# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Berez I - Landscape and Encounters

## Berez's Narrative Summary

### Brief History Recap

* + Once upon a time, Berez was as quaint and thriving as Kresk. But then Tatyana got reincarnated into a local farm girl named Marina. When Strahd started to charm Marina, the local burgomaster and local priest feared for her soul and had the girl executed. When Strahd found out Marina was dead, he was so angry that he flooded the river and drowned Berez, killing most of the locals.
  + The book is rather indescript with the timeframe for this event, but it most certainly couldn't have been recently due to the level of local decay. If asked, I'd say that Berez fell at least a century before the start of the campaign, if not much more.

### Berez Thematically

* + Berez is actually one of my favorite locations in CoS, simply for its atmosphere. It harnesses that beautiful, honest Louisiana spook you see in old voodoo movies.
  + Berez is also the home base for witchcraft in Barovia. And I'm not talking about advanced sorcery or elder mages pondering over books. I mean the hardcore, dirty and bloody type of magic that we most associate with the term, "witch."
    - To get your head into Berez, here are some other references that I believe to have the same feel.
    - Hemwick Charnel Lane from *Bloodborne*
    - The Brigmore Witches DLC from *Dishonored*
    - Crookback Bog from *The Witcher 3*
    - Tia Dalma and her area from *the Pirates of the Caribbean* series
    - (I find myself surprisingly lack of film versions of bog witches XP Can you tell I'm a gamer, lol?)

### Barovian Knowledge

* + Just in case the book isn't clear, the people of Barovia shouldn't actually know about Marina. If you decide to bring up Berez in rumors or conversations elsewhere in the campaign, no local should know Berez fell because of a woman.
  + Instead, Barovians know only the basics: that the people of Berez dared to defy the dread lord and were all killed for their impudence. The Devil Strahd called upon the river to drown them all and all that's left now is ruin.

## Ample Warning

No matter what, you ABSOLUTELY need to warn your party about Berez, either directly or indirectly. Out of character and out of campaign, it might not be a terrible idea to say, "Hey guys, this area is powerful, please be careful." Let's face it, some players need that out-of-character push to take things seriously. If you're not comfortable crossing that meta-y line, you should still drop multiple hints throughout the campaign that this place is an overpowered area. Here are some I recommend:

### Rumors About Strahd

* + Players might learn about Berez quite early in the campaign, depending on what rumors you throw around in passive conversation. An NPC trying to warn the party of Strahd's power could use Berez's fall as an example.
  + Hearing this story and planting the seed about "the ruins of old Berez" is a great way to tell players there's a dead-zone in Barovia.
  + Players might hear this bit of lore from:
    - Ireena and/or Ismark in the Village of Barovia
    - The Vistani at Tser Pool
    - Patrons at the Blue Water Inn in Vallaki
    - The Martikovs at the Winery

### The Winery and Gem Fetching

* + After PCs tackle the winery and learn about the stolen gems, they'll likely learn that one is in Berez.
  + Use the Martikovs to tell your PCs that Berez is *dangerous*. The wereraven family can easily tell the party the story of Berez and that the ruins are now solely inhabited by an evil, ageless witch. Use role-play and facial descriptions to show how outright terrified the Martikovs are of the swamps. Do your best to channel that fear into your players if they're under-leveled (which they likely are at that point in the campaign).

### Specialist Knowledge

* + As campaigns will certainly differ from one table to another, it's hard to say which NPCs your party will find and attach to. At your discretion, some NPCs might know a bit more about Berez and the local witch, telling your party to use utmost care if they decide to explore the ruins.
  + These more informed NPCs might include:
    - Van Richten and Ezmerelda - Both are dedicated, intelligent monster hunters and might have done their research.
    - Vladimir Horngard and Sir Godfry at Argynvostholt - These guys are undead and remember the time when Strahd first came to the valley. They might remember the arrival of his despicable wet nurse as well.
    - The Martikovs - The wereravens should most certainly know about Baba, but they won't straight up tell the players details unless under the right circumstances.

## Location Hooks

By the time my players got to Berez, they had three good hooks/reasons to deal with Baba Lysaga. If your group comes late game, they might even have a fourth.

### The Second Winery Gem

* This one is simple enough. The book tells us that Baba Lysaga stole the second magic gem from the vineyards. Players might go to Berez to recover the lost gem at the behest of the Martikovs.

### Rescuing Laura Stoneheart

* + I wrote about this in more detail in my Fanes of Barovia post, but in short, there are three archfey trapped in the forms of hideous hags. These archfey, known as the Ladies Three, used to reside over Barovia as nature goddesses until Strahd stole their power and displaced them. Find my full write-ups of the Fanes here.
  + **Meeting Jeny Greenteeth**
    - Jeny Greenteeth is one of the displaced goddesses trapped in hag form. She's an old quirky lady with a thing for potions and pranks.
    - The players might meet her elsewhere in the campaign and learn she has two sisters, one of which is held hostage by an evil witch in Berez.
    - If players fail to meet Jeny earlier in the campaign or do meet her but miss that information, Jeny appears on the road to Berez. She rides in an old rickshaw pulled by a giant boar. Jeny intends to save Laura from Baba, as she has tried to many times before. However, in her heavily weakened state as a hag, she has been unable to do so and always stumbles away from the fight bloodied and empty handed.
    - Upon seeing the players, Jeny is quite happy to pass on the task to the able-bodied adventurers, asking them to save her dear sister. In return for their help, Jeny gives the party two potions of greater healing, a potion of invisibility, and her wooden summoning coin (if she didn't already in a previous encounter).
  + Baba Lysaga captured Laura Stoneheart centuries ago and has been using the former goddess' blood to keep herself alive. The players can eventually find Laura trapped in Baba's hut, ready for rescuing.

