

AVERNUS AS A SANDBOX

Preface: This document is a write-up of [three blog posts made on eventyrgames.com](#). It offers a way to turn Avernus into a more sandbox-like experience. The information can be used in conjunction with the information supplied in [our DM's Resources for Chapter 3: Avernus](#), but they aren't required.

INTRODUCTION

By far the meatiest chapter in the book, **Chapter 3: Avernus** is where the party will probably spend the majority of their time both in- and out-of-character. It's a chapter filled to the brim with exotic encounters and fantastical locations, which is awesome.

But, it is also a fairly linear chapter, which has the players making one arbitrary choice between two paths, and then following that straight path all the way to their goal (the Bleeding Citadel), leaving it entirely up to the DM when (and if) to introduce additional encounters. This makes the chapter easy to run, but also less exciting than it could be.

In our [DM's resources for Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus](#), we've written quite a bit about this, offering ways to tie the Path of Demons and Path of Devils together to give the party some choices about where to go and who to speak to.

In this post, we'll elaborate even further upon this idea, presenting a full-fledged blueprint for turning Avernus into an actual sandbox, where the party must determine on their own how to reach their goal!

PART 1: STRUCTURE

Here we'll go over the fundamentals of a good sandbox and then put together a structure that uses what is already in the book in a more open and non-linear way.

THE PRINCIPLES OF A SANDBOX

The main difference between a linear story and a sandbox is the players' feeling of agency – the perception that they have choices and that those choices matter to the story. A linear story offers a straight path and clear motivation, but doesn't allow for alternate routes to success. A sandbox allows the players to choose their own path through the narrative by giving them several valid ways to reach their goals.

Alright, that sounds easy enough. We'll just dump the party in Avernus, let them know about *the sword of Zariel*, and see what they choose to do!

Unfortunately, it isn't quite that easy. Having infinite choices without any information about how to make the right choices isn't freedom – it's frustration. Especially in a place as unfamiliar and abstract as Avernus. No, to create a fun sandbox, we have to feed the players just enough information for them to realize that there's several ways to accomplish their goals.

So, how many options should the characters have in the perfect sandbox? As a rule thumb, three options is a good number to aim for. To the players, three different – but equally viable – ways to progress will often feel like freedom without being overwhelming. Our purpose, then, is to take the encounters and locations described in Chapter 3: Avernus and rearrange them in a way where the characters have at least three ways of progressing forward at (nearly) all times.

THE BASIC STRUCTURE

As suggested in the book, we'll start the chapter off with the characters going to Fort Knucklebone and interacting with Mad Maggie. Fort Knucklebone is an interesting location with fun NPCs, which has the added benefit of giving the characters an early opportunity to acquire infernal war machines and information about Avernus. We also won't change the chapter's endpoint, the Bleeding Citadel, where the adventurers will find the Sword of Zariel.

So, it's what is in-between these two points – Fort Knucklebone and the Bleeding Citadel – that will constitute our new structure for Chapter 3: Avernus.

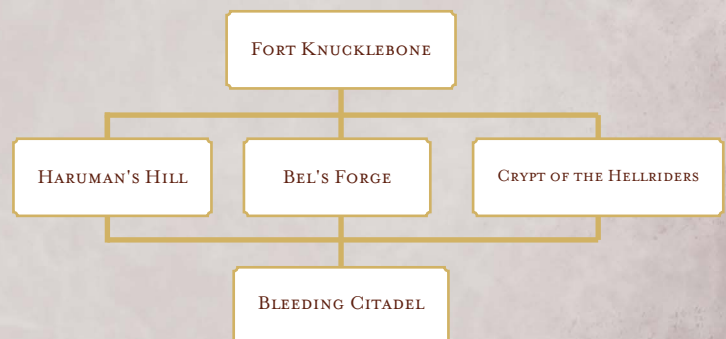
THE FALLEN THREE

To fill out the structure, we'll start by walking backwards from the Bleeding Citadel, the characters' final destination. The party will have learned about the Bleeding Citadel from the *Helm of Torm's Sight* in Elturel, and have traveled to Fort Knucklebone because they need find out where the Bleeding Citadel is.

From here on out, we scrap what is in the book – the Dream Quest doesn't end with Lulu pointing them toward a random hill, and then to the Demon Zapper or the Spawning Trees. Instead, the party's Dream Quest with Maggie will allow them to see the three important NPCs who know the way to the Bleeding Citadel: Olanthius (Crypt of the Hellriders), Haruman (Haruman's Hill) and Bel (Bel's Forge).

These three NPCs share a close connection to Zariel and the story of her fall, making them excellent choices for delivering the final information the party is after. Don't worry, we'll go into more detail about how information about these NPCs can be presented to the party in Part 2: Details

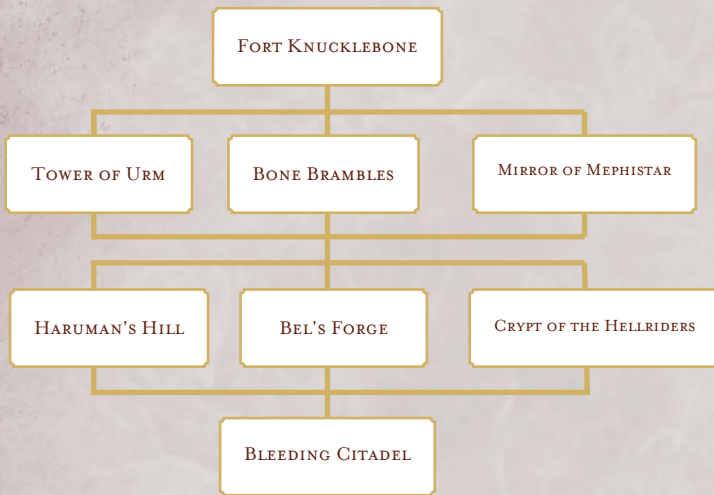
Of course, Mad Maggie doesn't simply point the party directly to the location of one of these 'Fallen Three'. That would be both too convenient and too short – remember, the characters are supposed to go from 7th to 11th level during Chapter 3. However, she (and other sources of information they meet) can help them find the 'Intermediaries' – NPCs with the power to locate the 'Fallen Three'.



