# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Background Prep

A long while ago, I started writing this series in hopes of helping expand Curse of Strahd, a campaign which I hold near and dear to my heart. While I initially expected to write up no more than a handful of posts, my Fleshing Out series has now become its own entity, one which has garnered more support and awesome feedback than I could have possibly fathomed.

If you're new to the campaign, welcome! My name is Mandy and I'm here to help you run Curse of Strahd. In this guide, I attempt to add depth to various NPCs, streamline confusing plot lines, fill in plot holes, and alleviate some of the stress associated with TPK inducing encounters.

Without further ado, let's get started!

## Background: Barovia's Origin

Before even getting your players together, there are a few background notes I'd like to go over. While the printed book gives you a fair amount to work with, it surprisingly never covers some key background about the setting of this campaign. Here’s some general info you should know before getting started.

### Trapped in Barovia

* + Most likely, your players are going to want to know why they’re trapped in Barovia. What in the world happened and how could such a place exist? If you have even a slightly inquisitive group, someone is going to want answers somewhere along the line and as the DM, you need to be ready for that.
  + The following is the most succinct, but still understandable way I can answer those questions.

### The Demiplanes of Dread

* + Once upon a time, there was an entire dimension called the Core as big and wondrous as Faerun. But, over the course of time, this dimension was split into a multitude of small, isolated dimensions. Demiplanes, to be more precise. Barovia is one of these demiplanes.
  + [Click here](http://www.fraternityofshadows.com/PortraitHall/JesterMaps/CoreMistyBordersPoster.png) for a nice map of the Core, complete with misty borders. Barovia is near the middle bottom.

### The Dark Powers

* + Why did the big dimension get split up? Because of the Dark Powers.
  + The Dark Powers are essentially a pantheon of old, dark gods. They’re very powerful, usually sinister beings.
  + Each demiplane has a ruling Dark Power. That god basically owns that particular mini world. However, these gods cannot actually own a plane just by wanting it. Instead, they choose a champion amongst mortals and form a sort of pact with them. That mortal becomes the Dark Power’s anchor to that particular demiplane.
  + The Dark Powers are always at war with one another, essentially fighting for real estate. It’s possible for one Dark Power to supplant another as ruler of a particular demiplane, provided they too have a chosen champion in that plane.
  + In CoS, the Dark Power that rules over Barovia is named Vampyr (original, I know). As written, Vampyr is trapped in a vestige at the Amber Temple. However, I've changed this so that Vampyr is free, lingering in the mists that surround Barovia. Strahd is Vampyr’s chosen champion to rule over Barovia, therefore giving Vampyr dominion over this demiplane.
* While I'm not 100% sure, I believe the Core, the Demiplanes of Dread, and everything else originates in 2e. There's actually no mention of them in the CoS campaign book. However, simply knowing this information and being ready when players ask is a must in my opinion.

## Background: Before the Mists

Barovia wasn't always a Demiplane of Dread, of course. What was the valley like before Strahd arrived? The following background is a mix of cannon lore, ideas borrowed from other amazing writers here on reddit, and my own imagination. This is the lore which I use throughout the entire Fleshing Out series.

### Druidic Tribes

* + *Long* before Strahd's reign and any official settlement, the valley was once home to a collection of nomadic, druidic tribes. These folk lived entirely off the land and were completely unsettled. They are, in fact, the ancient ancestors of the druids and barbarians found in the book.
  + ***Forest Folk***
    - I've never liked referring to these people as "Druids" or "Barbarians" in game, because it automatically tips off your players as to the basic stats and abilities of the enemies they're facing. It can break immersion, even if only a little.
    - Instead, I refer to these tribes of primitive peoples as the Forest Folk. Or, if we're referring to the tribes that live in the mountains, the Mountain Folk. Simple, clean, and easy to remember.
    - In the present date of the campaign, the native Barovians still refer to the wild peoples who live in the woods as forest folk. Or, sometimes, less flattering terms.

### The Fanes of Barovia

* + The forest folk of old used to worship a trio of archfey known as the Ladies Three. The Ladies were extremely powerful nature goddess who watched over the valley. They were:
    - ***The Huntress of the Mountain Fane***
    - ***The Weaver of the Swamp Fane***
    - ***The Seeker of the Forest Fane***
  + The Fanes are technically official Ravenloft lore found in previous editions but not mentioned at all in CoS. The subreddit community has resurrected them, and updated them for some awesome storytelling. Now they've become an integral part of the campaign.

### Settlements

* + As time went by, certain forest folk along with a mix of settlers from other lands established small villages in the valley. These settlements were tiny, each home to no more than a handful of families living in makeshift huts.
  + In time, four major settlements rose in the valley. These were the precursors to the towns in the CoS book. They are: The Village of Barovia, Vallaki, Kresk, and Berez. Although, they were known by other names in the past.
  + Most of these people, settled or not, still actively worshiped the Ladies Three.

### The Mages' Arrival

* + At one point, a little over a thousand years ago, a great circle of mages wondered into the valley. These mages had dedicated their lives to studying, understanding, and defeating great evils of a magical nature. In their studies, they discovered the Dark Powers and hoped to somehow subdue the evil gods.
  + The mages were looking for a place to found a base for their research. Not only was the valley beautiful and rich in magic, it was also remote, flanked by impassable mountains. These mages went on to build the Amber Temple on Mount Ghakis, and subsequently all died at the hands of their own good intentions.
  + However, the coming of the mages also lead to a sort of industrial boom for the settlements of the valley. The villages grew in population and became much more civilized.

### Strahd's Arrival

* + As the book says, Strahd was busy fighting wars in distant lands. At one point, he followed those enemies to the valley and discovered the beautiful land.
    - Now, I'm not entirely sure about this, but I think the book says Strahd became a vampire about 250 years before the campaign. Even for a vampire, this seems just a tiny bit short in my opinion. I personally pushed the dates back farther to about 700 years.
    - However, that is entirely my preference. So long as Strahd feels like a concrete, immovable fixture in Barovia, he can be as old as you want him to be so long as he fits okay into the general history.
  + Strahd claimed the valley as his own, naming it Barovia. He brought another wave of civilization growth to the already established towns and build Castle Ravenloft for his mother.
  + Though Strahd himself was never a terribly religious man, his people and soldiers also brought the religion of the Morning Lord to the valley, which spread rather quickly.
  + Strahd also discovered the Amber Temple in these early days and began conversing with the Dark Power Vampyr.

### The Mists Cometh

* + The rest of the fall of Strahd and Barovia occurs as the book says. The Sergei and Tatyana event pushed Strahd over a mental and emotional edge and he gave into the Dark Power who had become his companion. Strahd became a vampire and the mists cut Barovia off from the rest of the universe.
  + ***Repressing the Ladies Three***
    - In the very early years of his vampiric reign, Strahd set about making himself even more powerful, so that no one could challenge his post.
    - Strahd committed three terrible acts of desecration at the main shrines to the Ladies Three and stole their power over the valley. The Ladies, while still alive at the time of the campaign, are almost completely powerless now.

## The RAW Story's Shortcomings

* Obviously, this campaign is amazing. We wouldn't want to run CoS if we didn't love it. However, we can all spot plot hole and discrepancies when we see them.
* Curse of Strahd stands out in many ways from other campaigns. For one, it's only one of two campaigns to date with the mega villain in the title (Tiamat being the second), leaving no room for doubt about the big baddie. Players go into this campaign already knowing **the end goal: defeat Strahd**.
  + On one hand, this makes Strahd an extremely terrifying villain. Just by knowing his name, he becomes this omnipresent, unbeatable force that could outright crush the PCs if he wanted to. From session 1, CoS's story and environment feel oppressed. That is amazing for a horror campaign.
  + On the other hand, this turns literally the entire campaign into a series of leveling side quests, all meant to make the PCs powerful enough to beat Strahd. If they entered Barovia at level 10, they'd have absolutely no reason to go anywhere else except Castle Ravenloft. This can make the rest of Barovia feel like a chore. And that is simply not okay.
* There's also an additional problem with having Strahd on the cover: the lack of surprise.
  + Most good stories, be they in dnd, a movie, book, or otherwise, slowly unravel a mystery for the viewer to discover. And this isn't limited to mystery genres at all. In romances, we're led to discover the lover's pasts and see the relationship's ups and downs. It makes us wander, if only for a second, if the pair will end up together in the end.
    - Alright, so romance might not be the best example for you guys, lol. Instead, let me use something more on point: The Dark Knight. (Minor spoiler for the movie, I guess) In this Batman film, we know from the very beginning that the Joker is the bad guy. He's the one that has to be defeated when the credits roll. And in character, Batman knows his enemy within the first fifteen minutes of the movie.
    - The intrigue comes with the how. Batman doesn't go lock himself in his private gym, working out until he's muscle-y enough to go fight Joker mano-y-mano. Instead, he has to follow clues and hunt down other plot lines before having his final confrontation. It's about the brain work, not an end fight. (Yes, I know there a hundred other things that make this movie good, but if we strip down the plot to its barest roots, this is what we get.)
  + That required clue hunting is *exactly* what Curse of Strahd lacks. There's no actual plot inclusive reason for the players to save the winery or deal with the Abbot. If it were a video game, they'd be better off grinding experience on wolves in the woods before heading to the boss fight. As written, even the prophesied items from the Tarokka reading are technically not needed to beat the campaign.

### Ireena is the Main Character

* + This is the last major problem with CoS as a campaign.
  + Ireena is a great NPC. Okay, as written, she's actually super boring. But modified by the wonderful community on the subreddit, she's pretty cool. That's not the problem.
  + The problem is that, as written, Ireena is the main character of the campaign, not the players. Instead, the PCs are glorified bodyguards on a prolonged escort mission.

## The New Campaign Layout

With all the additions and changes detailed in this series, I hope to have fixed some of these core issues. And, as modified, this is the new plot we get.

### Firstly, STRAHD CANNOT DIE.

* + This is the very first and most important change I made to the campaign. Strahd is quite literally immortal. Not because he’s a vampire, but because he’s connected to a Dark Power. Even if you’ve got a band of level 30 characters all beating him to a pulp, Strahd would simply be resurrected the following dusk. Barovia is eternally under his control and Strahd takes great pleasure in this fact.
  + In the second third of the campaign or later, various NPCs can actually state this fact to the players. "Other adventures have come and killed Strahd before, you know. But he comes back. He always comes back..."

### Secondly, Strahd is *Obscenely* Powerful

* + He isn't just a high leveled enemy. Even if he weren't immortal from his connection to Vampyr, a team of level 20 PCs would have trouble fighting him.
    - There's a popular CR 27 version of Strahd out there if you'd like specific stats. However, just buffing him in every way possible and then giving him every spell on the Wizard list is more than enough to build a working stat block.
  + Why is Strahd so powerful? Because of the Fanes of Barovia. Strahd stole power from three very powerful nature goddesses when he desecrated their shrines. This power is why Strahd has control over the elements and weather in Barovia. This power is why Strahd is, "The Land."

### And Lastly, Ireena

* + ***Ireena is a PC***
    - If you can somehow transfer Ireena's narrative function to a PC, eliminating her as an NPC altogether, that'd be ideal. Now, Strahd is after a PC because that player is his reincarnated love. This makes things very personal to the players and makes them the center of the plot.
    - If this option is of interest to you, I highly recommend checking out my Village of Barovia chapter. It details this process more thoroughly.
  + ***Ireena as an NPC Doesn't get a Happy Ending***
    - I'll detail this more in a later post, but know that Ireena is pretty much doomed. I have some of this written in my Village of Barovia Post and will include much more in a future post on the Shrine of the White Sun in Kresk.
    - Forcing Ireena into a sad ending basically makes her a martyr for the narrative. Her death or other sad fall is no different from that obligatory parent murder in the beginning of so many action movies. Tragedy breeds heroes.