### The Skull of Argynvost

* + This is a small, but pretty major change I made to the whole campaign. I've mentioned it several times before in my posts, but I've moved the skull of the dragon Argynvost out of Castle Ravenloft and to Berez. Instead of Baba flying around in a giant's skull, she flies around in Argynvost's skull. She obtained the skull shortly after Argynvost's death and uses it as a form of desecration, delighting in shaming the dragon's memory.
  + Players will have to kill Baba in order to retrieve the skull.

### Restoring the Swamp Fane

* + In order to restore the Swamp Fane, players must slay Baba Lysaga and present the dead witch's heart at the shrine across the river. This is all detailed in my Fanes part 2 post.

## Witch Coventry

Alrighty. So, the following is completely optional, additional lore/story you might use for Berez. So even though this isn't in the book, you might find it interesting enough to include in your campaign.

### Berez and Baba as Written

* + Even though Berez in one of my personal favorite locations in CoS, it can also feel rather out of place with the rest of Barovia. While the rest of the land consists of cold, dry forests and lonesome mountainscapes, the bogs of Berez are certainly different. The change in environments can feel pretty abrupt if you run the area as written.
  + Additionally, Baba Lysaga isn't exactly incorporated into the rest of the campaign either. Most locations, NPCs, and plot devices in the campaign work together, hooks flowing from one to another and the like. But Baba and Berez are rarely mentioned in other locations.
  + What if we mixed things up a little bit, expanding Baba's influence in Barovia to at least incorporate Berez further into Barovia? Even just a little. Here's what I'd recommend.

### Additional Witchcraft

* + **Baba isn't just a lone witch.** She's the head of a coven. A small collection of women from all over Barovia have left their homes and accepted witchcraft, turning them into Barovian Witches.
    - Basically, every so often a normal girl or woman in Barovia ends up leaving their homes for whatever reason. Maybe a younger girl discovered she had the gift of magic, evoking abuse from her family. Maybe one woman discovered her cheating husband and murdered him, fleeing into the woods from the law. And maybe a couple others disputed a Vallakian festival and were exiled. Whatever.
    - The point is, for some reason or another, each witch in the coven found themselves exiled form normal society. Whether they left of their own free will or not depends on the girl.
  + **Survivors Strong**
    - The majority of Barovians die if left to the wilderness. After all, the woods are a horribly unforgiving place, especially in this particular demiplane. At one point, I imagine that at least one woman or another stumbled into Berez and into Baba's clutches. And Baba, being the corrupted horrible creature she is, offered the women the power to escape their inevitable deaths.
    - It didn't take long for the new witches to discover there's strength in numbers. Now, they're a formidable coven of exiles.

### Some Facts and Stats

* + **Witches, not Hags**
    - If you want to go this route, remember that the witches are still human. Even according the cannon stat blocks, Hags, like the coven at Old Bonegrinder, are fiends. But Baba and Barovian Witches are humanoids. Though we tend to slot them into the same category thematically, they're completely different entities.
    - On that note, I would personally feel free to vary the appearance of the witches as needed. The illustration in the book is very old school, Halloween witch, but it's quite possible the majority of the coven appear quite normal. I mean, they'll probably be dressed in rags wearing jewelry made from animal bones and stuff, but you get it. XD Just think voodoo witch ladies.
  + **Only Women**
    - This is just my personal preference, but I really liked the idea of making this particular coven only women.
    - My narrative reasoning for this is because of Baba. I play Baba as quite obsessed with Strahd. To her, Strahd is the one true king, man, etc. All other men are scum and the intensions of women are far purer. Plus, women will never appose Strahd as a "king." It's a really convoluted, hole ridden, way of thinking. But that's how I play her.
    - So, I simply couldn't imagine Baba ever teaching magic to a man. And having only ladies here makes really strengthens that sisterhood, Susperia, magic vibe, I think.
  + **Numbers**
    - Even though this is a formidable coven, I would only say they have about one to two dozen members. These would be witches accumulated over many years after all. And they would be the ones who actually survived exile long enough to find Berez. So there certainly couldn't be a huge number of them. Additionally, we certainly wouldn't want Berez to feel populated by any means.

