulu's timeline is filled with contradictions and inconsistencies!

*Descent Into Avernus* positions this as THE central mystery of the campaign, but then it basically doesn't have a coherent solution to the mystery. It's like a murder mystery that can't quite make up its mind about who committed the murder.

**DIA:** You MUST figure this out!

**Players:** Yes! We NEED to find the answers to this!

**DIA:** Find the answers to what now?

We'll be sorting this out in *Part 6D: Lulu's Memories*.

## THE KENKU PROBLEM



Remember those kenku?

*Descent Into Avernus* says, "Find the kenku! They knew Lulu back in Ye Olde Days! They'll have valuable information that will help you find the Sword!"

So the PCs go to Fort Knucklebones. They find the kenku. The adventure says, "The kenku Chukka and Clonk instantly recognize Lulu, since they've met her previously." And then... nothing.

Literally nothing.

The kenku remembering Lulu is, as far as I can tell, never mentioned again. And if the players decide to push the issue and try to get the valuable information they were promised, there's absolutely nothing for the DM to give them.

This isn't just a dead end either: Remember that the kenku DO remember Lulu. Even if they don't have any *vital* information, there's still a story to be told here – a lost fragment of Lulu's memories to recover in a scenario which has been explicitly positioned as being about recovering Lulu's memories. It's not that

*Descent Into Avernus* says “nothing to find here”; it’s that *Descent Into Avernus* just completely forgets the reason the PCs came to Fort Knucklebones.

It was almost incomprehensible to me that such an egregious oversight could have made it into print... until I took a step back and tried to understand the designers’ mental paradigm.

What we are, in fact, talking about here is the [scenario structure](#). I’ve [talked in the past](#) about the fact that D&D (and RPGs in general) do a pretty terrible job of teaching scenario structures to new DMs. In fact, they’ve historically only taught one ([dungeon crawling](#)), and in 5<sup>th</sup> Edition they’ve even failed to do that. (5<sup>th</sup> Edition notably doesn’t even teach a new DM how to key a map — or even provide an *example* of a keyed map! — let alone teach them how to use it in play.)

Without primary sources, new GMs are largely learning their scenario structures from published examples. But it’s been decades now and the communal knowledgebase is atrophying. It’s gotten so bad that even a lot of professional designers don’t know how scenarios are supposed to be structured, so even the published examples that GMs used to be able to learn from are degenerating.

Which brings us to *Descent Into Avernus*: The designers don’t actually have a functional scenario structure. They’ve instead flailed themselves into a sort of malformed scenario structure which consists entirely of:

1. An NPC tells the PCs where to go.
2. The PCs go there.

The entire campaign is just this one “structure” repeated infinitely: An NPC tells you where to go. You go there and you find another NPC who tells you where to go.

So when it comes to the kenku, the designers aren’t designing a situation; they aren’t thinking of the game world as a real place. They aren’t even thinking about what the players’ actual experience will be (what they’ll be thinking, what they’ll want, etc.). They’re thinking of the kenku strictly as another McGuffin in a long string of McGuffins: They needed a mechanism to move the PCs from Elturel to Fort Knucklebones. The kenku were that device. The PCs are now at the Fort. Therefore, the kenku are done.

And, thus, the kenku are immediately dropped.

Furthermore, because this malformed structure is apparently ALL THEY HAVE, it seems to have become a kind of cargo cult for them: They know that NPC A has to give some sort of “explanation” for why the PCs need to go to NPC B, but they frankly don’t care what the explanation is.

And they assume the players won’t care either. The presumption is that the players are onboard; that the players share their understanding that “the NPC tells me where to go and then I go there” is the one and only way that things work.

The designers expect that players to immediately transition to the “make Mad Maggie happy” mini-game they’ve designed without ever questioning the kenku about *the thing they came here to question the kenku about* because they literally never gave a shit about the ostensible reason the PCs were looking for the kenku.

I call this the Kenku Problem. And once you’ve seen it, you really can’t unsee it. It explains A LOT of the problems *Descent Into Avernus* has:

- Why do they keep putting Must Have Encounters™ [behind secret doors](#)? Because if the PCs haven’t found the NPC to tell them where to go next, clearly the players will know to keep looking until they find them!

- Why are the PCs told to go talk to people [without being given any reason for doing so](#)? Because the REASON is irrelevant. It's white noise surrounding the operative phrase of "go talk to <insert name>."
- Why are the PCs told what will be inside the puzzle box by the same guy who tells them to "go talk to <insert name> to have the puzzle box opened" ([thus murdering the pay-off for doing so](#))? Because they don't care about the mystery and they don't think you'll care either. The only reason the "mystery" exists is so that you'll go talk to <insert name>.
- Why does the adventure assume the PCs will simply *plane shift* to Hell [without having any reason to do so](#)? Because an NPC told them to! (Why not have the NPC give them a coherent reason? Because it doesn't matter!)

This superficially makes it seem as if the NPCs are all-important! But, ironically, they're not. They're just cogs in the machine; their sole function to point you to the next cog. This is why the adventure doesn't care enough about Kreeg's history to make it consistent. Nor Zariel's. Nor Lulu's. Nor Ravengard's. Nor the kenku. Nor... well, anybody.

Ravengard tells you to talk to the kenku. The kenku tell you to talk to Mad Maggie.

Nothing else matters.

*Note: There are twenty-nine (!) writers credited in Descent Into Avernus. It is quite plausible that when I'm ascribing creative decisions to the "designers" here what I'm actually doing is anthropomorphizing artifacts from whatever development process was used to create and stitch together all of those contributions. By the same token, the book still managed to get to press without anybody saying, "Hey... What do those kenku know about Lulu? Isn't that the whole reason the PCs came here?"*

## THE KNUCKLEBONES PROBLEM

Fort Knucklebones itself suffers from a common problem I see in adventure design: Interstitial content that's not supported by the main line of activity.

The fort is filled with encounters that all start with some variation of, "While the PCs are here..."

- "At some point during their visit, the characters see the kenku..."
- "Characters who witness this can..."
- "As events play out in Fort Knucklebone, the characters notice..."

And so forth.

There's absolutely nothing wrong with **interstitial content**: The world should not be strictly reactive (the PCs do something and the world reacts); it should also be proactive (stuff happens in the world and the PCs can react to it).

But for interstitial content to work, there MUST be enough stuff for the PCs to actively engage with so that there's enough time for the interstitial encounters to be triggered. And this is not the case here. Instead, as soon as the PCs enter Fort Knucklebones this happens:

The area enclosed by the rampart is littered with trash and mechanical parts, some put together in a way that resembles a vehicle. Ramshackle structures, built from the same junk as the outer wall, provide shelter.

A platoon of small fey creatures mills about, all looking like feral gnomes. Several of them sport tall red caps, some of which drip with vile ichor.

A pair of kenku examine one of the strange vehicles, chattering to each other in high-pitched squawks. These kenku carry an assortment of strange tools. When they see you, they turn and stare in wonder.

The kenku Chukka and Clonk instantly recognize Lulu, since they've met her previously. Before the characters can act, Clonk squawks at them:

One of the kenku waves in your direction as if telling you to remain where you are. "What a deal! Patience is a virtue! Can't keep the boss waiting!" He runs off into one of the trash structures.

Moments later he returns, leading a tall creature wearing a long, tattered shift covered in mud, blood, mold, and worse. The hag's eyes seem to move independently of each other as she approaches, her straggly brown hair hanging in front of them. Resting on each shoulder are red-eyed ravens that scrutinize your group. Behind her, a hulking creature built of disparate fiendish parts trudges, moaning and hopping as it walks.

Then both of the hag's eyes focus keenly on your group, and on Lulu specifically. "My goodness!" the hag croaks, spittle dribbling from her mouth. "Where did you find such a treasure?"

They immediately meet Mad Maggie. They tell her what they want. She immediately takes them to a dream machine and recovers Lulu's memories. Lulu immediately declares she knows where the Sword is. The PCs will then immediately leave. (Why wouldn't they?)

No narrative space is given for the PCs to just hang out at Fort Knucklebone, which means that all of the "hanging out at Fort Knucklebone" encounters will never happen.

It's possible that the fort was originally intended to be some sort of hub or home base for the PCs so that these interstitial encounters would play out over the course of several visits, but as written it isn't. In any

case, the encounters as written are supposed to play out before Maggie gives them supplies (because their outcome is supposed to influence that), even though there's a continual stream of uninterrupted interaction with Maggie from the moment they enter the base until she gives them the supplies.

You can kind of half-ass a solution by simply injecting extra time into the main line of Maggie's activities. For example:

- Instead of immediately meeting the kenku and having them immediately bring Maggie to the PCs, the PCs have to find the kenku and then go to Maggie (so that they explore the fort a bit and meet some of the people there before meeting her).
- It will take Maggie some time to assemble the dream machine. Probably a few hours should suffice, during which time the PCs can do all the other things.

If you want to full-ass a solution, though, you'll want to figure out some sort of active agenda the PCs could be pursuing at the fort while waiting for Maggie to finish the machine. Otherwise they're just twiddling their thumbs. Instead of Maggie automatically giving them supplies, for example, maybe they need to get properly outfitted for Avernus here.

As described in *Part 6C: Quest of the Dream Machine*, the Remix will, in fact, make Fort Knucklebones a *de facto* hub that the PCs are likely to make their homebase and return to multiple times.

## THE CHOOSE YOUR RAILROAD PROBLEM

Let's be blunt: Choose Your Railroad is a terrible scenario structure.

It's almost an oxymoron. You recognize that choice is important, but then you immediately discard it in favor a long string of Kenku Problem interactions lightly spiced with meaningless fetch quests.

(A quick digression on fetch quests: A fetch quest is any time an NPC tells a PC to get a Plot Coupon and return it to them; or, vice versa, when the NPC gives the PC a Plot Coupon and tells them to take it some place else. A meaningful fetch quest is one where the PCs care about the Plot Coupon and its disposition. A meaningless fetch quest is one where only the NPC cares about the Plot Coupon and the only reason the PCs are delivering it is because they want the NPC to do something else for them; as a result, the actual Plot Coupon and what you're doing with it is inconsequential and could easily be swapped out for any other arbitrary items/locations.)

This is very much a variation of the broken [Choose Your Own Adventure design technique](#), and it's particularly painful here because *Descent Into Avernus* actually promises to deliver this incredible, open-ended exploration of Avernus before yanking it away.

But the problems with the adventure's Choose Your Railroad go much deeper than the fact that it's just a bad idea in principle. It's actually difficult to explain how poorly this is done.

So the PCs have Mad Maggie use her dream machine on Lulu. Lulu wakes up and says, "The sword! The sword! I know where it is!"

(Spoilers: She doesn't.)

Her "dreams lead the characters on a wild goose chase to Haruman's Hill."

First: There's no clear reason given for why Lulu thinks Haruman's Hill is where the sword is.

Second: Given the timeline, it's fairly clear that Haruman's Hill did not and could not exist when Lulu was in Avernus.

But, OK. Fine. This thing that makes no sense happens. The PCs go adventuring at Haruman's Hill for a little while, they figure out that Lulu took them to the wrong place, and Lulu says:

"I'm so sorry! My memory is a little hazier than I thought! Having pondered my dreams further, I think there are two sites in Avernus that are important to finding the sword! Choose between a place where demons manifest and one where demons are destroyed."

These are, of course, the two railroads.

But, once again, there's no reason given for why Lulu thinks either of these locations have anything to do with the Sword.

And that's because they don't.

They have nothing to do with the Sword. They have nothing to do with Lulu's memories.

THERE IS NO REASON FOR LULU TO SAY YOU SHOULD GO TO THESE TWO LOCATIONS.

And this becomes abundantly clear as soon as the PCs go to them.

The first one is a harvesting station for abyssal chickens. Four (presumably redneck) devils are harvesting the chickens and bullying another devil who is mentally impaired. These guys explicitly know absolutely nothing about what the PCs are trying to do, but if the PCs bribe them they can tell them where to find a guy who MIGHT know something that can help them.

Okay. What about the other location?

Here the PCs meet a devil who knows absolutely nothing about what they're trying to do, but if they go on a meaningless fetch quest for him he'll give them a letter of introduction to another guy who MIGHT help them do a thing that they're NOT doing.

So to briefly recap here:

1. Lulu takes you to the wrong location.
2. Lulu tells you two more locations to go to, but can give no reason why you should.
3. If you go to those locations, it is immediately clear that there's no coherent reason for you to be there.

So Lulu:

1. Demonstrates she can't be trusted to give accurate directions.
2. Fails to give accurate directions AGAIN.
3. *Descent Into Avernus* than assumes the PCs will just continue along the "Path" they've "chosen," even though there's no discernible reason for them to do so.

And obviously this is a "reasonable" assumption because there are, after all, NPCs telling the PCs where to go and this is a Kenku Problem.

Fixing this was non-trivial. I wasn't sure there WAS a fix without starting over from scratch, because the adventure had really backed itself into a corner here.

If I hadn't solved it, of course, then we wouldn't be doing this Remix at all.

The actual railroads themselves are filled with a plethora of problems ([as railroads always are](#)), but since we're defenestrating the whole structure there's not a lot of value in breaking it down point by point. Our alternative structure will be laid out in *Part 6C: Quest of the Dream Machine*, and *Part 7: Exploring Avernus* will look at how to run Avernus as a true exploration campaign.

# PART 6B: THE AVERNIAN QUEST

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[by Justin Alexander – August 5th, 2020](#)



The PCs' goal in Avernus is to free Elturel, and this requires three things:

1. Bellandi's pact with Zariel must be broken.
2. The chains holding Elturel must be severed.
3. Elturel must be returned to the Material Plane.

Of these, the essential *modus operandi* is the first: For most of their time in Avernus, the PCs can be strictly motivated by figuring out how to break the pact and the campaign will keep ticking along happily. In fact, it's theoretically possible for them to actually destroy the contract only for them to then realize that, pact or no pact, Elturel is still physically stuck in Hell.

**BREAKING THE PACT:** There are three ways to break Bellandi's pact.

1. Both copies of the *infernal contract* must be brought together and then destroyed. Destruction requires special effort, such as dipping the contracts in the River Styx, the fires of an ancient dragon (or perhaps Tiamat?), or a *wish* spell.
2. If Zariel is redeemed, she will cancel all of her *infernal contracts*.
3. If Zariel is killed, all of her *infernal contracts* are canceled.

**SEVERING THE CHAINS:** The chains holding Elturel can be severed before the *infernal contract* is broken, but they will simply reform. They are a metaphysical manifestation of the contract and become physically severable only when the contract no longer exists. They can be severed in four ways.

1. Zariel could do it with or without the Sword (because it was her pact which formed them).

2. The PCs could form an alliance with a powerhouse (Bel, Tiamat, or a released Gargauth; but not the planetar or any holy power other than a redeemed Zariel for metaphysical reasons).
3. The Sword of Zariel can cut the chains.
4. There is a control room for the Dock of Fallen Cities in Zariel's Flying Fortress, which can be used to release the chains.

**RETURNING ELTUREL:** If the PCs break the contract and sever the chains, then Elturel is left floating above the plains of Avernus. Now what? Moving an entire city through planar space is a non-trivial task, that's why Zariel bathed the city in the Companion's light for fifty years in order to build up an etheric charge (see [Part 4B](#)).

Good news, though: When that negative charge was reversed to generate the energy wave that brought Elturel to Avernus, an equal and opposite charge was passed into the Companion. (That's the reason it's been crackling with lightning this whole time.) This means that if the planetar inside the Companion is released, it will be able to literally lift the entire city out of the Nine Hells and return it to the Material Plane.

1. The PCs can release the planetar by retrieving the adamantine key rods.
2. A redeemed Zariel can also do so.

**ALTERNATIVE - GATE ESCAPE:** Once Bellandi's pact has been broken and the chains severed, it becomes possible to evacuate Elturel. (Prior to that, anyone who was in Elturel when it was brought to Avernus is bound and cannot leave the Nine Hells.) We'll be seeding a few options for opening long-term gates that last long enough for thousands of people to pass through them into Part 7; it's also possible that the PCs might be able to convince powerful allies (like Tiamat or Bel) to do the same.

A full-scale evacuation option, however, is a corner case I'm not going to spend time prepping unless the players jump for it. The particulars of the evacuation will depend a lot on current circumstances. Things to think about:

- How can the PCs make sure everyone in Elturel knows about the evacuation?
- Who might attempt to stop the evacuation? (Zariel launching a full-fledged devil invasion of Elturel to prevent her prizes from escaping is definitely an option at this point.)
- How will the PCs protect the gate?
- What other problems, roadblocks, and catastrophes might afflict the evacuation effort?
- What factions can help the PCs (and how)?
- What ethical quandaries need to be resolved? (For example, who gets to go first? And should some people be allowed to go at all? Some factions might not want High Rider Ikaia and his vampiric spawn coming with them.)

To make things really epic, remember that we've set up the metaphysics so that it's literally the good souls in Elturel which keep the city floating above the Avernian plains. Although in this scenario the chains are no longer dragging the city down, if those souls literally *leave*, the whole city could begin rapidly falling. Imagine:

- A final siege upon the gate's position by Zariel.
- One whole half of the city cracks loose and falls into the Styx below.
- The PCs desperately trying to get the last few thousand people through the gate as the ground begins to crack and crumble around them!

## BARGAINING WITH ZARIEL

Things an unredeemed Zariel could potentially do:

- Give the PCs her copy of the Bellandi pact.
- Cancel the Bellandi pact outright.
- Sever or release the chains holding Elturel.
- Release the planetar from inside the Companion.

The only thing Zariel is willing to trade for is the Sword of Zariel. (The published adventure suggests a couple other possibilities, but given the scope of what Zariel is giving up – a plan 50+ years in the making and tens of thousands of new foot soldiers for her armies – it's *really* difficult justifying any of them.)

I further recommend that, by default, Zariel will only trade the Sword for the physical contract itself. (Primarily because the special effort still needed to destroy the paired contracts is more interesting than just having Zariel do it herself.) Smart PCs will even make sure the bargain includes a provision that Zariel won't send a task force of devils to steal the contracts back from them.

If the PCs can sweeten the deal (giving her the Shield of the Hidden Lord, agreeing to kill one of her enemies, etc.) they might be able to get her to cancel the contract outright or sever the chains, too.

## REDEEMING ZARIEL

As we'll discuss more in Part 6D, the Sword of Zariel contains a literal spark of goodness: Zariel placed a shard of her own soul in the Sword deliberately, knowing that the devils were coming for her and sensing her own weakness. The Sword will thus offer the PCs an opportunity to redeem Zariel if they have the chance.

If Zariel is redeemed, she can (and will):

- Cancel all of her *infernal contracts*.
- Sever the chains holding Elturel.
- Release the planetar.

This is more or less the "official" or "best" ending of *Descent Into Avernus*. If the PCs can pull off the redemption, they pretty much solve the whole problem in one fell swoop.

**ALTERNATIVE - DREAM MACHINE REDEMPTION:** As an alternative to the Sword of Zariel, it might also be possible to redeem Zariel by somehow maneuvering her into the dream machine with Lulu, forcing her to relive her memories, and, thus, giving her the opportunity to make a different choice.

This seems like a pretty long shot. But if one of the players make a 1,000 IQ play and they somehow manage to pull it off, more power to them. (Knocking Zariel unconscious and literally dragging her into the machine is one way. In her hubris, she'd probably also be willing to agree to get into the dream machine for a price considerably lower than the Sword of Zariel.)

# RAID ON THE FLYING FORTRESS

In Part 7, I'll be redesigning Zariel's Flying Fortress using the [Raiding the Death Star!](#) scenario structure. There are two things the PCs can gain by raiding the fortress:

- Zariel's half of Bellandi's contract.
- Access to the control room for the Dock of Fallen Cities (which they can use to detach the chains if the pact has been broken).

**ALTERNATIVE - ASSAULT ON THE DOCK OF FALLEN CITIES:** I've put the control room for the Dock of Fallen Cities on the flying fortress mostly to simplify my prep. In practice, there are some shortcomings: You can justify Zariel having the controls on her mothership, but logically it probably makes more sense for the Dock's control center to be onsite. There's also a real risk of déjà vu (with the PCs raiding the fortress for the contract, going to destroy the contract, and then having to raid the fortress again to disengage the chains). You can work around this by either allowing the PCs to set the controls to disengage once the contract is destroyed (so they can do both tasks in one raid) OR by making the second raid distinct and interesting in some way (by increasing security, for example).

Alternatively, you could move the control center to some spire or turret in the Dock of Fallen Cities and prep an alternative scenario in which the PCs (having somehow destroyed the contract) must now assault the Dock and release the chains!

(For example, you could take [this map](#), put [this map](#) at the bottom of it, and then put [this map](#) on top of the second map. Stock it up with a devilish security team and some magical defenses and away you go.)

## POWERFUL ALLIES

There are some very powerful allies (or, at least, allies of convenience) that the PCs can make in Avernus. Likely candidates include Bel, Tiamat, and Gargauth (if he's freed from the Shield of the Hidden Lord). Kostchtchie, Crokek'toeck, Yeenoghu, and maybe even Shummrath are significantly less likely options.

These allies can:

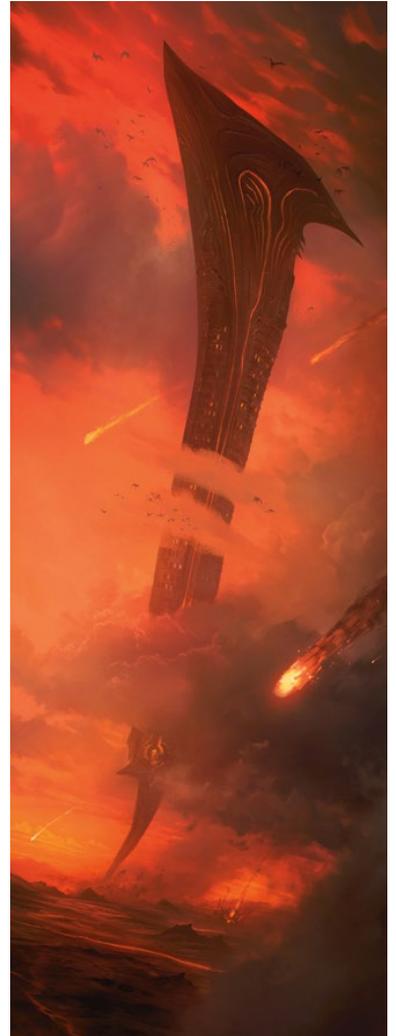
- Help the PCs kill Zariel. (Without such aid, it's extremely unlikely the PCs can pull this off.)
- Sever the chains holding Elturel.

Almost without exception, all of them are more likely to do the latter than the former. And, of course, getting any of them to help is going to come at a price.

## UNLOCKING THE COMPANION

Unlocking the Companion requires nine adamantine control rods which were lost when Zariel's previous flying fortress crashed (DIA, p. 118). The unlocking process is briefly described on DIA, p. 154.

Note that I'm deliberately getting rid of the option of shattering the Companion by hitting it with the Sword of Zariel. Because the Sword can also sever the chains, my personal preference is for it not to be a



one-stop shop for solving the whole problem. Your mileage may vary, however, and there's nothing inherently wrong with a Sword-wielding PC swooping up and hacking the planetar out of its prison.

**ALTERNATIVE - RODS, RODS, EVERYWHERE:** As written, all nine adamantine control rods are located in the wrecked flying fortress. Alternatively, the fortress could have been looted decades ago and the rods scattered across the Avernian plains. Maybe Zariel has recovered some and they're in her current fortress; maybe Bel has some; maybe some warlords prize them; maybe Maggie has one and doesn't even know what it is (the PCs see it early in the campaign and later realize - OMG! - it was right in front of them the whole time!).

This will extend the campaign, but can be used to [push](#) the PCs into interacting more widely/deeply with locations in Avernus.

## REVELATION LIST: THE BIG THREE

There are a number of revelations necessary for the PCs to complete the Avernian quest, so let's whip up some revelation lists. Like the list in [Part 3C: The Vanthampur Revelations](#), I'm including brief descriptions of each clue for clarity since many of these clues refer to material that won't be available until after this post goes live.

**HOW TO FREE ELTUREL:** Break the pact and sever the chains to free the city. Then you'll still need to find a way to take it home.

- **Liashandra.** The demon sent to stop Zariel from claiming Elturel will happily share her knowledge of how it can be prevented.
- **Bel's Forge.** The original plans for the Dock of Fallen Cities would spell it out.
- **Gargauth.** If pushed to the brink (see [Addendum: Playing Gargauth](#)), Gargauth can explain how to save Elturel.
- **Dock of Fallen Cities.** (Partial) The control instrumentation would indicate that the chains cannot be disengaged unless the pact has been broken.

**HOW TO BREAK THE PACT:** Get the other half of the contract from Zariel, kill her, or make a bargain with her.

- **Sylvira and Traxigor.** They explain this in their "mission briefing" before the PCs go to Hellturel.
- **Pherria Jynx & Ravengard.** If the PCs tell them that they have Bellandi's copy of the contract, Jynx knows enough lore to know what they have to do. Ravengard will explicitly tell them that this is what they should do.
- **Gargauth.**
- **Talking to almost anyone in Hell.** Pretty much everybody in Hell knows how to break an *infernal contract*.

**HOW TO SEVER THE CHAINS:** Can't be done until the *infernal contract* is broken. Requires someone or something of incredible power. Zariel herself could do it using the control room on her flying fortress.

- **Studying the Chains.** DC 16 Intelligence (Arcana) check while studying the chains with proper tools/spells will make it clear how much strength would be required; and possibly that the chains have a remote connection to something that must be controlling them.
- **Liashandra.** She doesn't know where the control room is, but knows that it must exist.
- **Bel's Forge.** The original plans for the Dock of Fallen Cities. Bel himself may also offer it in trade.
- **Gargauth.** If pushed to the brink, Gargauth can tell them how "impossible" it is to release the chains.

**HOW TO RETURN ELTUREL:** Open the Companion and free the planetar.

- **Bel's Forge.** The original plans for the Dock of Fallen Cities or Companion reveal the negative charge built up in the Companion.
- **Dock of Fallen Cities Control Room.** Instrumentation reveals the negative charge built up in the Companion.
- **Gargauth.** If pushed to the brink, Gargauth knows the planetar can save the city.

## REVELATION LIST: ADDITIONAL REVELATIONS

The revelations above reveal WHAT the PCs need to do. These supporting revelations point to HOW they can do it.

**ZARIEL WANTS THE SWORD:** And therefore might be willing to trade something for it.

- **The Vision from Torm** (*Lulu's Memories*)
- **Maggie** (*Fort Knucklebones*). She's an expert in Zariel lore.
- **Original Hellriders.** Any of the original Hellriders know how important the Sword is to Zariel.
- **Swordhunters.** Found throughout the Avernian plains, seeking Zariel's long-standing bounty for its recovery.

**THE TRUE NATURE OF THE SOLAR INSIDIATOR:** There's a planetar locked inside (and maybe you should free it).

- **Bel's Forge.** Where the Companion was built. The original plans can be found there; they have been notated to indicate that the control rods were lost in the wreck of Zariel's previous flying fortress.
- **Dock of Fallen Cities Control Room.** Instrumentation reveals true nature of the Companion.
- **Gargauth.** Gargauth knows. He may be willing to reveal this information without being pushed to the brink if circumstances / the offer is right.

**BEL'S FORGE IS WHERE THE COMPANION WAS BUILT:** And you can find out how to open it there.

- **Maggie** (*Fort Knucklebones*). Knows the Companion was designed at Bel's Forge.
- **Gargauth.** Doesn't know how to open the Companion, but knows it was built at Bel's Forge.
- **Dock of Fallen Cities Control Room.** Instrumentation bears Bel's forgemark.

**LOCATION OF THE CRASHED FLYING FORTRESS:** Where the adamantite control rods are.

- **Bel.** He knows.
- **Maggie.** She knows.
- **Avernian Warlord Rumors.** PCs can hunt for rumors (see *Part 7: Exploring Avernus*).

**THE SPARK IN THE SWORD:** The Sword of Zariel contains a spark of Zariel's divine light (and could be used to redeem her). This is not a proper revelation, but it is a significant info-dump so it may be worth pointing out here.

- **Lulu's Memories.** Foreshadow the truth.
- **Claiming the Sword.** The moment of claiming the Sword makes it crystal clear that the spark exists (and why it exists). See *Part 6D: Lulu's Memories*.

# PART 6C: QUEST OF THE DREAM MACHINE

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[by Justin Alexander – August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)



There are several different ways that the PCs can complete the [Avernian Quest](#), but the most immediate (and the one they're most likely to be pursuing as they leave Elturel for the first time) is the Sword of Zariel. The vision they receive from Torm and the shredded remnants of Lulu's memories point them towards a pair of kenku at Fort Knucklebones.

## THE HISTORY OF FORT KNUCKLEBONES

The kenku Lulu is looking for are long dead. Lulu actually came to Fort Knucklebones hundreds of years ago, shortly after Zariel's fall (see Part 6D).

See, there has always been a flock of kenku at Fort Knucklebones. For as long as anyone can remember. Longer, actually. The people in charge come and go, but the kenku are always there. The current boss is Mad Maggie, but before that there was:

- Lord Fauxen, a human warlock
- A flock of vrock, who secretly used the fort as a forward supply base in the Blood War
- Xartemug, a pit fiend

And so forth.

Although no one remembers Lulu here and no story of her original visit has been passed down, there is a vestige of her to be found among the local kenku: Kenku speak by mimicking words that they have heard. Flocks of kenku have small, unique collections of word "performances" that are collectively shared and passed down from one generation to the next. One such "word of the foreflock" in the Knucklebones

flock is Lulu saying the word “love.” For generations, when these kenku have said that they love each other (or anyone else), they have spoken it with Lulu’s voice.

The kenku will recognize Lulu’s voice and become quite excited about this.

## FORT KNUCKLEBONES

Fort Knucklebones is a trading post; a sort of Port Royal for the Avernian warlords where they come for supplies, recreation, and repairs. This also makes it a useful hub of operations for the PCs.

Mad Maggie is the current potentate of the fort. Although not a warlord herself, she is seen by them as an equal and the neutrality of the fort is (generally) respected.

The fort itself, based around an outcropping of red rock shaped like a clawed hand, is somewhat described in *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 80:

- There’s a **rampart** of rock, bones, and metal debris with a **gatehouse**.
- The **outer court**, roughly the area that lies between the rampart and the knuckle gates.
- There are four **courtyards** located between each of the knuckles. These courtyards are fronted by the **knuckle gates**, which can be shut for an additional line of defense, but are generally left open.
- There is a **fastness** within the outcropping, with access caves from most of the knuckle courtyards. The fastness includes various storehouses and also Maggie’s demesne.

*Note: Fort Knucklebones is also likely to be the PCs’ first introduction to soul coins as a form of currency. Take the opportunity to push home the “you’re not in Kansas any more” moment. Check out [Addendum: Soul Coins](#), for a more detailed look at how the coins can be used in Descent Into Avernus.*

**BETWEEN THE KNUCKLES:** There are four courtyards located between the “knuckles” of the outcropping.

- The **tinker’s shed**, a service station for war machines run by the kenku. A large cave at the back of this courtyard serves as a garage. The kenku live in a number of smaller caves that line the fingers to either side of the courtyard. A number of these caves are quite high, and the kenku have to climb ladders carved into the rock. (According to the flock’s oral tradition, before their entire species was cursed, the kenku of Fort Knucklebones could simply fly up to these caves. That’s how long they’ve been living here.)
- **The Well**, a bar built up around a rare natural spring of clean water. This spring is the reason Fort Knucklebones has been so constantly occupied. The barkeep at the Well is named Natasha the Dark; she claims to be a “cloned daughter of Baba Yaga.” (This would imply that she’s the clone-sister of Iggwilv. She’s probably making it up. But who knows? Maybe *she’s* the real Tasha who invented *Tasha’s hideous laughter* and Iggwilv stole *her* identity.)
- The **arcade** is filled with market tents. Maggie’s infernal bank, run by an imp named Sarcasia, can also be found here. (It houses her stockpile of soul coins, acts as a moneychanger, and offers loans of various sorts.)
- The **hostel**, located in the broad space between thumb and index finger, is more of a public campground. No fees are charged. Anyone can grab a slab of space and pitch a tent. (Maggie figures that if people are staying here, they’ll be spending money at the arcade and that’s where she gets her cut.) The imps love to play practical jokes on people staying here.

