BALDUR'S GATE: DESCENT INTO AVERNUS

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

DM's Resources for Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus
Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities

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Introduction

Venturing into hell requires some forethought – not just for the characters, but also for the Dungeon Master. The first chapters of *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus* is where you set the tone for the rest of the campaign, as you prepare the characters for their descend into Avernus and challenge them with dangerous encounters in the seedy city of Baldur's Gate.

This document seeks to provide you, the Dungeon Master, with tools and thoughts that will help you make the start of your *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*-campaign an exciting experience for your players. It's strongly recommended that you read the chapters 'About the Adventure' and 'Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities' before using these resources. And always remember, the advice and ideas given here are options – you know best what works at your table. This product contains:

Additional Hooks. Several ideas on how to get the characters probably hooked and motivated to fight devils and journey into Avernus!

Changing Campaigns. Advice on how to transfer your characters from either Ghosts of Saltmarsh or Waterdeep: Dragon Heist to Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus.

Running Chapter 1. Ideas on how to run each location in Chapter 1, extra content and advice on scaling difficulty.

Monster Stat Blocks. 20+ pages of monster stat blocks covering every foe in the chapter, neatly arranged together on pages, so you don't have to lip through several books.

Thavius Kreeg's Contract. A handout showing Thavius Kreeg's contract with the Duke of Avernus.

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Additional Hooks

Baldur's Gate Descent into Avernus assumes that your characters start out working for the Flaming Fist. Furthermore, the campaign also assumes that this relationship will take the party from trying to root out evil cultists to going up against one of Baldur's Gate's leaders – and, eventually, all the way to hell!

While there's some opportunity to expand upon the initial hook along the way – using NPCs such as Reya Mantlemorn and Lulu the Hollyphant – you may want to start the campaign off with a stronger hook. A little extra motivation can't hurt when you're trying to convince people to – quite literally – go to hell. Below you'll find some thoughts and ideas on how to do that, which you can alter to fit your game.

Dark Secrets

If your players are making new characters for this campaign, it certainly pays to consider giving them a shared 'Dark Secret' (*BG:DiA, pg. 208*). We're presented with some different options and interesting roll tables, though there's not much advice on how you tie the secret to the campaign, which is what we'll briefly expand on here.

Dark Secret as a Hook. Initially, the party's dark secret can serve as the reason why the characters are even doing what Captain Zodge says. They're forced to help him root out the cultists, because he knows what they did – a fact he continually rubs in their faces. Later, as the party stands before Sylvira and are faced with the prospect of going into hell, you can have the archmage (or Liara Portyr) also be aware of the characters' misdeeds, promising them forgiveness if they undertake the dangerous mission into Avernus. There's of course many variations of how you can set this up – what's the secret, who knows, how do they use it against the players, and so on – but as long as the deed was bad enough, the prospect of absolution can certainly act as a motivation for the players.

Takes One to Know One. The party's dark secret might also serve as something the demons and devils can use in their dealings with the party when they're in Avernus. Their misdeed might feature as they travel in Mad Maggie's dreamscape, an archdevil might smell the evil on them, or they'll stand face-to-face with the damned soul of someone who died as a result of their wrongdoing. Bringing the dark secret into the game this way gives the background some meaning even beyond Baldur's Gate and can create rewarding opportunities for roleplay.

Make it Personal

If your players are creating characters specifically for this campaign, you can let them know that the campaign starts shortly after the city of Elturel disappeared. Suggest that their character can either be from Elturel – avoiding it's disappearance because they live on the outskirts, were away on travel, or through sheer coincidence – or that they have some sort of bond with the city, such as relatives, a friend, an item they're looking for, or something along those lines. This ensures that they'll be motivated to figure out what happened to Elturel as soon as they're presented with it, and you can use their ties to Elturel to add some drama during Chapter 2.

As a note here, in the adventure **Baldur's Gate: The Fall of Elturel**, writers Anthony Joyce and Justice Arman does a very good job tying the characters to the fall of Elturel. This adventure can be used as an introduction to the events of *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*.

A Noble Quest

Instead of starting the adventure as the party negotiates with Captain Zodge, you can have Reya Mantlemorn set the party on their quest. As described in the campaign book (pg. 32), the young Hellrider has heard that Thavius Kreeg has been spotted in the city, surrounded by Vanthampur guards. You can elaborate on this: on the run from the Flaming Fist, there's no way Reya will be able to gain entrance to the Upper City to look for him. Thus, she wants the party to gain favor with the Flaming Fist, so that they'll be allowed into the Upper City. She offers the party 500 gp if they help her find Thavius Kreeg, and suggests that the Flaming Fist will probably also reward them for any help the party provides them along the way.

This hook has some advantages. First off, it starts the narrative early and ensures the party actually meets Reya. Second, it works just as well if you choose to skip the Dead Three cultists-plotline (see **Restructuring Chapter 1**), or if you're bringing in characters from another adventure, such as *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* or *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* (see **From Other Campaigns**).

A Deal With the Devil

For the more cynical characters, it might take more than a pleading paladin or a few missing relatives to get them involved. Here you can choose to draw on the campaign's unique flavor to pull characters in: devils and the Nine Hells.

An obvious choice for this is Tiamat, the Dragon Queen. You can have agents of Tiamat approach characters – perhaps masking their evil disposition – attempting to enlist the party to aid the Dragon Queen in overthrowing Zariel. Starting small, they first offer a few hundred gold pieces for aid in recovering stolen treasure from the Dead Three Cultists (thus pushing the party towards Captain Zodge, the Elfsong Tavern or directly to the Dead Three Dungeon).

