

CURSE OF STRAHD

Under raging storm clouds, a lone figure stands silhouetted against the ancient walls of Castle Ravenloft. The vampire Count Strahd von Zarovich stares down a sheer cliff at the village below. A cold, bitter wind spins dead leaves about him, billowing his cape in the darkness.

Lightning splits the clouds overhead, casting stark white light across him. Strahd turns to the sky, revealing the angular muscles of his face and hands. He has a look of power—and of madness. His once handsome face is contorted by a tragedy darker than the night itself.

Rumbling thunder pounds the castle spires. The winds howling increases as Strahd turns his gaze back to the village. Far below, yet not beyond his ken, a party of adventurers has just entered his domain. Strahd's face forms a twisted smile as his dark plan unfolds. He knew they were coming, and he knows why they have come all according to his plan. He, the master of Ravenloft, will attend to them.

Another lightning flash rips through the darkness, its thunder echoing through the castle is towers. But Strahd is gone. Only the howling of the wind—or perhaps a lone wolf—fills the midnight air. The master of Ravenloft is having guests for dinner. And you are invited.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Here lie memoirs of brave adventurers who ventured into Barovia. The team consisted **Lord Edward Coal**, a young and noble human paladin of Lathander, who was accompanied by his Tiefling mentor (who refuses to acknowledge the fact that he is indeed a Tiefling – the only signs being that he casts no shadow and has no mirror reflection) **Limyé** – an elder man, a warlock of the Undying Light. They were joined by **Richard**, a human rogue, who seems to have bad luck with owing money to the wrong people, and his companion, **Rann** – a young and quiet wood elf Ranger.

PROLOGUE

The two pairs of adventurers met together at The Leaping Satyr tavern in the *May Creek* hamlet, just 8 miles out of *Daggerford*. They were brought here by rumours of werewolves attacking the hamlets around *Daggerford*, killing farmers and stealing their children. Recently, the self-organized militia managed to capture one of the werewolves and extract some information, before putting the beast out of its misery. All they got was that the werewolf pack was quite sizable, their leader's name was **Kiril** and that they come from some land called **Barovia**, which no one seems to have heard of.

This information was not immediately obvious to be trustworthy, were it not for the fact that on their way to *May Creek*, **Richard** and **Rann** run into a group of colorful **Vistani** gypsy travellers. The leader of these travellers spun a story of their past, which was magically shown in the green flames of their campfire.



He spoke of a wounded soldier, who once stumbled into their camp. They nursed him back to health and found out that he was a prince, who had many enemies. In his thanks for saving his life, he provided them with land and safe passage. A curse has however befallen their prince. They hope that if our heroes ever come to their land of Barovia, maybe they can find a way to lift this curse.

Having established the existence of Barovia did not help however finding it. **Limyé** studied all his best maps, to no avail. As evening descended, the doors to the tavern swung open, and in came a brightly clad man with a hat hiding his eyes in shadow. Without hesitation he approached the table at which our adventurers were sitting, and asked them to come to his master's aid at first light. He handed the characters a letter from **Kolyan Indirovich**, burgomaster of Barovia (see Appendix). He described Barovia as a valley of great beauty and his master as a remarkable man. The road to Barovia supposedly was through the **Svalich Woods**, but the direction our group was pointed to seemed to agree with the location of the **Misty Forest**. The messenger introduced himself as **Arrigal** and paid both for drinks, and after some persuasion, also for the group's beds for the night. He left in bad mood however after loosing his money in a game of dice to **Richard**.

LAST DAY ON THE SWORD COAST

The following morning, our adventurers decided to visit the local church of Lathander, to see if perhaps the local priest knew anything more about Barovia. **Brother Liam** heard the name of the town mentioned some years before by a different group of adventurers, but could not recall more and he did not keep records of any church activities – a fact that **Limyé** was greatly upset about. Brother Liam did however offer the group his prayers.



The group then set out towards the Misty Forest. After travelling for 12 hours, they came to the conclusions that perhaps the five hours that Arrigal quoted referred to travel on horseback... Our adventurers were forced to camp overnight in the forest. The first and second shifts were uneventful, but things took turn for the worst during Richard's watch. While smoking his pipe next to the fire, he became drowsy and fell asleep. He woke up to terrible screams coming from the direction of the tent. The fire had gone out and there was thick mist everywhere. When he finally reached the tent, it was in shambles, and the bedrolls were covered in blood and gore. That's when he really woke up screaming. This immediately woke everyone up, but there was no apparent danger. It was already morning and thick fog hung in the air, turning the trees around into gray ghosts. That's when everyone noticed that these were not the same trees that surrounded them the night before...

WELCOME TO BAROVIA

After collecting themselves, our heroes started trying to get their bearings. Rann discovered that there was still a trail roughly in the same place as last night, while Limyé found out that the dense fog seemed to have a will of its own and that it tried to suck out his life energy. Just when our adventurers were about to leave the campsite, they noticed a skeletal rider on a skeletal horse passing in the fog. Something fell from his saddle, which upon inspection turned out to be a small black book holding the recent nightmarish dreams of Richard's. Some of these included dreams of horrible deaths while exploring a huge and horrible cliff-side castle. Lord Coal's efforts to write in this dream journal immediately resulted in a splitting headache for Richard. It was decided that he should keep it safely, lest it get into wrong hands.

After travelling along the narrow path in the woods, the party reached a huge wall with large iron gates, flanked by beheaded statues of armed guardians.



When they approached the wall, the gates swung screechingly open, without an apparent mechanism. After passing through them, the gates closed shut, trapping our heroes in Barovia, perhaps forever.

A while later, the party caught the scent of death on the air. Investigating the source, they found a body of a dead commoner, seemingly torn apart by wolves. Crows have been pecking at his body for several days. In his hand was a crumpled note, which Lord Coal read aloud. This seemed to have been a letter from Kolyan Indirovich, the burgomaster of Barovia, but in completely different writing than the first one the heroes got! This one (see Appendix) was meant to be put on the gates, warning everyone not to enter this land, as it is under a control of an ancient vampyr...

While reading the letter, the party heard wolves howling, first far away and then closer. Soon, they were attacked by three wolves, which were led by a huge wolf with glowing red eyes. Two of the wolves attacked Lord Coal, tearing pieces of flesh from him. The third wolf was immediately shot dead by a well placed arrow of Rann's. Richard sneakily killed both of the wolves biting Edward, by stabbing them straight in their assholes. With the smaller wolves dispatched, Limyé tried casting a spell at the bigger wolf, but surprisingly his magic failed him, as if it was somehow blocked. After staring with the crimson eyes at the party, the big wolf became enveloped in the creeping fog and vanished, never attacking, just observing.

DURST HOUSE

Soon the forest fell away from the road, which eventually led to a village, with its tall houses dark as tombstones. Nestled among them were a handful of closed-up shops. The party heard a soft whimpering, which drew their eyes to a pair of children standing in the middle of the street. When approached, the older sibling, a girl, proclaimed "There's a monster in our house!" The children never saw the monster, which their parents, Gustav and Elizabeth Durst, keep locked up in the basement. Richard, never trusting, decided to grab the girl by her wrist and cut her on the arm. This turned out to be a wise decision, as this caused both of the children to vanish.

However, the everpresent fog started enclosing our adventurers, which forced them to enter the house. They found that despite all of the lights being off, the house was kept in great condition – the floors well polished and no dust to be seen. Exploring the first floor, they discovered that not everything was as it seemed. Wood paneled walls in the house were carved with innocuous imagery, which on closer inspection seemed to hide disturbing details. The party raided the cloakroom, taking several black cloaks and a top hat. In the hunter's den Rann confirmed that the stuffed wolves were really stuffed, by ripping them apart, while Richard appropriated an improved smoking pipe.

SECOND FLOOR

On the second floor of the house the party saw a family portrait of the two children outside, their father holding a swaddled baby and their mother, looking with scorn at the baby. When they entered the library, the party's warlock went mad with Joy at discovering many first edition collected works of poetry and fiction, which he readily started packing away, to be taken back to his monastery's library. Rann found an iron key in one of the desk's drawers. Meanwhile, Richard decided to experiment with his dream journal by writing there himself, describing a sight of a beautiful woman. This time, instead of searing pain, he got an erection, but the text he wrote erased itself and soon the woman became a distant memory.

Exploring the library carefully, the party found a secret door, opened by pulling on a fake book. This room contained bookshelves packed with tomes describing fiend-summoning rituals and necromantic rituals of a cult called the **Priests of Osybus**. Limyé managed to ascertain that the rituals were bogus. Also in the room was a heavy wooden chest, from which a skeleton in leather armor was sticking out. Lord Coal managed to find out that the person died because of a poisoned dart trap in the chest, which now was however disarmed. Clutched in the skeleton's hand was a letter written in flowing script:

My most pathetic servant,

I am not a messiah sent to you by the Dark Powers of this land. I have not come to lead you on a path to immortality. However many souls you have bled on your hidden altar, however many visitors you have tortured in your dungeon, know that you are not the ones who brought me to this beautiful land. You are but worms writhing in my earth.

You say that you are cursed, your fortunes spent. You abandoned love for madness, took solace in the bosom of another woman, and sired a stillborn son. Cursed by darkness? Of that I have no doubt. Save you from your wretchedness? I think not. I much prefer you as you are.

Your dread lord and master,

Strahd von Zarovich

The adventurers recognized the handwriting to be the same as that of the letter they received from Arrigal, back in the tavern on the day they met!

LOOT IN THE CHEST

The chest contained the following:

- A tattered piece of sheet music
- Three blank books with black leather covers (worth 25 gp each)
- Three spell scrolls (*bless*, *protection from poison*, and *spiritual weapon*)
- The deed to the house, the deed to a windmill
- Signed last will, bequeathing all family property to Rosavalda and Thornboldt Durst in the event of their parents' death.

The party then explored the last room on the floor, which turned out to be some sort of conservatory with a harpsichord and a harp. Limyé decided to try playing the sheet music they found in the chest on the harpsichord. Shortly after he started, the room filled with ghosts that milled around the room socializing and dancing with each other. The harpsichord started playing on its own. None of the ghosts seem to take notice of our band of adventurers, passing through without interacting. Just then, they noticed two ghosts staring straight at them – ghosts the party recognized from the paintings as Gustav and Elizabeth Durst. Slowly, all the other ghosts stopped in their tracks, and turned to our misfortunate heroes. After Lord Coal bowed to them, suddenly all the ghosts disappeared. The house shook a little bit and a grinding noise could be heard from upstairs for a few seconds.

THIRD FLOOR

Climbing the marble staircase, the adventurers noticed that the third floor, unlike the lower floors, was in a state of neglect and disrepair – everything was dusty, the walls covered in cobwebs and the floors groaning underfoot. The balcony to which the staircase led had a suit of armor standing against one wall, which attacked the party on approaching. Fighting in the narrow space, the party managed to defeat the animated armor.



With the armor taken care of, the party decided to explore the door to the west. Behind them, they found an elegantly appointed bedroom shrouded in dust and cobwebs. Mounted on one of the walls, next to a wardrobe, was a full-length mirror with an ornate wooden frame carved to look like ivy and berries. A closer inspection revealed eyeballs hidden among the berries.

To his surprise, Limyé saw a reflection in the mirror, and it was that of a young woman in a nursemaid uniform. Never having seen his reflection before, he was intrigued that the woman seemed to follow his movements exactly, yet none of the other adventurers saw any reflection of his. Suddenly, a hooded figure in a black robe with a knife in hand appeared in the reflection behind the nursemaid, which spooked Limyé greatly, causing him to jump away. Upon telling of what he saw, Richard decided to smash the mirror. Behind it, the party found a secret door, which opened to a cobweb-filled staircase leading up to the attic.

Our adventurers decided however to explore the rest of the third floor before going up. Two other sets of doors led from this room. One, a double set of doors with stained glass panels clearly led to a balcony, which the group saw from the outside. The other led to a small nursery with a crib covered with a hanging black shroud. Carefully, Richard parted the shroud with his sword. Inside the crib, they saw a tightly wrapped, baby-sized bundle. Before attempting to open it, Rann decided to put a holy symbol onto the blanket, while Lord Coal spoke some prayers. Slowly, Rann unwrapped the blanket, only to find that it was empty inside. Just then, in the room behind, a young woman looking exactly like the one Limyé saw in the mirror, appeared. She shrieked "My baby!" and transformed into a spectral nightmare. She immediately charged towards Rann and slashed at him with spectral claws. The party tried reasoning with her, to no avail. It was a fierce battle, in which the warlock struck the specter twice with sacred flames. The weapons of others did not seem to hurt her as much, but imbued with righteousness, Lord Coal managed to score a killing strike.



Further exploration of the floor brought Richard into a dirty storage room, in which he was smacked several times by an animated broom, before hastily retreating and slamming the door behind him. This left only one room on the floor – the master suite.

Before checking out any of the objects in the room, Lord Coal decided to open the door leading to a balcony at the back of the house. The wall of fog seemed to play tricks on his eyes, as looking down onto the street, it seemed that he was much higher than a third floor. Back inside the suite, the group found a vanity with a wood-framed mirror and a jewelry box. Very cautiously, Limyé tried to look into the mirror, but he was relieved to see the familiar lack of reflection. However, when Lord Coal looked into it, he saw an older, wrinkled version of himself staring back at him! None of the others however saw any of this. After much thought, seeing Richard eyeing the jewelry box, Lord Coal decided to take it temporarily so that it does not fall into wrong hands.

JEWELRY BOX

The jewelry box is made of silver with gold filigree (itself worth 75 gp) and it contains:

- Three gold rings (worth 25 gp each)
- An exquisite thin platinum necklace with a topaz pendant (worth 750 gp)

ATTIC

Having explored the third floor fully, our intrepid group of adventurers decided to head to the attic using the cobweb-filled wooden staircase hidden behind the secret door in the nursemaid's bedroom. Carefully opening the attic door, they found themselves in a bare hall choked with dust and cobwebs. Four sets of doors led from it, one held shut with a rusted padlock – this one, it was decided, they wanted to leave for last. Two of the doors led to empty spare bedrooms, but the third door led to a dusty storage room packed with old furniture, all draped in dusty white sheets. In one corner of the room a portion of the wall seems to have receded, leaving scrapes on the floor – perhaps the sound the group heard after playing on the harpsichord downstairs. This hidden passage opened onto a circular staircase leading down, perhaps to the basement. Under one of the bedsheets, the group found a wooden trunk containing the skeletal remains of the family's nursemaid, wrapped in a tattered bedsheet stained with dry blood. Rann, upon closer inspection, managed to ascertain that she was stabbed to death by multiple knife wounds.

Before heading down, the party decided to check out the closed room. The iron key they found in the library opened the padlock. The room they found contained a bricked-up window flanked by two dusty, wood-framed beds sized for children. Close to the door was a toy chest with windmills painted on its sides and a doolhouse that was a perfect replica of the dreary edifice our adventurers were in. Lying in the middle of the floor were two small skeletons wearing tattered clothing that was familiar to the party. The smaller of the two also cradled a stuffed doll that they recognized to be the same, as the one held by Thornboldt outside. Limyé felt magic emanating from the doolhouse, but when the party touched it, the ghosts of the children appeared in the middle of the room.



The children, Rose and Thorn, explained to the adventurers that their parents locked them in the attic to protect them from "the monster in the basement," and that they died from hunger. Lord Coal managed to interpret from what the children said, that their brother Walter might have been a bastard born by the nursemaid. In the meantime, with the children's permission, the others explored the magical dollhouse. The different floors matched the house exactly, including stick figures where the adventurers were. The basement however was set into the floor, with the walls caulked onto it. The party got the permission to open up the basement level, which turned out to be significantly bigger than the house itself. A staircase in it led even deeper, but lifting up this level would be a significant undertaking. When the party decided to head towards the basement, the children pled them not to leave them alone. Their ghostly bodies, seeking the warm embrace of another soul, entered two of the adventurers – Rose entered Lord Coal, while Thorn entered Limyé. The warlock intimidated the child to leave him with his thaumaturgy, upon which Thorn switched his host to Richard, who was more accepting. After this the adventurers entered the spiral staircase leading to the basement...

BASEMENT

After descending the dark and cobweb-filled staircase, our adventurers found themselves in a dark dungeon carved out of earth, clay, and rock, with 4-foot narrow tunnels, supported by timber braces. The earthen floor was full of centuries-old human footprints leading every which way. An eerie, incessant chant could be heard echoing throughout. First they decided to explore the crypts nearby, which they saw previously in the dollhouse. The first two they investigated were empty, their stone slabs open. One of them had the name of Walter, the small baby, carved into it. There were four other crypts, dedicated to Rose, Thorn and their parents. Opening the crypts of the children, our group found empty coffins sitting on stone biers. The ghost of Rose within Lord Coal informed him that she felt that putting their bodies to rest would be the right thing to do. Upon doing this, the ghosts left the bodies of Richard and Edward, Rose even having a wan semblance of a smile, before vanishing from the realm of the living.

After this departure, the group decided to check on the parents' tombs. The coffin of Gustav Durst was empty, but upon lifting the lid of Elizabeth's one, Rann saw a swarm of centipedes boil out of the back wall and the ceiling of the crypt. Fortunately, Limyé was standing behind him, and with his arcane skills, incinerated the swarm quickly. The coffin of Elizabeth Durst turned out to be also empty.

After this encounter, the party decided to explore the corridor to the west, which brought them into a dining hall. The dirt floor was covered with mostly humanoid bones, which on closer inspection had human teeth marks. In the middle of the south wall was a darkened alcove, which Limyé illuminated with his magical light. Hidden in the ceiling of this decrepit larder, was an 8 feet long snake-like creature with a beak ringed by four barbed tentacles, which slithered out and lashed out at the warlock.



The rubbery skin of this monster seemed resistant to the attacks, but a concentric attack on its tentacles and the beak hurt it enough for the warlock's sacred flame to cook it crispy. Heedless of danger, our adventurers continued into another tunnel only to find the ground erupt under them, with four undead crawling out. This separated Lord Coal, who was leading, from the rest of the party. The situation looked dire for a while, when Edward was paralyzed by a ghoul. The rest of the group however dealt bravely with the other three foes. Rann went on a killing spree, taking off the heads of two enemies with his arrows. Waking up from his paralysis, Lord Coal killed the ghoul facing him, while Limyé burnt the last zombie. Having survived this battle, our heroes entered some sort of shrine. The room was festooned with moldy skeletons that hung from rusty shackles against the walls. A wide alcove in the south wall contained a painted wooden statue carved in the likeness of a gaunt, pale-faced man wearing a voluminous black cloak, his pale left hand resting on the head of a wolf that stood next to him. In his right hand, he held a smoky-gray crystal orb.

Limyé immediately felt magic radiating from the sphere, which on closer inspection seemed to have some mists swirling inside. Thinking back to the letter our adventurers found earlier, they suspected that this statue might be that of Strahd von Zarovich, who the cult seemed to worship as a messiah. Reasoning that the orb might be better used in the forces of good, the warlock asked his protégé, Lord Coal, to pick it up for him. The moment the orb left the statue's palm, three shadows separated themselves from the alcove. One of them immediately choked the warlock, who felt his strength being sapped away. Nonetheless, Limyé responded by basking the shadow with a radiant light, vanquishing it. Physical weapons did not seem to hurt them much, but despite that, Richard managed to sneakily destroy one of them by perforating its' shadowy ass. The third shadow seemed to have vanished, but when it reappeared, Lord Coal helped to finish it with his sword imbued with radiant power.



Upon finishing the fight, the tiefling warlock studied the smoky orb and discovered it to be an **Orb of a Warmage**. Richard in the meantime searched the room and discovered a rather poorly hidden secret door, which opened up to a ladder leading up. Scaling it, the party found that it led to a trapdoor into the hunter's den on the first floor of the house. Strangely enough, everyone was sure that such an obvious trapdoor was not there before.

Back in the basement, our adventurers decided to head forward, to what they remembered from the doolhouse to be a bedroom of sorts. Their way was blocked by a closed door, which Lord Coal decided to boldly open. Instead of swinging open however, the door grew eyes and a terrifying set of teeth, and bit into Edward's flesh deeply. After retreating a short distance, Limyé set it on fire. The **mimic**, a member of a species not known for their intelligence, decided to fall back and reform as a fake door in the other corridor leading to the same room. This left the way into the bedroom, through a den, open.

In the center of the room stood a large wood-framed bed with a rotted feather mattress. A wooden footlocker stood at the foot of the bed. Two of the walls were adorned with separate paintings of Gustav and Elisabeth Durst. Richard decided to check the wall behind Gustav's painting for hidden passages. Knocking on the wall, he discovered that the space behind was empty. When he started digging into the wall with a dagger, a wrinkled hand burst through the wall and grabbed him. When Richard tried to free himself, the ghastly undead remains of Gustav Durst followed. Soon thereafter, the other painting exploded, with undead Elisabeth joining the fray. With our heroes already wounded, this battle in close quarters was a close one. With a powerful swipe of his clawed hand, Gustav knocked Limyé out, leaving him bleeding to death. Everyone gave their best, focusing on taking down Gustav first. Rann managed to shoot him down with his bow. Elisabeth fought fiercely, but Richard managed to sneak in behind her and disembowel her all over the rotten mattress. With the fighting finished, Lord Coal rushed to his mentor's help and managed to stabilise him, before he succumbed to his wounds. Before retreating for some rest, the party checked out the footlocker, which turned out to be full of loot.

LOOT IN THE FOOTLOCKER

The footlocker contained the following:

- A *cloak of protection*
- A small wooden coffer (unlocked) containing four *potions of healing*
- A chain shirt
- A mess kit, a flask of alchemist's fire, a bullseye lantern, a set of thieves' tools
- A spellbook with a yellow leather cover containing the following wizard spells:

1st level: disguise self, identify, mage armor, magic missile, protection from evil and good
 2nd level: darkvision, hold person, invisibility, magic weapon

Battered and on the edge, the party retreated to the hunter's den using the secret passage, where they decided to rest. Afterwards, the adventurers returned to the basement, this time exploring the two leftover rooms. In the center of one of these rooms, they found a well. Investigating closer, our adventurers noticed that the inside walls of the well were covered with scratch marks, some of them covered with dried blood, with a fingernail embedded in a part of the masonry. They dared not explore it further. The room also contained five alcoves with decrepit beds and chests locked with padlocks. Inside they found evidence that these were some sort of cultist quarters and some loot.

LOOT IN THE CHESTS

The chests contained the following: 11 gp and 60 sp in a pouch made of human skin, 3 moss agates (worth 10 gp each) in a folded piece of black cloth, a black leather eyepatch with a carnelian (worth 50 gp) sewn into it, an ivory hairbrush with silver bristles (worth 25 gp) and a silvered shortsword.

The other room turned out to be most probably cult initiates' quarters, with several moldy straw pallets in alcoves. Having explored this level, our adventurers decided to descend lower, towards the sound of the incessant chanting. The direct route led through a corridor that Lord Coal noticed to be curiously empty of any footprints. A careful investigation revealed a 5-foot-long, 10-foot-deep pit hidden under several rotted wooden planks, all hidden under a thin layer of dirt. The pit had sharpened wooden spikes at the bottom. Circling around, our heroes finally took the stairs down.

LOWER BASEMENT

After descending down the 20-foot-long staircase, our heroes found themselves in a large room, which turned out to be some sort of reliquary. The ghostly chant emanating from one of the tunnels leading out of it could now be discerned to be the words "He is the Ancient. He is the Land." spoken over and over again by a dozen or so voices. Thirteen relics were stored in niches around the room:

- A small, mummified, yellow hand with sharp claws (a goblin's hand) on a loop of rope
- A knife carved from a human bone
- A dagger with a rat's skull set into the pommel
- An 8-inch-diameter varnished orb made from a nothic's eye
- An aspergillum carved from bone
- A folded cloak made from stitched ghoul skin
- A desiccated frog lashed to a stick (which Limyé originally mistook for a wand of polymorph)
- A bag full of bat guano
- A hag's severed finger
- A 6-inch-tall wooden figurine of a mummy, its arms crossed over its chest
- An iron pendant adorned with a devil's face
- The shrunken, shriveled head of a halfling
- A small wooden coffer containing a dire wolf's withered tongue

Two tunnels led from the room – from one of them the ghostly chant emanated, but the way was blocked with an iron portcullis. The other led the party to what looked like a prison, with rusty shackles on walls. One of these was occupied by a dried out skeleton. On its finger, Lord Coal found an interesting looking ring, which Limyé found to be magical. Putting it on, Edward found it to be inhabited by a soul of a former cultist of Osybus. The tiefling warlock took the ring and conversed with the ghost.

The group learned that the cult led by Dursts tried to summon malevolent extraplanar entities with no success. The cultists also preyed on visitors, sacrificed them in bizarre rituals, and hosted morbid banquets to feast on their corpses. When nothing came of these ritualized murders, the cultists' activities became thinly disguised excuses to indulge their lurid fantasies. The ranks of the cult thinned as members began to lose interest in the debacle. Then Strahd von Zarovich arrived. The cultists regarded Strahd as a messiah sent to them by the Dark Powers. Drawn to Strahd like moths to a flame, they pledged their devotion for a promise of immortality, but Strahd turned them away, deeming the cult and its leaders unworthy of his attention. The ring occupier was opposed to the cult's new direction, and was imprisoned for it, whence he died of hunger. He revealed that the ring is a

Ring of Mind Shielding.

Having heard enough, the warlock took the ring off and decided to keep it in his pocket until the party finds a way of removing the cannibal's spirit from it. In one of the walls, Rann discovered a secret door, which led into a forty-foot-square chamber from which the chant emanated. When our adventurers went through the door, the chant abruptly stopped. The smooth masonry walls provided excellent acoustics. Featureless stone pillars supported the ceiling, and a breach in the west wall lead to a dark cave heaped with refuse. Murky water covered most of the floor. Stairs led up to dry stone ledges that hugged the walls. In the middle of the room, more stairs rose to form an octagonal dais that also rose above the water. Rusty chains with shackles dangled from the ceiling directly above a stone altar mounted on the dais. The altar was carved with hideous depictions of grasping ghouls and was stained with dry blood.