*Note: “Tinker’s shed” is the generic term on Avernus for war machine repair shops or service stations. They take the name “shed” because they’re usually*

*rather small. The kenku's facility here at Fort Knucklebones is expansive, but still referred to as a shed.*

**INHABITANTS:** For ease of reference, here's a list of NPCs at Fort Knucklebones. Also arranged as a random table just in case:

<b>d12</b>	<b>NPC</b>
1	Mad Maggie (DIA, p. 82)
2	Mickey (DIA, p. 83)
3	Chukka the Kenku (DIA, p. 83)
4	Clonk the Kenku (DIA, p. 83)
5	Pins & Needles (DIA, p. 84)
6	Barnabas the Flameskull (DIA, p. 84)
7	Redcaps (DIA, p. 84)
8	Wazzik the Madcap (DIA, p. 84)
9	Sarcasia (see above)
10	Natasha the Dark (see above)
11	Elturian Escapee
12	Random Avernian Gang

If the PCs do end up making Fort Knucklebones a hub for their operations in Avernus, I'd recommend adding a few extra characters to this list and working it up with a [Tavern Time™](#) structure. This is a good example of where [smart prep](#) means waiting to prep something until the players have started wading into it and you know you'll need it.

**KNUCKLEBONES ENCOUNTERS:** Don't use up all the encounters in the first fifteen minutes the PCs are at Fort Knucklebones. Or even their first visit. This stuff can build over time.

- Chukka & Clonk: Help repair war-machine (DIA, p. 83)
- Mickey: Limping from injury (DIA, p. 83)
- Imps: Play a practical joke (DIA, p. 84)
- Imps: Want PCs to kill Wazzik (DIA, p. 84)
- Barnabas: Find the flameskull's missing tooth (DIA, p. 84)
- Redcaps: Offer PCs a severed finger as a friendship gift (DIA, p. 84)

If you rework Fort Knucklebones using the Tavern Time™ structure, you can pull these encounters into the NPC "topics of conversation." (You'll want 2-3 per NPC.)

*Bonus Encounter: Natasha the Dark wants someone to cast hideous laughter on her. It reminds her of her sister.*

**THE 1-TO-10 SCALE:** This is briefly described on DIA p. 80-81. It's basically a mental shorthand for tracking what an NPC's attitude is towards the PCs. You can actually track this sort of thing for all NPCs, on your [campaign status document](#) if it seems useful to you.

## ARRIVING AT FORT KNUCKLEBONES

When the PCs come to Fort Knucklebones for the first time, we don't want the kenku they're looking for to be the first thing they see. Looking for the kenku will mean exploring the fort, pushing and pulling them into encounters with the various locations and characters here.

**REDCAP WATCHPOST:** There's a watchpost in the fort's ramparts manned by redcaps. Use the encounter described in DIA, p. 81.

**OUTER COURT:** As the PCs pass through the watchpost and into the outer court, describe three specific people (or groups of people) doing things around the courtyard. (One of these might be an encounter, but that's probably not necessary right now.)

Note that you want to be *specific*. You don't want to just describe a generic mélange of activity (e.g., "The courtyard is full of strange-looking creatures. There are horns and tails and a faint smell of sulfur."). You want specific stuff they can choose to interact with.

None of these should be kenku. I recommend including a warlord gang (maybe hanging out around their war-machines outside the Well) as a way of foreshadowing or, if the PCs choose to interact with them, introducing this aspect of the campaign. (More on these gangs in Part 7.)

## FUTURE VISITS

On future visits to Fort Knucklebones I recommend having:

- 1d3 or 1d4-1 NPCs in the Outer Court and the Well.
- Having 1d2 or 1d3-1 NPCs in the other courtyards (plus whatever NPCs would logically be there, like the kenku in the garage).

If you expand the cast of characters here, you can probably bump those numbers up a notch.

Have one or two encounters on each visit. (If you haven't gone for a full Tavern Time™ structure, in which case they'll be keyed to the NPCs as you generate them.)

## QUEST OF THE DREAM MACHINE

In the published book, Mad Maggie uses her dream machine to unlock Lulu's memories and then Lulu's memories guide the PCs as they journey across Avernus (through the twin railroads).

We are more or less going to invert this structure:

- The PCs come to Fort Knucklebones.
- The kenku explain that they can't help, but maybe Mad Maggie can.
- Mad Maggie is intrigued (in large part due to her obsession with Zariel lore and Lulu's presence in the rare tapestry she owns, see Part 6D). She has a machine that she thinks could be used to recover Lulu's lost memories.
- Just one problem: The machine doesn't work. It's missing four key components. The PCs will need to find these components in order to make the machine work.

To find these components, the PCs will need to explore Avernus (as described in Part 7). Once they have the components, the dream machine can be repaired and Lulu's memories recovered (as described in Part 6D).

*Homework: How did Mad Maggie get the dream machine?*

### THE FOUR COMPONENTS:

- **Nirvanan Cogbox.** Used in a variety of infernal machines, these cogboxes come from Mechanus.
- **Heartstone.** Used by night hags to infiltrate the dreams of their victims. It's used as a prism or beam-splitter in the dream machine.
- **Phlegethosian sand.** Obsidian sand pounded from the jagged, rocky plains of Phlegethos, the fourth layer of Hell.

- **Astral pistons.** Another component used in various pieces of infernal machinery. The pistons are actually extruded into the astral plane, maximizing their mechanical output. It's an outdated technology and rarely used these days.

MAGGIE'S LEADS: TBD.

## RUMOR TABLE

TBD.

*Note: To be properly integrated, Maggie's leads and the rumor table need to be integrated with the Avernus hexcrawl described in Part 7. Based on feedback from readers and patrons, I would rather keep a regular schedule of material instead of waiting for Part 7 to be completed. So, long story short, I'll be coming back to complete these TBD sections (Maggie's Rumors and the Rumor Table) once Part 7 is done.*

*Some brief notes on methodology:*

*There should be at least three of each component seeded into the hexcrawl. (The [Three Clue Rule](#) waves hello.)*

*Maggie should give four leads. (Yup, the Three Clue Rule again.) She should suggest two different sources for one of the components, one potential source for a second component, and one potential source (which is incorrect or outdated) for a third component. She knows what the fourth component is, but she has no idea where the PCs might be able to find it.*

*(One of these leads will probably also be indirect. Something like: "You should talk to so-and-so. They probably know where you could find a cogbox." This will introduce players to the idea that asking around is a viable avenue for finding this stuff.*

*This should probably be the legitimate lead pointing to a component Maggie only has one lead for. This spreads three different experiences across the components: For one they have two leads and can choose one. For another they have to find somebody and ask questions. For the third they have a dead end and will need to find a different way.)*

*The PCs need to get leads to find the components (including alternate leads to the components Maggie has some inkling of and the ones she doesn't). We could super-saturate our hexcrawl with clues (specifically seeding in three clues for every instance of every component, for a total of 36 separate clues; honestly, it's just the Three Clue Rule all the way down here).*

*But that's a lot of work and still prone to failure (because the hexcrawl exploration structure doesn't guarantee that the PCs will encounter any given piece of content), so what I'm going to do instead is use a rumor table: Wherever the PCs go, they can ask people if they know anything about the components they're looking for. There's a 1 in 3 chance that they do, and then you can roll on the rumor table and give the appropriate lead.*

*I'll probably still lay down at least one layer of clues into the keyed content of the hexcrawl (one clue pointing to each individual component, which will still be three*

*clues per type of component) to give some potential variety to their investigation (rather than just every lead being a rumor they hear from someone they ask).*

# PART 6D: LULU'S MEMORIES

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[by Justin Alexander - October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)



We've previously discussed:

- The continuity errors in Lulu's backstory.
- The continuity errors in Zariel's backstory (including seeking vengeance against a Demon Lord of the Abyss by attacking the Nine Hells).
- The failure to pay off the rediscovery of Lulu's memories after positioning them as THE central mystery of the second half of the campaign.
- That many of the tools given to the DM for managing Lulu's memories are conceptually great (like a list of memory triggers and a definitive reference for her backstory), but unfortunately flawed and incomplete (i.e., giving a "definitive" reference that has both continuity errors and glaring omissions).

I've also briefly talked about my dissatisfaction with placing the Charge of the Hellriders in 1354 DR despite the fact that it was already [legendary and of uncertain truth in 1358 DR](#). (This is definitely a non-essential fix. But, yes, I'll be fixing it.)

In this installment of the Remix, we're also going to be looking at Lulu's dream quest and the other "memory dives" in the campaign.

One of the potential problems with *Descent Into Avernus* is that the PCs lack any sort of personal relationship with Zariel. She is, at best, a distant antagonist. Despite this, at the end of the campaign, the PCs are assumed to come face-to-face with her for the first time and immediately help her redeem her soul. This makes it *really* difficult to get the players emotionally invested in Zariel's ultimate fate.

This is what makes the idea of Lulu's dream quest so awesome! The PCs can actually *experience* the Charge of the Hellriders, the fall of Zariel, and all this other cool history the campaign is built around. They may not actually meet Zariel, but they'll nonetheless get a chance to know her and, therefore, care about her.

... except the dream quest doesn't actually do that. The dive into Lulu's "memories" are structured around five "dreams":

- Dream 1: Explicitly something that didn't actually happen.
- Dream 2: Didn't happen and isn't a memory.
- Dream 3: Actually just part of Dream 2.
- Dream 4: Not a memory.
- Dream 5: Lulu looks through a telescope and sees where the Sword is (except she doesn't, actually).

This is a huge missed opportunity!

Dream sequences often all flat because they aren't real and don't mean anything. But they can be really amazing if they ARE meaningful and have real stakes. Which is absolutely the case with Lulu's dream quest: Her memories are the central mystery of the campaign, right? And at stake is the location of the Sword of Zariel, which is the key to saving an entire city. Insofar as the players give a crap about this campaign, they will give a crap about what is revealed here.

Which is why it's so frustrating that *literally nothing is revealed*.

So we'll also be looking at how to structure these memory dives to provide a compelling "memory mystery" that delivers meaning and memorable pay-offs (pun intended). In fact, we'll be adding a couple new memory dives to further enhance this portion of the campaign.

## DEFINITIVE HISTORY OF ZARIEL & LULU

This is designed to be a broad, authoritative overview of the back story for Zariel and Lulu.

### MOUNT CELESTIA

#### THE AVERNIAD

- Aeons ago, when the cosmos was still young and the Great Wheel had not been fully turned from the primordial planar chaos, Zariel fought in the Legions of Heaven. She served under the command of Ashmedai, a Celestial Marshal who rode a golden, winged lion.
- Ashmedai and his legions were sent to Avernus. At this time, Avernus was a paradisaical plane. Elysium and the Seven Heavens both desired to add it to their realms, and so their armies clashed upon its emerald plains.
- The full tale of the Averniad is beyond the scope of our discussion today. (There are some who claim the full complexities of the celestial epic cannot be told in the course of a single mortal lifetime.) The important bit comes at the end: In the Great Betrayal, Ashmedai wrenched Avernus from the grasp of both Mt. Celestia and Elysium, instead claiming it for himself and aligning it with the Eight Hells. Thus Avernus became the Ninth Hell.
- Ashmedai's legions schismed between those who remained loyal to him and those who remained loyal to Mount Celestia. Ashmedai himself became Asmodeus, and his legion of fallen angels, using Avernus as a staging base, conquered Hell, wresting its crown from the brow of the dark lord Ahriman.

- **Zariel's Long March:** During the Fall of Avernus, Zariel's commander – an angel named Chazaqiel – followed Asmodeus. Zariel and a small band of angels loyal to Heaven broke away and began a long march across Avernus before finally escaping down the River Styx (which in those days followed a very different course).

**MEETING LULU:** Her experiences during the Fall of Avernus had tainted Zariel's mind with bitterness and anger. While recuperating within the starry groves of Lunia, Zariel met and befriended Lulu, a hollyphant who called the silvered forests of that plane home. When Zariel's soul found peace and returned to Heaven's legions, Lulu accompanied her as both friend and warmount.

## THE TRIAL OF ASMODEUS

- Long after the events related in the Averniad, a heavenly strike force penetrated Hell and captured Asmodeus, bringing him back to Mount Celestia to answer for his crimes. (There are some who believe that Asmodeus allowed himself to be captured, knowing what would happen next.)
- Asmodeus claimed rights under the Pact Primeval. Also known as the First Law and quite possibly the first legal code to ever exist, it had been a founding agreement among the first Planes of Law that had emerged out of primordial chaos (and later became the Seven Heavens and Mechanus). Other pacts, such as those between Celestia, Elysium, and Olympus, had been based upon the authority of the Pact Primeval. By the time Asmodeus made his appeal, the Pact had been supplanted by other codes, but most of those codes ultimately still derived their legal standing from the Pact itself. Therefore, Asmodeus' appeal to the Pact could not be ignored.
- Thus began the Trial of Asmodeus. Primus of the modrons was appointed as a neutral arbiter and judge.
- The alleged crimes of Asmodeus, spanning aeons, were limitless. Even the testimony to their effect was seemingly without end, as an angelic horde bore witness, one after another. At last Primus, having grown weary of the proceedings, called a halt to the testimony: The scope of Asmodeus' illimitable acts had been well-established and their sheer quantity was irrelevant.
- Zariel, who had not yet had the opportunity to testify to the atrocities she had personally witnessed, was outraged. She violently demanded that she be allowed to speak, and when Primus ordered her to be silenced, the altercation sprawled into a brawl which completely disrupted the proceedings. (Was this the moment that Zariel first came to Asmodeus' attention? Or had he had his eye upon her from the beginning?)
- Asmodeus' defense was simple: Although his former comrades interpreted his actions as a betrayal, they had not actually violated the principle of the Law. Indeed, they had upheld the law by preventing an alliance between Hell and the Abyss which might have swept away all other planar powers. The Blood War fought by his devils now safeguarded Law from the Chaos of the Abyss.
- In the end, Asmodeus prevailed. His acts may have been Evil, but Primus ruled that they were ultimately in accord with the Law, and were thus in accord with the Pact Primeval. The law which had once been the bedrock of Heaven now became Asmodeus' holy right to test the merit of mortal souls (i.e., tempt them to evil) and claim those souls which were Hell's due. (However, as part of Primus' ruling, Asmodeus was also bound to always carry the *Ruby Rod of Asmodeus*, an



artifact that both signified Asmodeus' divine rights, but also bound him – and, through him, the other devils of Hell – to uphold the bargains they made with mortals.)

## THE PURSUIT OF YEENOGHU

An almost incalculable amount of time then passed, during which Zariel and Lulu were living an eternal, angelic existence. Zariel remained of a martial temperament, waging war upon the forces of evil.

### THE FIRST VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN

- Several centuries ago (we could perhaps say the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century in Dale Reckoning, during the internecine conflicts which resulted in the Fields of the Dead becoming the Fields of the Dead), Zariel became aware that the demonic lord Yeenoghu had invaded the Material Plane and was personally leading a gnoll army that was sacking settlements north of the River Chionthar.
- Zariel and a band of angels journeyed to the Material Plane to put an end to Yeenoghu's depredations. They caught up with the demon lord in the village of Idyllglen.

### THE DAUGHTER OF ASMODEUS

- Zariel's task force weren't the only ones hunting Yeenoghu, however. A strike team from Avernus lead by Glasya, daughter of Asmodeus, had also been tracking Yeenoghu. They arrived during the battle and helped rout the demon lord.
- Yeenoghu escaped, but his army was decimated and scattered to the winds. After the battle, there was tension between the celestial and infernal hosts, but Zariel and Glasya spoke for a short while and – having briefly been strange allies in the Blood War against the Abyss – agreed to go their separate ways.

## ZARIEL'S CRUSADE

- Zariel's experiences at Idyllglen refocused her. Although she had served in Heaven's armies, the conflict had always been somewhat abstract to her; or, at least, an affair of the Outer Planes where the conflict had long been relegated in most realms to a Cold War where the borders between realms had been long-settled. Now she had seen firsthand how the evils of the Abyss seeped out into the wider planes, inflicting untold horrors upon the multiverse.
- Zariel began advocating for a more belligerent military policy. Some called her a warmonger, but Zariel disagreed: The war already existed, whether the angelic legions chose to fight in it or not.
- Others said that it should be left to the Blood War: Let Evil annihilate itself. There was no need for Heaven to spend itself in the conflict. But this, Zariel argued, made Heaven complicit in the system that corrupted mortal souls to fight in that war; and turned a blind eye to the demonic miseries suffered by untold millions. The stalemate of the Blood War did not keep Evil in check; it perpetuated it. And it was Heaven's duty to end it.

### THE SECOND VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN

- Following Zariel's intercession against Yeenoghu, Idyllglen had erected a shrine honoring the angel who had saved their village. In the early 10<sup>th</sup> century DR, Idyllglen's existence was once again threatened, this time by a marauding band of ogres led by a warlord named Irontusk.
- Zariel answered the prayers of the villagers, journeying to the Material Plane with Lulu to aid them.
- When they arrived, they met a young woman named Yael who had managed to organize the younger villagers into a defensive militia of sorts. Yael gladly yielded command of the militia to Zariel, who taught them much of the arts of war and forged them into a band of steadfast companions. The three of them – Zariel, Lulu, and Yael – became fast friends. With each new challenge they faced, Yael would smile and say, "We just need to dream a little bigger." Soon Zariel and Lulu were saying it, too.

- In a campaign that lasted for several months – during which the ranks of the militia swelled as it attracted recruits from other nearby settlements south of the Winding Water – Zariel defeated Irontusk’s warbands. Yael herself killed Irontusk in the climactic battle, and the remnants of the warband fled back across the Sunset Mountains and into the Goblin Marches to the east.

## DAWN OF THE HELLRIDERS

- Zariel returned to Mount Celestia, but the lust of battle still smoldered in her blood. Having tasted the fleeting, fast-paced passion of the mortals, she became even more frustrated with the glacial pace of change in the celestial realms. Her thoughts turned again and again to Yael and her other comrades in arms. *Dream a little bigger.*
- One night on the silver, starlit beaches of Mercuria, Zariel and Lulu hatched their plan: They would return to the Material Plane and raise a mortal army. The army would invade the Abyss, creating a second front in the Blood War. Zariel believed that if she could establish a flanking beachhead that other disaffected angelic warriors from Mount Celestia would rally to their cause. They didn’t have to win. They just had to upset the balance of the Blood War so that it would no longer be a stalemate.
- **Yael’s Zarielites:** When they returned to the Material Plane, Zariel and Lulu discovered that Yael had turned their militia into a regional peacekeeping force. (The ogres had not returned, but there’d been a spot of trouble with trolls out of the Trollclaws. Mostly they secured travel between the Winding Water settlements.) Known as the Zarielites, they wore a badge with twin suns, representing Zariel and Lulu as their angelic saviors.

*Note: This informal heraldry would be forgotten by the later Hellriders, but not by Zariel, who took a grim satisfaction in the irony of having her followers revive it as the heraldry of the Order of the Companion centuries later.*

- Yael’s response when she heard Zariel’s plan? *Aye. Let’s dream a little bigger.*
- **Olanthius, Lord of Elturel:** Word of Zariel’s return spread and recruitment swelled. Yael became an ambassador of sorts, spreading the good word of Zariel’s Crusade. Lulu often accompanied her on these journeys, including arguably the most important of them all, when Yael went south to Elturel. Olanthius was impressed with Yael’s courage and righteousness, and pledged his service to the Crusade. (Olanthius and Yael would later fall in love.)
- **The Elturian Crusade:** With Olanthius joining the cause, Zariel moved the headquarters of the Crusade south to Elturel.
- **Haruman, Lord Knight of the Far Hills:** Another major recruit to the Crusade was the Lord Knight of the Far Hills. Haruman had once been known as the Boy Warlord, rising from obscurity as a slave in the Goblin Marches to conquer Farkeep (the citadel which would later become known as Darkhold) at the age of thirteen. Hearing of Zariel’s holy cause, he rode down to Elturel from the Sunset Mountains and pledged all of his knights to her service.
- **The Three Generals:** Yael, Olanthius, and Haruman became known as the Three Generals, swearing fealty to the holy cause of the Crusade – to crush the evil of the Abyss under the guidance of Zariel.

*Note: Jander Sunstar was a knight-banneret in Haruman’s service. He was the one who first learned of the Crusade and converted Haruman to the cause. If you’re looking to place these events in [Jander’s personal timeline](#) – as related in Christie Golden’s [Vampire of the Mists](#) and various short stories – they occur between the time that Jander leaves the Dalelands and arrives in Waterdeep.*

## THE CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS

While preparations continued to be made for their invasion of the Abyss, the crusaders were not quiescent. They secured the lands around Elturel and undertook a number of goodwill actions. They also went on a number of quests to secure the supplies necessary for waging war against demonic hordes.

### YEENOGHU'S GAMBIT

- Yeenoghu learned that Zariel was raising a huge mortal army and planned to invade the Abyss with it.
- In response, Yeenoghu returned to the Material Plane at the head of a small demonic force. Once again recruiting an army of gnolls, he began razing the Winding Water settlements. Zariel responded, as Yeenoghu had known she would, by leading the Three Armies north.

### THE THIRD VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN

- The two armies met at Idyllglen. It seemed fated to the crusaders, but was actually according to Yeenoghu's design: He *wanted* to manipulate the emotional connection Yael and Zariel had to the village.
- During the battle, Yeenoghu detached a portion of his force and personally led a raid towards the village. General Yael responded almost immediately, moving her army out of position in pursuit.
- While Zariel, Olanthius, and Haruman sought to rearrange their own lines of battle to account for the chaos that ensued, Yeenoghu's force abruptly shifted direction. Casting off the illusions that had made them appear to be ordinary gnolls, the demons sliced their way through Yael's command.
- Neither Yael nor her knights were to be underestimated, however. This was, after all, the fight they had been preparing for. She stymied Yeenoghu's counterattack.
- Meanwhile, the bulk of the gnoll army – having lost their demonic commanders when Yeenoghu peeled them off – were routed by Zariel, Olanthius, and Haruman.
- As the rest of the crusader army rounded on his flank, Yeenoghu abruptly abandoned pretense and led an assault directly on General Yael's position. Slicing through her troops and cutting down her banner, Yeenoghu seized Yael, opened a portal, and leapt through it.

### THE AVERNIAN AMBUSH

- Zariel, leading her own charge atop Lulu, was only a couple dozen feet away as Yeenoghu vanished. "The demon lord flees before our wrath!" she cried. "And he has taken one of our own! To rescue and to salvation! Charge!"
- The Three Armies plunged through the portal. But rather than emerging in the Abyss as they had expected, the portal led to the fire-blasted plains of Avernus. Worse yet, Yeenoghu had a small demonic army – which had crossed the Styx and penetrated deep into Hell itself – waiting on the other side.
- Zariel arrayed her crusaders for battle, but her rear echelons were still passing through the portal when Yeenoghu's army moved rapidly to engage.

### THE BATTLE OF AVERNUS

- There were a number of glorious deeds that day, among them Yael freeing herself from captivity and fighting her way to Olanthius' side. Yeenoghu's army had made retreat impossible, but the crusaders had withstood the initial assault and now the second and third armies had passed through the portal and were marshalling their strength. They vastly outnumbered Yeenoghu's force, and there was a real chance that the demon lord would be destroyed, dealing the crusade's first blow against the Abyss.
- That's when an army of devils, under the command of Terza' reg of the Dark Eight and lured to the area by Yeenoghu's army, marched over the horizon.

- Jander Sunstar panicked. (“We can’t fight both Hell and the Abyss!”) Under his leadership, a large chunk of the army routed back through the portal... which then slammed shut. (The crusaders who remained in Avernus believed the deserters had sealed it behind them. It’s possible Yeenoghu seized the moment to shut down the portal he had opened. Or perhaps arcanists in the advancing devil army were responsible for closing it.)

*Note: Jander’s fate is somewhat beyond the scope of this reference, but worth establishing. He was the highest ranking officer among the crusaders who fled Avernus. The deserters became known as the Hellriders, their acts of infamy instead being told as deeds of glory, and Jander became the first High Rider of Elturel. He changed the Riders’ heraldry from the twin stars of the Zarielite Crusade to a horse rampant in flames. Eventually, sickened by his betrayal of both Zariel and Haruman, he left Elturel and headed to Waterdeep.*



## BATTLE’S END

- The three-way battle that ensued was pure chaos. The best we can do here is to highlight a few moments.
- Olanthius and Haruman were able to pincer the remnants of Yeenoghu’s army and finish them off, while Zariel and Yael wheeled her command about to meet Terza’reg’s army.
- Yeenoghu escaped triumphant, having tricked Zariel into spending her glorious army fighting devils instead of demons and turning what could have been a disaster for the Abyss into a huge advantage instead.
- Zariel led the flying cavalry squadron (featuring primarily pegasi) into the air to meet the flying devils that swarmed over the battlefield.
- Zariel and Lulu engaged in an aerial duel with Terza’reg, which ended when Terza’reg cut off Zariel’s right hand (still clutching her sword). Zariel leapt off of Lulu and dove after sword and hand, with Terza’reg in hot pursuit. At the last possible moment, Zariel snatched her sword from the air, reversed her flight, and plunged it through Terza’reg’s breast. A huge explosion rocked the battlefield as the devil general died, clouding the affair in a haze of red dust.
- Despite her dreadful injury and the ensuing chaos, after Terza’reg’s death it was possible that Zariel and her generals might have been able to rally. But then a second army under the command of Baalzephon arrived.
- To their credit, the remaining crusaders fought to the last warrior. (Although some, including Olanthius and Haruman, were captured after being struck down in battle.)
- Yael had joined Zariel and Lulu. As Baalzephon tightened the noose around their necks, the three old friends fought side by side. As the devils closed in, Zariel knew what would come and feared her own weakness. She took a shard of her angelic essence – a spark of goodness – and placed it

within her sword. She asked Yael to take the sword and make certain it was not captured by the forces of Hell. Yael refused. Zariel smiled sadly. "Look beyond this forsaken day. One last time, I need you to dream a little bigger."

- With tears in her eyes, Yael accepted.
- Zariel then turned to Lulu, said goodbye to her old friend, and asked her to go with Yael and keep her safe.
- The devils' aerial forces had been decimated, and so Yael – having concealed the sword within her cloak – was able to escape through their depleted ranks upon Lulu's back.

## THE FALL OF ZARIEL

- When the battle at last came to an end, Baalzephon was astonished to see Asmodeus himself arrive.
- They found Zariel beneath a mound of devils she had slain. She was badly injured, but still lived. As she awoke, Asmodeus knelt beside her in the dust of Avernus. He spoke to her in a soft voice.

*I look at you and I see that you are in despair. You thought you could make a difference. That you could end the Blood War. But here you are on a field of dead friends.*

*You look at me and I know you see malevolence. You see Evil. You see an antithesis. You see betrayal. But I did make a difference. And I will end the Blood War.*

*All those aeons ago, at my trial, when I looked you in the eye and laughed. Do you think I mocked you? No. I laughed because I saw you standing where I had stood before. I knew we walked the same road and you were just a few steps behind me.*

*Look around you. Look at the dead. Piled high. Do you really think this to be Good? Do you think this butchery to be worthwhile because it was done in a noble cause? You know as well as I do that as long as this continues, as long as the dead are nothing but tallies in the ledgers of complacent gods, Good is derelict. It is meaningless. It is feathery cupids cavorting on a celestial isle while suffering boils forth across the multiverse.*

*I know you came here to kill demons. You think you have failed. I think you have barely begun.*

*Which of us do you think sees more clearly?*

*What I offer you is simple: A chance to continue our fight. You have killed Terza' reg. I offer you his place on the Dark Eight and command of a Blood Legion. Serve me and your Crusade can still boil across the Abyss and turn the Great Wheel into a new epoch.*

- In truth, the two conversed on many different planes of thought. And, in the end, Zariel accepted Asmodeus' offer, swearing fealty to him and accepting his commission as one of Bel's generals. Perhaps Asmodeus was right. Or perhaps she had been right to fear her weakness. Or perhaps in her pride, she convinced herself that, once she had dealt with the Abyss, she would be able to turn on Asmodeus himself and save Hell from itself.
- But Zariel had fallen.
- Haruman willingly followed Zariel in swearing allegiance to Asmodeus. Olanthius chose to commit suicide instead, but even in death discovered that he was bound by his oath to "crush the evil of the Abyss under the guidance of Zariel" and was raised as a death knight in her thrall.

*Note: Once again, kids, examine the fine print of your oaths.*



## LULU: HIDING THE SWORD

- Yael and Lulu did not have any method for immediately fleeing the Outer Planes. In fact, they were essentially lost: Lulu had never been to Avernus before and the Zarielites had been preparing for an invasion of the Abyss, not the Nine Hells. However, part of those preparations *had* included learning the location of a number of pan-dimensional bolt-holes in the Abyss.
- Their plan, therefore, was to reach the Styx and use the river to travel into the Abyss and – if they got extremely lucky – find a way out. (If the plan failed, then perhaps they could throw the Sword of Zariel into the Styx to keep it out of Hell’s hands.)
- Lulu knew there would be Avernian watchposts along the length of the Styx. Penetrating that defensive line would be difficult. But Yeenoghu’s army must have crossed it somewhere and somehow, so they decided to backtrack his army and hope to duplicate his success.
- The plan worked: They discovered that Yeenoghu’s army had taken out three of the Styxian watchposts, leaving a gaping hole in the defensive line. They managed to cross the Styx and then commandeer an infernal ferry from a charonadaemon.

*Note: At this time during the Blood War, the demons of the Abyss had successfully captured the far shore of the Styx. Their war palaces were bastions of war and the heavily fortified banks of the Styx were a muddy mire of endless, bloody war that extended into astral trenches.*

- What they didn’t know was that Yeenoghu was tracking the Sword of Zariel. A war party waylaid them. With their ferry sinking, Yael and Lulu were forced back into Avernus.
- Pursued by Yeenoghu and with the forces of Hell closing in as well, Yael and Lulu realized that there was no escape. Yael plunged the Sword of Zariel into a rock and called for divine intervention. Lulu poured her own celestial essence into the call, the sympathetic resonance of her trumpet echoing across the Avernian plains as she drove Yael’s plea across the planes. Even so, the gods could wield little power in Avernus, but Lathander gave them an opportunity. Yael sacrificed herself, pouring her life force into what Lathander offered, raising an alabaster fortress around the Sword to protect it.
- The skein of Avernus itself rebelled at this holy touch, however, and a bloody cyst engulfed the fortress, Yael’s corpse, and Lulu.

## ZARIEL IN HELL

Zariel became one of the Dark Eight, a general serving Archduke Bel. She frequently rebelled against Bel’s commands, however, pursuing far more aggressive strategies. Her Blood Legion was

preternaturally successful, sacking numerous daemonic war palaces and establishing a beachhead on the far side of the Styx.



**THE RECKONING (13<sup>th</sup> Century DR):** The Reckoning was a tri-partite conspiracy masterminded by Glasya, daughter of Asmodeus. She managed to convince half the Lords of Hell that the other half were planning a rebellion and vice versa. The third conspiracy consisted of Glasya, Zariel, and Malagard the Hag Countess (who was a councilor to Moloch, Lord of the Sixth), who believed they could seize considerable power for themselves as the Lords warred against each other. (Glasya even had aspirations of overthrowing her father and claiming Hell for herself.)