With these three additions, the players can't just go level up until they're ready to kill the big baddie. They'll actually have to *do* something about Strahd's power and Strahd's immortality if they want to defeat him. And that gives us some plot to work with. ;)

### Here's the new baseline plot I've developed for CoS:

* + ***Hook Series***
    - Players are trapped in Barovia
    - Players get mission to escort Ireena to Vallaki. If a PC has replaced Ireena, they head to Vallaki seeking sanctuary from Strahd.
    - Players find out they are "the chosen ones" from Madam Eva
  + ***Building Relationships***
    - Through role play and adventuring, players are more thoroughly introduced to Barovia and its people.
    - Players should grow to love Ireena and a few other NPCs of the DM's integration.
    - Players should become an integral part of Vallaki's future, making them care about the citizens there and the future of the town.
  + ***Disaster Motivation***
    - Players learn how awful Strahd really is and genuinely come to hate him. He's been a passive name and possible chore so far, but now, they actively want him dead. They feel this way because:
    - Somehow, Strahd messed with Vallaki and the town they care about.
    - Strahd has started messing with the players, trying to turn them against each other or otherwise hurting them, making things personal.
    - Strahd captures Ireena, making the party want to rescue her.
    - Ireena somehow dies, invoking Strahd's wrath on the party. Players are pushed into a kill or be killed scenario for the rest of the campaign. Luckily, Strahd likes to play with his food and won't kill them right away.
  + ***Figuring Things Out***
    - The players follow a series of hooks from one location to another where they piece together important information. The quests for the prophesied items and the ally should facilitate these hooks.
    - The players discover, vaguely, that Strahd's power is not his own and that he is truly immortal. However, they still do not know how to undo that.
    - Eventually, they get hooked into the Amber Temple. The Amber Temple will tell the players how to reconsecrate the Fanes, weakening Strahd, and how to unhook Strahd from Vampyr, making Strahd permanently killable.
  + ***The Endgame***
    - Players make their way to Castle Ravenloft, reconsecrating the Fanes on the way.
    - This will also include some quick revisits to various locations in Barovia. The players can revisit some beloved NPCs if they chose, preparing themselves for the final battle and hardening their will.
    - Players face Strahd and Vampyr in Castle Ravenloft.
    - Barovia is freed from the mist and Strahd is dead.
* This is the most basic and shortest version of the plot I could write for you guys. Of course, there're still side quests and loads of plot in between, but at least now those quests actually lead somewhere. Now, players might confront the Abbott because they're searching for information on the Dark Powers. Now, the players might help the Martikovs at the winery in return for information on the Fanes. The players get to have plot. Imagine that!
* Additionally, adding a Vampyr fight to the end of the game gives the players a big baddie that's *not* on the cover. It's a name they'll only learn in the last stage of the campaign, making things a bit more surprising.

## Endings for the Campaign

Lastly, I'd like to talk about the possible endings for CoS. Having an ideal plot all lined out and defined is great and all, but players are always going to surprise you.

### So how can your players actually win?

* + After looking at a few different sources as well as brainstorming myself, I’ve come up with some viable options for characters to come across in order to defeat Strahd and escape Barovia. I think of this like a video game with multiple endings. There’s the good ending, the bad ending, and the true ending, etc. Here they are:

### Trap Strahd

* + This idea comes from the series, “Dice, Camera, Action.” You can find the whole thing on YouTube and I highly recommend watching it. Their first season takes them through CoS and I learned a great deal simply from watching them play together.
  + Their solution to defeating Strahd was to trap him within a doll, body and soul. If Strahd’s not around to rule Barovia, Barovia is basically free. Even though the Dark Power still technically has dominion, it can’t do anything without a champion in which to rule through.
  + You don’t have to use a doll to trap Strahd, of course. But this is a solid solution to beating the campaign.

### Change Strahd’s Heart

* + If you’ve read the background about him in the printed book, you’ll know Strahd’s a pretty jaded guy. He’s bitter about a lot of things, especially the bit about Tatyana and Sergei. If, somehow, your players manage to change Strahd from a bad guy into a good guy, he won’t torture Barovia anymore and your players win.
  + While this ending is technically possible, I honestly think this solution is the least feasible. After all, Strahd isn’t just jaded, he’s also an awful person. It’s not impossible that players may be able to change his heart, but I think it’s pretty improbable.

### Replace Strahd

* + This is the option I find the most interesting. While technically considered a “bad” ending, supplanting Strahd as ruler of Barovia is a pretty neat idea. The problem is, how far would someone have to fall, morally speaking, in order to do this? How far are your players willing to go?
  + ***Who can replace Strahd?***
    - **A Family Member**
      * There are a few mentioned family members in CoS, but the only one that matters is Arabelle, the Vistani Child. As an fyi, I completely changed Madam Eva's background so that she is no longer related. For flavor, you may even want to add another related NPC somewhere. Or, perhaps one of your player characters a distant relative (unknown to them of course).
      * The idea behind this option is that it would be easy to transfer the Dark Power’s sway from Strahd to someone of his own blood. The Dark Power wouldn’t see much of a difference. However, coming under the influence of any Dark Power does terrible things to a person’s soul and personality. Even if Arabelle becomes the next ruler of Barovia, for instance, she’ll likely have a descent before too long and become an even worse ruler than Strahd.
      * The players would feel all successful and the new ruler would let them leave Barovia. But within a year or so, unknown to the players, Barovia would again be plunged into a terrible darkness.
    - **A Player Character**
      * Throughout the campaign, you should design several opportunities for your characters to draw the attention of a Dark Power. Remember, even though Vampyr rules over this demiplane at the moment, another god can take over at any time. If your players start to behave more and more morally ambiguous, or show off their growing strength and potential, they’ll start to draw that attention.
      * If a Dark Power chooses a character as their champion, the character will gain great power and may supplant both Strahd and Vampyr as rulers of Barovia.
      * This comes at a cost of course. The characters will have to fall from grace more than once. And if they succeed, they’ll be as trapped in Barovia as Strahd was.
      * This is what I personally consider the ultimate Bad Ending, in which the good guys actually become the bad guys at the end. But let’s face it, that’s pretty cool though, huh?

### Kill the Dark Power

* + If trapping Strahd or changing his heart are the Good Endings and replacing him is the Bad Ending, I consider this the True Ending. Killing the Dark Power, Vampyr, would not only end Strahd, but also completely release Barovia as a Demiplane of Dread. No god or their twisted champion would hold sway over the land anymore.
  + There are a few things that would need to happen for this to go well.
    - One, none of your player characters can have a deal with a Dark Power. If they do, killing Vampyr will be no different from supplanting him. The player’s Dark Power would simply take over.
    - And two, the characters *will actually have to figure all this out*. This should sort of automatically happen when your players reach the Amber Temple. They'll find out how and why Strahd is immortal, but what they actually do about that is up to them. The library in the Temple can tell them how to kill a Dark Power, but it can also tell them how to supplant a champion, and many other things. Players will have to agree upon a solution and that decision can directly influence the ending they get.

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Player Characters and Mechanics

In my first post, I covered the general background and plot needed for prepping this adventure. Now, we're going to get into the mechanics of it all. I highly believe there are some things that need to be changed and established with your players before even starting session 1.

## Good Advice for all DMs

A while back, I wrote up a nice guide on improving your DMing. In that post, I cover the most common problems I see in DMs, especially those new to sitting behind the screen. While not specific to CoS, I still believe the information holds up and I encourage you to read the post if you're insecure about your own abilities.

Find it here: [The Most Common Problems I See in New DMs and How to Fix Them](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/9540jf/the_most_common_problems_i_see_in_new_dms_and_how/)

## General Preemptive Notes for CoS

### Party Size

* + I HIGHLY recommend a small party for this particular campaign. Four players I think would be ideal. Why? This is a campaign that takes place in the horror genre and as human beings, we naturally find safety in numbers. Your players aren’t going to feel as anxious if they march into a haunted house in a party of 7 as they would going in alone. Not only will it be easier to manage as a DM, but overall, a small party will improve the general atmosphere of the game.

### Your Characters’ Morality

* + Remember that one of the main goals of CoS is to corrupt your characters. No matter how happy and pure they may be entering Barovia, the horrors that character’s face and the double-edged choices they’ll be forced to make are meant to change them for the worse. Remember that.

### Don’t be Afraid to Laugh

* + That being said, this is game. Yes, it’s a horror game. But even if a situation is really friggin effed up, you and your players are allowed to joke and laugh. Even though the characters are suffering doesn’t mean your players should be.

### Leveling

* + I didn’t really mean to do this, but with all the content that I’ve added to this campaign, the level cap is no longer 1-10, but more like 1- 13 or 15. If you use a lot of the advice I write in this series, you should prepare for that as well.

## Illustrations and Pictures

THIS ONE IS IMPORTANT SO LISTEN UP FRIENDS.

Do NOT. I repeat. Do *NOT* show your players the blue tinted, stylized illustrations of various NPCs shown throughout the book. The picture of Rose and Thorne from Death House, for instance. Or that spread of Barovian citizens from the beginning of the book. Those are no-noes.

If you ever want to inspire friendship or trust between your players and an NPC, showing them a terrifying character portrait is not going to help. While the art throughout the CoS is beautiful and thematically great, it's not so good for running the campaign. Instead, keep those NPC portraits to yourself until you're sure your players are never going to meet that NPC again.

I MEAN LOOK. IS THIS A CHILD THAT INSPIRES TRUST?? O^O



## The Strength of Curses

* To be blunt, *Remove Curse* is both too powerful and too prevalent in Curse of Strahd.
  + While curses can be interesting in any game, they're arguably much more important in this specific campaign. "Curse" is in the title, for goodness’ sake. Curses are supposed to be major plot points and have significant effects on character growth, should they come into play.
  + However, almost all the negative ailments we see in the campaign can be cured by Remove Curse, a relatively easy to learn spell for PCs and something known by NPCs all over Barovia. As written, curses are no big deal at all.
  + Additionally, players already have a tip off to add *Remove Curse* to their spell list. Just seeing the title of the campaign will make them heavily consider learning the spell when the time comes.
* Instead, I would completely get rid of the spell in this specific campaign. In Session 0 when you're discussing everything with your players and establishing your house rules and all that, tell them that you're completely getting rid of *Remove Curse* in this campaign. They won't find the spell anywhere in the setting and they won't be able to learn the spell, even if it's on their spell list.
* If you're uncomfortable with that, homebrew the many curses and ailments found in CoS so that most of them can only be cured with a *Greater Restoration* spell or an equivalent.
* The point is, things like Vistani curses and Lycanthropy *matter*. They shouldn't be there for the day it takes PCs to go to the Abbot or Father Lucian and then disappear. That seems like a cheap loophole.

## Evil Player Characters

* This one is a bit of a personal suggestion. If you and/or your players are completely comfortable with evil aligned characters in the party, then by all means go for it. This is especially true if you have experience running a game with evil characters.
* However, I've found that evil PCs can be problematic in this campaign. And newer DMs can get blindsided by their ineffectiveness towards the plot.
* Why?
  + Evil player characters tend to work in direct opposition to the other PCs in the party. They're evil after all. That means they'll happily use and abuse the other players in your group. While this is totally in character and makes perfect sense, it also tends to sow discord between players and make sessions tense and uncomfortable.
  + Evil player characters also work in direct opposition to the plot of CoS. In this campaign, the majority of the hooks and transitions rely on the PCs' good nature. Evil PCs generally will not want to help those in need out of the goodness of their hearts. In fact, they may be more inclined to cause turmoil to forward their own desires. This can make it exceptionally hard to move the story from one location to the next, let alone actually get through the full plot.
* I know there are exceptions to this; that there are players out there who can expertly play evil characters and DMs who can flawlessly handle them so that everyone has fun. But I also know that I've heard the horror stories...
* I would recommend not allowing evil PCs in your game. *Especially* if you're a new DM. Believe me, theoretically, evil alignments sound super fun. But in a long-term game, they can cause more problems than you'd think.

## Personalizing Curse of Strahd

### Your Characters’ Stake in Barovia

* + Do your absolute best to work your PCs' backstories into the world of CoS. As written, the only motivation players are given to complete the campaign is to escape Barovia. And that doesn't hold up very well in the long run.
  + While the main goal of the campaign should be dealing with Strahd and escaping Barovia, each PC should also have their own personalized goals. Those goals and associated character arcs should be attainable during the campaign.
  + Work with your players to figure out their character's desires and goals, so that you can incorporate them into Barovia. Try to encourage motivations beyond the simple wizard looking for more arcane knowledge or the rogue looking for money.
    - Maybe a player lost someone they loved and are hunting down the murderer. That murderer is in Barovia.
    - Maybe a player's relative or dear friend disappeared without explanation and they desperately want to find that person again. That person is in Barovia.
  + Technically, this that you should do for any campaign. Giving your players a sense of agency in the world is rather important for telling a good story.