After the party has demonstrated their usefulness, the cultists ask them to eradicate the Dead Three Cult and its backers entirely, sending them after the Vanthampurs. Finally, the cultists pays the party handsomely for going to Avernus to thwart Zariel's evil plans with Elturel – perhaps not believing the party capable, but figuring that anything the adventurers can do to hinder Zariel will benefit Tiamat.

Of course, involving the players with Tiamat requires you to make some changes later, as the party runs into cultists of the Dragon Queen. It also requires a party willing to work for evil – or that the cultists present their tasks as benevolent and altruistic, hiding their true motives. You can easily replace Tiamat with any powerful devil, since the Lords of the Nine are always trying to undercut each other – it might be agents of Bel, who wants to overthrow the Duke of Avernus, or perhaps the paranoid archdevil Dispater, who fears Zariel is mustering forces to challenge him for dominion of the Second Layer of Hell.

Faction Hooks

There's also the option to hook individual characters or even the whole party in through the factions they're affiliated with (*DMG, pg. 21*). Most factions will have an interest in Elturel's disappearance, although their reasons and goals might differ, as suggested below.

Harpers. "With the disappearance of Elturel, Faerun has lost an invaluable beacon of hope and light – not to mention the thousands of innocents who disappeared with it. Most of those who survived fled to Baldur's Gate – including, rumor is, High Overseer Thavius Kreeg. Go to Baldur's Gate, get friendly with the Flaming Fist, and learn what you can. If there's a way to save Elturel, we need to find it."

Order of the Gauntlet. "The crater of Elturel stands as a mockery to the holy city that once sat there. We need you to investigate what happened to Elturel and, most importantly: is there anything we can do to restore it? We've secured you an assignment with the Flaming Fist in Baldur's Gate – start there and learn what you can, but take care not to let the mercenaries corrupt you."

Lords' Alliance. "As you probably know, Elturel was a member of the Lords' Alliance. We need to find out what happened to it, and if there's a risk to other cities in the North. Go to Baldur's Gate and see what you can learn. Unfortunately, Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard, whom we usually deal with, has disappeared as well. Without him, Baldur's Gate's loyalty to the Alliance is tentative at best, so you'll need to be careful. We've gotten you in with the Flaming Fist, but won't be able help you beyond that."

Emerald Enclave. "The disappearance of Elturel is not just evil, it's an abomination. It threatens the Balance – not just on our plane, but in the Cosmos itself. We must learn what happened to Elturel and find a way to undo it – or, at the very least, undo the harm caused by its disappearance. Go to Baldur's Gate, where the remnants of Elturel have fled, sign up with the Flaming Fist, and find out what you can."

Zhentarim. "The disappearance of Elturel, Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard and Thavius Kreeg creates an opportunity for us. Baldur's Gate is in disarray and Elturel is gone – but maybe not forever. The Black Network needs to insert itself – that means you – into the situation. Pal up with the Flaming Fist and find out how this chaos will best aid us. Whoever can save Elturel, or whatever is left of it, is most likely to end up with the power. That needs to be us!"

Keeping Them Hooked

Getting the players hooked initially might not be as hard as keeping them hooked, once they realize their quest will take them into the Nine Hells! For a campaign that seems to invite morally ambiguous and somewhat selfish characters, there's not much of a reward for going into Hell – a risky endeavor by any measure. It's simply assumed that the characters will happily volunteer to go on the quest to bring back Elturel from Avernus, at great personal peril. While your players might choose to be accommodating and just go along with it (they're here to play a campaign, after all) regardless of their characters' misgivings, there are ways to make their descent into Avernus a bit more appealing.

Wealth and Money

The only monetary reward mentioned before the characters descend into Avernus – beyond Captain Zodge's initial reward of 200 gp per character – is Falaster Fisk's (Sylvira's agent in Baldur's Gate) assertion that the tiefling archmage will pay for the delivery of Thavius Kreeg's infernal puzzle box. This reward isn't mentioned later under the 'Candlekeep'-section later in Chapter 1, but it seems that a tangible reward, such as 500 gp, an uncommon magic item (an example could be *Heavensfall*, the magical mace described on this page), or some valuable spell scrolls and potions, might work to at least make the journey to Candlekeep worthwhile.

As for the journey into hell, you can have the archmage offer to pay handsomely for the party's services – offering 5,000 gp and Candlekeep's gratitude if the party travels to the First Layer of Hell and saves the city. Alternatively, Sylvira can ask the party to stay for a few days, while she informs other interested parties about the deal gleaned from Thavius' puzzle box. This allows you to have relevant factions – such as the Lords' Alliance or Liara Portyr on behalf of the Flaming Fist – offer the party a monetary reward for making the journey into hell and attempting to save Elturel.

Fame and Power

For some characters, the strongest motivation might not be gold and wealth, but the prospect of fame and power. You can have NPCs – Sylvira, Liara, even Reya Mantlemorn – appeal to the character's innermost desires. "Only a true adventurer would dare go into the Nine Hells – such a hero would hear their name sung in every tavern from Calimport to Luskan!" or "Consider this: Right now, Elturel is leaderless, lost, abandoned. Whoever saves that city will not only have done Faerun a great service, they'll also have made a strong argument for who should hold power in a restored Elturel!"

Redemption and Forgiveness

If you've used the 'Dark Secret'-background to tie your players together and to Baldur's Gate, you can use the dark secret to motivate the party to undertake the journey to Avernus. Sylvira (or another NPC of your choosing) knows of the dark secret, and offers complete absolution (spiritually and legally), if the party attempts to free Elturel from Zariel's grasp. After all, isn't Hell where sinners go anyway?