- The trigger point for the Reckoning came when Bel was targeted by a demonic assassin. The attack failed, leaving Bel in a magical coma. Evidence pointed to Dispater, Archduke of Dis, the second level of Hell. (In reality, the “assassination” was actually arranged by Glasya and had exactly the intended effect.)
- Zariel, having forged an alliance with Tiamat, laid siege to Dis. (Tiamat not only gave Zariel safe passage to the second level of Hell, but also threw her own draconic legions into the fray.)
- The full details of the Reckoning are beyond the scope of this project. Zariel spent almost the entire war engaged in the siege of Dis.
- Near the end of the Reckoning, Tiamat betrayed Zariel. The siege of Dis was broken and Zariel ended up being held a prisoner in Tiamat’s dungeons.
- Glasya and Malagard had convinced Moloch, Lord of Malbolge, to pursue a scheme to use the chaos of the Reckoning to dethrone Asmodeus. It failed, but Glasya was able to use this as a framework to frame Moloch as the “mastermind” behind many of her own schemes. Moloch was deposed by Asmodeus and Malagard raised in his place. (Malagard herself was recently killed by Glasya, who has become Archduchess of Malbolge herself.)

*Design Note: Placing the Reckoning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century and ending it with Zariel as Tiamat’s prisoner allows us to preserve a lot of pre-DIA continuity that DIA’s retcons had wiped out. For example, all of Bel’s pre-DIA continuity remains intact (except that he now supplants Gargauth, not Zariel, to become Lord of Avernus). Zariel still gets to besiege Dis to begin the Reckoning. And the*

*imprisonment of Zariel by Tiamat (as described in Rise of Tiamat) is also slotted into place.*

**THE RIFT WAR (15<sup>th</sup> Century DR):** The surface of Avernus is periodically rent with massive rifts. Similar to rift valleys of the Material Plane, they are formed by the surface of Avernus pulling itself apart. But while some proceed with a glacial pace, others can appear with terrifying, convulsive speed.

There are many metaphysical theories about the nature of these rifts: Perhaps Avernus is like a “cap” which Asmodeus placed upon the Nine Hells, but Hell keeps trying to expand, trying to push its way through the planar substrate. Or Avernus itself is constantly expanding like a cancerous tumor, with the rifts either being where that new growth pushes out new planar material and/or where Avernus is trying to break apart, “budding” off new planes. Or they’re manifestations of demi-planes, either attaching themselves like parasites to Avernus or being forcibly scooped up by Hell’s vortex. Some even postulate they could be the spirits of evil living demi-planes that have died and are manifesting, lemure-like, in Hell. Or perhaps they are simply another hellish expression of Avernus’ corrupt landscape.

Whatever the case, in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century a rift of unprecedented size rapidly opened on the contested side of the Styx.

And it was *seething* with baatorians.

Baatorians were the original inhabitants of Hell. They had a unique life cycle: Their larval state (known as nupperibo) were spontaneously generated out of the substance of Hell itself as a sort of tubercular reaction to the arrival of an evil soul. As Hell expanded, this strange property seemed to extend to each new level. Over time, the nupperibo could ascend into higher forms (in a process known as “molting”). For untold aeons, they were the factious rulers of Hell.

The ultimate fate of the baatorians has been lost to legends older than mortal civilization: Some claim that the entire species ultimately ascended into forms of pure energy – stories speak of [“strange lights”](#) and [“malevolent shadows”](#) – leaving Hell uninhabited when Ahriman arrived. Others claim that Ahriman conquered the baatorians and wiped them out in a genocide of colossal proportions.

Whatever the case may be, it seems fairly certain that Ahriman fundamentally reworked the cosmology of Hell, somehow adapting the baatorian ecology to instead generate lemures, the larval state of the baatezu devils. (It’s possible this is somehow connected to the rerouting or creation of the River Styx, a transport mechanism for mortal souls from which many lemure emerge.) Nupperibo are still known to manifest from the firmament of Hell, but they are usually ruthlessly hunted down and destroyed by the devils before they can molt into the more advanced forms of their species.

Now, however, an entire army of baatorians boiled out of the rift – some strange redoubt or primeval throwback of the ancient race – and invaded Avernus.

- Bel blew it. He had left most of the war palaces Zariel had conquered vacant and the baatorians were able to seize them for their own use. The defensive lines of the blood legions, having been thoroughly disrupted, collapsed and were routed. Watchtowers along the Styx were overrun and destroyed. For the first time in centuries, the Avernian frontiers were in utter disarray. Although no alliance was formed between the baatorians and demons, armies of both races freely crossed the Styx.

- With the “Avernian situation” rapidly deteriorating, Glasya saw an opportunity. She journeyed to Tiamat’s citadel and arranged for Zariel’s release. (There are several stories of how she accomplished this: A secret deal with Tiamat. Delivery of an edict from Asmodeus himself. A daring jailbreak heist.)
- **Zariel’s Second Avernian March:** For a second time, Zariel began a march across Avernus. This time, rather than fleeing, Zariel was gathering the scattered, routed units of the blood legions. As Bel retreated, Zariel attacked. She forded the Styx, re-sacked the war palaces she had first claimed two centuries earlier, and broke the baatorian supply lines. Then she turned around, marched back to the Styx, and intercepted the baatorians’ main army as it was attempting to cross the river. In the bloody, muddy Battle of Lost Memories, the baatorians’ strength was broken.
- **The Rift Siege:** After the Battle of Lost Memories, Zariel was able to link up with Dagos and Furcas, two of the Dark Eight whose armies had been cut off, and re-established the defensive watchposts along the Styx. While Dagos and Furcas held the river, effectively dividing the remaining baatorian forces in half, Zariel led her army to lay siege to the Rift. Once the Rift fell, the war was essentially over.
- **The Archduchess:** Asmodeus punished Bel for his failure by demoting him back to the ranks of the Dark Eight. In Bel’s place, he elevated Zariel as the new Archduchess of Hell.



*Note: This history covers the broad strokes of Zariel’s life after her fall. For additional events directly relevant to Descent Into Avernus, refer to the “Lore of Gargauth” in [Part 3B](#) and “The History of Elturel’s Fall” in [Part 4B](#).*

## LULU LEAVES HELL

- Although Lulu had been caught inside the bloody cyst, over the intervening centuries she had been slowly getting pushed out – like a sliver from your foot. She awoke – dazed and confused – upon the scabrous surface of the cyst and wandered away. (This was most likely during the time that Zariel was imprisoned in Tiamat’s dungeons.)
- [Could potentially insert other memories of Avernian landmarks.]
- Lulu encountered the Wandering Emporium. There she was tricked by a rakshasa name Mahadi, who splashed her with water from the river Styx. Keeping her thus in a constant stupor, he kept her imprisoned. (A hollyphant’s tusks can be ground into a magical powder that transforms water or wine into an elixir of health. Mahadi kept her essentially drugged and senseless so that he could repeatedly grind down her tusks.)
- When Zariel became the new Archduchess of Avernus, Mahadi brought Lulu to her court and presented her as a gift. Zariel was disappointed to discover that Lulu was suffering from Styxian memory loss, for she wanted to recover her Sword, but had fond memories of her old friend. She gave orders that Lulu should be returned to Mount Celestia and dispatched a small party of devils to see it done.
- While crossing Avernus to an appropriate *gate*, Lulu’s devil escorts were ambushed by the warlord L’zeth (DIA, p. 90). Lulu, still in a Styxian befuddlement, wandered away from the scene of the ambush.

- Some time later, the effects of the water of the Styx finally wore off. (This is the beginning of Lulu’s memories.) She came to the River Styx shortly thereafter and followed it out of Avernus, journeying through the Outer Planes and having many adventures along the way.
- She eventually ended up in the Nexus (see [Book of Eldritch Might III](#)) and passed through a portal which took her to the city of Neverwinter in 1488 DR. From there she made her way south, returning to the area around Elturel. There she either becomes a PC (as described in [Part 2](#)) or met Sylvira (as described in [Part 4C](#)).

## LEGEND OF THE HELLRIDERS

Now that we’ve established the definitive truth of these events, let’s take a moment to look at how the story has been passed down to the modern day. How are the Hellriders remembered in Elturel and on the Sword Coast?

This material will be useful if any of the PCs are playing Hellriders (or, really, any Elturian characters). Or when they hear the legend at some point in the pre-Avernus part of the campaign (e.g., when speaking with Reya Mantlemorn or another Hellrider). I’ve included some additional notes in square brackets that can be used to expand the basic version of the legend if the PCs decide to do some detailed research into the legend (in Candlekeep, for example).

**THE FIRST HIGH RIDER:** Before humans came to Elturel, the site was ruled by an Ogre Lord in a crude stone bastion atop the tor where now stands the High Hall. The Ogre Lord captured the son of Lady Shiarra, a local noblewoman. Lady Shiarra, seeking vengeance against the Ogre Lord, drove him out of the bastion. [Other versions of the story claim that the Ogre had stolen Lady Shiarra’s sword or horse. One version says the Ogre was her son. If you asked a sufficiently erudite ogre about the matter, they’d probably have different opinions about the legitimacy of Lady Shiarra’s actions in general.]

After the Ogre Lord was defeated, Lady Shiarra called a concord of local lordlings to the site where Shiarra’s Market now stands (see [Part 5C](#)). These lordlings pledged fealty to each other and formed the Riders of Elturel, with Lady Shiarra as the first High Rider.

**OTHER TALES OF THE RIDERS OF ELTUREL:** There are a variety of chivalric stories featuring the early Riders of Elturel. The most common themes include:

- A lone Rider heads out from the city and faces evil. (Pick any monster from the *Monster Manual*.) Sometimes they are seeking that evil. Other times they stumble upon it in unexpectedly idyllic places.
- Romantic tourneys in which Riders (often with a mixture of foreign knights) face each other in various games of martial skill while sexual tension kindles between rivals. These tales usually feature a shapeshifter posing as a knight or otherwise confusing identities.
- Minor crusades, in which troops of Riders sally forth to save an entire community (usually in response to a plea for help). [These tales are generally told and have been shaped to support Elturel’s role as “protector” of the surrounding lands.]

**THE CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS:**

- Olanthius, the High Rider of Elturel, was often away from the High Hall, for the frontiers in those days were sore-pressed by warbands passing over the Sunset Mountains from the Goblin Marches. Fields were despoiled, livestock slaughtered, homes razed, and people dragged off to terrible fates. [When, exactly, Olanthius ruled Elturel is uncertain, but generally agreed to be the

9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century, although some claim it's as far back as the 8<sup>th</sup>. Some of the early chronicles say that the trouble actually originated from the Trollclaws and not the Goblin Marches, although some loremasters argue that both might be true.]

- While Olanthius was away, a Prince of Devils came to Elturel. Cloaked in a handsome form, he insinuated himself into the High Hall as Nothius, a Lord of Iriaebor. Over time, he enslaved the soul of Olanthius' love, the Lady Yael. [The early-14<sup>th</sup> century poet Aternicus wrote "The Lay of the Lady Yael," a now-classic masterpiece which weaves this story into a romantic seduction.]
- As winter fell upon another year, Olanthius returned from campaign over fresh-fallen snow to discover that his lady love had been stolen away. Alack! If only he had returned a few hours earlier, Lady Yael might have been saved! [In some versions of the story, Olanthius is now visited by a nameless angel who guides the Riders to where Yael is being held prisoner.]
- Olanthius led the Riders of Elturel in a frenzied chase. [*Maatal's Chronicle* instead describes a search of eighteen months – in some versions, eighteen *years* – in which the Riders of Elturel scatter across Toril, seeking the hiding place where Prince Nothius has concealed Lady Yael. Various tales have accumulated to individual knights, some of whom journeyed to distant Zakhara and even Maztica.]
- When the Riders caught up with Lord Nothius, the devil revealed his true form. A great battle then commenced, which ended when Nothius opened a gateway to Hell itself and, with a cackling laugh, carried Lady Yael through it! [Several chronicles also ascribe the goblin or troll invasions as being part of Nothius' schemes; these usually feature a ferocious battle as Olanthius and the Riders try to fight their way through to Nothius. In other versions, Nothius has carried Lady Yael to a citadel in the Sunset Mountains – sometimes identified as Darkhold – and the Riders must lay siege to it.]
- The Riders of Elturel did not hesitate! They plunged through the gate, pursuing the devil into Hell itself! [Some versions of the story have the Riders pursue the devil Nothius through all nine of the Hells. In these, Nothius is often revealed to be Asmodeus himself. These are generally agreed by serious historians to be exaggerations.]
- The pursuit of Nothius now continued across the blasted plains of Avernus itself. At last, the Riders of Elturel met the armies of Hell! The Riders defeated one of the fabled blood legions and Yael was reunited with Olanthius, but as they rode back towards the portal home a second and even larger legion threatened to cut them off.
- Olanthius knew the only hope of escape was if this legion was delayed. He asked for volunteers to accompany him... and all the Riders did so. Therefore lots were drawn to determine the lucky few who would ride one last time at the side of their lord. Olanthius begged Yael to fly to safety, but she, too, chose to ride into battle at his side.
- In the face of the Riders' charge, the legion of Avernus trembled and buckled... but did not break. Olanthius and Yael perished on the Avernian plains. It is said that where they fell in a final, martial embrace, a spring of holy water sprung up that was poison to the devils of that land.
- Their sacrifice, however, bought the time the other Riders needed to escape from Hell. Overcome with grief at the loss of their glorious leader and his love, they returned to the city. Their valor was never forgotten, and from that day forward the Riders of Elturel were known as the Hellriders.

As you can see here, much of the true history has been lost. Or, rather, distorted through a storied tradition – a golden age of Elturian chivalry which has been artificially extended back to the founding of the city to culminate triumphantly in the great tale of the Charge of the Hellriders. Thus the earliest Lords of Elturel (including Lady Shiarra) have become retroactively identified as High Riders.

*Design Note: This sort of thing isn't without precedent in the real world. See, for example, how the "Roman Emperors" would have been contemporaneously identified as Imperator, Augustus, and/or Caesar. Or the Arthurian tradition, in which history becomes encrusted with literary invention.*

*If the PCs decide to do some deep investigation along these lines, you could certainly hint at the uncertainty of the historical record here. Although even these hints wouldn't necessarily be accurate: For example, you might discuss how the loremaster Alice Messier of Iriaebor has recently done a study of "Jander Sunstar." Supposedly the High Rider who led the Riders of Elturel out of Hell, Messier has found references to another "Jander Sunstar" as a folk hero in the Dalelands whose stories were later merged with a set of vampiric myths arising from the infestation of vampires that led to Merrydale becoming Daggerdale. The obvious conclusion, of course, is that "Jander Sunstar" never actually existed, and the Dalelands folk hero was simply incorporated into the chivalric cycle of Elturel.*

*If you want to get ambitious, you could develop some [lore books](#) along these lines and perhaps distribute them in likely places in Elturel and/or Candlekeep.*

## LORE OF ZARIEL

Once the PCs become aware that they're dealing with Zarielite cultists in Baldur's Gate, they may want to do some research into who Zariel is. This might also be true in Candlekeep after Lulu's revelation that Zariel was involved in the Charge of the Hellriders. So it's worthwhile to briefly consider what they'll find in the history books.

You can also use this information to inform Intelligence (History) and Intelligence (Religion) checks.

*Design Note: The general theory of my approach here is that (a) Hell exists, but (b) it is very, very far away from the Material Plane. Thus the loremaster's understanding of Hell is akin to a scholar of Medieval Europe's understanding of the fine details of Japanese history (i.e., incredibly poor bordering on the mythical). The history of Hell also stretches back across aeons unimaginable to human history. Plus the entire place is inhabited entirely with gifted liars whose interactions with humans are usually based entirely around deceiving them.*

**AVERNIAD & THE TRIAL OF ASMODEUS:** These early events in planar history are known to mortal scholars, but are mostly obscured through a haze of confusing legendry. Zariel's name is not associated with them, although the incident in which a nameless angel started a deific brawl during the Trial of Asmodeus might crop up.

It's up to you how much chaff you want to throw up around the "true history of Asmodeus and/or Hell" if the PCs start looking into it. We're greatly aided in this, however, because D&D itself has published [a bunch of contradictory versions of this continuity](#):

- **Serpents of Law:** Asmodeus, then known as Ahriman, and Jazirian arose from the primal chaos as powerful serpent gods. The two serpents bit each others' tails and formed a great circle whose turning transformed chaos into the order of the Great Wheel. The two serpents quarreled, stripping each other of god-stuff. The diminished Asmodeus, a wingless serpent, crashed into Nessus, the First Hell, while the winged Jazirian rose to Mount Celestia.
- **Angelic Fall:** When the first gods grew weary of fighting demons, they created angels to continue the battle for them. The first of these angels was Asmodeus. Over time, Asmodeus assumed more and more control of the war, with the gods formalizing more and more of his authority in the

form of pacts. There came a time when the gods realized that Asmodeus had created a vast and horrific infrastructure for torturing mortal souls (i.e., Hell) and transforming them into foot soldiers (i.e., devils) – call it the military-infernal complex. Asmodeus was put on trial, but he simply pointed to the tangled web of pacts and declared that the gods had authorized *all of it*. Primus of the Modrons, who acted as the trial’s judge, ruled in Asmodeus’ favor, and the collection of pacts became known as the Pact Primeval. It remains the bedrock of celestial law.

- **He Who Was:** Asmodeus was once an exarch serving He Who Was. (Asmodeus would later go to considerable lengths to wipe out all record of the god’s name, leaving only the enigmatic title.) He Who Was was the ultimate god of law. To preserve a perfect order, He Who Was controlled every single aspect of reality, down to the smallest details. In his demesne, the mortal races did not yet have free will – they were automatons going through the motions of civilization. Asmodeus was no different, until he was corrupted by the demon lord Pazuzu. With the scales fallen from his eyes, Asmodeus saw clearly the tyranny of the Law according to He Who Was. After a quiet resistance (that may have lasted for centuries and also ties into the Dawn War waged against Tharizdun), Asmodeus journeyed to the bottom of the Abyss and found there the *shard of freedom* (which some “fools” have named the *shard of evil*) and crafted from it his *Ruby Rod*. The rod’s existence shattered the control of He Who Was (and, in some heretical texts, is claimed to be the basis for all mortal consciousness). Asmodeus slew He Who Was.

*Note: Some gnostic cults claim that the breaking of the Perfect Order is much more recent than one would suspect: Some claim it only happened a few short years ago. Others cite the Spellplague or the Sundering. For esoteric reasons, the date of 1358 DR is frequently given – the Year of Shadows in which mortals ceased to be mere shadows and became fully realized and autonomous spirits. In any case, according to the gnostics, all recorded history before that point was merely acted out according to the whim of He Who Was; the historical personages not truly possessed of what modern mortals understand as consciousness.*

**CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS:** Zariel’s name is also not associated with the Charge of the Hellriders in any way (see above).

#### **ZARIEL – WHAT IS KNOWN:**

- Zariel was one of the Dark Eight, the council of generals who lead Hell’s legions in the Blood War.
- She is believed to be a fallen angel, likely one of those who first followed Asmodeus to Hell, making her one of the oldest and probably most powerful devils.
- During the Reckoning – the War in Hell that turned Lords of Hell against each in the 13<sup>th</sup> century – Zariel initiated hostilities by forming an alliance with Tiamat and leading an army to besiege Dis, the second layer of the Nine Hells.
- Near the end of the Reckoning, Tiamat betrayed Zariel and the siege on Dis was broken. Zariel was imprisoned in Tiamat’s citadel.
- At the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Avernus – the first layer of Hell – was in a state of tumult. The Blood War was going poorly. Zariel escaped from Tiamat’s prison, raised an army, and turned the tide. To reward her, Asmodeus deposed Bel – who had been the Archduke of Avernus – and raised Zariel in his place.
- Zariel has been the Archduchess of Avernus ever since. A cruel and brutally effective military leader.

*Note: It’s possible that the inner mysteries of some Zarielite cults would preserve the knowledge that Zariel led the Charge of the Hellriders. From a practical standpoint, however, the PCs should not be able to learn this from the cultists in Baldur’s Gate. (The knowledge should drop in Candlekeep, as described in [Part 4C](#).) If you want to add this sort of deep lore to the Zarielites, I’d recommend*

*confining it to the revelation that she was a fallen angel and perhaps very early events pertaining to the Averniad and the Trial of Asmodeus.*

**WHAT DOES GARGAUTH KNOW?** If the PCs get the *Shield of Hidden Truth* and question Gargauth, he can provide a lot more detail. (These same general guidelines can probably be used for other denizens of Hell, other than those with personal first-hand knowledge.)

- Gargauth is not familiar with Zariel's role in the Charge of the Hellriders, but he knows that she was an angel who fell comparatively recently (within the last few centuries).
- Having been active in Elturel for decades, he's familiar with the Legend of the Hellriders (and can probably an account of many of its variations and details).
- He can provide detailed accounts of the Averniad and the Trial of Asmodeus. (He even knows that Zariel sparked a brawl during the trial.) However, it might amuse him to muddle things up with false tales (like those described above).
- He knows the Reckoning and the Rift War in detail.

## LULU'S MEMORY MYSTERY



As we've discussed, recovering Lulu's memories is a central pillar of the campaign: It is essentially the only way to recover the Sword of Zariel, and while the Sword of Zariel is not essential (in the Remix) it is certainly positioned as a major goal and resource.

Getting the Sword, it should be noted, is almost entirely procedural: Get the pieces for the dream machine. Strap Lulu into it. Ta-da! You get the location of the Sword of Zariel.

But if we take a step back, the *real* goal is to get the players invested in the True History of Zariel. The process of piecing together this enigma:

- Provides a tantalizing mystery that will keep the players engaged with the campaign and eager to figure out more.

- Creates a context for their interactions with the denizens of Hell (particularly the former Hellriders and others who participated in those events).
- Builds a relationship (albeit by proxy) with Zariel, creating the emotional foundation for the campaign's conclusion.
- Elevates the procedural accomplishment of activating the dream machine by providing not only the location of the Sword, but simultaneously a sense of closure on Lulu's story.

So how do we build this mystery?

**Lulu's Original Memories**, the ones that she has when she first appears in the campaign, are our foundation. Structurally, these are the facts that we *know* the party will have at any given point in the campaign. Ideally, we'll want enough chunks that the players can begin rampantly speculating about how they're connected, but vague enough that no definitive answers are really possible. We can think of each chunk as a "catalyst," in the sense that they give the speculations of the players material to react with (and will likely speed up that speculation, too).

**Lulu's Triggered Memories** are the memories that she spontaneously regains, either semi-randomly or in response to specific stimuli. These will primarily be additional catalysts – they'll be vague enough to mostly raise new questions, providing fresh fodder for the players' theory-crafting. (The more of these the PCs gain access to, however, the more complete their understanding of Lulu's history will become, making it easier to figure out how events relate to each other.) Some of these triggered memories, however, can also be rewards, providing definitive answers for some of Lulu's experiences.

If the PCs follow the Sword of Zariel threads all the way to their conclusion, there will also be four **Memory Dives**. These are the Vision from Torm, the Dream Machine, Claiming the Sword, and Zariel's Spark. Each allows the players to actually *experience* parts of Lulu's and Zariel's story.

There will also be **Other Sources** of information on Zariel's history. (If we think of the mystery as primarily being the True History of Zariel, then we'll also recognize that Lulu's memories are just one way of achieving that goal!) These can include historical records, questioning the "surviving" Hellriders, etc.

Finally, we'll organize all of this using **Revelation Lists**.

In doing so we will, of course, observe the [Three Clue Rule](#). But we'll want to use some special care here.

First, we want to structurally protect the memory dives. These should feel like big, momentous events with significant pay-offs for the effort the players have put into achieving them. We don't want to "spoil" them because if they don't reveal anything new, it'll deflate the moment. Therefore, the memory dives should have:

- Clear, definitive versions of events that could only be impartially understood before.
- Lynchpin moments that could NOT have been learned previously.
- Really mysterious, obscure versions of NEW events (i.e., new catalysts that can only be cleared up by future revelations).

This means we need to pace and position our revelation lists (and the clues in those lists) so that they set-up and pay-off the memory dives. We can actually think of each memory dive as a funnel, with certain revelations/clues positioned before the funnel and others generally not available until after the funnel. (It should be noted that the structure of the scenario more or less mirrors these funnels: For example, the PCs will almost certainly have the Vision from Torm before leaving Elturel; they won't be able to journey to the Scab before the Dream Machine; and so forth.)

## LULU'S ORIGINAL MEMORIES

Lulu is suffering from amnesia. Her first memory is of “waking up” in the red sands of the Avernian wastelands. (Although she only later learned that she was on Avernus, the First Layer of Hell.)

- She wandered for an interminable period of time before coming to the River Styx.
- She followed the River Styx out of Avernus, journeying through the Outer Planes.
- After any number of adventures, Lulu passed through a portal and found herself in a place called the Nexus, a seemingly endless gothic castle filled with magical portals. There she met Nival-Sca, the Mistress of Eternity. Nival-Sca had iridescent skin that gleamed with serpentine scales, her pupil-less eyes gleamed with a golden light, and her small feet never seemed to touch the ground when she walked. Hearing Lulu's story, she identified a portal that would return her to the world of the home she dimly remembered (see below).
- Passing through this portal, Lulu emerged in Neverwinter in 1488 DR.
- She made her way south from Neverwinter, eventually returning to the area around Elturel.

Lulu only has a few fragmentary memories of the time before her inexplicable amnesia. (These have returned to her slowly over time since she first woke up without any memory at all.)

- Her strongest memories are of being friends with a beautiful warrior angel. She and the angel came to a city called Elturel and led an army of knights from that city on a charge into Hell itself. (Lulu doesn't remember the actual battle, but assumes they must have lost and guesses that this is how she lost her memories. Having returned to modern Elturel, she now knows that these events must have taken place a long time in the past.)
- Sometimes this feels like a magician's trick: She remembers riding through the portals to Hell, seeing the plains of Avernus stretched out in front of her, and then... Everyone is gone and she's on the Avernian plains all by herself.

Other fragments of memory include:

- A silver beach beneath a pair of blue moons. (Sometimes she remembers her warrior angel being with her there.)
- Flying over a vast, dark ocean. The water reflects a sky filled with diamond-like stars. In the black depths below, a huge whale seemingly made from golden motes of light swims.
- Looking out a window made from gems set into silver and gold, across a verdant landscape where metallic dragons flit through the sky.
- The taste of blood and fur in her mouth.
- A busy marketplace carved from a cliff-face. She was speaking to a winged lion with the kind-yet-stern face of a man.
- Flying over a boundless expanse of black, cracked basalt. A single-file line of strange, polyhedral-shaped creatures marches below, stretching from horizon to horizon.

*Design Note: This can be used as either a handy reference for the GM and/or, if Lulu is a PC, given as a handout to her player. I also recommend empowering the player to flesh out any of the events that happened in Lulu's life after she “woke up” in Avernus. (For example, they could make up any number of stories about her adventures along the Styx.) Check out [Running the Campaign: Designing Character Backgrounds](#) and [Dragon Heist: Creating the Characters](#) for how this type of player/GM collaboration on character backgrounds can work in practice (although the process is sort of inverted here).*

**DM'S INFO:** The last few fragments of Lulu's memory are mostly visions from the Seven Heavens of Mount Celestia. They are, in order:

- The beaches of Mercuria.

- Flying over the waters of Lunia (with a celestial whale in the depths).
- Looking out the window of Bahamut’s Palace, also in Mercuria.
- Killing a gnoll during the First Visit to Idyllglen.
- The market of Heart’s Faith in Lunia.
- The Great Modron March. (Not [this one](#), though. The dates don’t line up.)

## TRIGGERED MEMORIES

These memories – identified by the associated trigger condition that prompts Lulu to remember them – are presented in no particular order. Be flexible with what will and will not trigger a memory: if it seems close enough that you can draw a clear parallel between what Lulu is currently experiencing and her memory, lean into that.

You might also decide that some other circumstance – something like significant trauma or just every time Lulu levels up – might be an appropriate trigger for a random memory. To that effect, I’ve included a random die roll on the trigger reference table below if you want to select the triggered memory randomly.

It’s not necessary for Lulu to recover all of these triggered memories. Don’t feel like you need to force them into play. In fact, triggering all of them might be overkill.

If you miss a trigger, it’s fine to just wait for the trigger to occur again. If the trigger would definitely not occur again, then it’s okay to just skip it. Memory is, after all, a fickle thing. (You might also flag such a “missed” memory to be used for a randomly triggered memory if you’re doing that.)

**SHARING LULU’S MEMORIES:** If Lulu is a PC, then implementing these triggered memories is relatively easy. (The only decision you need to make is whether to describe them openly at the table or just privately share them with Lulu’s player so that they can roleplay how they tell the other PCs about it.)

But what if Lulu’s an NPC?

The most direct solution is for her to simply describe the memories as she regains them. If you want to more directly describe them to the players as something experienced directly by their players, there are a couple of options:

First, during the Vision from Torm, the god can – while impressing the import of Lulu and her lost memories – forge a connection between the PCs and Lulu. When a memory gets triggered, both Lulu and the PCs experience it. (This link might be between Lulu and the entire group, or it might only be between Lulu and the PC who put on the helmet and received the Vision from Torm.)

Second, Lulu is telepathic and abruptly recovering these memories is a traumatic mental experience. When a memory is triggered, she might involuntarily broadcast it. You might limit this broadcast to the PCs (i.e., she’s broadcasting to those she trusts and is friends with) or it might just be an open blast to anyone nearby (which could result in any number of unforeseen consequences depending on which NPCs happen to be within range at the time).

d20	Trigger
1	Hearing Zariel’s Name
2	Heated Argument With a Devil
3	Lulu Comes to the High Hall
4	Downed PC / Companion / Ally
5	Seeing Zariel’s Flying Fortress
6	Meeting Bitter Breath
7	Seeing the Styx

8	Yael's Last Words
9	A Gathering of Forces / The Refugee Caravan
10	Name or Holy Symbol of Lathander
11	Being Imprisoned
12	A Magic Portal

**Hearing Zariel's Name:** "Zariel! That was the name of my angel!" Lulu remembers that the name of the warrior angel who was her friend was Zariel. She has a flash of Zariel's beatific face smiling in dappled, silvery moonlight. "Fair met, Lulu. I am Zariel, solar of Celestia."

**Heated Argument With a Devil:** Zariel is being held by a phalanx of winged angels, she is screaming at someone. Zariel wants to... testify? Someone is on trial. Zariel feels that justice isn't being done. "Your betrayal, Ashmedai, cost us everything! No matter what this farce of justice ordains! No matter what Primus lets you get away with! I will speak my truth!"

**Lulu Comes to the High Hall:** Double vision of the High Hall and the old citadel that once stood atop the tor. When she passes through the doors, the vision will intensify and she will see Yael kneeling before Olanthius. Olanthius reaches down and offers Yael his hand, saying, "Speak to me of your Crusade, milady." Yael responds, "Thank you, Lord Olanthius."

**Downed PC/ Companion/ Ally** (someone Lulu has formed a meaningful connection with): Lulu remembers flying above a blasted wasteland of black rock and red sands. There was a woman on her back softly weeping. Below them a vast sea of devils surges in the opposite direction. She tries to fly even faster. Looking back, at the center of the converging mass of fiends she sees a beam of golden light shooting into the air. And at the center of the beam a beautiful, angelic woman with white, bloodstained wings struggles against the mass that slowly overwhelms and quenches her light. The woman on Lulu's back swallows her tears and says, "Turn and face what is to come and not what is behind. We must fly fast, my friend. We have far to go." Yael... That was the woman's name. Yael.

*Design Note: If appropriate, this memory could be progressively triggered. For example, only the second time it's triggered does Lulu remember that there was a woman on her back. And only on the third time does she remember the woman's name.*

**Seeing Zariel's Flying Fortress:** Lulu has a double vision of seeing the flying fortress from a different angle (and possibly at a much closer distance). From this other angle, she's been leashed with a length of grey, woven rope and is surrounded by a small band of people: A woman dressed entirely in animated, multi-colored silk cloths that drift around her body. A pair of horned devils with pitch-black skin. Several scampering imps. A smiling, bearded man in silk robes with a jambiya blade thrust into a sash around his waist.

As the group approaches the fortress, a semi-circular silver platform slowly levitates to the ground. It appears to be operated by a bearded devil who stands near a copper pedestal. Lulu and her group board the platform and it begins to ascend back towards the fortress...

