# Fleshing out Curse of Strahd: Death House

In my last post, I went over some background knowledge I believe all DMs should have before running Curse of Strahd, as well a series of possible end games that don’t fall flat. Now that that’s all established, we can delve right into the story. In this section, I’ll be going over introductions to Barovia and the opening adventure, Death House.

## Entering Barovia

The book already gives you some decent options for introducing characters to the world of Barovia. But I’ll give you my thoughts all the same.

### Know your Players’ Characters

* + Whether or not your characters know each other before the beginning of this campaign will definitely influence how you run session 1. After all, a group that’s well acquainted would-be better off jumping right into the mists than a band of strangers. I’ve seen more than once where the DM takes their players through a minor encounter in Faerun before whisking them off to CoS. Some bandits, perhaps? Or maybe throw in those werewolves that flee into the mists with the characters hot in pursuit. Something like this might provide the initiative characters need to trust one another.

### Straight into the Mists

* + That being said, I would not personally recommend that minor encounter at all. While I recognize that it can work and some DMs will prefer that kind of intro, I’m totally for taking your group and throwing them straight into the Barovian woods. Here’s why:
	+ One, it doesn’t matter whether or not the characters know/trust one another in the beginning. This is a horror story, so the more thrown off people are, the more scared they’ll be. You’ll automatically be more on edge if you suddenly find yourself lost in the woods with a bunch of strangers than some people you just fought together with or know intimately.
	+ Two, players often want to get straight to the story. Think about it. When you play a video game, long tutorials can become super annoying very quickly. Players don’t generally want to waste time with an event that isn’t story relevant.
* So, skip the introduction and send them straight into the campaign!

## How to Actually Start

* Firstly, I would recommend arranging some quick, feasible intro to tell your players as to how they’re all together and in the woods somewhere in the first place. In the world of D&D, this is far easier than you’d think.
	+ My characters, for instance, were traveling with a merchant caravan. Two were on the run and one was on the general hunt for knowledge and they all ended up in the same group by coincidence. I told them this as exposition. As the caravan settled in for the evening, groups of people split off around a few different campfires and the characters all grouped around one fire in particular. I used this opportunity for them to go around the circle and describe their characters’ appearance as well as have a little role-play where they awkwardly introduced themselves. I made sure to keep this short and let my players’ characters’ all have their time.
	+ The next morning, they wake up and the caravan is gone. Not only that, but the forest around them is not the same forest that was there the previous night. And a thick fog surrounds them. Ta da! My players were in Barovia.
* When your characters are officially in the Svalich Woods, there are a few things you should describe to emphasize the atmosphere.
	+ This is not the same forest they came from.
	+ It’s very quiet. The normal, lively sounds of the woods are noticeably absent. Not only that, but the thick fog seems to carry every sound they make much farther than usual, making them all feel loud and exposed.
	+ Even though it’s morning, the light is dimmer than usual. The mist gives the whole world around them a hazy feel, illuminated by the sterile, white light of a sun far beyond their reach.
* THIS IS A GREAT TIME TO TAKE AWAY THEIR STUFF
	+ Remember, the more desperate the situation, the more the horror shines through. When your characters wake in the morning, tell them that not only are their bedrolls gone, but the actual campfire itself is missing. They should be able to figure that this isn’t the work of some thieves with that information.
	+ Also, the armor that they doffed before bed is gone. They’re traveling backpacks are gone. Their lanterns are gone. Their weapons are gone. All your characters should have on them at this point are their clothes and a few choice items they wouldn’t take off. For instance, the super paranoid rogue character probably sleeps with a dagger in his pocket. Would one particular character sleep with their coin pouch on? Maybe. Or maybe they would have put it in their backpack which is now gone? Would everyone have taken off his or her shoes before bed? Little details like this will seriously stress your players out and make them feel that much more vulnerable.
	+ Don’t worry too much about this though. Death House has a good deal items and weapons to help make up for the loss. The point is to make them anxious enough to scavenge. This will also bring out their resourceful side.
* At this point, your characters can probably have a nice little role-play experience, panicking together. They’ll eventually come to the conclusion that they can’t stay where they are and start walking in some direction. The heavy mist prevents them from knowing North from South, but it really doesn’t matter which way they walk. Eventually they’ll come across an old dirt road that will lead them in the right direction, towards the Village of Barovia.
* What if your players decide to stay put?
	+ Unfortunately, this is a little railroad-y, but you’re going to have to herd them a bit. To be fair, most of the beginning of this campaign is railroaded. But it is the beginning. We’ve got to give our players a direction somehow. Because your characters are quite defenseless at the moment, don’t throw anything horrible at them, though.
	+ What I had in my back pocket in case this happened was a wall of sinister mist that gradually got closer and closer to the party. I would tell them that this mist was far too dense to see through and their characters felt an overwhelming primal fear of it; felt that being swallowed by the wall of mist would most certainly be the end of them.