Expanding on a Previous Hook

You can also bring back a previous hook to motivate the character's to travel beyond Candlekeep. A faction agent reappears to offer more rewards and renown, Reya Mantlemorn promises Elturel's eternal gratitude if the party helps, or the agents of an archdevil make lofty claims about the adventures and treasures that await ahead.

Heavensfall

Weapon (mace), rare (requires attunement)

While you carry this magic mace and contemplate or undertake a malevolent act, Heavensfall enhances pangs of conscience.

Sacred. When you hit a fiend or undead creature with an attack using this mace, the creature takes an extra 1d4 radiant damage.

Heavens. While you carry this mace, you can use an action to cast *guiding bolt*. Once used, this property can't be used again until the next dawn.

From Other Campaigns

Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus might not be your players' first campaign. Below is some advice on how to start this infernal campaign if you're coming from *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* or *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*.

From Saltmarsh to Avernus

So you've played through some Ghosts of Saltmarsh and now want to make the jump into the newest official campaign. But how do you make the transition from maritime mysteries to hellish excursions? Below are some ideas to inspire you on how to go from one campaign to the other.

A Traitor in Our Midst

Skerrin Wavechaser (or some other important NPC in the Saltmarsh campaign) is actually a devotee of Zariel, set on the same mission as Thavius Kreeg and the Vanthampurs: Procure souls for Zariel by condemning Saltmarsh to the Nine Hells. The traitor has been spurring on pirates, lizardfolk and sahuagin to bloody conflict, hoping for enough bloodshed to fuel the ritual that'll transport Saltmarsh to the First Layer of Hell. As the party unravels the treachery, they'll find proof (such as an infernal puzzle box and secret communications) that ties the traitor to Thavius Kreeg and the Vanthampurs in Baldur's Gate, as well as the disappearance of Elturel. The Saltmarsh Council offers a hefty reward for getting to the root of this problem – sending the party to Baldur's Gate if they are low level, or directly to Candlekeep, if the party is already 5th level or higher.

Devils of the Sea

The sahuagin are the main threat in the three Saltmarsh-adventures, and specifically in *The Final Enemy*, although their presence is felt as early as in Danger at Dunwater. You can tie the events of *BG:DiA* to the sahuagin by having the fall of Elturel be the reason for their increased aggression. Perhaps the influence of their shark-deity, Sekolah, who inhabits the River Styx (which flows through the Nine Hells), is spilling over to the material place since the fall of Elturel. Or perhaps Zariel has petitioned Sekolah and its worshipers for a partnership, urging them to commit bloodshed that will aid her plan to condemn more Faerunian cities to the First Layer of Hell. The characters can discover this connection between the sahuagin threat and the fall of Elturel either through intermediaries – an emissary from Candlekeep aboard the Emperor of the Waves (in the adventure *Salvage Operation*), crazed devil-worshippers on an abandoned isle (in the adventure *Isle of the Abbey*) – or they might find proof with the sahuagin, as they investigate the stronghold in *The Final Enemy*.

Tammeraut's Fate and the Styes

The last two adventures in the Ghosts of Saltmarsh-anthology feature higher level threats: the Drowned Ones of the sinister sunken ship, Tammeraut, and a juvenile kraken festering in the Styes. Both adventures can serve nicely as a starting off point for a delve into Avernus.

The Pit of Hatred in *Tammeraut's Fate* might be a rift to the Hells instead of the Abyss (and Syrgaul's crew sworn to Zariel instead of Orcus) meant to eventually swallow up a nearby coastal city, such as Saltmarsh. To end the threat for good, the characters must travel to Avernus, stop Zariel's evil plans and – perhaps – save Elturel. Likewise, the crazed aboleth grooming a kraken in *The Styes* isn't doing the work of Tarizdun, but instead works for Zariel, preparing the Styes (or Baldur's Gate?) for its descent into Avernus.

From Waterdeep to Avernus

If you're playing through *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist* and want to make the jump to *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*, there's a wide array of options available to you. The assumption is that the characters are around 5th level, having just secured (or lost!) the dragon's cache. Because of your party's higher level – and because the characters have already played through five levels worth of urban adventure – you may want to skip or streamline some of the content in Chapter 1, regardless of how you transition the party. See **Restructuring Chapter 1** for more advice on how to do that.

Just Another Mission

It's likely that at least some of the characters have signed up with the various factions in Waterdeep, thus making the **Faction Hooks** an easy way to switch campaign. If characters have joined Bregan D'aerthe, Jarlaxle's reasons for exploring Elturel's disappearance will look much like the Zhentarim's: exploit the chaos to claim as much power and wealth as possible.

An Honorable Heist

Having lived through a season of high crime and intrigue in Waterdeep, the characters have built a strong reputation. Having heard of the resourceful adventurers, Reya Mantlemorn reaches out to the party – either making the long trip to Waterdeep herself, or sending a letter asking them to meet her in Baldur's Gate – and asks for their aid. She feels certain that Thavius Kreeg has been captured by the Vanthampurs, but she's a warrior, not an infiltrator – and, surely, breaking out Elturel's former leader is a heist worthy of Waterdeep's most famed heisters!