*DM Note: This group is the entourage Mahadi led to gift Lulu to Zariel. (Note that in the Remix, Mahadi gifted Lulu himself, rather than merely selling her to anonymous devils.)*

**Meeting Bitter Breath:** Lulu is being escorted by half a dozen devils across the red sands of Avernus. Zariel's flying fortress hangs in the sky behind them. Lulu feels... drunk? Concussed? Confused, certainly. Like she's viewing the world through a grey veil or haze. Time seems to rush by; or perhaps turgidly skips about. The flying fortress is gone now. But then, suddenly, there's an explosion of black energy that utterly consumes one of the devils escorting Lulu. Over a reddish dune ahead of them, a pack

of infernal warmachines churns into view. An arcanist hangs precariously off the side of one of them slinging spells. The devils with Lulu are thrown into confusion, but try to take up some form of defensive position. One of them is run over by a warmachine; smashed flat into the red dust in a smear of black ichor. A horned devil leaps from one of the vehicles and lands in a confused cluster of devils. Her tail whips out, tripping one of the devils and sending them crashing into the dust. She spears another on the end of her trident and laughs with joyful rage. "Tell Zariel that not one of her servants is safe from the vengeance of Bitter Breath!"

**Seeing the Styx:** A flash of memory. Lulu is riding on some sort of ferry steered by a dark-haired woman. The woman has a large sword strapped to her back that glows softly with a golden light. They're heading down river. The banks of the river are quite high, blocking Lulu's view of the surrounding landscape. But from one bank comes a demonic howl. And then another. The howls are getting closer...

**Yael's Last Words:** Yael's last words to Lulu, as she sacrificed herself to raise the alabaster fortress, were, "All that's left now is the dream." If Lulu hears someone say something similar to that – e.g., "all we need now is the dream machine" or "all that's left to do now is killing that devil" – she might have a very brief flash to a dark-haired woman saying, "All that's left now is the dream," before being swallowed up by an impossibly bright light that emanates from something held between her hands.

**A Gathering of Forces / The Refugee Caravan:** Lulu is in the form of a giant, golden-furred mammoth. Her angel is riding upon her back. They are at the head of a huge column of mounted soldiers, riding out of the gates of a city. The riders all wear a badge depicting twin suns – one larger than the other.

**Name or Holy Symbol of Lathander:** Lulu hears an impossibly loud trumpeting noise (that no other character can hear).

*DM Note: Lulu is literally "hearing" the memory of her own trumpet, as she called out across the planes and had her prayer answered by Lathander. This effect might repeat upon repeated exposures to Lathander's iconography, perhaps with the sound growing dimmer upon each repetition until it fades away.*

**Being Imprisoned:** Lulu flashes back to the sensation of being entombed in a warm, spongy, moist substance. A reddish light slowly suffuses her surroundings. There's a sense of pressure coupled to a desperate need to escape. Her limbs are lethargic, but she begins weakly thrusting against the pulpy mass which imprisons her. There's a tearing sensation followed by a hot blast of dry wind. There's something wrong with her vision... as if a red caul had been pulled across her eyes. But the light... the light is so bright...

**A Magic Portal:** Zariel is mounted upon Lulu in front of a swirling portal of red energies. They stand in a green field stained with blood. The portal is almost hypnotic. Lulu can't pull her eyes away from it. Zariel cries out to someone that Lulu can't see in the memory – shadowy shapes that are lost to her damaged mind. "He has taken one of our own! To rescue and to salvation! Charge!" Lulu leaps through the crimson portal...

*DM: Not simply ANY dimensional travel, but specifically a portal. (This is not, therefore, triggered when the PCs are plane shifted to Avernus. But it's likely to happen in the Grand Cemetery.)*

## REVELATION LIST – ESSENTIAL

This revelation list features revelations I've deemed "essential" for the players to (a) have a comprehensive picture of Lulu's missing memories and (b) fully comprehend and appreciate Zariel's story (particularly any path through the Avernian Quest which includes returning or using Zariel's Sword).

**LULU MEETS ZARIEL:**

- Triggered Memory: Hearing Zariel's Name
- TBD
- TBD

#### **TRIAL OF ASMODEUS**

- Triggered Memory: Heated Argument With a Devil
- TBD
- TBD

#### **FOUNDING THE CRUSADE**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Triggered Memory: A Gathering of Forces
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine
- TBD

#### **THE THREE GENERALS: YAEL**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Triggered Memory: Downed PC / Companion/ Ally
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine
- Memory Dive: Vision From Torm

#### **THE THREE GENERALS: OLANTHIUS**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Triggered Memory: Lulu Comes to High Hall
- Memory Dive: Vision From Torm

#### **THE THREE GENERALS: HARUMAN**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Memory Dive: Vision From Torm
- TBD

#### **CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS: THIRD VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Triggered Memory: A Magic Portal
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine
- Memory Dive: Vision From Torm

#### **CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS: BATTLE OF AVERNUS**

- Questioning the Hellriders
- Triggered Memory: Downed PC / Companion / Ally
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine

#### **ZARIEL FELL AFTER THE BATTLE OF AVERNUS**

- Memory Dive: Claiming the Sword / Vision From Torm
- Questioning Haruman / Olanthius
- TBD

#### **LULU & YAEL SENT TO HIDE ZARIEL'S SWORD**

- Triggered Memory: Seeing the Styx
- Triggered Memory: Yael's Last Words
- Memory Dive: Vision of Torm / The Dream Machine
- Questioning Yael

#### **LULU WANDERING: TBD**

- Triggered Memory: Being Imprisoned
- TBD
- TBD

#### **LULU WANDERING: THE WANDERING EMPORIUM**

- Triggered Memory: Seeing Zariel's Flying Fortress
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine
- TBD

#### **LULU WANDERING: AT ZARIEL'S COURT**

- Triggered Memory: Seeing Zariel's Flying Fortress
- Questioning Haruman
- TBD

#### **LULU WANDERING: L'ZETH'S AMBUSH**

- Triggered Memory: Meeting Bitter Breath
- Questioning Bitter Breath
- TBD

### **REVELATION LIST – COOL STUFF**

These additional revelations cover material from the Zariel/Lulu backstory that are significant, but not required for the Avernian Quest to make sense. Mostly I've created this list to properly distribute this lore throughout the campaign. Because these are non-essential elements, it's not strictly necessary to follow the Three Clue Rule. (Although I generally have because it's just good praxis.)

#### **AVERNIAD**

- Memory Dive: Claiming the Sword
- TBD
- TBD

#### **ZARIEL'S LONG MARCH**

- Memory Dive: Claiming the Sword
- Questioning Haruman
- TBD

#### **FIRST VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN**

- Memory Dive: Claiming the Sword
- Questioning Olanthus / Yael
- TBD

#### **SECOND VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN**

- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine

- Questioning Olanthius / Yael
- TBD

#### **“DREAM A LITTLE BIGGER”**

- Memory Dive: Vision from Torm
- Memory Dive: The Dream Machine
- Questioning Olanthius / Yael

#### **THE RECKONING: SIEGE OF DIS**

- Questioning Haruman
- TBD
- TBD

#### **THE RECKONING: ZARIEL’S IMPRISONMENT**

- Questioning Haruman
- TBD
- TBD

#### **THE RIFT WAR**

- Questioning Haruman
- TBD
- TBD

#### **THE RIFT WAR: ZARIEL’S SECOND AVERNIAN MARCH**

- Questioning Haruman
- TBD
- TBD

#### **THE RIFT WAR: ZARIEL BECOMES ARCHDUCHESS**

- Questioning Haruman
- TBD
- TBD

# THE FOUR MEMORY DIVES

In the Remix, there are four “memory dives”:

- The Vision From Torm
- The Dream Machine
- Claiming the Sword
- Zariel’s Spark

In each case, the players are given the opportunity to play through the events of the past. In some of the memory dives, the players will take on the roles of NPCs in those scenes. In others, it will seem as if the PCs themselves are part of the memory (as if they had been somehow transported into the past).

Regardless of method or methodology, we’ll refer to this as the **dreamscape**. While in the dreamscape:

- PCs cannot be killed. Characters taking damage in the dreamscape suffer psychic damage and if reduced to 0 hp are rendered unconscious but stable.
- The past cannot actually be changed: These are morphable (and, it should be noted, therefore unreliable) visions of what happened. The PCs are not actually travelling through time. The dreamscape experiences are strongly guided and, if the players deviate too far from the course of history, it’s likely that the dreamscape will adjust itself. (Alternatively, the memory dive might end abruptly and need to be restarted.)

*GM Note: Although the past cannot be changed by the PCs, it’s up to you how much the players can non-diegetically define what “really” happened. If it doesn’t contradict something previously established in the campaign and/or alter essential continuity, there’s no reason not to assume that how things play out at the table is how those things happened in the past. (For example, one of the players might improvise a battle cry during a memory dive, and then, later, one of the former Hellriders might make the same battle cry or talk about hearing it on the field of battle that day.)*

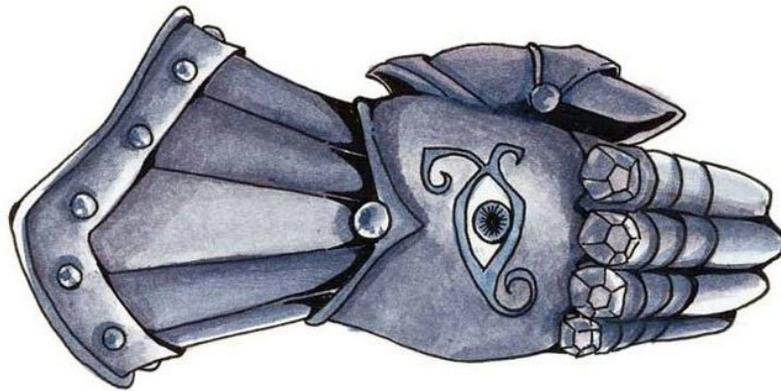
## THE VISION FROM TORM

When a PC puts on the Helm of Torm’s Sight in the Grand Cemetery of Elturel (see [Part 5D](#)), they’ll enter a comatose state until someone, most likely Pherria Jynks, performs a ritual to free them. As that ritual completes, flashback to the moment of them putting on the Helm and then play through the visions they’re shown.

If the players make note of the gauntlet imagery found throughout these visions, they can make a skill check:

- **Religion (DC 12):** A right-handed gauntlet, held upright, is Torm’s holy symbol.

Snippets are non-interactive. Visions are interactive, as noted.



**SNIPPET - THE BEGINNING OF ZARIEL'S FALL.** There is a kind of inky darkness; a nauseous veil of swirling shadows. Then a beam of golden light. The light slowly grows in intensity and the shadows are ripped apart, like a caul parting before your eyes. At the point where the light is almost blinding, it turns reddish and becomes *hot*. Dry and hot. A dry, hot wind.

As your vision clears, you're standing on a field of battle beneath the blood red sky of Avernus. A huge mound of devils lies dead. Other devils, still living, are hauling bodies off the mound, chattering amongst themselves.

All the way at the bottom of the mound, as one last corpse is pinioned on a pitchfork and flung to one side, the body of an angel is revealed. Her skin is porcelain white. Her hair the golden light of an evening sun. Her wings bloodstained ivory.

The devils draw back. Some of them are cackling, but then one glances back over their shoulder and suddenly drops prostrate to the ground. Others, too, following the first's gaze, throw themselves to the ground.

A tall devil with skin of maroon and crimson, dressed in robes of black and gold, strides in amongst the scattered corpses. He is possessed of a leonid beauty, with two almost impossibly long, dark horns curving gracefully from his forehead.

The devil's eyes smolder as he looks down at the angel. As he pulls off a gauntlet-like glove from his left hand, revealing the talons beneath, he turns and asks, in a smooth voice of elegance and grace, "Where is her Sword?"

The caul of gilded night sweeps over your vision.

**VISION - THE THREE GENERALS.** You are standing at attention in some sort of ceremonial uniform in a small group of similarly dressed knights. Each has a small badge on their left shoulder, depicting a pair of twin suns. Before you, on a grassy field, are arrayed three riders wearing identical badges: A woman with dark hair upon a black charger. A bearded man on a white horse. And the angel you saw lying beneath the mound of corpses riding a golden-furred, winged mammoth. Approaching from across the field is another mounted man, this one flanked by an honor guard.

*GM Note: This is an interactive vision, but it's designed to introduce the concept. If the player says they want to take an action, let them. Otherwise, the vision just plays out.*

As the man draws near the trio before you, he brings his horse to a stop and then dismounts. The trio does likewise. A herald steps forward and announces, "Haruman, Lord Knight of the Far Hills greets Lord Olanthius."

The bearded man smiles. "Hail to you, Lord Haruman. And welcome to Elturel. I am pleased to introduce you to Lady Yael of Idyllglen and Zariel, solar of Celestia."

"And I'm Lulu!" trumpets the mammoth.

Haruman removes his left gauntlet and extends his hand, shaking each of the others in turn – and also, with a laugh, Lulu's trunk! Escorted by Lord Olanthius, he proceeds down the line. In a few moments he stop before you and extends his hand. What do you do?

(As they grip Haruman's hand or within a few moments either way, the vision shifts again.)

**SNIPPET - ZARIEL'S REQUEST.** The red heat of Avernus sweeps over you. So do the sounds of battle, but only at a distance. There is a trumpeting and the shadows are swept away like mist in a strong wind, you see the angel Zariel kneeling in the dust. Lady Yael, arrayed for battle in battered, bloody, and dust-covered armor kneels on the ground next to her. Zariel is pushing her glowing sword into Lady Yael's hands.

*GM Note: The trumpeting is Lulu stomping some devils a little distance away.*

**Yael:** I refuse. Do not ask me of this.

**Zariel** (smiling sadly): I must. I do. Look beyond this forsaken day. One last time, I need you to dream a little bigger.

Yael weeps and then, unable to speak, nods, taking Zariel's sword.

There's another trumpet and Zariel's golden mammoth comes charging up. "I drove them off, but there's another group drawing near."

Zariel pulls off her left gauntlet and buries her hand in Lulu's fur, taking a moment of comfort. "My old friend. Goodbye. Perhaps we shall meet again, but I do not think so. I need you to go with Yael. Help her make certain my Sword is not captured by the forces of Hell. Let it become a symbol of everything we have fought for. Even if it has ended in folly, let our deeds have meaning."

As the veil of shadows of gold wraps itself around you again, slowly blotting out everything except the sword still glowing in Yael's hand, Zariel's voice continues: "This is the last thing I will ever ask of you. Protect Yael."

**VISION - YEENOGHU'S GAMBIT.** Through the shadows, the sounds of battle intensify. Your vision clears to reveal yourself riding on horseback at a full gallop. The sun hanging high in the blue sky momentarily blinds you. Your companions are with you: [insert PC names] Ahead of you, on the back of a golden mammoth and leading your charge, is the angelic Zariel. You're surrounded by a massive battle – an army of mostly human knights are fighting a horde of gnolls.

[Call for initiative checks.]

A *wall* of black-furred gnolls come loping up over the top of the hill in front of you. Dozens of them. Maybe hundreds. Zariel calls back over her shoulder: "Guard the flanks! I'll cut us a path through!" Then she spurs Lulu to an even higher speed; the mammoth's feet actually glide off the ground.

[Collect initiative scores and start combat.]

**Combat Encounter:** As Zariel instructs, she's got the gnolls in front. (If one of the PCs is playing Lulu, give them the Hollyphant Elder stat block from *Lulu's Guide to Hollyphants*. They can help Zariel on the

front lines, probably attacking gnoll pack lords. Alternatively, have Zariel order her to help guard the flanks and add an extra Fang and four gnolls to the fight.)

- **Left Flank:** Gnoll Fang of Yeenoghu, Gnoll Pack Lord, 8 Gnolls
- **Right Flank:** 2 Gnoll Pack Lords, 8 Gnolls

**After Combat:** After the fight, the PCs can rally to Zariel and ride up over the top of the hill. From there they can look out over farm fields churned and ruined by the battle, sowed a carpet of the dead. Off to their left is a small village. Some of the buildings are on fire.

A few hundred yards away across a field stands a twelve-foot-tall demon gnoll. It holds aloft a dark-haired woman – Lady Yael – by the neck. Seeing Zariel across the field of battle, it turns and with a slash of its claws rends a purple, roiling gash in the air. With a hyena-like cackle which crackles across the field like black lightning, it leaps through the portal with Lady Yael still clutched in its gauntleted right hand.

**SNIPPET – ZARIEL’S COURT.** As the demon vanishes, the energy of the portal seems to turn into swirls of shadow and gold. Through the darkness you hear two voices.

The first voice, as if played from a cracked record, asks, “Where is the Sword?”

And the second voice, weak and disoriented, replies, “I don’t know... I don’t... I used to know, but I don’t any more. I don’t.”

**SNIPPET – MESSAGE FROM TORM.** A hand – or, rather, a gauntlet – reaches through the shadows and sweeps them away. An immense light which seems as if it should be blinding in its intensity but which is instead a soothing comfort to your eyes emanates from the gauntlet... or perhaps from a point behind the gauntlet.

A booming voice emanates seemingly from all directions: “Seek ye Zariel’s blade. It is the key to her heart and her greatest desire. With it, Elturel’s chains can be severed.”

The gauntlet clenches into a fist as the voice speaks. Then it opens and, upon the palm of the gauntlet, a tiny golden elephant – Lulu – is flying in miniature. “Even from my sight is the Sword hidden. There is only one who knows and she knows not.”

The gauntlet closes again, then opens to reveal two black-feathered, birdlike humanoids standing next to a strange vehicle of blackened iron. “She must seek the kenku. In her memory they speak.”

The gauntlet closes for a third time. You hear a different voice chanting as if from a great distance.

[This is the voice of whoever is casting the spell. The PC might recognize this voice.]

The booming voice speaks again, but it, too, seems to come from a distance now as the other voice grows stronger: “Seek the kenku!”

The light now truly becomes blinding and –

[The PC wakes up.]

*Note: As per p. 72 of Descent Into Avernus, when the PC who received the vision tells Lulu what they saw, it will trigger a memory of meeting two kenku at a place called Fort Knucklebones. Realizing it was near the Dock of Fallen Cities, she’ll swoop up into the sky and then return, declaring that it’s only a dozen miles off and she can lead the PCs there.*

*If Lulu is a PC in your campaign, you might want to prep a brief handout describing the kenku and Fort Knucklebones, and also telling Lulu’s player that she knows how to get there across the Avernian plains.*

*If it WAS Lulu who put on the Helm, modify Torm's final vision. He'll say something like, "Among all living creatures, only you know where it was hidden." He might also show her Fort Knucklebones in miniature, triggering her memory of the kenku there.*

## THE DREAM MACHINE

The dream machine allows multiple subjects to be strapped into it and share the dreams of the primary subject. Lulu is the primary subject here, and the dream machine should allow her to dive into and recover memories that she has lost. Mad Maggie will encourage as many PCs as possible to join Lulu in the machine so that they can help her in recovering her lost memories.

Once everyone is attached to the machine, Mad Maggie will activate it (and will continue monitoring its activity from outside the shared dreamscape) while promising to pull them out if things get too rough.

**SNIPPET - TUNING INTO LULU'S DREAMS:** There's a strange rushing sensation and/or sound (it's difficult to differentiate one sense from another for a moment) and then all of the PCs open their eyes to find themselves with Lulu in an infinite, featureless white void.

- A moment of double vision: The PCs realize that they are looking out of each other's eyes. (So PC 1 is looking out of PC 2's eyes and is seeing themselves, for example.)
- They hear Mad Maggie's voice cackling out of the white void all around them: "That's odd! One moment!"
- There's a high-pitched squeal, everyone's vision blurs, and then they're all looking out of the correct sets of eyes.
- Mad Maggie says: "That's better! Now, give me just a moment to synchronize your soul-streams with the heartstone. [PC's name] seems a little choleric."
- As Mad Maggie adjusts the machinery, the white void slowly morphs or shifts or phases in and out of a sickeningly pink and fluffy landscape that slowly comes more and more into focus until it finally solidifies around the PCs... this is the inside of Lulu's mind.
- Mad Maggie: "You should all be on the same beam now. This may hurt a little. I'm going to adjust the machine to harmonize with her Styx-tainted memories."
- The fluffy pink landscape begins to undulate precipitously. It seems to accelerate unevenly in semi-random directions, rushing past the PCs and Lulu in a dizzying display. Then pieces of the pink fluff seem to either desiccate or decay; turning into faded brown patches or, in some cases, a dripping black sludge.
- The effect accelerates – more and more of the pink fluff turning into a sickening morass that swirls about the PCs in a whirl of multi-shaded black. PCs need to make a **DC 13 Dexterity or Wisdom check** to avoid having this black muck cling and stick to them. On a failure, they will suffer disadvantage on their first check in the vision.

**VISION - THIRD VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN:** The black sludge sloughs away to reveal a field of battle. It's chaotic. The battle lines of Zarielite crusaders have met a ravaging mass of gnolls and the front lines are a frantic melee. [PC's name] is just dragging their sword free from the dead body of a gnoll.

- Lulu is nearby and Zariel is mounted atop her. But even in that moment of respite, Zariel cries out, "Lulu! Help hold the line here! I'm going to get a lay of the land!"
- As Zariel shoots straight up into the air, another clot of gnolls comes rushing down the hill.

**Encounter:** Zariel can be seen circling above. You might describe her occasionally diving down towards some distant part of the battlefield, only to reappear above on the next round.

- 4 **gnoll fangs of Yeenoghu** (MM, p. 163)
- 7 **gnoll pack lords** (MM, p. 163)
- 16 **gnolls** (MM, p. 162)

**Second Round:** A “gnoll” archmage strides to the top of the hill about 250 feet away. There’s only a 50% chance per round that it focuses its spellcasting on the PCs’ section of the battle. (You can describe other spells zipping off to blast away NPCs fighting to either side.)

- Use stats for **archmage** (MM, p. 343), with following changes.
- **Damage Resistance** cold, fire, lightning; bludgeoning, piercing, and slashing from nonmagical weapons.
- **Damage Immunities** poison
- **Condition Immunities** poison
- **Senses** truesight 120 ft., passive Perception 12

**Wrap Up:** At a time of your choosing (probably when the PCs are finishing off the gnolls in their immediate vicinity and/or when they’ve credibly threatened the archmage), there is a terrible trumpeting sound that echoes across the field of battle.

- It’s followed by a monstrous voice echoing through a bullhorn. It speaks Abyssal: “Cast off! Cast off! Demons of the Abyss, to arms! To arms! We ride for the flag of Yael! At Yael we strike!”
- On its next action, the skin of the “gnoll” archmage sloughs off, revealing a chitinous, winged, demonic form that takes to the air and flies towards the bullhorn’s command.
- “To Yael! To Yael we ride!”

**SNIPPET - SECOND VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN:** Just as the demon’s gnoll-skin sloughed away, the fields of Idyllglen begin to decay once more into that thick, black sludge.

- The PCs can hear the sound of something metallic being struck repeatedly; like a cheap gong.
- Mad Maggie’s voice from a distance: “Worthless junk! Worthless! Align you thrice-cursed pile of barlgura dung! Align, damn you!”
- The black sludge churns for a moment longer and then grows still. Just a black void that seems to press in on the PCs from all sides.
- Out of the darkness: “You’re no ogres! Identify yourselves!”
- There’s a blazing golden light: Lulu! Lit up as if golden flames danced through her fur! Zariel is astride her. The sudden light also reveals a small band of irregularly outfitted soldiers, led by a woman with long black hair. [Yael]
- Zariel says, “Know ye that I am Zariel! By the compact of old and in heed of your call, I return to you in your hour of need!”
- The woman smiles, walking forward: “I am Yael of Idyllglen. And we are sore pressed, milady.”
- Zariel dismounts and extends her hand, clasping Yael’s: “I am glad to you meet you, Yael of Idyllglen.”

**Montage of Lost Conversations.** There’s a horrible screech and the vision flies apart in tatters.

- Mad Maggie: “Hold on in there! One the bile ducts has gotten wedged open!”

What follows are just fragments of conversation (the PCs may not even see all the speakers, who are indicated in brackets for the GM’s elucidation):

- “Yeenoghu has returned! He razes the settlements of the Winding Water!” [a messenger to Zariel and the Three Generals, precipitating the Third Visit to Idyllglen]
- **Zariel:** “Chazaqiël has betrayed all we believe in. You must see that! To Hell with her if that is what she wants, but we would break our oath to follow her!” [Zariel rallying those loyal to Heaven before her Long March during the Averniad]
- “Which of us do you think sees more clearly?” [Asmodeus, tempting Zariel to her fall]
- **Zariel:** “The demon lord flees before our wrath! And he has taken one our own! To rescue and salvation! Charge!” [Zariel unwittingly leading the Three Armies through the portal to Avernus]

- “My friend, you will find the aid of the Emporium to be all that you would ever wish.” [Mahadi, shortly before he splashes Lulu with water from the Styx]
- **Zariel:** “It may be madness. But will you join me?” Yael: “Aye. Let’s dream a little bigger.” [Yael and Zariel forming the Zarielite Crusade]

**VISION - LAST STAND ON THE STYX:** They hear Yael’s voice continuing to speak, but now it’s some sort of eldritch chant. It seems to *pulling* at them. Their vision begins to clear. They find themselves surrounded by a gentle undulation. Like the surface of a scrying pool, it shows them:

- Yael and Lulu onboard an infernal ferry sailing down a river [the Styx].
- The ferry has been hulled and is slewed to one side; it’s slowly sinking.
- They’re surrounded by demons. Lulu has just gored two of them with her tusks and, with a shake of her head, hurls them overboard.
- Yael is casting a spell. Her chanting voice is literally drawing the PCs towards it. They can resist this effect with a DC 14 Wisdom save if they choose to (in which case they remain in the undulating space for what follows, but can choose to leap through at any time).

Yael is casting a *summon celestial* spell (see *Tasha’s Cauldron*, p. 110). PCs who are drawn through the undulating surface of the vision actually *become* the Celestial Spirits she summoned that day. Yael says, “Well... it seems the gods can still hear us, even here.”

- Let the players choose whether they wish to be Avengers or Defenders (*Tasha’s Cauldron*, p. 110).
- Although they have the stat block of a Celestial Spirit, they use their own normal attack bonuses and have their own physical appearance, but with golden, glowing skin and hair that seems to be made from pure light.
- If Lulu is a PC, she’ll assume the role of her former self.

Shortly after the Celestial Spirits arrive, Yael calls out to Lulu: They’re losing the ship! They need to flee back into Avernus to escape the demons tracking them from the Abyss! Yael flies off on Lulu’s back, leaving the Celestial Spirits to cover their retreat.

**Encounter.** This is not an encounter designed for the PCs to win. (If they do, great. End it there.)

- 2 **shadow demons** (MM, p. 64) + 4 **barlgura** (MM, p. 56) on the ferry
- 8 **barlgura** on the shore; 1d4 leap onto the boat each round
- 4 **glabrezu** (MM, p. 58) on the shore, shouting orders to the barlgura (they’ll come across at an opportune time)
- A flock of 8 **vrock** (MM, p. 64) on the shore next to the glabrezu, some of whom take off and pursue Lulu and Yael (send all of them if Lulu is player-controlled) while the rest continue assaulting the boat

**Wrapping Up.** This vision ends when the Celestial Spirits have been overwhelmed or, against all odds, destroyed the demonic war party.

**SNIPPET - LULU CROSSING AVERNUS:** As the PCs return to the undulating place, they see Lulu and Yael flying low across the Avernian wastelands.

There’s a kind of “glitch” and then it’s just Lulu flying by herself. The glitch repeats, and Lulu the War Mammoth is replaced by Lulu the Cute Little Elephant. Another glitch and now it’s Yael walking alongside the Cute Little Elephant.

*GM Note: Lulu’s many, fractured memories of wandering Avernus are getting mixed up.*

**VISION - LULU & ZARIEL IN MERCURIA:** There's a final glitch as they see Lulu the Cute Elephant again, flying across the red sands of Avernus. The hue of the sands slowly shifts to a silverish color as the skies above darken and fill with a cascade of diamond-like stars shining bright.

The vision of Lulu fades away and they find themselves on a beach, the wine-dark waves gently lapping a beach of gleaming silver sand.

Arranged on the beach are eight pairs of frozen figures: Each pair is the same two figures in different positions and poses. Lulu (in her "fuzzy war mammoth" form) and Zariel, talking to each other.

**Vignettes.** The pairs of figures remain frozen until one of them is touched. Touching a frozen vignette causes it to come to life, playing out a brief snippet of the long-ago conversation between the two friends.

*GM Tip: If Lulu is a player character, you could give her the script for each vignette to play out her historical part with Zariel.*

**Vignette #1 - Planning to Return:** Zariel is standing, staring up at the stars. Lulu is curled around her feet.

- **Zariel:** I look out across the vast gulfs of the multiverse, and I am the sick for the need of change.
- **Lulu:** If change is what you're looking for, then you'll need to look somewhere new to find it.
- **Zariel:** It's these mortals. Speaking with them - feeling the heat and fleeting speed of their passion - has aroused in me the truth. We may be eternal, but they are not. And if we fail them, our eternity makes the failure even greater.
- **Lulu:** Could mortals truly make such a difference in your heart?

**Vignette #2 - The Disaffected Angels:** Zariel wading through the waves.

- **Lulu:** And when the infinite forces of the Abyss sweep down upon us?
- **Zariel:** Then we will fight! [she laughs] But, no. Once a beachhead exists, others will flock to our cause. I am not the only disaffected angel! Give them but a chance, and they will seize it!

**Vignette #3 - Dream a Little Bigger:** Lulu and Zariel standing side by side, looking up at the stars.

- **Lulu:** From the Powers of Heaven? You're certainly following her advice! Your dream is impossibly large!
- **Zariel:** Perhaps. But we'll dream it together?
- **Lulu:** Forever.

**Vignette #4 - What Army?** Zariel and Lulu sitting on the beach facing each other.

- **Lulu:** You already have an army!
- **Zariel:** [after a moment's confusion] You mean Yael?
- **Lulu:** And her militia. Yes!
- **Zariel:** That's a force for bandit ogres, not demonwars!
- **Lulu:** But it could be!

**Vignette #5 - Secrets from Heaven:** Lulu and Zariel sitting on a log side by side.

- **Zariel:** They will not appreciate having hand being forced.
- **Lulu:** Then we must keep it a secret.
- **Zariel:** For as long as we are able.

**Vignette #6 - Mortal Army:** Zariel petting the top of Lulu's head.

- **Lulu:** Then it will be a crusade.
- **Zariel:** A crusade of the valiant, whose courage shall never be broken!

**Vignette #7 – Giving the Mortals a Chance:** Zariel hovering a few feet off the ground, her wings spread wide. Laughing. Lulu looking up at her.

- **Zariel:** They have! They have made all the difference! ... And perhaps that is the key. From eternity nothing can change, but if the mortals are given a chance.
- **Lulu:** What sort of chance?
- **Zariel:** To fight! To take up swords and say that their destiny is their own! That they're no longer children! That they will no longer stand idly by while gods and godlings waste eternity!

**Vignette #8 – The Second Front:** Zariel is sketching something in the silver sand with her finger; Lulu is hovering in the air, looking down over her shoulder.

- **Lulu:** But to what end?
- **Zariel:** To disrupt the balance! Demons vs. devils. Heaven vs. Hell. The Great Wheel is a trap. It turns, but never ends. We will break the wheel.
- **Lulu:** How? Where?
- **Zariel:** The Blood War. The Powers of Heaven refuse to intervene – to break an eternal cycle endlessly consuming mortal souls. But if we created a second front – if we broke the balance – that might be all it would take.

**SNIPPET – JANDER'S BETRAYAL:** Zariel is astride Lulu and General Yael is beside them on her black charger. The battle flags of Yael's crusaders are nearby. They stand atop a small rise on the Avernian plains surrounded by a vast array of soldiers.