Lord Coal first decided to carefully examine the pile of refuse, which turned out to contain old bones, scraps of clothing and other trash. Rann decided to jump onto the dais from the ledge, but his first attempt led him to tripping into the fould water. Nonplussed, he got up and stepped up to the altar. In that moment the chanting rose once more as thirteen dark apparitions appeared on the ledges overlooking the room. Each one resembled a black-robed figure holding a torch, but the torch's fire was black and seemed to draw light into it. Where you'd expect to see faces were voids. "One must die!" they chanted, over and over. "One must die! One must die!" Rann's reaction was to immediately shoot one of the spectral cultists, but the arrow passed through him without any apparent effect. The ranger decided to walk down from the dais. When he stepped off, the cultists' chant changed: "Lorghoth the Decayer, we awaken thee!" This chant roused the mound in the alcove. With the final change of the chant to "The end comes! Death, be praised!", the heap attacked Lord Coal standing nearby.



Rather than run away, the party decided to face this horror. While their attacks kept hitting it, the monster seemed to take little notice of it. Rann and Richard kept shooting it from distance, Limyé pummeled it with his sacred flames, while Edward kept stabbing it with his rapier from behind. The thing tried at first to smash Lord Coal with its tentacles, unsuccessfully, before advancing on the other adventurers, who bunched up by the portcullis. Switching to melee range, Rann attacked it with two shortswords, while Richard sneakily attacked it from the flank. This did not stop its advances however, and its tentacles felled the warlock, before turning its attention to the sneaky rogue. Despite Rann cutting off one of its tentacles, the other one knocked Richard off his feet, leaving him bleeding out. The lucky rogue however quickly sprung to his feet. Lord Coal infused his silver rapier with divine energy, and together with dual-wielding Rann, they managed to bring down the monstrosity before it killed them all.

Once the shambling mound died, the cloaked figures vanished and the basement shook slightly. The paladin layed his hands on the injured rogue and warlock to bring them back from the brink of death. After resting up, our adventurers decided to check if the mists have cleared and if it's safe to leave this house now. When they returned to the first floor through the hidden trapdoor in the hunter's den, they found the house transformed. The interior walls became rotted, the floor cracked, while the previously empty fireplace spewed out black, poisonous smoke. Additionally, all the doors were gone, replaced by slashing scytheblades. Richard studied the pattern of the blades and managed to jump out of the room safely. He taught the others how to do it, but the old Limyé stumbled and got nearly cut in half. Rather than try to repeat this with the other doors, our group decided to try to smash through the interior brittle walls. Swarms of rats poured out of these holes and attacked our heroes, but eventually they managed to leave this death trap without casualties. The mists were gone, and in the dying light of the day, our adventurers for the first time saw that a dark and foreboding castle towers a thousand feet above the village...



VILLAGE OF BAROVIA

With the mists gone, our unfortunate group of adventurers could take their first glimps of the village they found themselves in. No sound cut the silence apart from mournful sobbing echoing through the streets. Many of the houses had their doors and windows shuttered, most of them covered by claw marks. Nearly all the shops were closed long time ago, many of them looted of everything of value. Only two establishments in the village centre gave obvious signs of life, with light spilling out of their windows - the first one with a sign reading "Bildrath's Mercantile", while the second had a sign hanging precariously askew, proclaiming it to be the Bould in the Vine tavern.

The group entered the shop first. Inside they met **Bidrath Cantemir**, the owner of the establishment. From him, they learned that the village they found themselves in is called Barovia. The land has been cursed by the devil, Strahd von Zarovich - a vampire that has ruled over this domain for four centuries. The village resides in a valley, also called Barovia, which is separated from the external world. This didn't seem to bother Cantemir much, as he makes a living off visitors, such as our heroes. Indeed, the prices of his merchandise were tenfold higher than the group was used to, but nonetheless they decided to barter. It was then that they discovered that much of what they took from the Durst house has decayed, including the great collection of books that the warlock took into under protection. Before leaving the shop, the group also learned that there are two other settlements in the valley - the town of Vallaki and the village of Krezk. On the way to these stands an abandoned mill, to which our group seems to possess a deed.

Leaving the shop, they decided to visit the tavern. Inside, a blazing fire in the hearth gave scant warmth to the few souls within. These included the barkeep, three colorfully dressed women sitting together, and a man sitting in the opposite corner. Richard immediately hit the bar, trying to chat up the barkeep. The fellow was mindlessly cleaning the glasses, one after the other. When he finished, he started over again. With a dull, hollow voice he informed the rogue of the prices, but was silent to any other questioning. Finding no luck there, Richard decided to try the pretty ladies, who found him immediately charming. They introduced themselves as Alenka, Mirabel and Sorvia - the Vistani owners of the tavern. These ladies had a very different outlook on the local situation. According to them, Strahd was not such a bad ruler, especially since he allowed the Vistani to come and go as they please. Limyé was very interested to find out that the Vistani are planar travellers, and that indeed Barovia sits in its own plane. He was hurt however, when they referred to the Plane of Light as a boring place. They educated our group that the Barovians are simple, frightened people, most of them without souls - leaving them only capable of fear. The girls also urged the party to visit their camp outside the village, to meet their leader - **Madam Eva** - who could read them their destiny.

The man sitting by himself turned out to be **Ismark Kolyanovich**, the son of Kolyan Indirovich, the burgomaster of Barovia. He confirmed to our adventurers that the letter of invitation they received was a forgery and warned our heroes not to trust the Vistani, who he claimed are Strahd's spies. With that out of the way, he asked for help in getting his sister Ireena to safety outside of the village. He would not go into the details inside the tavern and invited the group to follow him to his house.

The group arrived at a weary-looking mansion hiding behind a twisted and torn fence. Heavy claw markings have stripped the once-beautiful finish of the walls. Great black marks told of the fires that have assailed the mansion. Not a pane nor a shard of glass stood in the windows, all of them barred with planks, each one marked with stains of evil omen. Upon entering, the party met **Ireena Kolyana**, a striking young woman with auburn hair and pale skin. The burgomaster was in a side drawing room - lying in a simple wooden coffin surrounded by wilting flowers and a faint odor of decay.

Ireena and Ismark told the adventurers that their home has been under attack by creatures of the night for weeks. Their father's heart couldn't stand the constant assault, and he died three days ago. Looking closer at Ireena, Rann noticed two puncture wounds on Ireena's neck. The siblings explained that she has been already bitten twice by Strahd himself, and while still alive, she would not survive another of his attacks. That's why Ismark wanted the group to help him escort her to safety either in Vallaki's church, or even better in the Abbey of Saint Markovia in Krezk. Before leaving however, the burgomaster had to be buried - Ireena kindly asked the group if they could help to bury their father in the local cemetery, to which they agreed. Our adventurers decided to speedily do it the same evening and set out with the coffin in a procession.



CHURCH

The church stood atop a slight rise, against the roots of the pillar stone that supports Castle Ravenloft, the residence of the devil Strahd. The church has obviously weathered the assaults of evil for centuries on end. A bell tower rose toward the back, and a flickering light shone through the holes in the shingled roof. The heavy wooden doors of the church were covered by claw marks and scarred by fire. Opening them led into a dark hall reeking of mildew, leading to a brightly lit chapel. From the entrance, the chapel was obviously strewn with debris, but a soft voice reciting a prayer could be heard from within. The group advanced inside. Suddenly, the prayer was blotted out by an inhuman scream rising from beneath the wooden floor. The chapel was in shambles, with overturned and broken pews littering the dusty floor. Dozens of candles mounted in candlesticks and candelabras lit every dusty corner in a fervent attempt to rid the chapel of shadows. At the far end of the church sat a claw-scarred altar, behind which a priest kneeled in soiled vestments. From beneath the chapel floor, the group heard a young man's voice cry out, "Father! I'm starving!"

The priest seemed to be in a daze, his voice hoarse and weak. Only when Lord Coal and Limyé noticed that he wore the vestments of Lathander and remarked upon it, did his insanity temporarily recede. He introduced himself as **Father Donavich**, and informed the party that the church has been cursed - the screams below coming from his own son, whom he imprisoned. A little more than a year ago, his twenty-year old son **Doru** and several other villagers stormed Castle Ravenloft in revolt, having been lured there by a wizard in black robes who came to Barovia from a faraway land. By all accounts, the wizard died by Strahd's hand, and so too did Doru. However, a month ago his son returned changed, a vampire spawn.

Donavich was able to trap his son in the church's undercroft, where he remained to this day. Doru hadn't been fed since he was imprisoned, and has been crying out to his father at all hours. The priest meanwhile has been praying day and night, hoping that the Morninglord would tell him how to save Doru without destroying him.

Our adventurers decided to help the priest with his son, promising not to hurt him. They found the trapdoor to the basement in a moldy, neglected room with holes punched in the ceiling. The heavy wooden trapdoor was held shut with a chain and padlock, which Richard deftly opened with his lockpicks. Going down the hatch, they found themselves in a large undercroft with rough-hewn walls and a rickety staircase leading down to a floor made of damp clay and earth. Their torches revealed a gaunt shape of Doru in the far corner. As the adventurers slowly approached and cornered him, he hissed "I can smell your blood!" Doru surprised everyone, when instead of rushing at them, he jumped onto the wall and spider-climbed on the ceiling towards the open trapdoor. Fortunately, Rann stayed at the top of the staircase and managed to bar his passage long enough for the Kolyanovich siblings to slam the hatch shut, trapping the vampire spawn with our adventurers.

Having nowhere to run, Doru turned to attacking our heroes. Despite his small stature, he was surprisingly strong and nimble. The group repeatedly stabbed and slashed at him, but his wounds kept closing. At one point, Doru jumped onto Rann and bit into his neck, leaving the elf significantly weakened, while the vampire regenerated. Rann smashed his holy symbol into Doru's face, successfully throwing him off himself. The contact with the holy symbol temporarily stopped his regeneration, and it seemed like finally the vampire spawn could be brought down. However, Doru chose his next victim in the warlock, and latched onto his throat. This brought Limyé to his knees, nearly killing him. Rann managed to force Doru off by smashing a bottle of holy water on his back, causing him to writhe in pain. With his regenerative abilities blocked, the damage started showing effects. Finally, Lord Coal imbued his rapier with divine energy and stabbed Doru in the back of the neck. The holy power ripped the young man apart, scattering his flesh everywhere.

Having put the son to rest, the party returned to the church proper and locked the basement away. Rather than telling the truth, Richard spun a convincing story of using magical means to put his son to sleep and forbidding Donavich to enter the undercroft. With this, the priest regained enough composure to oversee the funeral of the burgomaster. The group hoisted the coffin and left in a procession to the cemetery behind the church. Richard, Lord Coal and Ismark volunteered to dig the grave, while Rann climbed the roof of the church to keep watch. With the hole dug, the ceremony started, but it was obvious that Father Donavich was not fully up to the task, forgetting his words. Limyé however was quick to help and started leading the priest in the prayer.

It was then, during the ceremony, that Rann noticed the mists closing in around the cemetery. He also noticed a large black cloud moving fast. As it got closer, it became obvious that it was not a cloud, but thousands of bats. They rushed into the graveyard, blinding everyone. In just a few moments it was gone, but looking around, everyone now noticed that behind the graveyard's fences, dozens of wolves were visible in the mists.



Behind the wolves stood a long-haired man with a pale face, clad in a dark cape. He extended his hand towards the group in the graveyard and the wolves jumped over the fence. The group was quickly overwhelmed by the numbers, though curiously none of the wolves went after Ireena. As she started to stab the wolves around, the figure behind the fence raised his hand again and spoke quietly. Lord Coal heard the words "Come to me, Tatyana." Upon this, Ireena dropped her sword and started to slowly head in the direction of the caped figure. While Richard led a quick retreat towards the rood of the church, Lord Coal cast his commanding magic onto Ireena, freeing her mind from the control of the man in the mists. They joined the flight towards the church, but Ismark was not fortunate enough - several wolves tore at his legs, bringing him down. His sister tried to help him, but Edward wrestled her to safety.

Things were looking dire, when the sky filled yet again with black shapes. This time however, it was an unkindness of ravens, which descended upon the wolves. The caped man shouted "You can't keep her from me for long!" Quickly, the mists grew denser, and only screams of tortured Ismark could be heard. Within a minute, the mists quickly dispersed, with the wolves and the man gone. The group saw Ismark still moving in a spreading pool of blood. Limyé quickly ran to him and used his magic to spare him from dying. Together with Edward's divine healing, they managed to stabilize him. Father Donavich was however not that lucky - they found his body hiding behind one of the tombstones, his throat ripped open.

The party then decided to quickly dig a second grave for the priest and finish the ceremony. Shortly after concluding the funerals, the group noticed an eerie green light suffusing the graveyard. From this light a ghostly procession emerged.

Wavering images of doughty women toting greatswords, woodwise men with slender bows, dwarves with glittering axes and archaically dressed mages with beards and strange, pointed hats march forth from the graveyard into the musts. Ismark and Ireena explained to the group that this happens every midnight - the ghosts of adventurers who came here to destroy Strahd, but failed, raise to attempt to complete their quests, and each night they fail.

Having enough of this madness, the group decided to retreat to the burgomaster's mansion for the night and rest. While checking whether the house was secure, Lord Coal came upon a mirror, in which he yet again saw himself older. This time the visage was even older than last time, most of his hair fallen out, face covered with wrinkles and scars. No one else saw anything strange in it however, and when he looked back, he saw his normal self.

THE ROAD TO VALLAKI

In the morning, the adventurers decided to help Ismark in escorting his sister to safety of the church in Vallaki. Leaving the mansion, they found the streets covered in morning mists. On the way out of the village, they heard the sound of small, wooden wheels rolling across damp cobbles. They traced the lonely sound to a hunched old woman bundled in rags, pushing a rickety wooden cart through the fog. Richard approached her and found out that she was out trying to sell her *dream pastries*, only 1 gp apiece. He refused politely, and the whole group left for the road to Vallaki.



Shortly after leaving the village, the party crossed an arching 50 feet long stone bridge over the river Ivlis. Within an hour, they found themselves at a crossroads. An old wooden gallows creaked in a chill wind blowing down from the high ground to the west. A frayed length of rope danced from its beam. The well-worn road split here, and a signpost opposite the gallows pointed off in three directions: *BAROVIA VILLAGE* to the east, *TSER POOL* to the northwest, and *RAVENLOFT/VALLAKI* to the southwest. The northwest fork slanted down and disappeared into the trees, while the southwest clung to an upward slope. Across from the gallows, a low crumbling wall enclosed a small plot of graves. Ismark informed the group that there is a Vistani camp at Tser Pool, where they could hopefully borrow horses for the longer trip to Vallaki and meet the local Vistani leader.

As the group turned to the northwest path, they heard a creaking noise behind, coming from the gallows. Where there was nothing before now hung a lifeless, gray body. The breeze turned the hanged figure slowly, revealing it to be Rann! With the fear gripping his hearts, Rann cut down the body without touching it and asked the warlock to set the gallows on fire. Limyé created a bonfire under the platform, and when the flames touched it, the body quickly melted away into nothingness.

TSER POOL

Somewhat disturbed, the party headed towards the Vistani camp. The road gradually disappeared and was replaced by a twisted, muddy path through the trees. Deep ruts in the earth were evidence of the comings and goings of wagons.

The canopy of mist and branches suddenly gave way to black clouds boiling far above. They came to a clearing next to a river that widened to form a small lake several hundred feet across. Five colorful round tents, each ten feet in diameter, were pitched outside a ring of four barrel-topped wagons. A much larger tent stood near the shore of the lake, its sagging form lit from within. Near this tent, eight unbridled horses were drinking from the lake.

Mournful strains of an accordion clashed with the singing of several brightly clad figures around the bonfire. The Vistani invited the group to join them and offered refreshments. Richard told them a modified version of the story of how the group arrived in Barovia, and inquired about where they could find Arrigal, the man who gave them the original letter. "He's in the larger camp just outside of Vallaki," was the answer. Grateful for his story, one of the colorful figures in the circle told his own story:

"A mighty wizard came to this land over a year ago. I remember him like it was yesterday. He stood exactly where you're standing. A very charismatic man, he was. He thought he could rally the people of Barovia against the devil Strahd. He stirred them with thoughts of revolt and bore them to the castle en masse."

"When the vampire appeared, the wizard's peasant army fled in terror. A few stood their ground and were never seen again."

"The wizard and the vampire cast spells at each other. Their battle flew from the courtyards of Ravenloft to a precipice overlooking the falls. I saw the battle with my own eyes. Thunder shook the mountainside, and great rocks tumbled down upon the wizard, yet by his magic he survived. Lightning from the heavens struck the wizard, and again he stood his ground. But when the devil Strahd fell upon him, the wizard's magic couldn't save him. I saw him thrown a thousand feet to his death. I climbed down to the river to search for the wizard's body, to see if, you know, he had anything of value, but the River Ivlis had already spirited him away."

After finishing his story, he told the group that it was actually fated that they would visit the camp, as **Madam Eva** foretold their coming, and she awaited them in her tent. Curious, they accepted the invitation and headed to the larger tent. Magic flames cast a reddish glow over the interior of this tent, revealing a low table covered in a black velvet cloth.

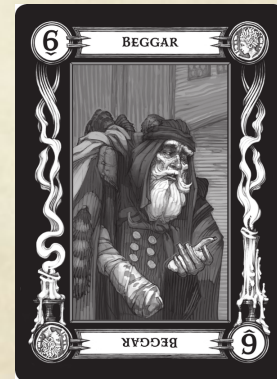
Glints of light seemed to flash from a crystal ball on the table as a hunched figure peered into its depth. As the crone spoke, her voice crackled like dry weeds. "At last you have arrived!" Cackling laughter burst like mad lightning from her withered lips. Madam Evaseemed to know the names of the adventurers and asked them if they want their fortunes read. When they agreed, she pulled out a worn deck of cards and drew five cards from it, placing them face down on the table.

She first flipped the left card and said "This card tells of history. Knowledge of the ancient will help you better understand your enemy."



"9 of Swords, the Torturer... There is a town where all is not well. There you will find a house of corruption, and within, a dark room full of still ghosts."

She then flipped the top card, and spoke "This card tells of a powerful force for good and protection, a holy symbol of great hope."



"6 of Coins, the Beggar... A wounded elf has what you seek. He will part with the treasure to see his dark dreams fulfilled."

Next she turned the rightmost card and said "This is a card of power and strength. It tells of a weapon of vengeance: a sword of sunlight."



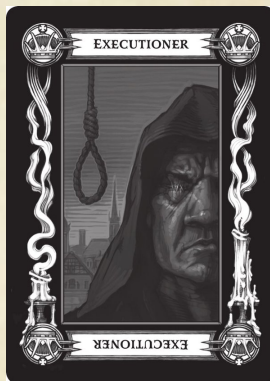
"9 of Coins, the Miser... Look for a fortress inside a fortress, in a place hidden behind fire."

She then turned the bottom card: "This card sheds light on one who will help you greatly in the battle against darkness."



"The Broken One... Your greatest ally will be a wizard. His mind is broken, but his spells are strong."

Finally, she flipped the last, central card and proclaimed "Your enemy is a creature of darkness, whose powers are beyond mortality. This card will lead you to him!"



"The Executioner... I see a dark figure on a balcony, looking down upon this tortured land with a twisted smile."

The group tried to ask Madam Eva for clarifications, but she was silent on them, save for explaining that their greatest enemy in this land is Strahd von Zarovich, and that she hopes they can lift his curse and let him finally find happiness, which he has not tasted ever since the love of his life, a Barovian girl named Tatyana, died so many centuries ago. Not being able to get more understanding of the prophecy, Richard asked if they could borrow some horses for Madam Eva's quest, to which she agreed and told him to discuss it with Petr outside. The group left the tent, but Limyé stayed behind for a while, asking Madam Eva, if she would teach him their ways of planar travel if they manage to destroy Strahd. The old crone was noncommittal, but did not outright refuse.

Outside, Richard approached Petr about borrowing some horses. He agreed, but naturally wanted some payment in exchange. It just happened that he was making a doll for his daughter and was missing hair for it, so if Rann would be so nice as to give a lock of his, he would be happy. Smelling a trap, Richard spun a story of coming from a land of Farquaad, where sharing one's hair is a taboo. After some discussions, they agreed overtly to get the hair of Ireena. In truth, Rann sneaked towards the horses, and using his great affinity with animals, shaved off some horse tail hairs, while Richard distracted Petr with a description of a dice game he invented.

THE OLD SVALICH ROAD

With three least pretty horses, the group turned back to the way they came from. Returning to the crossing, they found the gallows completely burned down, and chose the southwest fork towards Vallaki. The road had an upward slope, clinging to a mountainside. The group rode with their eyes peeled for any surprises, and within an hour was back in deep woods.

At one point, they noticed a foot trail that crossed through the wilderness. Knowing that this part of the wood was not very deep, Rann and Richard decided to follow the path, not wanting to be surprised from behind later. The trail was clearly man-made, and here and there a bare foot print could be found. Rann found out that this was a clear trap, when he nearly fell into a concealed pit, the bottom of which was lined with sharpened wooden stakes. From the size of it, it was clear that the trap was meant for curious travellers.

Back on the trail, the group soon came to an arching bridge of mold-encrusted stone spanning a natural chasm. Gargoyles cloaked in black moss perched on the corners of the bridge, their frowns weatherworn. On the mountainous side of the bridge, a waterfall spilled into a misty pool, seemingly the one next to the Vistani camp, nearly a thousand feet below. Fearing the gargoyles to be real, the warlock concentrated on detecting any magic, but found none. The group dismounted the horses and crossed the bridge on foot, to avoid slipping on the slick stones.

Shortly after, the travelling party arrived at another split in the road. The eastern branch widened and showed patches of cobblestone, suggesting it was once an important thoroughfare. The place was deathly quiet and devoid of life, save for a lone raven that circled overhead. The Kolyanovich siblings informed our intrepid adventurers that the road to the east led to Castle Ravenloft. It was decided unanimously that the west road was the better choice for this trip.

Within a few minutes, the horses led them to an enormous set of gates in a valley, similar to the ones that the party used to enter the valley in the first place. The gigantic iron gates were closed, but opened screechingly on their own when the horses got closer. Once the last horse passed through, the gates shut with a loud clang that could be heard for miles.

The trail now started sloping down through a valley and soon entered the misty woods yet again. After a while a voice called out "Who goes there?" From within the thick mists came out a large man in drab clothing, with shaggy, black hair and thick muttonchops. He leaned heavily on a spear and had a small bundle of animal pelts slung over his shoulder. Behind him four more trappers appeared from the fog. They seemed friendly enough, but their interest in our adventurers' weapons, and whether they were silvered, arose suspicion. Feeling that these might be lycanthropes, the party showed off their weapons peacefully, and Richard told the story of Limyé - the famous werewolf hunter. This seems to have worked, as the strangers soon left.

Soon, the horses led our party out of the woods, and the Old Svalich Road transitioned from being a winding path through the Balinok Mountains to a lazy trail that hugged the mountainside, as it descended into a fog-filled valley. In the heart of the valley, a walled town could be seen near the shores of a great mountain lake, its waters dark and still. "Vallaki," said Ismark. A branch in the road split west leading to a promontory, atop which perched a dilapidated windmill.



Being in a possession of a deed to the Durst windmill, our adventurers decided to take a small detour and inspect the structure closer. The onion-domed edifice leaned forward and to one side, as though trying to turn away from the stormy gray sky. The walls were made from gray brick and a decrepit wooden platform encircled the windmill above a flimsy doorway. Perched on a wooden beam above the door was a raven. It hopped and squawked at the group, seemingly agitated. Rann tried communicating with the bird to see what it felt, and got "Danger! Danger!" in response. The raven flapped its wings outward and flew away. Richard immediately counseled to leave the place for later exploration. Just then, everyone heard a faint scream of a child from within. Lord Coal and Ireena were very concerned and wanted to immediately rush in, but others tried to talk them out of it. Another scream broke the silence.

Upon being questioned about this place, Ismark said that he didn't know much about it, save for the fact that some locals call it the **Old Bonegrinder**. Our adventurers were torn about entering, but Richard strongly opposed entering, on account of being lured in by children to a previous property owned by the Dursts. Ireena countered by saying that she was aware of some children going missing in Barovia village in recent times. In the meantime Limy  concentrated on detecting whether magic emanated from the place and found that indeed there was. The party decided to first escort Ireena to safety, before returning here later. Just as they were leaving, Richard heard the last scream, this time proclaiming "I don't want to be eaten!", but seeing that no one else heard it, decided to not burden them with these words.

VALLAKI

The rest of the road to Vallaki was uneventful, and within a few hours the travellers reached the sullen mountain burg surrounded by a wooden palisade. Thick fog pressed up against this wall, as though looking for a way inside. The dirt road ended at a set of sturdy iron gates with a pair of shadowy figures behind them. Planted in the ground and flanking the road outside the gates were a half-dozen pikes with wolves' heads impaled on them.

The two guards were suspicious at first, but eventually agreed to let everyone in. They introduced themselves as **Anton Groza** and **Lavinia Vadu** and answered some questions about Vallaki. First and foremost, they spoke of the burgomaster, **Baron Vargas Vallakovich**, who rules over Vallaki.

The Baron is a strong man who opposes Strahd, but his way of keeping evil at bay is to enforce happiness. He organizes festivals nearly every week, which the guards secretly found tedious. Last week there was the Wolf's Head Jamboree and within three days there would be the Festival of the Blazing Sun. Anton warned the party to not anger the burgomaster however, as he punishes any wrongdoings severely, and to be especially careful of his main henchman **Izek Strazni**, who can be easily recognized on account of having a demonic fiery hand. On being asked where they could stay, the guards suggested the **Blue Water Inn**, which offers food, wine and shelter to visitors. A stranger with pointy ears arrived there recently, coming to Barovia from a distant land, riding into town on a carnival wagon.



The group decided to head straight for the church. On the way they passed the **Arasek Stockyard**, parked in which was the carnival wagon, its colorful paint peeling off. Faded lettering on its sides spelled out the words "Rictavio's Carnival of Wonders."

