

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

[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 1st 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.

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 2nd 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 2nd 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

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

3. ARMY OF DEMONS

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

4. METEOR!

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

5. ELTUREL BESIEGED!

Elturel has not actually fallen! It is merely besieged by a necromancer's army of the undead / a horde of orcs / an army of devils that has ridden out of the Nine Hells to seek revenge against the Hellriders who had once ridden through a *gate* into Avernus itself! The Flaming Fist is refusing to ride forth and break the siege, even though Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard — who had been visiting the city on a diplomatic mission — remains trapped inside. The rumor identifies some other member of the Council of Four — Thalamra Vanthampur, Dillard Portyr, 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 Etlurel long thought! It was actually some strange, celestial egg! And now it's hatched! Some report that a titanic humanoid figure standing several hundred feet high and glowing with a golden light now stands in the ruins of what was once Etlurel, gazing towards the southwest. Others say that the egg's hatching unleashed a swarm of hellwasps or thousands of giant, ever-burning spiders that have wreathed the city in their webs. (There might still be time to save most of the people if we act quickly! Most have only been cocooned by the spiders!) And so forth.

7. RAVENGARD'S BETRAYAL

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

8. COMPANION'S END

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

9. ILLITHID ATTACK

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

10. CIVIL WAR

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

11. THE SECOND CITY

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

12. THE LEGACY OF MORNINGLORD

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

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



PART 2: CHARACTER CREATION

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



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

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

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

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

GMPCs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REYA MANTLEMORN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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.

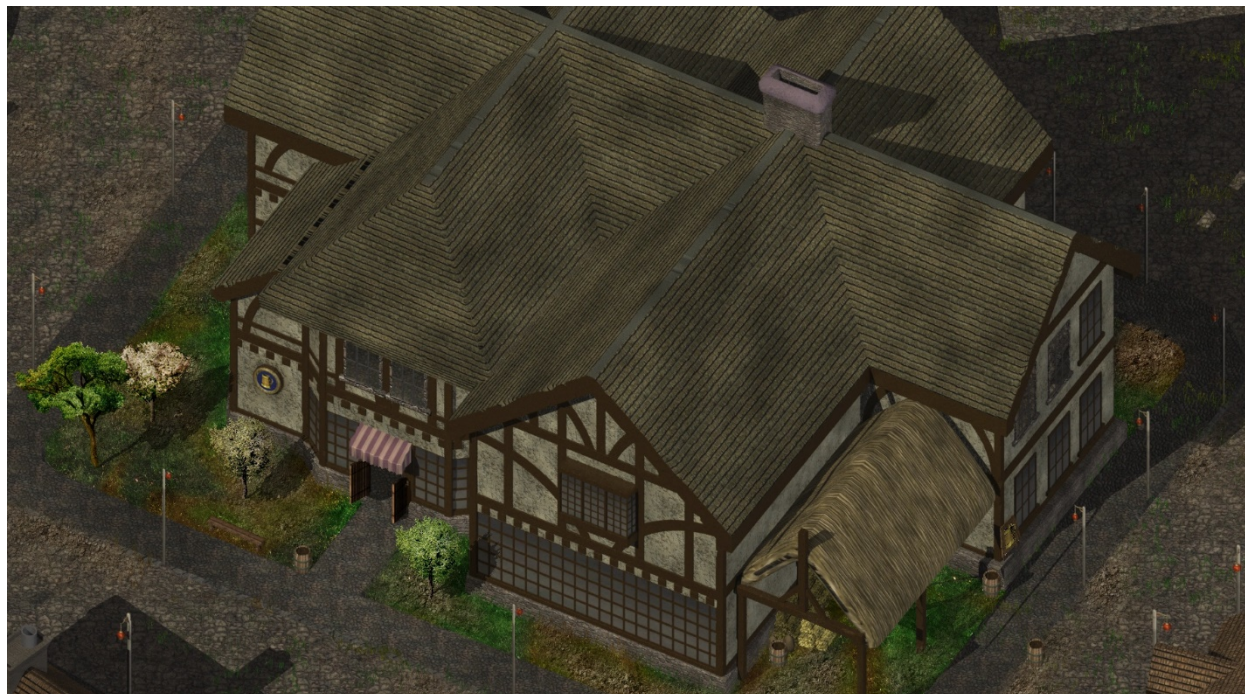
The rest of the group was shell-shocked: We didn't plan it this way, but we had never explicitly told the other players that this *wasn't* the new player's PC, and while we assumed they knew, they didn't. So the complete unraveling and destruction of this character hit them really hard, because they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