**Zariel:** The demon army is buckling under Olanthius' assault. I think Haruman may be able to catch them in a pincer and end Yeenoghu's terror for all time.

**Yael:** I agree. As long as my army holds strong, we can keep the devil army engaged until their bloody work is done.

At that moment, a desperate trumpet sounds out across the battlefield. Zariel, Yael, and Lulu jerk their heads around.

**Yael:** I gave no order!

**Lulu:** What's happening?

Yael grabs ahold of Lulu's fur and shouts, "Fly! We need to see!"

Lulu launches into the sky, carrying both Yael and Zariel into a formation of pegasus-riding Crusaders.

**Yael:** Report!

**Pegasus Rider:** Sunstar's platoon has sounded a retreat!

**Yael:** What?

**Pegasus Rider:** The call is spreading!

Looking down, they can see that a huge section of Yael's army is peeling away towards the large portal through which Yeenoghu led the Crusaders to Avernus. Small units from other sections of the army – including some from Haruman's and Olanthius' armies – are following.

**Zariel:** What has he done?

**Insight (DC 12):** Zariel is in despair. She's lost. Uncertain. Doesn't know what to do. Her hope is breaking.

**Another Pegasus Rider:** What should we do?

**Insight (DC 12):** Yael sees Zariel's despair and for a moment it washes over her. She, too, is losing hope. And then a steely strength seems to enter her eyes; her back straightens.

**Yael:** Send a messenger. Order Jander to turn back. Then rally the rest of the reserve! We are going to charge the devil army! We have to keep them off Haruman's back!

The doubt vanishes from Zariel's eyes.

**Zariel:** The rest of you form up on me! We'll need to intercept those flying devils! Keep them off the riders below!

Yael lets go of Lulu and plunges back towards the army waiting below.

**Mad Maggie** can be heard again: "What was that? One moment, the cogbox is rattling up a storm."

Following Zariel's orders, the pegasi begin gathering into a three-dimensional formation above the battle.

**Mad Maggie:** "The cogbox is resonating with something in there! A powerful memory! Hang on! I've got a shifter around here somewhere!"

There are rattling noises. The sound of metallic items being thrown around.

The pegasi are now in formation. Zariel's eyes drift to the portal, where Jander Sunstar and the Hellriders are fleeing back to the mortal plane.

They aren't turning back.

The portal snaps shut.

Zariel orders the charge.

**Mad Maggie:** "I've got it!" A screeching sound of metal on metal.

**SNIPPET - THE BLOODY CYST:** The memories *glitch*. You're back a few moments earlier. Yael is still clinging to the side of Lulu. "We're going to charge the devil army!!"

The memory glitches. Repeats. Yael is clinging to Lulu's fur. "We're going to—"

**Mad Maggie:** "Turn you bastard!"

The memory glitches. Repeats. She lets go and begins to fall... and fall... and fall...

**Mad Maggie:** "There it is!" The sound of a clutch box screeching, and then gears slamming into place.

The battlefield melts away beneath Yael. The memory reshapes itself.

Yael stands next to Lulu in the Avernian wastelands. They're alone. Yael slumps against Lulu's side, clutching her fur to stay on her feet. She's looking toward the horizon: There's a huge cloud of dust. Some massive force is approaching.

She turns and looks in the opposite direction. A cluster of black spots can be seen in the distance. They're far away, but Lulu's sharp eyes can see them: Demons. And they're getting nearer.

**Yael:** It's done. There's no place left to run.

**Lulu:** There has to be something we can do!

**Yael:** There is... Do you trust me, Lulu?

**Lulu:** To the very end.

Yael draws the Sword of Zariel. It bursts with golden, divine light. A beacon which seems to call out a challenge to the approaching forces of evil.

Yael raises the Sword high above her head. "To all the Gods of the Seven Heavens, I plead for your aid! In the name of Zariel, Solar of Celestia. In the name of Yael of Idyllglen. In the name of the mortal souls who have died in this noble cause! I beg a boon to fulfill the final wish of a dying angel! I beg you not to forsake the greatest and most daring of your warriors!"

Lulu rears back on her hind legs, raises her trunk, and *trumpets*. The sound is deafening, yet simultaneously soothing. You can feel the hollyphant pouring her own celestial essence into Yael's call, the sympathetic resonance of her trumpet echoing across the Avernian plains as she drives Yael's plea across the planes.

*And there was an answer.*

Not a voice perhaps. But a presence. Riding Lulu's trumpet back across the planar boundaries.

"Lathander..." Yael murmurs. "Thank you." And then she plunges the sword down into the rocky surface of the Avernian wastelands. There's a huge burst of holy light.

Lulu cries out. "Yael! No!" She can feel Yael pouring her own life force into the gift Lathander had offered.

Yael looks up at Lulu and smiles. "All that's left now is the dream."

The light intensifies. It's a blinding blast that never seems to end.

But then it does. Rising from the ground – from the confluence of holy might and mortal sacrifice – is an alabaster fortress. Here the Sword will be protected. Here the Sword will be safe.

But the skein of Avernus itself rebels at this holy touch. The wastelands seethe and boil in a pustulent eruption. A cancerous, bloody cyst surges upwards, engulfing the fortress, Yael, and Lulu herself.

## CLAIMING THE SWORD

In the larger structure of the campaign, this [memory dive](#) more or less replaces the Idyllglen visions from *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 140. Its presentation and function, however, different.

In the published campaign, the Idyllglen vision is triggered by Lulu's memories being restored in a burst of magical light. In the Remix, that doesn't really happen. We've put large structures in place for Lulu (and the other PCs) [to slowly piece together](#) what was taken from her, but there is no finale where it all magically comes back to her.

This memory dive is instead triggered when a PC moves to claim the Sword of Zariel. Within the Sword is Zariel's Spark, and this memory dive is basically the Spark showing the PCs' the long path to the Fall of Zariel.

Structurally it's more or less doing the same thing for the players: We're setting up the path to Zariel's Fall because that's also the path to her Redemption — if the PCs choose to take that path. (If they don't, then this simply completes Zariel's story and reveals the origin of her evil.)



So, a PC reaches for the Sword, there's a flash of golden light and...

**SNIPPET - THE LEGIONS OF HEAVEN:** A legion of solars stand at attention, flaming swords held point-down before them. Before them - inspecting them - is another angel. He rides a golden, winged lion. His face shares the fierce, leonid beauty of his mount.

Zariel is there — somehow younger in her timeless beauty. An innocence around her eyes? A naivete? An eagerness?

The mounted angel stops. He speaks, but not to Zariel. To an angel just a little further down the line.

**Celestial Marshal:** What's your name?

**Chazaqiel:** Chazaqiel, Marshal, of the ninth legion.

**Celestial Marshal:** Do you know why you are here, young one?

**Chazaqiel:** Elysium seeks to claim the Avernian paradise!

**Celestial Marshal:** Thank you, young one.

The winged lion spreads its wings and soars into the sky.

**Celestial Marshal** (addressing the whole assembly): To glory, my angels!  
To the emerald plains we'll soar, and there forge our destiny! The Legions  
of Heaven shall secure the Eighth Heaven!

A great, golden light grows around the mounted figure, suddenly pulsing with blinding intensity. And then...

*GM Note: The Celestial Marshal is Ashmedai, who shall become Asmodeus.*

**VISION - THE GREAT BETRAYAL:** You find yourselves... flying? Yes, flying on feathered wings through a jungle at night. Somewhere nearby the forest is on fire — a wall of blue flame which sends

strange shadows dancing through the writhing foliage. The air is hazed with purple smoke. You're following another angel, your commanding officer.

"Zariel!"

Another small squad of angels swoops out of the night, led by Chazaqiel. Your commanding officer — who you realize is Zariel — pulls up in midair.

**Zariel:** Kentarch Chazaqiel! Thank the Heavens! Have you heard from Princeps Sanniel?

**Chazaqiel:** Sanniel is no longer in command. I am Princeps now.

**Zariel:** What do you mean? Was she killed in the planar upheaval?

**Chazaqiel:** No. She turned against the Celestial Marshal.

**Zariel:** Against Ashmedai? What are you talking about?

**Chazaqiel:** Things are changing, Hecatón. We are no longer going to be a the plaything dangled between Elysium and Celestia. Ashmedai has claimed Avernus for himself. The great work has just begun. We ride paradise into the jaws of battle!

**Zariel:** Where?

**Chazaqiel:** To Hell.

**Zariel:** This is treason!

**Chazaqiel:** Don't be a fool, Zariel! You swore an oath to the Celestial Marshal! Now obey him! Obey us!

**Zariel:** I swore an oath to Heaven, Chazaqiel. To Heaven above all.

Zariel abruptly draws her sword and attacks! Chazaqiel beats his wings and flies back just out of reach.

[Roll initiative.]

**Angelic Rebellion:** The PCs are currently solars under Zariel's command. They use their own stat blocks, but have the hit points, AC, and other abilities of a solar (MM, p. 18).

- Zariel and Chazaqiel both command an equal number of solars. (The PCs are free to choose which side of the conflict to side with.)
- After 3 rounds, there are trumpets from reinforcements nearby. Zariel orders those loyal to her to cut their way free and flee!

**The Flight of Blue Fire.** Use the rules for chases (DMG, p. 253). Even if the PCs are captured or cut down, Zariel is fated to escape with a small band of other loyalists.

*Homework: Develop a chase complications table that features the after effects of the planar upheaval as Avernus plunges through the multiverse.*

When the chase comes to an end (either because the PCs have been captured or they have escaped with Zariel), there is a flash of golden light. A voice cries out, "The demon lord flees!" And then...

**SNIPPET - FIRST VISIT TO IDYLLGLEN:** Zariel is mounted upon Lulu in her golden war mammoth form. A small force of planetars and other celestials are arrayed behind and above them. Across a recent

battlefield of torn mud and blood, they are glowering at a deviless mounted upon a dire hellhound and surrounded by a motley gang of devils.

The deviless has coppery skin, dark hair, and two curving ram's horns upon her head. Her lips are curled in a sultry smile that doesn't touch her tawny eyes.

**Zariel:** What has brought you to the mortal plane, devil?

**Glasya:** It seems the same as you, angel. We pursue the demon lord Yeenoghu and followed the foul beast here to his butchery among the humans.

**Zariel:** And your name?

**Glasya:** I am Glasya, daughter of Asmodeus.

Several of the planetars surged forward with a strong beat of their wings. Zariel raises her hand to keep them at peace.

**Glasya:** And yours?

**Zariel:** Zariel. What are your intentions?

**Glasya:** Completed, I think. Yeenoghu has slipped through our snare. He has most likely slunk back to the Abyss with this tail tucked between his legs. [she looks up at the planetars] Will we need to tuck yours, too?

**A Planetar:** She'll only have a tail once she's ripped it off of you!

**Glasya (laughs):** Come, Zariel. Leash your dogs and I'll leash mine. I would speak with you without our voices being drowned by the rattling of sabers.

Zariel gestures towards a small grove off to one side. Glasya considers it, then nods her head and dismounts. Zariel follows suit, leaving Lulu and the others behind as she moves off to parlay with the devil.

Glasya's hellhound edges closer to Lulu and sniffs. Lulu recoils. The hellhound reaches up... and licks her trunk.

Glasya and Zariel return. Zariel announces that they have both agreed to leave the fields of Idyllglen in peace, having "fought to common purpose."

There's a flash of golden light. And then...

**SNIPPET - ZARIEL'S FALL:** As your vision clears, you're standing on a field of battle beneath the blood red sky of Avernus. A huge mound of devils lies dead. Other devils, still living, are hauling bodies off the mound, chattering amongst themselves.

All the way at the bottom of the mound, as one last corpse is pinioned on a pitchfork and flung to one side, the body of an angel is revealed. A blood-stained Zariel.

The devils draw back. Some of them are cackling, but then one glances back over their shoulder and suddenly drops prostrate to the ground. Others, too, following the first's gaze, throw themselves to the ground.

A tall devil with skin of maroon and crimson, dressed in robes of black and gold, strides in amongst the scattered corpses. He is possessed of a leonid beauty, with two almost impossibly long, dark horns curving gracefully from his forehead.

You recognize this face. It is the face of Ashmedai, once Celestial Marshal of the Legions of Heaven.

The devil's eyes smolder as he looks down at the angel. In a smooth voice of elegance and grace he asks, "Where is her Sword?"

"Gone." Zariel chokes out of the word. "Asmodeus."

"Fetch her some water," Asmodeus says.

They wait. Simply gazing at each other. A few minutes later, the water is brought in a chalice of ivory-and-gold. Asmodeus takes the cup and offers it to Zariel.

Zariel smacks his hand aside, spilling the cup into the dust and blood.

Asmodeus smiles:

*I look at you and I see that you are in despair. You thought you could make a difference. That you could end the Blood War. But here you are on a field of dead friends.*

*You look at me and I know you see malevolence. You see Evil. You see an antithesis. You see betrayal. But I did make a difference. And I will end the Blood War.*

*All those aeons ago, at my trial, when I looked you in the eye and laughed. Do you think I mocked you? No. I laughed because I saw you standing where I had stood before. I knew we walked the same road and you were just a few steps behind me.*

*Look around you. Look at the dead. Piled high. Do you really think this to be Good? Do you think this butchery to be worthwhile because it was done in a noble cause? You know as well as I do that as long as this continues, as long as the dead are nothing but tallies in the ledgers of complacent gods, Good is derelict. It is meaningless. It is feathery cupids cavorting on a celestial isle while suffering boils forth across the multiverse.*

*I know you came here to kill demons. You think you have failed. I think you have barely begun.*

*Which of us do you think sees more clearly?*

*What I offer you is simple: A chance to continue our fight. You have killed Terza'reg. I offer you his place on the Dark Eight and command of a Blood Legion. Serve me and your Crusade can still boil across the Abyss and turn the Great Wheel into a new epoch.*

As Asmodeus speaks, you sense that this is but one truth among many: That Zariel and Asmodeus converse upon many different planes of thought. That this is but a mortal reflection of a myriad complexity beyond your grasp.

But when it is done, Zariel gazes upon Asmodeus for a long moment. An eternal moment.

And then she reaches out her hand.

"I accept."

As their hands clasp, they explode with a blinding, golden light. And then...

**SNIPPET - ZARIEL'S REQUEST, REDUX:** You are elsewhere on the Avernian field of battle. Zariel is kneeling in the dust. Lady Yael, arrayed for battle in battered, bloody, dust-covered armor kneels on the ground next her. Zariel is pushing her glowing sword into Lady Yael's hands.

**Yael:** I refuse. Do not ask me of this.

**Zariel** (smiling sadly): I must. I do. Look beyond this forsaken day. One last time, I need you to dream a little bigger.

Yael weeps and then, unable to speak, nods, taking Zariel's sword.

But the moment shifts, and you see that in the moment Zariel passes over the Sword, she passes something else, too: A part of herself. A spark. A shard of her eternal, celestial soul.

*I am the memory of Zariel that was and who can be again.*

*I am the Sword of her will and the Blade of her soul.*

Zariel continues to speak to Yael, but she turns her head and her blazing eyes bore into you: "This is the last thing I will ever ask of you."



## ZARIEL'S SPARK

The last of our four [memory dives](#) comes at the moment when the Archduchess of Avernus touches the Sword of Zariel. As we've now established, Zariel placed a small shard of her soul into the Sword of Zariel before giving it Yael. This spark of Zariel's former self is what provides Zariel with a chance for redemption.

Here's how that plays out:

- The Archduchess and the PCs are drawn into a memory dive.
- The events of Zariel's Fall (see above) play out once more.
- But this time, the "Zariel" of the past has the appearance of the Archduchess of Avernus. She's living out her own memory of what happened.
- The PCs are also present in the scene (although only Zariel can see or hear them).

The key here is that the spark within the Sword basically gives Zariel a chance to relive this pivotal moment and (most importantly!) *make a different choice* when the ultimate moment arrives.

If Zariel rejects Asmodeus' offer, that obviously doesn't actually change the past. This is a memory dive, not time travel. But it *is* her chance for redemption: The vision ends, the PCs return to the real world to find that no time has passed, but Zariel's devilish form melts away as she is returned to her angelic form (see *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 148).

**INFLUENCING ZARIEL:** The PCs can attempt to influence Zariel's choice. They might counter Asmodeus's arguments, remind Zariel of events from her own past, or perhaps even make an emotional appeal (which could be particularly effective coming from Lulu).

Resolve this as a special group check, calling for skill or ability checks at DC 15. Give them advantage on this check if they invoke something they've learned about Zariel's past. If at least half of the group makes a successful check (even if not everyone in the group makes a check), then they succeed: Zariel makes a different choice and is redeemed.

On a failure, they still grant advantage to Zariel's Wisdom save (see below).

**BEARING SILENT WITNESS:** If the PCs don't intervene or fail the group check, then Zariel makes a DC 22 Wisdom save. On a success, she makes a different choice and is redeemed. On a failure, she rejects redemption and destroys the Sword (along with the spark of goodness within it).

## ON THE MATTER OF REDEMPTION

This is a semi-controversial point in *Descent Into Avernus*: Zariel has spent centuries as a devil, doing countless evil acts on a scope probably beyond mortal comprehension (of her own free will!), and now she just waves her hand and is redeemed?! What the hell?!

(If you'll pardon the pun.)

You can see similar arguments around Darth Vader's redemption in *Return of the Jedi*.

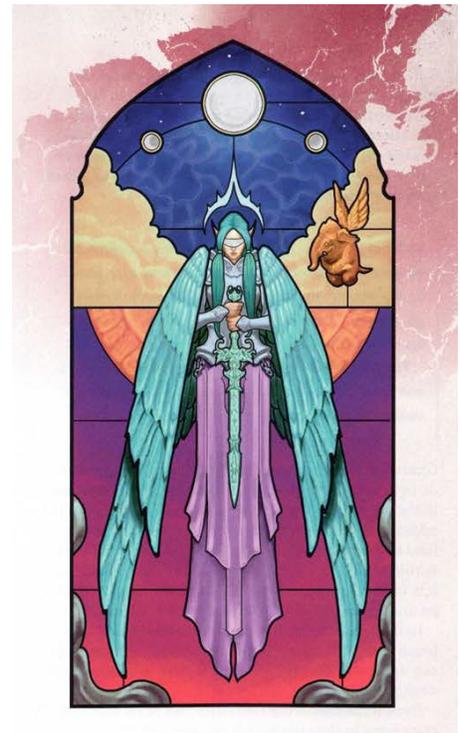
What seems to trip people up here is the idea that redemption means Zariel or Vader should be automatically forgiven for the things they did or should be immune from facing consequences for those actions. There are ethical structures in which this is true, but it's not intrinsically linked to the act of redemption itself.

Redemption isn't about how other people treat you or should treat you. It's about your fundamental identity and the type of person you are (which will determine the actions you will take in the future). You can choose to be a better person starting RIGHT NOW, but ultimately no one else needs to change their behavior because of that until your actions give them cause to do so.

In Christianity, for example, the only person who "needs" to do anything differently because you're redeemed is God. Who is, notably, omniscient and can, therefore, "see" redemption without the need for action.

(The meaning of the word "redemption" is actually based on the Christian God's omniscience: Only He can redeem your sin - i.e., declare it a debt no longer owed - because only He can see your "ledger.")

This same thing applies to the *Star Wars* universe: Force magic allows you to "see" a person's fundamental identity and the fact that Anakin is able to manifest as a Force Ghost is evidence of how he



was “aligned” as a person, regardless of the actions he had taken previously (and which would have demonstrated that personal alignment).

And we see the same thing in the metaphysics of *Descent Into Avernus*: Zariel is a supernatural being and if the fundamental alignment of the cosmos recognizes her as an angel... well, it means she has, in fact, fundamentally changed. She has rejected sin and found redemption.

In the real world, we could similarly hypothesize the ability to have this knowledge: Like, if we could take 100% accurate brain scans and were able to analyze a person’s “code” to see what type of person they were, we’d be able to know whether or not someone had truly become redeemed – had fundamentally changed and become the type of person who does good things.

Once we have that technology, the ethics of crime and punishment will need to change (but will almost certainly take decades or centuries to adjust). But until we have that technology (if we ever do), then it’s just a fantasy that can be fun to think about.

## QUESTIONING THE HELLRIDERS

While exploring Avernus, the PCs have several opportunities to actually meet the crusaders who rode with Zariel into Hell itself.

At **Haruman’s Hill** they can speak with Jander Sunstar, the crucified Hellriders who abandoned Zariel and their comrades, and General Haruman himself.

At the **Crypt of the Hellriders** they can speak with the disembodied spirits of the crusaders who remained in Hell when the others fled. They can also meet General Olanthius.

And, of course, Yael herself will be met at the **Bloody Cyst**.

These encounters provide a really amazing opportunity for the PCs to interact with history. And if we’ve set things up correctly, the players will really *feel* that: Getting to meet Sunstar or Olanthius or Yael – after learning so much about them – will carry the same weight as meeting JFK or Cleopatra or William Shakespeare.

To this end, I’ve prepped a basic [NPC roleplaying template](#) for each of the Hellriders, allowing us to run these encounters with easy confidence within the revised continuity of the Remix. The key info section for each Hellrider contains the key references for the [Memory Revelations](#), but since the PCs will likely be interested in hearing their tale, I’ve tried to keep the background sections as clear and straightforward (for easy reference) as possible.

### JANDER SUNSTAR

**Appearance:** Impaled upon an iron tree, his pale skin is stained with a thin network of red and lurid veins. His dull-grey eyes are sunken pits of bruised crimson.

#### **Roleplaying:**

- His voice is wracked with eternal anguish.
- His arms are pinioned; his hands straining and palsied, their motion limited.
- He feels he deserves this punishment, but feels endless guilt for leading his Hellriders to this fate.

#### **Background - Early History:**

- Gold elf born on the island of Evermeet.
- Left Evermeet in search of adventure.

- 786 DR: Joined the armies of King Sarshel of Impiltur, serving under the three Paladin Princes (Essys, Araln, and Nord) as a knight of the Order of the Triad. In the Battle of the Moaning Gorge, Essys and Araln were killed, but the Impiltur forces defeated the armies of the balor Ndulu, driving both the demon and his horde back into the Abyss.
- 788 DR to 794 DR: Nord became king of Impiltur and begins the Harrowing of Nord, seeking to purge all the fiend-worshippers in the kingdom. Jander grew weary of the work and, with his friend Gideon (another knight of the Order of the Triad), left Impiltur and headed west into the Dalelands.
- 796 DR: In the Year of Grey Mists, Jander and Gideon become two members of the Silver Six and slay a red dragon in Merrydale. A few weeks later, the dale is plagued by a group of vampires. Two of the Silver Six are killed. In the same year, Merrydale is renamed Daggersdale.
- 798 DR: Jander is turned by the vampire lord Cassiar.
- 892 DR: Jander manages to slay Cassiar and escape from his influence.
- Early 10<sup>th</sup> Century DR: Jander ends up in the Goblin Marches, where he falls in with a slave revolt led by Haruman, the Boy Warlord. Haruman eventually becomes the Lord Knight of the Far Hills, ruling a fiefdom out of Farkeep (the citadel which would later become known as Darkhold). Jander became a knight-banneret in his service.

#### **Background - Zarielite Crusade:**

- While questing to the west of Farkeep, Jander encountered Zarielite crusaders and learned of their cause. Moved by their grand desire to strike at the very heart of evil – something which seems to echo with his own eternal struggle – he returned to Farkeep and converted Haruman to the cause.
- Jander rode to Elturel with Haruman, where the Lord Knight of the Far Hills pledged himself as the Third General of the Crusade, joining General Yael and Olanthus, Lord of Elturel.
- Under the command of the Zariel and the Three Generals, the crusaders marched to war against a demon lord named Yeenoghu outside a small town called Idyllglen. Jander was the commander of one of the cavalry wings.
- As the battle seemed to be drawing to a close, Yeenoghu captured General Yael and fled through a portal. Zariel, riding a golden hollyphant, led the army through the portal in pursuit, emerging onto the plains of Avernus.
- During the Battle of Avernus, while the Three Armies were engaged with Yeenoghu's army, an army of devils approached. Jander panicked ("We can't fight both Hell and the Abyss!") and led a large chunk of the army back through the portal to Idyllglen. The portal then slammed shut behind them, leaving Zariel, Yael, Olanthus, Haruman, and most of the crusaders trapped in Hell. (Jander doesn't know what caused the portal to close.)
- Jander was the highest ranking officer among the crusaders who had fled (and therefore survived) Avernus. The deserters became known as the Hellriders, their acts of infamy instead being told as deeds of glory.
- Jander became the first High Rider of Elturel. He changed the Riders' heraldry from the twin stars of the Zarielite Crusade to a horse rampant in flames.

#### **Background - Later Life:**

- Sickened by his betrayal of both Zariel and Haruman, Jander felt he was living a lie. The dark blot of the vampiric curse on his soul grew larger and he was no longer able to fully control his need for human blood.
- Resigning his position, Jander left Elturel and resumed his long-delayed journey to the west, eventually ending up Waterdeep.

- In Waterdeep, he withdrew further and further from human society, eventually becoming a hermit living in a cave outside of town. He would occasionally come into town to “sip” from the inmates of Waterdeep’s asylum.
- During one of his feeding trips, he met a mad women named Anna and fell in love with her. He discovered that she had been cursed in a land called Barovia.
- After Anna’s death, Jander journeyed to Barovia to seek revenge against the one who had placed the curse of madness upon her. He eventually discovered that Anna was Tatyana, a woman who had been pursued by Count Strahd of Ravenloft, the ruler of Barovia.
- Although he attempted to end Strahd’s life, Jander failed. Finding peace with himself at long last, however, he climbed to a high cliff, prayed to Lathander, and waited for the sun to rise.
- ... but he found no grace or forgiveness from Lathander. Upon his suicide, his soul was taken to Avernus. Reformed into the vampiric form he loathed in “life,” Jander was taken to Haruman’s Hill and crucified as an eternal punishment for his betrayal of the Archduchess Zariel during the Battle of Avernus.

#### Key Info:

- Jander was a Zarielite Crusader.
- The Three Generals were Yael, Olanthius, and Haruman.
- Jander betrayed Zariel during the Battle of Avernus, leading a chunk of the army back through the portal. The deserters became known as the Hellriders, cloaking themselves in false glory.

*Design Note: Jander Sunstar first appears in Christie Golden’s [Vampire of the Mists](#) and various short stories. The continuity of those stories is impossible to bring into accord with the events described in *Descent Into Avernus*. Not only are the particular dates of the original story not internally consistent to begin with, but the sequence of events is fundamentally different: In the original stories, Jander serves as a Hellrider with Gideon, is later turned into a vampire, goes to Ravenloft, and then dies. In *Descent Into Avernus*, on the other hand, he becomes a vampire, goes to Ravenloft, apparently doesn’t die when he attempts suicide, serves as a Hellrider, and then commits suicide at some unspecified later date.*

*(The “doesn’t die” thing can actually be traced back to AD&D sourcebooks that apparently wanted to include a prominent character from the tie-in novels, but didn’t have any utility for a long-dead NPC. But most of the confusion once again maps back to the decision to move the Charge of the Hellriders to the 14<sup>th</sup> century, [as we’ve discussed previously](#).)*

*I’ve done my best here to weld the continuity back into something semi-coherent: You still have to basically ignore any specific dates given in Golden’s original stories, but the actual sequence of Jander’s life is now consistent through those stories. I’ve provided an alternative military campaign for Jander to meet Gideon during and also unified his suicide “attempts” so that everything leads up to the culmination of the original novel.*

*My goal is that – if your players have read the novel – the scene with Jander will be a really cool experience that builds on their existing knowledge of the character.*

## HARUMAN

**Appearance:** He wears armor formed from countless, curved plates of razor-sharp, black steel. From beneath the visor of his scythe-topped helm a pair of glowing red eyes glare out with baleful hatred.

**Roleplaying:**

- Does NOT like being referred to as a Hellrider.
- Taciturn to a fault. It takes effort to draw him out. (Appealing to his hatred for the crucified traitors is a particularly effective method, however.)
- When still or in conversation, keeps both hands clasped atop his claymore, held in front of him.

#### Background:

- Haruman was a slave in the Goblin Marches.
- When he was eleven, he killed his goblin overlord and initiated a slave revolt.
- He marched out of the Goblin Marches as the Boy Warlord, eventually conquering Farkeep (the citadel which would later become known as Darkhold) at the age of thirteen. He became known as the Lord Knight of the Far Hills.
- **Zarielite Crusade:** Eight years later, he learned from Jander Sunstar – a knight-banneret who had fought by his side during the slave revolt – of the Zarielite Crusade. Mustering his forces, he marched to Elturel and swore an oath of loyalty to Zariel and the Crusade. He joined Lady Yael and Lord Olanthius as one of the Three Generals.
- **Battle of Idyllglen:** He marched with the rest of the Crusade to Idyllglen when they learned it was being attacked by a demon lord named Yeenoghu. During the battle, Lady Yael was captured and carried through a portal by Yeenoghu. Zariel ordered a pursuit, and Haruman led his army through the portal.
- **Battle of Avernus:** The portal led to Avernus. The crusaders were doing well against Yeenoghu's demon army when an army of devils approached. Jander Sunstar betrayed them, rode back through the portal to Idyllglen with hundreds of other cowards, and then sealed the portal behind him, trapping everyone else in Hell.
- Olanthius and Haruman were able to pincer the remnants of Yeenoghu's army and finish them off, while Zariel and Yael wheeled her command about to meet the devil army. Yeenoghu escaped, but Zariel killed the devil general Terza' reg.
- Then a second devil army, this one under the command of Baalzephon, arrived.
- The Crusaders fought to the last man, but Olanthius and Haruman were among those captured. They were brought before Zariel, who had been transformed into a glorious devil. She told them that their battle against the Demons of the Abyss would continue; that Hell had granted her the power to continue their great work. And she asked them to join her.
- Haruman accepted and was transformed into a narzugon. Olanthius chose to commit suicide instead... but discovered that even in death he was bound to Zariel by the oaths they had sworn and was raised as a death knight to serve as her thrall.
- Zariel set for Haruman the task of punishing those who had betrayed them. It has been his driving obsession down through the centuries since then.
- **The Reckoning:** Haruman fought alongside Zariel during the Reckoning, laying siege to Dis, the great city which is the second layer of Hell. He was nearly killed when, near the end of the Reckoning, Tiamat betrayed Zariel and took her prisoner.
- **The Rift War:** Centuries later, Haruman was serving in the legions of Bel when the Rift gaped open and vomited forth a baatorian invasion that washed over the defenses of Avernus.
- When Zariel was released from Tiamat's prison by Glasya, the daughter of Asmodeus, Haruman gathered the soldier loyal to him and rode to join Zariel in her Second Avernian March: As Bel retreated (yet another traitorous coward!), they attacked.
- Zariel forded the Styx, sacked the war palaces that had been taken by the baatorians, and broke the baatorian supply lines. Then she turned around and marched back to the Styx, intercepting the baatorians' main army as it was attempting to cross the river. During the Battle of Lost Memories, the baatorians' strength was broken.
- Haruman took command of several watchposts along the Styx while Zariel marched to lay siege to the Rift itself. When the Rift fell, Zariel was made Archduchess of Avernus by Asmodeus' decree. (A reward for her loyalty!)

### Key Info:

- He resents that Olanthius (who tried to “forsake his duties” by committing suicide) has been given the honor of keeping watch on the Crypt of the Hellriders while he must serve as guardian over the eternal damnation of these traitors.
- Like Jander, Yael abandoned Zariel at the final hour. She is the great prize; and although she has so far managed to hide her soul from Haruman, he will some day bring her to justice. (False, but he believes it)
- Haruman was present in Zariel’s court when the amnesiac Lulu was brought as a gift for the freshly crowned Archduchess of Avernus: He knows that Zariel believed Lulu had hidden the Sword of Zariel and she was angry that Lulu had lost her memories and could no longer reveal the secret of its hiding place.
- Haruman uses tales of his service with Zariel in the Reckoning and the Rift War as an example of what true loyalty looks like; and of the eternal glories which traitors like Sunstar gave up in their cowardice.
- If asked about the Second Avernian March, Haruman is familiar with the tale of Zariel’s First Avernian March: Long ago, before Avernus had become a part of Hell, Zariel was betrayed by her commanding officer, an angel named Chazaquel. Zariel and a small band of angels loyal to Heaven broke away and began a long march across Avernus before finally escaping down the River Styx (which in those days followed a very different course through the Outer Planes).