ST. ANDRAL'S BONES

Along the way to the **St. Andral's Church**, they passed a more lively town than Barovia village, with several stores, including a toy shop. Finally the group arrived at a slouching, centuries-old church of the Morninglord with a bulging steeple in the back and walls lined with cracked, stained glass windows depicting pious saints. Inside were several older women praying in the pews, and a priest with an altar boy. The group introduced their necessity of protecting Ireena from Strahd to **Father Lucian Petrovich**. Upon hearing this, the priest's face fell and he ushered the party in to his office for a private chat.

Until recently, the church was protected from Strahd's depredations by the bones of St. Andral, which were sealed in a crypt beneath the church's main altar. But now the church is at risk because someone broke into the crypt a few nights ago and stole the bones. Until recently, Father Lucian was the only person in Vallaki who knew about the bones, but he recalled mentioning them to Yeska, the altar boy, over a month ago to put the fearful boy at ease. After the bones were stolen, Father Lucian asked Yeska if he told anyone else about the bones. The boy nodded but wouldn't divulge a name.

The group agreed to help in finding the bones to restore the protection, and called in Yeska into the office. Richard scared the little boy into submission, and learned from him that the boy spoke of the bones to **Milvoj**, the grounds keeper and grave digger. Father Lucian suspected him, but has been reluctant to confront him because the lad is so temperamental.

Our adventurers found Milvoj in the church's graveyard. When confronted about the theft, he was defensive at first. Only when Richard bluffed about taking him to the Baron, did Milvoj spill his story. He admitted that Yeska told him about the bones. He also admitted to passing along the information to **Henrik van der Voort**, the local coffin maker, and to stealing the bones for Henrik in return for money to help feed his younger sisters and brothers. Upon finding out that his theft has removed the protection from forces of evil, Milvoj broke down in tears.

With an hour left before sunset, the party decided to quickly head to the coffin maker's shop. The uninviting shop was two stories tall and had a sign shaped like a coffin above the front door. All of the window shutters were closed up tight, and a deathly silence surrounded the establishment. Not wanting to lose time, the group decided to split - Richard and Rann would try climbing to the second story and break in through one of the windows, while the others would use the front doors. When Lord Coal knocked on the door, all he got in response was "Go Away! We're closed!" Further reasoning with him to open the shop did not bear fruit. That's when Richard successfully managed to open the window on the second floor and entered a large, drafty room strung with cobwebs. It took up most of the upper floor. Stacks of wooden planks lay amid several crates marked "JUNK." Rann decided to open the first crate in front of him, and just as he started lifting the lid, something exploded from within!

As soil and wood fell to ground, a vampire spawn emerged from the box, dressed like a fallen adventurer. Five more vampiric adventurers jumped from the other crates and all attacked the unlucky Rann and Richard. At first our adventurers tried to fight and stand their ground, but it soon became obvious that this is not a fight they could win. One of the vampires latched onto the elf and started drinking his blood.

In the meantime, the group outside heard the commotion, and Lord Coal decided to kick the door open. The coffin maker quickly told them that he was being held against his will by vampires, and that the stolen bones were upstairs in his bedroom, hidden in a wardrobe. Edward and Limyé rushed upstairs, towards the bedroom. Meanwhile, Rann through a flask of oil on the vampire on him and lit it, freeing himself. He then leapt out of the window. Richard soon followed him, but not before stabbing one of the undead adventurers. The fire spread, and the creatures were kept busy trying to put it out. A flaming torch or two thrown in by Rann added to the distraction. Richard circled around and started setting the workshop on fire and calling for guards.

While Limyé run into the bedroom in search of the bones, Lord Coal defended him from the vampires. The sack of bones was well-hidden however, and it took many precious seconds to find it. Too many, as a vampire managed to climb around on the outside of the building and enter through the window into the bedroom. It jumped onto the warlock and drank his blood. Lord Coal used all his divine powers to protect his mentor from the other vampires and remove the one on him, with success.

Holding the sacks he found - one with bones and one with coins (**30 sp and 12 ep**) - Limyé decided to jump out of the window. On the way to it, two of the undead adventurers managed to swipe at him, the second one unbalancing the old man just as he was jumping out. The tiefling landed on his face unconscious.

One of the vampires jumped out after him and stabbed him with his claws, ending the warlock's life. Lord Coal followed and was horrified to see his mentor's lifeless body bleeding out on the ground. He took the bags out of his hands and handed them to Ireena, instructing her to run towards the church as fast as possible.

Limyé woke up in a dark crypt. Taking out his magical light, he saw that behind him, skeletal hands started springing from the ground, as far as the eye could see. Each had fingernails sharper than any sword the warlock had ever seen. In the other direction he saw a body, floating in midair, bleeding from the stumps where its right arm, legs, and head should be. It offered him its left hand, which was missing the fingers and thumb. Knowing that certain death would come for him otherwise, and that his soul would be forever lost in the mists of Barovia, Limyé took the thing's hand.

Lord Coal looked on with shock as Limyé rose up, his wounds closing. Then he looked into his mentor's face - his eyes had melted away. The warlock lost his ability to see, but gained magical blindsight. With no time for exploring this, everyone ran away towards the church. On the way, our group was stopped by a small garrison of town guards, whom they sent towards the shop, with explanation of vampire attack.

Our adventurers reached the St. Andral's Church shortly before sunset, right during the evening mass. Once father Lucian found out that the bones have been returned, he told the group that they have to be reburied for the church to be protected from forces of evil. The mass was cut short, and Richard helped escort two children home. Rann climbed the bell tower for lookout, while Limyé stayed outside in shadows. Lord Coal assisted in the prayers, while Milvoj dug behind the altar to the previous resting place of St. Andral.

Just as the empty box was revealed, Rann noticed a familiar black cloud closing in from the distance. He managed to warn the others by ringing the bell, before a swarm of bats surrounded him and smashed their way into the church through the stained-glass windows. Shortly after, the doors to the church started buckling, something trying to get in. From top, Rann saw that this was caused by four of the vampire spawn trying to get in. Limyé snuck in through the back entrance and burned half of the bats with his magic, while Rann jumped down on the vampires, stabbing two of them with wooden spikes through their chests. This slowed them down enough for Lord Coal and Father Lucian to finish the burial.

In that moment, bright daylight emanated from the church for a moment, scattering the bats and setting the vampire spawn on fire. The undead adventurers fled, but Rann managed to bring one of them down with his bow. On him, he found a sack with **70 pp** and **Staff of Healing**. Inside the church, with the bats gone, the group noticed the lifeless body of Milvoj, the gravedigger, drained of blood by the bats. Our adventurers managed to convince Father Petrovich that he should be cremated.

With the church now safe, our adventurers decided to spend the night there, together with the Kolyanovich siblings. Before retiring to sleep, however, the warlock was questioned about his resurrection. He lied that it must have been the Morninglord who returned him, but Rann's and Lord Coal's detection magic told them that Limyé seems to have become an evil undead. He however did not feel much different, apart from the blindness. Lord Coal decided to fix that temporarily, by blackening his mentor's glasses with soot.

SECOND DAY IN VALLAKI

In the morning our adventurers decided to see what happened with the coffin maker. Heading over to his shop, they found the workshop partially burned, with new bloodstains, but no one was there. Close to the coffin maker's place however, the group found Vallaki's town square. The shops and homes that enclose it were decorated with limp, tattered garlands and painted wooden boxes filled with tiny, dead flowers. At the north end of the square stood a row of stocks, locked in which were several men, women, and children wearing crude, plaster donkey heads. Next to that stood gallows, from which hung the dead coffin maker. posted proclamations:

In the center of the square, peasants in patchwork clothes eyed the group suspiciously as they used cups and vases to draw water from a crumbling stone fountain. Standing tall at the center of the fountain was a gray statue of an impressive man facing west. All around the square were posted proclamations:

Come one, come all,
to the greatest celebration of the year:
THE WOLF'S HEAD JAMBOREE!
Attendance and children required.
Pikes will be provided.
ALL WILL BE WELL!
-The Baron-

As the group stood looking around the square, two town guards arrived with a large man with a demonic hand, who the group recognized as the Baron's henchman Izek Strazni from previous description. One of the guards started tearing down all of the old proclamations while the other posted the following new one:

COME ONE, COME ALL,
to the greatest celebration of the year:
THE FESTIVAL OF THE BLAZING SUN!
Attendance and children required.
Rain or shine.
ALL WILL BE WELL!
-The Baron-

Soon the guards noticed our group and approached. Izek at first accused them of disturbing peace, but Richard made the good case of revealing a traitor in the town. Izek then agreed to set up a meeting with the Baron in the afternoon. After he left, our adventurers decided to shop around a little bit, including improving their armor with the local blacksmith. At the Arasek Stockyard, Richard decided to look closer at the carnival wagon. As he got closer, the wagon suddenly lurched, as though something big had thrown itself against the inside wall. You could hear the cracking of wood, the scraping of metal, and the snarl of something inhuman. Upon closer inspection, Richard noticed that the sides of the wagon were spattered with dry blood. He also saw an inscription on the wagon's door frame that read, "I bring you from Shadow into Light!" Climbing on top of the wagon, he found a small hatch in the roof, through which he saw some sort of tiger inside.

After this, the group decided to visit the Blue Water Inn, at which they heard the carnival master was staying. The tavern was packed with tables and chairs, with narrow paths meandering between them. A bar stretched along one wall, under a balcony that could be reached by a wooden staircase that hugged the north wall. Another balcony overhanged an entrance to the east. All the windows were fitted with thick shutters and crossbars. Lanterns hanging above the bar and resting on the tables bathed the room in dull orange light and cast shadows upon the walls, most of which were adorned with wolf heads mounted on wooden plaques.

It being only shortly after noon, the inn was not yet packed with crowds, but a few tables were occupied. At one sat two burly hunters, while another was occupied by two young men, who could have been brothers. The barmaid welcomed the group to the inn, while Rann decided to climb the stairs to the balcony. He immediately ran into an older half-elf, who introduced himself as Rictavio, the carnival master. Rann brought him back to the others to meet Everyone introduced themselves, and Rictavio recognized the name of Lord Coal, saying that he was also from the Sword Coast.

The group was very curious of the bard travelling alone through Barovia. He claimed that he came into this land to seek curiosities for his circus. Before delving into a discussion, Richard went to the bar to order wine and wolf steaks for everyone at the table. Learning that the group wanted to rid the land of Strahd, he invited them to his room.

Once they had more privacy, Rictavio confessed that he also came to Barovia to fight evil, but that he would not be able to join the adventurers, as a powerful Vistani curse laid upon him made sure that his companions would forever meet untimely ends. The group was reluctant to trust him at first, especially with Limyé seeing that he wore the invisible ring of mind shielding. This, Rictavio claimed, was to protect him from the scrying magic of Strahd, who he claimed to be a powerful wizard.

Deciding that they needed allies, our group told Rictavio of Madam Eva's fortune telling. Rictavio immediately interpreted for them that the first card had to be telling of Vallaki, perhaps the house of the burgomaster. He was also sure that the second card spoke of Kasimir Velikov, a dusk elf living outside of the town. For the third one, he wasn't sure if it referred to Castle Ravenloft, or the Amber Temple deep in the mountains to the south. As for the mad mage, he mentioned that the locals have seen him in the past on the northern shores of lake Zarovich, which lies to the town's north. The card leading the adventurers to the prince of darkness he interpreted as pointing to a balcony within the castle Ravenloft's grounds.

Beyond this, Rictavio promised them that he would try to provide additional help, but would not join in their travels. Coming back downstairs, the group ate their steaks, which were brought by the owner of the Blue Water Inn, **Urwin Martikov**. He told the newcomers that the wine comes from his family's vineyard, but that the supply is nearly gone, and the next shipment was overdue. If they would find themselves going west, he would be very glad if they could look into what was causing the delays. Additionally, the local patron, **Bluto**, who used to exchange fish for wine, has not come in the last week, so checking on him around the lake would be also appreciated.

Before leaving the establishment for the meeting with the Baron, the group spoke to the two wolf hunters, **Szoldar Szoldarovich** and **Yevgeni Krushkin**. In exchange for drinks, these two dour fellows gave some advice and directions to different places to our group. Notably, they spoke of the village of Krezk to the west, on the slopes of the mountain; an abandoned village to the south, which in the past has been destroyed by Strahd, and an ancient mansion, where a dragon was once slain.

BURGOMASTER'S MANSION

With their bellies full, our heroes set out towards the Baron's mansion. Just as they arrived, Izek Strazni came out for some errands. Before entering, Rann decided to focus and sense any undead creatures close by. He did in fact sense several faint auras of undead, but coming from some creatures much smaller than halflings. The warlock decided to cast a ritual of magic detection, which told him that there were several sources of magic coming from the attic, including one of powerful, yet undetermined aura.

Lord Coal knocked on the mansion's door, which were then opened by a house maid. The inside corridors were stacked with twig bundles, which the maid explained were for the coming festival. The girl led the group to a well appointed den with a fearsome bear's head on display and asked them to wait, while she fetched the master.

Rather than wait, Richard and Rann decided to sneak out and explore stealthily. Rann used his magic to change his appearance to that of the maid and explored the rooms on the ground floor. In the meantime, Richard snuck towards the staircase leading up and listened for activity. He immediately heard the muted discussion of the maid the the Baron, who decided his guests needed a bit of simmering under the bear's stare. He decided to spend the time by shagging the maid. Richard quietly snuck past the door of the room with the Baron and the maid, and checked out an unlocked bedroom, which was devoid of interesting things. He hid there, waiting for the Baron to leave downstairs.

Just as Rann finished checking out the rooms downstairs, which included a room full of women during some dinner party, and started heading upstairs, he heard the Baron emerging from a room and heading down. The elf hid, and as the burgomaster passed him, he headed upstairs to find a way to the attic, as well as explore a room on the second floor, from which Limyé felt some magic after entering the house. This led him to a room with a large mirror and a manequin with a bridal gown, one which Richard dreamt of the night before.

Baron Vargas Vallakovich entered the den flanked by two huge black mastiffs, wearing a breastplate and a rapier at his side. Lord Coal successfully bluffed that the two other companions had to leave in urgent business. Indeed, Lord Coal and his mentor were so persuasive and agreeing, that the stern burgomaster allowed himself to tell them of the dangers to him at every corner - seemingly two of his house staff vanished a few days ago without any trace! The two party members suggested that they could look into this manner, to which the paranoid burgomaster agreed, calling over the maid to lead them to the servants quarters.

In the meantime, Richard lockpicked his way into another bedroom. This one was full of pretty little dolls with powder-white skin and auburn hair, some of them dressed beautifully, others plainly.

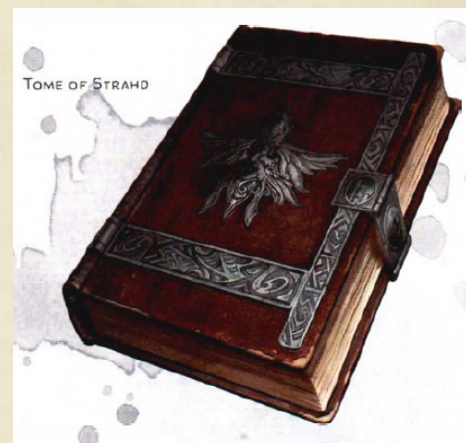
Some of the dolls filled a long bookshelf, and others were arranged in neat rows on wallmounted shelves. Still others were piled atop a bed and a heavy wooden chest. What's most odd is that all of the dolls, apart from their clothing, looked the same. They all looked like Ireena Kolyana. Under the bed, Richard found several empty bottles of wine. He took one of the dolls with him, and headed towards the room in which the Baron was previously in - this turned out to be a library, though he didn't find anything there of interest. The last door in the corridor was also locked, and as he heard the footsteps of the Baron returning, Richard deftly picked the lock and jumped into the small closet.

Downstairs, the maid led the warlock and the paladin into the servant quarters, where they found all of the belongings of the two staff members still there. After asking some questions about the house layout, they promised the maid that they would leave the house, while she took care of some urgent matters. Naturally, when the chance presented itself, the duo snuck upstairs, and joined Rann in entering the attic through the trapdoor in the master bedroom.

After fumbling with his matchbox and finding some light, Richard found out that he wasn't alone in the closet - chained to the back wall was a badly beaten man wearing nothing but a loincloth. The iron shackles had cut into his wrists, causing blood to trickle down his hands. He introduced himself as Udo Lukovich, the shoemaker. He was arrested during the Wolf's Head Jamboree for carrying a sign that suggested that Vallakians should feed the Baron to the wolves. Richard decided to unlock his shackles, but could not risk escorting the man out yet. Instead he gave him a dagger to stab his torturer and promised that on their way out, the group would try helping him. He then sneaked out and eventually found his way to the attic, joining his friends.

This large attic was full of old, forgotten things draped in white sheets. Piled around them were barrels, crates, trunks, and old furnishings covered with cobwebs and dust. A clear footpath could be seen through the maze, leading to a door. Someone had carved a large skull into this door. Hanging from the doorknob was a wooden sign that read "ALL IS NOT WELL!" Listening in, the warlock heard a young man's voice beyond, which abruptly cut off when he bumped into a crate nearby. Looking closer, he noticed a *glyph of warding* etched into the skull's forehead.

Before trying to enter, the adventurers decided to thoroughly check out the attic for the source of the powerful magic that Limyé felt earlier. After searching for an hour, Richard came upon an ancient tome covered in decades of dust, hidden in a corner.



The book was bound in a thick leather cover with steel hinges and fastenings. The pages were of parchment and very brittle. Most of the book was written in the curious shorthand. Stains and age have made most of the work illegible, but several paragraphs remained intact and readable. The **Tome of Strahd** is an ancient work penned by Strahd, a tragic tale of how he came to his fallen state (see Appendix). It told of how his love for a peasant girl, **Tatyana**, and her rejection in favor of Strahd's brother **Sergei** led him onto the path of Vampyr.

After finding this important artifact, our adventurers decided to enter the room with the skull on the door. From a safe distance Lord Coal threw several objects at the door handle, until he successfully managed to open the door. This immediately led to a silent explosion of lightning, which stopped just shy of himself and Richard. Carefully stepping in, they found that someone has taken old, mismatched furniture and created a study is a dusty, lamplit chamber. Tables were strewn with pieces of parchment, on which strange diagrams were drawn, and a freestanding bookshelf held a collection of bones. A dusty rug covered the floor in front of a pine box, on which lounged a skeletal cat. Several more skeletal cats skulked about. Most unnerving of all was the sight of three small children standing with their backs to the room in the northeast corner.

Upon closer inspection, Lord Coal realized that the "children" standing in the corner were painted wooden dolls dressed in clothing. When Limyé entered the room, he immediately noticed the invisible mage standing in one corner and addressed him. This spooked the man, who eventually turned visible. He introduced himself as Victor Vallakovich, and requested that the group leave his study. They however retorted that the Baron gave them leave to conduct a search of the missing staff. Victor was reluctant to speak to them until he realized that Limyé was a fellow practitioner of magic.

Victor found a spellbook in his father's library and was using it to teach himself the art of spellcasting. Only recently has he been able to decipher some of its high-level spells. For practice and for fun, Victor dug up some old cat bones behind and animated them, which didn't sit well with our group. He has been trying to master the Teleportation Circle spell in efforts to leave this cursed land. Limyé however realized that Victor's circle was horribly flawed and potentially deadly when used. In his opinion it would most probably turn the user into some sort of gray ooze, rather than have the desired effect.

An unease fell immediately over our adventurers, and they asked if Victor did not by any chance try out the circle on the servants. The boy immediately responded with "No!", but it was obvious from his demeanor that this was a lie. Victor realized the position he was in, and threatened the group to not reveal this. He started casting a spell of invisibility on himself, but didn't finish before Rann put two arrows in his chest. Heavily injured, the mage unleashed a cone of cold on the party, inflicting great harm. The young adventurers managed to avoid the brunt of the spell's force, but the elderly warlock received it head on and froze in place, covered with a layer of ice.

Lord Coal shoved himself onto the mage, making him lose his concentration and become visible again. Rick didn't skip a beat and stabbed Victor from behind, the tip of his rapier emerging from the mage's eye. Victor slumped down on the floor dead, with a pool of spreading blood.

Immediately, Lord Coal came to his mentor's help and lay his hands on him, willing some divine energy in to heal. Limyé woke up, though still was freezingly cold. In the chest, the Rann found a half finished wizard's robe, a large sack filled with copper coins (**900 cp**) and a spellbook that contained the following spells:

VICTOR'S SPELLBOOK

- (1st level): detect magic, mage armor, magic missile, shield, thunderwave
- (2nd level): darkvision, levitate, misty step, suggestion
- (3rd level): animate dead, counterspell, fireball, fly, glyph of warding, remove curse
- (4th level): blight, greater invisibility, ice storm
- (5th level): cloudkill, cone of cold

Finding themselves having just killed the burgomaster's son, the group decided to clean up, stash his body in a metal crate and try to flee through the back window, climbing down a rope. As they were preparing the rope, they heard shouts from downstairs - seemingly the prisoner stabbed at his torturer, Izek, but did not succeed. Heavy beating sounds ensued, which the party decided to use as cover for escape. Apart from slipping down in the case of Rick and Limyé, they successfully managed to leave the mansion without anyone noticing.

BLINSKY TOYS

With some time until night came, our adventurers decided to head into the toy shop, to understand the collection of Ireena dolls. This cramped shop had a dark entrance portico, above which hung a wooden sign shaped like a rocking horse, with a "B" engraved on both sides. Flanking the entrance were two arched, lead-framed windows. Through the dirty glass, you could see jumbled displays of toys and hanging placards bearing the slogan "Is No Fun, Is No Blinsky!"



Inside, the group was met by a heavysset man wearing a moth-eaten jester's cap with a monkey perched on his shoulder. He recited a well-rehearsed greeting "Wwelcome; friends, to the House of Blinsky, where hyappinness and smiles can be bought at bargain prices.. Pernaps you know a leetle child in need of joy? A leetle toy for a girl or boy?"

On display were a few of his creations, most of them toys that would be too disturbing for any child:

- A headless doll that comes with a sack of attachable heads, including one with its eyes and mouth stitched shut
- A miniature gallows, complete with trapdoor and a weighted "hanged man"
- A set of wooden nesting dolls; the smaller each one gets, the older it gets, until the innermost doll is a mummified corpse
- A wood-and-string mobile of hanging bats with flapping wings
- A wind-up musical merry-go-round with figures of snarling wolves chasing children in place of prancing horses
- A ventriloquist's dummy that looks like Strahd von Zarovich
- A doll that looks remarkably like Ireena Kolyana

Richard tricked Blinsky into thinking that the group works for the baron, and asked about the Ireena dolls that he found in the house. The heavyset man told them that the toys are made on order by Izek Strazni. Izek doesn't pay for the dolls but instead threatens to burn down Blinsky's shop unless the toymaker delivers a new doll every month. Every doll is modeled on a description given to Blinsky by Izek, and each doll has been closer to capturing Ireena's likeness than the last. Blinsky didn't know that the doll is meant to be modeled after anyone in particular.

Finding this out, the group agreed to try protecting the toymaker from Izek's anger. With this show of friendliness, Blinsky told them that he considers himself a student of a great inventor and toymaker named Fritz von Weerg. Blinsky has heard rumors that von Weerg's greatest invention - a clockwork man - lies somewhere in Castle Ravenloft. Knowing that the group seemed intent on going there, Blinsky asked, if they would be so kind as to find the clockwork "myasterpiece" and "dyeliver" it to him, in exchange for which Blinsky offered to make them any toy they desired. Because "byusiness" has not been good, he said, he had no other reward to offer except, perhaps, his new monkey companion he received from Rictavio.

Having exhausted the information Blinsky was aware of, the group returned to the Blue Water Inn to have dinner and turn in for the night. They shared the information about the Tome of Strahd with Rictavio, but decided to keep the tome, rather than give it to the strange man. Lord Coal also talked with two young drunk brothers - Nikolai and Karl Wachter - who told him of their plan of releasing the wild beast in Rictavio's wagon during the Festival of the Blazing Sun for fun.

After drinks and food, the group rented a room with four beds and went to sleep. The night was peaceful, apart from Richard's, who again had nightmares. Apart from some images of skeletons bursting from under ground to get him, he also heard a voice from the past, one that universally seemed to spell doom for those around him. This shocked him, as he expected that being in Barovia would keep him safe from this particular nightmare, but strangely the voice was even more clear than on the Sword Coast. This time, he could clearly hear the phrase "Kill them... Kill them all..." With more nightmarish images filled with death and suffering, Rick woke up with a scream.

THIRD DAY IN VALLAKI

After breakfast, our group headed for the horses in the church and decided to check out the Lake Zarovich to the north of the town, before heading to the Vistani camp to the west. On the way to the church, Rann noticed that someone was following them. Together with Lord Coal, they managed to confront the man, who introduced himself as **Ernst Larnak**, a concerned citizen keeping a watchful eye out for all strangers. As reasonable as this seemed, Lord Coal felt that this average looking man was not telling all truth. Ernst agreed that he works for powerful people who are trying to provide an alternative to baron Vallakovich's tyrannical rule, and invited the group to meet his benefactor in the afternoon.

Post-confrontation, our heroes left through the north gate to the lake. After a short trip on horseback, they arrived at the large lake nestled in the misty forest, at the foot of a mountain. The water was perfectly still and dark, reflecting the black clouds overhead like a monstrous mirror. Pulled up along the south shore were three small rowboats. A fourth boat could be seen in the middle of the lake, with a lone figure sitting in it, fishing pole in hand. Our adventurers tried calling out to the person, but got no response, so they decided to try using a rowboat.

Just then, they noticed that the man stood up and picked up a burlack sack from within the boat. Rann noticed some movement within, and judged the sack to be big enough to hold a small humanoid, before the man hurled it into the lake. Rick and Rann immediately started rowing as fast as possible towards the man in the boat. When they got close, Rick jumped into the dark waters. Luckily enough, he managed to grab onto the sack and hauled it towards the surface. Together with Rann, they managed to pull it into their boat. Inside, they found a girl with alabaster-white skin and raven-black hair, still alive, but coughing horrendously. In the meantime, Lord Coal and his mentor arrived in a second boat and restrained the fisherman, who was obviously extremely drunk and nearly catatonic.