## Death House

As written, Death House is a notorious party killer. There’s a freaking shambling mound in the basement, for goodness’ sake. However, the story and atmosphere of this module is so unique to the d&d world, I couldn’t imagine skipping it. It’s also a wonderful way to show your players that, “Hey, this is what you’re in for, guys.” However, besides being overwhelming murderous, Death House also has a few glaring plot holes. Here’s how I addressed and fixed these issues.

### Location of the Death House

* + This is the first problem I had with the module. Having Death House actually within the Village of Barovia didn’t make sense to me. I know the village is pretty devoid already, but people still live there. I can’t imagine that such a wicked house could be anywhere civilized. Also, what if your level 1 characters decide to skip the house entirely and go straight for the church with Doru in the basement? They’ll all die for sure.
	+ I moved the Death House out of the village, placing it on a little hamlet along the roadside, long before the massive gates pictured in the book. I put two other structures on either side of the house, so it wouldn’t look out of place. One was a dilapidated servant’s house and the other a ruined stable. My characters could go check out these two buildings if they really wanted to, but the buildings are definitely on the condemned side of structural code and there wouldn’t be anything to find really. Besides, they should be more concerned about Rose and Thorne than the side structures.

## The New Story

* This honestly isn’t too radically changed from the written material, but I feel it does fill in some gaps and streamlines some otherwise confusing details.
	+ In essence, the Durst family was an upper-class family in Barovia around the time Strahd came to town. However, Mr. Durst had a bit of a fling with the nanny that accidentally produced a bastard baby. Mrs. Durst became insanely jealous and vindictive, convinced that her growing age was the reason for her husband’s adultery. She began her own little cult to try and find the secret to immorality and youth, dragging her husband along with her. They would lure travelers off the street and newly hired servants to sacrifice them on the altar in the basement. However, nothing ever worked.
	+ Each time Mr. and Mrs. Durst would perform these sacrifices, they would lock their children in their room to protect them. This was an honest attempt to spare Rose and Thorne’s innocence.
	+ Only a few months after Walter was born, Mrs. Durst completely lost her patience. She murdered the nanny and took Walter to the basement and sacrificed him without Mr. Durst’s knowledge. Because of the atrocity of this act, she attracted the notice of a Dark Power that cursed the entire house. Mrs. Durst and some of the other cultists present at the time were finally granted their immortality... by being turned into ghouls and ghasts. Mr. Durst, upon seeing what his wife had done, was overcome with guilt and grief and hanged himself in the basement. With no adults left to remember them, Rose and Thorne starved to death in their room.
	+ However, this last sacrifice created more than just some undead in the basement. It also turned Walter into a horrible monster that the players will have to face in order to free the house of its curse.

### Big things that change in this version of Death House

### Baby Walter is a bastard, but not a stillborn

* + Walter is one of the reasons Rose and Thorne want characters to help them in the first place. They actually ask the players to check on their baby brother, who they left upstairs when they got scared by the screaming monster in the basement.
	+ Walter appears in the family portrait on the second floor of the house. If he were stillborn, why would this be here?
	+ Remember to change the letter from Strahd found in the secret room. Simply change the word from “stillborn” to “bastard” and you should be good to go.