## OLANTHIUS

**Appearance:** A skeletal warrior in matte-black plate armor. Blue flames flicker in the sockets of his skull. He wears a tattered, azure cloak embroidered with faded golden thread in the symbol of twin suns.

### Roleplaying:

- A sibilant, hissing voice is all that remains of a once commanding presence.
- Flames in his eyes flare when frustrated or angry. (But they dim when he thinks of Lady Yael.)
- He is bound by an oath to Zariel, and yet struggles against it eternally.

### Background:

- Olanthius inherited his position as Lord of Elturel when it was yet a relatively small fiefdom, but he commanded a large order of knights who spread peace along the River Chionthar.
- **Zarielite Crusade:** Yael and Lulu came to Elturel to proselytize the Crusade. Olanthius was impressed with Yael’s courage and righteousness, and pledged his service to the Crusade. Elturel became the headquarters of the Crusade and Olanthius became one of the Three Generals.
- Olanthius and Lady Yael fell in love. They were never married... the work of the Crusade kept them too busy.
- **Battle of Idyllglen:** He marched with the rest of the Crusade to Idyllglen when they learned it was being attacked by a demon lord named Yeenoghu. During the battle, Lady Yael was captured and carried through a portal by Yeenoghu. Zariel ordered a pursuit, with Olanthius close on her heels.
- **Battle of Avernus:** The portal led to Avernus. Yael freed herself and fought her way to Olanthius’ side. The crusaders were doing well against Yeenoghu’s demon army when an army of devils approached. Some of Haruman’s soldiers betrayed them, fleeing back through the portal and then shutting it behind them.
- Olanthius and Haruman were able to pincer the remnants of Yeenoghu’s army and finish them off, while Zariel and Yael wheeled her command about to meet the devil army. Yeenoghu escaped, but Zariel killed the devil general Terza’reg.
- Then a second devil army, this one under the command of Baalzephon, arrived.

- The Crusaders fought to the last man, but Olanthius and Haruman were among those captured. They were brought before Zariel, who had been transformed into a glorious devil. She told them that their battle against the Demons of the Abyss would continue; that Hell had granted her the power to continue their great work. And she asked them to join her.
- Haruman accepted and was transformed into a narzugon. Olanthius chose to commit suicide instead... but discovered that even in death he was bound to Zariel by the oaths they had sworn and was raised as a death knight to serve as her thrall.
- **Crypt of the Hellriders:** Zariel tasked Olanthius with building a crypt for their fallen comrades and protect it. For long centuries that was the totality of his existence. When she became Archduchess, he became a minor member of her court.

#### **Key Info:**

- Haruman was one of the Three Generals. Unlike Olanthius, he willingly followed Zariel in swearing allegiance to Hell and became a devil. A once noble man, he is now bereft of compassion – obsessed with punishing anyone who has “betrayed” Zariel. He can oft be found at Haruman’s Hill.
- He doesn’t know Yael’s ultimate fate, although he knows Zariel asked Lulu to help her escape. (If it seems the PCs seek her, he will ask them to give his love to her if they were to somehow to succeed.)
- Olanthius is a member of Zariel’s court: He could lead them to her flying fortress and even potentially help them gain access to it.
- Olanthius would like to see Zariel dead (which would free him from his bondage), but would require considerable proof that an assassination attempt is plausible before being willing to assist it. (And he would struggle with his oath throughout.)
- Yael told Olanthius of the legends of Zariel’s first visit to Idyllglen: How the demonic lord Yeenoghu was leading a gnoll army and sacking settlements north of the Chionthar, and Zariel led a band of angels to put an end of to his depredations. Idyllglen raised a shrine to honor what Zariel had done for them, and it was in this shrine that Yael prayed for Zariel’s return when a marauding band of ogres led by a warlord named Irontusk threatened Idyllglen hundreds of years later. Zariel once again came, and that was the seed that began the entire Crusade.
- Yael used to tell him – tell them all, really – to “dream a little bigger.” (It’s what convinced him to join the Crusade.) But he hasn’t been able to dream for centuries now.

## LADY YAEL

**Appearance:** The translucent image of a woman in her thirties wearing plate armor and bearing a thin scar on her cheek. She is surrounded by a soft, comforting glow of radiant energy.

#### **Roleplaying:**

- A kind smile; her warmth and charisma undimmed by death or the passing aeons.
- A soft and gentle voice, touched by an immense sadness.
- Very excited to see Lulu; an old friend she thought long dead.
- “You just need to dream a little bigger.”

#### **Background:**

- Yael was born in the village of Idyllglen. When she was a young woman in the 10<sup>th</sup> century DR, Idyllglen’s existence was threatened by a marauding band of ogres led by a warlord named Irontusk.
- Yael organized the younger villagers into a defensive militia of sorts, but it wasn’t enough. She prayed in a shrine dedicated to Zariel – who had come to Idyllglen once centuries earlier and

saved the village from a horde of gnolls led by the demon lord Yeenoghu – and asked for her help. Zariel answered the prayer, coming with Lulu

- Zariel, Lulu, and Yael became fast friends. With each challenge they faced, Yael would smile and say, “We just need to dream a little bigger.”
- The campaign lasted for several months, but they were ultimately successful.
- After Zariel left, Yael turned their militia into a regional peacekeeping force. (The ogres didn’t return, but there was a spot of trouble with trolls out of the Trollclaws. Mostly they secured the Winding Water settlements.)
- **Zarielite Crusade:** Several years later, Zariel returned. She had hatched a plan: Raise a mortal army in the Material Plane to invade the Abyss and create a second front in the Blood War. Yael’s response when she heard the plans? “Aye. Let’s dream a little bigger.”
- The militia became the first Crusaders. They wore a badge with twin suns, representing Zariel and Lulu as their angelic saviors.
- **Olanthius:** Yael and Lulu went on a number of recruitment missions. Perhaps the most important proved to be to Lord Olanthius in Elturel. Olanthius became a convert and the Crusade moved its center of operations south to the city. Yael fell in love with the young lord, and he with her. (They were never married – the Crusade simply consumed too much of the time. Yael regrets that now and hopes that Olanthius’ spirit is at peace.)
- **The Three Generals:** Yael, Olanthius, and another lord named Haruman became the Three Generals.
- **Battle of Idyllglen:** Then Yeenoghu returned. They learned that the demon lord was attacking the settlements of the Winding Water. They rode north and intercepted his army at Idyllglen. During the battle, Yael was captured and carried through a portal by Yeenoghu. When she saw the Crusaders emerge through the portal behind them – with Zariel leading the charge – it was both the most relieved she had ever been, and also the most terrified. For she realized that Yeenoghu had laid a trap for them.
- **Battle of Avernus:** The portal led to Avernus. There were a number of glorious deeds that day, among them Yael freeing herself from captivity and fighting her way to Olanthius’ side.
- The crusaders were doing well against Yeenoghu’s demon army when an army of devils under the command Terza’reg approached. Jander Sunstar, one of Haruman’s knight-bannerets, panicked and led a rout of many of the knights back through the portal (which then shut behind them; Yael is certain it was Yeenoghu’s last cruel joke).
- **The Final Fight:** Olanthius and Haruman were able to pincer the remnants of Yeenoghu’s army and finish them off, while Zariel and Yael wheeled her command about to meet the devil army. Yeenoghu escaped, but Zariel killed the devil general Terza’reg.
- Zariel led the flying cavalry squadron (featuring primarily pegasi) into the air to meet the flying devils that swarmed over the battlefield.
- Zariel and Lulu engaged in an aerial duel with Terza’reg, which ended when Terza’reg cut off Zariel’s right hand (still clutching her sword). Zariel leapt off of Lulu and dove after sword and hand, with Terza’reg in hot pursuit. At the last possible moment, Zariel snatched her sword from the air, reversed her flight, and plunged it through Terza’reg’s breast. A huge explosion rocked the battlefield as the devil general died, clouding the affair in a haze of red dust.
- Despite her dreadful injury and the ensuing chaos, after Terza’reg’s death it was possible that Zariel and her generals might have been able to rally. But then a second army under the command of Baalzephon arrived.
- **Zariel’s Final Request:** Yael had joined Zariel and Lulu. As Baalzephon tightened the noose around their necks, the three old friends fought side by side. As the devils closed in, Zariel knew what would come and feared her own weakness. She took a shard of her angelic essence – a spark of goodness – and placed it within her sword. She asked Yael to take the sword and make certain it was not captured by the forces of Hell. Yael refused. Zariel smiled sadly. “Look beyond this forsaken day. One last time, I need you to dream a little bigger.”

- With tears in her eyes, Yael accepted.
- Zariel then turned to Lulu, said goodbye to her old friend, and asked her to go with Yael and keep her safe.
- The devils' aerial forces had been decimated, and so Yael – having concealed the sword within her cloak – was able to escape through their depleted ranks upon Lulu's back.
- **Hiding the Sword:** Yael and Lulu tried to escape Hell, but were intercepted at the Styx by Yeenoghu. They fled back into Avernus. With both demons and devils closing in on them, they realized that escape was impossible.
- Yael plunged the Sword of Zariel into a rock and called for divine intervention. Lulu poured her own celestial essence into the call, the sympathetic resonance of her trumpet echoing across the Avernian plains as she drove Yael's plea across the planes. Even so, the gods could wield little power in Avernus, but Lathander gave them an opportunity. Yael sacrificed herself, pouring her life force into what Lathander offered, raising an alabaster fortress around the Sword to protect it.
- The skein of Avernus itself rebelled at this holy touch, however, and a bloody cyst engulfed the fortress, Yael's corpse, and Lulu.

#### Key Info:

- Yael will be reticent until the PCs have proved their worthiness by claiming the Sword of Zariel.
- After that, with very little prompting, Yael will answer any questions that they have. (This may include relating her entire biography, above.) She will be able to fill in many of the holes the PCs might still be missing.
- She knows nothing of what happened after the Battle of Avernus and the formation of the Bloody Cyst, but she and Zariel spoke often of Zariel's past. You can similarly use Yael to fill any gaps in the PCs knowledge regarding Zariel's past (the Averniad, her Long March across Avernus, the Trial of Asmodeus, etc.).

## OTHER CRUSADERS / HELLRIDERS

Other Crusaders and/or Hellriders can generally fill the PCs in on a brief overview of the true history of the Crusade:

- Zariel and Lulu descended from the Heavens to lead a mortal army of the chosen faithful on a glorious crusade into the Abyss where they would turn the tide of the Blood War.
- Supporters swarmed to the Crusade from across the Sword Coast.
- Yael was the first of the Three Generals.
- Lord Olanthius of Elturel became a convert and invited the crusade to use the city as its staging ground.
- Haruman, Lord Knight of the Far Hills, rode to Elturel, pledge his service to Zariel, and became the Third General.
- The demon lord Yeenoghu led an army onto the Material Plane and the Crusaders fought him at the Battle of Idyllglen.
- The Crusaders pursued Yeenoghu through a portal which led them, inexplicably, to the plains of Avernus.
- Many of the crusaders panicked and fled back through the portal, closing it behind them and stranding the rest of the crusaders in Hell.
- The crusaders who remained bravely fought to the last man.

**KEY INFO:** They'll all make a point of mentioning Zariel's glowing sword.

- She was wearing it when they first saw her.
- She knighted them with it.
- She was wielding it in battle.

- It was the last thing they saw before riding back through the portal / dying on the field of battle.

**CUSTOMIZING THE CRUSADERS:** Every crusader is a unique individual and their story should reflect that.

- When did they join the Crusade? (Idyllglen before Zariel, after Zariel, one of Olanthius' knights, one of Haruman's knights, rode independently to Elturel)
- If they're a Hellrider, how do they feel about fleeing Avernus? If they're a crusader who didn't flee, how do they feel about the Hellriders who did?
- Where and how did they die?
- Try to give them one unique anecdote associated with one of the key moments or characters discussed above. (For example, they were sent to protect Idyllglen from a phalanx of demonic warriors. Or they died at Zariel's feet. Or they, too, were trying to flee through the portal, but it snapped shut just before they could pass through it.)

# ADDENDUM: SOUL COINS

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[by Justin Alexander – August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020](#)



Soul coins are one of the cool ideas bouncing around *Descent Into Avernus*. The basic concept is that souls damned to Hell are forged into coins on Minauros, the third layer of the Nine Hells, and then “used for goods and services, infernal deals, dark bargains, and bribes.”

This is great worldbuilding both literally and metaphorically: Devils making deals for souls is an epistemological satire of commercial dealings, and the trading of souls as literal currency simply extends that satire. But it also just logically makes sense that devils, having obtained a soul, would want to package it into as convenient and relatively compact a form as possible. And the universal form is such as to dehumanize the victims by establishing that the individual holds no significance to the devil.

The full function of soul coins is described in “Commerce” (DIA, p. 78), “Soul Fuel” (p. 217), and “Soul Coins” (p. 225).

Unfortunately, the book’s handling of soul coins is rather flawed.

First, the actual value and rarity of soul coins is all over the map. They are either very rare and incredibly difficult to find or incredibly common and the basis for all commerce in Avernus. In some places their value is pegged at being roughly equivalent to 6 sp, but elsewhere an NPC will offer 100 gp worth of gems for every soul coin the PCs can find for him.

It seems fairly clear that some of the writers on the book thought the soul coins were meant to be the *de facto* currency of Avernus, while others thought of them as rare magical artifacts. Or perhaps they started as the former, but then someone along the line got cold feet because... well... they’re *souls* aren’t they? Wouldn’t they be pretty rare? (Not necessarily. Eternity across potentially infinite planes can make souls as common or as precious on Avernus as you like.)

Second, there are inconsistencies in which functions of a soul coin require charges and/or how many charges it takes to exhaust a soul coin. For example, the stat block of a soul coin says each time you question the soul inside the coin it costs a charge (and each coin only has three charges), but there’s also an NPC with a soul coin collection that they chat with on the daily.

Third, at first glance *Descent Into Avernus* also does a clever thing by making soul coins the fuel for various infernal machines, creating an ethical dilemma for PCs who have to choose between using those machines or literally burning up the souls inside the coins.

In practice, though, the only thing it really seems to do is actively discourage any non-evil character (and, realistically, prohibit any good character) from riding kick-ass war machines across the Avernian plains. And, I'm going to be honest, the war machines are a lot fucking cooler than the ethical dilemma.

Fourth, there's some metaphysical vagueness, which is fortunately fairly easy to clear up. Are the coins forged exclusively from evil souls or are some good souls illegitimately captured? And, similarly, do the lowest order of evil souls sent to Hell end up as lemures or forged in soul coins? In both cases: Why not both? In the latter case, it's easy to imagine that there all manner of Hellish intakes for new souls. (You could perhaps even imagine a different one for each of the Nine Layers.)

## COINS AS FUEL

I'd make two adjustments to the coins:

- Talking to the soul inside doesn't require charges.
- Expending all the charges in a coin (or using it up as fuel for an infernal machine) burns out the coin, but doesn't destroy the soul inside. (Such coins need to be taken back to Minauros to be reforged, with the soul being transferred to a new coin.)

My goals here are twofold:

First, it's interesting to talk to the souls inside the coins, so I don't want to discourage it. Similarly, NPCs with collections of coins that they chat with or regularly consult/torment are cool.

Second, I want to dull the ethical conundrum for PCs using soul coins. There are still plenty of ethical conundrums here: Should you free them? The souls, uh... *scream* when you use them as fuel. But it's not just an instant no-brainer for anyone who isn't evil.

**ALTERNATE FUEL:** Devils need soul coins to fuel their war-machines because they're not mortal. Mortals like the PCs, however, can directly fuel the war-machines. The mortal suffers 1d10 points of damage and fuels the war-machine for 24 hours. This damage cannot be healed by normal means, but returns at a rate of 1 hit point per day. A *greater restoration* instantly restores these lost hit points.

This also means that you can have devils riding across the Avernian plains with screaming strapped to their war-machines *Mad Max*-style.



*Design Note: My goal, obviously, is to give PCs the option to drive war-machines without exploiting trapped souls. You might require them to track down (and install) a converter to do so, but I don't think it's necessary.*

## COINS AS COMPANIONS

Every soul coin is a unique NPC. I recommend leaning into this.

**WHO THEY ARE:** Check out [51 Soul Coins](#) as a good source for random soul coin characters. The collection is a limited in its range (featuring almost exclusively average people who got gulled by a devil), so you may want to broaden its scope (with, say, historical figures, those who damned themselves to Hell without the help of a devil's contract, good souls who were captured and forced into a coin, and so forth).

**WHAT THEY KNOW:** Soul coins are constantly aware of their surroundings, making them a potentially valuable source of information. Let's give them a 1 in 6 chance of having useful information (i.e., roll on the Avernian rumor tables).

**COIN MADNESS:** Being locked up inside a coin for eternity is not conducive to a sane mind. Many soul coins have had their sanity shredded to the point that they are no longer coherent or intelligible (see table below), and even those who are capable of conversing may display strange tics of behavior and distress.

d8	Madness
1	Hysteria
2	Amnesia
3	Hallucinations
4	Mania
5	Logorrhea
6	Paranoia
7	Echopraxia
8	Catatonia

## COINS AS CURRENCY

If you want soul coins to be prized as fuel for the war-machines, then they can't be common enough to serve as coinage in Avernus. Which is a pity, because the use of an alternate currency would be an excellent opportunity to alienate and disorient the players (and their characters). "What do you mean I can't pay with gold?"

As I describe in [Random Worldbuilding - Coins & Currency](#), money can be a powerful channel for conveying information about the world to the players. And this would be a powerful one: Not only clearly signaling that "you're not in the Realms any more," but also viscerally signaling how Hell is fundamentally built upon the suffering and exploitation of mortal souls.

So here's my recommendation:

- **Soul coins** are worth roughly 50 platinum pieces in purchasing power. They are rarely used in actual commerce, and instead serve primarily as a coin of account.
- **Spent soul coins** are more common, accumulating over millennia of soul coins being used up that aren't important enough to reforge. They have a purchasing power roughly equivalent to 1 platinum piece.
- **Obsidian chits** are the common currency of Avernus, with a purchasing power of 1 gold piece. These chits are issued by various Dukes and warlords and backed by stockpiles of soul coins.

Mad Maggie, for example, has a small stockpile and issues her own chits, as does the Wandering Emporium.

You can generally issue about 1,000 chits per soul coin. (That's more than the strict conversion rate, but welcome to the wonderful world of being a banker.) If you want to get more complicated, you could postulate cheap chits or bull-chits – chits which were circulated by Avernian powerbrokers who no longer exist or whose soul coin stockpile was lost. These are still perceived as having some value and could be used as the equivalent of copper pieces.

*Design Note: Such cheap chits could also be a window into Avernian history. Or just easter eggs. For example, the PCs might find cheap chits that were issued by Gargauth when he was [Treasurer of Hell](#).*

## COINS AS SOULS

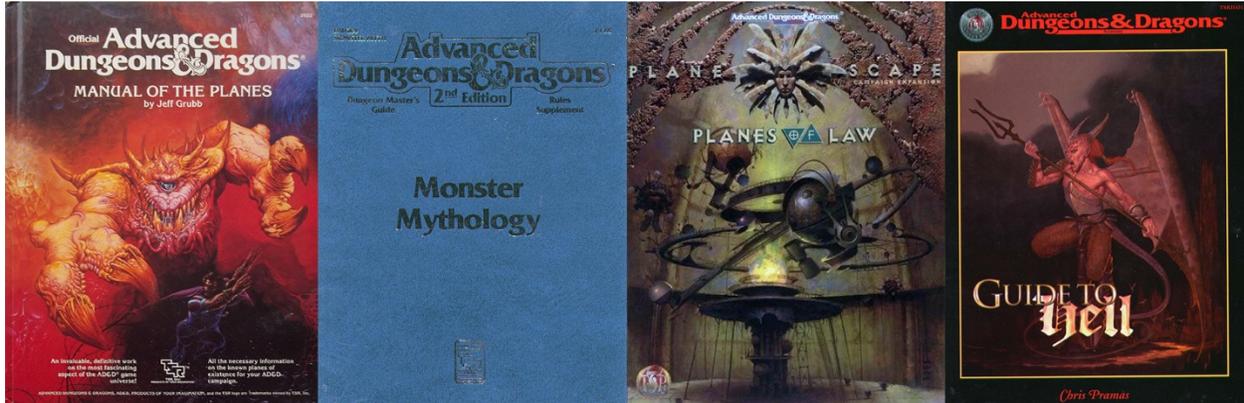
As described in *Descent Into Avernus*, p. 226, the soul within a soul coin can be freed by casting a spell that removes a curse. A freed soul is released to whatever planar afterlife it belongs in... which means that for most soul coins the soul is just churned back through Hell's intake for new souls.

**USING THE SOUL:** A *soul coin* can also be used in conjunction with *animate dead* or *create undead* to bind the soul to the undead created. Such undead can be controlled by anyone holding the soul coin they were created from. If the undead are destroyed, the soul is released to whichever planar afterlife it belongs in (see above).

If you are in Hell, you can similarly cast *infernal calling* (from [Xanathar's Guide to Everything](#), p. 158) in conjunction with a soul coin to transform the soul within the coin into a lemure. The soul coin is destroyed in the process. (You've more or less just created the lemure the soul would have become if it had entered Hell through Avernus rather than Minauros.)

# ADDENDUM: A TEXTUAL HISTORY OF ZARIEL

by Justin Alexander – September 26<sup>th</sup>, 2020



I was trying to avoid doing this, but [as with Elturel](#), I ended up doing a fairly deep dive into Zariel's background as I was working on the Remix. After digging into sources from across multiple editions of the game, I thought it might be interesting to share the results. Perhaps more importantly, a lot of this material will influence *Part 6D: Lulu's Memories*, but I don't want to weigh that material down by trying to discuss all of this there.

In addition to Zariel herself, this textual history will also briefly look at adjacent topics (primarily how the rulership of Avernus shifted both diegetically and non-diegetically over time).

## DESCENT INTO AVERNUS (2019)

Let's start by looking at the version of events laid out in [Descent Into Avernus](#) itself. Or rather, as we'll see, the *many* versions of those events. (The continuity is rather tangled.)

**TO BEGIN WITH:** Zariel and Lulu, her hollyphant war mount, were friends for centuries.

**GENERATIONS BEFORE THE 14<sup>th</sup> CENTURY:** In response to a prayer to Lathander, Zariel is sent to the village of Idyllglen in the Fields of the Dead to drive off a gnoll invasion.

**13?? DR – ZARIEL'S CRUSADE:** Zariel leaves Mount Celestia with Lulu. She goes to Elturel and creates the order of knights which would become the Hellriders.

- The knights swear a personal oath to Zariel that binds them to her service even after death.
- **General Yael** was Zariel's most loyal general.
- **General Olanthius** was in love with Yael. (It's unclear if this was reciprocated.)
- **General Haruman**
- Among the knights was **Jandar Sunstar**, a reformed vampire.

*Note: I find the use of "General" (and the fact that the Crusade had so many of them) curious. It would seem to suggest that Zariel managed to raise an army of thousands or even tens of thousands.*

*The Crusade is referred to as such only twice (and in lower case). But I think it's useful term. And referring to Zariel's knights as crusaders is probably a useful bit of nomenclature.*

**135? DR – IDYLLGLEN:** Yeenoghu personally leads an attack on the village of Idyllglen. Zariel leads the Hellriders to repel the attack.

There is an implication that Yeenoghu fled to Avernus, leaving the portal open behind him and that the Riders immediately followed him on the Charge (see below): "As Zariel prepares to send her forces through the portal into Avernus..." (DIA, p. 144)

But this is a continuity error because the boxed text earlier on the same page reads: "The angel slashes her sword across Yeenoghu's chest and utters a spell. A portal opens behind the demon lord as the mammoth rams its head into Yeenoghu. The demon lord is sent tumbling through the portal, which quickly closes behind him."

*Note: This material also contradicts how the Hellriders got their name – i.e., for riding into Hell – because they're referred to as such before doing so.*

**1354 DR – THE CHARGE OF THE HELLRIDERS:** Zariel leads the Elturian knights into Avernus.

Some of the knights panic, ride back through the gate, and seal it. They become the first Hellriders, telling a false tale of their "glorious" achievements.

- **VERSION 2:** The future Hellriders didn't flee until the middle of the battle. (Lulu says, "Victory was within our grasp until some of the Hellriders betrayed us. They retreated through the gate and sealed it behind them.

*Note: This is also inconsistent with how the Hellriders got their name, once again suggesting they were known as such before and/or during the Ride and not just after it.*

- Jander Sunstar was among those who fled back through the portal. It's implied on p. 93 that he was the one to actually seal the portal.

*Note: It's possible he was also a general and actually led or triggered the retreat back through the portal, but it's vague. I don't think he was a general (see below), but my personal head canon is that he was the highest ranking officer among those who betrayed Zariel and he subsequently became the first High Rider of the Hellriders. (Partly I like the poetry of both the first and last High Rider having been vampires.)*

The rest of Zariel's army fights to utter destruction.

If the memories Lulu recovers in Fort Knucklebones are real (which they probably aren't), then at some point during the fighting Zariel and Lulu are both knocked unconscious.

Zariel's hand holding her Sword is cut off. As it falls towards the ground, she orders General Yael to take the Sword and hide it. Lulu goes with Yael and they hide the Sword.

- **VERSION 2:** Zariel ordered Lulu (not Yael) to hide the Sword and Yael went with Lulu.
- **VERSION 3:** Zariel ordered Yael to hide the Sword and also ordered Lulu to help Yael do it.

*Note: These seem like subtle differences, but thematically there's actually quite a bit of weight to exactly who was charged to do what in those final moments.*

Olanthius, Haruman, and Zariel are captured and sent to Nessus, the lowest of the Nine Hells.

- **VERSION 2:** Asmodeus appeared in front of Zariel on the Avernian battlefield and immediately offered her command of the Blood Legions in exchange for her fealty. In this version, Yael and Lulu are there to witness Asmodeus make the offer, but flee with Zariel's Sword before Zariel accepts and becomes an archdevil.

**1354 DR – LULU AND YAEL HIDE THE SWORD OF ZARIEL.**

Lulu and Yael blundered into a group of demons led by Yeenoghu, but narrowly escaped.

*Note: This probably makes more sense if we assume they crossed the Styx in an effort to escape Avernus with the Sword, only to be forced back across the River when they encountered Yeenoghu's legions.*

Crokek'toek, a demon follower of Yeenoghu, chased them across the Avernian plains.

Just before Crokek'toek could catch them, Yael plunged the Sword into a rock and Lulu "made a trumpet sound" with her trunk before pouring "every ounce of her celestial being into it," causing a fortress or alabaster palace to spring up around the sword "hedging out evil."

- **VERSION 2:** Lulu "gave up [her] magic and memories, and Yael gave her life" to construct the palace.

Lulu flew up into the sky and watched as a bloody scab grew from the ground to engulf the palace and the enormous demon.

Lulu became disoriented and flew away, leaving Yael behind.

**1354 DR – ZARIEL'S FALL:** Asmodeus immediately offers Zariel rulership of Avernus, replacing Bel. She accepts. (This either happens on the battlefield in Avernus or in Nessus, see variants above.)

General Haruman joined Zariel in swearing fealty to Asmodeus and became a devil. He ends up watching over Haruman's Hill.

General Olanthius commits suicide. He's raised as a death knight and ends up watching over the Crypt of the Hellriders.

*Note: This is described as "most of her generals fell to evil." This would suggest there were only three generals in her army – Haruman, Olanthius, and Yael – and two of them fell to evil.*

**1354 DR – LULU WANDERS AVERNUS:** For "several months."

Lulu goes to Fort Knucklebones and meets two kenku named Chukka and Clonk who were working on an infernal war machine.

Lulu goes to the Wandering Emporium, where she is "befriended" by a rakshasa named Mahadi.

Mahadi splashes Lulu with water from the River Styx, stripping her memory and her spellcasting.

*Note: This contradicts the version of events in which Lulu sacrificed her memories to make the alabaster fortress. See above.*

Mahadi gives Lulu to a group of devils who take her to Zariel as a gift. "Zariel had Lulu sent back to Faerun with her mental faculties restored. Unfortunately, the damage to Lulu's memories was not so easy to repair.

*Note: No idea what "with her mental faculties restored" is supposed to mean. Neither her memories nor her spellcasting abilities were restored to her.*

Zariel's last words to her were: "This is who I am. When demons die, they cry out my name in terror."

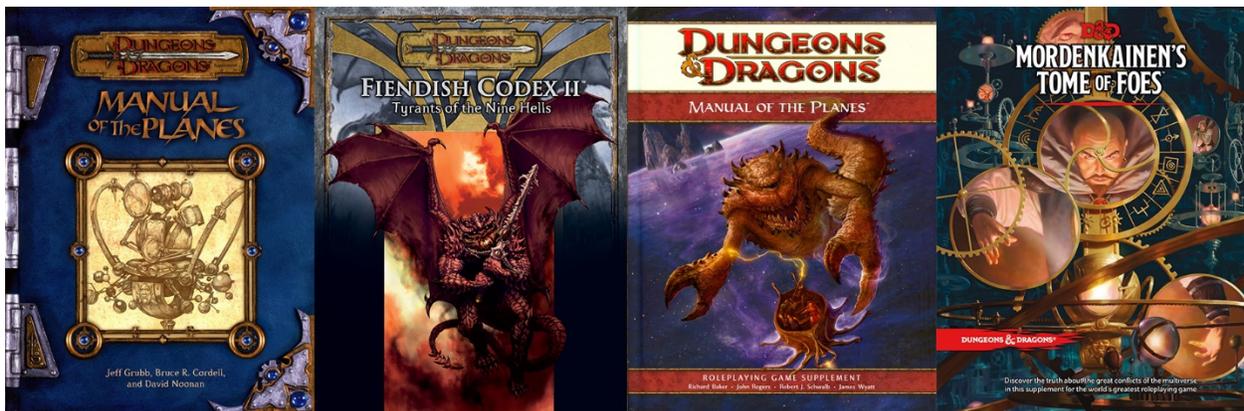
**1444 DR - THE PACT OF THE COMPANION:** Zariel makes the Pact of the Companion with Thavius Kreeg.

**149? DR - SYLVIRA FINDS LULU:** Sylvira finds Lulu near a portal to the Nine Hells in the Fields of the Dead west of Elturel.

*Note: So did Lulu spend 140-ish years just floating around the portal she came back through? Was this originally meant to be the portal that the Hellriders used (even though we're told that it was "sealed" elsewhere)? If not, then... what was this portal? Why was Lulu there? Is it still open? Where in Hell does it lead, exactly?*

**1494 DR - TODAY.**

## PREVIOUS ZARIEL CONTINUITY



Now that we've looked at what vaguely passes for continuity in *Descent Into Avernus*, let's look at what preceded it.

The first thing to note is that Zariel was not previously involved in the famous Charge of the Hellriders. Variants in that continuity are covered in more depth as part of the [Textual History of Elturel](#), but the short version is that:

- The Charge was originally an almost legendary event in 1358 DR (which makes it unlikely that it happened in 1354 DR).
- The original explanation for the Charge was that the knights were riding to rescue a companion.
- This was later changed to "long ago warriors of Elturel literally rode through a gate into the Nine Hells to be pursue and destroy devils that had been plaguing the people."

You can see how, in *Descent Into Avernus*, this was changed again to something between "holy crusade that was the whole reason they had signed up in the first place" and "pursuing and destroying DEMONS that had been plaguing their people."

### TIAMAT, THE LORD OF AVERNUS (1977)

Way back in 1977, the original [Monster Manual](#) said that "Tiamat rules the first plane of the Nine Hells where she spawns all evil dragonkind."