[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 14th 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,

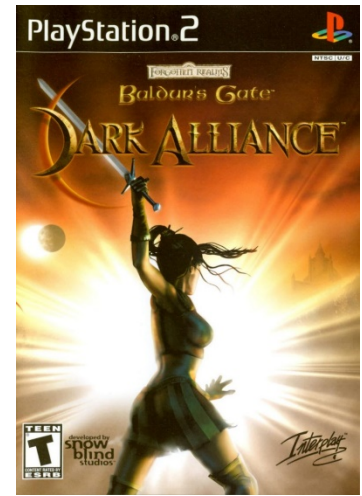
and who is behind a locked door on the second floor of the tavern. (Remember: The PCs have no reason to ever leave the common room of the tavern.)

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

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

ELFSONG

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

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

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

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

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

We'll do the same thing here:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

OSHALLA

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

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

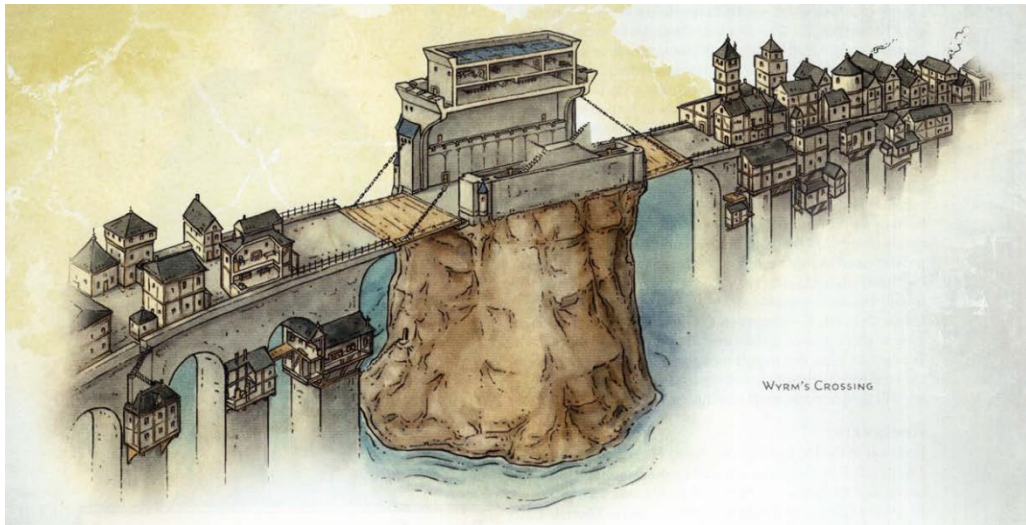
(This leverages Oshalla so that the PCs will actually interact with her. It also reinforces their new role as members of the Flaming Fist.)

TOPICS OF CONVERSATION

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

REDUX REFUGEE

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

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

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

THE PIRATES

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

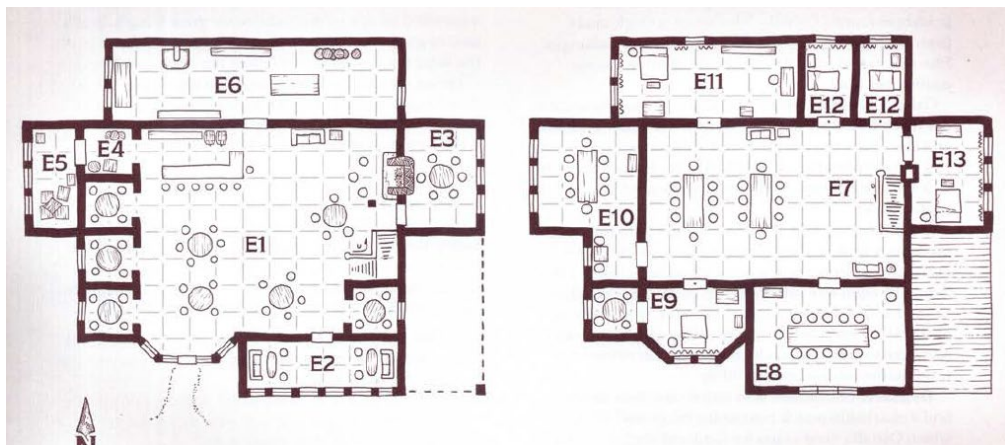
(If, as I've suggested, you've either run the refugee caravan scenario or simply had the players create 2nd level characters, then this is completely unnecessary.)