The girl introduced herself as **Arabelle**, the daughter of the leader of the Vistani outside of Vallaki, and demanded the group to return her to her family. She said that she was kidnapped by this drunk fisherman, who mumbled something about sacrifice. Our adventurers decided to take the two back first to the Blue Water Inn, as it was on the way. Inside, they found out from the owners that this was **Bluto**, the regular who used to trade fish for wine. Limyé used his new healing wand on the drunkard to bring him back to sobriety. Bluto, sober for the first time in years, fell into a near-madness when he realized what he was trying to do - having kidnapped the little girl, believing that Vistani are lucky, he intended to sacrifice her to the lake, hoping it would give up some of its fish in return. He felt that someone suggested it to him, but could not remember the details. Before he could remember more, he succumbed to shock and lost his consciousness. This last fact heavily bothered our adventurers, as it suggested worrisome influence by an unknown party.

Arabelle wanted our group of adventurers to haul the drunkard before her father for punishment, but they decided to first find out more from him, before deciding whether to hand him over or not. As he was clearly out of it, the Danikovs promised to take care of him until the group returned later. So it was that our men set out towards the Vistani camp with the small girl.

VISTANI CAMP

Shortly behind the west gate, our group led the horses into the woods along a well-traversed track. Soon the woods parted to reveal an expansive clearing: a small, grass-covered hill with low houses built into its sides. Fog obscured the details, but you could see that these buildings featured elegantly carved woodwork and had decorative lanterns hanging from their sculpted eaves. Atop the hill, above the fog, was a ring of barrel-topped wagons that surrounded a large tent with a column of smoke pouring out through a hole in the top. The tent was brightly lit from within. Even at this distance, you could smell the odors of wine and horses that emanated from this central area.



They headed straight towards the central tent. Piled outside the tent were several empty casks of wine. From inside came the crack of a whip followed by the howls of a young man. Three sputtering campfires filled the tent with smoke, and through the haze you could see six Vistani passed out in various places on the dead grass. A barely conscious and shirtless teenager hugged the central tent pole, his wrists bound with rope and his back streaked with blood. An older, larger man in studded leather armor lasheed the young man with a horsewhip, causing him to scream again. Standing in the bigger man's shadow was a third man also clad in studded leather. "Easy, brother," he said to the whip-wielding brute. "I think Alexei has learned his lesson." As they enter the tent, our adventurers recognize the third man as Arrigal - the man who brought them to this land.

Arabelle jumped towards the man with the whip, shouting "Daddy!", before she started crying. The man introduced himself as **Luvash**. He was overjoyed to find his daughter alive, as she went missing the previous night. In his thanks he told his brother to give a gift to the brave adventurers. He also promised to exact revenge on the drunkard who kidnapped Arabelle, but the group refused to provide his name.

Arrigal led the group to a wagon outside, but before he opened it, the adventurers asked him about the reason for the fake invitation to Barovia. Arrigal claimed that he was forced to do so by Strahd himself. After producing a key from beneath his shirt, he opened a treasure wagon, and let the group choose one item from several possibilities, including a wooden chest, an iron chest, an onyx jewelry box with gold filigree, a wooden throne with gold inlay and decorative stones, a rolled up rug and a small wooden box. The old warlock cast a ritual to detect magic from either of these, while Richard decided to gamble with Arrigal on getting some extra information. He lost, upon which Arrigal took away the small wooden box, informing the group that it contained potions that would allow one to leave Barovia safely. Rick was disturbed when he heard an inner voice telling him to kill the little girl and steal everything.

Limy  detected that the small jewellery box contained some small amount of magic. After discussion, the group decided to take it. The box itself was worth **250 gp**, and within were six pieces of cheap jewelry (worth 50 gp each) and a potion in an unlabeled crystal vial.

Arrigal feigned not remembering what the potion was for. Having promised that they would give back the horses to the Vistani here, the group asked if they could keep at least one. Luvash agreed on account of the rescuing of his daughter. Not wanting to linger, our adventurers headed to the small houses at the bottom of the hill, where they ran into three sullen, gray-cloaked figures, their angular features and black, flowing hair half-hidden under their cowls. These were the dusk elves. They invited the group to one of the houses to meet their leader, **Kasimir Velikov**.

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The hovel had a decorated vestibule and a comfortable room beyond with a fireplace. Wooden statuettes of elven deities stood in cubbyholes along one wall. A tapestry of a forest hanged on the opposite wall. The leader of the dusk elves also wore a cowl, which Rann noticed was to hide his disfigurement - his ears were cut off. The group was curious if this wounded elf was the one that Madam Eva spoke of. After finding out that our adventurers intended to destroy Strahd, Kasimir confessed that he is burdened by dreams sent to him by his dead sister, Patrina Velikovna, whose spirit has languished in the catacombs below Castle Ravenloft for centuries. Kasimir believed that Patrina has repented for her many sins, and he yearns not only to free her but also to restore her to life. This is because centuries ago he was convinced that she was the concubine of the devil Strahd. Kasimir and his fellow dusk elves stoned Patrina to death to spare her soul. As punishment for depriving him of his bride, Strahd butchered all the women in the dusk elf tribe, and Kasimir's ears were cut off to punish him for instigating the stoning.

Kasimir told our group that he believes the **Amber Temple** holds both the secret to breaking Strahd's pact and freeing Barovia from its curse, as well as returning his sister to life. He asked the group if they would accompany him to the temple. In exchange, he would give them what Madam Eva foretold - the **Holy Symbol of Ravenkind**.



The group agreed to going to the Amber temple, but agreed with Kasimir to prepare for this trek into the temple deep in the mountains. The leader of the dusk elves said that it was a cold and dangerous place. At the minimum, the group would need heavy clothing, which they might be able to but in the village of Krezk. It was agreed that the expedition would start a week from then.

It being just after noon, the group decided to head over to the windmill outside of Vallaki and investigate the screams they heard days ago. Before that, Lord Coal decided to summon a magical steed, to have two horses. He focused deeply, imagining the ideal white warhorse and sent out the divine magic into the wild. What happened next was deeply disturbing however. The ground erupted, and from within, a skeletal horse emerged, still with scraps of dry meat hanging onto it. Seemingly nothing worked as it should in Barovia, but the undead horse was obedient. The group set out to the Old Bonegrinder and reached it in less than two hours.

OLD BONEGRINDER

Arriving at the onion-domed windmill, Richard decided to climb the decrepit wooden platform encircling it. The windows were grimy, but cleaning them he noticed some movement within. Lord Coal knocked on the door, and a shout emerged from within "Coming!" The figure in the window descended to the ground floor and opened the door. A haggard, heavysset old woman with a face as wrinkled as a boiled apple stood in the doorway. She wore a bloodstained, flour-caked apron. A long, sharp bodkin impaled her bundled-up mound of gray hair. The group recognized her as the old lady with the cart back in Barovia village.

The ground floor of the mill had been converted into a makeshift kitchen, but the room was filthy. Baskets and old dishware were piled everywhere. Adding to the clutter was a peddler's cart, a chicken coop, a heavy wooden trunk, and a pretty wooden cabinet with flowers painted on its doors. In addition to the clucking of the chickens, you could hear toads croaking. The sweet smell of pastries blended horribly with a stench that burned nostrils. The awful odor came out of an open, upright barrel in the center of the room. Warmth issued from a brick oven against one wall, and a crumbling staircase ascended the wall across from it. Shrieks and cackles from somewhere higher up caused the old mill to shudder.

Lord Coal produced the deed for the windmill they found in the Durst house, but refused to give it to the old lady to see the details. She claimed that she's been using it with her daughters for ages, but invited the group in to have some of her pastries. Richard was still on the platform above the doors, and Edward with Rann were vehemently opposed to the idea. Limyé however found himself a bit peckish, and could not resist taking a bite. Before anyone could stop him, he devoured the whole pastry.

The warlock immediately felt happiness descend onto him. He suddenly felt a young man again, having a picnic with a beautiful young lady on a peaceful meadow. Externally however, he just stood perfectly still in a trance, his mouth agape and his eyes glazed over. Lord Coal immediately demanded to know what happened to his mentor, to which the old lady replied that she brought happiness to his life. Rann however felt that the situation was getting out of hand and decided to restrain the woman. Soon after he grabbed her, she simply vanished into thin air, and the ranger felt nothing in his fingers.

Edward decided to shake his mentor from the trance. Just as Limyé was about to consummate his new-found love, he was hurled back into the cold, bleak reality with an awkward boner. Rann in the meantime discovered that the flagstone floor was littered with small human bones. Just then the old lady reappeared in a corner, to which Rann's response was to shoot her with three arrows within a few heartbeats. Her response was to shoot a lightning bolt from her fingers at Lord Coal and Richard. The terrible blast nearly knocked them down, but they fought back against the hag. From the floor above, hurried steps could be heard, and a younger hag dropped her invisibility on the staircase, when she conjured imaginary horrors for Lord Coal, terryfing the young paladin.

A second daughter of the old hag appeared and another lightning bolt was cast. The situation looked dire, when Rann cast a spell of Silence, stopping the hags from casting any magic. This had the unfortunate effect of robbing Limyé of his blindsight, but the old warlock managed to find the door to the outside and leave the sphere of silence. He started hurling eldritch blasts blindly into the windmill, hoping not to hit his allies. With the combined efforts of Rick, Edward and Rann, the now near-impotent hags were killed without the loss of lives.

Exploring the kitchen, they found a cabinet containing wooden bowls full of herbs and baking ingredients, including flour, sugar, and several gourds of powdered bone. Hanging on the inside of the cabinet doors were a dozen locks of hair, some of which they decided to take. Amid various concoctions were three small, labeled containers that held elixirs. The first was a golden syrupy elixir, labeled "Youth." The second red elixir was labeled "Laughter," while the third one, a greenish milky liquid, was labeled "Mother's Milk." Apart from these, on the bodies of the hags the group found two **spell scrolls** (*Spare the dying* and *Comprehend Languages*), 3 **healing potions**, some money and a **Heartstone** - a large black gem allowing a hag to become ethereal while it is in her possession. The touch of a Heartstone also cures any disease.

Upstairs, they found a millstone with small bones lying around it, and above that a bedroom. In this cramped circular room was a rotting wooden closet with three crates, stacked one atop another, with small doors set into them. Next to the closet was a heap of discarded clothing, which on a closer inspection belonged to dozens of children. A moldy bed with a tattered canopy stood nearby, hidden in which Richard found six pieces of cheap jewelry (worth 25 gp each). Opening the crates carefully, Lord Coal discovered the top one to be empty, but the other two contained alive children lying among cookie crumbs. The two captured children were taken from the village of Barovia after being given to the hags by their parents in exchange for the dream pastries. The boy, Freek, was seven years old and visibly without a soul. The girl, Myrtle, was barely five. She spoke of another child, Petyr, that was devoured a day earlier. Limyé realized with horror that he probably ate him, which filled the dead cultist in his ring with glee.

Our adventurers decided to take the children to Ireena and Ismark, rather than back to their parents. After leaving the windmill, they spotted four ancient moss-covered stones bearing crude carvings of cities, each associated with a different season. The winter city was covered with snow, the city of spring arrayed in flowers, the city of summer with a sunburst, and the autumn city covered with leaves.

Several ravens circled overhead, and one was pecking at something on top of the stone that depicted the city of autumn. Upon inspection, the group saw that the raven was pecking at a dream pastry, and on the ground in the center of the stone circle was a small pile of children's teeth, placed there to desecrate the stones.

WACHTERHAUS

The way back to Vallaki was safe and our adventurers delivered the children safely to Ireena. She was distraught to find out that indeed there were children in the windmill and that she could have saved them several days earlier. Leaving the church, the group was met with Ernst Larnak, who escorted our adventurers to meet his benefactor.

They arrived at a house that seemed disgusted with itself. A slouching roof hung heavy over furrowed gables, and moss-covered walls sagged and bulged under the weight of the vegetation. As they studied the house's sullen countenance, you could hear the edifice actually groaning. Ernst led the group through the front door into a narrow vestibule, and from there into a dining room. An ornate dining table stretched the length of this room, a crystal chandelier hanging above it imperiously. The silverware was tarnished, the dishes chipped, yet all were still quite elegant. Eight chairs, their backs adorned with sculpted elk horns, surrounded the table. Arched windows made of a latticework of iron and glass looked out onto the small, fog-swept estate. Ernst asked the group to wait here, while he went to his benefactor.

Soon, a door opened, and a matronly woman came out. She introduced herself as **Lady Fiona Wachter**, and invited the group to sit down and have dinner with her. She explained to our heroes that she wished to provide an alternative to Baron Vallakovich's iron rule over Vallaki. She seemed reasonable at first, asking the group to only help her by removing the Baron's henchman, Izek, from the game. By a slip of the tongue, Rann suggested that the group was on a collision course with Strahd. Lady Wachter angrily stated in no uncertain terms that she was not, nor ever would be, Strahd's enemy.

Lord Coal was quick to claim that she misunderstood them, and that they were not enemies of Strahd. His speech convinced her, and she explained that Strahd von Zarovich was no tyrant but, at worst, a negligent landlord. She would happily serve Strahd as burgomaster of Vallaki, but she knew that Baron Vargas Vallakovich wouldn't give up his birthright without a fight. In the past, Fiona conspired to wed her young daughter, **Stella**, to the baron's son, Victor, as part of a plot to gain a foothold in the baron's mansion, but Stella found Victor to be demented, and he showed no interest in Stella whatsoever. In fact, he spoke such unkind words to Stella that she went mad, and Fiona had to lock her daughter away.

The last straw for our adventurers however was her proclamation that, if she were to gain rule over Vallaki, she would destroy the local church on account of the priest's opposition to Strahd. Richard then suggested that Rann do his thing that he did earlier in the day. There was some confusion at first, but then the elf got the gist and cast magical Silence. Limy  was annoyed to yet again lose sensory information, and Edward didn't know what to make of Rann's casting. Richard didn't waste any time and pulled out his rapier. Two rapid stabs through the gut and the neck killed the Lady of the house.

Lord Coal stared with horror and shock at what transpired. He was even more distraught when Rann opened the adjoining door, still wreathed in silence, and shot Ernst Larnak through the eye, killing him instantly. Richard then quickly proceeded to the servant quarters, where he told the maid that Lady Fiona was arrested and that she should help him in finding more evidence upstairs, while sending the other staff to quickly go find Izek Strazni for prisoner hand off. In the meantime, Rann kept up his magical silence to prevent Lord Coal from bringing Lady Fiona back from the dead, and stashed both of the bodies in a closet.

Upstairs, Rick came to a hallway with a window at each end. Framed portraits and mirrors festooned the walls, surrounding the viewer with judging looks and dark reflections. Something could be heard scratching at one of the many doors. The maid said that private documents could be found either in the library or the master bedroom. Entering the library, Rick found the room crawling with cats. Bookshelves hugged the walls, but most of the shelves were bare. Other furnishings included a desk, a chair, a table, and a wine cabinet. The room had an irregular shape, and none of its angles seemed quite right, as though the shifting of the house has set the whole place on edge. One of the cats had a small key hanging from its collar, which Rick asked the maid to retrieve, after which he instructed her to leave the house quickly. By this time, the others joined them upstairs, though Lord Coal was still visibly in shock.

The group found that the section of the bookshelf that stretched along the southernmost wall was actually a secret door on hidden hinges. Behind the hinged panel in the bookcase lay a dusty, ten-foot-square room with a curtained window and shelves lining three walls. On the bottom shelf rested an iron chest. The other shelves were bare. The key from the cat unlocked the chest, and disabled a trap at the same time. Inside they found several items:

TREASURE IN THE IRON CHEST

The chest contained the following:

- A silk bag containing 180 ep, each coin bearing Strahd's stern visage in profile
- A leather bag containing 110 gp
- A wooden pipe that has been passed down through many generations of Wachter Patriarchs
- Five scrolls-notarized deeds: for parcels of land given to the Wachter family by Count Strahd von Zarovich nearly four centuries ago
- A supple leather case containing an unbound manuscript titled *The Devil We Know* - a poetic manifesto written by Lady Fiona Wachter attesting that the worship of devils can bring happiness, success, freedom, wealth, and longevity
- A blasphemous treatise bound in black leather titled *The Grimoire of the Four Quarters*, written by the infamous diabolist Devostas, who was drawn and quartered for his fell practices yet did not die (this is a forgery; the actual grimoire would drive a reader mad)

The chest also contained a very old letter to Lady Lovina Wachter (an ancestor) from one Lord Vasili von Holtz, thanking Lovina for her hospitality, loyalty, and friendship over the years. The group realized that the handwriting in Lady Lovina's letter was identical to Strahd's handwriting.

Leaving the library, the group approached the room with scratching noises. A plaintive female voice meowed like a cat and said, "Can little kitty come out to play? Little kitty is sad and lonely and promises to be good this time, really she does." The room was locked, but Rick swiftly defeated the lock with his tools. The room was musty and dark. An iron-framed bed fitted with leather straps stood near a wall. The place had no other furnishings. Scurrying away from the group on all fours was a young woman in a soiled nightgown. She leapt onto the bed and hissed like a cat. "Little kitty doesn't know you!" she shouted. "Little kitty doesn't like the smell of you!" Finding Stella completely mad, they retreated and went to the master bedroom. The servant's key opened the door.

Across from the door, a fire sputtered and struggled for life in the hearth, above which hung a framed family portrait: a noble father and mother, their two young sons, and a baby daughter in the father's arms. The sons were smiling in a way that suggested mischief. The parents looked like uncrowned royalty. Wood paneling covered the walls of the room. A closet and a framed mirror flanked a curtained window to the south. To the north, a wide, canopied bed lay pinned between matching end tables with oil lamps. Stretched out on one side of the bed was a man dressed in black, his eyes each covered with a copper piece. He bore a striking resemblance to the father in the painting. The impeccably dressed man was obviously quite deceased.

At first Rann wanted to stab the body preemptively, but was stopped by Limyé, who told him that the body seemed to be under the effect of the *Gentle Repose* spell, keeping it fresh for potential resurrection. Rick in the meantime explored the closet, in which he found a locked iron chest. He proceeded to pick the lock and successfully opened it. When he was about to gloat, a poison needle shot from within and knocked him unconscious. Rann stepped over his fallen companion and carefully nudged the chest open. The iron chest was lined with thin sheets of lead and contained a set of human bones. On closer inspection, the spine was crushed around the neck, and the back of the skull was caved in. Limyé hypothesized that this would be a way to store a body in a way that would prevent its resurrection or use in other magic. Having killed the lady of the house however, no further identification could be carried out.

Having probably insufficient evidence against Lady Wachter, the group went downstairs to explore the house more. Rann checked out the bodies, but only found a pearl necklace (worth 200 gp) on Lady Wachter, which Limyé took for use with the *Identify* spell. Lord Coal explored the back rooms and found a secret door in the servants' closet, which opened onto a stone staircase leading down. Our group took these stairs, and arrived at a large root cellar with a dirt floor. Another flight of stone steps enclosed by wooden railings stood across from the one they were on. Tracks in the earth lead from one staircase to the other, and other trails went from both staircases to the center of the bare west wall. Four neatly made cots were set in a row against the south wall. Lord Coal and Rann jumped over the railing, and when they landed, eight skeletons burst out of the ground!

This was however a very short fight, as Rann, Rick and Edward quickly dispatched four of the undead, while Limyé shattered the remaining four with his magic, all within a few seconds. The group then examined the west wall and quickly found the secret door set within it. The blind warlock also realized that this door was soundproof, so that if anything was on the other side, they would have the advantage. Lord Coal opened the door and jumped inside.

Flickering candles in iron holders filled this room with light and shadows. The room had a ten-foot-high ceiling and a large black pentagram inscribed on the stone floor. At each point of the pentagram rested a wooden chair. Seated in four of the five chairs were men and women in black robes with hoods: a young man with the face of an angel; a balding hulk of a man; a squat, middle-aged woman; and a taller, younger woman with an unsettling glare. They rose upon this intrusion, alarm in their faces. Lord Coal tried to convince them that Lady Fiona hired them and that the Baron was on his way to arrest them, but the young paladin was not very skilled in the art of lying. The hooded cultists realized that their faces were seen and attacked Edward.

Lord Coal jumped into the fray and was quickly surrounded by three cultists. One of them feigned slashing with his dagger, which Edward evaded, but his goal was to just touch the paladin. When the cultist grabbed him, necrotic energy deeply wounded Coal, nearly bringing him down. However, with the help of his friends, the cultists were driven back. One of them was killed Rann's arrow, while another was brought to near death by an arrow through the chest. Soon three of the surviving cultists were taken down, but still alive, if barely. One of them was still able to speak, and she explained that they were members of Lady Fiona's "book club". They planned to overthrow the Baron and practiced some magic under the Lady's tutelage. Much of what they learned seemed to be hogwash however, as even the pentagram on the ground was a non-magical decoration.

When Izek Strazni knocked on the door, Lord Coal and Rann went upstairs. Rann hid in the den next to the dinner room, while Edward answered the door and led Izek with a few guards down to the basement. The group showed him the devil-worshipping manuscript and presented the cultists, together with the story of how Lady Wachter wanted to overthrow the Baron. Richard convinced Izek that Lady Fiona fled with her spy, which Rann overheard upstairs.

The ranger was in the process of stealing a golden goblet (worth 250 gp) and a crystal wine decanter (worth 250 gp) from the den, when he heard the lie. He quickly decided that the bodies had to be hidden better. He could not bury them in the garden on account of having no shovel, but he realized that the bodies could be stashed in two empty-ish wine barrels behind the kitchen.

Izek sent out his guards to quickly cut off the escape of the traitor and thanked our group for bringing this attempted coup to his attention. Upon leaving, he off-handedly asked if the group has seen Victor Vallakovich, as the Baron's son has not been seen in the last two days, and his presence would be needed during the festival tomorrow. Carefully, the group lied that they've never met the young man. So it was that our heroes got away with multiple murder.

The group then returned to the Blue Water Inn, where they learned that Bluto, the drunkard, hanged himself after understanding what he tried to do. Limyé consoled Danika that this was better than what he would get from the Vistani.

Before going to sleep, Limyé found out that Lord Coal had a scroll of *Remove Curse* hidden in his backpack this whole time and took it with himself when he went to the privy. He decided to cast the spell on himself, in hope of at least removing the auro of undeadness from himself, and maybe also regaining the eyesight. After the holy energy suffused him, he didn't feel any immediate difference. Soon, only an annoying itchiness in his eyehole appeared. When he touched the inside, he felt some sort of mucuous membrane forming there. When he returned to his room, his companions noticed a proto-matrix of some goo froming there. They hoped that perhaps his eyes were slowly regenerating.

FESTIVAL OF THE BLAZING SUN

In the morning, our group went towards the town square to witness the festival. In the crowd they saw the priest with Ireena, Ismark and the wto children. Under threatening skies, a parade of unhappy children dressed as flowers trudged through the muddy streets, leading the way for a group of sorry-looking men and women carrying a ten-foot-diameter wicker ball. The burgomaster and his smiling wife, who held a sad bouquet of wilting flowers, followed the procession on horseback. As weary spectators watched from their stoops, the ball was borne to the town square. There, it was hoisted and hung from a fifteen-foot-high wooden scaffold, and townsfolk took turns splashing it with oil. Before the wicker sun could be set ablaze, the sky tore open in a sudden downpour.

"All will be well!" cried the burgomaster as he brandished a sputtering torch and marched defiantly through the rain toward the wicker ball, only to have his torch go out as he thrust it into the sphere. A singular laugh erupted from the crowd, drawing the burgomaster's fiery gaze as well as gasps from the townsfolk. The laugh came from a member of the town militia. The other guards were aghast at his ill-timed outburst. The burgomaster immediately had the man arrested for "spite". He was bound at the ankles and wrists, and then attached to the burgomaster's horse.

Richard tried to intervene, saying that this is too much punishment for such a small infraction. Baron Vallakovich's answer was to shout to the guards to arrest Richard and take his weapons away. As the guards started approaching him, Rann suggested to Limyé that he could try using some of his skills. The warlock created a magical bonfire under the wicker ball, setting it ablaze. He then manipulated the flames to make them look like the sun of the Morninglord. Lord Coal shouted "All is well!", which placated the burgomaster. He motioned the militia away, and the crowd erupted in applause. The burgomaster then kicked his spurs and rode around on his horse, dragging the prisoner behind himself, amused by his screams of pain.

In that moment, our group noticed that Izek Strazni was staring pointedly in one direction. Following his line of sight, they found that he was staring at Ireena! At the same time, screams erupted from some distance. After several moments they clarified to shouts of "Tiger! Tiger on the loose!" Within moments, Rann saw the saber-toothed tiger running through the crowd. Lord Coal freighthened the animal with his divine power and the ranger spoke soothingly to it. The baron however ordered his men to slay the beast, and several militia surrounded it. The first to strike it was a terrified young man, who was immediately mauled by the tiger in self-defence.

In the meantime, Izek started apoproaching Ireena. Remembering his doll collection, Rann disguised himself magically as Ireena and tapped Izek on his shoulder. The ugly man made a double-take and grabbed Rann-Ireena, picked him/her up and started running away towards the Baron's mansion. Lord Coal quickly took the real Ireena back to the church, while Rick and Limyé gave chase.

On the way, Izek shouted "I finally found you, my sister!" He burst into the mansion, scaled the stairs with Rann in his arms and kicked the door to his doll-filled bedroom open. He threw the fake Ireena on the bed and started ripping her clothes of and kissing her. Rann created a magical fog before things went too far and quietly slipped away. He dropped his diguise and got reunited with his teammates, before Izek jumped out of the mansion with his pants unbuckled. The group convinced him that they saw a woman running towards the north, perhaps to the gates. Izek quickly buckled himself up and run in the indicated direction. Our adventurers got the feeling that it was high time to leave this town.

