

# 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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[Addendum: Rumors of Elturel](#)

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

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

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

# PART 1: THE BEGINNING

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



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

It’s not an auspicious beginning.

## THE PREMISE

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

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

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

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

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

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 2<sup>nd</sup> level.

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

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

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



## THE MYSTERY OF ELTUREL'S FATE

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

- What happened to Elturel? (It was taken to Hell.)
- Why did this happen? (The city was sold as part of an infernal pact.)
- The true history of the Hellriders. (They betrayed Zariel and left her for dead in Avernus.)



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

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

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

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

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

Seed these rumors into:

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

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

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

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

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

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

# AVERNUS – RUMORS OF ELTUREL

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



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

## 1. ELTUREL LIVES!

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

## 2. FIRE OF DRAGONS

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

## 3. ARMY OF DEMONS

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Companion – the second sun which had long hung in the sky above Etlurel – exploded! The city was completely wiped out, leaving nothing but a smoking crater where it had once stood. Some claim that the devastation was due to the Sun God withdrawing his holy blessing from the city, and priests of Amaunator can be seen throughout the refugee communities in Baldur's Gate preaching apocalyptic messages or flagellating themselves in the hope that they can regain their god's blessing through the mortification of their own flesh. Others suggest that the Companion was sabotaged: Natives of Baldur's Gate suggest that it must have been devils from the Nine Hells (possibly in retaliation for the Hellriders who long ago invaded Avernus; everyone knows devils have infinite patience in their schemes and that revenge is best served cold!). Many among the 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

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



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

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

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

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

## GMPCs

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## REYA MANTLEMORN

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## LULU THE HOLLYPHANT

Slightly more unusual is the case of Lulu the Hollyphant.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Just have her show up sooner.

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

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



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

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

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

## TARINA

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

But I digress.

# PART 2B: ELFSONG TAVERN

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



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

The tavern is described with:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



## ENTER TARINA

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

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

We're going to make a simple tweak here:

- When the PCs show up at 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.

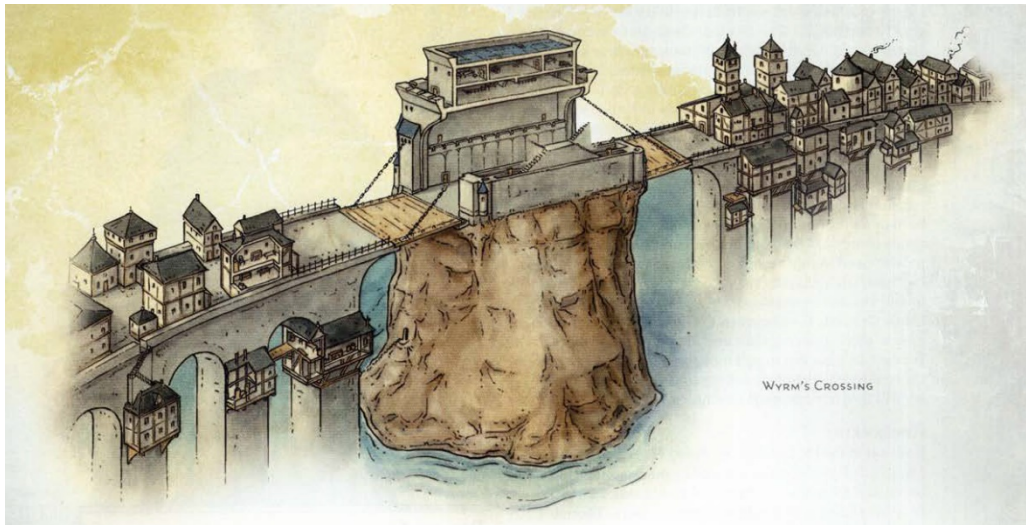
(This leverages Oshalla so that the PCs will actually interact with her. It also reinforces their new role as members of the Flaming Fist.)