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

[by Justin Alexander – March 23rd, 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 2nd and 3rd 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 3rd Edition, and it was a powerful evil artifact that allowed Gargauth to communicate with and subtly influence its bearer.

Gargauth vanished in 4th Edition, but in 5th 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

[by Justin Alexander – March 25th, 2020](#)

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

LORE OF GARGAUTH

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

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



- The *Shield* was then given to Zariel, who was in charge of the Dock of Fallen Cities (see Part 5). She cast Gargauth out onto the Material Plane, and he has been working on his charge ever since. (Elturel may or may not have been his first success. Perhaps cities far from the Sword Coast have been taken. Or it is possible that there are, in fact, many *Shields of the Hidden Lord*, with Gargauth's essence refracted across a multitude of Material Planes.)
- In the case of Faerunian history, the *Shield* has been prized by Astarothian cultists (who still hear the voice of their God in it), Dead Three cultists (who honor Gargauth for his alliance with the Dark Gods), and the Cult of Zariel (see below).
- In one notable instance, Dead Three cultists managed to temporarily free Gargauth from the *Shield* (or possibly just manifest his Avatar from it) as part of an assault on the Sign of the Silver Harp, an inn that was used as a gathering place for the Harpers in the 11th 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.)
- 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).

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. For more on Gargauth, check out Powers & Pantheons (p. 23).

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

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

THE CULT OF ZARIEL

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

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

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

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

THE MURDERS

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

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

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

DEAD THREE CULTISTS

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

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

She didn't really have a specific purpose for it at the time, but figured having a private underground lair would come in useful at some point. The complex has been used at various times to store drugs, slaves, and other illicit goods. The Vanthampurs have also used it to hold and torture prisoners. Unfortunately, the contamination of the air by subterranean gases (see Part 3F) has limited its utility and, therefore,



value. The Dead Three cultists nevertheless consider the restoration of this holy site an almost incomparable gift, putting them deeply in Duke Vanthampur's debt.

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

PART 3C: THE VANTHAMPUR REVELATIONS

[by Justin Alexander – April 6th, 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 3rd level PCs than for 2nd 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 5th level when they head to Candlekeep (and, subsequently, Avernus).

REMIXING THE CONSPIRACY

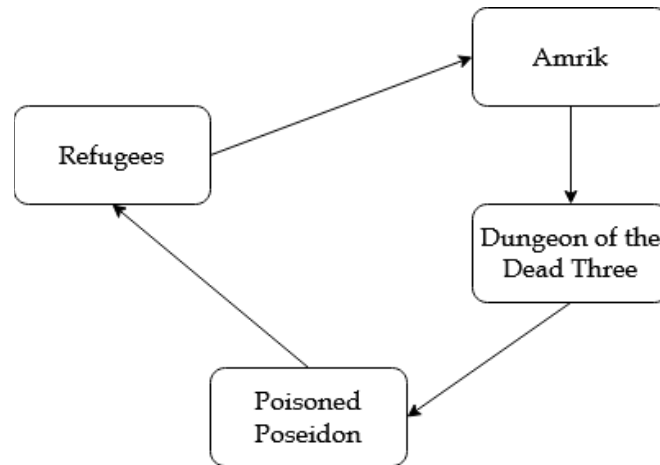
There's a million and one ways to create a thing, but generally the first thing I do when designing an adventure or campaign is to simply brainstorm ideas. (I describe a quick version of this in [5 Node Mystery](#).) We're remixing the raw material from *Descent Into Avernus* here, so we can largely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

by Justin Alexander – April 15th, 2020



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

THE VICTIMS

There have been six victims:

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

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

ADDITIONAL VICTIMS

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

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

- Weronika Nuska (sisters)

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

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

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

INSIGHT PARK



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Torimesh can tell them:

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

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

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

The resulting image depicts:

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

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

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

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

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

Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Medicine)

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

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

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

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

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

CANDULHALLOW'S MORTUARIUM

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

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

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

Intelligence (Arcana/Religion)

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

Intelligence (Religion)

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

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



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

Intelligence (Arcana) / Wisdom (Medicine)

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

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

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

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

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

CANVASSING VICTIMS

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

Things to think about during these improvisations:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LEIV & ANETA DIOMIDIS: Leiv and Aneta were siblings; they were also both Hellriders. 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.