Upon returning to the town square, they found the tiger dead, together with several guards. The Wachter brothers were being questioned about what happened, but were mum on the subject. However, Gunther and Yelena Arasek, owners of the stockyard, admitted to hearing "evil growls" and scratching sounds coming from inside the carnival wagon parked in their stockyard. When pressed, the Araseks admitted to seeing the wagon's "weird owner" routinely drop food into the wagon through a hatch in the roof. They also confessed that the half-elf paid them for their silence. Baron Vallakovich immediately ordered the arrest of Rictavio. Hearing this, our group decided to help the man, as he has indicated that he was also an enemy of Strahd. Having a bit of a headstart, they ran to the Blue Water Inn.

Inside the Inn they immediately ran into the wanted man, who asked them to distract the burgomaster and the guards while he gathers his horse and wagon. He told them that he would hide away in an old tower to the west. They agreed and went outside. Soon, several guards arrived. Limyé created an illusion of Rictavio in a house across the street and the militia men fell for it. While they were distracted, Rictavio left on his horse behind the Inn and waved to our heroes. He touched something on his head, and suddenly he looked like a different man, a strange hat in his hand.

The adventurers reunited in the church with Lord Coal and the Kolyanovich siblings. It was decided that Ireena wasn't safe in Vallaki, on account of the previous attack of the vampires and Izek's unhealthy obsession and that she would accompany the group to Krezk. Ismark agreed to let her go without him, as he should take care of his village, as currently it was burgomaster-less. The priest agreed to take care of the children rescued in the windmill. The group provided funds for taking care of them (5 gp).

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

The group left Vallaki on two horses, Rann running beside them. Not long after, the road came to an X intersection, with branches to the northwest, northeast, southwest, and southeast. The lower half of a snapped wooden signpost thrust upward at an angle near the eastern elbow of the intersection. The top half of the sign, featuring arms pointing in four directions, lay in the weeds nearby. When the two parts of the sign were aligned and rejoined, the arms

indicated KREZK and TSOLENKA PASS to the southwest, LAKE BARATOK to the northwest, VALLAKI and RAVENLOFT to the northeast, and BEREZ to the southeast. Knowing that the Abbey of Saint Markovia lies in Krezk, they took the southwest route.

Within an hour, the group noticed a shadow in the fog ahead. As they drew closer, they recognized it to belong to the skeletal rider they met upon entering Barovia for the first time. Yet again, he ignored them, and again he dropped something before vanishing back into the mists. Richard approached the item, which turned out to be a small locked box, with a lock too small to be opened with his lockpicks. He decided to try playing with it more later to see if it is some sort of puzzle box.

Soon, they came to a branch in the road, with the side path seemingly leading to some ruined castle they could see in the distance whenever the fog broke. Escorting Ireena they decided to stick to the Old Svalich Road however. Half an hour later the road branched again, with a dirt path leading north and a sign pointing to Lake Baratok. Shortly after yet another branch in the road led south to Tsolenka Pass. Half a mile after that, the road split. A weatherworn signpost next to the road pointed along the three branches of the road. The arm pointing north read KREZK, and through the woods one could see an arching stone bridge spanning a river. The arm pointing east read VALLAKI and the arm pointing southwest read THE WIZARD OF WINES. After a short discussion, the group decided to head to Krezk first and later go to the winery.

While crossing the bridge, our group saw the lake in the distance, with a tower on a small island. They concluded that this was probably the tower Rictavio mentioned. After another mile and a half, the road branched north and climbed a rocky escarpment, ending at a gatehouse built into a twenty-foot-high wall of stone reinforced with buttresses every fifty feet or so. The wall enclosed a settlement on the side of a snowdusted mountain spur. Beyond the wall were the tops of snow-covered pines and thin, white wisps of smoke. The somber toll of a bell came from a stone abbey that clung to the mountainside high above the settlement. The steady chime was inviting - a welcome change from the deathly silence and oppressive fog to which our adventurers have grown accustomed. It was hard to tell at this distance, but there seemed to be a switchback road clinging to the cliffs that lead up from the walled settlement to the abbey.

The air grew colder as they approached the walled settlement. Two square towers with peaked roofs flanked a stone archway into which was set a pair of twelve-foot-tall, iron bound wooden doors. Carved into the arch above the doors was a name: Krezk. The walls that extended from the gatehouse were twenty feet high. Atop the parapet stood four figures wearing fur hats and clutching spears. They watched the approaching group nervously.

As our group reached the closed gates, one of the guards run towards the village. Soon he returned with a man of stature, who introduced himself as **Dmitri Krezkov**, the burgomaster of Krezk. After a glance at the group he surmised them to be a band of adventurers. From his point of view, independent of whether they were Strahd's allies or enemies, their presence spelled trouble for Krezk. Dmitri wasn't prepared to shelter Strahd's enemies any more than he was willing to humor Strahd's allies.

When the group inquired if there was some way they could earn his favor, the burgomaster asked them to secure a wagonload of wine from the Wizard of Wines winery to the south. His people have been without wine for day, and the next delivery was long overdue. Were they to accomplish this task, Dmitri would be required by his oath of office and his honor as a Barovian noble to show them hospitality. Seeing no other way, our band of adventurers agreed to this. They decided to hurry, as it was well after noon.

After backtracking, they chose the fork of the road leading to the winery. Along the way, Rann suddenly noticed a man pointing a crossbow at them, hidden in the woods. He immediately drew his bow and shot the crossbow out of the man's hands. He turned out to be a hunter from Krezk, who was spooked by the passage of the group. The man was quite terrified that he would be killed, but when it became apparent that no such thing would be happening, he opened up and answered some questions. He told the adventurers that the winery was a mile and a half away at that point. When asked about the burgomaster of Krezk, he only had good things to say about the man, but did agree that he placed the safety of his village above the welfare of strangers.

Letting the hunter go, the group was back on the road. Soon the road became a muddy trail that meandered through the woods, descending gradually until the trees parted, revealing a mist-shrouded meadow. The trail split. One branch headed west into the valley, and the other lead south into dark woods. A wooden signpost at the intersection pointed west and read, "Vineyard."

WIZARD OF THE WINES



A light drizzle began to fall. Unpainted fences blindly followed the trail, which skirted north of a sprawling vineyard before bending south toward a stately building. The fog took on ghostly forms as it swirled between the neatly tended rows of grapevines. Here and there, one could see rope-handled half-barrels used for hauling grapes. North of the trail was a large stand of trees. A man wearing a dark cloak and cowl stood at the edge of the trees, beckoning our adventurers.

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As they approached, eight more cloaked figures emerged from the trees, five adults and four children in total. The old man at the front introduced himself as **Davian Martikov**, the

owner of the Wizard of the Wines. The other people were his family members. His face bore the similarity to the owner of the Blue Water Inn, who they realized must have been the son of Davian. Lord Coal mentioned that they were sent from Krezk to see what happened to the wine deliveries. Davian shocked them by saying that that evil druids and blights have attacked the winery and forced his family to take refuge in the woods. The brave adventurers agreed to help them recover the winery.

After leaving Ireena with the Martikovs, they continued on towards the winery. Situated in the midst of the vineyard, the winery was an old, two-story stone building with multiple entrances, thick ivy covering every wall, and iron fencing along its roofline. The trail ended at an open loading dock on the ground floor. A wooden stable of more recent construction was attached to the east side of the winery, next to the loading dock. West of the winery was a crumbling well and a wooden outhouse.

As they reached the winery, the group could hear the rustle of dead vines all around them. Inhuman shapes emerged from the vineyard, their limbs cracking as they trudged forth through the mist and rain.



At first the group only noticed several of these shapes, but soon Lord Coal pointed out that there was about 30 of them. Limy  recalled that blights were actually blind beyond 60 feet, so the group decided to try to sneak towards the winery. Rann used his magic to allow the group to pass without trace, and they managed to sneak up to the main house without the blights noticing.

Before entering the building, the group decided to circle it around and look into any of the windows that presented themselves. Most of the windows were on second floor, but a few were on the ground level. These however only showed a stone spiral staircase in one of the turrets, a ramp in another and an empty glassblower's workshop in the back.

Two of the doors to the house were half open, one inside the loading dock and one beside the empty outhouse. Rann led the group through the latter into a storage room. Shelves to the south held several pairs of stained wooden sandals with oversized soles. Another set of doors was open and led deeper into the house. Rann peaked his head quickly out and when he was not immediately attacked, took in the surroundings.

The rich smell of fermenting wine filled this large, two story chamber, which was dominated by four enormous wooden casks, each one eight feet wide and twelve feet tall. A wooden staircase in the center of the room climbed to a ten-foot-high wooden balcony that clung to the south wall, which had four windows set into it at balcony level. Stacked against the wall underneath the balcony were old, empty barrels with "The Wizard of Wines" burned into their sides. The balcony climbed another five feet as it continued along the west and east walls, ending at doors leading to the winery's upper level. Underneath these side balconies were several doors, some of which hung open. Beneath the sloping roof stretched thick rafters, upon which scores of ravens have quietly gathered.

Not seeing any movement from where he stood, Rann decided to inch his way into the room and look up at the balcony, while clinging to the shadows. The balcony suddenly creaked, drawing his eye to a wild-looking figure hunched over the westernmost cask, pouring a flask of thick syrup into it. She wore a gown made of animal skins and a headdress with goat horns, and her hair was long and unkempt. Just then, he also noticed something skittering across the floor. It looked like a tiny creature made of twigs. It moved from its hiding place under the stairs and disappeared behind the easternmost cask.

Trusting the Martikovs that the druids were up to no good, Rann aimed his bow at the woman and let three arrows fly before she had time to react. All three struck dead on, and with a short scream the druid keeled over and fell with a crash into the large cask of wine. Immediately, sound of twigs cracking could be heard from deeper in the room, but before any of the twig creatures arrived, Rann already retreated from the room. The group then decided to enter the house from the front, near the loading dock, but not before making sure that the stables were empty, save for two horses.

This led them into an empty barrel maker's workshop, which had another set of doors. These led into a room filled with rows of new barrels. A narrow stone staircase spiraled upward in the southwest corner and led to a corridor which disappeared around a corner and contained four sets of doors, the last one half-open. Rann led the way to this last doorway, behind which was a chamber with a strange contraption that took up most of the northern end of the room. Three creatures were here. One appeared human but was so caked with dirt and mud that it was hard to know for sure. Her hair was full of twigs, and her face was hidden behind a veil of moss. She was rooting through the contents of a cabinet and haphazardly tossing them onto the floor. Behind her stood two creatures made entirely of dead vines.

The group had a drop on them and swiftly attacked. After a brief struggle, the two vine blights fell apart and the druid was filled with arrows and set on fire. The strange machine in the room turned out to be a printing press. The next two rooms were very similar, each containing two pairs of bunk beds and four identical footlockers. A few toys were scattered about on the floor of one of these rooms. One of the toys

seem to resemble a child's wooden rocking horse, except that the horse was black with wild eyes and has painted orange flames where its mane, tail, and hooves should be. Carved into the wooden nightmare was the name "Beucephalus" and, in smaller lettering, the slogan "Is No Fun, Is No Blinsky!"

The last door led to a kitchen and a dining room, and from there to a master bedroom. This room contained a four-poster bed, its headboard carved in the likeness of a giant raven. A soft black rug covered the floor between the bed and the door. In the corners of the south wall stood two slender wardrobes with a tapestry of a church hanging on the wall between them. Beneath the tapestry sat a handsomely carved rocking cradle. To the north, under a window, was a plain desk and chair. Other furnishings included a locked wooden chest and a freestanding mirror in a wooden frame. Exploring the room, Richard found a secret door in the eastern wall.

These opened onto a room with a wooden floor with a ten-foot-square hole cut into the middle of it. Looming over the hole was a wooden winch. Perched atop it was a man with wild hair, rotted teeth, and skin painted red with blood. He waved a gnarled staff made from a black branch and babbles something in druidic. He didn't notice Rann, before the ranger managed to kill him with his bow. Richard then decided to pick up the smoking evil-looking staff.



When he touched it, he suddenly had a vision of a great tree on a hill, an axe embedded in it and small twig creatures dancing around it. Limyé decided to study this staff, and prepared a ritual to identify its properties.

In the meantime, Rann and Richard went back into the master bedroom and investigated it a bit more. Richard looked over manifests recording wine shipments for the last century. A cursory examination of recent records revealed that almost all shipments have been made to the following locations:

- "BV" (which he guessed stood for the Blood o' the Vine tavern in the village of Barovia)
- "BW" (probably the Blue Water Inn in the town of Vallaki)
- "K" (Krezk?)
- "VISTANI"

The earliest entries also included the letter "S", which Rick guessed stood for Strahd. Rann meanwhile picked open the chest, within which he found quite a bit of money, as well as a secret compartment holding some gems and a golden locket containing a painted portrait of a beautiful woman. She held some similarity to the younger members of the Martikov family. The group decided not to rob the owners of the winery.

Limyé finished his ritual and found out that this staff was part of a Gulthias tree, which is an origin of power for all blights. He also understood that if he were to destroy the staff, all blights within 300 feet would wither and die. As he was about to burn it, Richard suggested that they should first lure in the plant creatures outside.

The group barricaded themselves in the kitchen, Rann opened a window and shot one of the needle blights outside. Once all of them converged towards the house, Limyé placed the staff on the oven and set it on fire. Blood oozed out of the porous wood and the staff released a terrible, inhuman scream. All of the blights visible outside collapsed lifeless.

Having explored the two floors of the house, our adventurers decided to clear the basement. They descended down the western turret and found themselves in an ice-cold cellar split in two parts by a fivefoot-thick brick wall. A thin mist covered the floor. Each half of the cellar featured an eight-foot tall wooden partition that doubled as a wine rack. The western rack stood empty, but the eastern one was half filled with wine bottles.

Something moved behind the eastern wine rack. Through the holes, the group glimpsed a figure with a full rack of antlers surrounded by dead blights. A gravelly voice muttered the words of a spell. The druid didn't manage to finish the spell before he was taken down by Rick and Rann. Exploring the cellar, Rann found a secret door set in the partition. These opened onto a very cold and dark tunnel covered in some sort of mold. As he entered to explore it, the cold got worse and worse until he felt his life departing him. The cave at the end of the tunnel was empty, save for brown mold. Our adventurers came to the conclusion that the Martikovs must have been using this magical mold to keep the cellar cold.

Having cleared the house, the group returned to the main hall with casks to check out what the druid was pouring into them. It turned out to be some poison meant to spoil the wine. The druid didn't seem to be carrying much with them, as they found only a **healing potion** and 16 copper pieces.

With the mission to clear the house accomplished, they returned to the Martikovs and Ireena. Davian and his kin were delighted to hear that the druids have been defeated, but then told the group of the real problems befalling the winery. To get to it however, Davian said that he needed to explain the history of the place.

The Wizard of Wines was founded by a mage whose name is buried in the annals of history. The wizard fashioned three magic gems, each one as big as a pinecone, and planted them in the rich valley soil. These "seeds" gave rise to healthy grapevines, which produced sweet, plump grapes. Even after Strahd's curse settled over Barovia, the gems kept the vines and their grapes from succumbing to the darkness.

The winery is known for three wines: the unremarkable Purple Grapemash No. 3, the slightly more tantalizing Red Dragon Crush, and the rich Champagne du le Stomp. Ten years ago, one of the vineyard's magic gems was dug up and stolen, and as a result, the winery stopped producing its best

vintage, the champagne. No one knows what happened to the gem. Davian Martikov blames his middle son, Urwin (the owner of the Blue Water Inn in Vallaki), for the loss because Urwin was on watch the night the gem was taken. Davian is convinced that Urwin shirked his duty to spend time with his betrothed, and the two men have been at odds ever since.

Adding to Davian's misery, the family has been fending off frequent attacks by scarecrow constructs of a witch to the west, **Baba Lysaga**. Three weeks ago, during one such attack, another gem was found, dug up, and taken. Davian believes that it is in the possession of Baba Lysaga, who resides in the ruins of **Berez**, a village to the south of Vallaki that was once destroyed by Strahd.

Five days ago, evil druids stole the third and final gem and bore it probably to **Yester Hill**, their home to the south. The Martikovs launched a counterattack on Yester Hill, hoping to get it back, but to no avail. The druids and their blights proved more than a match for the wine makers. Two days ago, the druids returned with a horde of blights and drove Davian's family from the winery.

Even though our adventurers succeeded in helping the Martikovs reclaim the winery, wine production in the valley will eventually stop as the vineyard dies off, since without the gems no grapes could grow in this sunless valley. Only if the the magic gems were recovered and replanted in the soil could the winery ensure that the Barovians aren't without wine to comfort them on dark, wretched nights.

The group promised to look into this issue on their travels, but said that first they had to deliver the wine to Krezk. Davian agreed wholeheartedly and suggested that two of his sons would go, but that an escort would be very appreciated. Since it was growing dark, the Martikovs proposed that the adventurers and Ireena stay for the night and set out next morning, to which they agreed. Since only two beds were available, Ireena and Limyé took them. Rick decided to lie on the floor of the same room, while Lord Coal and Rann slept in the barn.

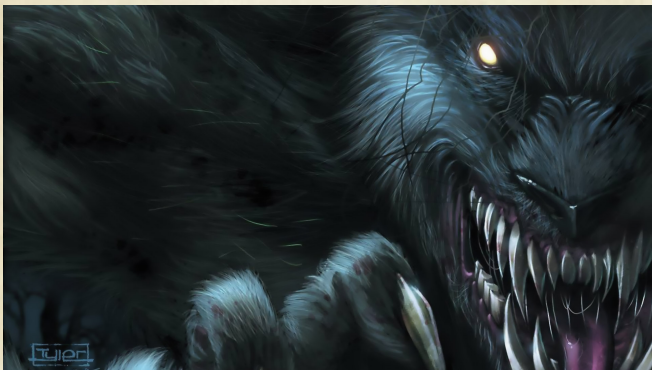
Richard had another nightmare this night. It started with the feeling of being chased in a forest, something bad getting closer and closer. Rick didn't dare look behind him. He was with other people around him, his teammates, as well as some random faces he's met since coming to Barovia. One by one, they started being picked off by whatever was chasing them. Finally he managed to hide himself behind some walls. The dream then shifted to Rick finding himself surrounded by strange creatures, some of them half animal- half human hybrids. They were screaming, crying and babbling incoherently. The dream ended with him feeling lost, approaching a lake and feeling that drowning in it would be the only escape from this cursed land. He surrendered himself to the waters and felt something resembling peace, as water started choking him.

He then woke up with a start, only to find it was still the middle of the night. The other companions were still fast asleep. That's when he started seeing his breath turn to fog, as the temperature seemingly dropped. He started hearing some kind of slithering noises outside. He also started hearing the wispers that have accompanied him in in the past. Suddenly, horrible blood-curdling screams split the night stillness. None of the people in the room would however wake up, no matter how much Richard shook them. He decided to check out what was happening, and opened the door. The corridor was pitch black, so he had to light a torch.

He immediately noticed some scratches and gouge marks on the walls and the floor that weren't there before. To his left he noticed blood pooling out from the kitchen. Carefully, he opened the door to find a trail of blood flowing out of the master bedroom. He decided to sneak around and enter the room through the secret door. These opened onto a scene of bloodshed. Two young parents were lying on the bed, their bellies ripped open. Blood and gore wer everywhere. Standing over a crib was some living horror. The light didn't seem to reach far enough, but what Richard saw was a creature with insect-like appendages, bones sticking out of everywhere and a deformed humanoid skull. The thing noticed him and broke through a wall outside. As Rick approached the crib to look into it, he woke up. This time, it was already past dawn and the others in the room were stirring up.



Disturbingly, there were some signs of the creature from his dream on the wall behind him - same kind of scratches, and something written in blood behind where Rick was sitting. When he noticed it, he decided to take some fresh air and smoke his pipe. Ireena was horrified by the scene, as were the two Martikov brothers. Limyé inspected the writing in blood, he realized it was written in Abyssal, and it translated roughly to "Suffer alone or face death". Strangely, no one in the house had wounds that would account for the amount of blood on the wall. Rann decided to investigate the scratch marks and found that they were also present, though faintly, in the corridor, the kitchen and the master bedroom, leading to the crib. The path agreed with the decription in Rick's small book of nightmares.



Rann reasoned that these were fiend tracks, and together with Limyé they came to the conclusion that some sort of demon must be following Rick, and that it very well may move through the ethereal plane. They decided to ask Richard later to see if he knew anything more.

The Martikovs were visibly disturbed, but tried to play this off on Barovia's weirdness. However they suggested that the party leave early to Krezk and escort **Adrian** and **Elvir Martikov** with the wine wagon. After packing the wine onto the wagon and a hearty breakfast, the group set out. Lord Coal rode on his undead horse in the front, Limyé and Ireena sat on the wagon, while Richard rode the horse just behind the wagon. As the pace was rather slow, Rann walked beside it.

ENCOUNTER ON THE WAY

The cloud cover was very thick and it felt oppressive, but the road seemed safe. The group crossed the bridge after several miles and was getting close to Krezk, when the road was barred by five bandits, who demanded the wine. Our adventurers felt that they had the upper hand here and laughed them off, upon which the five men dropped their weapons. Rather than run however, they started transforming, their bones cracking and their faces taking on lupine features. Within seconds, five ferocious werewolves stood in front of the group.

To everyone's surprise, the two Martikov brothers also transformed themselves, sprouting wings and taking on a half human-half raven form. Lord Coal rode into the werewolves and trampled one of them, while stabbing another one with his rapier. With the help of silvered weapons, our adventurers were able to hurt the werewolves. The Martikov brothers lacked such tools, but their tactic was more jaw-dropping, as they grabbed the enemies, flew up and dropped them from high up. The werewolves were very tough and managed to bite Limyé, Lord Coal and Rick, who were left uncertain whether they would catch lycantrophy.



The group however dealt very swiftly with the creatures and they cheerfully shouted to each other that they were indeed werewolf hunters now. As Lord Coal knocked down the last werewolf and was about to deal it a finishing strike, he heard the telltale sounds of a galloping horse. He looked back and was surprised to notice in the distance seemingly a horse on fire, with a rider on top of it. Rann and Limyé didn't waste time in helping Edward dispatch the last werewolf, while Rick decided to pull the wagon aside to make space for this new arrival.

One of the Martikov brothers, who were still in their wereraven form, looked in the direction and gasped. He shouted "Run! It's the devil Strahd!" before he and his brothers flew away in the opposite direction, leaving everyone behind. Afraid that he would get Ireena, Lord Coal took her on his skeletal horse and together they rode off as fast as possible towards Krezk, hoping that the rest would either hide or buy them some time.

By now, it was clear that this was not a horse on fire, but rather a horse from hell, his mane, tail and hooves made of fire. Suddenly, the nightmare jumped and started galloping through the air. He then suddenly vanished. Richard quickly hid himself in the trees, while Limyé grabbed Rann and made both of them invisible and run towards the trees. Strahd reappeared on his nightmare next to the wagon, which spooked the horses to run off towards Krezk. The invisible adventurers saw him mumbling something just before a wall



of wind picked up leaves and other detritus and blasted them towards the treeline. Our invisible duo was suddenly outlined by the dead leaves. Richard decided then to shoot Strahd. His arrow hit true, but some kind of red shimmer appeared over the vampire and the arrowhead plopped out of him within a second.

Seeing this, Limyé decided to join in the fight, but was out of his magical energy. He took out a *scroll of Spiritual Wapon* and summoned a magical maul that hit the devil. It hit him, but again the red shimmer seemed to neutralize most of the damage. Strahd turned to the now visible warlock, extended his hand and suddenly Limyé found himself charmed by the lord of this land. He felt as he was in the presence of his best friend. The vampire asked him if the group has come across in their travels upon anything that would be harmful to him. The old warlock immediately fished out Strahd's tome, which they found in Vallaki. He was about to give it to him, when Richard jumped out and grabbed it, after which he shot Strahd another time. Again, the arrow hit, but it did not seem to have its desired effect with the strange shimmer.

Limyé was outraged that Richard would hurt his best friend and tried setting him on fire with his magic, but the nimble rogue jumped out of the way. When he recovered from the leap, he found himself staring into Strahd's eyes and suddenly felt ashamed to have attacked his pal, the vampire. Strahd asked him to hand over the book and join him. Rann decided that it was imperative to move now - he ran over to Rick, still invisible and grabbed the book from him, after which he created a magical fog to obscure himself.

Both Rick and Limyé tried to grab it away from him, but the nimble ranger avoided them and then cast a rope into the sky, and created a magical pocket dimension into which it rose. He immediately climbed the 15 feet to the invisible doorway and hid there, pulling the rope in behind himself, hoping to buy enough time for Lord Coal to come back. Edward by this time reached Krezk, and after leaving Ireena at the gates, he quickly rode back to his friends.

When the two new friends of Strahd could not reach up to the gateway into the pocket dimension, in which Rann hid, the vampire lord decided to take matters into his own hands. He turned into a bat and flew into the space occupied by the ranger and bit into his neck. Rann screamed out in pain and pried the vampire away, who immediately turned back into his normal form. Still not wanting to give the tome back to Strahd, Rann broke a flask of oil on the floor of under Strahd's feet, lit it on fire and threw the book into it. Strahd angrily reached into the flames and snatched the book away before it could burn down. Meanwhile the sky filled with swarms of bats, which dove down to our brave adventurers outside.



Richard and Limyé hid in the trees, while Strahd jumped out of the pocket dimension onto his nightmare. Rann quickly followed, trying to snatch the book back. At this time Lord Coal rode back into the clearing, seeing two of his friends battling away bats. He noticed Rann running after the vampire lord and tried to block off the way. Edward quickly realized that it would be hopeless to kill the vampire, so the group decided to target Strahd's mount. With several attacks from Rann and Lord Coal, who imbued his rapier with holy power, they managed to topple the beast.