### Hidden Backgrounds

* + It's also worth incorporating some surprise revelations into the campaign if you can. These are plot points that the players wouldn't be necessarily looking for, but love to discover nonetheless.
  + ***Some examples:***
    - Replacing Ireena with a PC. The PC discovers that they are being pursued by an evil vampire lord for some reason. As the campaign progresses, they find out they are the reincarnation of the lord's lost love, Tatyana.
    - Making a PC Izek's sibling. The PC discovers that they aren't the orphan they thought they were. They were actually born in Barovia and have a weird brother with a demon arm!
    - A PC has Vistani roots. The PC discovers that their missing parent(s) were actually Vistani. Somehow, the PC was left behind and raised outside Barovia. Now they have a whole extended family they didn't know about.
    - The PC is from an order of knights. They discover that the silver knights of Argynvostholt were actually the precursors to their own order.

## Personalizing Dark Powers

In my first post, I talked about the nature of the Dark Powers in Barovia. They're not just a collective of distant, uninvolved gods, but active entities looking to prey on mortal souls through a champion. Currently, the Dark Power Vampyr has dominion over Barovia and Strahd is his champion.

However, other Dark Powers are constantly on the lookout for champions that can help them take Barovia from Vampyr. Anyone of both exceptional power and questionable moral activity can draw the Dark Power’s attention. In other words, it won’t take long for your player characters to fall into their sights. As the story progresses, your players will both become stronger and come across horrific side plots meant to corrupt them, making them all the more favorable as a Dark Power's potential champion.

### PC/Dark Power Interaction

* + The relationship between a PC and a Dark Power is meant to feel like that between a PC and an important NPC. It's a subtle, private matter that should develop and grow as the campaign progresses. For specifics on developing this relationship, I've written up a full guide covering the stages of Dark Power interaction. You can find that post here.
    - In summary, the Dark Power is a god that answers the player's prayers, helping them should they ask. As the relationship develops, the Dark Power's traits and influences begin to show themselves through the PC. The PC's soul slowly comes to belong to the Dark Power.
    - Once the PC has developed a dependency on the Dark Power's guidance and gifts, the Dark Power starts to cause bad things to happen through the PC. However, because the PC is addicted to their relationship, they don't stop these things from happening. This is the direct, slow burning progression of a PC's moral decline throughout the campaign.
  + I developed this method of running the Dark Powers to completely replace the vestiges in the Amber Temple and their evil gifts. Instead of random agreements causing PCs to suddenly turn evil, the decline happens over the course of the campaign and therefore has time to develop and feel natural.

### Individualized Powers

* + Before the campaign began, I went through and customized a Dark Power for each of my players. If you're going to have an evil god slowly corrupt a player, you can't have him walk up and be like, "Hey! Kill all the civilians and I'll give you all the powweeerrrr!!!!" It has to be much more subtle to have any success.
  + Each player and their character are going to have a personality they lean towards, a personality type with which they are more likely to make friends. Create a Dark Power that fits that personality mold. Essentially, you are customizing your PCs' best friends.

### Examples of Dark Powers

* + The best thing I think I can give you are the examples from my own campaign. These are the three Dark Powers I developed for my three players.
  + ***The Evening Glory***
    - The Evening Glory is a Dark Power featured in the Adventure League modules. However, I reworked and developed her for the main campaign for the fighter in my party. The fighter is a knightly sort of guy, full of honor and fighting for the common good.
    - I knew that power and other such temptations wouldn't work on the fighter. So instead, I developed the Evening Glory to be much more deceptive in her corruption. She appears as an angelic woman with long, radiant hair and wears a white dress. She’s deceptively beautiful and convinces others that she’s good. Glory is meant to play the innocent, not the seductress. She doesn’t flirt with the players or anything, but rather convinces them to fight for her in the same way a princess might dote on a gallant knight.
    - The Evening Glory is inspired by true love. She believes in the bonds between individuals more than anything else. However, this belief is completely tainted, for Glory also thinks that anything left alive too long will inevitably erode and tarnish… even love. Because of this, she believes that the greatest mercy to be given is death. Anything bright and wonderful and good must be killed before it can be corrupted. And that’s what makes her evil.
    - The Evening Glory’s powers are meant to be as deceptive as her appearance. She specializes in light/radiant attacks and magic. Her abilities also grant a lot of instant death. For instance, if your player has a bond with Glory and tries to go for a non-lethal kill, it will automatically kill the target anyway. Glory also has a lot of petrification abilities that can turn figures into marble or glass statues. After all, a statue cannot age or tarnish. Remember that she wants to preserve beautiful things.
  + ***Delban, Star of Ice and Hate***
    - This Power actually appears as one of the entities trapped at the Amber Temple. I developed him for my warlock player as her patron.
    - Because the warlock already depended on her patron for her magic, I didn't have to make Delban particularly nice. In fact, I could take things in quite the opposite direction. I made Delban power hungry and cold. He would berate the warlock when she failed and remain silent when she succeeded. In Delban's mind, there is no room for weakness. In a way, he's a very abusive, militaristic sort of Dark Power.
    - From his title, I made Delban's abilities have everything to do with cold. If/when the warlock gained levels and got closer with Delban, she gained boons and cosmetic traits which had to do with cold.
  + ***Turian, Whisperer of Words***
    - Turian is a completely original Dark Power I created for the rogue in my party. Turian is meant to reflect Loki from old Norse mythology. He's the ultimate trickster. I felt like my wise-cracking rogue would respond well to such a character.
    - Turian is a god of chaos and lies. He pretends to make friends with mortals but in reality, feels no connection to them, preferring to use them and turn brother against brother for his own entertainment. What he hates the most is the boring and mundane. Turian physically appears the most human in my lot of Dark Powers. If my players come in contact with him, I want them to like and trust him, after all. However, they won’t know that’s he’s actively playing to their whims and desires to turn them against one another.
    - Any power having to do with Turian is going to be fast paced, allowing his champion to zip around and sneak like a boss. They’ll also have levels of enchantment and illusion magic, allowing them to trick and manipulate multiple enemies at once.

## PC Death in Barovia

I am personally not a huge fan of permanent player character death in a dnd campaign. While I know that sometimes the dice are simply not in our favor, PC death can hit us like an anvil. Both myself and my players tend to invest a lot of emotional and mental energy into their characters, so losing them unexpectedly breaks our hearts. And let's face it, CoS RAW has some pretty unfair, TPK inducing encounters throughout the book.

To that effect, I've outlined a few ways to deal with PC death in the CoS Campaign, to give your players every chance to keep their characters before having to roll a new sheet.

### Resurrection

* + Firstly, remember that resurrection is possible in Barovia by means of the Abbott in Kresk. Prior to the party getting to this location, you should have native Barovians drop hints that the Abbott is a powerful man of the Morninglord and is known for creating miracles. Specifically, there's a rumor that he brought back a young boy from the grave.
  + Much more secretly, both Jeny Greenteeth and Madam Eva can resurrect the dead. However, neither will do so lightly.

### The Ghost Effect

* + After a character dies, have them come back as a ghost (not an actual ghost monster, btw). After all, their soul can’t leave Barovia because of the mists, so canonically it makes sense.
  + ***Possession***
    - As a ghost, the PC is invisible and can't interact with the living world in any way. The other players can't see or hear the dead PC at all.
    - However, the ghost player has the ability to temporarily possess other intelligent creatures (must have the aptitude for language), so that they can continue to interact with the campaign. When trying to possess a creature, they must enter a charisma contest with the possessed. On a success, the dead PC gains full control of the creature's body. While they keep their own mental stats and abilities, they must use the physical stats of the possessed creature.
    - Possession lasts up to 3 hours, at which point the PC ghost is expelled from the body. They must take a short rest before they can attempt possession again. If the PC attempts to possess the same creature as before, the creature has advantage on their charisma contest to fend off possession.
  + ***The Mist Wall***
    - As a ghost, the PC is still technically attached to their body, even if they possess another creature, and cannot go farther than 300 ft from their corpse. At that radius, the dead PC can see an obtrusive wall of mist 360 degrees around them. If the ghost PC approaches the mist, they can see ominous, gargantuan dark shapes moving within (Dark Powers) as well as see the distant shapes of other dead humanoids running in the mists (dead Barovians waiting to be reincarnated and trying to hide from the prowling Dark Powers). Every day the PC remains dead, the radius of the mist wall shrinks by 30 ft.
    - While a ghost, a PC has 1d8+2 days to be resurrected into their own body. After that, their body becomes too decayed to properly sustain life. The PC has 10 days (until the mist wall shrinks completely) to be resurrected at all, possibly into another body. This can be a constructed creature without a soul, like Vasilka, or a soulless Barovian. The Abbot, Jeny Greenteeth, and Madam Eva are the only ones capable of tying a soul to a new vessel. Once the mist wall closes and consumes the PC ghost, they are officially and irrevocably dead and have to roll a new character.

### Dark Power Intervention

* + During their time in Barovia, your players should start attracting the attention of Dark Powers, as previously stated.
  + If there comes a time when one of your players is in a pretty dire situation and happens to die, you can have the Dark Power come to their aid. After all, an evil god probably doesn’t want to lose its chosen plaything. Players can temporarily enter a Beast Mode version of themselves as they’re overwhelmed with the ability of the Dark Power. They can then use their temporary power to crush their enemies before becoming drained again.
  + Having the Dark Powers intervene can be a story relevant way to avoid character death in CoS. But it should come with a price.

### Strahd Intervenes

* + This could be pretty darn interesting, but also depends heavily on Strahd’s opinion of the party at any given time during the campaign. If Strahd actively hates a character, he won’t care if that character dies. However, if Strahd finds the characters interesting playthings in his lands, he might not want to see them die just yet.
  + If death seems imminent for a character, you might just have the dark lord himself arrive on scene. I would play it like Strahd is there to finish off the party on his own. Strahd should toy with your players’ terror, making them feel cornered. And then, at the last possible moment, Strahd turns around and slays the enemy instead. This will show your players just how fickle Strahd is and how very little he cares about the lives of others. And at the same time, you’ve craftily avoided a character death.
  + This is actually a really good option for early game PC death.

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Setting

Hello everyone and welcome! This time, I'm going to cover the overall stats of Barovia as a setting. This post includes population sizes, native animal species, and a few other topics covering the valley. Enjoy!

## Scale of Barovia and the Importance of Downtime

Collectively, most of the subreddit has agreed that the general scale of Barovia is abysmally small. As portrayed, it's only about 6.5 miles between Vallaki and Kresk. The average human walks about 3 mph. That means that players can get from Vallaki to Kresk in a little under 3 hours at the worst. The whole map is only about 20 miles wide for goodness’ sake!

### The Importance of Travel Time

* + When I first started DMing, I desperately wanted my players to have fun. To that effect, I accidentally ended up rocketing my players from one major event to another. I was anxious and didn't want things to be boring. Instead, this had the direct opposite effect. Things ended up feeling rushed and my players were under constant stress to deal with one disaster after another. While they were still having fun, they didn't have the time to really develop relationships or settle into the world.
  + I can imagine I'm not the only DM to have made this mistake.
  + ***Camping***
    - Camping is one of the most basic solutions to this. Travel time forces a campaign to slow down, giving players a chance to role-play between one another and build their in-character relationships. It also gives them the time to read books and investigate magic items found in game.
    - Camping also gives you time for random encounters. Wolf attacks and such will help the players feel like they're developing their abilities and get to know the world.
  + ***Leveling and In Game Time***
    - Travel time is also essential for pacing a campaign. Think about it. With the as written distances, players can potentially go from level 1 to level 10 in a week or two. That is simply not feasible. A farmer shouldn't become one of the deadliest swordsmen in the world in a couple weeks.