PART 3E: THE POISONED POSEIDON

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



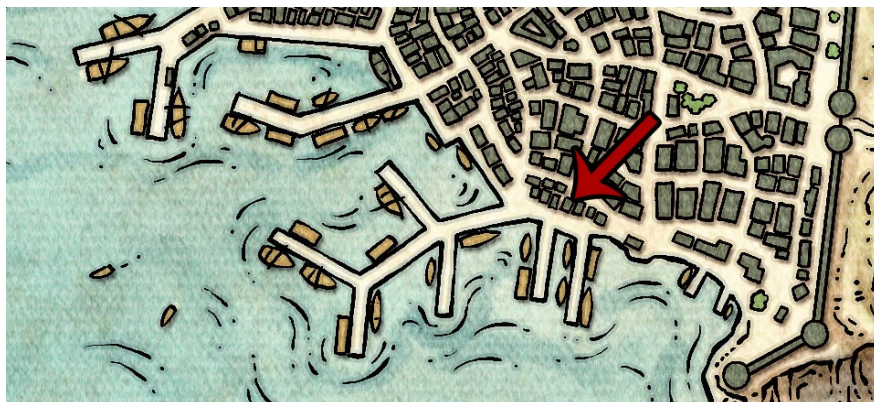
Forty years ago, the *Poisoned Poseidon* was a pirate ship that tormented the Sword Coast. Its captain was the warlock Kelton Hunter, who used his ill-gotten gains to fund his infernal spellcraft. In 1457 DR, the pirate warlock sailed the *Poseidon* at the head of a pirate fleet into the harbor of Baldur's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

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

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

LOCATION OF THE POSEIDON

The *Poisoned Poseidon* is located here:



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

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

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

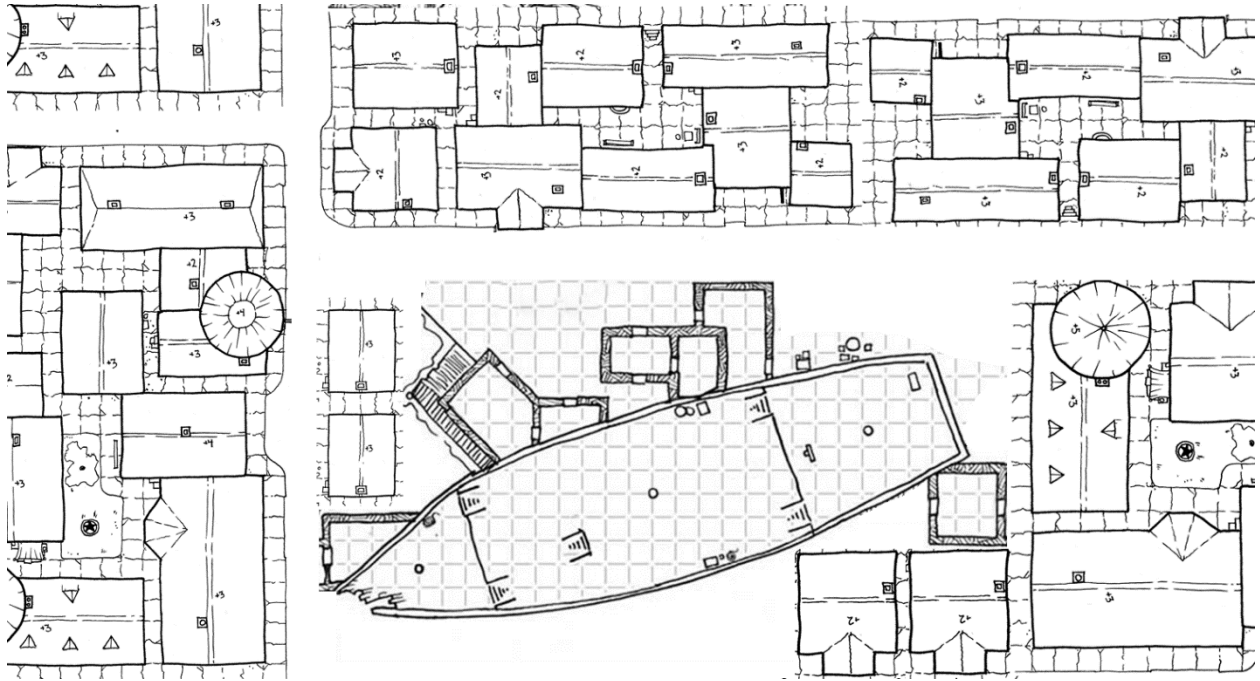


You can buy the high-resolution [isometric map](#) and [top-down map](#) from Mike Schley's web store. The image above is a relatively tiny section of the isometric view, but I've maintained the same resolution so if you buy the map you should be able to add it seamlessly using any image manipulation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

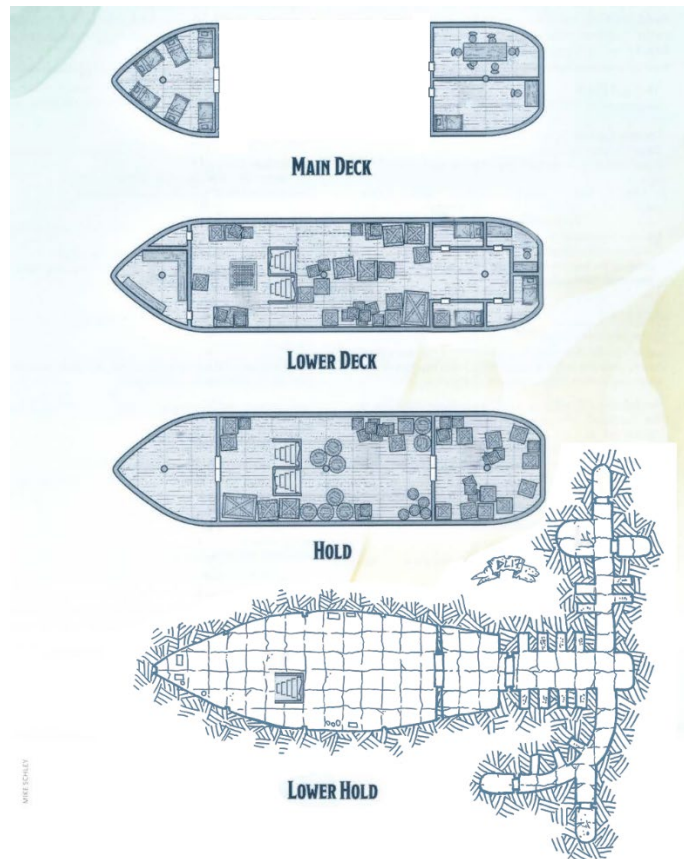
REFUGEES ON THE DOCKS: One of the reasons for using the *Poisoned Poseidon* and placing it on the Docks, is to provide an opportunity to the Eturellian refugee crisis from a different angle. The docks just to the east are crowded with refugees trying to find passage on already overbooked ships. Where 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 Eturel is coming for Baldur's Gate next and they just want to get as far away as possible. See [Rumors of Eturel](#).)

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)	Lower Hold	(preparing body)
2 Fists of Bane	Lower Hold - Tunnels	(guarding cells)

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

[by Justin Alexander - April 20th, 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:

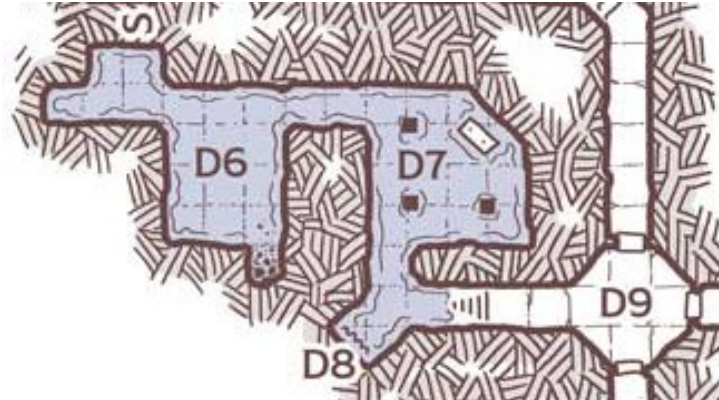
- He sends an imp to barter with the PCs. (He'd probably like them to kill one or both of his brothers. If he's feeling daring, or if the PCs have already succeeded at eliminating his brothers, he might even ask them to kill his mother so that he can take her place at the head of the family. If the PCs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