Changing Locales

At the moment, we don't know if there's a deeper reason *BG:DiA* starts in Baldur's Gate, but the content described in Chapter 1 can quite easily be reskinned to fit Waterdeep instead. If you want to include all the content of Chapter 1, a faction might hire the adventurer's to deal with dangerous cultists, taking them all the way to a prominent noble Waterdhavian family's estate, where they'll find the shield of the hidden lord and Thavius Kreeg, the High Overseer of Elturel ("oh, yeah, that city we heard of, which disappeared suddenly a few weeks ago"). All you need to do then is replace the disappeared Grand Duke Ulder Ravengard with a notable Waterdhavian such as Mirt, Volothamp Geddarm, Renaer Neverember, or the monk Hlam. You can even spare the party the trip to Candlekeep, having Vajra Safahr replace Sylvira when it comes to opening the infernal puzzle box, introducing the party to Lulu the Hollyphant and whisking them off to the First Layer of Hell.

Alternatively, if you are still playing through *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*, you can make sure to set the Cassalanters up as the campaign's villains, and have them shelter the treacherous Thavius Kreeg and his infernal puzzle box in their villa. It will take a bit of rewriting to pull off, but could make for a seamless transition from one campaign to the next.

Handling NPCs

When reading through BG:DiA, you'll notice that the campaign seems to rely heavily on a few key NPCs: Reya Mantlemorn, Gargauth (the *Shield of the Hidden Lord*) and Lulu the Hollyphant. We write 'seems' because it's actually quite doable (and perhaps, depending on your table, more enjoyable) to play the campaign without one or more of them. Below we'll give suggestions on how to handle – or entirely remove – these important NPCs.

Reya Mantlemorn

Reya Mantlemorn is the runaway Hellrider who steers the party towards the Vanthampur Villa, Candlekeep and eventually Elturel. She brings some drama to the story with her personal involvement, and relays some of the Hellriders' backstory to the party. However, if you'd rather not have her tag along, or she and the party take a dislike to each other, you can easily write her out of the story. You can have Sylvira provide the exact same information about the Hellriders as she does, and any NPC the party meets in Elturel can point the party towards the High Hall when they get there. The only thing you'll really be missing if you minimize Reya's role is the emotional weight her reactions give to certain situations – Thavius Kreeg's corruption, the fallen Elturel, and so on.

Shield of the Hidden Lord

Gargauth – the pit fiend inside the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* – serves two purposes: it is the instrument with which Thavius and the Vanthampurs plan to cause Baldur's Gate's descent into Avernus, and it's a companion/guide for the characters on their travels in hell. Giving the party an evil, sentient shield as a companion can make for some interesting situations, but it is not without issues.

First, the shield is a +2 shield that can cast several powerful spells – and the characters get it very early. Bounded accuracy is a thing in 5E, and you might find the shield more than a little frustrating. Second, the plan to use the shield to bring down Baldur's Gate is a bit vague. Additionally, while the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* might seem important to the plot, the shield is barely mentioned again until chapter 5, where the pit fiend may – or may not – help the party against Zariel. Thus, you can quite easily write it out of the adventure, if you'd rather not bother with it.

Instead of using the shield, you can have Thavius and the Vanthampurs' plan be to smuggle *hellfire weapons* into Baldur's Gate and giving them to the Dead Three Cultists. This way they can both bolster the ranks of devils in Avernus, while also causing chaos and destruction in Baldur's Gate, hopefully bringing about its downfall. Simply place a few Hellfire Weapons with the Dead Three Cultists – you can give one to Flennis (D13), Mortlock (D29) and Vaaz (D33). This has the added benefit of giving the party some magical weapons before traveling into Avernus, saving them the trouble of scrambling to get silvered weapons made!

Alternatively, you can keep the Shield of the Hidden Lord in the campaign, but dial down it's powers – perhaps entirely removing the +2 bonus to AC that comes with it. You can even give Gargauth a more prominent role, having it take Lulu the Hollyphant's place as the party's guide to important locations in Avernus.

Lulu the Hollyphant

Possibly the most important NPC in the campaign is Lulu the Hollyphant. She's both plot-engine and infernal guide, as she keeps the party moving from location to location in Avernus – and is apparently so important that she will be magically resurrected in Chapter 4, if she should die along the way. In some ways, she can come to feel like the story's main protagonist – a role that you would traditionally reserve for the party.

Luckily, you don't have to bring along a flying, golden elephant, if you don't want to. There's various different ways to replace her, but before we get to that, let's first look at her role in the campaign. Lulu is vital to the story at four points:

- She points the party towards Fort Knucklebone after Ulder Ravengard has been saved (pg. 72)
- She's the conduit for Mad Maggie's ritual in Fort Knucklebone, after which she points the party toward Haruman's Hill (pg. 86)
- She points the party toward either the Spawning Trees or the Demon Zapper after Haruman's Hill is found to be a dead-end (pg. 93)
- She's the conduit for the party's travel to Idyllglen just before the party can claim the Sword of Zariel (pg. 140)

When reading through the sections where Lulu makes an appearance, it is clear that while she has important functions, they are not tied to who or what she is. You can easily replace Lulu with any other creature or even an inanimate object, if you want to. You can even do this in ways that seem a bit more credible than the party just happening upon exactly the flying elephant they need to save Elturel. Here is an example of how you can replace Lulu with a small shard from the Sword of Zariel.

Replacing Lulu in Chapter 1

In the first chapter, the only change you need to make is to skip the part where the characters are introduced to Lulu the Hollyphant.