# 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.

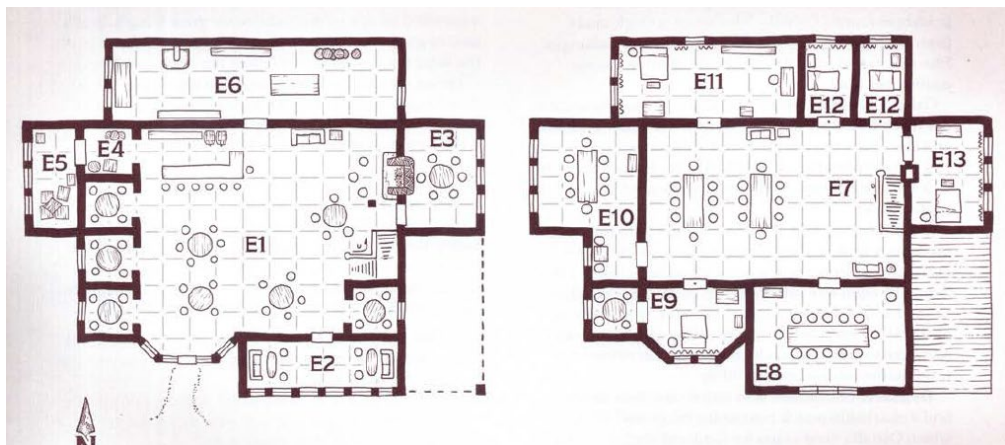
(If, as I've suggested, you've either run the refugee caravan scenario or simply had the players create 2<sup>nd</sup> level characters, then this is completely unnecessary.)

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

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

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

## EVENT SEQUENCE



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

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

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

## ALTERNATIVE CAMPAIGN HOOKS

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

Well, we did establish that these killings were targeting refugees, right? Pick one of the refugees from the caravan (preferably whichever one was the players' favorite) and murder them. Other refugees from the caravan find the PCs and ask for their help again. (The refugees might have found lodging at the Elfsong Tavern, so you can still frame this scene there.) You can then use an [investigative montage](#) to point the PCs at the bathhouse the Dead Three cultists are using.

# PART 3: THE VANTHAMPUR INVESTIGATIONS

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



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

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

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

As written, there are significant problems with all three.



## PROBLEM: THE MURDERS

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

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

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

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

The result is that the army is now in charge.

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

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

## PROBLEM: SENDING BALDUR’S GATE TO HELL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The problem is that this cannot possibly be true.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

All this is my everlasting pledge.

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

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

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

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

## PROBLEM: THE TRUTH OF ELTUREL'S FALL

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Everything else in this chain of revelations is similarly dysfunctional.

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

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

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

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

## PROBLEM: THE INVESTIGATION TRACK

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

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

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

There are several problems:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# REMIXING THE INVESTIGATION

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

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

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

# PART 3B: LORE OF THE VANTHAMPUR INVESTIGATIONS

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

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

## LORE OF GARGAUTH

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

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



- The *Shield* was then given to Zariel, who was in charge of the Dock of Fallen Cities (see Part 5). She cast Gargauth out onto the Material Plane, and he has been working on his charge ever since. (Elturel may or may not have been his first success. Perhaps cities far from the Sword Coast have been taken. Or it is possible that there are, in fact, many *Shields of the Hidden Lord*, with Gargauth's essence refracted across a multitude of Material Planes.)
- In the case of Faerunian history, the *Shield* has been prized by Astarothian cultists (who still hear the voice of their God in it), Dead Three cultists (who honor Gargauth for his alliance with the Dark Gods), and the Cult of Zariel (see below).
- In one notable instance, Dead Three cultists managed to temporarily free Gargauth from the *Shield* (or possibly just manifest his Avatar from it) as part of an assault on the Sign of the Silver Harp, an inn that was used as a gathering place for the Harpers in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. It turned out the entire affair was an elaborate trap set by Elminster and Khelben Arunsun, and Gargauth ended up defeated and back in the *Shield*. (See *Code of the Harpers*, p. 27.)
- 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. If you want to maintain that continuity, replace Zariel's role 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 3D) 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.*