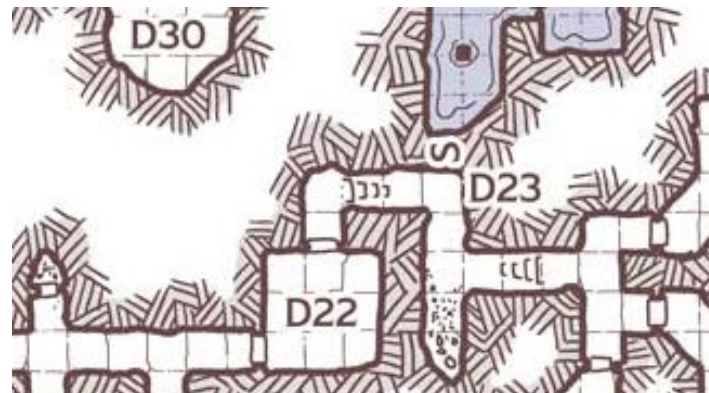
There are several text-to-map mismatches in the dungeon, but the most significant are those related to the flooding in the dungeon.

First, Area D8 is described as a “dry alcove”:



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

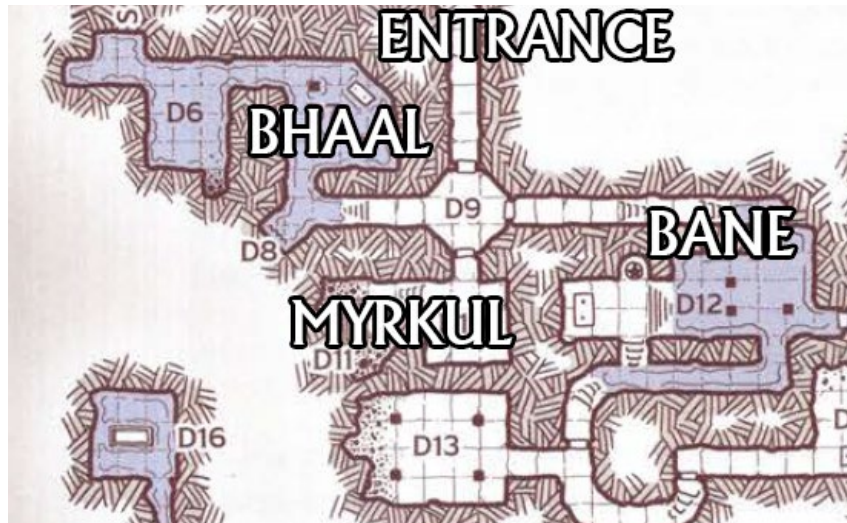
The design of the dungeon actually does a good job of having the flooded portions of the dungeon consistently lower than the rest of the dungeon. Which is why the failure to color in Area D23 (which is correctly described as flooded in the text) is also an error:



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

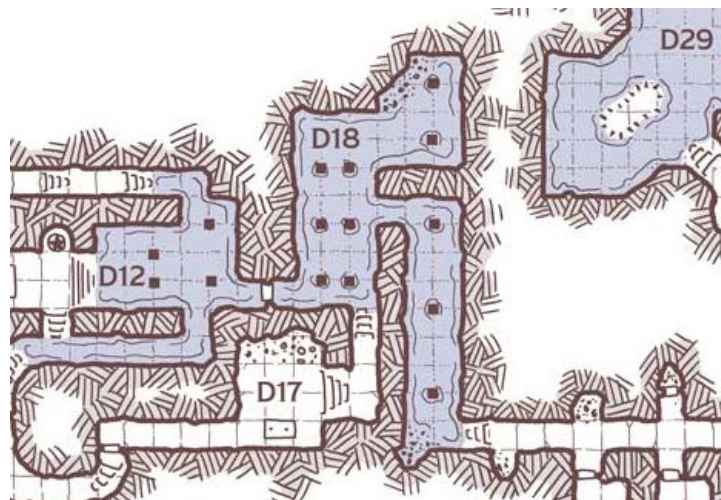
Am I crazy or should the door to the north actually be to the west so that all of the themed doors match the themed content behind them?