Replacing Lulu in Chapter 2

- One of Lulu's functions in Chapter 2 is as a friendly combatant who can offer great aid during the many combat encounters presented in this chapter. If you write her out of the adventure, you may want to scale down the challenges a bit. Luckily, no one encounter in the book is too hard, so you can simply exclude encounters as you see fit, making sure that the characters aren't overwhelmed.
- When the party finds Ulder Ravengard in the Grand Cemetery, the Grand Duke isn't just wearing the Helmet of Torm, he's also clutching a small object in his gauntleted fist. However much the characters try, they can't open the Grand Duke's clenched fist.
- As Ulder Ravengard describes his visions (or a character sees the vision for themselves), remove any mention of Lulu and instead highlight how the sword was missing a piece before the woman plunged it into the ground (the sword was damaged during Zariel's final battle). This is when Ulder opens his fist and shows the shard in his hand, which he professes that Torm must have placed there.
- Ulder (or a character who holds the shard) can feel its urge to be reunited with the rest of the sword. Pherria (or a character's Arcana check) recognizes that the shard has a small sliver of sentience, and that strong divination magic might be able to unlock its memories and lead the characters to the Sword of Zariel. As described on the previous page, Gargauth, a Warlord of the Avernian Wastelands, or the two kenku, can then point the party toward Mad Maggie and Fort Knucklebone.

Replacing Lulu in Chapter 3

- Mad Maggie performs the ritual on the shard, putting the party through the same dream sequence (but without Lulu making an appearance), although Dream 5: Revelation is replaced with a vision of demons being spawned and slain by Zariel wielding the *Sword of Zariel*, which Mad Maggie interprets as 'the path leading to the sword starts where demons are either made or destroyed'. You can skip the Haruman's Hill encounter – or simply have it be a 'random' encounter on the way to one of these destinations (which you can once again have Gargauth or any other interesting NPC they meet on their way direct the party to!).
- At Haruman's Hill, you can have the hellwasps steal an important item from the players – such as the *Shield of the Hidden Lord* or the shard from the *Sword of Zariel* instead of Lulu.
- At other points during the chapter, where Lulu might feasibly play a role – such as in encounters with the Wandering Emporium or when facing Olanthius – you can either just ignore this aspect, or have NPCs recognize the shard instead.

Replacing Lulu in Chapter 4

- Describe the Sword of Zariel as missing the shard, when the party first sees it.
- The shard functions as the conduit for the characters' spirit journey into Idyllglen.
- After the party has helped save Idyllglen, the shard floats up to the sword and reattaches itself in a burst of gleaming light, completing the restoration of the sword, and granting hope that Zariel can still be redeemed – or defeated.

Remove Only If Necessary

This example of how you can write Lulu out of your campaign is by no means the only way to handle Lulu. Whether you should even do so – and exactly what you replace her with – depends on your campaign and your players. If you feel like your players will appreciate having Lulu around, and you don't mind playing her (or having one of your players control her), then there's no reason to change anything – she can be a lot of fun for the right table. You can also choose to minimize her role and actions at some points, while still keeping her around as a conduit for background information and to keep the characters on track.

Other Alternatives to Lulu

If you don't like the idea of replacing Lulu with a shard from the Sword of Zariel, here's some other ideas:

The Hand of Zariel. You can have the gauntleted hand that Zariel lost during her fall replace Lulu. It fits nicely with Torm, who's holy symbol is a gauntlet, and can be played in much the same way as a shard from the sword.

Helm of Torm's Sight. Perhaps Ulder or Pherria senses that more information can be wrought from the Helm of Torm's Sight, but that doing so requires that the helm is repaired first. Who better to repair a broken artifact than a mad witch living in a dystopian junkyard?

Nothing at All. Nothing seems like a poor replacement, but it should be doable. If the characters only know that they have to find the Sword of Zariel, the plot suddenly becomes much more open as they leave Elturel. NPCs they meet may still point them toward the mystical Mad Maggie, who'll send the party into a weird dreamworld to investigate Zariel's fall, not needing a conduit for the ritual, but only fools willing to risk their lives and souls in pursuit of the delicious memories.

Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities

Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities serves as the starting point for *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*. It's an introductory chapter packed with action, where the party gets a feel for the seedy streets of Baldur's Gate, and discover background information, dark secrets and new allies, setting them up for their descent into Avernus.

Running Chapter 1

Once you've set up for Chapter 1: A Tale of Two Cities, it's time to run the chapter for your players. It's a long chapter with a lot of content, most of which is very entertaining. Below we'll go over each of the major sections of the chapter – Elfsong Tavern, Dungeon of the Dead Three, Low Lantern and Vanthampur Villa – offering advice and inspiration on how to run the content. First, however, we'll shortly look at how you can restructure Chapter 1 to fit your needs.

Restructuring Chapter 1

Chapter 1 is in essence an investigation. Initially, a mission to discover – and eliminate – cultists of the Dead Three, which later evolves into an investigation into the Vanthampur's and their involvement in the disappearance of Elturel. This is a neat – and very fast – way of getting the party from 1st-level adventurers to seasoned 5th-level heroes before their descent into Avernus. However, if you want to get to the point (Avernus, in this case) faster, or you have a party starting at a higher level, here's some advice on how you can restructure Chapter 1 to better suit your needs.

As a note here, you can also find the appendix 'Finding the Dead Three' with this download. The appendix contains two additional encounters in Baldur's Gate you can use in to make the chapter a bit less linear.

Skipping the Pirate Encounter

The most expendable block of content is probably the pirate encounter in Elfsong Tavern, which gets your party from level 1 to 2. While a good starting point for newer players, this bar fight with unnamed bandits unrelated to the larger story isn't integral to the campaign. If you want, you can simply start the adventure at 2nd level, skip the scuffle with the spurned pirates and have Tarina insist on a few games of Baldur's Bones before she divulges any information about the cultists.