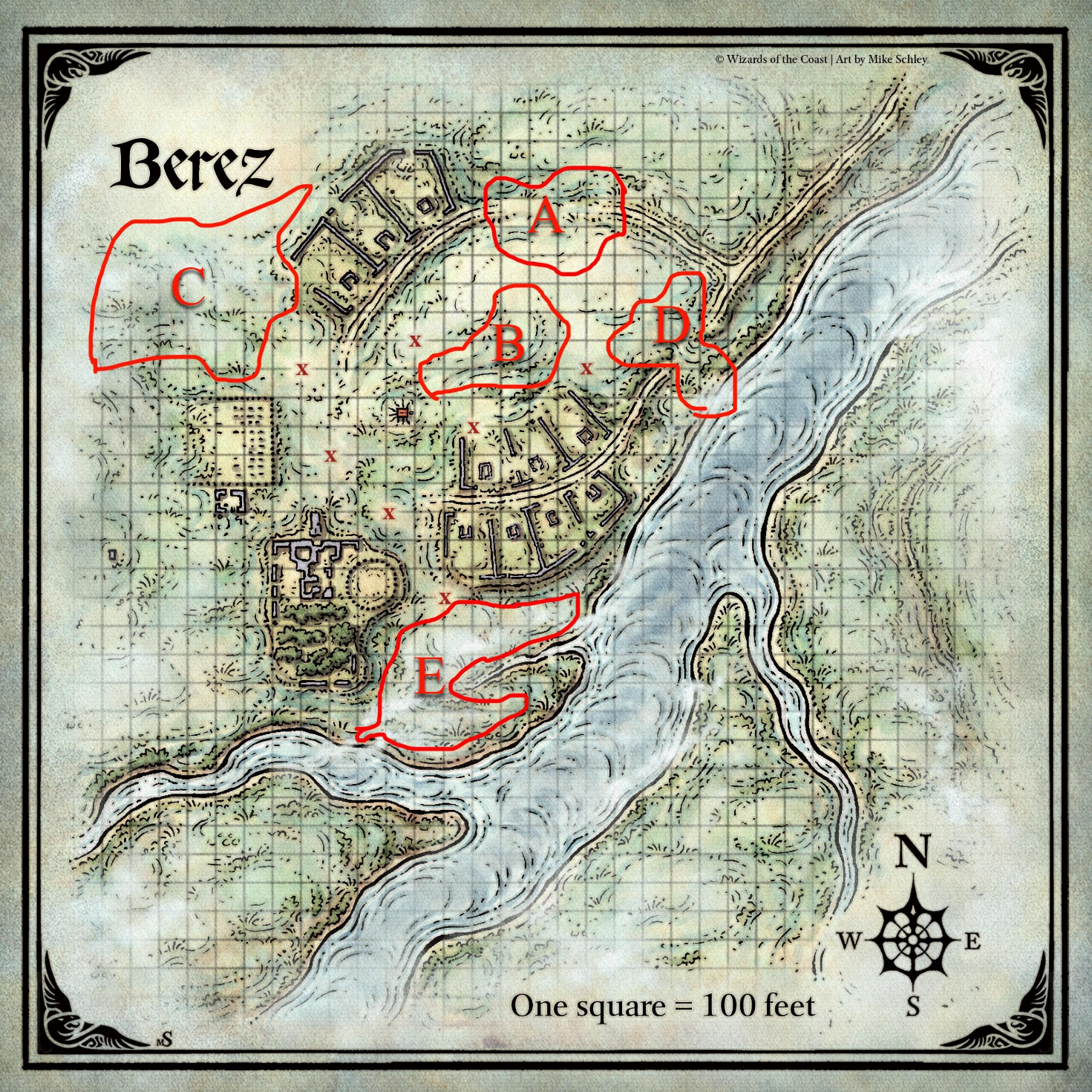
### Running the Coven

* + **Baba's Corruption**
    - I love making NPCs who look evil into good guys. Swapping around alignments and playing with bad guys' backstories is something I do all the time. But, in this case, I feel it's important to note that the witches should definitely be evil. These ladies should be bad. Think about Strahd's main brides, for instance. They are hardcore crazy b\*tches. The Berez coven should have the same kind of crazy evil in them.
    - This should largely be because of Baba's teachings and magics. Baba's magic should be straight up dark magic. And dark magic has a way corrupting people. Even if someone would normally be kind and rational, the fear of death and the isolation of exile can push them into doing things they wouldn't normally do. There's only so many times you can kill a goat in ritual sacrifice before you become desensitized to it, especially if doing so makes you stronger magically.
    - The coven now has a very strong insiders-versus-outsiders mentality. They don't like intruders. And anyone who threatens their new way of life must be eliminated. After all, each witch knows what it's like to have their lives and families ripped away from them. They all know what it's like to be lost and alone. Now, however, they have the power to prevent that from ever happening to them again. They'll fight to the death to keep the sisterhood and their new "mother" safe.
  + **Outside Berez**
    - To foreshadow Berez throughout the campaign, I would make normal Barovians have an idea of what's going down in Berez. Like I said before, they know that Berez is a drowned, forsaken village. But they also have heard rumors that degenerate, evil women who have fallen out of the Morning Lord's sight gather there. They eat the flesh of babes and dance naked in the moonlight (or whatever classic, witch-y rumors float your boat).
    - I still wouldn't mention Baba, though, with the normal Barovians. The only ones who should know about her are the individuals I detailed above.
    - One way to suggest the witchcraft in Berez early on is with Gertruda, the missing girl in the Village of Barovia. When the players find out Gertruda is missing, Ireena and/or Ismark suggest that she's been missing over a week and is likely already dead. If she isn't, she might have fallen into darkness like the heathen women in the ruins of Berez. Morning Lord rest her soul.
    - If you have any other women NPCs who evade the party, it's possible they might make a second appearance in Berez as well. For instance, in my campaign, I ran the modified version of Kresk I wrote about here, which leaves Anna Kreskov in a morally ambiguous place. My players chose to exile her for her crimes. I decided Anna would end up in Berez and turn into a witch. If you have any other instances like this more specific to your campaign, Berez is a great area for NPCs' surprise returns.

## Exploration and Environment

### Bogs For Days

* + Berez is one of the most unique locations in Barovia. Its wet, muggy environment is quite different from the rest of the landscape. When introducing the area, I would recommend you look up some marshes and bogs to help you set the scene.
  + Describe how the old dirt roads turn slowly to mud and how the banks of the river become less and less discernible. There's standing water across the whole area and the cacophony of toads and buzzing insects makes up most of the ambiance. The players should feel damp and gross, their boots sucking into the mud with every step. Don't be afraid to push your descriptions to make them feel unclean and uncomfortable.
  + **Deeper Water**
    - To make things a bit more interesting, I've defined a few places on the map in which the waters get quite deep. These areas are technically level with the regular terrain of course, and murky to say the least, so it would be extremely difficult for PCs to fully perceive their depth. The PCs should gradually descend into the murky waters, only noticing the ground's gradual slope as they travel further into the area, amping up the spook factor.
    - On an average sized humanoid (about 5'6" height I'd say), the waters in Areas A and D get up to about ribcage height. The waters in Areas B and C get up to about waist height. And the waters in Area E get up to about shoulder height. The rest of Berez is filled with either ankle-deep to knee-deep water.