THE INTERMEDIARIES

There are three NPCs who can help the party locate the 'Fallen Three' and – in turn – the Bleeding Citadel: Mordenkainen (Tower of Urm), Red Ruth (Bone Brambles) and Mephistopheles (Mirror of Mephistar). Wizard, witch and fiend, these intermediaries are all powerful and resourceful spellcasters.

This gives us the following structure:



BLOOD PAY

Now, this is certainly a start. The party has a meaningful choice about which of the three 'Intermediaries' to seek out, and subsequently a choice to make about which of the 'Fallen Three' they want to ask about the Bleeding Citadel.

However, there's still many encounters in Chapter 3: Avernus that deserve to see some use. To fill out our sandbox, we'll insert a fetch quest after the 'Intermediaries' – a task that needs to be completed, before the NPC will help the party find Olanthius, Haruman or Bel.

Luckily for us (and our preparation), Mordenkainen, Red Ruth and Mephistopheles, are all after the same thing: blood from powerful creatures inhabiting Avernus. This leads to at least one of these encounters:

- **Arkhan (Monument to Tiamat)**
- **Uldrak (Uldrak's Grave)**
- **Ubbalux (Obelisk)**
- **Shummrath (Pit of Shummrath)**

But, finding these creatures isn't just enough – to get the blood, the characters must complete a task first:

- To get Tiamat's blood from Arkhan, they'll have to travel to his tower and then to the Monument to Tiamat, where they must either take the blood by force, or sacrifice a good-aligned creature – such as the unicorn from the Demon Zapper.
- To transform Uldrak back to an empyrean, they must first help him slay a dragon – which can be found at Arkhan's Tower.
- To release Ubbalux from his prison, they have to convince another sentient creature to willingly take his place – perhaps the chaotic good Krikendolt at the Spawning Trees.
- To free Shummrath, the characters must first secure explosives from the Firesnake Forge at the Wandering Emporium.

FINAL TASK

To further pad out our structure, we'll also place a task after each of the 'Fallen Three' – something that needs to be done before the party can learn the way to the Bleeding Citadel. Here we won't give the party multiple choices, since they've already had quite a bit of agency (and always having three choices can get nonsensical if overdone). In short summary:

- Olanthius wants the party to distract Zariel by freeing Kostchtchie (Kostchchie's Maw)
- Bel wants the party to find the control rods (Wrecked Flying Fortress)
- Haruman won't tell the party anything, so they'll have to extract the location of the Bleeding Citadel from his corpse by feeding the dead narzugon to the Sibriex (Sibriex).

...AND EVEN MORE FILLING

There's still some encounters left in Chapter 3 that we aren't using, however. We still haven't used the Arches of Ulloch or the Hellwasp Nest. Additionally, there's also the Wandering Emporium and Smiler the Defiler, both of which offer cool social encounters and nice ways to supply the party with information. Lastly, there's our own 'Infernal Bounty'-encounter, which you can [download for free at the DM's Guild](#).

ARCHES OF ULLOCH

In our [DM's Resources for Chapter 3: Avernus](#), we've fleshed out the Arches of Ulloch into an elaborate encounter involving an infernal sphinx. We can fill out the structure a bit more by inserting the Arches of Ulloch as the only way one can actually reach the Bleeding Citadel – also providing a logical explanation to why nobody can find or locate the citadel through other means.

HELLWASP NEST

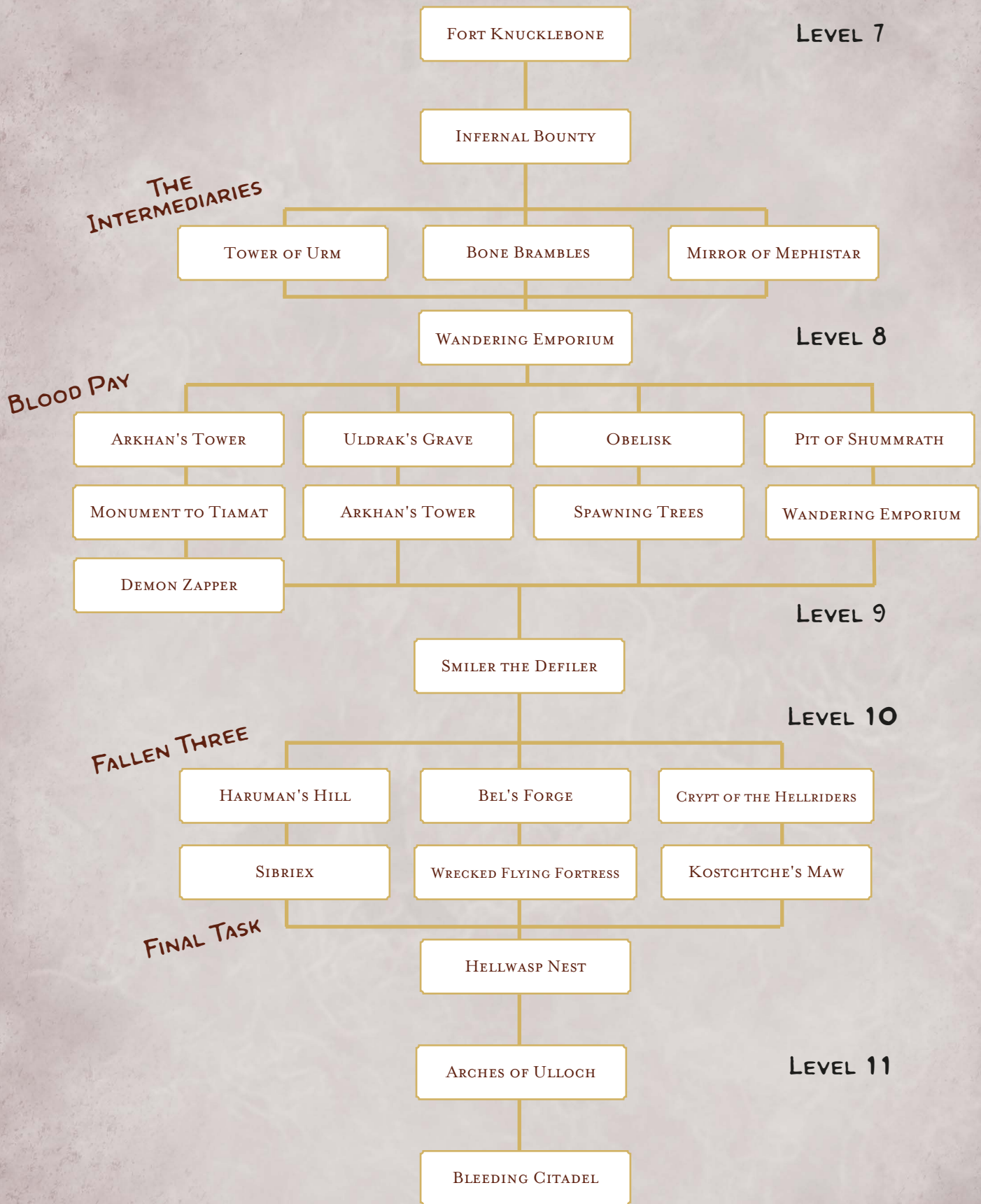
The Hellwasp Nest can be intertwined with Haruman's Hill, or used independently as a 'random' encounter, that can take place at any time you want to shake things up a bit. If the players are thinking to take rest before they've been properly pushed, it might be time for a few hellwasps to descend upon them and steal some valuable stuff (or golden elephants!).