Skipping the Dead Three Cultists

While the cultists of the Dead Three might feature more prominently in a future campaign, they play only a very minor part in this campaign. Their function is more-or-less just to get the party leveled up and to serve as a segue to the Vanthampurs. You can use Reya Mantlemorn (or any faction of your choice) as the hook instead (see **Additional Hooks**), informing the party that she thinks the Vanthampurs have Thavius Kreeg, leading the party straight to Amrik in the Low Lantern, as she hopes to learn more about Thavius and perhaps gain access to the Upper City.

Straight to the Vanthampurs

Most everything the party actually needs to know before going to Avernus, can be found in the Vanthampur Villa: Thavius Kreeg and his *infernal puzzle box*, the *shield of the hidden lord*, and Falaster Fisk. If you have Reya Mantlemorn give the party the mission, you could have the infiltration of the Vanthampur Villa act as the start of the adventure. This works especially well for a party that's around 4th or 5th level or have just played through *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*.

If your party is starting at 5th level (as opposed to 4th level), you can increase the difficulty of the Vanthampur Villa by placing Mortlock Vanthampur and a few bandits or cultists in the Villa's Foyer (V3), and putting Amrik and his bodyguards in the Dining Room under the Villa (V24).

Elfsong Tavern

The characters' first mission in Baldur's Gate takes them to Elfsong Tavern, where the following is meant to happen:

- ***Find Tarina.*** The party finds Tarina, who wants the party to help her kill a band of pirates coming to kill her.
- ***Hear the Elfsong.*** While waiting for the pirates, the party hears an elf spirit singing about Elturel (they can also play tavern games and hear rumors!)
- ***Kill the Pirates.*** The characters fight Captain Dead-Eye and his crew of pirates.
- ***Get Pointed to the Bathhouse.*** Tarina tells the party that the cultists frequent a bathhouse several blocks away.

All told, the party's visit to Elfsong Tavern should make for some entertaining play, featuring roleplay, tavern games, an eerie elfsong and a good ol' fashioned bar fight. Below is some advice on how to run Elfsong Tavern.

Setting the Scene

You can set the scene by using the description below:

> As you enter the Elfsong Tavern, you find yourself immediately enveloped by the heat and noise of a busy taproom. On one side of the entrance stands a hulk of a woman, who's clearly got some orc or even ogre in her bloodline. On the other side of the door is an empty suit of armor – not just ordinary armor, you realize, as the empty helmet moves to glance at you for a moment, before returning its eyeless gaze to the taproom. The room itself is filled with a wide variety of patrons, all of which carry at least one weapon – and, in some cases, multiple – while either discussing and laughing loudly, or engaging in hushed conversations in private booths. None seem to take particular interest in you. Two young men serve the tables, while the middle-aged man standing behind the bar gives a slight nod as you enter.

If the party is unsure where to start or how to find Tarina, you can describe the following scene:

> Suddenly, a loud crash followed by intense shouting from above silences the taproom. A few seconds later, a disheveled, elderly woman stumbles down the stairs. At the bottom, she turns back and shouts back up the stairs:
> "A fine lot you are, pushing an old woman down the stairs! Fools too – I wasn't asking The All-Seeing to help me cheat, I asked him to help me uncover the real cheater. Yes, I said it – should be Tarina kicked off the table, not me!"

The woman is Rahima Sahiressa (*BG:DiA, pg. 16*), an acolyte and astrologer who worships Savras, the All-Seeing God of divination and fate. She might come into play again in a minute (see 'Killing Time – and Pirates!').

Cheating at Tavern Games

A cheating character makes a Dexterity (Sleight of Hand) check against the passive Perception of all onlookers. On a success, they can reroll one of the game's skill checks or one of the dice they've rolled, if playing a dice game. On a failure, well, that depends who notices...

Killing Time – and Pirates!

When the party speaks to Tarina, she insists that they stay to help her against her old crew, which she thinks have found her. The book leaves it up to you to decide how long it'll take before the pirates show up to accost Tarina. The characters might wonder – and rightly so – if they're meant to stay in the tavern for days, as they wait for the pirates to eventually show up. Additionally, it's quite the coincidence that the party arrives just in time to help Tarina against her old crew.

By making just a few, simple changes, we can make this scenario both more plausible and prevent the party from concluding that simply beating the information out of Tarina is the easiest way to gain the information they're after.

Instead of Tarina asking the party to help her against the pirates, you can have her insist that they instead play a few rounds of Baldur's Bones (or another tavern game) with her, before she tells them what she knows. Tarina sees this as an opportunity to cheat the party out of some coin (see 'Cheating at Tavern Games') before handing over information.

You can have the party play a round or two of Baldur's Bones, with an ante of 2 gold pieces. Then present an interlude in the form of the 'Elfsong' sounding throughout the tavern. You can then resume the game of Baldur's Bones, until the characters seem bored, confront Tarina with her cheating, or simply demand to get the information. This is when Lekard 'Dead-Eye' Cadavrus and his bandits arrive downstairs, and a worried look comes across Tarina's face.

In a hushed voice, Tarina quickly fills the party in on her falling out with the pirates and offers her final bargain: "They's going to kill me and ain't a soul in here who'll dare do nottin'. 'Cept ye lot, that is. Ye'll have to, if ye want to learn what I knows 'bout dem cultists ye're lookin' fer."