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 3F: 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)

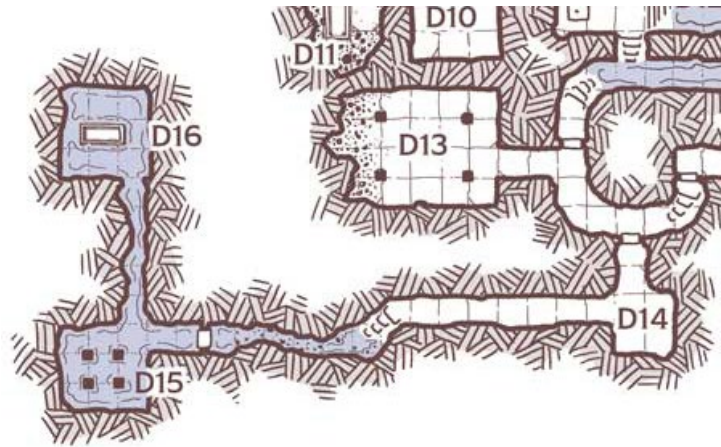
In researching safety lamps I discovered that the word *dampf*, in German, means "vapour." In England, the term became used to describe a variety of gases encountered during mining:

- **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).

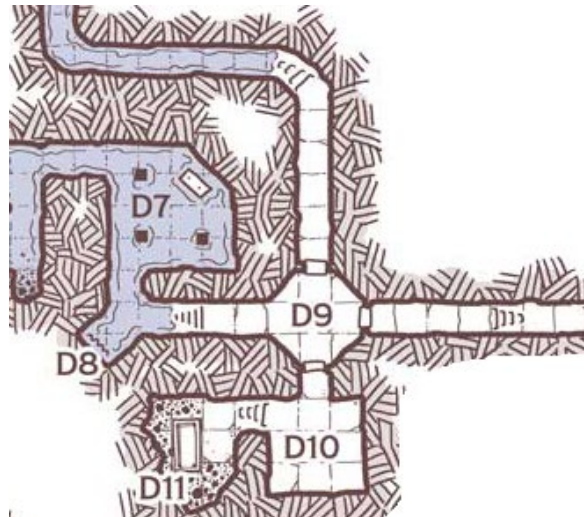
With that being said, to make a dungeon like the Dungeon of the Dead Three really come alive, you need to break the preconception (that's been subconsciously ground into you by dozens, hundreds, or thousands of encounters from published scenarios) that fights "belong" to a particular keyed room.

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.

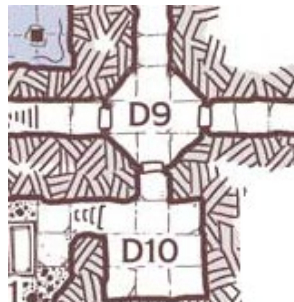
D7. BHAAL'S ALTAR

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 “Myrkul’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.

D25. BANE'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 Ψ* 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	D1 - Courtyard	(spies for Thurstwell)
3 Night Blades	D2 - Baths	
Necromite	D4 - North Massage Room	

DUNGEON

2 corpsedamp zombies	D6 - Bloating Corpse	
3 Necromites	D10 - Necromites' Room	
Yignath (Iron Consul) ¹	D12 - Bane's Altar	
Kazzira (Fist of Bane)	D12 - Bane's Altar	
2 Flying Gauntlets	D12 - Bane's Altar	(must be summoned)
Flennis (Master of Souls) ² + Skeletal Rats	D13 - Morgue	(use stats for swarm of rats)
3 skeletons	D17 - Myrkul's Altar	(must be summoned)
3 corpsedamp zombies	D21 - Zombie Crypt	(must be summoned by Flennis)
Fist of Bane	D23 - Secret Door Sentry	
4 Fists of Bane	D25 - Bane's Rest	(sleeping)
Reaper	D26 - Bhaal's Rest	
2 corpsedamp zombies	D28 - Old Cellar	(must be summoned)
Mortlock ³ + Vaaz ⁴ (Death's Head)	D29	(programmed encounter)

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

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

³ Carries *Mortlock's Correspondence* handout.

⁴ 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

- 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 3f: 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 Elturel, 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 Elturel. 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.

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.

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.

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.

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.