WANDERING EMPORIUM, SMILER THE DEFILER & INFERNAL BOUNTY

We can use the last three encounters – the Wandering Emporium, Smiler the Defiler and the 'Infernal Bounty'-encounter – as means to supply the party with information, so they become aware of the options available to them in an organic way. With Smiler the Defiler, we'll use [our Bitter Rivals-adventure](#), which turns the chance encounter into a full day of adventuring.

CONCLUSION

This structure provides us with roughly 10 encounters between Fort Knucklebone and the Bleeding Citadel, while also allowing the players to make meaningful choices at (at least) three critical junctions: choosing which of the 'Intermediaries' to seek out initially, choosing what 'Blood Pay' to go after, and, finally, which of the 'Fallen Three' to seek out.



PART 2: DETAILS

Here we'll go over over each encounter and location in turn, briefly discussing what we need to change to make the structure work. It's highly recommended that you read through the encounters in the Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus-campaign book before or while reading this post. Along the way, there will also be references to [our DM's Resources for Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus](#), but while these resources will certainly be helpful, they are not necessary to make the structure work.

As we go over the various encounters and locations, we'll also offer suggestions on how to deliver information to the players in an organic way, so that they become aware of the options available to them without feeling like they're being flooded with information and exposition.

FORT KNUCKLEBONE

In the book, the characters are supposed to undergo a ritual at Fort Knucklebone, venturing into Lulu the Hollyphant's dreams with Mad Maggie as their guide. At the end of the Dream Quest, Lulu looks into a spyglass, exclaims that she knows where the sword is, and leads the characters to Haruman's Hill without further explanation.

The logic – or lack-there-of – behind going from Fort Knucklebone to Haruman's Hill always seemed a bit jarring to me, and since we now need the party to seek out three Intermediaries, who can help them find one of the Fallen Three, we'll scrap that final dream and alter what the characters experience during the Dream Quest.

ALTERING THE DREAM QUEST

To open up this part of the story, and give the characters more options – and perhaps options that make more sense than Lulu simply pointing them along without an explanation – we'll insert Bel, Olanthius and Haruman into the Dream Quest. We do this by replacing Dream 5: Revelation with one or two scenes featuring Zariel, Olanthius, Haruman and Bel:

A terrible scene fills your vision. The angel you saw earlier is surrounded by a throng of fiends, flanked only by two bloodied, human knights wearing the insignia of high-ranking generals. For a moment, it seems like they will be able to hold against the devils surrounding them, but then a mighty pit fiend emerges, wearing a devilish grin and a cruel blade. In one fell swoop, the pit fiend severs the angel's hand at the wrist, sending her sword flying far away. The vision begins to darken and fade then, just as the legion of devils finally bury the three valiant warriors beneath their unending numbers.

If you want to, you can follow this scene up with another scene showing Zariel's submission to Asmodeus (or use either of the two, as you see fit):

A huge, dark throne of skulls, blades and bones stands before you. Seated on the throne is a slim, red-skinned devil more than 13 ft. tall, wearing luxurious black and red robes. The angel kneels before the throne, a human paladin kneeling on either side of her. All three are beaten and bloodied, looks of utter defeat on their worn faces. To the

right stands an enormous pit fiend wearing a sardonic grin, seemingly presenting the captives. The devil on the throne speaks – the dream muffles the words, rendering them inaudible – and a contract appears in a puff of black smoke to float eerily in front of the captives. The pit fiend seems to roar in protest, but a stern look from the figure on the throne silences the fuming devil. Meanwhile, an angry, resolute look comes over the angel's grim features, and after only a moment of hesitation, she signs the contract with a bloody finger. As she does, her wings melt away to blackened vestiges, her golden hair withers to bare her pale scalp, and her glowing halo becomes a ring of infernal fire. One paladin bows his head solemnly, before putting his own finger to the contract, immediately sending spasms through his form as it darkens and transforms, turning into something vile and evil. The other paladin roars in grief and anger at the sight of his comrades' betrayal, and swiftly snatches a dagger from his belt and slices his own throat. His limp form falls to the ground to lie completely still, blood flowing thickly from the deep gash in his neck. Just before the dream fades to darkness, you see the fallen angel leaning over to touch the body, a dark glow spreading from her fingers to cover the paladin's still form – and the paladin's eyes reopen, though his gaze remains cold and lifeless.

When the Dream Quest is over, Mad Maggie (or Lulu, if she's with the party) can help the characters interpret the meaning of what they've seen: only those present when Zariel fell knows where to find the Sword of Zariel. Maggie can easily identify Asmodeus (the figure on the throne), but focuses on the other three. She can name Bel, the former Lord of Avernus, as the pit fiend that cut off Zariel's hand, while Lulu (or Gargauth, if Lulu's not present) can supply the names of the two generals, Olanthius and Haruman. Unfortunately, neither know where to find these 'Fallen Three'.

FINDING THE FALLEN THREE

To find the 'Fallen Three', the party will need to find a very powerful spellcaster. At this point, you can have Mad Maggie name all three 'Intermediaries' (Mordenkainen, Red Ruth and Mephistopheles) as NPCs that may be able to locate the 'Fallen Three'. This gives the party all their options from the start, at the risk of feeling a bit too convenient.