### New Scale

* + There's actually more than one way to adjust the scale to better fit the campaign. But no matter what you do, the goal is the same: you want your players to spend at least one night in camp between each major location, if not two.
  + This travel time doesn't have to include a random encounter at all. It could just be a montage of your party marching to the Following the Leader song from Peter Pan. Whatever floats your boat.
  + The point is, you should give your players the opportunity to role-play amongst themselves and appropriately process things that have happened in the campaign so far. If they don't seem to need that time, fast forward through the travel with a quick description. "The march is long and you guys end up settling in early when you see the mists thicken at dusk. As each of you takes a watch, you feel like the darkness is watching you somehow. But then morning comes. You share some rations, and march on again." Even such a short description gives the campaign a little breathing room.
  + That being said, here are a couple options for quick fixing the scale:
    - If you're going off straight up travel time, changing the map to 1 hex = 4 miles will more than do the trick. That puts about 35 hours of walking time between Vallaki and Kresk, forcing at least one night on the road.
    - You might also opt for a less extreme option. 1 hex = 1 mile can be reasonable, provided you identify pretty much all of Barovia as difficult terrain. The mountainous landscape and winding, forested roads more than accommodates slow travel, after all.
  + I am certainly no cartographer, but I think these options work out better in the long run. The landmarks on the map might seem a bit big just in looks, but in game, it tends to work out really well. Besides, most players aren't counting the hexes between locations so guesstimating is perfectly fine.

### Map for the players

* + It also all works if you don't give your players the full, accurate map of Barovia. Especially since this is a new land for them, not giving them a map is really good for making them feel alienated and out of their depth.
  + ***Hand Drawn***
    - Once your players get to Vallaki, they can likely find a hand drawn map from someone in town. The Baron and Lady Watcher probably have something, so depending on whose favor the party garners, they can earn a map from either source. There's also likely a shop selling a map of Barovia for a pretty penny.
    - If you do this, still do not give your players the accurate map. And for goodness’ sake don't give them one that's labeled.
    - I personally used [these maps](https://www.dmsguild.com/product/208560/Barovia-Hand-Drawn-Maps) and they've worked splendidly.
    - There's also [this map](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/9vtapt/map_to_the_barony_of_barovia/) from the subreddit, from [u/theBlackBlue](https://www.reddit.com/user/theBlackBlue).
  + Towards the very end of your campaign, once players have visited pretty much every relevant location, you can share the real map with them. At that point, the mystery is more null and void and it's fun to watch them analyze the real map and compare it to all their adventures thus far.

## Population of Barovia

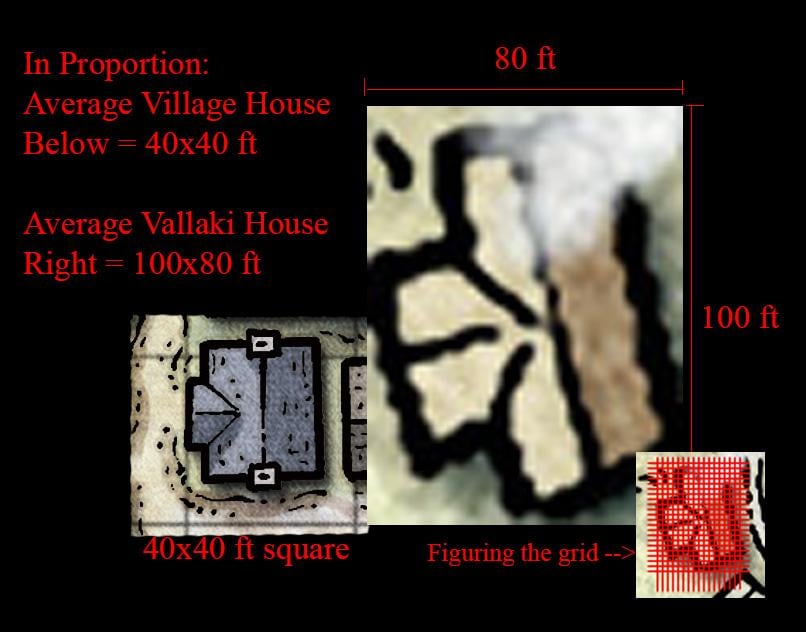
This goes partially hand in hand with the scale issue. Frankly, there aren't enough people in Barovia to appropriately support an economy as written. Plus, "tiny scared village stuck in the dark ages" gets old as the month’s role by. Your players need some new sights in order to keep things interesting. Part of the success of horror comes in seeing the good. For moments of terror and isolation, there should also be times of joy and comfort. For the miles and miles of horrible woods and dark dungeons, there should also be places of civilization and normalcy.

### Village of Barovia

* + ***Fewer Abandoned Houses***
    - Yes, the Village of Barovia is a downtrodden place. But as written, it's a borderline ghost town. The people still have to support themselves. Plus, I doubt Strahd would want his stock of humans so absolutely decimated. And if the Village still has an active, functioning government/burgomaster, there actually has to be enough people to have a functioning society.
    - While the Village isn't a happening place, I still would increase its liveliness a bit. The people are hard workers and don't generally care for chat. But they still get up and go to work every day.
  + ***No Zombies***
    - To that effect, I would get rid of the zombies in some of the houses. Because why on earth would any populated village actively live with zombies next door?
    - And to put things into further perspective, there are literally about 100 zombies (20% of 118 houses times 4(2d4) zombies) as written living amongst the people of the Village. That's not a random encounter, that's an episode of The Walking Dead.
    - Take the zombies out of town and save them for a random encounter on the road. Maybe the players encounter an abandoned farm house full of the things. But they certainly don't belong in the Village.
  + ***Fewer Rats***
    - Similarly, the number of rats as written in the Village are more akin to a steam punk film of London during the plague.
    - The book says that on average there are 4(2d4) swarms in 25% of the houses in the Village. That means that there are literally about 120 swarms living in Barovia with the normal people. And the zombies. XD It's just not reasonable guys.
  + ***I would instead adjust the random occupant’s chart accordingly:***
    - Roll a d20
    - 1-3 = Abandoned, empty house
    - 4-6 = Swarms of rats
    - 7-20 Barovian villagers
    - This way, about 30% of the Village is actually vacant, which is much more reasonable than the 60% the book implies.
  + ***Population***
    - Okay. Let me tell you guys right now. I actually did the math here. From what I've seen, most DMs guesstimate the population of the Village to be very low. In general, I've seen numbers as low as 50, but the average guess people make is one or two hundred.
    - Now, the book says that there are a maximum of 11 people living in a house (1d4 adults (4) and 1d8-1 children (7)). And there are 118 houses in the Village (I counted. I know I'm lame.) So that means when the Village was absolutely booming, there were as many as 1200 people living in this town. That is significantly more than 50.
    - Of course, that number is going off the max. If we're averaging things out (About 6 people per house. 1d4 (2) adults plus 1d8-1 (4) children) that still puts us at a population of about 700.
    - Now let's take into account the abandoned houses. If we subtract that as written 60%, we get a population of about 250 people. The Village is basically dead in the water. To stabilize the area a bit by nixing those zombies and filling some space, we instead subtract the 30%. We now get around 500 people. And that's much more reasonable.
    - In conclusion, the Village of Barovia should have about 500 people living there.

### Vallaki

* + ***Almost No Abandoned Houses***
    - Vallaki is supposed to be a pretty booming town by Barovian standards. And it's the closest thing your players are going to get to a city the whole campaign. And a larger, functioning town is nice in a long-term campaign. Such a place can encourage players to look into downtime, learning new tools and spending their adventuring money.
    - I figure, in a large town like Vallaki, the number of abandoned houses should be quite minuscule. As such, I'd change the random occupant’s chart. Only on a 1 is the house abandoned, leaving only about 5% of the structures in Vallaki unoccupied.
  + ***Population***
    - Here comes some more math. I'll keep it short for you guys this time though.
    - Again, the average number of residents per house is listed as 6. However, the average Vallaki house is about twice the size of a Village house. So, I raised the average resident number to 8.
    - And then I counted the number of houses at around 220. Some of the buildings look small enough to be sheds or other non-residents, so I didn't count them. (And yes, I actually did literally count them on the map :P)
    - That, minus the 5% unoccupied space puts the total population of Vallaki at about 1500 people.
    - The average Vallaki house is twice the size of a Village house. Scale checked.



### Kresk

* + ***Population***
    - In general, I've seen both the Village and Vallaki's populations severely underdone. Like I mentioned before, most of the time I've seen the Village averaged at about 100 people. Vallaki is often guessed at about 500. Both are nowhere near the true populations. However, Kresk is usually far overestimated at about 200.
    - Unlike the other towns, Kresk's average occupation number is 3. And there are only 23 houses in town. So, in reality, Kresk is only home to about 75 people. Which, I suppose, does make sense considering every home grows their own crops and is entirely self-sufficient.

### Population Summary

* + ***Village of Barovia:*** 500 people
  + ***Vallaki:*** 1500 people
  + ***Kresk:*** 75 people

Now, all of this is a bit null and void. Your players likely won't be looking for the demographics of the towns. XD But, I've seen discussions about Barovia's population sizes come and go for long enough now. I think having some concrete analysis down has to do somebody some good, lol.

## Animals and Food

### Wildlife as Written

* + After population sizes, I also frequently see people ask about the general animal life in the valley. As written, we only ever see wolves, rats, snakes, ravens, bats, and dogs. Oh, and domesticated horses. There are even times in the Adventure League modules that suggest these are the only animals that live in the valley.
  + Frankly, that's just not plausible. The wolves need to eat something to survive. And Barovians have to have some sort of food variety to maintain their towns.

### Updated Animal Lists

* + I've come up with a few lists of natural wildlife that can be found in Barovia. As the area is based off of Romania, I tried to stick to species found in such an environment.
    - Of course, these lists probably don't include every animal found is such an environment, but it's comprehensive enough to satisfy you and your players in a pinch.
    - Also note that these lists DO NOT include fantasy beasts we might see in dnd. I'm just trying to set up a baseline environment here.
  + ***Woods***
    - **Predators**: Wolves, Boar, Bears, Lynx, Foxes
    - **Game**: Deer, Rabbits, Squirrels, Mice
    - **Birds**: Ravens, Owls, Falcons, Larks, Jackdaws, Pheasant, Doves, Thrush
    - **Other**: Rats, Bats
  + ***Swamps***
    - **Predators**: Wolves, Boar, Snakes
    - **Game**: Muskrats
    - **Birds**: Ravens, Owls, Larks, Jackdaws, Thrush
    - **Other**: Rats, Bats, Frogs/Toads
  + ***Mountains***
    - **Predators**: Wolves, Bears, Lynx, Foxes
    - **Game**: Rabbits, Mountain Goats, Squirrels
    - **Birds**: Ravens, Owls, Falcons
    - **Other**: Rats, Bats
  + ***Domestic Environments***: Or, animals that live in towns through widespread domestication but are not commonly found in the wild.
    - **Food Production**: Sheep, Goats, Chickens, Domestic Boar (basically hairy pigs)
    - **Pets/Labor Animals**: Dogs, Cats, Horses, Mules
  + ***Fish***
    - I know the book says there aren't fish in Lake Zarovich. Fine. But there are still plenty of rivers and other small lakes where Barovians can fish.
    - There are likely Carp, Perch, Pike, and Trout in Barovia.

### Farming and Edibles

* + There is no sunlight in Barovia. Like ever. The sky is perpetually overcast at Strahd's own will. That puts a little hamper on farming in the valley. The people of Barovia can't live off the abilities of hunters and fishermen alone though.
  + I've compiled a list of likely crops which grow with almost no direct sunlight. Note that most of these crops usually have darker leaves and vines from the lack of sunlight. This is a real-world effect that happens on certain crops grown in shade, and it just so happens to help up the aesthetic for CoS. Also remember that most of products of these crops will be smaller and under-grown from the lack of sunlight.
  + Barovian Crops: Carrots, turnips, beets, potatoes, radishes, cabbage, mustard greens, kale, and collards.

## Wine

The only alcoholic beverage in Barovia is wine. No beer. No mead or whiskey. Wine. Quite frankly, Barovia doesn't have the environment to support the crops needed to make other alcohol.

The Vistani are the only ones who might have other alcohol, though they themselves culturally prefer wine. And because they don't get along with Barovians, they certainly don't try to import alcohol into the valley.

The exclusivity of wine in Barovia can be hilarious if you get the right PC in your group. The smart talking rogue in my group wrote about having an affinity for ale in his backstory. Now, almost a year of gameplay later, his inability to find ale is a running joke in my group.