Meanwhile, the pirates are making their way up the stairs, 'Dead-Eye' shouting at the top of his lungs: "I knows ye're here, Rhonda – or Tarina is it? That old bird said as much, swore it on her All-Hearing or All-Knowing or All-Something-god! We even pricked her a little to make sure she wasn't tellin' no tales!"

Scaling the Encounter

A **bandit captain** and seven **bandits** is a hefty challenge for a party of 1st level adventurers. As a **bandit** herself, Tarina isn't going to provide much aid, and the book specifically says that other patrons won't intervene unless bribed. Here are some ways you can increase the party's chances:

- Allow the party to ambush the pirates as they come up the stairs, gaining a surprise round and funneling their enemies, as they block each other on the narrow staircase.
- Make Tarina a **spy** instead of a **bandit** and have the pirates focus their attacks on her instead of the party.
- If Tarina is killed, Dead-Eye offers a truce. If the party protests that they needed information from Tarina, Dead-Eye suggests they find a priest and speak to the corpse.
- If Dead-Eye is killed, any remaining bandits flee.

What Tarina Knows

After helping Tarina, she tells what she knows about the bathhouse. If the characters fared badly in the fight with the pirates, you can also have her suggest that they get a good, long rest before going there – allowing them to get to 2nd level and prepare themselvs for the hard challenges that await in the Dungeon of the Dead Three.

If you want to make the road to the bathhouse a bit less linear, you can also have Tarina instead supply the characters with information that can help them find out where the cultists hide, instead of sending them directly there. See the appendix 'Finding the Dead Three' for more information.

Dungeon of the Dead Three

The Dungeon of the Dead Three underneath a public bathhouse run by the Vanthampurs presents itself as a classic dungeon crawl, where the characters must fight – and kill – cultists of the gods Bane, Bhaal and Myrkul.

Jabaz and Qurmilah

We're told that the two masseuses who work in the bathhouse during the day (areas D3 and D4) know about the secret entrance, but won't tell the party about it. This seems a bit counterproductive. Instead, if your party arrives at the bathhouse during opening hours to question the masseuses, but don't know where to go from there, you can have either Jabaz or Qurmilah seek them out as they leave through the bathhouse's garden. The masseuse explains their suspicions: "I think Mortlock is running some shady business on the side, but I'm too afraid to say anything. He's told me I can't hang around after hours, and there's a hidden door leading down to some dark, stinky place in the northern massage room!"

D7. Bhaal's Altar

It seems a wasted opportunity not to give this altar a function of some sort. Consider having the words *"Present your work to the Lord of Murder"* be scratched into the wall underneath the steel mask. If a character places a body or body parts on the altar (either from the corpse in D6 or one of the cultists above) they gain a +2 bonus to Strength and Dexterity that lasts 1 hour, during which they feel an increased urge to spill blood and murder. If a character instead desecrates the altar (breaking it, pouring holy water on it or something similar), they feel like they've rectified a great evil, granting them 5 temporary hit points that lasts 1 hour.

D12. Bane's Altar

As with Bhaal's Altar in D7, you can give this altar an inscription and function as well. Above the altar is written: *"Submit your servant to the Lord of Darkness."*

A character that forces an unwilling creature to kneel by the altar (such as Klim, the noble already shackled in the room) can use the **iron consul**'s Voice of Command-feature once as a bonus action within the next hour. Similar to Bhaal's altar, a character that instead desecrates Bane's altar gains 5 temporary hit points.

D13. Morgue

Against characters of 2nd level, the **master of souls**' fireball is potentially campaign-ending. Consider replacing it with *fear* or *stinking cloud*, both of which work well thematically.

D17. Myrkul's Altar

Here we don't need to make any alterations, except granting a character that desecrates the altar 5 temporary hit points.

D18. Gas Buildup

This room threads a fine line between a non-issue and a total party kill. With an initial explosion dealing up to 4d6 fire damage, followed by a 25% chance of the roof collapsing for another 4d10 bludgeoning damage, this room could very well end the campaign if the characters are very unlucky.

Consider either ignoring the possibility of a roof collapse, or allowing the most likely character (such as a dwarf or a creature with a background in construction) to realize the structural damage with a DC 10 Intelligence check, giving them time to warn the other characters before the collapse.

D29. Mortlock Vanthampur

The scene in this room is quite cinematic, but you can add even more drama, if you want to. As the party enters, Vaaz is standing over **Mortlock**, ready to finish him off. Seeing the party, Vaz hisses: "So you've brought friends, eh, Mortlock? A little late to the party, aren't they?" before stabbing Mortlock in the stomach and retreating towards area D33.

If the party starts to chase after Vaaz, Mortlock begs in a gravelly voice: "Hold up.. My pouch.. A potion.. I'll tell you everything.. I'll help you.." while fumbling with his pouch, clearly bleeding out. The potion is a *greater potion of healing*, which the party can either administer to Mortlock, or take with them.

Mortlock will then tell his story, either in an effort to get the party to heal him, or after they've given him the potion. He'll also warn them that Vaaz is very dangerous, and informs the characters that there's no other exits ahead. He suggests they replenish their strength (take a short rest) before facing the murderous cultist.

Scaling the Encounter with Vaaz

A 2nd-level character usually has somewhere between 10-20 hit points, and deals an average of 5-10 damage in a round. Vaaz, a **death's head of Bhaal** has 76 hit points (not counting his ability to shrug off three attacks) and deals upwards of 20-30 damage in a round with his two dagger attacks because of his Aura of Murder. Furthermore, he's resistant to magic and can stun a target each round.