You can also choose to ration the information, having Maggie say something along the lines of: "Hmm... I might know someone who could help you. A distant cousin of mine, Red Ruth, lives out by the Bone Brambles. A darned good diviner that one – but a bit loopy, if you ask me, heh!"

If the party has the Shield of the Fallen Lord, you can have Gargauth chime in: "Red Ruth is hardly the only diviner in Avernus. The archwizard Mordenkainen spends much of his time doing research in Avernus. If anyone can help us find these generals, it would be him. Plus, I'm getting tired of haggling with hags!" Of course, Gargauth has ulterior motives – he hopes that Mordenkainen has the power to release him from his prison. If Gargauth isn't with the party, you can also have Lulu provide the rumor, or have a character with proficiency in History or Arcana automatically remember that the wizard Mordenkainen often frequents Avernus.

To supply the characters with the third option, you can have them run into some informative NPCs shortly after leaving Fort Knucklebone. In our sample structure, this would be the bounty hunters from the ‘Infernal Bounty’-encounter, but it could also be the Wandering Emporium, Smiler the Defiler, another Warlord, or someone else. These NPCs can drop information about the Mirror of Mephistar if the characters mention that they need to find someone, are looking for information, or just as a random passing comment. Perhaps it was the Mirror of Mephistar that informed the bounty hunters where to find the party – “so if you need to find someone, well, that would be my best bet” – or any mention of a powerful spellcaster will make Mahadi, Smiler or a Warlord tell the party that “there’s no spellcaster more powerful than Mephistopheles – so that’s what I would recommend!”

THE INTERMEDIARIES

Below, we’ll quickly go over how to alter the three encounter locations that constitute our ‘Intermediaries’: Mordenkainen at the Tower of Urm, Red Ruth at the Bone Brambles and Rigorath at the Mirror of Mephistar.

MORDENKAINEN (TOWER OF URM)

You can run the encounter with Mordenkainen exactly as it is described in the book, or the more elaborate version from our DM’s resources for Baldur’s Gate: Descent into Avernus, altering only the information Mordenkainen gives the party. Instead of sending the characters along to the Obelisk, Mordenkainen asserts that he can easily find any of the ‘Fallen Three’ (the location of the Bleeding Citadel itself, however, is hidden even from him). Before the wizard will tell the party anything, however, he wants them to retrieve a pint of blood from a balor, a pit fiend, or a creature even more powerful – an ingredient he often needs for his arcane experiments. Mordenkainen has no idea where to find such a creature, and won’t waste time helping the party find out, instead sending them on their way to find out on their own.

RED RUTH AT THE BONE BRAMBLES

Once again, you can run this encounter pretty much as it is described in the book. After making their way through the maze, Ruth asks the party to arrange and pay for her pampering session at the Infernal Rapture in the Wandering Emporium, and watch over her grove while she’s away. When that whole deal has been resolved, Ruth tells the party that she’ll help them with the ritual, but that it will require blood from a creature at least as powerful as a balor or a pit fiend. Her only suggestions are Zariel and Bel, both of which are quite unlikely, so once again the characters are on their own.

MIRROR OF MEPHISTAR

At the mirror of Mephistar, Rigorath informs the party that Mephistopheles can help them ascertain the location of any of the ‘Fallen Three’, but that he requires a service in return. Like Mordenkainen, Mephistopheles is always in need of powerful blood for his arcane experiments, although his true motivation for offering this quest is more nefarious. Mephistopheles knows it will be hard for the party to get the blood without somehow causing chaos in Avernus – chaos that will harm Zariel and, thus, benefit Mephistopheles. Once again, the adventurers are given no directions, but told to find out on their own.

WHERE TO NOW?

This is where we enter true sandbox-territory. The characters know they have to find blood from a powerful creature – but where can they learn more about one of those?

Literally anywhere you choose. You can have any NPC they come across have information about Arkhan, Uldrak, Ubbalux or Shummrath. They can learn about them from Gargauth, Lulu, Mad Maggie, the yugoloths outside Mordenkainen’s Tower, a random imp they meet on the plains, or the other ‘Intermediaries’, if they seek them out.

However, this is also the perfect point to introduce the Wandering Emporium, which we’ll describe in more detail below.

THE WANDERING EMPORIUM

The Wandering Emporium is a fun location, which also works really well as a hub for information. You’ll probably want to make sure that the characters find it early, so they always have somewhere to return to when they need more information, or are unsure about what to do. So, how do we get them there?

GETTING TO THE WANDERING EMPORIUM

Of course, the Wandering Emporium can just show up right after the party has visited an Intermediary. But, the party might also seek it out on their own (and this can feel more rewarding) – below we’ll go over some ways you can make that happen:

- The pair of nycaloths from outside the Tower of Urm ambush the characters after their visit at the tower, and a surviving fiend surrenders and offers to aid the characters, leading them to the Wandering Emporium.
- The characters ask Gargauth where they can find blood from a powerful creature – and though he doesn’t know, he can suggest that Mahadi from the Wandering Emporium might know.
- The party asks Lulu, who doesn’t know, but vaguely remembers a caravan filled with all manners of exotic and powerful creatures: the Wandering Emporium.

The party might also go to one of the other ‘Intermediaries’ in search of a powerful creature. In all three cases, the party learns something from the NPC, but has to go to the Wandering Emporium first – where they can learn even more, if they think to ask:

- To Red Ruth, who now can’t help them find the ‘Fallen Three’, but can tell the party about Ubbalux – a balor in disguise – if they secure her a spa treatment at the Infernal Rapture at the Wandering Emporium.
- To Mordenkainen, who can inform the party about Uldrak, if they first pick up some demon ichor for him from Ichor’s Aweigh at the Wandering Emporium.
- To the Mirror of Mephistar, where Rigorath can tell the party about Arkhan and the blood of Tiamat, if the characters fetch some yugoloth larvae from Zneth’s Larvae Farm at the Wandering Emporium.

If you want to make finding the Wandering Emporium a bit more convenient and less random, you can have NPCs – or Mahadi himself, after their first visit – give the characters a *Wandering Coin*. If thrown on the ground, this dented, rust-colored coin, showing Mahadi’s grinning face on one side and a tiger’s paw on the other, begins rolling along on its side 10 feet in front of whoever threw it, unerringly leading the way to wherever the Wandering Emporium is at that moment.

THE EMPORIUM AS AN INFORMATION HUB

So, how do we give the party information at the Wandering Emporium?