In the [Manual of the Planes](#) (1987), we are told that, "The watchdog of the Hells' front parlor is Tiamat."

In [Monster Mythology](#) (1992), Tiamat “infests the uppermost of the Nine Hells with her consorts, each a Great Wyrm of a different color — one red, one white, one green, one blue, and one black.” (These consorts are an evolution of Tiamat’s “guard” in [Supplement I: Greyhawk](#) (1975), when she was merely the Dragon Queen and her “major abode is in a stupendous cavern far beneath the earth.”)

We’re also told in *Monster Mythology* that Tiamat’s “relations with the baatezu [devils] that populate the Hells and stray into her realm at times is the subject of considerable speculation by sages.” (Which is basically the author, the esteemed Carl Sargent, saying, “I’m really trying to figure out why the evil Dragon Queen is in charge of Avernus.”) These “sages” have traditionally said that she’s been at war with the devils, but now it seems that the devils may be seeking to make some sort of pact with her to aid them in the Blood War.

## PLANESCAPE: PLANES OF LAW (1995)

Here we are told that there are giant *fireballs* that just randomly appear around Avernus for no apparent reason. “Some sages say the *fireballs* represent the will of the **nameless archduke of the level.**” (emphasis added)

“Speaking of the archduke: Bel, the pit-fiend commander of the armies of this layer, leads immense legions across the plane, scouring every inch of it for invaders and searching for honors from the archduke.” Bel has “been appointed by the Dark Eight” and is the senior general of Avernus (with other generals “bowing to Bel’s experience and political muscle.”)

This is the first reference to an Archduke of Avernus. But if they’re nameless, what happened to Tiamat?

“Tiamat, the Lady of Dragonkind, guards the only known entrance to the next layer. It’s only through her lair that one can arrive in the verdigrised plains near the Iron City of Dis.”

*Note: I’m pretty confident that “watchdog of the Hells’ front parlor” in the Manual of Planes was just a poetic rephrasing of “Tiamat rules the first plane of the Nine Hells” from the original Monster Manual. Here, however, the meaning has glided towards guarding a literal “front parlor;” i.e., the path to Dis.*

## DRAGON #223 – THE LORDS OF THE NINE (1995)

*Planes of Law* came out in February 1995. As noted, it included Bel as a general and left all but three of the Lords of the Nine mysterious and unknown. This, it should be noted, was a diegetic mystery — it’s not just that TSR wasn’t telling you; it was that their identities were a mystery to the characters in the game world itself.

But in the November 1995 issue of *Dragon Magazine* (#223, which would have been released in August 1995), Colin McComb writes “The Lords of the Nine”: “The Lords of the Nine Layers of Baator have been revealed at last! Do you dare to read about them?”

And, indeed, McComb provides identities for all nine archdukes. And this is done diegetically. A character named Willgan the Dogged has discovered their identities and is ready to tell all!

*Note: I belabor this mostly because I’m fascinated by the decision process to drop this entire aspect of the Planescape setting almost immediately after publishing the boxed set.*

Regarding Bel, we are told, that “the original Lord of Avernus (not Tiamat, contrary to popular belief) found herself imprisoned and entrapped by her warlord, the pit fiend Bel, thousands of years ago.” Bel is siphoning more of the Lord’s power for himself, but is still beholden to the Dark Eight.

## GUIDE TO HELL (1999)

Chris Pramas' [Guide to Hell](#) is Zariel's first named appearance. She is described as the "original Lord of Avernus."

Pramas also described the Reckoning: A great war in Hell which started when Zariel laid siege to Dis. Her allies – Moloch and Belial – simultaneously launched an assault on Stygia. Mephistopheles eventually broke the siege on Dis, forcing Zariel back to Avernus. The final battle was to be fought in Maladomini (the seventh layer of Hell), but Asmodeus pulled a coup: Geryon, Lord of Stygia, had suborned the generals of the other Lords' armies. On the day of the ultimate battle, the generals mutinied, declared their loyalty to Asmodeus, and ended the war. Bizarrely, only Geryon – the only Lord to remain loyal to Asmodeus – was subsequently ousted from his position of power.

The generals, however, were empowered as the newly created Dark Eight. This council runs the Blood War from Nessus, the lowest level of Hell.

The pit fiend Bel, after running successful covert ops missions during the Blood War under the command of the Dark Eight, became Zariel's right-hand man in Avernus. He then betrayed and imprisoned her, rendering her powerless.

*Note: Describing Zariel as the "original Lord of Avernus" might seem in direct contradiction to Tiamat having held that position before. This is most likely intended as a straight-up retcon, but it doesn't necessarily have to be so: My head canon is that Zariel, the original Lord of Avernus, has been intermittently deposed from time to time over the course of long eons, including stints by both Tiamat and Bel.*

## MANUAL OF THE PLANES (3<sup>RD</sup> EDITION, 2001)

The references to Avernus in the [Manual of the Planes](#) are largely a very short summary of the material from [Guide to Hell](#), but there's one addition to the mythology: "Bel still keeps Zariel prisoner somewhere deep in the Bronze Citadel so that he can siphon her hellish power to himself, increasing his own abilities while slowly reducing her to just another soul shell."

This is repeated in the *Book of Vile Darkness* (2002), where Zariel is kept in the Bronze Citadel where Bel "draws off her power to extend his own."

## FIENDISH CODEX II (2006)

[Fiendish Codex II: Tyrants of the Nine Hells](#) largely reiterates the continuity from [Guide to Hell](#) (in a more complete form than that necessarily found in the *Manual of the Planes*).

The Dark Eight, however, are now based out of Avernus where they "eschew the title of duke, preferring the rank of general."

Zariel remains "imprisoned in the bowels of the Bronze Citadel," where she "languishes under the cruel knives of the abishai torturers that carve bits off of her flesh to feed to their master."

*Note: The context here is somewhat confusing and could be interpreted as meaning that Zariel's flesh is being fed to Tiamat, who is traditionally the master of the abishai. A closer reading, however, makes it clear that the "master" here is referring to Bel, and the abishai are those who are serving him due to a pact he has forged with Tiamat. (Remember Sargent's sages who rumored that a pact was being negotiated with Tiamat?) This continuity is consistent with Bel "drawing off her power," with the method now being defined as some sort of devilish cannibalism.*

## MANUAL OF THE PLANES (4<sup>TH</sup> EDITION, 2008)

The 4<sup>th</sup> Edition of D&D really features a completely different planar cosmology, but there is some continuity here that makes it potentially worthwhile to take a peek.

Zariel is not referenced, but “a circle of pit fiends known as the Dark Eight serve as Bel’s vassals and councilors. Bel governs only at their pleasure, and he must constantly consider whether his actions will meet with the approval of the Dark Eight.”

*Note: They are both his vassals AND he serves only at their pleasure? Go home, 4<sup>th</sup> Edition, you’re drunk.*

*What we’re seeing rather bluntly manifest in this text, however, is an uncertainty and confusion which has crept into who and what the Dark Eight are: They were originally established as being based out of Nessus (i.e., Asmodeus’ court) and could be seen as a parallel power to the Lords of the Nine: In other words, there were eight archdukes who ruled the layers of Hell (plus Asmodeus, the ninth) and there were the Dark Eight who served as military generals.*

*But somewhere along the way they had slid from Nessus to Avernus and ended up in the power structure of the Archduke of Avernus.*

*Having the Dark Eight be the generals of Avernus became my head canon more or less by accident, as I had not fully delved into their history yet when I started thinking about them in relation to [the history of Gargauth and Bel](#).*

## DUNGEON #197 – CODEX OF BETRAYAL: GLASYA, PRINCESS OF THE NINE HELLS (2011)

This article by Robert J. Schwalb seems to be the only reference to Zariel in 4<sup>th</sup> Edition. She remains the original Lord of Avernus and she “ruled thus for many eons.”

We are also given a new continuity for the end of Zariel’s rule, revolving around an alternative version of the Reckoning.

This Reckoning was an incredibly convoluted soap opera involving Asmodeus’ daughters Glasya. Long story short, she single-handedly convinced all the Lords to go to war with each other. In this version of reality, the Dark Eight already existed but were also the pit fiend generals in command of the Archdukes’ armies. At Asmodeus’ command, the Dark Eight betrayed their masters and ended the conflict.

*Note: The Reckoning reputedly lasted for an “eon,” but this doesn’t really track with the very specific series of events described in the text.*

The Dark Eight then took all the legions of Baator to Avernus. Once there, they hunted Zariel down and imprisoned her. Bel was then raised up as “a puppet ruler over her realm.”

*Why this happened is really unclear, because Zariel had actually been part of the faction loyal to Asmodeus. The article even says, “Strangely, though, Asmodeus’ allies suffered the worst,” but there’s even less explanation forthcoming than the previous version of the Reckoning.*

## RISE OF TIAMAT (2014)

“Asmodeus recently reinstated the fallen angel Zariel as the Archduchess of Avernus, reversing an earlier decision that allowed a pit fiend named Bel to take the throne.”

*Note: I am fairly certain that this is the first reference to Zariel being a fallen angel.*

“While in exile from her seat of power, Zariel was at the mercy of Tiamat – a fate that rankles her still.”

*Note: Remember when I mentioned that the reference in Fiendish Codex II to Zariel being tortured by abishai on behalf of their master could erroneously lead one to believe that she was being fed to Tiamat? I'm fairly certain that's what's happened here.*

## MORDENKAINEN'S TOME OF FOES (2018)

I'd be curious to know if *Descent Into Avernus* was already in development at the time his book was published. (And, if so, how much influence it had on the text.) In any case, this is the book that retcons the entire history of Zariel being the original Lord of Avernus.

Long, long ago, during the Trial of Asmodeus, Zariel got into a brawl with her fellow angels, demanding to give testimony to Asmodeus' crimes.

We are also told that Zariel is Asmodeus' "most recent recruit." Zariel grew obsessed with the Blood War and believed that the hosts of Mount Celestia could descend upon Avernus and wipe out both the devils and the demons of the Blood War.

“Accompanied by a mob of mortal followers, she cut a swath through a legion of devils before their numbers overwhelmed her. A delegation of bone devils dispatched to the site by Asmodeus recovered her unconscious form beneath a small mountain of her slaughtered enemies. After allowing her to recover in the depths of Nessus, Asmodeus installed her on Avernus as his champion and new lord of that layer.”

*Note: This probably explains where the random dream image of Zariel being unconscious on the battlefield – which is not consistent with any other continuity from Descent Into Avernus – came from.*

This transition from Bel to Zariel is described as marking a new chapter in the Blood War, with Zariel preferring aggressive offensive tactics instead of simply sustaining a passive defense of the Avernian frontiers. Her obsession with fighting on the frontlines, however, has distracted her from the courts of Hell and made her a political pariah without alliances with the other Lords of the Nine.

*Note: Oddly, this just takes the previous description of Bel – freshly aggressive, politically isolated (he was often referred to in Hell as Bel the Pretender) – from Guide to Hell and applies it to Zariel instead.*

# PART 7: EXPLORING AVERNUS

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[by Justin Alexander - March 30th, 2021](#)

It's time to explore Hell itself on the war-torn plains of Avernus!

... except there's a problem.

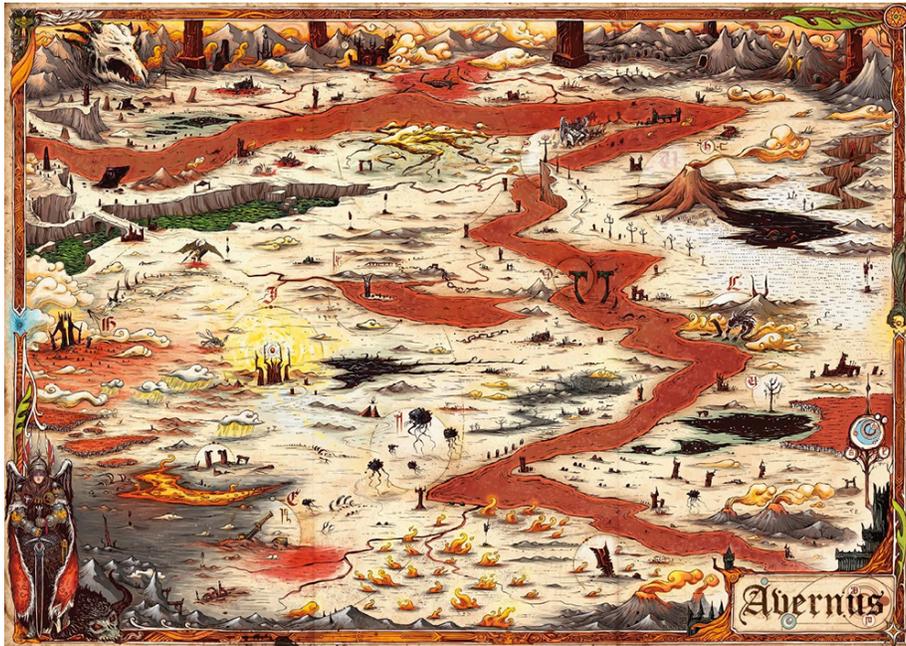
*Descent Into Avernus* frequently talks about how the PCs are going to be "exploring" Avernus. Unfortunately, it goes out of its way to stop them from doing that in almost every way possible.

For example, it's impossible to make a map. And the reason it's impossible to make a map is because navigation is meaningless. *Descent Into Avernus* revamps the metaphysics of the Lawful Evil plane of Avernus into a chaotic, ever-shifting place where direction and distance are unfathomable and any attempt to make a map drives the cartographer insane. If the PCs attempt to go somewhere, you just roll a completely random die to determine if they get there or not.

Why have they done this?

I honestly have no idea

Despite maps being both impossible and meaningless, the adventure nevertheless gives the players a poster map:



It's unlabeled and, again, the spatial relationships it depicts don't actually exist, so it's utterly useless for literally anything you might actually use a map for. The map also doesn't include Elturel (where the PCs would begin their exploration of Avernus) or Fort Knucklebones (the first place they're likely to be going), but the DM is instructed to put these locations anywhere on the map they want. (Although, once again, this is totally meaningless.)

The module actually says:

*Your players should never feel like they understand Avernus geographically, providing an unsettled and disorienting feeling as they roam the hellscape.*

And, to be clear, this is not how things used to work in Avernus. The designers of *Descent Into Avernus* did this deliberately. They repeatedly sell the experience – in both marketing and the book itself – as “exploring” Avernus, but then go out of their way to discard the existing lore and the established 5<sup>th</sup> Edition rules for wilderness travel in order to create a custom experience designed to make actual exploration completely impossible.

I should mention that the one thing the map DOES do is magically talk to the PCs: Every time they go somewhere, the map tells them exactly what the location is before they have a chance to explore and find out for themselves.

Without actually seeing it in the book, it’s actually difficult to believe the lengths *Descent Into Avernus* goes to in order to make sure that the players absolutely cannot explore Avernus in any possible way.

## THE AVERNIAN HEXCRAWL

For the Remix, we’re basically going to just toss all of that out:

- The geography of Avernus will be comprehensible.
- Navigation (and therefore exploration) will be possible.
- The map the players receive will be meaningful.

To achieve this, we’ll be redesigning Avernus to use a [hexcrawl](#) scenario structure for wilderness exploration.

Now, one thing I’ve heard from a number of people while working on the Remix is that they’re really looking forward to seeing how I redesign Avernus as a sandbox. So I think it’s important to make something clear:

I am NOT going to be redesigning Avernus as a sandbox.

An RPG sandbox exists when the players can either choose or define what the next scenario of the campaign will be. For example, the opening chapters of *Icwind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden* [are a sandbox](#).

*Descent Into Avernus*, on the other hand, isn’t a sandbox. It isn’t designed for the players to choose or define the scenario. The scenario is saving Elturel.

By using a hexcrawl structure to create a massively non-linear exploration experience while simultaneously blowing open the potential solution space for saving Elturel (as described in [Part 6B: The Avernian Quest](#)), we’re creating a huge playground in which the players will have enormous freedom to chart their own course through the campaign.

But, ultimately, they are not choosing their destination. Their destination is saving Elturel.

And this is significant because our design of the Avernian hexcrawl is going to be driven by that knowledge; it is going to be designed and structured for the PCs to save Elturel.

Now, with that being said, there are almost certainly going to be a lot of sandbox-like elements in our Avernian hexcrawl, and the hexcrawl itself is a very robust and flexible structure. So if you (or your PCs) were to ditch the idea of saving Elturel, it would probably be just a hop, skip, and a jump to use the Avernian hexcrawl as the basis for a pretty cool sandbox campaign. But there are meaningful structural

changes and accompanying expansions of material that you'd want (or need) to make to truly shift the focus from saving Elturel and realize a fully functional and effective sandbox.

*Note: There's a fairly popular supplement called [Avernus as a Sandbox](#). It's also not a sandbox. They are misusing the term to just mean "non-linear scenario." It's actually a [Choose Your Own Adventure](#) structure. This is a really effective way of repackaging the [Choose Your Railroad](#) structure of the published campaign, but it's not a sandbox.*

## MAKING THE HEX MAP

The first thing we'll need for an Avernian hexcrawl is a hex map.

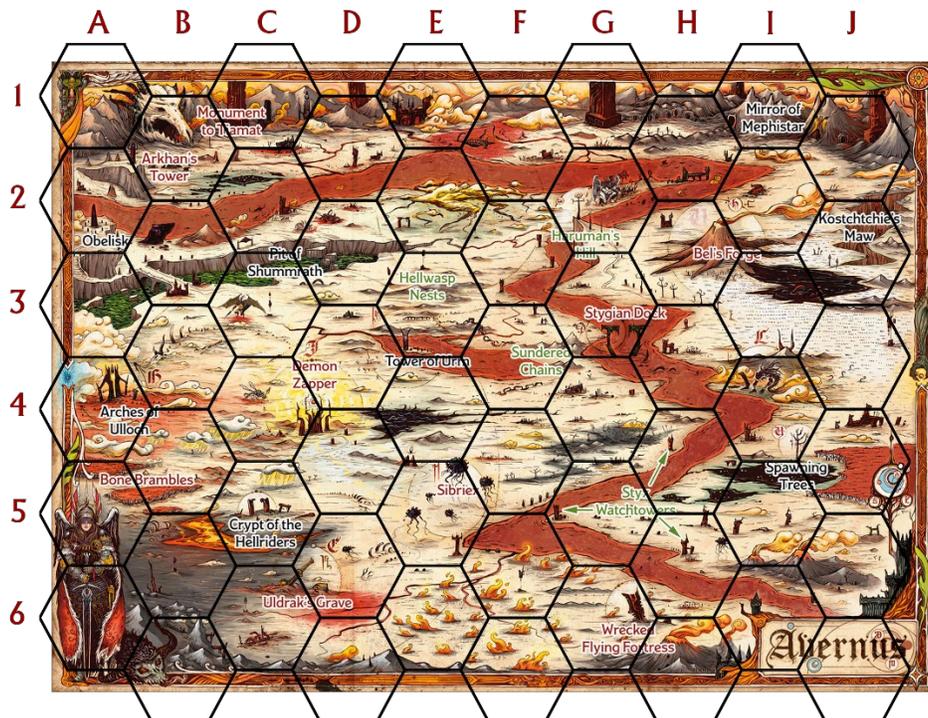
In designing the hex map, we're going to want to keep the player's map of Avernus in mind: If the players use their map to navigate, the navigational choices they make need to product coherent results when translated into the hexcrawl system.

(For example, they might be at the Hellwasp Nests and see, on their map, that the Demon Zapper lies to the "southwest." If they tell the GM that they're heading southwest, then when the GM plugs that movement into hex map, they should generally end up at the Demon Zapper.)

The good news is that the player's map is (a) illustrative instead of strictly representational and (b) lacks a scale. In other words, the only specific navigational information encoded into the map is a directional relationship (and even this can be arguably distorted by the imprecision of the illustrations). This gives us a great deal of latitude in tweaking the map.

(No pun intended.)

To create the map, I'm simply going to drape a hex grid over the top of the labeled DM's version of the map:



In doing this, I've played around with the precise positioning of the grid to (as much as possible):

- Keep each location in a unique hex; and
- Maintain as many of the clear directional relationships as possible.

I'm fairly satisfied with the results here, so the next step is to start creating our hex key by assigning all the locations on the map to the corresponding hex. For example:

- A4 is the Arches of Ulloch
- B1 is Arkhan's Tower
- C1 is the Monument to Tiamat.
- G6 is the Wrecked Flying Fortress.

And so forth.

## MAP DIMENSIONS

I've used a 6 x 10 grid here, but because the player's map has no scale, we have a pretty free rein in what the size of the hex map can be. (We could, for example, have just as easily made this a 10 x 20 grid or even distorted the map to achieve something like a 30 x 30 grid.)

In deciding the initial size of your hex map in a hexcrawl, there are basically two factors. First, you need to stock all these hexes with content, so you don't want so many hexes that the task is overwhelming. Second, the hex map needs to be large enough that the PCs won't immediately run off the edge of it and into uncharted territory.

(It's quite likely they'll eventually end up deciding to see what's beyond the edge of the map, but if it happens in every single session including the first it can be problematic.)

In the case of *Descent Into Avernus*, we also have to consider the amount of time and narrative space we want to dedicate to exploring Avernus. If we had a 30 x 30 grid, for example, there would be 900 (!) hexes. That would probably mean spending twenty or thirty times longer in Avernus than the rest of the campaign combined (which would make it very difficult to maintain focus) OR it would mean the players only experiencing a tiny, tiny fraction of the hexcrawl (which would mean a ton of [wasted prep](#)).

Based on my experience, I generally recommend a 10 x 10 or 12 x 12 hex grid for an initial hexcrawl campaign (assuming the PCs' homebase is located in the center of the map).

Our 6 x 10 map, therefore, is a little undersized in one dimension. I think this will be fine in practice because the existence of the map will act as a soft constraint on the PCs' navigation: Having a map in hand focuses a group's attention on the area depicted by the map, and they will tend to make their decisions within the confines of the map. There are also mountain ranges depicted to both the north and south, which will act as natural navigational constraints as well.

## ADDING LOCATIONS

There are roughly two dozen locations described in *Descent Into Avernus*. So even after placing those locations, we'll still have three dozen empty hexes that we'll need to fill with new content. We'll take a closer look at that in *Part 7C: Avernian Hex Key*.

However, among the existing locations, as mentioned above, there are two that need to be added to map: The Dock of Fallen Cities (where Elturel is currently located) and Fort Knucklebones.

These two locations need to be placed in relation to each other, as Lulu can hypothetically see Fort Knucklebones from the Dock of Fallen Cities. Furthermore, we know that the Dock of Fallen Cities is located on the Styx.

We could put both of these locations in a single hex, but it probably works just as well to put them into two separate hexes.

The map actually has a number of unlabeled locations, and to simplify my life it would also be great if I could grab one of them and use it for either the Dock or the Fort or both. I'd also prefer a relatively central location.

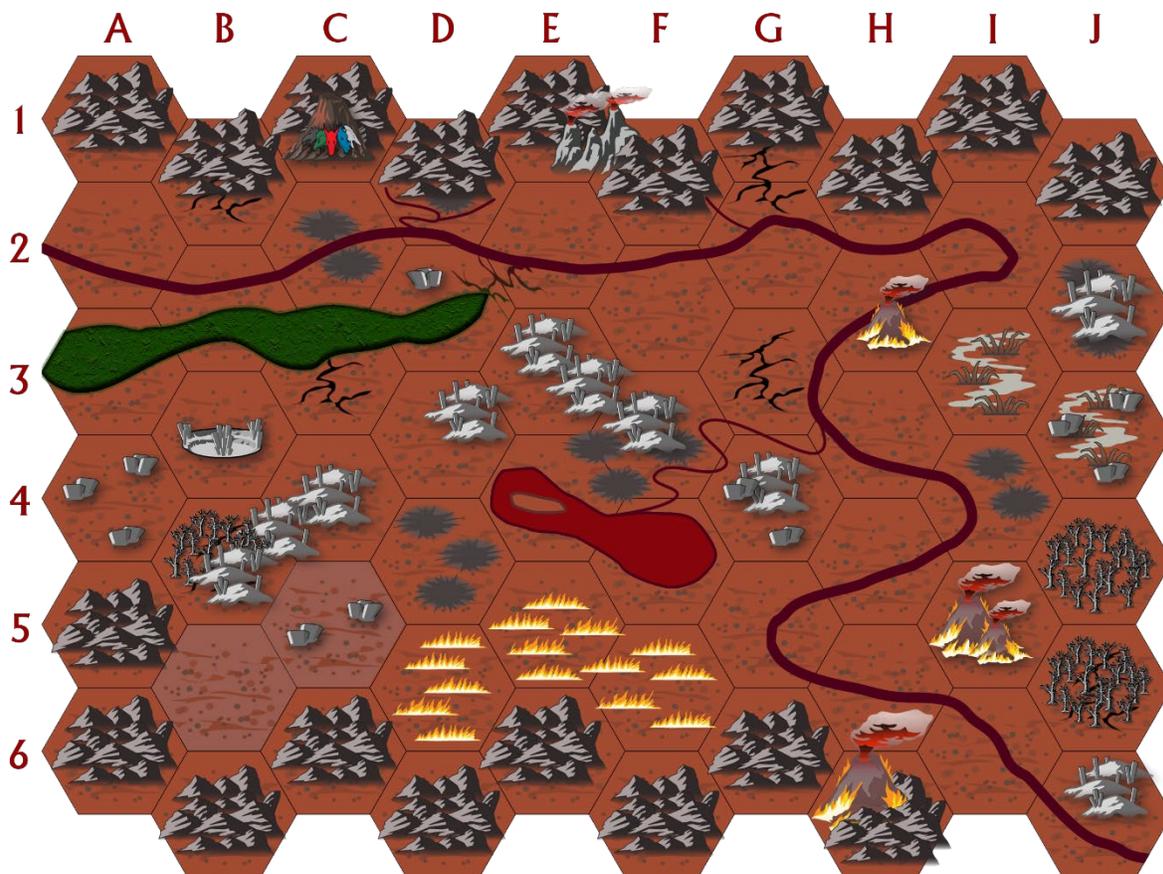
Scanning the map, this hill looks promising:



You could pretty easily make the case for that depicting Fort Knucklebones. That's in hex I3, so we'll go ahead and slot the Dock of Fallen Cities in hex H3.

# PART 7B: AVERNIAN HEX MAP

by Justin Alexander - April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021



This is the DM's map for running the Avernian hexcrawl. It's designed for use with the Alexandrian Hexcrawl, as described in the [5E Hexcrawl](#) series. We'll be making some tweaks to this structure, however, to accommodate the unusual features of Avernus.

## HEX SCALE

1 Hex = 40 miles (center to center / side to side) = 23 mile sides = 1385 square miles

The Avernian Hexcrawl uses 40 mile hexes. When tracking progress, this means it requires 20 miles of progress to exit a hex through one of the two nearest faces. (If they exit back through the face through which they entered the hex for a reason other than doubling back along their own trail, it requires 2d10 miles of progress to exit the hex, unless circumstances suggest some other figure.)

*Design Note: The primary reason for choosing a 40 mile scale is because the PCs are likely to end up using infernal machines with much higher speeds of travel. The secondary reason is aesthetic: Avernus is supposed to be a wasteland. By*

*increasing the scale of the hexes, we achieve that (increasing the average distance between points of interest).*

## OPPRESSIVE ENVIRONMENT

The conditions in Avernus are debilitating, alien, and severe, particularly for mortals. In addition to the normal encounter check, there is a 1 in 6 chance per watch that an oppressive condition will begin. Once begun, an oppressive condition continues until another 1 in 6 check per watch succeeds.

d4	Oppressive Condition
1	Extreme Heat
2	Choking Miasma
3	Psychic Evil
4	Terrain Condition

**EXTREME HEAT:** Temperatures reach extreme heat. A creature exposed to extreme heat must succeed on a Constitution saving throw at the end of each hour or gain one level of exhaustion. The DC is 5 for the first hour and increases by 1 for each additional hour. Creatures wearing medium or heavy armor, or clad in heavy clothing, have disadvantage on the saving throw. Creatures with resistance or immunity to fire damage automatically succeed on the saving throw, as do creatures native to Avernus.

**CHOKING MIASMA:** Thick, noxious fumes fill the air. They may have a source (like volcanic clouds rolling off the mountains) or they may seem to rise from the ground or even just spontaneously emerge from the air itself. At the end of each watch, creatures must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or suffer one level of exhaustion. Creatures who are resting gain advantage on the saving throw. Creatures with resistance or immunity to poison automatically succeed on the saving throw, as do creatures native to Avernus.

**PSYCHIC EVIL:** The supernatural evil of the Nine Hells weighs on the bodies and souls of those who are not evil. A non-evil creature must make a DC 15 Constitution saving throw at the end of each watch or suffer 1d3 points of psychic damage.

**TERRAIN CONDITION:** Each type of Avernian terrain has an oppressive condition. This result on the table indicates that you should use the oppressive condition of the terrain in the expedition's current hex.

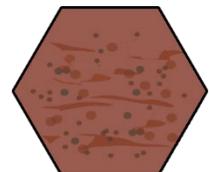
As noted below, some terrain conditions do not persist. They occur once in the watch during which they are rolled, and then additional checks for oppressive conditions immediately resume in the next watch.

## AVERNIAN TERRAIN

*The wasteland of Avernus is scattered with rocks of obsidian and quartz. There're mountains dotting the bloody-dusty plain, and foothills march across the land like the overturned tracks of some gargantuan, unknown beast. – Planes of Law (1995)*

**ASHLANDS:** The ground here is covered in a thick layer of black ash, generally varying in depth from six to eighteen inches. The ash does not easily compress or support weight, so travelers will often find themselves more less wading through the ash.

*Oppressive Condition – Ash Pit:* In some areas the thin sand is much deeper than it appears. [Sentinels](#) can attempt a DC 18 Wisdom (Perception) check to spot the ash pit as the expedition approaches. If no one spots the ash pit, 1d4 random characters in



the expedition must make a DC 15 Dexterity saving throw or abruptly sink 2d4 feet deep in the ash.

At the start of each ash-bound creature's turn, they sink another 1d4 feet into the ash. A character can attempt to escape by using their action to make a Strength check with a DC equal to 10 plus the number of feet they've sunk into the ash. If they have become completely submerged, they suffer disadvantage on this check and also begin suffocating.

Ash pits do not persist as an oppressive condition.

**BONE BRAMBLES:** A maze of warped trees and bonelike vines. Calcified corpses merge with the trees, covered in fungal pods that feed on the blood oozing through the undergrowth. Experienced Avernian explorers know that bone brambles often grow up around sources of fresh water.

*Oppressive Condition - White Mists:* The brambles exude a thick, cloying, almost oily white mist. This creates a condition of poor visibility (halving moving speeds and giving disadvantage on navigation and forage checks). The mist is almost refreshingly cool by Avernian standards, but there are strange whispers and disturbing groans that come and go among the mists.



**CAUSTIC BOGS:** On the current map, the caustic bogs are formed from the polluted run-off from Bel's Forge (Hex H2), but similar areas can be found across Avernus, horrific remnants of the Blood War.

While travelling through the caustic bogs, characters must succeed on a DC 12 Constitution saving throw each watch or gain the Poisoned condition. The character can repeat the saving throw every 24 hours, ending the effect on itself on a success.

*Oppressive Condition - Caustic Pollution:* Characters must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or suffer 1d3 acid damage.



**HILLS, AVERNIAN:** Either low mounds that undulate out of the wastelands or jagged promontories of razor-like rock that jut toward the blood red sky. The native life of Avernus, such as it is, often clings and clusters in the hills.

*Oppressive Condition - Scree:* See the Wastelands terrain below.



**MOUNTAINS, AVERNIAN:** There are generally two types of mountains in Avernus. Newer mountains that thrust up like broken blades of obsidian; raw and dangerous. And the older mountains that have been worn down by countless aeons, their gray immensity aching with an age incalculable to the mortal soul.