### Mrs. Durst is the bad guy, not Mr. Durst

* + Even though Mr. Durst technically is part of the cult and helped with the sacrifices, all the horrors are actually the result of Mrs. Durst’s wickedness. Even if the characters recognize that Mr. Durst is still a bad person, they should still feel a level of pity and sympathy for him.
	+ This also takes away one Ghast in the basement, to help your party survive this house.

### Nix the cannibalism thing

* + Without having some out of character explanations, there’s no real way for your characters to learn and confirm this fact anyway. It’s an extra level of grotesque, sure, but it’s ultimately hard to figure out and confuses the plot. It’s also easy to blame the chewed bones in the basement on the ghouls, anyway. The story and cult are horrific enough, so you really don’t need the cannibalism.

## New Letters and Supplements

* Here are a couple letters and details I added for my party to find to help tell the story.
	+ ***Strahd’s Letter***
		- As previously stated, I changed the word “stillborn” to “bastard” in Strahd’s letter to the Dursts.
	+ ***An Unsent Letter from Mrs. Durst to a fellow Cult Member***
		- I put this letter in Mrs. Durst’s jewelry box in the master bedroom.

*My Dear Mrs. Petrovna,*

*Your advice on dealing with the unwanted fiend in my home is very good advice indeed. Tonight's ceremony will proceed as planned when the moon is at its highest peak - without, of course, the attendance of Mr. Durst. I must agree with you that, yes, with such an innocent sacrifice our proceedings may have better results. Although, "innocent" is not quite the term I would use.*

*My Thanks,*

*Mrs. Elisabeth Durst*

### Cultist Logbook

* + I put this item in one of the locked foot lockers in the basement in the cult barrack’s section.
	+ I didn’t write anything down to show my players for this one, but simply described it as a list of names, descriptions of people, and details of some sort of ceremony.
	+ In other words, this is a logbook of the cult’s victims kept by one of the head cultists. There’s a column for names of their victims. A second column with the victim’s physical description. And a third column telling gruesome details like, “Struggled profusely” and “No tranquilizers given this time.”

### Mr. Durst’s Suicide Note

* + Mr. Durst hanged himself in the master bedroom in the basement. The party will also meet the ghast version of Mrs. Durst in this room. After whatever confrontation takes place, the party will be able to find the suicide note on Mr. Durst’s corpse.
	+ Most of this note is borrowed from the game, Layers of Fear. I felt it fit almost too well.

*My Beloved Children,*

*I wish I could do what all fathers do and tell you that monsters aren’t real. But it wouldn’t be true.*

*Life can create things of exquisite beauty. But it can also twist them into hideous beings. Selfish. Violent. Grotesque. Monstrous. It hurts me to say that your mother has turned into one such monster, inside and out. And I’m afraid the disease that afflicted her mind has taken hold of me as well.*

*It sickens me to think what we’ve put you through. There is no excuse. I only ask of you, though I know I do not have the right to do so, to try and forgive us. I despise what your mother has become, but I love and pity her all the same.*

*Rose, I wish I could see you blossom into a strong, beautiful woman. Thorne, Walter, I wish I could be there for you. But I can’t. This is the only way.*

*Goodbye.*

## Far Fewer Fights and Monsters

* I took out the following battles in order to stop the TPK syndrome associated with this module. Your party is level 1-2 through this whole thing anyway, so they shouldn’t have so much hurt this early on. Also, if you’re sticking to a smaller party like I previously recommended, the fights will already be harder on them.
	+ *The Nursemaid Specter.* She’s still present as a character, but I didn’t have my players fight her.
	+ *The Animated Broom.* This just seemed frivolous. It also lightened the mood too much just when the characters are entering the eerie part of the house. I kept the animated armor instead.
	+ *The Grick.* Honestly, four level 2 characters should NOT be fighting a grick and multiple ghouls at the same time.
	+ *The Shadows.* Shadows can drain strength and easily kill a weak party member. After 4-6 ghouls, these have no business being here. Especially with Mrs. Durst the ghast and the big boss that’s coming up.
	+ *The Mimic.* Honestly, why is there a mimic??
* Taking out these fights made Death House more about the story and overall, more enjoyable for my players.