We can assume that the party will first ask Mahadi, who can – at your discretion – know as much or as little as you'd like. I have found that it works best if Mahadi doesn't know much himself, but freely names the various NPCs in the emporium, many of which will be able to help. This allows the players more agency in finding out information, instead of just getting everything from one source.

The following NPCs can help the party find a powerful creature's blood:

- Rassh, Skidds & Slagg at the Firesnake Forge know that Bel (their former employer) has imprisoned a pit fiend named Shummrath in a crevice near the River Styx. They can also sell the party Shattersticks to help free Shummrath.
- Burney the Barber knows that Arkhan carries Tiamat's blood in a vial around his neck, and freely points the party to Arkhan's Tower in the hopes that the adventurers will kill Arkhan, or at least hinder Arkhan's plans to free Tiamat.
- Elliach at Ichor's Aweigh knows that Ubbalux – seemingly a wizard imprisoned by an obelisk – is in fact a balor, and can point the party to the Obelisk.
- Fhet'ahla knows about Uldrak – his imps have told him about a spined devil who insists that it is in fact an empyrean, hanging out near a gargantuan sword and helmet on the plains of Avernus.

The point here isn't that the characters need to discover all four options, but that it should be relatively easy for them to do so, if they put in just a little effort. They might only learn about one, and just go for that option – and as long as they know that more options likely would have been available, if they had asked around more, then that's perfectly fine. Remember also, it's always up to you which of the options you want to emphasize or withhold, if there's any options you particularly like or dislike.

BLOOD PAY

The next leg of the characters' journey leads them to either Arkhan (Arkhan's Tower), Uldrak (Uldrak's Grave), Ubbalux (Obelisk), or Shummrath (Pit of Shummrath), where they can recover a pint of blood for the 'Intermediary' of their choice. Below we'll go over how to make each of these encounters/locations fit the new structure.

ARKHAN'S TOWER & MONUMENT TO TIAMAT

The characters' arrival at Arkhan's Tower can be handled exactly as described in the book, except that the characters won't have an Orb of Dragonkind to trade. After being led to the Monument to Tiamat by Krull, the characters will have to – as in the book – trade or fight with Arkhan to obtain Tiamat's Blood.

Arkhan offers his deal – the sacrifice of a good-aligned creature for a vial of the dragon queen's blood. Once again, Lulu is an ideal candidate, but characters who ask around with NPCs they've already met – one of the 'Intermediaries', someone at the Wandering Emporium, etc. – can also learn about Mooncolor at the Demon Zapper or Krikendolt at the Spawning Trees, both of which meet the criteria. Or, as adventurers are wont to do, they may go toe-to-toe with Arkhan and his followers in an epic battle instead, and hopefully live to

tell the tale (we have some notes about handling that battle in our DM's resources for Chapter 3: Avernus).

ULDRAK'S GRAVE

Uldrak is an empyrean, who ventured into Avernus to slay Tiamat, but was defeated and transformed into a lowly spined devil by the dragon queen – a form he has now held for millennia.

In the book, Uldrak must spill the blood of Tiamat on the ground of Avernus to break the curse – and tells the party as much, while showing them the Orb of Dragonkind that sits in the pommel of his giant sword, in the hope that they will trade the orb for the vial of Tiamat's blood Arkhan the Cruel carries around his neck.

Because the party is already out for powerful blood, we don't want Tiamat's blood to be the way to break Uldrak's curse. Instead, Uldrak must slay a dragon for the curse to be broken – a solution chosen by Tiamat to cruelly mock the empyrean's new, puny form. However, with the party's help, slaying a dragon might not be all that impossible. In fact, Uldrak even knows where to find a dragon: there's several of them by Arkhan's Tower, a five-spined monstrosity not far from Uldrak's Grave.

If the characters go to Arkhan's Tower intending to slay a dragon, it's likely they'll get into a fight with Krull and the dragons at the tower. If they face everything at once, this fight is extremely dangerous, so you may want to split things up a bit, having the party face Krull, the dragon Obatala and his ghouls, or Krull and the four young/wyrmiling dragons residing in the tower. To break the curse, Uldrak simply has to participate in the killing of the dragon. If the transformed empyrean dies in the process – well, the party will have to go somewhere else for the blood they're after.

OBELISK

At the obelisk, the party finds a trapped demon disguised as a wizard, who first makes them perform an arcane ritual before eventually revealing its true identity and sending the party toward Mephistopheles at the Mirror of Mephistar.

You can run this encounter pretty much as it is, changing only two things: Ubbalux is a balor, not a bargura, and it doesn't point them to Mephistopheles at the end of the encounter.

Ubbalux is a balor (instead of a bargura) both because it makes more sense, but also because the party needs to find a powerful creature, and not just any old demon. And because the party might have already been by Mephistopheles, we don't want the archfiend to be the solution to Ubbalux' predicament.

Instead, Bel has made the way to free the balor so difficult, it might as well be impossible: to break the obelisk's hold on Ubbalux, another creature has to willingly and without coercion take the demon's place in the prison – while being fully aware that this means being trapped for eternity (or until another creature willingly takes their place).

Since self-sacrifice and selflessness are some of the rarest commodities in Avernus, Ubbalux has all but given up on being freed this way. However, if the party asks around (likely informants could be Elliach at Ichor's Aweigh, Smiler the Defiler, or other NPCs who travel a lot or deals with demons), they can eventually learn about a bearded devil out by the Spawning Trees, who's recently become very soft-hearted. Or, you can

also just have the party find the Spawning Trees by pure chance and realize the opportunity for themselves.

Regardless of how they arrive at the Spawning Trees, they can here save Krikendolt from his bullying comrades, and easily convince the devil to give his own freedom up to free Ubbalux (“it’s just sooo sad that he has been imprisoned for so long, unable to go home. Of course, I’ll take his place!”). If you want to top off the ordeal with an encounter, you can have a weakened Ubbalux – a balor with four levels of exhaustion – immediately take his pent-up rage out on the party, instead of upholding his end of the bargain!

If the characters can’t convince anyone to take the balor’s place, or fail to extract the blood from the freed Ubbalux, they will have the other options waiting for them.