### Scale

* + Like Yesterhill, the scale of this map is massive. Remember that a character token is technically one twentieth of a grid square. For that reason, I would HIGHLY recommend you don't hold any battles using the Berez map. I'd find another random battle map for fights in Berez.
  + On a similar note, I also wouldn't show them the Berez map at all. Leave this area to the theater of the mind and perception checks. When they arrive, most likely from the north, describe how the muddy road splits in two and how they can vaguely see old ruins rising out of the mists.
  + For a little bit of reference, Area A, which I've marked on the map below, is roughly the length of a football/soccer field.
  + Also, even the "unmarked" map of Berez still has those pesky X's marking the locations of the scarecrows. So not showing the map to your players is probably a good idea.

### Fighting the Elements

* + There are few locations in CoS that will physically tax your PCs as much as Berez. Because the bogs, in and of themselves, are so environmentally hostile, I'd utilize them in every possible way to further your players' discomfort.
    - Most of Berez is difficult terrain. Your players will be trudging through mud and knee-high water most of the time.
    - The mud and waters will also make players loud. Unless they make some clever use of tools, magic, or the environment, most stealth checks should be rolled with disadvantage.
    - Players should be unable to take a Long Rest in this location due to the swarm of insects encounter. See the Encounters section below for more.

### The River

* + As an additional reminder, the river itself is nothing to sneeze at. It's massive, for one. Players would have to swim the length of a football/soccer field to reach the other side. It should be about 10-15 feet deep, meaning you couldn't just walk it and survive.
    - Should players try to cross the river, those in heavy armor will not be able to do so. The weight would drag them to the bottom, no questions asked. Heavy armor would have to be doffed for swimming.
    - The current, though not horrible, is also an added danger. It flows northwards and players who might get pulled under or exhausted will eventually wash up upstream, somewhere by Lake Zarovich.
  + If your players do decide to cross the river without planning (ropes or magic or something, I mean), make them roll 3 DC 11 Constitution saving throws.
    - If a player has swim speed, then no checks are needed.
    - If the PC fails 1 save, they make it to the other side, but washed up 60 ft northward of their intended location.
    - If the PC fails 2 saves, they make it to the other side, washed up 60 ft northward, but also gain a level of exhaustion.
    - If the PC fails all three saves, the river sweeps them northward and they blackout. They wake up washed up on the shores by Lake Zarovich, separated from the party. This could be an opportunity to run a split party bit for a while, as the two groups struggle to find one another again.
    - If another PC (Bob) is within 30 ft of the failed PC (Jim), give them the opportunity to try and rescue their friend before they're swept away by the river. Bob can try to swim after Jim, but must add another Con save to his roster. If Bob's already failed two, but succeeded on a third, for instance, the fourth roll might put him at 3 failures. Then Bob gets swept away too.

## Battles and Encounters

As Berez is host to one of the toughest boss battles in CoS, don't overload your players with minor skirmishes as they trudge through the swamp. Yes, the book describes a multitude of different areas and enemies, but try to preplan only a couple battles if you can. Here are a few I would recommend.

### Giant Poisonous Snakes

* + Those deeper water areas I mentioned above? Well, those aren't for nothing, folks! When/if the party trudges into the watery areas, I would recommend pulling out a page from the *Anaconda* films for some scary times.
  + Have 2-4 giant snakes sneak through the water (Because the waters are so muddy and opaque, players can roll perception with disadvantage if they're on the lookout. DC 17 to notice the snakes). Battle should initiate when one snake tries (and hopefully succeeds for cinematic effect) to grapple and pull one PC under the water. Holding their breath, combined with the difficult terrain of the deep water and the lack of perception of the enemy should make this a really cool battle.
  + **Here are some statistical reminders:**
    - Most attacks should be at disadvantage because the players cannot see the snakes beneath the water.
    - The rules for breathing: "A creature can hold its breath for a number of minutes equal to 1 + its Constitution modifier (minimum of 30 seconds)."
  + As a little tip, remember that these snakes can do pretty decent damage, but have abysmally low HP. All it'll take is one or two hits to take them down, making the fight pretty fast. Excellent for some lighter fun before the horror that is Baba Lysaga. ;)

### Scarecrows

* + Thankfully, the book gives us some automatic leeway with the scarecrows, telling us they only attack when harmed or if the alarm system around the goat pen sounds. So technically, players can walk right up to them and nothing will happen unless the players actually attack. Here are some additional notes about these guys.
  + **Additional Spook**
    - The scarecrows are another reason not to show your players the big map of Berez. Even on the unmarked map, those giant red Xs are still there, giving them away.
    - Instead, every so often, have your party roll perception checks. Depending on the roll, have them spot a humanoid figure standing out in the mists. This should freak them out a bit and put them into stealth mode.
  + **One at a Time**
    - The book also tells us that once the scarecrows come under attack, they all begin to gather and rush into battle. I think this is where most DMs go wrong, throwing the party into battle with 7 scarecrows at once. However, if the party got into a fight with a single scarecrow at any of the marked locations, it would take at least three to four rounds for the nearest scarecrow to even get to the battle ground, let alone all at once.
    - Instead, stagger the enemies by that arrival window and count your rounds. If/when your party gets into a fight with a scarecrow, have them roll initiative with just the one scarecrow. After 3 rounds, have the players roll perception checks to see another creepy, humanoid figure racing towards them in the fog. On the fourth round, the second scarecrow rolls initiative and joins the battle.
    - Repeat this process every three and four rounds, adding a new scarecrow to initiative until all seven are present. Hopefully by that point, your players will have had enough time to deal with multiple enemies and even out their chances. Or, they'll believe the attacks are never-ending and try to hide, stopping the battle.