While Richard was fighting the bats and being bit by them, he managed to shake off the charm that Strahd placed on him, after which he promptly tried to run away. Not fast enough however, as Strahd in his anger unleashed a fireball onto everyone apart from Limyé. Rick fell to this, but Lord Coal and Rann still barely stood. Edwards's undead horse was however blown to bits. Limyé was very confused about the situation and used his staff of healing to top up his friends, which brought everyone back. Richard however decided to play dead, which turned out to be smart, as Strahd anger seemed to have no limits. The vampire unleashed another fireball onto Rann and Edward, nearly killing them.

At this point, Lord Coal decided to surrender. He dropped his weapons, which seemed to placate Strahd. Things might have turned out well, if it wasn't for Rann, who hated the thought of giving up. He shot the vampire while retreating. Strahd responded by setting Lord Coal on fire with another fireball and piercing Rann with a ray of frost, taking both of them down.

While Rick was playing dead, the vampire approached him and picked him up by his throat. He looked into his eyes and Richard fell under Strahd's charm again. He then brought back his horse back from beyond as an undead creature and asked the two remaining adventurers to join him. Since there was not enough space on his undead steed, he polymorphed Limyé into a slug and put in his pocket.

SPLIT UP

Strahd took off east with Rick and the slug. Before reaching Vallaki, he peeled off the road and rode on the shore of lake Zarovich. At one point Rick noticed a great elk in the distance staring after them with uncanny intelligence. Back on the road, Richard suggested to Strahd that they could try to revive his mount in a proper way. The concept seemed very alien to the undead vampire, but he assented and decided to visit Madam Eva first.

When they reached the bridge over the waterfall feeding the Tser Pool, Strahd became impatient and asked Richard and the slug to hold themselves. He murmured a spell of some sort and then had the horse leap down. Rather than fall, the undead horse started running down the wall at great speed. Rick managed to barely hold on during the 1000 feet hellish ride. When they reached the camp, the Vistani bowed in front of their liege. Strahd flicked the slug out of his pocket, and soon after Limyé came back to his form.

Madam Eva came out of her tent, and hearily agreed to bring Bucephalus back from the dead. She required a diamond to cast the spell and a dead horse. Strahd flicked a slime-covered gem from his pocket to her and snapped the neck of the undead horse. The ritual would take an hour, she said. Strahd forced her to hurry it up. In the meantime Rick and Limyé decided to barter with the Vistani merchant.

Richard pawned off some of their loot for currency, while Limyé browsed the collection of spell scrolls the merchant possessed. He squealed in happiness when he noticed the ritual of finding a familiar. He really wanted to buy it, and together with Rick managed to barter the necklace they originally found in the Durst house (worth about 750gp) for the spell scroll, **2 potions of Great Healing** and a **potion of Fire Breath**.

When Madam Eva's ritual finished, the nightmare came back to life and a small semblance of a non-frown appeared on Strahd's face. He then asked his new found friends to join him for dinner at his place. At first the charmed adventurers were trying to refuse, feeling some sort of unease, but they found no logical reasons not to go. Strahd turned Limyé into a spider this time, putting him in the pocket yet again. When Rick sat on the nightmare, the beast took off into the sky and flew towards the castle above.

A FRIENDLY VISIT TO CASTLE RAVENLOFT



Bucephalus brought the group to a drawbridge spanning a great chasm in front of the great castle. Trotting through a tunnel at the end of the bridge, they came upon the main doors of Ravenloft standing open. A rich, warm light spilled from within, flooding the courtyard. Torches fluttered sadly in sconces on both sides of the open doors. When they stepped off the nightmare, it took to the sky. Strahd took out the spider from his pocket and brought Limyé back to his natural form.

They entered through an ornate set of doors into a foyer. Overhead, four statues of dragons glared down, their eyes flickering in the torchlight. A second set of doors swung open itself as Strahd approached, and opened onto a great, dusty hall dimly lit by sputtering torches in iron sconces. The torches cast odd shadows across the faces of eight stone gargoyles squatting motionlessly on the rim of the domed frescoed ceiling. To the north, a wide staircase climbed into darkness. A lit hallway to the south contained another set of bronze doors. Footsteps echoed down from the stairway and a dusk elf descended the steps. He bowed down to Strahd, who introduced the new guests.

The vampire instructed his chamberlain to escort Rick and Limyé to the guest bedroom for some rest before the dinner. Strahd then suddenly turned into mist and floated away. The elf introduced himself as **Rahadin**. As the two adventurers approached him, they heard thousands of terrible screams. Rahadin explained that this was a curse he had to live with - be surrounded with the dying screams of his victims.

He led our duo to a staircase opposite the bronze doors to the south and together they climbed one of the castle towers. After many steps, they finally came to a dark landing. A cold draft of wind rushed down the spiral staircase at the north end of the east wall and whistled mournfully through the room before streaming down the stairs they came from. Hanging on the north wall above a trapdoor was a framed portrait of a handsome, well-dressed man with a serene yet penetrating gaze, who they recognized as a younger version of Strahd, perhaps before he became a vampire. He then opened a door that led into lounge of sorts.

As thunder shook the tower, heavy beams groaned under the weight of the ceiling. Three ornate lanterns hung by chains from these beams, each casting a dim glow. The curved west wall was fitted with three windows of leaded glass in steel latticework. A bookcase sat on the east wall between two doors. Plush, overstuffed chairs and couches were placed about the room. The fabric has faded with age, and the patterns it depicted were nearly gone. Lounging on one couch was a handsome young man whose attire, while elegant, was worn and faded.

Rahadin introduced the youthful man as **Escher** and told him to take care of the guests before the dinner, before he retreated down the stairs. Escher showed great interest and affection in Rick, who however didn't feel like swinging that way. The young man then suggested that he could get them some female company. The old warlock refused, on account of his celibacy, but Richard was not opposed to the idea. Both of the adventurers decided to take a short rest however.

Escher opened another door, which led into a room with a large bed sitting in the center. Its four corner posts supported a black canopy trimmed with gold tassels. Several comfortable divans were placed about the room. There was a small door in the east wall. Richard decided to lie down on the bed, while Limyé decided to browse the books on the shelves of the lounge. Some of the titles on the bookshelf included *Embalming: The Lost Art*, *Life Among the Undead: Learning to Cope*, *Castle Building 101*, and *Goats of the Balinok Mountains*. He took one of the tomes on undead life and settled down on a couch.

Soon two beautiful women arrived, but Limyé was too busy with his reading to give them much attention. The ladies entered the bedroom and found the sleeping rogue. Rick woke up to the two beauties half naked and licking his earlobes. All inhibition flew out of the window, and soon they dropped their lingerie to the floor gracefully and started undressing Richard. This was his wildest dreams coming true. One of the girls was kissing him and licking his nipples, while the other one went down on him. She was evidently greatly skilled, but did not rush in her pleasure giving. Lost in pleasure, Rick felt that coming here was really worth it. Just as he approached climax, the woman below bit his member and drank his blood! Great pleasure combined with terrible pain - by far the weirdest orgasm of Rick's life. He kicked the vampire off and ran naked for the door.



He burst out and ran straight for the other door, to the bewilderment of Limyé and Escher. The naked rogue ran up the spiral staircase and found himself in a low ceilinged room. Torn and broken couches lay in heaps, haphazardly strewn about. Deep claw marks covered the hardwood furniture, and the once lush upholstery had been sliced to shreds. From the dark shadows amid the rubble, three pairs of green eyes stared back at him. As he was about to reach the another door, Escher caught up to him and convinced him to come back, promising to scold the ladies.

When they returned, Escher did as promised and asked the women to be more considerate to the guests of Strahd. Rick closed himself off in the bedroom and applied some first aid to his bitten member, by wrapping it in some torn bedding. He then put his clothes on and decided to check where the other door in the room led. It turned out to be a small, wood-paneled closet that reeked of mildew and had a ten-foot-high ceiling. Iron hooks lined the walls, and a dusty black cloak hung from one hook in the center of the south wall. Rick noticed that there was a secret trapdoor in the ceiling.

He climbed one of the hooks and managed to open the trapdoor. He secured it so that it would not lock up and climbed up. He found himself in a large room with heavy beams support the ceiling and an outer wall curved to follow the shape of the tower. Dim light filtered into the room through the steel lattice squares of two leaded glass windows. Several tables stood throughout the room, weighed down by stacks of glass jars and bottles, all of them bearing labels. The labels identified such items as "Eye of Newt," "Hair of Bat," "Snail Hearts," and "Frog's Breath." Two doors led from the room. From behind one of them some terrible odor emanated and cackling of old women could be heard. He chose the other door, which led to the room where he was stopped by Escher. Rick decided to quietly sneak down the stairs and explore the castle.

In the meantime, Limyé also asked if he could see some of the castle. Escher agreed, but said that he would have to get Rick. When he discovered that he was gone, he searched the floor above through the trapdoor, before coming back for the warlock to search downstairs for the missing rogue.

Richard quietly climbed down to the landing below. A single door stood there, which opened onto a short, dark hallway. A door of delicately engraved steel stood at its west end. Intricate details stood out clearly on the door's surface. The door seemed to shine with a light of its own, untouched by time. Flanking the door were two alcoves in shadow. A dark, vaguely manshaped figure stood in each alcove. As Rick approached the shapes, they turned out to be rats piled on top of each other. The vermin jumped on him and started biting him. The pain allowed him to shake off the charm that Strahd placed on him. He started fighting back, but made enough noise for Escher and Limyé to find him. The old warlock set some of the rats on fire, but a word spoken in some strange language from Escher made the rats scurry back to the alcoves.

After Rick apologized for wandering on his own, Escher brought the adventurers down to the ground floor. He then opened the bronze floor in the grand hall, which led to a dining hall. Three enormous crystal chandeliers brilliantly illuminated this magnificent chamber. Pillars of stone stood against dull white marble walls, supporting the ceiling. In the center of the room, a long, heavy table was covered with a fine white satin cloth.

The table was laden with many delectable foods: roasted mutton basted in a savory sauce, roots and herbs of every taste, and sweet fruits and vegetables. A few places have been set with fine, delicate china and silver. At each place was a crystal goblet filled with an amber liquid with a delicate, tantalizing fragrance. At the center of the far west wall, between floor-to-ceiling mirrors, stood a massive organ.

Soon after Rick and Limyé arrived, a young, pretty girl appeared together with Strahd, who motioned everyone to sit and eat. She introduced herself as **Gertruda**. The girl was clearly in love with Strahd, which Rick understood to be most probably due to the vampire's charm ability. Gertruda was oblivious to any danger to herself - especially from Strahd. The innocent girl had a very fairy-tale view of life and believed that she would soon become a bride to the lord.

Rick and Limyé were quite ravenous and found both the wine and the food to be exquisite. The old warlock was just eating his mutton, when Strahd said that he would also have his dinner, after which he tore into the throat of Gertruda and sucked life out of her. Once he was finished, the girl's limp body fell loudly on the floor. Our adventurers froze mid-bite.

Strahd then directly asked both of them if they would like to join him in immortal life. Limyé refused, while Rick tried to somehow stall for time. When it became obvious to the overlord of Barovia that these individuals would not be joining him on their own will, he expressed disappointment, but said that he would still recoup his enjoyment from this meeting. That's when Limyé suddenly felt sleepy and face-planted into his plate. Richard realized that the food must have been poisoned, and managed to keep his eyes open for a few moments more, before he too lost consciousness.

They woke up some time later to find themselves in a precarious situation. Richard was tied up on a large, wooden throne resting on a balcony. Next to him, on another throne, sat Strahd. Behind them hung a red velvet curtain. In front however was a 10 foot drop into some sort of torture chamber. Racks, iron maidens, stocks, and other instruments of torture thrust up out of still, brackish water that filled the room below, the ceiling of which was festooned with hanging chains. The skeletons of their last victims lay within them.



Limy e lay on one of the racks, though he was not tied up. When they stirred, Strahd smiled and said that he would enjoy what came next. He then raised his hands, and spoke "Let the games begin!" Limy e was surprised when six rotting corpses slowly rose out of the water and lurched towards him. The zombies fell on the poor warlock and started tearing him apart. Within seconds, the old man collapsed. As Strahd was showing his disappointment, suddenly a great radiant brightness exploded out of Limy e, who jumped to his feet as if nothing happened. With the slow zombies temporarily blinded, he managed to run away a short distance and kill one of the undead with his eldritch powers.

When the light exploded, Rick took it as an opportunity to try and loosen his bonds. Strahd was just barely inconvenienced by the explosion of light, but after a few seconds he screamed in great anger. It seemed as if the source of this was something else. He snarled, "I don't have time for this! Rahadin, come here!", after which he turned into mist and went straight through the ceiling.

Knowing that this might be their only chance to escape, Rick managed to untie himself and helped pull the old warlock up before he was eaten by the zombies. The mindless creatures could not scale the high wall. Quickly, they checked what was behind the curtain - a door. This led to a large room, rising to a twenty-foot-tall flat ceiling. A stone brazier burned fiercely in the center of the room, but its tall white flame produced no heat. The rim of the brazier was carved with seven cup-shaped indentations spaced evenly around the circumference. Within each indentation was a spherical stone, twice the diameter of a human eyeball and made of a colored crystal. No two stones were the same color. Overhead, a wood-framed hourglass as tall and wide as a dwarf hung ten feet above the brazier, suspended from the ceiling by thick iron chains. All the sand was stuck in the upper portion of the hourglass, unable to run down.

Written in glowing script on the base of the hourglass was a verse in Common. Two nine-foot-tall iron statues of knights on horseback, poised to charge with swords drawn, stood in deep alcoves facing each other.

VERSE ON THE HOURGLASS

Cast a stone into the fire:

Violet leads to the mountain spire
Orange to the castle's peak
Red if lore is what you seek
Green to where the coffins hide
Indigo to the master's bride
Blue to ancient magic's womb
Yellow to the master's tomb

The stones around the brazier corresponded to the ones in the verse. Richard and Limy e came to the conclusion that this might have been some sort of a teleportation circle. Having established that, they took a short while to decide where they would go. The warlock was very tempted by the lore and ancient magic, but was afraid that this could lead into the amber temple, which could be dangerous. They decided that the mountain spire, the master's bride or the place of coffins would possibly be the safest. Not wanting to stay too long, they decided on the master's bride, hoping that this would lead to Ireena.

Limy e had Rick pick up the indigo stone and throw it into the white flame, which immediately took on the stone's color. The sand began to fall into the bottom of the hourglass. Rick immediately hid behind one of the statues, but came out when nothing bad happened. They were surprised that no teleportation took place, but then realized that they might have to enter the heatless flame. The moment that Rick touched the indigo flame, he vanished. Limy e followed after him.

COLD AWAKENING

In the meantime, Rann recovered his consciousness slowly about an hour after getting knocked out. He was covered with slush, the ice having melted after it started raining. He was freezing, but noticed immediately that a few wolves have been feasting on the dead horse and werewolves. They had not yet noticed him, perhaps because of the ice. Two wolves were however approaching the still-breathing well-cooked Edward.

Rann quickly drank a potion of healing to bring himself up a bit, before he ran up to Lord Coal and the wolves and tried to convince them to leave his friend alone. He carefully woke up his companion and fed him a potion of healing. The wolves however smelled easy prey. Seeing the beasts, Lord Coal scrambled quickly up a tree with Rann's help, but the ranger was a moment too slow to follow - he was bitten. He managed to keep standing however and climbed the tree with Edward providing covering fire with his longbow. When they were at a safe height they shot at the wolves and managed to kill a few, driving the rest away.

Cold and near-dead, they decided to trek towards Krezk. After half a mile they managed to get there, but realized they needed the wine. The tracks in the mud led more west. After half an hour, they managed to find the wagon, with the horses eating grass by the side of the road. One of the barrels was missing, but they found it on the way back to Krezk.

As they arrived at the gates, the guards yet again sent back for the burgomaster. Soon, Dmitri Krezkov reappeared and kept his word. He asked the guards to raise the portcullis, while asking Rann and Edwards where the others were and what happened to them. Lord Coal told the story of a fight with werewolves, but left out the part with the devil himself making an appearance.

Dmitri led them to the front of his house, and the two adventurers helped him unload it into his wine cellar. The village apparently had no inns or taverns, but the kind burgomaster distributes it for free to the townsfolk who come. Lord Coal noticed that Dmitri was trying to hide the fact that he was distraught. When asked, he reluctantly said that he was grieving over the death of his last child –**Ilya**, a fourteen-year old boy, died seven days earlier due to an illness.

The burgomaster invited the haggard adventurers to their home, where they met his wife **Anna**, and were reunited with Ireena. The girl, noticing the deathly paleness over the two near-revenants, quickly ministered to their health. Once she wrapped them in bandages, the duo decided to rest for a few hours, before going any further.

When Edward woke up and Rann finished his meditation, Ireena told them of what she learned about the village and the abbey on the mountain. Apparently, the Abbey of Saint Markovia was named after a priest of the Morninglord who took a stand against the devil Strahd. After a fierce uprising, Markovia and her most loyal followers stormed Castle Ravenloft, only to be destroyed. The abbey was once a hospital and a convent but it fell on hard times after the land was swallowed up by the mists. Some of the clergy fell prey to Strahd, while others went mad and either starved themselves to death or turned to cannibalism.

The current head of the Abbey, called simply the **Abbot**, arrived over a century ago and hasn't aged a day since. He occasionally visits the **Shrine of the White Sun** at the northern end of the village, but doesn't talk much, and he demands tribute in the form of wine. No one knows his true name or where he came from, and many believe he's Strahd's servant or the vampire himself in disguise. For this reason, no one from the village visits the abbey anymore. The abbey's bell rings at odd times, day and night, and the place is filled with baleful screams and horrible, inhuman laughter that can be heard throughout the village.

Ireena confessed to the remaining two adventurers that she is afraid of going to the Abbey. Rann and Edward agreed, and suggested that they would first scout the place out, while she should stay in the village. Ireena pleaded that she would at least like to pray to the Morninglord in some sacred place, and suggested going first to the Shrine of the White Sun. Rann was a bit reluctant, but Lord Coal also wanted to pray to Lathander.

After a short walk, they found themselves at a pool at the north end of the village which, even under the gray skies, shimmered and sparkled. Near its shore sat an old gazebo on the verge of collapse. A wooden statue of a mournful, bare-chested man, its paint chipped and faded, stood in the gazebo with arms outstretched, as though waiting to be embraced. Ireena claimed that she started hearing some gentle whispering. As she reached the pool's edge, an image appeared in its sparkling blue waters: a handsome youth of kind and noble visage. The sadness in his eyes turned to sudden joy.



"Tatyana!" he said. "It has been so long! Come, my love. Let us be together at last."

Ireena gasped and put a hand on her heart. "My beloved Sergei! In life, you were a prince and a man of faith. We were to be married long ago. Has this blessed pool called your spirit to me?" She reached toward the water's surface as a hand of water rose up to take hers.

Rann and Lord Coal were quite alarmed, and Edward grabbed Ireena by her hand. They asked her what was going on, and she said that memories of ages ago came back to her. They recalled from the Tome of Strahd, that Sergei was the vampire's brother, who was meant to marry Strahd's love, Tatyana.

Wanting to see what would happen, Edward heeld her hand and together they entered the pools slowly. Ireena was slowly pulled into the pool and embraced Sergei beneath the rippling water, with Edward leading her as if during a wedding. He has never seen a happier couple as they both began to fade from view.

Edward found himself standing alone in the water, the young girl having simply vanished. Suddenly, a peal of thunder shook the land, and the dark clouds coalesced into a terrible visage of Strahd von Zarovich. A deep, dark voice from beyond the mountains cried out, "She is mine!" A terrible crack resounded as blue lightning split the sky and struck the pool.

Rann nearly lost his footing, as the gazebo next to him was knocked down from the blast. The unlucky Edward, still in water, found himself nearly electrocuted. Barely alive, he climbed out of the pool and sagged to the ground, smoke rising from him. He called upon the powers of Lathander and brought back some life into himself.

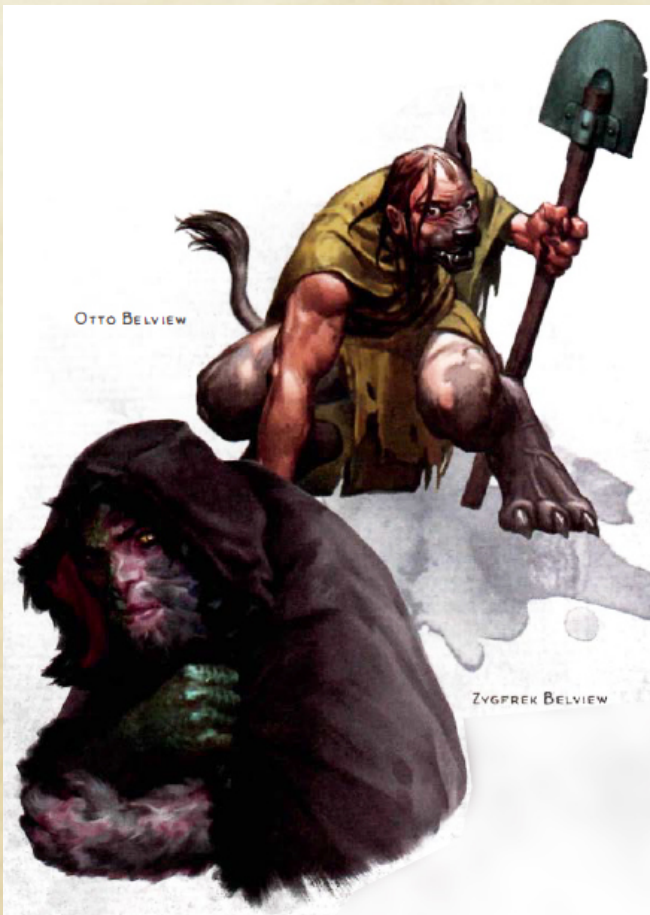
Feeling that they have probably succeeded in saving Ireena from Strahd, Rann and Lord Coal decided to fix up the knocked down shrine and set out to climb the Abbey before it got too dark. The switchback road that hugged the cliff was ten feet wide and covered with loose gravel and chunks of broken rock. The ascent was slow and somewhat treacherous, and the air grew colder as they neared the top.

ABBAY OF SAINT MARKOVIA

Feeling that they have probably succeeded in saving Ireena from Strahd, Rann and Lord Coal decided to fix up the knocked down shrine to the Morninglord. After putting it roughly back together, they set out to climb the Abbey of Saint Markovia to investigate the rumors before it got too dark. The switchback road that hugged the cliff was ten feet wide and covered with loose gravel and chunks of broken rock. The ascent was slow and somewhat treacherous, and the air grew colder as they neared the top.

The road from the village climbed above the mist to the wide ledge on which the abbey was perched. A light dusting of snow covered the trees and the rocky earth. The gravel road passed between two small, stone outbuildings, to either side of which stretched a five-foot-high, three-foot-thick wall of jumbled stones held together with mortar. Blocking the road were iron gates attached to the outbuildings by rusty hinges. They appeared to be unlocked. Viewed through the gates, the stone abbey stood quiet. Its two wings were joined by a fifteen-foot-high curtain wall. A belfry protruded from the rooftop of the closer north wing, which also sported a chimney billowing gray smoke.

As they tried the rusty gate, it squealed loudly. Two bizarre creatures jumped out of the outbuildings. One was 4 feet, 9 inches tall and squatted instead of standing upright. He looked like a beardless dwarf with patches of donkey flesh covering his face and body. He had one human ear and one wolf's ear, and a protruding wolf's snout and fangs. His arms and hands were human, but his legs and feet were leonine, and he had a donkey's tail. He could barely speak Common, but Edward and Rann understood that his name was **Otto Belview**.



The other creature was even shorter. The left side of her face and body was covered with lizard scales, the right with tufts of gray wolf fur. Between these tufts was pale human skin. One of her eyes was that of a feline, and her fingers and hands resembled cat's paws with opposable thumbs. She had a gruff voice and wore a gray cloak with black fur trim, introducing herself as **Zygfrek**.

The two guards asked our duo what their business was. The diplomatic Edward asked politely if they could see the Abbot. Otto told them to follow him, laughing like a donkey.

They walked up to a fifteen-foot-high curtain wall joining the abbey's two wings. Behind its battlements, two guards stood at attention, their features obscured by fog. As they got closer, Rann and Edward realized that the "guards" on the wall were propped-up scarecrows that wore corroded chain shirts and clutched rusted spears. Below them, set into the wall, was a pair of ten-foot-tall, wooden doors reinforced with bands of steel. To the right of these doors, mounted on the wall, was a tarnished copper plaque bearing the abbey's name, under which appeared the words: "May her light cure all illness."

The door opened onto a courtyard filled with swirling thick fog. The courtyard was surrounded by a fifteen-foot-high curtain wall on which stood several "guards". From this side it was very clear that these guards were merely scarecrows. Wooden doors to the north and east led to the abbey's two wings. In the center of the courtyard was a stone well fitted with an iron winch, to which a rope and bucket were attached. Along the perimeter, tucked under the overhanging wall, were several stone sheds with padlocked wooden doors, as well as three shallow alcoves that contained wooden troughs. Two wooden posts pounded into the rocky earth had iron rings bolted to them, and chained to one of them was a short humanoid with bat wings and spider mandibles. The quiet was shattered by horrible screams coming from the sheds.

Otto asked the two to wait while he would go inform the Abbot of their presence. He vanished into the smaller north wing. While waiting for him, Lord Coal approached the well in the center and peered down. He noticed some kind of humanoid-spider chimera inside. Rann meanwhile went over to the chained up batlike lady, who fluttered wildly and screamed nonsense. She was seemingly convinced that powerful enemies were hunting her, and their agents were everywhere she went, sure that "they" were watching her all the time.

Soon, Otto came back and invited the two inside. They were wary of a trap, but decided to follow. As they came to the door, they heard gentle-sounding music trickling down from above, played on a single stringed instrument by some unseen master. The ground floor was one large, fifty-foot-square room with arched, leaded glass windows. A cauldron sat on an iron rack above a fire in a hearth, while above the fireplace mantel hung a golden disk engraved with the symbol of the sun. In one corner, a wooden staircase climbed to the upper level, while in another corner a stone staircase descended into darkness. Several chairs surrounded a wooden table that stretched nearly the length of the room. Wooden dishware and gold candelabras were neatly arranged on the table, standing behind which was a young woman with alabaster skin dressed in a torn and soiled red gown. Her auburn hair was neatly bundled so as not to touch her soft shoulders. She seemed lost in her own thoughts.