SHUMMRATH’S PIT

This encounter can run just like in the book (with the salamanders in the Wandering Emporium providing the Shattersticks instead of Mephistopheles) up until the point where the river’s flow is dammed. After damming the River Styx, the party will have to wait around for about 24 hours, as Shummrath reforms enough for them to harvest its blood. To add an encounter at the end, you can have the weakened, but now sentient, pit fiend put up a fight. Even with four levels of exhaustion (disadvantage on everything, speed and hit points halved), the pit fiend should still present a decent challenge for the party.

PAYING WITH BLOOD

When the characters return with a flask of blood for their intermediary of choice, they can finally learn the location of one of the ‘Fallen Three’:

- Mordenkainen’s simulacrum closes his eyes for a brief second, accessing the memories of his main form, before swiftly (and impatiently) relaying the location of the Fallen Three.
- Red Ruth brews a stinking concoction with the blood, inhaling the fumes as she sends her consciousness flying across the vast plains of Avernus to seek out the Fallen Three.
- Rigorath, Mephistopheles’ cambion, disappears into the portal for a few hours, and reappears unceremoniously to give the party their answer.

Now, it’s up to you whether Red Ruth, Mordenkainen or Mephistopheles can provide the party with the locations of all three fallen NPCs, or only one of them – but no matter what, it should be the characters themselves that get to decide which one they will seek out.

SMILER THE DEFILER

Somewhere during ‘Blood Pay’ or soon after, our structure calls for another travel encounter. Here we have chosen Smiler the Defiler, but once again, you can use any travel encounter you’d like. The purpose of this encounter is to supply the party with additional guidance and information – if they need it – but also to make Avernus feel alive and exciting by breaking up the monotony of travel.

When using Smiler the Defiler, we do so using our own published adventure *Bitter Rivals*, which has Smiler beseeching the party to help him get vengeance on Bitter Breath and his hobgoblin marauders. This encounter gives the party a nice, hardy combat challenge and an opportunity to flex their infernal war machines. You don’t have to use that adventure, of

course, there’s a hundred different ways you can have Smiler show up to interact with the party.

As mentioned above, Smiler can also serve as a conduit for information if the characters are unsure about where to go next during their search for a powerful creature’s blood. A traveling soul is likely to know much about Avernus – where to find a fiend dumb enough to give themselves up to release Ubbalux, how to find an innocent creature to sacrifice to Arkhan, where to locate a dragon to end Uldrak’s curse, or where to find explosives potent enough to dam the River Styx.

FALLEN THREE

In the final part of Chapter 3, the party heads toward one of the Fallen Three: Bel, Olanthius, or Haruman to finally discover the location of the Bleeding Citadel.

BEL’S FORGE

You can run the encounter with Bel exactly as it is in the book, only cutting out the Sibriex – or keeping it in, if you like it, it won’t matter if the party never seeks out Haruman – and perhaps adding the Arches of Ulloch as the key to finding the Bleeding Citadel, if you want to run that encounter as well (more on that below). Everything else remains the same: the characters are accosted by devils outside of the forge and attacked by fire giants within, before they can finally strike a telepathic deal with Bel to find the adamantine rods in the Wrecked Flying Fortress in return for the location of the Bleeding Citadel.

HARUMAN’S HILL

The encounter at Haruman’s Hill can also be run much as it is in the book, and you can even include the Hellwasp Nest if you want to beef up the fight a bit. Regardless of the circumstances, Haruman fights to the bitter end, not allowing himself to be taken alive.

When Haruman is destroyed, his fiendish form shifts back into that of a human paladin – greyed, bloodied and broken. If the characters try to speak with the corpse, all they get is dead silence – no soul resides within Haruman’s broken form.

At this point, you can have Jander Sunstar chime in, saying that he knows that there are ways to extract memories from even a soulless body. Perhaps he even knows of a creature wielding such powers – a sibriex – which he’s seen travelling through Avernus. It’s up to you whether Jander also knows where the sibriex is, or if the characters will have to find out through other means (causing them to revisit other NPCs).

Alternatively, you can leave the characters with no information and see what they do – maybe they seek out another of the Fallen Three, or take the body with them and try to find some way to reach its memories (perhaps Red Ruth, Mordenkainen or Mephistopheles can extract information from the corpse in return for more blood!).

If the characters do seek out the sibriex, this encounter runs pretty much as in the book, except it is Haruman’s memories and not the location of the adamantine rods, that the party is after. The sibriex can, by devouring the body of Haruman, relay the location of the Bleeding Citadel to the characters, but will only do so if they free it first.

CRYPT OF THE HELLRIDERS

You can run this location exactly as it is in the book, except switching around the Arches of Ulloch and the freeing of Kostchtchie, if you want to use the Arches as the only way to reach the Bleeding Citadel (as described below). The encounter with Olanthius otherwise requires no changes.

Introducing more of the Fallen Three

Allowing the characters to interact with the figures from the story – Haruman, Olanthius, Bel, Yael, Zariel – is what really makes it come to life. In the structure above, the characters will end up meeting only one of either Bel, Haruman and Olanthius – instead of at least two (Haruman plus either Bel or Olanthius) as the original structure does. If you want your party to meet at least two of the fallen three, you can do it by having the first Fallen Three lead to one of the other, either by making them a dead-end, or by otherwise involving them in the encounter. It could look something like this:

- After releasing Kostchtchie for Olanthius, the party returns to find that the death knight has been destroyed. Ghosts at the Crypt of the Hellriders can inform them that it was a legion of devils led by Haruman who did the dark deed, and the party must now find Haruman (or Bel) instead.
- After destroying Haruman, Jander Sunstar doesn't relay information about a sibriex, but instead tells the party about the animosity between Zariel's two former generals and suggests they seek out Olanthius instead.
- After the party has recovered the control rods from the Wrecked Flying Fortress, Bel still hesitates, demanding that they also destroy Haruman, Zariel's most loyal follower, before he dares divulge the location of the Bleeding Citadel.

In addition, you can also include one of the three NPCs in the final showdown with Zariel. We've written a bit more about this in our DM's Resources for Chapter 5: Escape from Avernus, but to briefly summarize, you can have Olanthius show up to aid the party against Zariel, have Haruman show up to aid Zariel (not that she particularly needs it) against the party, or have Bel show up to attack a redeemed (but weakened) Zariel, requiring the party to defend her.