### Swarm of Flies

* + This minor encounter is one of my favorites from the raw material. If you guys haven't noticed, I tend to edit and reform a lot of encounters (lol), but this one is pretty solid in my opinion. I just have a couple minor notes.
  + If players try to take a short rest in Berez, go ahead and roll a d8. On a 1 or 2, they're accosted by the swarms.
  + If players try to take a long rest in Berez, they absolutely will be attacked by the flies. This overly hostile area should not allow for long rests except in three areas: Baba's Hut, Marina's Shrine, and the Standing Stones across the river. Remember, if a long rest is interrupted by battle, it doesn't count. The players would have to start the rest all over again to try and benefit from it, at which point they'd only be attacked again.

### Barovian Witches

* + THIS IS PRETTY MUCH THE ONLY LOCATION THESE ENEMIES ACTUALLY FIT IN COS. >^<
  + Sorry. Minor explosion there, lol. It's just that Barovian Witches are a great enemy made specifically for CoS, but they don't fit in just about any of the locations where they're listed. And I'm talking thematically, let alone considering power levels or narrative. The Amber Temple, for example, is a location based around lost knowledge and the ancient arcane, not Macbethian witches collecting toads and newts for potions.
  + But *Berez*. Berez is a great place for these lovely gals. Which is why I writing that whole section on covens above.
  + If the players are exploring the actual ruins of Berez, you might have them encounter some of the witches. 3 or 4 would be a descent number for a battle maybe. But I would first run it as a brief role-play encounter and see how the players react. Just remember that these ladies are very volatile and things could turn into a battle very quickly.

### Other Encounters in the Book

* + **Ulrich the Ghost**
    - I personally got rid of this character and encounter altogether. Why? For two reasons. One, Ulrich is essentially an info-dump character, designed to tell the players what happened to Berez. In general, you should try to put hints and information throughout a campaign to let your players figure things out for themselves about any history. Info-dump NPCs (which is what I call them), are kind of cheap and I really don't like them.
    - Instead, just put some Barovian Witches in the mansion if the players haven't met them already. Leave the story of Berez's fall to rumors from other Barovians and the circle of stones across the river. When the players reconsecrate the shrine to the Weaver (find the details here), they'll learn about Marina.
    - I also would get rid of the snakes in the garden in favor of putting them in the deep water encounter I detailed above.
  + **Zombies with Swarms of Snakes**
    - This can be a cool encounter, but I would definitely prioritize the witches over zombies. At this point in the campaign, your players will have met ghosts and undead and should be quite familiar with them, so showing off the witches in the one location they fit is a must in my opinion.

## Marina's Shrine

I really hate to say it, but Marina's Shrine is a very unnecessary location. It's far away from the core of Berez, gives only the slightest bit of story (which the players learn more naturally elsewhere) and offers no reward unless you've got a Fortunes of Ravenloft there. I would personally ignore the location altogether.

Instead, you can move her shrine/grave to the actual cemetery in Berez, giving the players an interesting but still small encounter. It's also a safe place to long rest closer to Berez that way.

If you feel like you absolutely have to have the shrine out there - or maybe you've shown the players the map for some reason and they want to go see what that dot is - make sure to put some other sort of boon there. Maybe a magical weapon not included in the book. A cool witch-y staff that isn't evil or a bow that fires poison vines. You can tailor something nice for one of your players.

## The Standing Stones

Alright. I admit it. I completely changed the circumstances around this circle of stones. XD

### History

* + As yet another reference/reminder of my Fanes post, this circle of stones is actually an old shrine built to the Ladies Three. Specifically, this shrine honors the Swamp Fane (the Weaver, Jeny Greenteeth).
  + I changed this from the druidic event/connection detailed in the book.

### Muriel

* + The addition of Muriel Vinshaw, the wereraven, is pretty great actually. Having a Keeper of the Feather that isn't a Martikov can be extraordinarily refreshing.
  + However, I really dislike the way Muriel is presented here. Why? Because the book basically turns her into a device for an information dump. She's another Info-Dump NPC, like Ulrich. In writing, you hear the phrase, "show, don't tell" pretty often. In other words, don't tell a player they're cold, describe the sensations so that it becomes much more personal. You don't want an NPC to give your players all the info they need. You want to provide bits and pieces; clues that allow the players to put things together themselves.
  + Instead, I've seen Muriel placed at different places in the campaign. Some have recommended her having an appearance in the Village of Barovia. Others have suggested that Muriel be the raven that warns players outside Old Bonegrinder.
  + No matter where you place her, I wouldn't place her here. Take out Muriel altogether and therefore get rid of the temptation to info dump on your players at this shrine. If you really want her to make an appearance in Berez, have it been after the fact, in which she's one of the trapped ravens outside Baba's hut.

### Visions of the Past

* + I've changed the shrine into a pretty neat magical location, if I do say so myself. This shrine is a reflection of the Swamp Fane Lady, aka the Weaver. The Weaver, as her title suggests, is sort of in charge of the stitching time and fate. Now, she certainly doesn't have total control over fate, but she can see its echoes in the universe. In the old days, worshipers of the Weaver often sought ways to change the past.
  + Highly charged emotions and events leave a mark on fate's great weave, and this shrine is a way to bring back and view those memories. However, since the fall of the Fanes, the power of the shrine is all but dead.

### Interacting with the Shrine

* + Should your players actually reach the shrine (by braving the river), the shrine itself is remarkably uneventful on this first visit. Players can take a long or short rest here without being accosted by encounters and they're effectively under the protection of a nondetection spell.
  + But otherwise, the shrine's big event only occurs when the players are purposefully trying to restore the Fanes in the endgame. Nothing will actually happen unless they are at the shrine with that specific purpose.

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I think that's it for now. Let me know what you guys think and if you have any suggestions on stuff, I might have missed for part two. Otherwise, look forward to dear old Baba! :)

- Mandy

# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Berez II - Baba Lysaga

## Why Non-Optional?

With my little intro blurb there, I feel like this is a question I'm going to get, lol.