In other words, Vaaz is a big mouthful for a party of 2nd-level adventurers, especially if they're low on hit points and resources. Depending on their strength and numbers, you may want to adjust the difficulty of this encounter:

- As mentioned above, you can have Mortlock suggest the party takes a short rest before facing Vaaz.
- If Mortlock has been healed, he'll aid the party against Vaaz, who in turn focuses his attacks on the brute.
- During combat, Mortlock will suggest to the party that they shove Vaaz toward the statue of Bane, hoping that the cultist will succumb to its magic.
- Describe Vaaz as wounded, having suffered a few hits of Mortlock's greatclub earlier, reducing the cultist's hit points to a more appropriate number, depending on the party's strength.

Low Lantern

The characters' visit to Low Lantern is a social encounter bound to become a combat encounter. It presents itself as a fun scenario, that should be pretty straight-forward to run – and not too dangerous. By themselves, Amrik and his two bodyguards shouldn't be too much of an issue for a party of 3rd-level adventurers, especially not if they've brought Mortlock. But, there's a wildcard in this scenario, that should be handled with some care.

Poisoned Drinks

Amrik can signal the tavern staff to spike hostile characters' drinks with *torpor poison* – something he will probably do immediately when he realizes the characters suspect his involvement with the Dead Three Cultists. It's a fun little gimmick, but since torpor poison has a DC of 15, and renders a character both poisoned and unconscious for 4d6 hours, it might end the encounter before it begins, or cause one or more players to sit out the entirety of the encounter (and the rest of the adventuring day!), which isn't very fun.

Noticing the Poison

Instead of removing the poisoning from the encounter (which would be a shame), you can give the characters a fighting chance, allowing each character who is given a poisoned cup to make a DC 15 Wisdom (Perception) check to realize that the drink smells or tastes weirdly, before swallowing the poison. This allows them an extra chance to avoid being poisoned, although they won't realize in time to prevent other characters from drinking the poison.

Adding More Saving Throws

Additionally, you can have a character that drinks the poison make three saving throws instead of one. The first immediately, the second after three rounds, and the third after a minute. On the first failure they become poisoned and on the second failure they become incapacitated for the duration (4d6 hours). This gives them at least a chance to participate in the fight that inevitably breaks out when they realize Amrik is trying to poison them!

Handling Metagaming

Finally, poisoning is always a bit hard to handle, since players might insist that their character wouldn't have drunk anything, once you inform them that they've been poisoned. On the other hand, you can't very well ask the players if their characters drink what they're offered without making it painfully obvious that the drinks have been poisoned.

To get around this, you can have Amrik toast the characters (for their cunning or some other perceived accomplishment), the city of Baldur's Gate or the disappeared Archduke Ulder Ravengard, prompting the players to declare whether their characters participate in the toast or not. Alternatively, you can have players who argue that their characters wouldn't have drunk anything make a DC 13 Intelligence check, allowing them to have abstained on a success.

Vanthampur Villa

The Vanthampur Villa is where the party will finally unravel the conspiracy, face off with Duke Vanthampur and, most importantly, High Overseer Thavius Kreeg. Once again this looks much like a straightforward dungeon crawl, but there's a few things it pays to be aware of.

V13. Thurstwell Vanthampur

Thurstwell has important information, as well as the infernal puzzle box, which is vital to the story. There's no guarantee, however, that the party will go up before they head down into the sewer complex. Returning to fight Thurstwell after clearing out the sewers will seem a bit flat, so you may want to make it more likely that they confront Thurstwell first.

If Mortlock or Amrik is with the party, you can have them direct the party to Thurstwell – Amrik because he sees a chance to escape while the party kills his brother, and Mortlock because he wants vengeance. Alternatively, you can have the characters hear sounds of shrill shrieking and frustration, as Thurstwell is working on the puzzle box, hopefully drawing the party upstairs.

V26. Temple of Zariel

There's a magical mace hiding in this statue's head and neck, which a character can find by breaking the statue. That seems slightly unlikely – plus, +1 weapons are a bit bland. You can substitute this mace for *Heavensfall* (see page 3 of this document), and have one or more characters with a 'righteous disposition' sense something calling to them from within the statue, as they fight the **barbed devil** in this chamber, increasing the chances that they'll actually find it.

V36. Vanthampur Vault

In the book, there's not much advice on what to do with Thavius Kreeg if the party doesn't kill him. Indeed, it seems that Thavius Kreeg is meant to die, so that the party has a chance to face him later in hell. But, Thavius is also described as a cowardly liar, so it's unlikely he'd provoke the party into killing him.

If you want to make Thavius' death a bit more likely, you can have the former High Overseer break down in a fit of guilt and self-pity, as the party levels accusations against him. Moaning stuff like "Oh, what have I done, what have I done?" and "Why me? Why? Oh gods, why?" before finally collapsing in a sobbing heap on the floor, face-down. As the party – or Reya – turns him over, they see black foam on his lips and a small vial in his hand. Dying from the self-administered *assassin's blood-poison*, Thavius only has the time to mutter: "Fools... There's no sense fighting it... The Duke of Avernus will get her way. She always does..."

Alternatively, you can have Reya Mantlemorn – if she's with the party – kill the infernal High Overseer in a fit of righteous rage, once she realizes his treachery. This rash and foul misdeed might become a source of regret for the young woman, and serve as her motivation for traveling into the Nine Hells, where she hopes to find atonement. You can even have the Flaming Fist accuse the party of being co-conspirators to the murder, using it as leverage to press the party into going to Avernus to save Elturel.