## The Seasons

### Side Note

* + In order to prepare for the Kresk arc I've written in this guide; I would advise that your players start the campaign in Barovian autumn. While seasons aren't really mentioned in the book, I wrote a rather large expansion to Kresk that involves the coming of winter.

### A Colorless World

* + Regardless of Romanian environments and normal seasons, I would personally normalize the seasons as much as possible. In other words, the changes between the seasons aren't as drastic as they would be in the real world.
  + ***Autumn***
    - Autumn in Barovia is just a bit nippier than usual. The various pine trees don't shed their needles or anything, obviously. The more normal trees change colors, but mostly to a few different shades of muddy brown. The brilliant reds and oranges we associate with Fall don't come in Barovia.
  + ***Winter***
    - It rarely snows during Barovian winters. Instead, it frosts. The trees and underbrush (what little there actually are) all dies and hardens with the cold and shallow springs and streams freeze over. Though the temperatures drop to frigid, the cold seems to petrify the landscape instead of transforming it into a white wonderland.
    - The higher mountains are exempt to this, of course. It snows year-round in such areas and winter is especially brutal.
  + ***Spring/Summer***
    - There's actually little difference between the two warmer seasons. Once the ice of winter breaks, the valley turns into what we would normally imagine from the CoS book. The environment is temperate.
  + Luckily, Barovian winters are typically short, autumn and winter taking up no more than four or so months of the year. The rest of the year is typical of Ravenloft visual representations.

## Barovian Culture and Lore

For the last section of this chapter, I'd like to compile some of the more important lore and societal norms for you. Some of these are new additions. Others are from the RAW text, repeated here as a reminder. Though, I'm only focusing on what I consider some of the more world building lore that you might otherwise forget.

### Average Barovian Views

* + ***Humans or Bust***
    - Other races besides humans are quite rare and unusual in Barovia.
    - As a result, Barovians will react more strongly to PCs of different races, either positively or negatively depending on the NPC.
  + ***Vistani Aren't to Be Trusted***
    - Most Barovians have a generalized fear of Vistani. The Vistani are the only ones unharassed by Strahd, and so the natives of the valley believe that they are somehow evil.
    - This fear is unfounded, however. The Vistani are actually a very welcoming people. For a full write up of my expansion on the Vistani, check out my Tser Pool post.

### Superstitions

* + ***Ravens are Good Luck***
    - Just like the book says. It's bad luck to harm or kill a raven and the majority of Barovians will treat anyone that does so as a doomed pariah.
    - Conversely, ravens showing up at an ideal time are good omens.
    - This superstition originates from the Fanes of Barovia. Ravens are the symbolic animals of the Seeker.
  + ***Redheads are Bad Luck***
    - This bit of lore comes from [u/guildsbounty](https://www.reddit.com/u/guildsbounty/).
    - Tatyana was a redhead and each of her incarnations also have red hair. These women all met a horrible end. As the centuries have rolled by, Barovians have slightly picked up on the unluckiness of redheaded women in the valley and now associate all people with red hair, man or woman, as generally unlucky.
    - Ireena has red hair.
    - This superstition is null and void if a PC replaces Ireena's role in the campaign and has dark hair. If the PC is blonde or their hair is a color less common than black or brown, just switch the superstition to that color.
    - Redheads are not actually common in Barovia, so when one is born, they don't go unnoticed.
    - Though this is a generally accepted superstition, it isn't something that Barovians actively shun. More like, they purse their lips and crinkle their noses at redheads. Think of how people would react if a guy with a face tattoo walked into a store. Everyone sees the face tattoo guy and they all feel just a little bit uncomfortable. But the cashier is still going to ring the guy up and no one is going to say anything except in whispers to their friends. Barovians treat redheads the same way.

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And that should do it for my thoughts on Barovia as a setting. Hopefully, this collects and lists some statistics about the Valley a little easier. Until next time my dears!

- Mandy

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Running the Dark Powers and PC Interaction

Since the beginning of my Fleshing Out posts, I've become much more experienced in running the Dark Powers in my game. I wrote up a post way back when about formulating the Powers, but now that I know more, I feel like I can give out some more concrete advice and suggestions. This post will be much more technical and therefore should be more helpful when formulating and running the Dark Powers in your own game.

## What Dark Powers Want

Every villain has a goal. The Dark Powers, I figure, shouldn't be any different. Initially, I made them try to corrupt players "just because." But that honestly made for really poor planning and role-play. Here's something a bit more concrete.

### My Weird, but Effective Fishing Metaphor

* + ***Hungry***
    - Imagine that the Dark Powers are human beings who are immortal. However, they're still plagued by human needs, namely hunger. While they can't actually starve to death, being hungry is a horrible feeling and they're desperate for food.
    - However, they can only eat fish. That's it. Nothing else in the whole world can satiate their hunger. There's just one super obvious problem: fish live underwater. And humans certainly can't live down there.
  + ***Divers***
    - How do we catch the fish then? Well, we can dive into the water and hold our breath. It's not a terribly effective method, but we might be able to bag a fish every so often so we can eat.
    - But even then, eventually, we have to get out of the water. We can't swim/tread water forever.
  + ***Fishermen***
    - We might also cast a line into the water; use some juicy bait to lure unsuspecting fish into our clutches.
    - In this way, we might attract a few easy meals. But it's hardly filling and not terribly consistent. Also, we have to do a lot of hard work that's not becoming of beings of our greatness.
  + ***Recruiting a Shark***
    - This is where my metaphor gets a little absurd, but I still like it so whatever. XD
    - What if we could instead recruit one of the fish to catch other fish *for* us? The fish lives in the water, so it doesn't have that pesky breathing problem. And its proximity would be much more consistent for a source of food.
    - But how could we persuade the fish to lead other fish to their doom? What if we offered it a boon? What if we made it a *shark*? A shark would be sooooo much more powerful than the other fish, after all. And a shark would never have to be afraid of anything else in the sea. It would be a scary boss fish. And all it would have to do is catch us loads of fish to eat. Which it would already be doing anyway. Really, it's a win-win. ;)

### Translation:

* + That's basically what the Dark Powers want. They feed on mortal souls. However, those souls only exist in realms in which they can't live. Sure, they can enter a mortal realm for a short time, but they can never stay. Every so often, they can reach out and corrupt a soul ripe for stealing, but it's hard work and doesn't happen consistently. Collecting souls through a champion (a shark) is a much better method of finding food.

## Collecting Souls

### Special Diet

* + Each Dark Power has a specific sort of soul to collect to feed their hunger, usually based on their representative power. Fekre, Queen of Poxes, collects the souls of those who die from her pox. Delban, Star of Ice and Hate, collects souls who freeze to death.
  + Vampyr collects the souls of those who die from insanguination (extreme blood loss). So, a champion who quite literally needs to drink blood is an excellent way to collect. Basically, anybody who dies in Barovia by vampire bite loses their soul to Vampyr.

### Direct Causation

* + Mind you, not every soul in all the universe that dies from cold will go to Delban. In order for a Dark Power to "consume" a soul, they must have some kind of causation. A fisherman certainly can't take credit for fish who randomly die in the ocean, after all. They actually have to catch the fish, whether with their own abilities or through a shark/employee/champion.
  + So, other vampires don't filter their prey to Vampyr automatically. It works as a sort of chain of command. Vampyr gets his souls through Strahd. Vampire spawn created by Strahd also get linked in the chain. But another high vampire totally unrelated to Strahd would have nothing to do with Vampyr.

### The Soulless

* + You can, if you want, interpret this as the reason there are soulless people in Barovia. While there was once a plethora of souls in the valley - so many so that there weren't enough physical bodies to house them all at any given time - now there simply aren't enough. Those who have died to the vampires in Barovia over the many centuries have lost their souls to Vampyr and the mists prevent any new souls from entering the land.

## Prep Work

* I would recommend that you tailor a Dark Power for each PC. Try to make an evil god that will suit the player and their character, based off both personality and player class. You can use the names and abilities of the Powers in the Amber Temple as a jumping off point, if you'd like, or just make one up. Either way, try to establish the following for each Dark Power:
  + ***How do they eat souls?***
    - Pox, cold, fire, fall damage, whatever.
  + ***What is the Dark Power's personality?***
    - Or, how will they interact with the player? Will they be godly, or seem just like an average joe? Will they appeal to the PC's sense of morality and secretly try to twist it, or offer straight up power or gold?
  + ***Should my player go far with this Dark Power, what kind of boons will they receive?***
    - For making a deal with Delban, a PC might eventually get immunity to cold damage. Maybe they'll get a trait that temporarily boosts their AC for another Dark Power. You should figure out the theme of your boons.
    - Remember, not all boons have to be useful. Some can be completely cosmetic. A PC might start having horrible nightmares or maybe their eyes turn solid white. Stuff that adds to the story and that other PCs will notice, but otherwise have no effect on gameplay/combat.

## PC Interaction

Now that we've established what the Dark Powers actually want, how do we translate that into gameplay? How do we determine how and when a Dark Power will approach a PC to become their champion? We certainly can't just have an oogy-boogy devil come out of the shadows and say, "Join the Dark Side!" Almost every player in their right role-playing mind would refuse.

Instead, we have to make things much more subtle. The Dark Powers are tempting, not forceful. And as DMs role-playing these evil gods, we have to act accordingly. Bwah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!!!!

### Stage 0: Contact

* + ***Asking for Help***
    - This is perhaps the most consistent and coolest way to establish contact with a Dark Power. With this method, the players are the ones who initiate a connection with a Dark Power, which can make for an excellent and surprising bit of role-play.
    - Wait for a PC to ask for help in character. Maybe they're dealing with a particularly frustrating NPC and they're like, "Lathander give me strength!" Or maybe they're in a heated battle with few hit points left and they say, "For the love of God, miss you evil creature!"
    - This is your way in. The players are asking for divine help, even accidentally. Calling out for some help is something that everybody does naturally in speech. We never expect that something might actually answer. This time, it works.
    - Stop whatever is happening and have the player roll a Religion check. If their religion is particularly high or low, maybe a simple wisdom or charisma check instead.
    - A DC 10 means something small will happen. Maybe the enemy will suddenly have disadvantage on their attack roll as a gust of wind blows their hair in their eyes. A DC 15 means something small and consistant will happen. A sudden flash of light appears right in front of the enemy's eyes and blinds them, giving them disadvantage on all their attacks for the next minute. A DC 20 means an outright miracle intervention. The ceiling suddenly caves in and crushes the enemy. The annoying NPC is suddenly unable to speak anything but the truth for a minute. Succeeding to this degree at Stage 0 means some cool shit.
  + ***Answering a Need***
    - This is the second method of contact and is more of a later game connection.
    - Remember that the Dark Powers are always actively looking for a champion. This potential champion is, ideally, someone whom they can easily control due to like-minded personalities as well as someone powerful. The more powerful the individual, the better champion they'll be.
    - As the campaign progresses, the PCs are going to level up and get more and more powerful. That's a given. Somewhere at a midway point, the party is going to do something impressive. Maybe they'll defeat Wintersplinter at Yesterhill. Maybe they'll remove the curse from the Fidatov Manor or challenge the Abbot to a duel. Showing such strength is going to make the Dark Powers take notice.
    - After a show of power, a Dark Power might visit a PC and offer help with a task. If the party is unsure where the Werewolf Den is, for instance, a Dark Power might show up to one PC in their dreams and offer directions. Remember, this is still a Stage 0 contact, however. There won't be any deal making or boons. Just a polite, "How d'ya do?" and a pinch of assistance.
  + ***Shut Down***
    - It's completely possible that a PC's interactions with a Dark Power might never go beyond Stage 0. If they never seek further assistance or outright refuse any help offered by the dream being, the Dark Power isn't going to force a connection with them. Remember that it's okay for a PC or two to never have a Dark Power in this campaign.