### Campaign Balancing

* + If you've read other posts in this series, you'll know I have a habit of heavily expanding menacing NPCs. This can and has turned many potential fights into role-play encounters instead. I love doing this, as I feel it adds depth to the campaign and really makes Barovia and its inhabitants feel alive.
  + However, there's always a limit. Just like with the as-written CoS book, which I feel has too many non-optional battles and overtly hostile NPCs, it's possible to have too few as well. Outside of random encounters and small groups of meaningless enemies, I definitely wanted a couple of harsh, impactful battles in the campaign. Baba's fight felt right for that.

### Dat Stat Block Tho

* + When I first picked up the campaign book and gave it a read, I fell in love with Baba's stat block. I loved the possibility of having such a battle with so many spells at my disposal. And while I knew that playing Strahd's fight would be brutal, I also knew that it would be intelligent. Baba had the opportunity to be much more forceful and outright cruel.
  + To be perfectly frank, I wanted this battle. Yes, that's a personal preference. Yes, you can totally disagree with me and that's absolutely okay. If you'd like to disregard most of this post and make changes (like my treatment of Neferon and Exethanter in the Amber Temple for example) then by all means, go for it. That's just not what I did. ¯\\_(ツ)\_/¯

### Narratively

* + In my story of the campaign, players need Baba's heart to reconsecrate the Swamp Fane. You can find my full write-ups on the Fanes here for more information. But, in a nutshell, restoring the Fanes is a requirement for defeating Strahd. Adding this requirement gave meaning and hooks to many of the locations throughout the campaign, including Berez. And getting Baba's heart means having to kill her.
  + There are also the other couple hooks associated with Baba to consider. While it's possible to steal Argynvost's skull and/or the winery gem out from under Baba's nose, it's also very unlikely. If Baba senses the players are trying to steal from her, we all know she'd respond violently.

## Baba's Background

### Mother Night

* + Firstly, I completely got rid of and replaced Baba's connection to Mother Night. In fact, I sort of got rid of the Mother Night god in general in the campaign.
    - This was unintentional at first, but once I noticed what I was doing I just went with it. The worship of the Morning Lord made sense to me, but I ended up replacing all the portrayals of Mother Night with the Fanes.
    - That's not to say the Fanes are evil like Mother Night. Quite the opposite. The Fanes just ended up fitting better. For instance, the statue in the werewolf den being of the Huntress, the creator of werewolf lycanthropy in Barovia, simply makes more sense than the whole clan basically worshiping the devil.
  + Similarly, I replaced Baba's background with a more basic one with the Morning Lord and then the exploitation of the Fanes.

### The Midwife

* + For the most part, I kept this story the same, sans devil worship of course. It goes like this:
    - Baba was once a normal woman living in Strahd's parents' kingdom. She was one of the handful of maidservants to the Queen.
    - Though Baba longed for a child, the Morning Lord never saw fit to bless her with one. Her desperation for a child, however, slowly drove her mad. She had multiple hysterical pregnancies (a mental condition where a woman's body will physically change as if she were pregnant even if she isn't) as her sanity waned.
    - Delivering Strahd was the best thing that ever happened to Baba. She became convinced that the Morning Lord had used the Queen as a vessel for her own child, since Baba's body couldn't carry a baby. Baba honestly believes Strahd to be her biological son, simply surrogated by Queen Ravenovia.
  + **Contact with Strahd**
    - The book says Baba hasn't had contact with Strahd since he was a toddler. I changed that a bit. Either way, it likely won't matter much in your actual game since players are unlikely to uncover Baba's full background, but it might be nice to know.
    - Though Baba couldn't conceive a child, she had always had a gift for magic. At the time of Strahd's infancy, Baba's power consisted of no more than simple, household charms and potions. Things to help clean house or cure a stomach ache, for instance.
    - In Strahd's early childhood, Baba sought to teach him magic so that he may be more successful in life. And she did so without issue. The issue came from Baba's obvious and mentally unstable obsession with Strahd, which of course did not go unnoticed. Even after being cast out from the castle, Baba continued to sneak in to see her "son," paying him visits every few months.
    - As time went by, Baba herself had to learn stronger magic in order to keep seeing Strahd. She turned to darker magics to grow stronger, and in turn taught them to Strahd so that he would be a great King.
    - Once Strahd was grown (late teens perhaps), he could see and understand that Baba was unhinged. But he also respected her ongoing devotion to him, even if some of her magical practices were revolting. Though he never accepted her as his mother, Strahd kept Baba nearby because she was familiar and useful.
    - When Strahd went to Barovia, Baba followed. Even as Strahd's men introduced the religion of the Morning Lord to the valley, Baba investigated the locals' beliefs in the Fanes, learning additional magic. When Strahd became a vampire and sought a way to further cement his rule, Baba helped him desecrate the Fanes and steal their power.

### Baba Now

* + Before desecrating the Fanes, Baba didn't look quite as monstrous as she does now. She was an old sorceress, yes, but not terrifying in appearance.
  + After the desecration, however, Baba discovered that she could actually capture the weakened nature goddesses and perhaps use them to her own whims. And she did so. Baba managed to capture Laura Stoneheart, the Huntress of the Mountain Fane, and uses the former goddess to remain alive by bathing in her blood.
  + While the horrible practice has preserved Baba's life, it has also morphed her appearance into the hideous swamp witch she is today. Strahd, disgusted by his former nursemaid's appearance, now keeps the woman at arm’s reach so that he doesn't have to see her, but can also call on her if the need ever arises.

## Baba's Mindset

Firstly, Baba is insane. Secondly, Baba is cruel. As such, much of her personality and beliefs are extremely hypocritical and don't make much sense. And yet, I found they worked for her.