ARCHES OF ULLOCH

I personally find that the Arches of Ulloch is a pretty dull encounter, as it is used in the campaign book. A teleportation portal serves little purpose in a place where distance and time is already abstract – unless, of course, we decide that the Arches of Ulloch is the only way to reach the Bleeding Citadel.

This makes sense if Asmodeus has hidden away the Bleeding Citadel with powerful magic in an attempt to ensure that no creature – Zariel least of all – can find the sword. The only way to reach it from Avernus itself (the demons scouring through the citadel have arrived through their own magical means) is through the Arches of Ulloch.

In our DM's resources for Chapter 3: Avernus we've written up an extensive encounter for the Arches of Ulloch, which has the place guarded by an infernal androsphinx, but you can choose any guardian you like, such as a young red shadow dragon, a battalion of yugoloths, or something else you find fitting. The point of the Arches of Ulloch is to challenge the party a bit before they move on from chapter 3, and to give a logical explanation for why the Bleeding Citadel is so damned hard to find!

PART 3: EXTRA ADVICE

In this post we'll talk a bit about how to implement the structure for making Avernus into a sandbox that we've covered in part 1 and part 2 of this series (if you haven't already, you really should read those before jumping into this one!). This includes both general and specific advice about running an open adventure, as well as troubleshooting for certain problems that may arise along the way.

Because not everything here is relevant for every DM, here's a list of section headlines so you can seek out what interests you:

- Manage Player Expectations (preparing your players for a sandbox-style-game).
- Keeping Players on Track (making sure your players can keep up and stay on task)
- Keeping Yourself on Track (how to run and prepare a more open chapter 3)
- Pacing Chapter 3 (how to control the overall pace of the chapter)
- Pacing the Adventuring Day (how to control the length of each adventuring day, so the chapter stays exciting and challenging)

MANAGE PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

When running an open(ish) adventure, it's usually never a bad idea to tell the players up front what is expected of them. This is especially true for the Descent into Avernus-campaign, where the characters will likely have been travelling more or less on rails through chapters 1 and 2, before we suddenly begin demanding that they figure stuff out on their own as they come into Chapter 3.

A good time to do this – manage your players' expectations, as well as tell them what is expected of them – is after the Dream Quest at Fort Knucklebone. You can simply let your players know that they will now be entering into a more 'open' part of the campaign, where there will be multiple ways to proceed forward, and that they should no longer worry about what the 'story expects them to do' or 'what they're meant to do'. They have to stand on their own legs now, and trust that answers will be available to them, if they just remember to ask questions.

KEEPING PLAYERS ON TRACK

When running adventures that are less linear, it becomes increasingly important for everyone to keep track of what is happening. Some players – and entire groups – are very good at this, while others have a harder time staying on task when everything is open and free.

You can help your players stay on track by taking time at the beginning of each session to remind the party what they're doing and why (unless they're having tons of fun being off-track, in which case you should probably just roll with that!), by simply reminding them that they're "looking for Olanthius, Haruman or Bel, who can help you find the Sword of Zariel, which is supposed to be the key to freeing Etlurel".

If at any point your players seem lost or frustrated, travel encounters are often your best tools to get them back on track. The Wandering Emporium, which serves as a hub for NPCs who can carry all manner of information, is particularly well-suited for this, and can show up at any time you want it to.

Remember though, that the whole point of a sandbox is to foster player agency and creativity, so if your players suddenly become enamored with a particular path you haven't planned for, try to see if it's something you can work with. If the players – as an example – decide to seek out Asmodeus, because they think he'll be able to help them find the sword, your immediate reaction may be to have Mad Maggie go “uh, no, bad idea”, but maybe you can work with it? Perhaps the Intermediary becomes a means of introduction in this case – someone who can get a message through to the Supreme Lord of the Nine Hells – and an intense encounter with a bemused Asmodeus substitutes an encounter with another of the Fallen Three. Building on player ideas is always better than shutting them down!

Finally, if your players seem to be responding badly to having too many choices – they become frustrated, meandering, demotivated – don't be afraid to reign things in and put them back on the rails (i.e. having NPCs strongly suggest one option, or simply cut some of the options out) – that just might be the way your group prefers to play.

KEEPING YOURSELF ON TRACK

It's not just the players who have to stay on track – it's also you! As the story opens up, you are required to keep track of more encounters and locations, because you have to be ready for whatever the players decide to do next. And, to make things even harder, you'll now also have to both consult the campaign book and the information here!?

Relax, breathe! Remember that chapter 3 will probably span something like 5 to 15 sessions of play. You will have months to figure everything out. To begin with, all you need to do is have a basic understanding of the chapter's structure, and be prepared for the next 3-4 hours of play.

To address the first point, it may help you to remember the following, very abbreviated general structure of the sandbox:

- **Fort Knucklebone.** At Fort Knucklebone, the party learns that they must find one of the Fallen Three, Bel, Olanthius and Haruman.
- **Intermediaries.** Soon after, they learn that three Intermediaries can guide them along: Mordenkainen, Red Ruth and Mephistopheles.
- **Blood Pay.** To get aid from an Intermediary, they must find blood from a powerful creature (Arkhan, Ubbalux, Uldrak or Shummrath).
- **Fallen Three.** When they find the Fallen Three, they'll perform a simple task to gain the information, and are then told how to find the Bleeding Citadel.

That's more or less all there is to it! Now, all you need to do is keep track of the basic structure, and stay one step ahead of the party at all times. If they're dealing with the Intermediaries, look ahead to the Blood Pay-section and understand the encounters there, and so on.

Having a rough idea of your party's intentions will also help you. At the end of each session, try to gauge where the players are likely to go next. Prepare that/those location(s), make a note of what information they'll find there, and you're more than likely fine for the next session. Remember, depending on your group's style, you're always allowed to ask the party in-between sessions if they have decided where to go next, so you know what you should be preparing for.

Lastly, remember that, unlike most of the creatures they control, a DM is only human. If you suddenly find yourself treading water, become unsure about what to do next, or get entirely in over your head, call for a break or end the session early, get yourself back on track and pick it back up later. That's always an option – and never something to be ashamed of. We've all been there!

PACING CHAPTER 3

Another question that can arise has to do with the pacing of the chapter – in particular, the fact that the players are supposed to go from 7th to 11th level during Chapter 3. Will the characters just blow through these levels in no time, making the chapter feel incredibly fast – and does the sandbox-structure do anything to mitigate this?