### Stage 1: Connection

* + Once a player knows that something/someone is listening to them, they'll be hard pressed not to try and make contact again. As soon as you make them roll that Religion check the first time, it's a rare party that won't try and repeat the outcome. At this point, the PC will reach Stage 1, in which they begin forging a minimal understanding and relationship with the Dark Power.
  + ***Mystery is Key***
    - Stage 1 is all about giving a little and then reeling them in, giving a little then reeling them in, giving a - you get the point. More fishing metaphors up in here.
    - Basically, you don't want to info dump on a player. No, "I am Delban Master of Ice AND I CAN GIVE YOU ALL THE POWER!!!!"
    - Keep it subtle. If the PC prays for guidance, the Dark Power can give them a sign. "Hey, mister god man who helped me before, Lady Watcher is giving me mixed signals. What's up with that?" *rolls 18 Religion*. DM - "You're suddenly struck with a vision of Lady Watcher in a heavy cloak, raising a ceremonial dagger."
  + Once the connection grows and the PCs have used it a handful of times, the Dark Power will try to make an actual meeting.
    - Dream visits are great for some minimal conversation, but the Dark Power will likely appear in a form that appeals to the player and talk more about the PC than themselves.
    - They may also appear to a player when they're alone. Maybe a player is on watch duty and everyone else is asleep, for instance.
    - This meeting is all about building a rapport with the player so that the players trust the Power.

### Stage 2: Pact

* + This is when you start giving out boons or traits. Once a player likes and trusts the Dark Power enough, they'll be willing to come to an agreement. The Dark Power will start giving them power ups and whatnot which could prove invaluable in battle.
    - Resistance to an element. A trait that allows them to gain 5 temp hit points per long rest. Start small, and then work your way up.
    - Don't overload with traits. Treat these the same way you would treat magical weapons. You certainly don't want to give any party a bunch of magical weapons at once. Or a single particular game breaking magical weapon. Keep it small and simple.
    - Also, just from general pacing, no single player should reach this stage until they're well into Vallaki at the very earliest. Level wise, level 5 or 6 might be a good marker to think about handing out a boon.
  + During Stage 2, the Dark Power will still not ask for anything in return (certainly not servitude or souls). Maybe they'll ask for something minor, but most likely they'll justify their boons as help from a friend. If anything, they'll freely admit their hatred for Strahd. After all, they want to replace Strahd and Vampyr, so they're both enemies.
  + Lastly, remember that even here at Stage 2, conversations should be limited. The Dark Powers can't just dump answers on the players. It's a fine line between too much and too little, but try to tread carefully.

### Stage 3: Dependence

* + At this point, a PC is basically addicted to their Dark Power. They try to contact the Dark Power frequently and use whatever boon(s) they might have on a regular basis. In a way, they're becoming reliant on the Dark Power and crave a closer connection in order to get more boons. Power is most certainly addictive, after all.
  + This is when the Dark Power starts to show its true colors, as a player will likely continue the connection despite bad things happening.
  + The following is likely to happen:
    - The Dark Power will start to feed false information to the PC. "Hey should I trust Davian Martikov?" "*Definitely not*."
    - The Dark Power will start to act against the rest of the party. The more alone the PC feels, the more dependent they'll be on the Power. Friends are therefore a no-no. "When you cast that spell, it's much stronger than you expect, practically incinerating the enemy! You hear its screeches as it takes the fire damage. However, you watch as the flames seem to grow a mind of their own and arch towards your friends as well! Jimmy, Laura, make Dex saves!"
  + During Stage 3, PCs should see that either directly or indirectly, their relationships and general gameplay are taking a turn for the worst. People are dying and getting hurt. When they try to help NPCs, they often make the wrong decisions. While their powers are pretty baller, they tend to go to sleep in Barovia feeling bad about themselves.

### Stage 4: Ownership

* + This is the most critical stage of connecting to a Dark Power. By the time any PC reaches Stage 4, they should be of a higher level and likely somewhere in the last fourth of the campaign.
  + ***Stage 4 PCs usually have the following:***
    - At least a few different boons from the Dark Power. At this point, they should be a little over-powered if we're being completely honest.
    - The attacks against the other party members should be less accidental and more outright hostile. There are bad things happening at the worst moments, to the point where it can't be a coincidence anymore.
    - The afflicted PC has blackouts, loosing temporary control over their character. Say they want to cast an attack spell on an enemy, but you as a DM know they have an AOE spell in their list, meaning it'll hit the other party members in vicinity as well. "You hold up your hand and begin the quick, familiar incantation for Magic Missile. Suddenly, you feel a jolt come from within you, crackling through your bones. You can't control your own voice as you say the incantation for Fireball instead and the flames leap forth!"
    - In role-play, the player may go to sleep at night and wake up in another building, next to someone killed in a way indicative of the Dark Power. Or it's some other dark scene. You get it.
    - Pile on the cosmetic changes!!!! Anything dark and evident of the Dark Power should show itself.
    - As an example, one player in my campaign has reached Stage 4 with Delban (the ice guy). She's a warlock teifling. Her hellish rebuke gives off cold damage instead of fire. She's immune to cold damage, but vulnerable to fire damage. Her skin is not only freezing to the touch, but she's basically a walking air conditioner. Any room she spends time in gets frigidly cold in no time. Though winter has been approaching in Barovia, it's looking like this year will be really rough and all the NPCs make comments about it. Basically, cold, cold, cold, and colder. I've piled it on thick.
  + ***Immortality***
    - At Stage 4, a PC has almost completely lost their soul to the Dark Power. Their soul is still recoverable, but it's not totally their own anymore. Because of this, the PC becomes basically immortal. If they die, the Dark Power brings them back to life again. Unless it's something crazy like complete disintegration, the PC doesn't stay dead.
    - Yet again, I'll remind you that this is late campaign stage. No PC should reach this stage until high levels. And even then, they won't know about their immortality unless they test it, which is unlikely to happen.
  + ***A Threat to Vampyr***
    - If any PC reaches Stage 4 with a Dark Power and meets Strahd face-to-face, Vampyr will *know*. Though Vampyr and Strahd aren't close, Strahd still understands where his power comes from. He won't tolerate a threat to his throne. And Vampyr certainly won't tolerate a threat to his demiplane.
    - If you're familiar with [u/guildsbounty's](https://www.reddit.com/u/guildsbounty/) lovely [post on running Strahd like the scariest mo-fo that ever did vampire](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8ts5bg/my_notes_on_running_strahd_like_an_unholy_terror/), this constitutes Strahd going into Destroy-the-PCs mode.

### Stage 5: Champion

* + At Stage 5, Strahd is defeated and Vampyr is displaced as ruler of Barovia. The player loses complete control of their character as they become locked into their pact with the Dark Power. Game over, cue the bad ending.

## Beast Mode

* Beast Mode is an effect which I created for a temporary divine intervention of the Dark Powers. Throughout the campaign, I’ve placed certain story markers and triggers that will summon a Dark Power to a character. These instances will usually occur at a place of great turmoil and desperation, where the player is more likely to want the help a god can give them, evil or not. Upon acceptance, the player will effectively enter a temporary Beast Mode version of themselves, complete with super powers reflective of their Dark Power patron.
  + This can also be an excellent alternative to PC death. If a PC totally and completely dies, especially early in the campaign, a Dark Power can reach out to them and then and offer them a connection. The player goes into Beast Mode temporarily before losing the power.

### What is Beast Mode?

* + I secretly made a copy of each of my player’s character sheets and then leveled them up to level 19. Their stats went through the roof and they had more traits than even I knew what to do with. But on top of all that, I gave them extra abilities that suited their Dark Power.
  + Upon a certain trigger, like death, you give the player this temporary, beefed-up character sheet to use in combat.
    - I would recommend you plan for Beast Mode uses, though. Set up some “if, then” scenarios. ‘If my players do this at this location, then the druid will hit Beast Mode’, for example.
    - Also, use these sparingly. You don’t want to overindulge your players after all. You want them to feel like Beast Mode is a wonderful, one-time reward. Each player should only use a Beast Mode once in the campaign, if at all.

## On Strahd

For what it's worth, this is the process I imagined happened to Strahd when he first came to the valley of Barovia. He would have met Vampyr completely accidentally during one of his initial visits to the Amber Temple. As proud as he was, even then, Strahd would have never seen Vampyr's subtle connection as a threat.

Vampyr would have fostered a connection with Strahd, feeding him the power to destroy his enemies and settle the valley in the name of his parents. And that power would have been hopelessly addictive, especially since it allowed Strahd to save the lives of his men by doing more of the fighting himself.

When Tatyana came along, Vampyr was the one whispering in Strahd's ear, telling Strahd he was too old for her. Vampyr fed Strahd's insecurities, making Strahd more volatile and pushing Tatyana even farther away. I imagine that it might even have been Vampyr himself who somehow guided Sergei to Barovia, knowing it would make Strahd desperate for more power.

And it worked. Strahd finally gave himself completely to Vampyr in order to forsake his own death and earn Tatyana's love. However, Vampyr consistently keeps Tatyana away from Strahd so that Strahd will keep needing him. Thus creates the endless cycle of misery and power that truly makes up Strahd's curse.

## Breaking a Connection with a Dark Power

In most cases, your players will realize that something is up with the gods whispering to them, especially if they reach Stage 3. They'll want to disconnect from the Dark Power.

### Stages 1-3

* + It's actually surprisingly easy to break a connection to a Dark Power in any of these stages. Quite simply, a PC just has to tell the Dark Power, "No." No, I don't want help. No, I don't want to talk, get the hell out of my dreams. No, I won't use your boon, take it back. Basically, this is Barovia's Just Say No to Drugs speech.
  + The Dark Power will be appropriately angry, but because they don't have an active champion or equivalent pawn to work through, they can't actually do much about it. Up until this point, the PC has been the pawn.
  + The Dark Power will do everything they can to change the PC's mind. Persuasion, begging, offering more power, temptations, etc. But in the end, a persistent PC can put their foot down and banish the Dark Power. The Dark Power will take their boons (if they gave any at that point) and never return.

### Stage 4

* + Breaking the connection at Stage 4 is just as simple. Just say no. The only difference is that there's usually some kind of backlash as the PC regains the other half of their lost soul.
  + You should give the PC a temporary anti-boon or stat debuff that lasts a few in-game days. The PC should get sick or their magic is on the fritz or their Constitution is a 5 for three days. They should be able to feel this break and it shouldn't be pretty.
  + For added effect, don't let players know the debuffs are temporary. Just let them waltz through feeling horrible and then regain themselves in time.

### Stage 5

* + Stage 5ers can't break their connection. They've given their soul to the Dark Power and are effectively lost. If the connection were broken - likely forcefully as in the case with Strahd - the breakage would kill them permanently.

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That's it, folks! Those are my notes on running Dark Powers in game. While this is quite detailed, don't fret about it too much. It's unlikely that most players will go very far with a Dark Power, especially once they sense something is up. I'm currently in the last stretch of my game and I've got one Stage 4 player, one Stage 2 player, and one that didn't go past Stage 0. So, while this looks long and complicated, it's more there for the sake of being prepared.

- Mandy

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Understanding Strahd von Zarovich

Let’s talk about Strahd. I mean the character/villain, not the campaign as a whole. Now, there's already plenty out there on how to actually run Strahd in your game. Personally, I would recommend [this amazing guide](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8ts5bg/my_notes_on_running_strahd_like_an_unholy_terror/) by [u/guildsbounty](https://www.reddit.com/u/guildsbounty/). I have found none better.

This post, on the other hand, is going to break down Strahd's character history and personality. I wanted to write out a nice analysis so that you guys can understand where Strahd is coming from and what exactly is going on in the big man's head.

In this post, I'll give a brief rundown of the origin of vampires in media and what they represent, as well as provide a psyche analysis on Strahd (brace yourselves, guys, but Strahd is not a psychopath/sociopath). Let's do this!

## On Vampires

* Modern media has really warped vampires. Nowadays we have vampires that sparkle and constitute the ultimate teenage romance. However, this is most certainly not where vampires began.