### Men and Women, Adults and Children

* + As I mentioned in Berez Part I, I played Baba as having an intense hatred for men. Not because she believes women are superior, but because men can pose a threat to Strahd in a patriarch rule. This belief is, of course, quite convoluted as a woman could easily take Strahd's place as a potential queen. But somehow, Baba just doesn't see it that way. To Baba, every man is a potential challenger to her son, and that is not okay.
    - The only exception to this is male children. And I'm talking about 10 years old and under. Remember that, primarily, Baba is a mother. The desire for motherhood was her greatest dream and the cause of her mental breakdown.
    - All children, including boys, have a soft spot in Baba's heart. The trouble comes when these children grow up. I imagine that Baba doesn't quite see children as people, but rather as some sort of idealized pet. So, if Baba were to adopt a little boy, she would love him and dote on him. But once that child started to come of age, her love would easily morph into hate.
  + On the other hand, Baba doesn't think much of women either. She has an extraordinarily backwards view on girls in general; that they're all in constant search of a husband and therefore victims of carnal desires. She doesn't see women as intelligent beings, generally speaking. (I know this is quite hypocritical as Baba is a woman herself, but that's how I imagine her. Delusionally hypocritical.)
    - And yet there are exceptions to this as well. Baba sympathizes heavily with women of two sorts: women who are mothers themselves and women who have had abusive mothers. Baba believes there is no joy like motherhood and no greater grief than a woman who has lost her child. She also believes that a mother's love is sacrosanct, and if abused is the greatest of all sins.
    - A good portion of the witch coven in Berez is made up of such women.

### For the Sake of her Son

* + Most everything that Baba does is for the sake of Strahd. She does everything she can to help him, even though she has not seen him in a few centuries.
  + Because of that, I kept Baba's general, present-day goals the same as the ones listed in text. Baba has discovered the plotting of the wereraven clan and seeks to wipe them out entirely. And if she has to eradicate all normal ravens in Barovia in the process, then so be it.

### Solitary

* + Baba is a very private person. She lives in the middle of the swamp, for goodness’ sake. She doesn't like people and people most certainly wouldn't like her. She hates any and all of Strahd's consorts (no one is good enough for her baby) and she can only stand talking to the girls in her own coven for so long before dismissing them. The only reason she keeps them around is because they call her "mother."
  + As such, don't expect your players to get goody goody with her and have a long-winded chat, even if they are female with abusive mothers in their pasts. Baba frankly doesn't have the patience for it.

## Outside the Hut

Okie dokie. Here are some things to remember when dealing with the coming fight.

### Difficult Terrain

* + Most of the area around Baba's hut should be difficult terrain from the mud and knee-high water. Speed during combat is halved. You can choose to bypass this rule if you feel it's unfair, but it's also part of Berez's unforgiving environment. It's up to you.

### Ravens

* + There are two raven swarms magically locked in iron cages hanging outside the hut. They require DC 20 strength or lock picking checks to open.
  + The constant noise from the ravens means that players automatically succeed any stealth check to approach the hut. However, if they decide to sneak you should still have them roll stealth so they *think* something could go wrong. Head games ftw.
  + You might want to mix in at least one wereraven into the swarms. This might be Muriel Vinshaw or another homebrew NPC. "Dice, Camera, Action," incorporated a great wereraven NPC named Falkon, for instance.

### The Skull

* + I've mentioned this change of mine several times throughout my Fleshing Out series, but this is the first post to have the information in an official capacity. I moved the skull of Argynvost the dragon out of Castle Ravenloft to here, replacing the giant's skull.
    - This change provided an additional hook to Berez from Argynvostholt and also made it a bit easier for the players, since the distance would be considerably shorter for the fetch quest.
    - Baba delights in using the dragon's skull as a vehicle because Argynvost was once one of Strahd's great enemies. She views her use as a form of desecration and dishonor.
  + **Non-Floating**
    - One minor change I made was to the initial presentation of the skull. Instead of floating, I had it sitting upside-down, half sunken in the mud. If players tried to mess with it, Baba would know because magic and investigate. This gave an added surprise for my players when Baba jumped into the skull and started flying around.
  + **Stats**
    - The skull has a fly speed of 40 ft. and is only big enough for Baba. If another creature (a PC for instance) tries to hitch a ride with Baba, cut the speed in half.
    - The skull has AC 15 and 50 HP. If reduced to 0 HP, the skull isn't destroyed, but instead crashes back into the mud, inanimate and unenchanted. If Baba lives and the skull remains, she can re-enchant it after a long rest.

## Inside the Hut

Annndd here are some things to know about inside the hut.

### Baby Strahd

* + The illusion can easily throw players for a loop if they don't know it’s an illusion. If the hut comes to life for instance, they might easily worry the baby might be in danger. This can be quite interesting in the coming fight.
  + Remember that the players can see through the illusion if they roll a DC 17 investigation check, or if they try to touch the child (he has no physical substance).
  + Though the baby is meant to represent Strahd, there's nothing to actually label him so. The only way the players would know he's meant to be Strahd is if they hear Baba refer to the illusion by name at some point.