A handsome young man in a brown monk's robe gently held the woman by her hand. A painted wooden holy symbol that depicted the sun hung from a chain around his neck. He moved with the grace of a saint. Seeing our adventuring duo, he smiled and welcomed them to his abbey. Disturbed by the half human-half animal forms outside, Rann asked were they came from right of the bat. The smile vanished from the Abbot's face. He said, "I created them. But it was what they asked for..." He then went on to explain that the Belviews - a family of sickly, inbred lepers, came to the abbey seeking salvation some decades earlier.

The Abbot rid them of their diseases, an act for which they were eternally grateful, but could not cure them of certain human defects that had been present since birth. The Abbot became consumed with a prideful, obsessive desire to rid the poor Belviews of their lingering imperfections. The Belview family, however, had strange ideas of what it meant to be perfect. They didn't want to be ordinary humans. They wanted the eyes of a cat, wings to fly like a bat, the strength of a mule, and the guile of a snake. In short, they craved bestial traits, and the Abbot, taking pity on them, yielded to their mad desires.

The Abbot's early experiments proved fatal to their subjects, but the Belviews insisted that he keep trying. One day, a Barovian lord named **Vasili von Holtz** visited the abbey. The Abbot knew at once that the man was evil, but von Holtz stressed that he only wanted to help. He furnished the Abbot with forbidden lore plucked from the Amber Temple, then helped the Abbot transform the Belviews into mongrelfolk. The Belviews were happy, albeit insane. Only then did von Holtz reveal himself to be Strahd von Zarovich. The Abbot however realized that any attempt to slay Strahd would be futile - that the ancient curse upon the land meant that the vampire could never truly die, at least not in Barovia.

Both Rann and Edward were quite outraged by the Abbot. He claimed however that he did what he did to only fulfill the wishes of the Belviews - it was their choice. They then asked about the young lady next to him. He introduced her as **Vasilka**, though the girl seemed to shy to say anything. The Abbot said that Strahd confided in him, lamenting his curse and telling him that he wished nothing more than to escape Barovia. The Abbot then set out to find a cure for Strahd's "malady." He became convinced that the cure lay in reuniting Strahd with his lost love and, in so doing, ending Barovia's curse. He hoped that Vasilka could be the girl to cure Strahd. He's been giving her lessons in etiquette and ladylike conduct so that she could be formally presented to Strahd and win his love.

Rann had enough, and decided to apprehend the obviously mad Abbot. As he got closer, he noticed seams in Vasilka's powdered skin. Pointing this out, the Abbot agreed that she was in fact a flesh golem, built out of the most perfect body parts he could find. Horrified by this, Edward decided to Detect Evil, to see if this was some fiend or undead in disguise. He was shocked, when he discovered that the Abbot was instead a celestial creature! As Rann reached for him, The Abbot shed his disguise and assumed his true angelic form, to convince them that they were wrong about him.

Believing that he was tainted by the evil of Barovia, Lord Coal and Rann tried reasoning with the Abbot that he should turn the Belviews back to human form and start working at healing the Barovians and providing them with hope.

At some point in the conversation, the bell upstairs started tolling. Soon, cries of "Food! Food, food! Fooooood!" could be heard from outside. Once the bell stopped ringing, they could hear doors upstairs opening and closing.

Lord Coal's rhetoric seemed to work, as the Abbot agreed that he should focus more on the well-being of Barovians outside his abbey, as well as bringing the Belviews back to human form, a project that would however take a long time. He refused though to give up on trying to heal Strahd with love. Suddenly, some kind of loud thud could be heard from upstairs. Rann and Edward got the Abbot's leave to check out the abbey's grounds.

They climbed the wooden stairs, to find themselves in a loft with a pitched roof and a door in the center of the south wall. Unlit lanterns hung from the rafters, and a rope dangled from a bronze bell lodged in the belfry thirty feet overhead. A cot heaped with furs rested in the northeast corner, surrounded by empty wine bottles. A black shroud covered a humanoid shape lying on a wooden table. The room was unoccupied.

With trepidation, they lifted the black shroud. Beneath it lay a creature made of stitched-together body parts. They recognized some of these parts as those of Richard and Limyé! Suddenly, another thud resounded just behind them.

REUNION

Richard and Limyé found themselves in near complete darkness, with a very dim source of light in the distance. They also stood in a foot of water. Richard lit up a torch and they found that they were in some sort of tunnel in stone. Disturbingly, they discovered that it was not water, but blood that covered the floor. Behind them was a wall with a small opening at the top, spewing out a small bloody waterfall.



Having only one direction to go, they set out. After some time passed, the walls started taking on a more organic tone, looking like the innards of some vast creature. The path sloped slightly upwards and soon they came to a dead end. What blocked their path seemed to be some sort of organic membrane. When Rick extinguished his light, he noticed that the dim light emanated from behind the membrane. Bringing the light back, he experimentally stabbed the wall with his rapier. It passed cleanly through, though blood seeped out of the "wound". Together with Limyé they decided to try and hack their way through.

Back in the Abbey, more thuds could be heard coming from a point on the floor. Rann quickly ran downstairs, but there was nothing there to explain the sounds. He then approached the spot carefully and decided to pry the floorboards away with his crowbar. Beneath them, he saw some strange organic membrane. That's when a geyser of blood erupted from it, splattering Rann head to toe, and Richard with Limyé climbed out of a newly opened hole, also drenched in blood and gore.

Soon, the hole started closing up. Lord Coal tried to stop it from happening, but his effort was in vain. Magically, the floorboards dragged themselves back and soon there was no sign of the passage. Edward and Rann were shocked that their friends were in front of them and asked them to look at the body behind them. This time however, what they saw was some random female body parts sewn together. Again, Barovia played tricks on their eyes, it would seem.

After reuniting, they told each other of what happened to them, though Lord Coal played down his electrocution and Richard did not want to share too much about his bite wound. After catching up, they decided that they would search the Abbey a bit more and then head out either to the tower Rictavio spoke of, or to the druid hill. They came out on the curtain wall outside, and the two newcomers were much surprised by the bat-like lady in the courtyard. Two doors led into the other wing.

Opening the leftmost one, they entered a ruined office. A wooden counter shaped like an L stood at the front, but all the other furniture has rotted away, leaving heaps of moldy wood and faded cloth. Another door led from it, and a rickety staircase led down, from where whoops, laughter, and screams could be heard. The door opened onto a spacious chamber containing bed frames of wrought iron arranged in two neat rows. Cobwebs and bits of rotten mattress clung to each frame. Three doors were spaced along the south wall, each with a plaque mounted on it. From west to east, the plaques read OPERATING ROOM, NURSERY, and MORGUE.

As they entered this abandoned hospital, six shadows came into existence and attacked the party. Having great experience in fighting the undead, this was a short fight. Only Rann was touched by one of the spirits, some of his strength leaving him, but he retaliated by destroying two of the shadows himself. Finding nothing in the room after the fight, they opened the door to the operating room. A bloodstained table stood in the middle of the otherwise empty room. When Lord Coal touched the table to look under it, a scream filled the room – a scream that echoed through time. It was followed by other, fainter screams of those who died under the knife. The screams faded until they were nothing more than haunting memories.

The doors into the nursery opened onto a room containing the wreckage of old wooden cribs. Lord Coal saw a figure reflected in the window glass: a nun in white robes, standing in the doorway. A look back toward the door revealed nothing there, and the reflection was gone. The last door opened onto a completely empty room, apart from a raven perched on the windowsill. It flapped away and rested on the shoulders of a scarecrow in the garden.

Before going downstairs, they explored the other door to the wing. They opened onto some sort of barracks with moldy beds. Here they met a colorfully dressed woman, armed to the teeth. She introduced herself as **Ezmerelda d'Avenir**, a vampire hunter. She claimed to have come to Barovia to find her mentor, **Rudolph van Richten**, who came to Barovia to destroy the greatest vampire of them all. Rann recognized the name of van Richten, who was famous as probably the greatest monster hunter alive. Ezmerelda believed that he might have been hiding in a nearby tower, but has not seen him yet. The group immediately suggested that van Richten might be disguising himself as Rictavio, especially since some of them have seen him take on a different form.

The group was curious what Ezmerelda was doing in the abbey. She explained that she crept into Krezk unseen under cover of darkness, in the hope of gaining knowledge about Strahd and his domain from the residents. Having met the Abbot and Strahd's "bride", she realized the Abbot was insane. The Abbot told her that he was expecting Strahd to visit his bride-to-be, so she decided to wait for the vampire to come, so that she could destroy him.



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Ezmerelda agreed to joining forces against the vampire, but only after testing the group's knowledge about the nature of vampires. When she joined them to walk, Lord Coal noticed that one of her legs was artificial, though Ezmerelda seemed to walk almost normally. She explained that a werewolf once bit off her leg below the knee. She avoided getting infected, and commissioned a master artisan from Waterdeep to craft a prosthetic lower leg and foot. After several tries, he delivered a prosthesis that restored her mobility. They also discovered that she was a Vistani, but has left her people to work with her mentor.

Together, they went downstairs and found themselves in the center of madness. A hallway full of whispers, mad laughter and screams led from the ruined room. This lightless corridor had multiple doors behind which lay creatures that shattered the quiet with their mad cackles and whispered curses. The stench was overpowering. Down the hallway they saw a two-headed mongrel feeding others from a big cauldron, while a 7-foot-tall assemblage of human body parts stood guard. About sixty members of the deformed Belview family were locked behind doors here, wallowing in filth.

Having seen more than enough misery and madness, the group decided to leave the abbey. Before going back to the burgomaster's house, they decided to wash off the blood covering them in the pool at the north end of the village. Only when they arrived, did Limyé remember that he could have used his Prestidigitation skills to clean themselves up magically. Having done that, they decided to rest for the night at the Krezkov house, only Richard voicing his concerns that Strahd could find them here, angry after loosing Ireena.

Since there was no better place to hide for the evening however, they stayed with the Krezkovs. As they were preparing to sleep for the night, someone knocked on the house's door. As the baron came to answer it, our adventurers peaked out. It was the Abbot, who told the burgomaster and his wife that he wanted to raise their son from the dead. He claimed that the "gods of light" wanted the Krezkov bloodline restored. The burgomaster immediately agreed through his tears and went to dig up the grave. Rann pronounced this to be a terrible idea and went back to rest. Lord Coal assisted Dmitri and soon the coffin was out.

Limyé observed closely, wanting to make sure that the Abbot would not cast some different ritual, but was surprised when the celestial being just spoke a short prayer, used no material components whatsoever and brought back Ilya from the dead in a minute. The boy gasped fresh air and normal color returned to him, his flesh mending itself. The Krezkovs were crying from happiness. Anna Krezkova praised the Abbot and Saint Markovia for this generous act before tending to her son. The burgomaster, his grief dispelled, feared that he has misjudged the Abbot and had no way to repay him for this supreme act of kindness. The Abbot responded that all he wanted in return was a bridal gown, before leaving back to the abbey.

Our group of adventurers, now increased to five, took rest in the old room belonging to the other deceased children. Richard again had some disturbing dreams, in which he again saw the great tree on the hill, before being grabbed by some plant behind him and having his head chewed off. He woke up with a yelp, his other companions waking up as well. It was still very early in the morning, when suddenly a terrible woman's scream could be heard in the house. At first Rick thought that he was still dreaming, but that was not the case. They ran to the source of the scream, entering the master bedroom.

They found Anna standing over her husband, his throat slit. Dmitri was still alive, so Lord Coal rushed to save him with his divine powers. When he was stabilized, Anna said that their son Ilya was responsible. Not wanting to lose time, the group ran downstairs after him. On the table in the dining room, they found a bloody knife stabbed into a letter. Opening it, they found it to be an invitation for them to dine at castle Ravenloft with Strahd (see Appendix). The door to the house was left open. Rann found tracks leading out of the village. Following them, they found two dead guards lying on the ground in front of open gates. Quickly following the trail, they soon entered the dark woods. Soon, they noticed a source of torchlight bobbing away in the fog. The group agreed for Rann to stealthily explore it. He made his way quickly yet cautiously through the fog until he came upon the shell of a ruined tower. The upper floors of the structure have collapsed, leaving heaps of rubble and shattered timber around the tower's base. The feeble light moved through an open doorway on the ground floor, then flickered and went out.

Afraid that this was some trap, the group decided to not follow any more and went back to the village to buy the supplies they would need later for the trip to the Amber Temple. The shop just opened and the owner did not yet know of what transpired, so the group bought five sets of furs. Limyé additionally bought supplies he would need to summon a familiar. After finishing the shopping, they checked on Dmitri, who was still stable, but lost the ability to speak.

YESTER HILL

The group decided to leave the depressing village and headed out towards the Yester Hill, where the druids resided. Their way was unimpeded, and within two hours they passed by the road to the winery and kept going south. After another half hour, the trail through the thick woods led to a hill covered with dead grass and cairns of black rock. Dark, ominous clouds gathered high above, and a single bolt of lightning struck the hilltop. West of the hill, the land, the woods, and the sky vanished behind a towering wall of fog.

Rann decided to scout ahead carefully, while the rest hid in the treeline. Dirt trails ran along two concentric rings of cairns that encircled the hillside. Each cairn was a ten-foot-high mound of slimy black rocks. He heard a whisper, a deep voice carried on the wind. "Long have I waited," it said, "for one who is worthy. My spear hungers for blood. Retrieve it, and rule these mountains in my stead, just like the mighty warriors from the early days of the Whispering Wall." Rann felt drawn to one of the cairns and dug through it. In there, he found a **blood spear** amid moldy bones.

KAVAN'S BLOOD SPEAR

Any creature can wield the spear, but only the character chosen by Kavan to wield it gains a +2 bonus to attack and damage rolls made with this magic weapon.

When you hit with a melee attack using this magic spear and reduce the target to 0 hit points, you gain 2d6 temporary hit points.

As he continued his scouting, he noticed a sickly copse the south end of the hilltop – a grove of dead trees and shrubs with a huge, misshapen tree at its core. Blood oozed like sap from its twisted trunk. Skulking around the tree were six gangly humanoid creatures covered with needles. Embedded in the tree was a shiny battleaxe, beneath which lay a humanoid skeleton. When he came back to the others to tell of this, Limyé realized that his probably was a **Gulthiass tree**, from which all blights originate. They decided to burn it down safely. Quietly they climbed the hill, and when they got close Rann cast Rope Trick.

After everyone climbed into the pocket dimension, Limyé leaned out, with the others holding his legs. He created a sphere of fire, which he hurled into the tree. The dried husk easily caught fire. It turned out that there were a lot more blights around, as all of them came closer trying to beat out the flames, but all of them caught fire as well. When his spell ended, the tree still stood.



Wanting to finish it, Limyé started hurling Eldritch blasts at the burning tree. One of these imploded in his hands, which made him lose his balance and fall out. Landing painfully, the old man picked himself up and started angrily hurling green flame everywhere. Soon, the great tree collapsed. He approached the shining battleaxe and tried picking it up. It sprouted thorns from its handle, and the old warlock dropped it. The others climbed out of the pocket dimension, and approached as well. Rann tried picking the axe up and noticed that its handle was carved with leaves and vines, and the weapon weighed half as much as a normal battleaxe. This time it did not sprout anything. When it did not for Lord Coal either, they decided that it probably reacted well only to truly good-natured men.

THE PLANTKILLER

Apart from being a **light** magical weapon, when the axe hits a plant, whether an ordinary plant or a plant creature, the target takes an extra 1d8 slashing damage.

Now that they had a moment's respite, they noticed that looking west into the curtain of fog, one could see a white fortress on a hill above a great city. The city appeared quite distant, maybe a mile away. The fog obscured all detail, but you could hear what sounded like the echo of a church bell. Atop the hill was also a wide ring of black boulders and smaller rocks that collectively formed a makeshift wall enclosing a field of dead grass. Lightning struck the edge of the ring from time to time, illuminating a ghastly, fifty-foot-tall statue made of tightly woven twigs and packed with black earth. The statue resembled a towering, cloaked man with fangs.

Entering the ring, they noticed fresh graves around. At the center of the statue's chest, they noticed a faint glow. Guessing that this might be a gem, they decided to look at it closer. That was when Richard, who was keeping watch, noticed the familiar rider on a horse from hell in the sky. Everyone decided to run into the pocket dimension up the rope, apart from Edward, who decided to quickly remove the gem. He misty-stepped up onto the statue and started trying to hack his way in. That's when the graves below moved, six druids and six wild men with emerging. The druid started chanting "Wintersplinter! Wintersplinter! Wintersplinter!" on and on, as Lord Coal hurried before Strahd arrived. As he was getting close, he noticed that it seemed there was a statue within the statue. Suddenly, a thirty-foot-tall plant creature burst out of the statue, sending twigs and earth flying. The creature resembled a dead treant with green light seeping out of it, with Lord Coal riding its face.

Noticing that their friend was in grave danger, the group in the pocket dimension started planning on how to get him back safely. At first they planned to run up to him, when the large monster would get closer to them. When the Wintersplinter however started heading north, while trying to stab Lord Coal with its branches, the plan fell to ruins. Knowing that Ezmerelda could turn one of them invisible, they decided that Limyé would become so and run as fast as possible to Edward, and turn him invisible with his magic as well, hopefully protecting them from the monster, Strahd and the crazy occupants of the hill. Once Ezmerelda turned him invisible, he quickly scurried down the rope and started heading north, trying to go around the circle of stones.



As the beast lumbered north, Lord Coal tried to hack into it to reach the glow within it. Quickly it became obvious to him that this was not something he could take one-on-one. With just a few of hits from the branches, he was nearly out. One of the roots of the tree blight wrapped around him and started squeezing mercilessly. Nearly dead, Lord Coal used his remaining magic to Misty Step 30 feet away on the ground and started limping away, circling south along the wall of stones. Curiously, the creature did not follow him, but rather kept on heading north.

Soon, Strahd arrived above him on his nightmare, but rather than do anything nefarious, he taunted Lord Coal, seemingly enjoying his pain. He renewed his invitation for dinner, and Lord Coal took time to answer politely that they would come to it in near future. Not being able to run much longer, he lay hands on himself and channeled his divine power to heal himself a bit.

Meanwhile, the berserkers came out to investigate the direction everyone else ran in. To distract them, Richard majestically jumped out of the hole in air and hid in nearby bushes. From there, he stealthily started shooting at the wild men. Ezmerelda joined him and unleashed two lightning bolts onto the berserkers, before retreating. Hurrying to join them, Rann fell out of the pocket dimension painfully, but then took a shot at a few of them, before deciding to run away as well.

Richard kept shooting from his cover, until he was discovered by one of the enemies, upon which they quickly had him surrounded. The rogue used his great dexterity to slink away at the last moment and joined the two others in running northwards.

The invisible Limyé reached Lord Coal just after Strahd lost interest in taunting him and turned to look at the city in the mist, a glass of red liquid in his hand. Quietly, the warlock called out to his friend. When Edward found his mentor, Limyé turned him invisible as well. They then decided to follow the tree creature and join in with others on the way to the winery, which they agreed earlier to go to if they were separated.

As it turned out, the Wintersplinter seemed to be heading straight for the Wizard of the Wines. The two groups eventually caught up to each other and decided to stop the monster before it would reach the winery. The beast was a tough opponent, but a five-on-one battle was greatly to the advantage of our adventurers. While it hurt Limyé severely, the fight was short, and our group was victorious.

A WEDDING GONE BAD

After the fight, our band of adventurers decided to rest up, sitting on the defeated tree blight. Rann practised with his new spear and worked on his martial arts, which he has been training lately. The others mostly rested after the long run through the forest. Lord Coal finally chopped into the chest of the creature and discovered a fist-sized green gem inside. The group decided that it was probably the seed the Martikovs spoke of and decided to head to the nearby winery.

When they arrived at the main house, they were met by Davian, who was very happy to learn of their recovery. He apologized also for his sons running away during the encounter with Strahd and explained that indeed the whole family was cursed with raven lycanthropy. They call themselves **Keepers of the Feather** and try to oppose Strahd's rule. Before they gave him the gem, Richard inquired about becoming a wereraven. Davian's response was that they tried to keep the curse within family. When Richard insisted, Davian mentioned that his granddaughter **Yolanda** was of ripe age for a marriage and that she indeed fancied Rick. Both Davian and Rick seemed satisfied with an idea of a quick marriage, with Limyé acting as a priest.

The old warlock took Richard aside and tried to convince him that it was a bad idea, and that he could not in good conscience wed them if Rick did not intend to be a faithful and good husband. Richard however promised that after defeating Strahd, he would settle down with Yolanda, were they to be married. Seeing the young girl, who he found quite pretty, Richard decided not to worry about the potential hidden problems the girl might have, given that her guardian was so quick to agree to a wedding.

Seeing no way to block this, Limyé agreed to preside over the ceremony. Not wanting to lose time, Davian suggested that they perform it right then and there. With the whole Martikov family and his friends as witnesses, Richard stood next to Yolanda, while Limyé performed the wedding Lathander-style. When he spoke of the duties of a husband, the old warlock tried to give a meaningful stare to Richard, though the effect was a bit spoiled on account of his lack of eyes. As he was getting to the "and now you may kiss the bride", Davian Martikov said that this part would be done in the tradition of his family. Yolanda suddenly turned into a half-human-half-raven hybrid and pecked Rick in his lips, once, twice, thrice, before he felt some small change flow over him.

As his new family cheered and surrounded them, Richard started smelling something strange. At first he wondered if this was an effect of becoming a wereraven, but soon the stink became horrible – the smell of death and decay. Looking around, he did not notice an obvious source, nor did any others seem to react to it. He then started hearing the dreaded whispers from his past. He tried willing them away, but they refused to go away. He heard quite clearly the words "Suffer alone or face death". Just then, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed something trying to climb out of the ground in the direction no one was paying any attention to. When it crawled out, he realized it was the monstrosity from his nightmare a couple night ago, the one he dreamt in the winery! He shouted a warning, drew his weapon and attacked the creature.

The others however did not see the same thing as Richard did. Instead, they saw the groom standing eerily still and



sweating profusely, his mouth open in a silent scream. They were horrified when suddenly blood started trickling from Richard's eyes, ears and his nose. The trickle soon became more serious and his face started coming apart, as if ripped away from the inside. His eyes melted away, leaving red pinpoints of light and his mouth split more than humanly possible, filled with dozens of sharp teeth. His fingers grew out terrible claws and some sort of insect-like appendages erupted from his midriff, while some sort of black, spiky tentacles ripped out of his back.

Everyone was too shocked to react, and only when the demonic Richard seized his bride and stabbed her with his claws, did they decide to subdue him. Davian shouted in fear for Yolanda, while Rick's friends attacked his changed form, which seemed much more resilient than a human.

Richard in the meantime was still convinced that he was fighting the monster, which now was attacking his friends and trying to devour them. As it was ripping them to shreds, it avoided directly attacking him. He tried reasoning with it, but there was no response, so he kept on hacking at it in his mind.

Back in the real world, the changed Rick mumbled something in Abyssal and soon black tentacles burst out of the ground, grabbing most of the Martikov family and Rick's friends as well. Davian shouted for his family to turn and try to fly away. Our adventurers kept attacking the monstrosity, which responded in kind by nearly killing Limyé. The tentacles started squeezing its prey. The wailing Yolanda started choking and retching when one of the tentacles forced itself in through her throat. Another small girl from the Martikov family was at the same time also crushed in this horrible way, a spiked tentacle piercing her belly. Our valiant heroes were quickly cutting the Richard-thing to pieces, when

the tentacles started draining the two dying girls of their life essence. Just as they nearly destroyed the thing, it convulsed and started changing yet again, seemingly growing by consuming its victims. All semblance of humanity left the fiendish Richard, his flesh falling off. More tentacles sprouted from his body, and he grew twice in size within seconds. The transformation was associated with sickly sounding breaking of bones. The form that stood in front of them was the same one Richard saw in his dreams.

The group stopped limiting themselves at this point and decided to destroy this thing as fast as possible. They hacked mercilessly, stabbed it, threw spells at it, and used their divine favors. The monster was deeply wounded from before its second transformation, and finally Ezmerelda dealt a finishing blow with her magic sword. The beast shuddered and collapsed. It then started to melt into blood and smaller pieces of gore. Under all of this they found the unconscious Richard, his clothes ripped apart.

The Martikovs were terrified and wailing at the loss of life. Davian accused the group of bringing a monster into the wedding, but they swore that they did not know anything about it. Limyé secretly however suspected that this might be some demonic possession, though outwardly he claimed that it must have been the devil's doing. When Richard started waking up, he was surprised to see that the monster did not indeed kill all of his friends. He had a hard time believing about what everyone told him had happened. Davian was furious and did not want to see the group ever again, as long as his granddaughters were dead.

The group decided to head towards the tower on the lake, where Rictavio was hiding. On the way, they grilled Richard about what he knew about this monster. He reluctantly said that his family has been followed by some malevolent spirit for generations. He himself only saw flashes of it once or twice. The first time he hid, only to find his family all dead. Since then, he's been on the road, never staying in one place too long. Limyé suspected that maybe indeed the settling down had something to do with the attack just now.

A SKELETON CROSSES THE ROAD AGAIN

As they were heading north on the road, in the distance they saw a familiar figure in the fog – that of the skeletal rider – passing across the way into the forest. Something yet again seemed to fall out of his saddle, but this time they decided to follow the rider and figure out why he was doing what he did. The skeletal rider however did not react at all to the group's calls. Wanting a word, Rann shot his skeletal horse, breaking it to pieces with his arrows. The undead rider fell out of his rotten saddle and angrily turned onto his attackers. A single slash from Lord Coal removed his arm holding a rusty sword. The band decided to restrain him and ask him questions. However, the undead seemed unable to communicate. In a flash of brilliance, they decided to put onto the skeleton's finger the Ring of Mind Shielding that Limyé wore, in which the dead cannibal cultist kept talking and talking. The warlock convinced the cultist to ask questions of the rider. They learned that the undead skeleton has been trapped in Barovia for centuries, after he died trying to make his way out through the fog. Ever since then, he's been trying to find his way out and helping on the way others who were trapped. He was unable to answer how he came into the possession of these strange objects, apart from saying that he found them.