### Vampires are Metaphors for Rapists

* + Yup, you read that right. Things might get a little touchy here, but this is all very true.
  + ***Sex in Media***
    - In the olden days, portraying sex in any way in public media was extremely taboo. Writers didn’t write about it and, later on, filmmakers didn’t even imply it in their work. If you go back and watch some old black-and-white films, even married couples are portrayed as sleeping in separate beds.
    - Creative people had to get crafty in order to talk about sex in entertainment media, and often used subtext and metaphors to convey the idea. Vampires are one of the results of this. If you can’t talk about a man forcing himself on a woman for sex, instead you talk about a man forcing himself on a woman for her blood because he “needs it”. Suddenly it becomes acceptable to show to the mass media.
  + ***The Ultimate Man***
    - If you think of vampires, be they Dracula or Strahd or even Edward Cullen, they all have similar airs about them. They’re all powerful, well-learned, wealthy men and usually have a heavy level of societal influence. Strahd is technically a King, after all, even though he refers to himself as a Count.
    - These aspects make vampires the ultimate catch. They’re meant to represent the extreme upper class and therefor the husband that every woman wants. In more modern times, our cultural ideals for romance have thankfully become more fluid and accepting. But when we talk about vampires, this is generally the archaic form of love we see.
* Because vampires are the ultimate man, they’re able to get away with quite a bit, and that includes abusing their lovers. Vampires are meant to represent that even aristocrats and kings are capable of being monsters when the sun goes down. All their wealth and cunning doesn’t change the fact that they are abominations. The same can be said of a politician or wealthy businessman who regularly abuses his power to get away with taking advantage of others. The need for sex is a carnal and visceral desire and so is a vampire’s need for blood. When the powerful give into that desire, the result is monstrous.

## Psychologically Diagnosing Strahd

Now that we have an idea of where vampires come from and what they are supposed to represent, let's look more specifically at Strahd. We already know how he acts and how he fights, but why? Let's figure it out.

But firstly, a quick disclaimer. While I took a few years of psychology and sociology courses in college, I am far from an actual, licensed professional. Most of what's here comes from analysis, looking up some psych journals, and going back to my copy of the DSM (Diagnostic Stat Manual for Mental Disorders) for reference. So yeah. While I consider myself well researched, I'm definitely no expert. XD

### Strahd is Not a Psychopath/Sociopath

* + Yes, he has some symptoms of psychopathy, but he's actually totally not. He's just a really bad person with delusional self-justifications. But I'll go into all that in a minute.

### What is Psychopathy?

* + Well, firstly you guys should know that Psychopathy and Sociopathy are the same illness. Like literally. They are simply alternative names for Antisocial Personality Disorder.
    - Some professionals like to suggest that psychopaths are merely more extreme versions of sociopaths. Others say that psychopaths are violent and sociopaths are not. And still others suggest that psychopaths are more passion killers while sociopaths feel nothing at all.
    - But, as written in the official diagnosis, none of that is true. It's just Antisocial Personality Disorder. While I love Sherlock as much as the next nerd, "high-functioning sociopath" is not a politically correct term. (So stawp calling Strahd that, ya dweebs! ;P)

### So how does the DSM diagnose APD? With the following symptoms:

* + "There is a pervasive pattern of disregard for and violation of the rights of others occurring since age 15 years, as indicated by three (or more) of the following:
    - Failure to conform to social norms with respect to lawful behaviors as indicated by repeatedly performing acts that are grounds for arrest.
    - Deceitfulness, as indicated by repeated lying, use of aliases, or conning others for personal profit or pleasure.
    - Impulsivity or failure to plan ahead.
    - Irritability and aggressiveness, as indicated by repeated physical fights or assaults.
    - Reckless disregard for safety of self or others.
    - Consistent irresponsibility, as indicated by repeated failure to sustain consistent work behavior or honor financial obligations.
    - Lack of remorse, as indicated by being indifferent to or rationalizing having hurt, mistreated, or stolen from another.
  + The individual is at least age 18 years.
  + There is evidence of conduct disorder with onset before age 15 years.
  + The occurrence of antisocial behavior is not exclusively during the course of schizophrenia or a manic episode."

Phew. What a mouthful. Okie dokie, let me nicely lay out why Strahd does NOT fit that mold.

### Point 1: "Not respecting social norms and doing bad things for the sake of doing bad things."

* + Strahd is an exceptionally lawful individual and has been his *entire* life.
    - In his own words, he "squandered his youth" being a dutiful prince leading army off to war. He has a healthy respect for rules and the only time he actually stepped outside the law was during the Sergei/Tatyana murders. And that law breaking was not done because Strahd didn't care about the law, his brother, or Tatyana. Instead, Strahd cared but invented justifications for himself to avoid feeling guilty or assuming blame.
    - Even afterwards, in his time as a vampire and during the campaign, Strahd does not hurt someone unless he feels the punishment is earned. Is the punishment actually always earned? No. But does Strahd believe it is? Yes.
    - Strahd actually has a very strong internal moral code which he is loath to break. He's not drowning Berez "just cause." He's doing it because they killed Marina and therefore deserve to die.

### Point 2: "Lying for personal gain."

* + In the campaign, we actually do have a distinct example of this behavior in the form of Strahd's alter ego, Vasili. He does, in fact, assume a different name in order to trick others into trusting him.
  + However, Strahd does not lie on a regular basis. In fact, he is usually very upfront and honorable when addressing others. He speaks his mind, listens to others' opinions and replies accordingly. If he withholds information, it's usually under reasonable terms.
    - For instance, if players were to ask what happened to Tatyana, Strahd might say that he "lost her in a horrible accident." To Strahd, this is the complete truth. He certainly didn't mean for Tatyana to kill herself. And talking about the the gritty details of someone's suicide isn't exactly polite conversation, so it makes sense for him not to mention them (\*cough\* reference back to point one where he respects social norms).
  + So, while Vasili is indeed an alter ego and a lie, one drink does not an alcoholic make. We certainly wouldn't label Aladdin a psychopath for assuming the role of Prince Ali to get the girl of his dreams. And we certainly wouldn't label Jasmine a psychopath for pretending to be a peasant to escape her palace life. Their circumstances justify their deceits more than the intense, remorseless lies of a psychopath.

### Point 3: "Impulsive and not planning ahead."

* + I would hardly call Strahd impulsive. If anything, he's an extremely calm and calculating individual. He was a freaking General in an army for the first couple decades of his life, for goodness’ sake. And a damn good General at that, from what we're told.
  + He even carefully planned out his own brother's murder. It wasn't a passion killing. So, it's not like even his violence is impulsive.

### Point 4: Being super aggressive.

* + Yes, he's a murderer. Yes, he's no stranger to bloodshed. But Strahd isn't the type to pick a fight without reason. He also doesn't take life without reason. To be repetitive, he's calm and calculating, rarely losing his temper.

### Point 5: Not caring about safety of self or others.

* + While Strahd certainly doesn't worry about his own safety, he's also fully aware that he is an all-powerful vampire. He doesn't *need* to be safe. If he were mortal, he'd likely put in a little more care when charging into danger. But as he is, he's technically always safe. Should the players eventually prove themselves a real threat to his life and reign, Strahd will most definitely do something about it. He isn't nonchalant about his power.
  + As for others, Strahd actually does care about people, if only for his warped sense of morality. In I, Strahd, for instance, he frequently protects others. Though he may not particularly care about these individuals, he also clearly doesn't want them harmed because they don't deserve to be harmed. And, in most instances, these people are under his protection as Lord of Barovia, so he feels it is his duty to keep them alive. So maybe he doesn't care for the right reasons, but he certainly does care.

### Point 6: Irresponsibility

* + lololololol Strahd was collecting taxes a month after losing Tatyana and being turned into a vampire.

### Point 7: Lack of remorse and rationalizing bad behavior.

* + STRAHD HAS THIS ONE. This is literally the only of the seven criteria of APD that Strahd actually has. When he does wrong, he rarely feels remorse and when he does something clearly awful, it's because he's somehow justified the act to himself. So, BING, one point for Strahd.

### Those Last Points: Evidence of APD as an adolescent.

* + As far as we know, Strahd was a perfect little angel when he was a kid. He certainly wasn't out killing cats or something. The only evidence of his villain side that we have begins with Sergei and Tatyana's deaths, *much* later in his life.

And SO. My dear friends. STRAHD IS NOT A SOCIOPATH.

## Strahd's Personality

I know what you're thinking. "Okay, Mandy, so what is actually wrong with Strahd? He's clearly the *villain*."

Strahd doesn't actually have a mental disorder. He's just a terrible person. Remember, not all murderers are diagnosable, even if they are fictional vampire overlords. Sometimes people are just cruel.

* If you're looking for something more specific, Strahd is plagued by delusional, self-justifying behavior. And, while not an actual narcissist, he also has a rather inflated ego that pushes him to abuse the people who submit themselves to him. These aren't mental illnesses, though, just personality traits.

### Delusional

* + We all justify things to ourselves in order to handle life. It's normal. It's natural. It's human. We say, "Oh I worked out hard this week so it's okay for me to have some cake." We tell ourselves, "So what if I speed a little? Everyone else does it so it's okay." And, for the most part, these little lies that we tell ourselves are harmless. Even though the cake is technically bad for you, we intrinsically know that it's not a big deal to indulge.
  + When these self-justifications grow, gain consistency, and then get out of hand, we have a problem. *That* is what's happened to Strahd. For instance:
    - Strahd is intelligent enough to know that his inability to claim Tatyana's soul is directly linked to his power and vampirism. He knows that if he were to give up his immortality, he'd be able to finally have the woman he loves.
    - Instead, he refuses to do so because he values his power more than his love. However, Strahd himself is unaware of this fact, living in perpetual self-doubt. He tells himself that if he were to give up his eternal life, he would grow old and therefore be unworthy of Tatyana. He tells himself that without his power, he would no longer be appealing to Tatyana.
    - But the root of the matter is that Strahd loves his power and is unwilling to give it up. And Strahd is so obsessed with his own delusion of loving Tatyana, he doesn't see that fact.
  + The same can be said for his killer nature.
    - As I said before, Strahd is no passion killer. He rarely lets his emotions overwhelm his rational mind. So how could any lawful, rational man allow himself to kill hundreds of people? Because he justifies it to himself.
    - Strahd is the kind of person that would murder a man's children to punish that man. Strahd would tell himself that the death of the children wasn't his fault; that if the man had only followed his law, the children would still be alive. But we can all clearly see that Strahd has committed an unforgivable atrocity. Strahd can't see that at all. He would feel bad that the children had to die. He would see it as a horrible loss. But Strahd in no way would feel any guilt or regret over the murders.
    - Similarly, to Strahd, the PCs deserve to be hunted. They're keeping Tatyana (Ireena) from him. They're defying him. They're breaking the laws of the land. They're disrespecting the king. So, hunting them down and destroying anything and everything that gets in his way is totally okay.

### In Romance

* + Though the RAW CoS text isn't terribly specific, the book combined with some outside material clearly shows us that Strahd doesn't actually turn people into vampires who don't want to be turned.
    - Patrina (the dusk elf woman), for instance, came to *him*. He in no way forced Patrina to be his lover.
    - Gertruda, the young human girl in Castle Ravenloft, is also there of her own volition technically.
  + The problem comes when we also take into account Strahd's delusional behavior. In some manner, Strahd actually believes that his ability to charm people is a nonmagical version of enlightenment. He believes that those charmed by his will are simply being encouraged to realize their true, underlying feelings.
    - This delusion is why he honestly believes that Tatyana loved him. Strahd charmed her and she came to him in love. And Strahd believed - still believes - that to be her true nature.
    - However, this is entirely untrue. Really, Strahd's ability to charm his lovers is nothing short of a magical version of the date-rape drug. Though he believes the romance to be reciprocated, he's completely wrong.
  + That's not to say that Strahd isn't entirely wrong either. For as many lovers/spawns he's had to charm, there are just as many who didn't need that push. And, perhaps, that's where the line truly blurs for Strahd. He can no longer tell the difference between those who have real romantic inclinations towards him and those who do not.
  + This harkens back to what I was saying about vampires representing the perfect man. Strahd is, in fact, a highly desirable individual on the surface. He's not bad looking. He's rich and a king. He's extremely well-mannered and battle hardened. And, to top it all off, Strahd knows it. He *knows* how attractive he is and so has no reason to question it when someone flirts with him. (Even if that person is a sheltered, sixteen-year-old who's basically the definition of statutory rape. #Gertruda)

### Abusive Ego

* + I believe that the root problem in all of this is Strahd's pride. Pride is Strahd's deadliest sin and it leads him to do terrible things.
    - Strahd is so proud that he believes there's no way someone could ever refuse him romantically. Tatyana's denial was a misunderstanding on her part. There's simply no way she didn't love him.
    - Strahd is so proud that he believes his word is law and is therefore above question. When Strahd says someone should die, they must deserve to die. There's no way his judgment could be in error.
    - Strahd is so proud that he believes it is an honor to be a part of his harem of consorts. So, what if he locks them up in the catacombs for all eternity? They wanted this didn't they?
  + If Strahd ever managed to learn a healthy amount of self-doubt and humility, he might realize the absolutely horrible things he's done. But, if that happened, his own sense of lawful justice would likely so overwhelm him with guilt he'd feel he himself deserved to die. So, in a way, his delusions are a form of self-preservation, protecting his own mind from the monster he's become.