### Laura Stoneheart

* + This part is entirely of my own creation and goes hand in hand with my Fanes posts. **In summary:**
    - The Fanes of Barovia were a trio of nature based archfey that watched over the valley before Strahd's arrival. After becoming a vampire, Strahd desecrated their shrines and stole their power for his own. This reduced the Ladies Three to old, humanoid crones who cannot die and have little magical power.
    - In my version of the Fanes, Laura Stoneheart is the crone version of the Huntress of the Mountain Fane. As mentioned above, Baba managed to capture Laura in the beginning of Strahd's vampire days and has kept the former goddess hostage ever since.
  + **Current State**
    - Laura has been nailed to the ceiling above Baba's stained bathtub by thirteen iron rods, bent at the ends to keep her from sliding off. Her body as long since healed around the iron rods, even though certain ones seem to go through major organs. Because she is a goddess, Laura cannot be killed by such means. Though she is in constant pain, she cannot die.
    - Laura wears torn, thin rags and her throat hangs exposed above the tub. Her neck bears a myriad of scars as if her throat was cut repeatedly. Some of the scars are old and almost faded away. The newest seems to be scabbed over.
  + **Rescuing Laura**
    - If and when players pry the iron stakes from Laura's body, she cries in pain and promptly faints. After a long rest, she'll wake enough to speak, but only in broken sentences before falling unconscious again. She has literally hundreds of years of torture to recover from, after all.
    - Though Laura is grateful for her rescue, she's also the harshest of the three sisters. Laura is grim, open to the point of rudeness, and not incredibly likable. But she still thanks the players and damns the now dead Baba Lysaga.
    - Laura will not imply that she is a Fane. After all, the last person who knew her true identity nailed her to a ceiling for a handful of centuries. If asked how she survived so long, she'll suggest she was quite lucky. If players ask why Baba had her in the first place, Laura claims ignorance.
    - Upon leaving Berez with Laura, Jeny Greenteeth and her rickshaw meet them on the road. Jeny rushes to her sister and ardently thanks and praises the players. Though she too avoids admitting to their godly nature. Jeny then tells the players that she'll take care of her sister thereafter and leaves the PCs to their travels.

### The Second Winery Gem

* + The gem is located under the crib and its green glow is visible through the floorboards. Players can get to it with either DC 14 Strength check or dealing 10 HP damage to the floor.
  + Instead of on Baba's command, I gave the hut minor sentience. The moment a player starts messing with the floorboards, the hut comes to life to protect itself. It is technically alive now, so I felt it had the right to defend itself.
  + I had the following checks for players inside the hut when it is alive:
    - At the start of a players turn, players have to roll a DC 13 dex saving throw or be tossed out the open door of the hut. This check is rolled at advantage if they are on their hands and knees.
    - If a player tries to take the gem from the cavity, stay to the book. I just lowered the DC a tiny bit because I know my players are the worst rollers ever. DC 18 (instead of 20) dex saving throw. On a success, they get the gem. On a failure, the wood bites them and they take 10 (3d6) piercing damage.

### Treasure

* + I would use the glyph of warding trap optionally. If your players just beat Baba and her dang hut, they might be really beat up. If you think that 5d8 thunder damage might down your party, maybe consider not having the trap at all. Just to be nice and not wipe out your players after they just won something major. ;)
  + The crawling hands are actually quite weak and fighting them can be really comical. I wouldn't be afraid of having them after fighting Baba.
  + The loot here is crazy awesome. But remember that there's literally over 25 pounds of it here. If you follow encumbrance rules or something similar, that's a lot of gold, lol.

## Baba's Fighting Tactics

I think my players were level 7 or 8 for this fight and it went pretty well. They were beat up by the end, but they actually fought great.

### *"Get to the choppa!"*

* + Once a fight begins, Baba's first order of business should be getting to Argynvost's skull. On the ground, she is as hindered by difficult terrain as the players. For this initial travel to the skull, she may even use her shapechanger ability to change into a swarm of flies to get there faster.

### Spells for Days

* + Baba is wicked and ruthless in a fight. She doesn't attack *smartly* per say, but rather chooses spells that would be fun. The nastier the spell and the more it'll mess with her attackers, the better.
    - For instance, instead of turning a PC into a toad, which has no attack capabilities, with *Polymorph* she'd rather turn them into a goat because it's more interesting.
  + The first PC to land a hit on her gets the *Finger of Death* in return. Not as a reaction of course, but on Baba's next turn. She screams, "How *dare* you mark the mother of the king!" and then boom, *death*.
  + *Lightning Bolt* and *Witch Bolt* are very witch-y spells and are great for this fight thematically. As is *Crown of Madness*. Just a suggestion. ;)
  + If a player makes it inside the hut while the battle takes place outside, have Baba cast *cloudkill* inside the hut. She screams, "No! Stay away from my baby!" Which would, of course, be counterintuitive if the baby were alive. But hey, Baba's a crazy gal. If you like, summoning those swarms of insects inside the hut instead of using a spell would also be effective.
  + The quarterstaff should be Baba's last form of attack. Even in close quarters, running low on spell slots, still choose to use a spell if possible. Remember, Baba's ruthless and just a bit reckless. She isn't used to fighting physically, even if it's in her best interest.

### The Hut

* + Once Baba is bloodied, consider having her bring the hut to life to help her, if the players haven't triggered it already of course. If the players are looking pretty horribly and on the verge of death, maybe not. But it's still something to consider to make this fight more epic otherwise.
  + If the hut fights and a player try to get out of range of its attacks, make *sure* to target that player with a rock attack on the hut's next turn. It'd be cinematic as heck. XD "Oh come on it's not like the house can throw boulders or some.... *no*."
  + Should you bring the hut to life, remember that it does an average of 30 points of damage in a single hit. With its multiattack, that's potentially 90+ HP damage a round. If the hut is on its own, maybe that's a hardcore fight. Fighting alongside Baba however... well that might be a TPK. Consider lowering the multiattack to two hits instead of three. And maybe bring the attack modifier down a little if you have a particularly weakened or underleveled party.

### Until Dead

* + Even if the fight is looking really bad for her, Baba doesn't retreat. The more hurt she is, the crazier she becomes, out of her mind with unending rage and hatred. She won't let outsiders take her home or baby Strahd. Even if players dispel the illusionary infant, Baba still associates the hut with her child and won't leave it behind.
  + Baba and her hut fight until dead. And that, as they say, is that.
  + Lastly, if you'd like some inspirational quotes and such to help you bring Baba to life, I recommend you go take a look at that one boss in *Resident Evil 7*. C'mon. You know the one. ;)

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And that's it for Berez, me thinks! I don't know about you guys, but I have now said "Baba" so many times that all I can hear is that creepy Baba-dok-dook-doooook sound bite. XP Until next time!

- Mandy