If I'm being perfectly honest – which I try to be – the sandbox-like structure we've put out here probably improves the pacing slightly, but does not completely slow down the relatively fast pace of Chapter 3: Avernus, as it is written in the campaign book.

Before you start to work on the chapter's pace, however, you should first decide whether it's really an issue or not. If you have a talkative, RPG-heavy-group, that loves to visit new locations, revisit old locations, speak at length with every NPC, and constantly gets sidetracked, then it probably won't feel that fast at all, since Avernus has plenty of locations and NPCs to engage with. Hell, even if you have hyper-focused, combat-excited players, who gloss over the talky bits so they can get to the action, a fast pace may not be an issue, simply because they'll enjoy getting their levels fast, so they can become even more powerful and awesome.

However, if you fall somewhere in between, and want the party to cover more ground before they get their levels and can move on with the story, there are several tools at your disposal – most of which require only minimal alterations to the structure. Here's a few ideas on how you can slow down the pace of Chapter 3:

- **Use more travel encounters.** This one is obvious, and fairly easy to implement. There should be at least a handful of encounters that will end up left unused, depending on where your players go and what they do – if you want the chapter to feel longer, simply let them stumble upon these along the way.
- **More Blood Pay.** Having the party perform an additional Blood Pay-quest should extend the chapter by at least a few sessions. Perhaps the first attempt is a dead end – Arkhan disappears with Tiamat's blood, Ubbalux/Shummrath escape before the party gets their blood, or Uldrak is killed before his curse can be broken – and the party will have to find an alternate 'donor'.
- **A Dead End.** The Fallen Three can also become dead-ends (as suggested under 'Telling the Story' above), requiring the characters to find another of the Fallen Three to progress – and perhaps even sending them all the way back to find more blood first!

PACING THE ADVENTURING DAY

An equally important pacing issue – perhaps even more important – has to do with the pacing of individual adventuring days during Chapter 3.

At the end of a good adventuring day, the characters should be drained of nearly all resources, on the brink of collapse, and a few near-death experiences richer. To accomplish this, we must fill each ‘active’ adventuring day (i.e. days not spent in fast-travel, or doing simple tasks like shopping/resting/etc.) with enough exploration and combat encounters to actually challenge the characters – before they get the chance to take another long rest and ‘reset’.

Here’s an example of the adventuring days your players might have during Chapter 3 using the sandbox-structure (this will vary greatly depending on player choice, so use this only as an example!):

ADVENTURING DAY 1

- Fort Knucklebone encounters
- Infernal Bounty-encounter
- Nycaloth-encounter after speaking with Mordenkainen
- Wandering Emporium

ADVENTURING DAY 2

- Arkhan’s Tower Encounter (brief fight with young dragons/wyrmiling dragons)
- Monument to Tiamat (fight with Arkhan + entourage)

ADVENTURING DAY 3

- Smiler the Defiler (Bitter Rivals-adventure)

ADVENTURING DAY 4

- Haruman’s Hill
- Sibriex
- Hellwasp Nest
- Arches of Ulloch

As you’ll notice, this also coincides with when the characters are intended to level, i.e. the characters gain a level after completing each adventuring day. If you think that’s awfully fast, you’re not wrong (see Pacing Chapter 3 above!), but remember that between these adventuring days, there will likely be whole days spent behind the wheel of an infernal war machine, shopping at the Wandering Emporium, or having meaningful philosophical discussions with unicorns and devils.

The more important question is, how do we ensure that the characters don’t break the pacing of these adventuring days? If we allow the party to rest in-between encounters, they can effectively split the adventuring days into pieces, making one exciting, challenging adventuring day, into two easy, boring adventuring days. And that’s not fun for anyone.

In Chapter 3, we run the risk of having many of these very low-intensity adventuring days, because the characters will often be travelling between encounters, giving them ample opportunity to set up camp, roll out bedrolls and hunker down for some good shut-eye. We’ve already written a bit about this in our DM’s resources for Baldur’s Gate: Descent into Avernus, but I think it’s important enough to repeat here: if we want a chapter with this much travel to be exciting, we have to shape the adventuring day to fit our needs.

Luckily, because Avernus is such a fantastical and otherworldly location, we can control both travel distances and rests even more than we usually can.

SHORTEN TRAVEL TIMES

We can keep each adventuring day exciting by lumping encounters together. We do this making travel distances between combat encounters be very short, right until the party needs a long rest. That means handling Fort Knucklebone in the morning, running into infernal bounty hunters in the afternoon, and battling nycaloths in the evening. No rest for the wicked!

While this strategy can certainly be effective, it can also make the chapter’s pace feel a bit funky – several days of ‘nothing really happens’ interspersed with a few days of high intensity, where travel times are suddenly super-short. Additionally, the party can always overrule this by simply setting camp early or taking a long rest in the middle of the day.

CONTROLLING RESTS

My preferred method for keeping the pace of adventuring days in Chapter 3: Avernus is to make it harder for the party to rest. Because Avernus is such an awful place, with threats constantly looming, insufferable heat, and loud fireballs exploding everywhere, the characters simply can’t get the restorative benefits of a long rest (regaining hit points, hit dice, spell slots, abilities) unless they’re sleeping in a safe location, of which there are very few in Avernus (Note: You’ll have to ban the spell Leomund’s Tiny Hut, if a character has access to that!). By doing this, we can have several days of travel between locations – thus extending the adventuring day – without ruining the pace of each adventuring day.

In our example from above, the characters would be able to rest at the Wandering Emporium after visiting Mordenkainen, can rest in Arkhan’s camp after defeating him and his forces, can rest in the Marauders’ War Camp after clearing it with Smiler the Defiler, and set up camp in a more gentle, secluded area of Avernus after travelling through the Arches of Ulloch to the Bleeding Citadel.

This approach gives you more-or-less complete control of when long rests happen. Want to push the party a bit further before they rest? Don’t give them any safe spot to set up camp. Running low on resources right before you know a big fight is coming? Oh, lo and behold if it isn’t Mahadi and his Wandering Emporium ahead!

CONCLUSION

We hope the above advice and suggestions can help you make your Baldur’s Gate: Descent into Avernus-campaign as awesome as possible. Remember, you’re allowed to pick-and-choose from the content as much as you want, so use only what you like, and discard what you don’t. Your game, your rules!

Have fun in Hell!
J. A. Valeur