## Presenting Strahd In-Game

Lastly, I'd like to discuss how to present Strahd as a NPC and a villain in your game.

### Mechanically

* + For stats and battle plans and instructions on how to mess with the PCs, there really is no better guide than [u/guildsbounty's](https://www.reddit.com/u/guildsbounty/) [Strahd post](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/8ts5bg/my_notes_on_running_strahd_like_an_unholy_terror/). I won't do it the injustice of trying to rewrite or summarize it for you guys, so you'll just have to go read the gloriousness for yourselves. ;)
  + And for an actual stat block, there's a CR 27 version of [Strahd on the DM's Guild](https://www.dmsguild.com/product/226077/The-Real-Devil-Strahd--A-CR27-Version-of-the-Devil) that is well worth the two dollars.

### General Actions in His Vampire Life

* + ***Pursuing Tatyana***
    - For all of his pride and talent, there's one thing that Strahd can never have: youth. And that hurts him immensely. For the man who has it all, one base denial can be maddening. And that is what Tatyana represents to Strahd. She is youth incarnate and, in Strahd's mind, obtaining her is like obtaining the holy grail.
    - Though Strahd claims these feelings as true love, it is nothing more than an extreme obsession. Strahd himself cannot tell the difference, honestly believing he and Tatyana are soul mates.
  + ***Collecting Consorts***
    - Strahd has a fascination with collecting beautiful and/or interesting people to be his consorts. Biologically, he uses them for their blood. After a while, he turns them into vampire spawn that entertain him mentally and physically. And finally, when they are no longer entertaining, he seals them away in the underground crypt so that no one else can have them.
    - Strahd has had a variety of different consorts. Though it’s made evident that he primarily prefers women, he’s also had a few male consorts as seen in both Escher and Doru.
    - Intellectual consorts are always preferred.
    - No matter what he himself might believe, Strahd does not actually care about his consorts. Strahd may refer to his consorts as lovers, may even think he feels some slight romance for them, but they are literally nothing but toys to him, to be used for a while and then placed on a shelf and replaced with a newer model.
  + ***Finding an Heir***
    - Strahd is *not* looking for a successor. At least not really. He's a centuries old vampire lord with nothing better to do, is all. He's read every book in his libraries at least twice, he's the master of several crafts, his kingdom basically runs itself for fear of him, and he's got all the romance and blood he could possibly need.
    - Strand's life has basically come to a stagnation. The years in between Tatyana's reincarnations are wrought with overwhelming boredom. At some point, Strahd gave himself a task to find an heir to keep his own mind busy.
    - But as yet another of Strad's delusions, Strahd doesn't see it that way. He honestly believes he's searching for a successor. But, in truth, the fact that no one ever meets his expectations is just another self-justification to keep his power.

### Show, Don't Tell

* + When role-playing Strahd with your players, do your best to consider him as the multilayered, confused, and overconfident individual I've hopefully defined in this post.
  + Like with any NPC, you shouldn't have to tell your players any of this information. Simply by having conversations with the big baddy, your players should be able to discern the discrepancies between Strahd's words and Strahd's actions all on their own.

## One Last Thing

* This should be considered common sense. But this is the internet. And the internet is a crazy place. So, I'll say it anyway.

### Sex in D&D

* + Yes, I just established that vampires are the fantasy versions of rapists. Yes, I just wrote a whole lot about how Strahd literally keeps a harem to satisfy his own desires. But holy goodness DO NOT have sex/rape actually in your game!
    - It's fine to imply that some awful things are going on behind the scenes. Imply that Strahd might have raped Ireena if he manages to capture her in-game. But don't actually describe stuff like that. Don't make your players walk into a rape scene.
    - It's also fine to have the bad guy’s flirt with your player characters. Strahd and other vampires can make comments with sexual undertones. In fact, these instances can be funny if played right. But under no circumstances should Strahd or anyone else try to rape a player! Ever!
  + ***That being said, know your players.***
    - If you're playing with a group of friends that you're very familiar with, you should know what they will and will not be comfortable with.
    - However, if you're only D&D buddies, err on the side of caution and remember to keep things light with the in-game romance.

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Phew! Alright. Hopefully the contents of this post have helped you guys understand Strahd as a character. I've seen more than one post drift across the subreddit with people unsatisfied with the portrayal of Strahd's character. Those only referencing the campaign book usually find him flat and boring, no more than another horrible villain without depth. Those referencing outside material like *I, Strahd* often sympathize with Strahd too much, unable to see him as menacing anymore. So maybe this helps? XD

Love you guys and until next time,

Mandy

# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Campaign Roadmap and Leveling Guide

This is a rather short post, but I wanted to get it out there for anyone who might find it useful. I've received a lot of PMs and questions about the campaign's timeline as well as leveling in correlation to my write ups. I mentioned rather early on that I increased the level cap in CoS to 1-15. So, in an effort to make things easier, I've got this for you guys. :)

Firstly, though. A disclaimer. Please, please remember that dnd is an ever-flowing game paced out by the actions of your players. Though we, the DMs, can plan to the nines, every campaign is going to be different. Take this post as a recommendation and not a commandment. Don't expect to stick to it, as players will *always* surprise you. To that extent, I've tried to keep this as simple as possible to accommodate the bulk of campaigns.

Oh! Also, this guide assumes you're using the milestone version of leveling, not exp.

## Part 1: Introductions and Townships

For the sake of comprehension, I've split the campaign into three narrative parts. Part 1 will introduce players to Barovia and immerse them into the world. They should meet the human element of the campaign and form connections throughout each township.

Part 1 will likely be longer than the other two parts of the campaign, taking up the bulk of your play time.

### Death House

* + Self-explanatory
    - **Level 1**
    - **Level 2** once players get to the basement
    - **Level 3** on completion

### Village of Barovia

* + Meeting Ismark and Ireena
  + Church

### Tser Pool

* + Vistani Fun Times
  + Madam Eva Card Reading
    - **Level 4, Possible**
    - (You should likely give out lvl 4 either before or after Old Bonegrinder. If you give the level to them beforehand, they'll be better off for a tough battle. If you give the level to them afterwards, it'll feel more like a reward. It's up to you.)

### Old Bonegrinder

* + Have mercy on their sweet souls
    - **Level 4, Possible** See above.

### Vallaki

* + Lawrdy goodness, Vallaki's a lot. I'm not even going to try to list it all out here. You get the gist.
    - **Level 5**
    - The party should get lvl 5 somewhere in the later part of Vallaki. After the Festival or the Feast is usually a good marker, but other plot places are understandable. Try to wait until they've done, endured, or witnessed something significant so that the new level feels like a real accomplishment.

### The Winery

* + Most likely destination after Vallaki.
  + Even if they go to Kresk first, they'll be turned away at the gate most likely. Unless they break in. Which of course means you'll have to rework this.

### Yester Hill

* + Retrieving the first gem and dealing with Wintersplinter.
  + This is a tough fight and might leave somebody dead. If so, the Martikovs can point the party towards the Abbey for resurrection.
    - **Level 6**
    - You survive Yester Hill, you get a level gosh darn it.

### Kresk

* + Likely an introduction to the Abbey. It's unlikely that the players will be able to do anything about the Abbott at this point though.
  + The rest of Kresk (taken from my expansion in this series including the Fidatov saga)
    - **Level 7**
    - Only give out lvl 7 if the players do a bunch in Kresk. If they totally clear the Abbey, for instance. Or if they do the whole quest line I home-brewed including the Fidatov mansion and maze. If they just visit Kresk briefly, do nothing, and then move on, no level.
    - If you're running [u/DragnaCarta's](https://www.reddit.com/u/DragnaCarta/) expansion to Kresk which includes the Werewolf Den, you could give level 7 upon completing that.

### Return to Vallaki

* + If players decide to bring wine to Vallaki first instead of Kresk, they might get to see some aftermath of their actions depending on what went down during their first visit.
  + This can be really cool to homebrew some events that directly relate to your campaign and party. Are vampires everywhere? Has Lady Watcher taken over and now the party has to deal with that? Let your players see their actions have consequences.

## Part 2: Things Get Real

At this point, the campaign starts to branch. The players are much more battle worn and are highly familiar with the world. Where they go next will depend on what hooks they latch onto. They also might go to different locations to check things off their to-do list for various NPCs. Do your best to guide your players and transition them from one location to another. But be prepared, for the order of locales is definitely going to vary from one campaign to the next.

### Richten's Tower

* + Fun story time with Richten and maybe a fight.

### Werewolf Den

* + Awooooooo
    - **Level 8-10**
    - Players should receive a level for clearing this dungeon. If they just have a little encounter, they don't earn that level. They have to actually deal with the Kiril problem for it to count.

### Argynvostholt

* + Dead knights and ghost dragons, oh my.
    - **Level 8-10**
    - Players only receive a level after they've returned the skull to the tower OR fought and defeated Vladimir. Basically, they have to do something significant to earn a level, per usual.

### Berez

* + Pray for your players. Pray.
    - **Level 8-10**
    - Players only get a level after dealing with Baba.

### Town Returns

* + Throughout their traveling to the hard areas, players might return to the townships of Barovia for rest periods. In that time, they can finish up loose ends, deal with the Abbott, see some Vallaki aftermath, and anything else.

## Part 3: Endgame

In part 3, the players are on a mission. And that mission is to kill Strahd. No more lolly-gagging. They are mighty warriors here to kick butt and take names.

In this final section of the game, players will find answers, restore the Fanes of Barovia, and confront Strahd in Ravenloft.

### Tsolenka Pass

* + *Send Me On My Way* - Rusted Root

### Amber Temple

* + Where the players get all their answers. They learn how to restore the Fanes, kill Strahd, and seal away Vampyr.
  + They also deal with any Dark Powers they've come in contact with throughout the campaign.
    - **Level 11**
    - You can give the level once they've had their fill of the library or upon actually leaving the temple. Whatever feels right to you.

### Reconsecrating the Fanes

* + Players travel beneath the Gulthias Tree and restore the Mountain Fane.
  + Players travel to Berez and restore the Swamp Fane.
  + Players travel to Old Bonegrinder and restore the Forest Fane.
    - **Level 12**

### Castle Ravenloft

* + End Dungeon
  + Epic Strahd Fight
  + Epic Vampyr Fight
    - **Level 13-14**
    - Players should likely get a level somewhere in the middle of Ravenloft. If they dungeon a whole bunch before battling Strahd for instance. Or, maybe between the Strahd fight and the Vampyr fight.
    - Players get a level after it's all over. Technically the campaign's over, but hey, another level feels nice.

### Extra Wiggle Room Level

* + An extra level somewhere in the campaign that would let the players end at 15 isn't a bad idea. Save that extra level for something more personal to your campaign. Do they have a full quest line in their return to Vallaki? Do they have a whole separate side quest based off a PC's backstory? Do they have to deal with some added, unexpected enemy? All of these story markers and accomplishments are ripe for earning a level. But that is up to your discretion as the DM.

## Some More General Reminders

Please remember that this is my personal ideal outline for CoS and it won't work for everyone. It's possible that your campaign won't even reach certain areas and therefore won't earn the attached level. Some games will finish at level 12. Others, 15. It depends on the players.

It's also possible that your party will enter areas at different times in the campaign than listed here. Maybe they wander off to Argynvostholt in between Vallaki and the Winery. Make sure to warn them (in game through NPCs and other factors) that they're approaching an area for which they are under leveled.

On the other hand, some areas might get much easier if the players are at a high level and might have to be adjusted accordingly. I personally haven't had this problem, but I'm also running the game with 3 players, so it's evened out considerably. If players get a bit too powerful for an area, be prepared to modify enemy stat blocks to meet them. Give the enemies some additional HP and an extra damage die for instance. Whatever works.

Otherwise, for those of you who find this kind of outline helpful, I genuinely hope this gives you some guidance.

<3

- Mandy