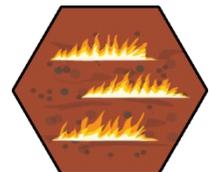
*Oppressive Condition - Tremor:* Avernus in general is tectonically unstable and this effect is magnified along the mountain crests. This condition indicates a tremor significant enough to disrupt travel, imposing a  $\times \frac{3}{4}$  speed modifier for the current watch. 1 in 10 such tremors are more serious, triggering significant hazards like an avalanche, rockslide, cave collapse, or the like.



This does not persist as an oppressive condition.

**PLAINS OF FIRE:** An iridescent, tarry putrescence seeps up through the soil here. These alchemical slicks catch on fire, a combination of small ever-burning wells and huge infernos miles long and high.

Failing a navigation check in the plains of afire. At the DM's discretion, it may indicate that the group has gotten cut off by a rapidly spreading fire, trapping the PCs in the eye of a firestorm.

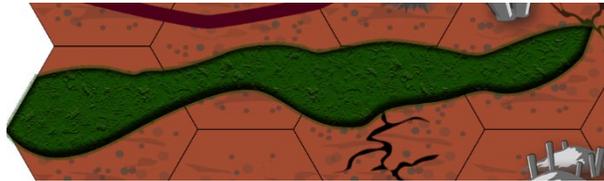


*Oppressive Condition - Extreme Heat:* As described above.

**PIT OF SHUMMRATH:** A grand canyon more than a mile deep and filled with a lake of green slime that undulates as though breathing. The slime is actually the protoplasmic residue of an ancient devil imprisoned here by Archduke Bel many centuries ago, still possessed of some residual sentience and a telepathic ability to communicate (see p. 100 of *Descent Into Avernus*).

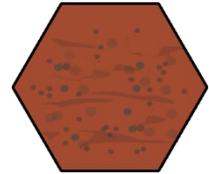
Large sections of the Shummrathian slime actually have a very thick skin, allowing the brave and foolhardy to actually walk across its slightly undulating surface. In slightly less gelatinous sections of the Pit, barges can dredge their way across.

*Oppressive Condition – Telepathic Agony:* An overwhelming telepathic burst emanates from the canyon, communicating in a single searing thought the eternal agony of Shummrath’s shattered consciousness. Characters must succeed on a DC 15 Wisdom saving throw or suffer 2d6 psychic damage.



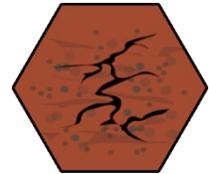
**WASTELANDS:** The wastelands of Avernus look like sand, but are mostly made up of hard, sharp rocks akin to the quartzes and obsidian of the Material Plane. Footing can be treacherous.

*Oppressive Condition – Scree:* Traveling characters must make a DC 12 Dexterity saving throw each watch or suffer 1d3 damage. A character failing the saving throw must immediately attempt another, repeating until they succeed on a check or choose to stop traveling (in which case their distance traveled for the watch is halved).



**WASTELANDS, CRACKED:** The surface of Avernus is a rotten rind stretched across a festering fruit. In places, the ground has split apart. In cracked regions of the wastelands, the land is riven with fissures and ravines. Navigating these regions is difficult, either requiring great effort to circle around impassable chasms, or maze-like passages through the fissures themselves.

*Oppressive Condition – Scree:* See the Wastelands terrain above.



**VOLCANIC PLAINS:** Vast, smooth plains of black, basaltic rock. Sometimes shattered by tectonic upheavals. Often studded with fissure vents and bubbling pools of fresh lava.

An unusual feature of Avernian volcanic plains are the kipukas: Isolated areas of older lava flows surrounded by newer flows. On Avernus, these kipukas are often etched with the characters of some ancient and utterly forgotten tongue.



*Oppressive Condition – Volcanic Event:* Journeying near an active volcano is, of course, not safe in any circumstances, and even less so given the churning activity of a typical Avernian caldera. There are several volcanic events that could arise as an oppressive condition.

- A **choking miasma** of volcanic gas (see Oppressive Environment, above). More serious outbreaks of volcanic gas are also possible; resolve as a *cloudkill* spell.
- An **active lava flow**, blocking the desired path of travel.
- A **tephra fall**, in which multiple inches and even several feet of ash fall as precipitation. Add +2 to the DC of navigation checks and +4 to the DC of forage checks.
- A **lahar**, a violent mudflow formed from a slurry of pyroclastic material. (Resolve like an avalanche.)
- An **eruption**. This might be modeled by requiring the PCs to flee the hex within a certain timeframe.

Terrain	Highway	Road/Trail	Trackless	Navigation DC	Forage DC
Ashlands	x1	x1	x 1/2	12	24
Bone Brambles	x1	x1	x 1/2	18	16
Caustic Bogs	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	15	20
Hills, Avernian	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	14	18
Mountains, Avernian	x 3/4	x 3/4	x 1/2	16	22
Plains of Fire	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	14	24
Pit of Shummrath	x1	x 3/4	x 1/4	15	22
Wastelands	x1	x1	x 3/4	12	20
Wastelands, Cracked	x1	x 3/4	x 1/2	16	20
Volcanic Plains	x1	x 3/4	x 3/4	12	24

*Note: Although values are given for Highway speed, there are no such causeways in this section of Avernus. (They're quite rare in Avernus in general.)*

## THE STYX

The effects of the River Styx are described on p. 76 of *Descent Into Avernus*.

It should be noted that these effects apply only to the waters of the river itself. The Styx is fed by a number of tributaries which do not share these effects until they join the main channel of the Styx. In Avernus, these tributaries may be water, but are more likely to be fouler effluvia. (In places within Avernus there are whole systems of rivers and lakes filled with nothing but the blood and bile and other fluids of mortal creatures spilling down into the Styx.)

## NAVIGATING AVERNUS

*Avernus... Its blasted, rock-strewn fields gape like festering wounds under a crimson sky. Neither stars nor sun brighten the infinite reach of this layer's sky, for the blood-red light emanates from the air itself. There's no way to keep time in Avernus, save by the screaming of the [suffering]. – Planes of Law (1995)*

**COMPASS DIRECTIONS:** Cardinal and ordinal directions don't exist in Avernus. (There is no rising sun, no stars in a night sky, and no magnetic field for aligning compasses.) This imposes disadvantage to navigation checks until a navigator has adapted to the oddities of Avernian geography (by successfully reaching an intended destination for the first time).

**PLANAR COMPASS:** A *planar compass* is a technomantic device which allows for navigation in the Outer Planes. A *planar compass* aligns to the nearest planar borders. In this particular region of Avernus that corresponds to the planar borders with Dis (to the "north" side of our) and the Abyss (to the "east"). Thus Dis-ward, Abyss-ward, contra-Dis, and contra-Abyss.

*Design Note: For simplicity, you might still want to use the familiar cardinal directions at the table. Here's one way you could justify that: The word "north" actually derives from a word meaning "left" because it was the direction to the left of the rising sun. You could hypothesize an Avernian dialect in which the direction towards the Abyss (and the front lines of the Blood War) is adversa, and "Avernian north" is the direction to the left of that. In translation to the Common tongue, the common names – north, east, south, west – are extrapolated accordingly.*

**SIGHTING MOUNTAINS:** In the absence of stars, sun, or magnetic fields, navigation in Avernus relies heavily on landmarks. In this particular region of Avernus, this is greatly aided by the Dispatrian Mountains that lie Dis-ward and the Praefervian Mountains to the contra-Dis.

On a clear day, both mountain ranges can be seen at a distance of two hexes (80 miles). The thick haze of the Avernian atmosphere, however, usually reduces this to a single hex. Volcanic peaks indicated on the map (like Bel's Forge in Hex H2) can similarly be seen at a distance of 1-2 hexes.

**IDENTIFYING MAP LOCATIONS:** If the PCs make inquiries, assume that Avernian natives can identify 1d6-1 locations on the player's map.

## OTHER AVERNIAN GUIDELINES

**FORAGING:** Food and water – particularly that suitable for mortal consumption – is hard to come by in Avernus. The native flora and fauna have a bitter or ashen flavor, and even drinkable water usually tastes foul.

Mortals make forage checks in Avernus at disadvantage. (Hell is not a place for mortals.) This does not apply to characters with demonic or devilish heritage (such as tieflings), who will find a broader range of Avernian wildlife suitable for their palates.

**UNSUITABLE TERRAIN:** Land vehicles perform poorly in unsuitable terrain. Infernal warmachines are well-suited to the Avernian wastelands, however, and are likely to only find mountainous terrain unsuitable. At the DM's discretion they might also find unusual terrain like the Pit of Shummrath or the caustic bogs similarly problematic.

*Some map icons from Hells Upper Levels by Keith Curtis via Inkwell Ideas.*

*Additional icons by Kevin Chenevert of RedKobold.com.*

# 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.

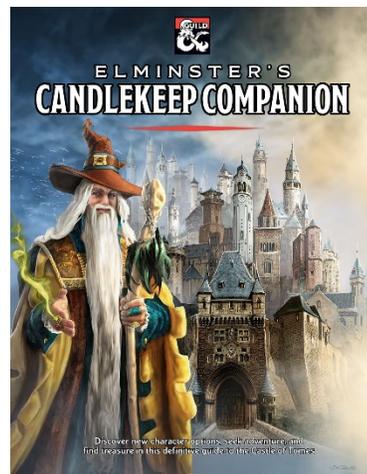
A few quick provisos before we begin:

- 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

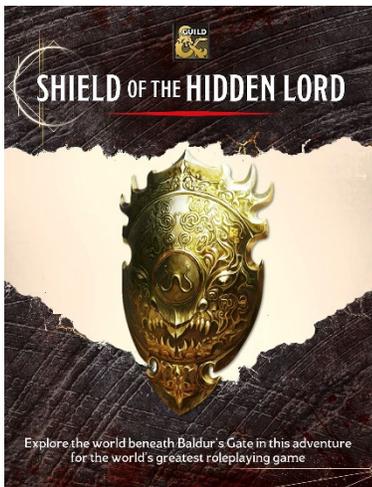


ideas here (using the Prophecies of Alaundo to push the PCs towards Avernus and using the original gateway used for the Charge of the Hellriders to reach Avernus), but they both need a bit of TLC.

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 means 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.

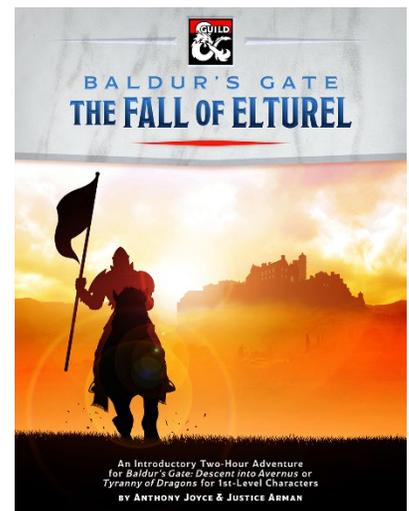
I really don't like the fact that the maps are only located as separate files (and not included in the PDF layout), but including versions both with and without numbers gets two huge thumbs up from me. (Hard to believe in an era of virtual tabletops people are still getting this wrong.)

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.

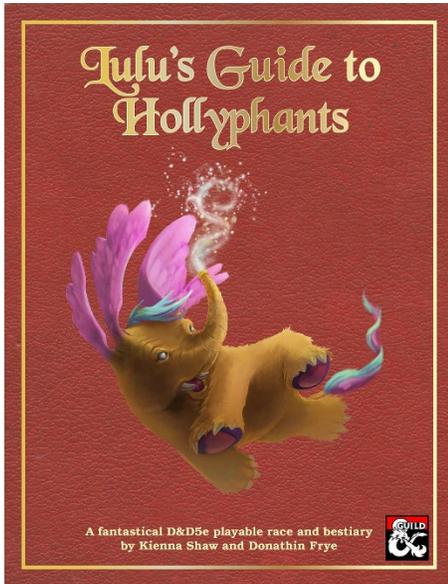
But there's just nothing terribly exciting about the content, and the structure is problematic. The initial hook is weak and the adventure immediately saddles you with Reya Mantlemorn as a GMPC who constantly tells the PCs what they're supposed to be doing at every single step (right down to prompting



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.

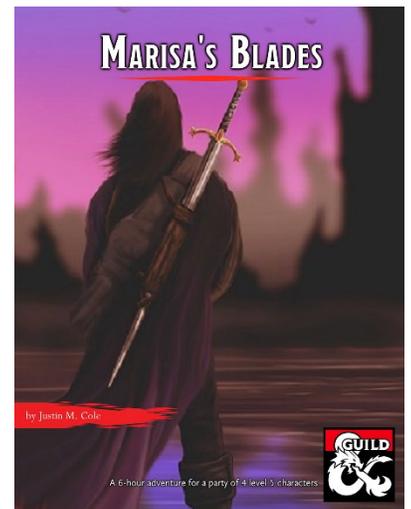
- *Grade: D+*

**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.

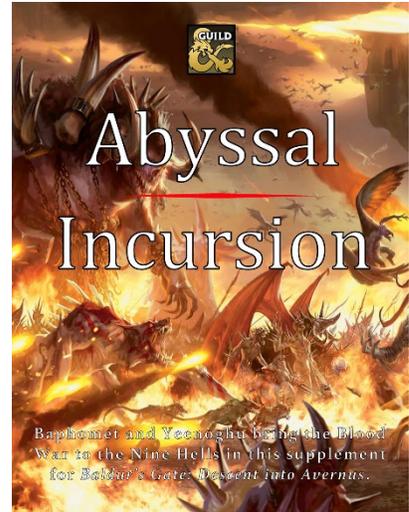
- *Grade: B-*

**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.

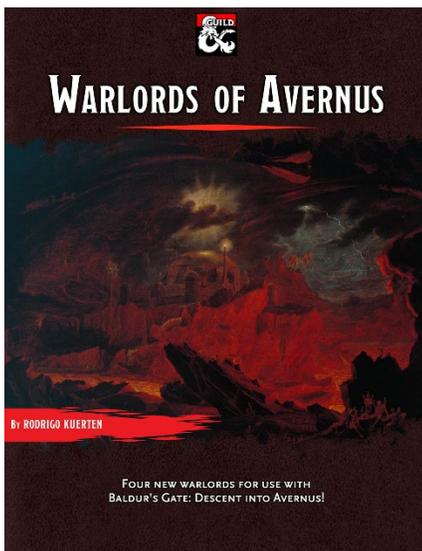


Where *Abyssal Incursions* comes up a bit short for me is its actual utility: Billed as a supplement for *Descent Into Avernus* (a campaign for 1<sup>st</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> level characters), both Baphomet's battle barge and Yeenoghu's worm feature impossibly difficult demon armies. Despite this, 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.

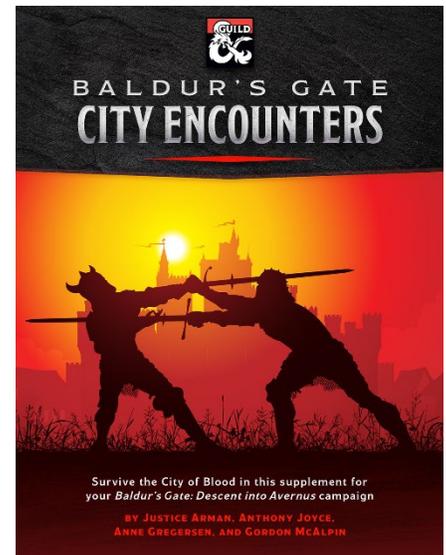
So when I saw that there was a [Baldur's Gate: City Encounters](#) book, I snapped it up right quick. Unfortunately, this book (lead design by Justice Arman and Anthony Joyce) is considerably less useful

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.)

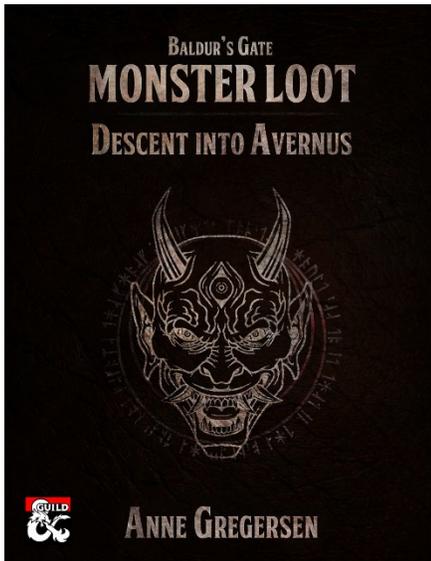
The book also includes a neighborhood map of Baldur's Gate which, for reasons I don't really understand, doesn't match any other extant maps of Baldur's Gate.

- *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

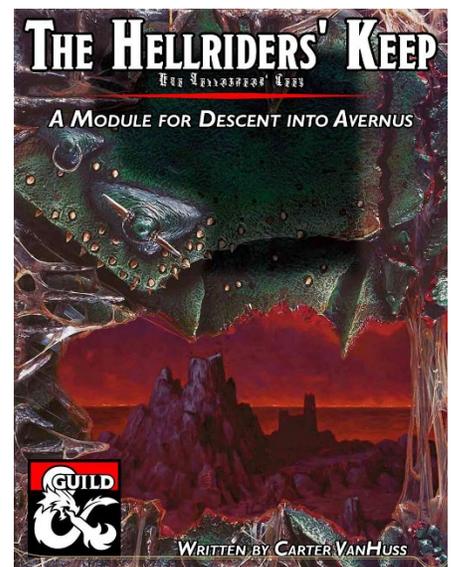
**THE HELLRIDERS' KEEP:** This supplement adds a new location to Elturel. Conceptually it's great. Not only does making Elturel a richer location for the PCs to explore make a lot of sense, but Carter VanHuss very astutely notes that the published adventure doesn't cleanly clue the PCs into the true 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.

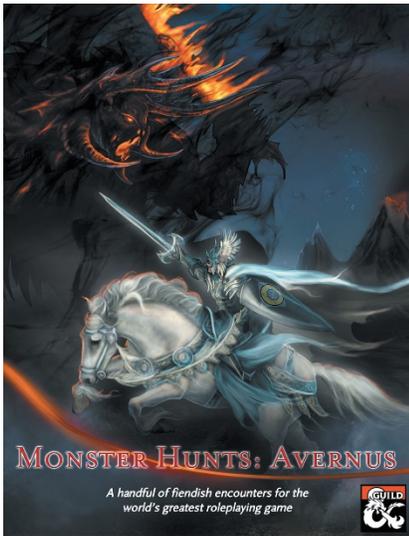
Unfortunately, the book does get a little hamstrung by a couple of structural issues. First, the hook is just another, "NPC tells the PCs to go some place, the PCs got there" affair. To some extent, I can see how his hands were tied by the published campaign itself, but it feels like with a little extra 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

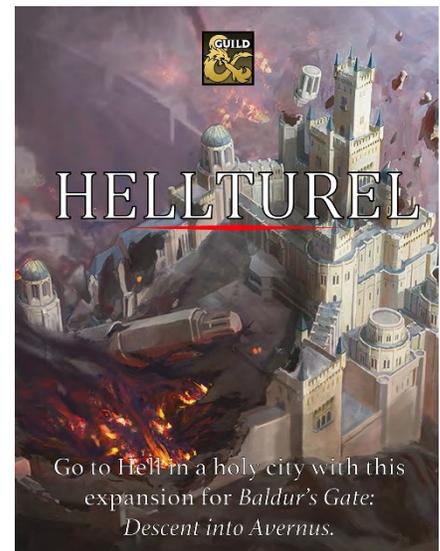
**HELLTUREL:** James Introcaso has really hit the nail on the head with [Hellturel](#). This 32-page supplement presents four new locations for Elturel, nicely fleshing out the city for PCs who want to explore it. Not only are the locations well-designed, they are connected using [node-based scenario 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 needs to be cleaned up.

But, as I say, really good stuff. Recommended.

- *Grade:* B-

**51 SOUL COINS:** Written by Florian Emmerich and Bryan Holmes, [51 Soul Coins](#) delivers exactly what’s on the tin: 51 pregenerated soul coin NPCs that can be slotted in whenever the PCs find a soul coin in *Descent Into Avernus*. (It also includes a couple pages talking about how you could incorporate soul coins into other published campaigns, although this advice is mostly self-evident; i.e., to have soul coins in those campaigns, add them to those campaigns.) They also do this cool little homage where some of the NPCs are crossovers from other DM’s Guild adventures.



The significant shortcoming of the book is the lack of variety in the NPCs: Almost all of them are “ordinary person made a deal, it was a trick, off to Hell with ‘em.” I’d have liked to see some people who cut epic deals; major historical figures; evil souls who were damned to Hell without making deals with devils. Maybe even some good souls that were captured and wrongfully imprisoned in the forges of Minauros.

Ideally this book would be a one-stop shop that would completely obviate any need for me to prep soul coins. Unfortunately, the lack of variety means I still need to do a lot of work, which knocks this down a grade level for me.

- *Grade: C*

**A LIGHT IN THE DARK:** [A Light in the Dark](#) bills itself as tying into the continuity of *Descent Into Avernus*, but it’s set in Baldur’s Gate while having a suggested level at which PCs in the campaign will have long since left Baldur’s Gate behind. Its purpose, therefore, is somewhat confusing.

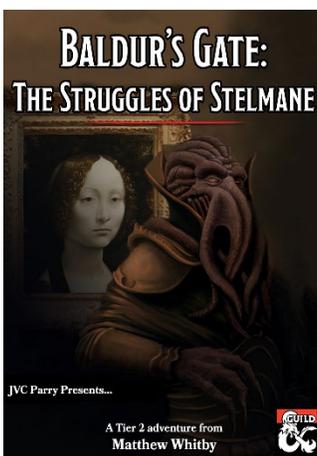
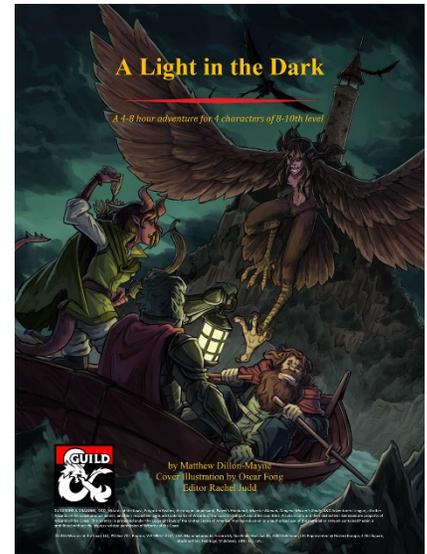
The maps are nice and the concept is fine, but the adventure itself is virtually unplayable. It’s more or less written as a Choose Your Own Adventure novel, consisting of literally just pages and pages (and pages!) of horribly executed boxed text. Often this boxed text is outlining literal A or B choices. It repeatedly ends with the refrain, “What do you want to do?” literally scripted in. And it is constantly either telling the players what their characters do or simply leaving them helplessly standing by while entire scenes play out without their input.

Perhaps the most egregious example of this comes when the PCs confront the villain. While the PCs stand unable to act (because the DM is reading), the boxed text has:

- The villain order a zombie girl to go punish her parents.
- The zombie girl leave the room.
- The girl’s parents scream and beg for mercy from the neighboring room.
- The sound of thumping that turns to screams of pain.
- “The noises they make will stay with you for a long time.”

This is one of those times where I wish I had more nice things to say about an adventure. But I don’t.

- *Grade: F*



**BALDUR'S GATE - THE STRUGGLES OF STELMANE:** This is another adventure which presents itself as being something you can incorporate into a *Descent Into Avernus* campaign, but which is nevertheless set in Baldur's Gate with a suggested level too high to be used in the campaign. (What gives, folks?)

[The Struggles of Stelmene](#) is a fairly simple adventure: A mind flayer is attempting to take control of Duke Stelmene. The PCs are told by the Duke's assistant to investigate some caves. They do so and find a tunnel that leads to Stelmene's manor. (Which – pet peeve alert! – is incorrectly referred to as a villa.) The mind flayer is in the manor. The PCs kill it.

Unfortunately, the adventure spends a great deal of time spinning its wheels. (It's about 5 pages of content in a 20 page PDF.) And when it's not spinning its wheels, it frequently just doesn't make sense: The mind flayer telepathically read

Stelmane’s mind and for some reason this is causing Stelmane’s physical health to deteriorate. The duke’s assistant requests a meeting with the PCs, but the only thing he asks them to do is investigate a murder that doesn’t happen until the PCs show up to meet him. The adventure frequently talks about “following a series of clues,” but there are no clues to follow. And so forth.

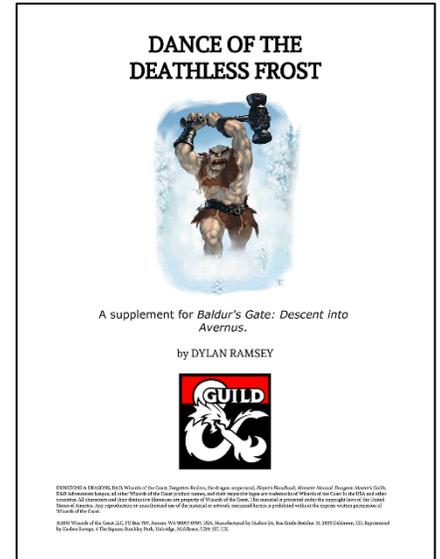
- *Grade: D-*

**DANCE OF DEATHLESS FROST:** Dylan Ramsey delivers a clever little expansion of *Descent Into Avernus*, giving the PCs an opportunity to track down the mysterious *phylactery of deathless frost*. With it they can either control the demon lord Kostchtchie or destroy it and turn him mortal.

My one quibble with the adventure is that it suffers a little from what I call “idea guy syndrome.” A common variant is, “Wouldn’t this encounter be cool?” This often takes the form of the bad guys sending minions to attack the PCs... but the encounter isn’t actually started up (e.g., “She could send fiendish assassins or a simulacrum to try to steal the phylactery from the characters.”) But you also get stuff like, “It feels like the NPC’s lair should have fiendishly clever defenses... but I couldn’t figure out how to do it, so here’s a couple of vague ideas.”

So, basically, you’re going to have to put some elbow-grease into [Dance of Deathless Frost](#) if you want to use it. Nevertheless, Ramsey delivers some cool ideas, memorable locales, and nifty ideas, so it’s probably worth the effort. (I will most likely be incorporating this scenario into the Remix.)

- *Grade: C-*



**FORGES OF AVERNUS:** The central conceit of [Forges of Avernus](#) is that each Warlord of Avernus maintains their own forge to outfit their warriors, and each of these forges are skilled in the creation of special, themed weapons. I like this *a lot*: One of the big shortcomings in *Descent Into Avernus* is that it details the warlords, but not their warbands. I wanted to supplement that lack, and *Forges of Avernus* does a lot of heavy lifting for me. Not only will the unique weapons make for distinct combat encounters with each warband, but the supplement also details the NPC forge masters (adding extra roleplaying opportunities).

The only drawback here is that the mechanical mastery of 5<sup>th</sup> Edition is a little shaky. For example, there are several effects triggered “on a critical failure,” but there are no critical failures in 5<sup>th</sup> Edition. This doesn’t appear to be a crippling problem, but when you see a weak grasp of mechanical fundamentals it erodes trust in the rest of the mechanical implementation, so you’ll probably want to double-check these elements as you add them to your campaign.

- *Grade: B-*

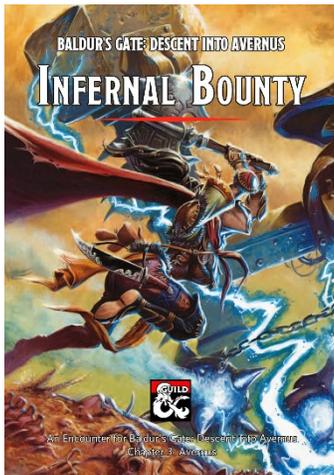
**BITTER RIVALS:** [Bitter Rivals](#) is a slick, professional-grade adventure designed to be seamlessly slotted into *Descent Into Avernus*. It adds a ton of lore to the warlord Bitter Breath and completely details their warcamp as part of a raid scenario. This is a no-brainer for any GM planning to run *Descent Into Avernus*, with or without the Remix.

The organization and level of detail, in particular, are fantastic. One example is the formatting of the mission briefing given in the scenario hook. Rather than using traditional boxed text, J.A. Valeur of Eventyr Games uses in-line headings to identify the major bullet points of the briefing while providing the written dialogue associated with that bullet point in plain text behind the in-line heading. I hadn't seen this technique previously, but it's best-of-both-worlds stuff.

There's also a really nifty DM's Cheat Sheet section of the adventure, which basically presents the entire adventure a second time but with only the essential elements (like encounter rosters, the bullet point version of the mission briefing, etc.). Stripped of the surrounding explanatory text, this is a great document for efficiently running the adventure without flipping back and forth through multiple pages.

- *Grade: B*

**INFERNAL BOUNTY:** Another *Descent Into Avernus* supplement from Eventyr Games, this short 2-page PDF is basically just a random encounter with a pair of bounty hunter devils (using some *very* lightly customized stat blocks) for \$0.50. In addition to being a random encounter, the fiend duo can make a decent response team that can be flexibly deployed at need. But I just don't see a lot of value in [Infernal Bounty](#) even at the fairly cheap price point.



- *Grade: D*

**ENHANCED DEVILS:** Another Eventyr supplement, [Enhanced Devils](#) looks at a dozen or so devils from the *Monster Manual* and soups up their stat blocks, giving them extra abilities that don't necessarily make them more powerful, but *do* give them more options in combat so that multiple encounters with them stay fresh.

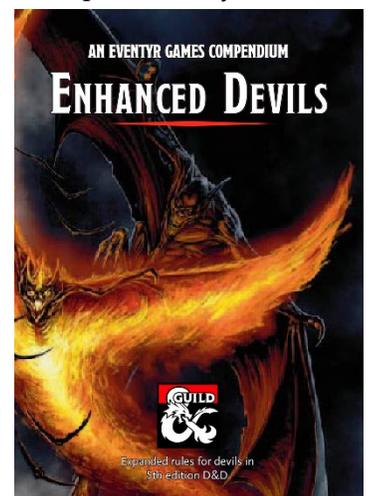
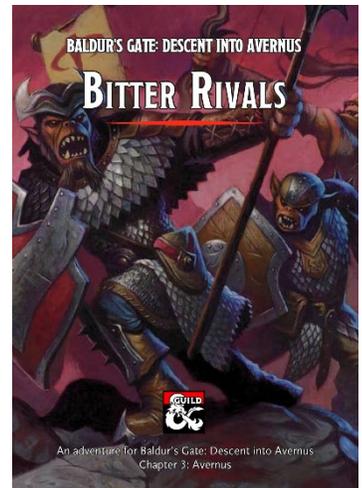
I haven't playtested these yet, but they look balanced and useful. The important thing here, though, is the word "yet." I've [talked in the past](#) about how 4<sup>th</sup> Edition's design philosophy of reducing the breadth of abilities possessed by monsters (which has carried through, albeit to a lesser extent, in 5<sup>th</sup> Edition) on the theory that the typical monster only lasts for 3-5 rounds is fundamentally

flawed (because, if nothing else, when you build an encounter with 5 of those monsters, the stat block immediately has 15-25 rounds of actions), so it's probably not surprising to discover that I like what this supplement is doing and I like these stat blocks. I'll be using them to help keep encounters in Avernus fresh and interesting.

- *Grade: C*

**TEMPLE OF THE BROKEN PRINCE:** Yet another adventure that sells itself as a plug-and-play side quest for *Descent Into Avernus*, but isn't actually designed to work that way. This time, the adventure is set on Avernus, but the recommended level is too low.

In actual practice, the location is not really designed for Avernus. But it IS a fairly nice location-crawl that could easily be slotted into any traditional D&D setting. (If you still wanted to use [Temple of the Broken Prince](#) as part of the Remix, it might work well as the mission that sends the PCs out of Elturel just in time for the whole city to get sucked into Hell.) A demonic temple turned into a demonic sepulcher, the rooms are weird, sinister, and drenched with dread. There's also a couple new monsters that look like creepy fun.



- *Grade: C+*