In the meantime, they decided to check out the most recent drop, which turned out to be a letter addressed to Edward! When the paladin saw it, he recognized the writing as that belonging to his dead father! He cleaned up the envelop and hid it in his pocket to read later in privacy. The skeleton was however unable to answer where he found this letter. Not being able to find more, the group decided to slow down the skeleton, which seemed intent on killing them. Rann broke his foot, and they through away the sword into the bushes further away. When they released him, the undead headed for his weapon. As this was taking place, Richard noticed that there was someone looking at them in the forest. Lord Coal also noticed this, though he severely lacked in the subterfuge department, as he pointed out the figure to others without hiding it. The man in the bushes started running away.

The group gave chase, but the man was faster than them. Not wanting to lose him, Rann shot an arrow through his knee. The man fell to the ground, screaming in pain. When they caught up to him, he claimed to be a hunter that was curious about the situation. Even though he seemed a bit suspicious, the group had no outright reason to disbelieve him. As Lord Coal closed his wound, the man accidentally stumbled and nearly pulled out some of his hair. Even more suspicious, the group quickly left him alone. Their road to the tower on the lake was uneventful after that.

VAN RICHTEN'S TOWER



They came to a cold mountain lake enclosed by misty woods and rocky bluffs. Thick fog crept across the dark, still waters. The trail ended at a grass-covered causeway that stretched a hundred yards across the lake to a flat, marshy island with a stone tower on it. The tower was old and decrepit, with collapsing scaffolds clinging to one side where a large gash has split the wall. Timeworn griffon statues, their wings and flanks covered with moss, perched atop buttresses that support the walls. Parked near the base of the tower, within sight of the entrance, was a barrel-topped wagon spattered with mud. This, Ezmerelda said, was her wagon. She warned the others not to try entering it, as it was booby-trapped with explosives.

Under layers of mud, this wagon sported a fresh coat of purple paint, and its wheels had a fancy gold trim. A brass lantern hung from each corner, and red drapes covered a tombstone-shaped window on each side. A steel padlock secured the back door, hanging from which was a cheap wooden sign that read, "Keep out!" The tower door was made of iron, with no visible handles or hinges. In the middle of the door was a large, embossed symbol – a connected series of lines with eight stick figures set around it. Carved into the lintel above the door was a word: KHAZAN.

Richard approached the door and decided to try pushing it open. The moment he did it, lightning enveloped the tower and shocked him, Edward and Limyé, who stood nearby. This started setting the scaffolds on fire. Ezmerelda informed them that she climbed the scaffold the one time she was here, but that seemed impossible now. The arlock decided to sit down and try to identify what type of magic this was, while the lightning shield continued. As he was finishing his ritual, the shield vanished.



Not wanting to set off the trap again, Limyé had Edward describe the door to him in detail. He started making the shapes on the door, but stopped midway through, worried that he was doing them out of order. When he halted, a young blue dragon magically appeared 30 feet away from the entrance, ready to attack the group! Richard quickly ran up to it, and tried stabbing it, while Rann shot his bow at it. Angered, the dragon roared and breathed out a terrifying bolt of lightning, hitting both Richard and Edward, who stood closer to the wagon. This knocked Lord Coal out, but what happened next shocked everyone – the bolt of lightning continued through him and shot into the wagon. A mere blink of an eye later, the wagon exploded, killing Edward and Limyé on spot, and hurling Ezmerelda and Rann away!

Rick and Rann tried avenging their friends and let out a barrage of attacks at the beast, but Ezmerelda ran towards the door. While the two men were keeping the dragon busy, she tried completing the sequence of moves on the door. Meanwhile, Lord Coal woke up in dense mist and found himself alone. He was quite confused as to what exactly happened and where he was. Wandering around, he came upon Yolanda, who was equally confused as to where she was. Soon, he noticed more and more people, who he was previously convinced were dead, some of them more translucent and being pulled away by the mists.

Limyé also came to, and found himself in utter darkness. He heard however some rustling to his side. Following the sound, he came to a dark pedestal with an open tome on top.

He recognized this as the Book of Vile Darkness, a truly terrible tome of dark magic. He was convinced that it was again the dark powers of Barovia trying to tempt him, especially when the tome opened up onto a page that was blank, apart from the title "Limyé's resurrection", and a blank signature line. Knowing that his soul would be forever trapped in Barovia, should he not accept, he nonetheless decided he could not live with himself, if he were to make another pact.

Back in the real world, Ezmerelda managed to complete her dance, just as the dragon was about to breathe lightning again. The beast vanished and the door clicked open. From inside, came out Rictavio, who was shocked to find two adventurers lying dead on the doorstep, and the wagon blown to bits. When he noticed Ezmerelda, he took off his hat of disguise, and was transformed into the old human, who Rann and Rick previously saw, as he fled from Vallaki. Ezmerelda jumped to him and hugged him tight, shouting "Master!" He turned to the two remaining adventurers, and reintroduced himself as Rudolph van Richten. When asked whether he could bring their friends back, he confessed, that he indeed have two scrolls for raising the dead, but no more. Knowing that these could have been used for bringing the Martikov girls back, they pleaded nonetheless to bring their friends back. The famous monster hunter agreed, and cast the two spells, bringing back first the warlock, and then the paladin. Edward was shocked to see the face of van Richten. While he did not see him in Vallaki, this was a face he would never forget, as this was the man that he found standing over his father's dead body years ago!

Meanwhile, Rann helped Ezmerelda pick through the remains of her dear wagon. Here and there lay broken weapons, burnt clothes and spell scrolls, shattered vials, chicken feathers and so on. The distraught Ezmerelda only found a map of Barovia, which she gave to Rann. The elf ranger also found a burnt page from a journal, which seemed to have been written by Rudolph van Richten, talking about his past (see the Appendix). After quickly skimming through it, he gave it back to van Richten.

With the evening approaching, van Richten invited everyone to follow him into the tower. The flagstone floor inside was strewn with debris, and a few old crates stood near the east wall. A torn curtain to the south partially obscured the tower vestibule. A five-foot-square indentation in the center of the floor contained four pulleys attached to taut iron chains that stretched up through a similarly sized hole in the rotted wooden ceiling. Standing next to the chains were four tall clay statues. Van Richten asked everyone to get onto the indentation, after which he gestured to the statues. Suddenly, they came to life and started pulling onto the chains, lifting the platform up. The ride wasn't smooth, but eventually it rose through two dusty and broken floors, finally arriving at the top of the tower.

Unlike the levels below, this room showed signs of recent habitation, and although the place reeked of mold and mildew, it had plenty of creature comforts, including a cozy bed, a desk with matching chair, bright tapestries, and a large iron stove with plenty of wood to feed it. Light entered through arrow slits as well as through dirt-caked windows with broken shutters. Other features of the room included a standing suit of armor and a wooden chest, which van Richten said held his investigative tools. Old wooden rafters bent under the weight of the tower roof, somehow still intact.

Van Richten let the group know that no magic would work within the tower, as the original owner of it, a wizard named Khazan, placed a sophisticated anti-magic field on it. Nonetheless, the armor in the room was an animated construct that follows the commands of anyone for who calls out the name of Khazan next to it for the next 24 hours. The group found out from him that he was investigating the Keepers of the Feather, who he thought were a secret society that opposed Strahd. Our adventurers told him of the Martikov family and the wereravens, which greatly pleased him.

Ezmerelda then told her mentor what happened to Richard at the wedding and asked for his opinion. Van Richten asked Richard to explain everything he knew, which did not seem as much – he did say though that he was aware that some kind of presence also stalked his grandpa. This convinced van Richten that this was a demonic possession of his entire bloodline, jumping onto a younger family member probably after the host's death. He then explained that even though they defeated the demon, it might not be gone yet. Exorcising it out of Richard however would be nontrivial. Casting Protection from Evil would protect anyone for only 10 minutes, so this would not be a permanent solution.

He then outlined how one could go about getting rid of the demon. Casting Dispel Evil would remove the demon, but this would have to be done only after protecting everyone around from evil, to prohibit the demon entering anyone else. Ideally, Richard would be sitting in a Magic Circle before the dispelling process. Once the demon would be loose, one would have to Banish it back into the Abyss, but this could be tricky, as the demon might resist it. Alternatively, one could instead of banishment try to bind the demon to an object. Van Richten did not know how to do it, but suspected this might be explained in the Book Of Vile Darkness, the Black Scrolls of Ahm or the Demonomicon of Iggwilv. Limyé cursed himself for his decision earlier. The vampire hunter and the warlock said that you would most likely be tainted by evil just by reading these books, but the knowledge could perhaps be found in the Amber Temple, which was supposed to house ancient secrets.

The adventurers decided to head to the Amber Temple the next morning, though Lord Coal was uncharacteristically quiet the whole time. Van Richten told them that long time ago he was cursed and that anyone he travels with ends up injured or dead, so he would stay behind, and only join them if they were to fight Strahd. The group however managed to convince him to help them by giving them his **Hat of Disguise**. After making the plans, the group decided to rest for the night. Before he went to sleep, Lord Coal pulled out the letter from his father and read it.

My dear Edward,

Please, forgive me in your heart for what will happen. Lord Tronka must be held responsible for what he did to your mother, but I fear the Duke has been bought and is against me. I have made a bargain that will help me in taking him down, but I am afraid that this choice sets me on a path that will create a gulf between us, my dear son. I do not want you to follow a life of hatred. Please, let the circle of revenge stop with the judgement I will receive. I want you to know that all I did, I did for love.

Edward was quite skeptical of whether the letter was not written under duress. He recalled how his father tried to exact revenge on Lord Tronka for the rape and murder of his wife, when Edward was just 7 years old. Somehow miraculously, his father managed to storm the Tronka castle with minimal force and left behind a bloodbath, but did not find his enemy there. Two nights after the castle attack however, on the eve of leaving for Lord Tronka's summer residence, little Edward came to his father's study to find a stranger, who he now knew to be van Richten, an older man in a black coat, standing over his father's decapitated body with a sword cane in his hand. He mournfully said that he was sorry that he had to see this, after which Edward lost consciousness.

While everyone was asleep, Rann decided to quietly check out the wooden chest, which emanated a lavender aroma. Opening it, he found a severed human head. In the morning he confronted the vampire hunter over this, who responded that the head belonged to a Vistana who tried to kill him. Van Richten has used his ability to speak with the dead to interrogate the head about the Vistani and Barovia in general. As the group was preparing to depart, van Richten asked Edward to stay behind for a while. Limyé joined him. As the others stood outside the tower, van Richten confessed to having killed Edward's father, but that he did so because the late Lord Coal sold his soul in revenge – he became a werewolf in order to storm the Tronka castle, and killed numerous innocents in his rage. Edwards was lost for words, though he seemed to believe the words of van Richten. He decided to discuss this more with van Richten after Strahd is taken down.

WEREWOLVES!

As the group was departing the tower, they noticed some movement in the forest across from the causeway. As they approached closer, a pack of 16 wolves came out running towards them. Not having time to backtrack to the tower, they decided to try to block the narrow causeway as best as possible and started attacking the lupines from distance. Seven of the wolves transformed into the hybrid half-human/half-wolf form of lycanthropes, one of them clearly bigger and leading the pack.



A long fight ensued, in which Limyé stayed in the back and kept either hurling his spells at the enemy or healed his companions with his magical staff. Fortunately, nine of the opponents were common wolves, otherwise the fight would have been the end of our adventurers. As it was, one by one the wolves and then the werewolves started falling, but nonetheless inflicted grievous wounds on the front rank.

Only Limyé and the nimble Rann avoided being bit by the werewolves. When only three werewolves were still alive, the bleeding leader of the pack started retreating into the forest. The group quickly finished off the two wounded lycanthropes, but not before the leader vanished behind the tree line. Ezmerelda suggested that this would be a great opportunity to track the lone werewolf to his den, but that they should later come back to van Richten to remove the curse of lycantrophy from them, while it was not too late.

Rann led the tracking effort, which was rather simple on account of the trail of blood. The leader of the werewolves seemed to be circling around the Lake Baratok to the west, but the trail ended when the beast crossed the wide Raven River. Rather than try to follow through the river, they decided to head a quarter mile west and cross a bridge there, and then backtrack to the other side. Luckily, Rann managed to find a trail after some searching. Soon, the trail led up a slope. Above the tree line, carved into the side of a rocky mountain spur, was a wide, torchlit cave that looked like the gaping maw of a great wolf.

Worried that this could be a trap, Rick and Rann decided to scout out the entrance stealthily first. To ease this, Rann used his magic to pass without trace. Hiding in shadows, the duo came to the open jaws of the wolf's head, which formed a fifteen-foot-high canopy of rock over the cave mouth, held up by natural pillars of rock. The ceiling rose to a height of twenty feet inside the cave. Torches in iron brackets lined the walls. From somewhere deep inside, they heard the echoing sounds of a flute. Some of the notes were discordant – painfully so. Deeper in, the cave split to the left and right. Standing on a five-foot-high ledge between the divide were two feral-looking women wearing shredded clothing and clutching spears.

After they came back to the group, it was decided that Ezmerelda and Limyé would come in invisible, while the others would try to sneak in with Rann's magic. Rann, Rick and Edward managed to pass behind the two women without being noticed, and prepared themselves to attack the guards. Ezmerelda unfortunately stumbled loudly as she entered the wolf's jaw, which drew the attention of the two women. That's when the trio behind them stabbed them in the back. From their invisible spots Ezmerelda and Limyé fired off their magic, and together the group managed to take out the two lycanthropes with minimum sound.

Still, the flute music stopped, and an old man could be heard shouting "What happened?" Ezmerelda tried shouting back that it was nothing, which seemed to have worked, as the music restarted. They then scouted out the two passages. To the west was a large cave with a five-foot-high stone ledge overlooking it, and a smoldering campfire at the far west end. Sitting by it was an old man playing on an electrum flute, with nine wolves lying behind him. The floor was covered with gnawed bones. The other path led to a dank, torchlit cave with a gash in the rocky ceiling allowing the gray light and cold drizzle of the outdoors to seep in, where an underground spring formed a pool of water roughly forty feet across and ten feet deep. A five-foot high ledge to the north overlooked the pool. A similar ledge spanned the eastern wall, with a rough-hewn staircase leading up to it. A few crates sat atop the eastern ledge. Inside were only rough adult clothes. Lord Coal decided that it would be probably safer to check out the deeper parts of the cave by getting to the ledge above the pool, rather than fight the wolves in the other cave.

Edward used his Misty Step to get there and then secured a rope for others to climb up after swimming to him. His mentor was quite upset about getting wet. They found themselves in a maze of torch lit tunnels and caves. Bones lay strewn upon the floor. Rann explored quietly and noticed the wounded leader of the pack in a corner. Two quick shots with his silver arrows put him down quietly. He then came upon two werewolves in a wolf form, which he took on together with Ezmerelda. Meanwhile, Rick explored to the north, where he came upon rough-hewn stairs leading down to a torchlit cave and a bizarre sight: wide-eyed children stood behind wooden bars and stared at him in terrified silence. The cave held six wooden cages, their lids held shut with heavy rocks. One of the cages was empty, one held one child and each of the others held a pair of frightened children. A crude wooden statue stood between the cages. It bore the rough likeness of a wolf-headed woman draped in garlands of vines and night flowers. Piled around the statue's base was an incredible amount of treasure. A woman in shredded clothes knelt before the statue. Behind the statue, two maggot-ridden corpses hung from iron shackles bolted to the wall.

Rick quietly ran up to the woman and attacked her, but she pleaded him to not kill her – that she was a prisoner here as well, despite being a lycanthrope. She explained that the leader of the pack, **Kiril**, and her mate had a falling out, and as a result she was shunned. As she explained this, Rick pocketed some gems. While this was going on, the old man and his wolves heard the sound of combat and rushed in to join the fight. When they got close enough, Limyé hurled a flaming sphere at the common wolves, killing them one by one. Edward protected his mentor, and after Rann and Ezmerelda finished off the two werewolves, they flanked the enemy. As the wolves burned to death, soon it was only the old man, who refused to surrender and died last. On his corpse they found the nonmagical **electrum flute** (worth 250 gp) and a pouch containing four 50 gp gemstones.

The surviving woman introduced herself as **Zuleika Toranescu**, and she explained that Kiril had the kidnapped children fight each other to death in a circle of stones upstairs, before bestowing on the victor the gift of lycantrophy. Her mate, **Emil**, wanted to turn all the children



instead. This ideological divide couldn't be reconciled and led to many disagreements. The other werewolves were split between the two camps, and it seemed likely that either Kirill or Emil would die before the conflict could be resolved. Then Kirill disappeared for several days, causing the other werewolves to wonder whether he had fled or had been quietly disposed of by Emil and his allies. When Kiril returned, he was accompanied by a pack of several dozen dire wolves loyal to Strahd, and he brought word from Castle Ravenloft that Strahd was not pleased with Emil's attempt to fracture the pack. The dire wolves took Emil back to Castle Ravenloft to face punishment, and he was never seen again. Ezmerelda and Lord Coal proceeded to free the crying children, while Richard started packing away the treasures into his bag. Rann considered helping him, but cautiously first asked Zuleika if it wasn't cursed by any chance. She responded nonchalantly, that yes, it was indeed cursed – those that took the treasure would have horrible dreams at night. This gave Rick a short pause, but being accustomed to bad nightmares, he continued. After a brief fight with himself, Rann joined in.

TREASURE

The treasure piled around the base of Mother Night's statue includes:

- 4,500 cp, 900 sp, and 250 gp (all coins of mintages foreign to Barovia)
- Thirty 50 gp gemstones and seven 100 gp gemstones
- Twelve pieces of plain gold jewelry (worth 25 gp each) and a finely wrought gold cloak-pin inlaid with shards of jet (worth 250 gp)
- An ivory drinking horn engraved with dancing dryads and satyr pipe players (worth 250 gp)
- An ornate electrum censer with platinum filigree (worth 750 gp)

The body of the leader of the werewolves lay in a cave, at the back of which hung a curtain made of human skin, concealing a staircase leading up. On him, the group found **Boots of Striding and Springing** and a **Rust Bag of Tricks**. The stairs led up to a ring of stones Zuleika spoke of. Having cleared the den, our brave adventurers led the children back first to van Richten's tower, where he removed the potential curses from Lord Coal, Ezmerelda and Rann. Richard refused this, on account of not wanting to lose his wereraven lycantrophy..

APPENDIX

FIRST LETTER FROM KOLYAN INDIROVICH

Received from Arrigal in May Creek.

Hail to thee of might and valor.

I, a lowly servant of Barovia, send honor to thee. We plead for thy so desperately needed assistance.

The love of my life, Ireena Kolyana, has been afflicted by an evil so deadly that even the good people of our village cannot protect her. She languishes from her wound, and I would have her saved from this menace.

There is much wealth in this community. I offer all that might be had to thee and thy fellows if thou shalt but answer my desperate plea.

Come quickly, for her time is at hand! All that I have shall be thine!

Kolyan Indirovich
Burgomaster

**SECOND LETTER FROM KOLYAN
INDIROVICH**

Found on a dead body behind the gates

Hail thee of might and valor:

I, the Burgomaster of Barovia, send you honor with despair. My adopted daughter, the fair Lorena Kolyana, has been these past nights bitten by a vampire. For over four hundred years, this creature has drained the life blood of my people. Now, my dear Lorena languishes and dies from an unholy wound caused by this vile beast. He has become too powerful to conquer.

So I say to you, give us up for dead and encircle this land with the symbols of good. Let holy men call upon their power that the devil may be contained within the walls of weeping Barovia. Leave our sorrows to our graves, and save the world from this evil fate of ours.

There is much wealth entraped in this community. Return for your reward after we are all departed for a better life.

Kolyan Indirovich
Burgomaster

I am the Ancient. I am the Land. My beginnings are lost in the darkness of the past. I was the warrior, I was good and just. I thundered across the land like the wrath of a just god, but the war years and the killing years wore down my soul as the wind wears stone into sand.

Old goodness slipped from my life. I found my youth and strength gone, and all I had left was death. My army settled in the valley of Barovia and took power over the people in the name of a just god, but with none of a god's grace or justice.

I called for my family, long unseated from their ancient thrones, and brought them here to settle in the castle Ravenloft. They came with a younger brother of mine, Sergei. He was handsome and youthful. I hated him for both.

From the families of the valley, one spirit shone above all others. A rare beauty, who was called "perfection," "joy," and "treasure." Her name was Tatyana, and I longed for her to be mine.

I loved her with all my heart. I loved her for her youth. I loved her for her joy. But she spurned me! "Old One" was my name to her—"elder" and "brother" also. Her heart went to Sergei. They were betrothed. The date was set.

With words she called me "brother," but when I looked into her eyes they reflected another name: "death." It was the death of the aged that she saw in me. She loved her youth and enjoyed it. But I had squandered mine.

The death she saw in me turned her from me. And so I came to hate death—my death. My hate is

very strong. I would not be called "death" so soon. I made a pact with death, a pact of blood. On the day of the wedding, I killed Sergei, my brother. My pact was sealed with his blood.

I found Tatyana weeping in the garden east of the chapel. She fled from me. She would not let me explain, and a great anger swelled within me. She had to understand the pact I made for her. I pursued her. Finally, in despair, she flung herself from the walls of Ravenloft, and I watched everything I ever wanted fall from my grasp forever.

It was a thousand feet through the mists. No trace of her was ever found. Not even I know her final fate.

Arrows from the castle guards pierced me to my soul, but I did not die. Nor did I live. I became undead, forever.

I have studied much since then. "Vampyre" is my new name. I still lust for life and youth, and I curse the living that took them from me. Even the sun is against me. It is the sun and its light I fear the most, but little else can harm me now. Even a stake through my heart does not kill me, though it holds me from movement. But the sword, that cursed sword that Sergei brought! I must dispose of that awful tool! I fear and hate it as much as the sun.

I have often hunted for Tatyana. I have even felt her within my grasp, but she escapes. She taunts me! She taunts me! What will it take to bend her love to me?

I now reside far below Ravenloft. I live among the dead and sleep beneath the very stones of this hollow castle of despair. I shall seal shut the walls of the stairs that none may disturb me.

*My friends,
Know that it is I who have brought you to this
land, my home, and know that I alone can
release you from it. I bid you dine at my castle
so that we can meet in civilized surroundings.
Your passage here will be a safe one. I await
your arrival.*



*Your host,
Strahd von Zarovich*

For more than three decades now, I have undertaken to investigate and expose creatures of darkness to the purifying light of truth and knowledge. "Hero" I am named in some circles; "sage" and "master hunter" I am called in others. That I have survived countless supernatural assaults is seen as a marvel among my peers; my name is spoken with fear and loathing among my foes.

In truth, this "virtuous" calling began as an obsessive effort to destroy a vampire that murdered my child, and it has become for me a tedious and bleak career. Even as my life of hunting monsters began, I felt the weight of time on my weary shoulders. Today I am a man who has simply lived too long. Like a regretful lich, I find myself inexorably bound to an existence I sought out of madness and, seemingly, must now endure for all eternity. Of course I shall die, but whether I shall ever rest in my grave haunts my idle thoughts, and torments me in my dreams.

I expect that those who think me a hero will change their minds when they know the whole truth about my life as a hunter of the unnatural. Nevertheless, I must reveal, here and now, that I have been the indirect yet certain cause of many deaths, and the loss of many good friends. Mistake me not! I do not merely feel sorry for myself. Rather, I come to grips with a devastating realization: I now see that I am the object of a hateful Voslani curse. More tragically, the nature of this hex is such that I have not borne the brunt of it; instead, far worse, those who surround me have fallen victim to it!

I have related the tragic story of how my only child Erasmus was taken by Voslani and sold to a vampire. I explained how Erasmus was made a minion of the night stalker, and how it was my miserable part to free him from that fate at the point of a stake. What I have neglected to illuminate before is how I tracked Erasmus's kidnappers across the land, or how I "extracted" Erasmus's whereabouts from them.

In fact, the Voslani took Erasmus with my own, unwilling permission. They had brought an extremely ill member of their tribe to me one evening

and insisted that I treat him, but I was unable to save the young man's life. In fear of their retribution, I begged the Vistani to take anything of mine if only they would withhold their terrifying powers, of which I knew nothing. To my lasting astonishment, they chose to surreptitiously take my son in exchange for their loss! By the time I realized what had occurred, they were already an hour gone.

Incensed beyond reason, I strapped the body of the dead young man to my horse and doggedly followed the Vistani caravan through the woods, naively allowing the sun to set before me without seeking shelter from the night. Shortly after darkness fell, I was beset by undead that would have slain me, had not their master—a lich—intervened and spared my life, for reasons that I do not completely understand. He somehow detected me and, with his powerful magic, took control of a pack of zombies that wandered in the forest. He spoke to me through the mouths of the dead things and placed a magic ward against undead on me, then animated the dead Vistana and bade it tell me where I could find its people. Unfortunately (I say in hindsight), the plan worked. I found the child-stealers, and my unwelcome entourage included a growing horde of voracious undead that could not touch me, thanks to the lich's ward.

When I found the caravan, I threatened to set the zombies on the Vistani unless they returned my dear boy. They replied that he had been sold to the vampire, Baron Metz. Something inside me snapped. I released the zombies, and the entire tribe was eaten alive.

Yet the story has not ended. Before she died, the leader cursed me, saying, "Live you always among monsters, and see everyone you love die beneath their claws!" Even now, so many years later, I can hear her words with painful clarity. A short time later, I found my dear Erasmus made into a vampire. He begged me to end his curse, which I did with a heavy heart. The darkness had torn him from my loving arms forever, and I foolishly believed that the curse had exacted its deadly toll. I wept until an insatiate desire for vengeance filled the bottomless rift in my heart.