## Gertruda’s Dog

* This is something that I find a wonderful addition to Death House and comes directly from [another reddit post](https://www.reddit.com/r/DnDBehindTheScreen/comments/70o4b7/lessons_from_running_curse_of_strahd_death_house/). Thank you so much for this idea!
* In the conservatory/music room on the second floor, the players will come across an old dog hiding under the harpsichord. They’ll have to lure him out, but once he approaches, he’s very friendly. This is actually Gertruda’s childhood dog. You know, the missing teenager that the party will eventually find in Castle Ravenloft? The daughter of Mad Mary? That Gertruda.
* Since Gertruda is an airheaded youth who believes heartily in fairy tales, I named the dog, Lancelot. The characters can find the name on the dog’s collar.
* Having Lancelot join the party is not only a welcome bit of sweetness in this horror house, but also gives the party a non-player character to sacrifice in the basement. It’s a terrible thing to for them to deal with morally and that makes it all the better for this campaign.

## Rose and Thorne

* Firstly, DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT SHOW YOUR PLAYERS THE PICTURE OF THESE CHILDREN. Don’t get me wrong, the artwork throughout this campaign is beautiful. I love the stylized illustrations and the creepy imagery. But the blue tinted character portraits don’t exactly inspire trust. Your players are supposed to feel sorry for these kids and want to help them. Showing them the illustration is only going to make them distrustful.
	+ In fact, on a similar note, don’t show your players any of the creepy character portraits that are in this style. As you flip through the book, you should be able to tell the safe head shots from the not so safe blue tinted work. Keep those to yourself until long after the party has moved on. If you’re certain your party is never going to deal with that NPC again, share the art as much as you want.

### Projections or Ghosts?

* + The book tells you that this version of Rose and Thorne are just projections from the house. But no matter how much I think about it, there’s no real way for characters to figure this out. Also, if Rose and Thorne are actively trying to lure the characters into Death House, you’ll have to be rolling deception for them if your players want to insight check them. This could lead to trouble.
	+ Instead, I made this version of Rose and Thorne the actual ghosts of the children. They don’t know they’re dead yet because their bodies are still locked in their room in the attic. Everything they say here is therefore sincere. They also appear entirely corporeal outside the home, looking alive and well.
	+ Once the characters discover the children’s remains, Rose and Thorne will reappear with memories far more intact. They’ll also actually look like ghosts this time, spectral and see-through. At this point, they’ll recall that they were often locked away when their parents went to “deal with the monster” and that the last time, no one came back for them. They were “so very hungry, but no one came when we cried. And then the hunger went away and we grew very cold and went to sleep.”

### Asking the Players for Help

* + When the players first meet the siblings in front of the house, they tell the players that their parents are currently dealing with a monster in the basement. Rose and Thorne were supposed to stay upstairs and care for their baby brother, but Thorne got scared by the monster’s cries and ran outside. Now little Walter is all alone in the house. Have Rose ask the players to go make sure Walter is okay. You should imply that it looks like they both are too frightened to back into the house themselves, though. If your players have a heart at all, this should be more than enough to get them into the house.
	+ The final conversation with Rose and Thorne’s ghosts in the attic should have the children implore the players for help yet again. They remember much more this time around, but they’re still ignorant to the true nature of their parents. However, Rose thinks that their mother might have taken Walter to the basement last. She asks the players to save their baby brother and their parents and defeat the monster once and for all. If asked how to get into the basement, Rose points at the dollhouse revealing the secret entry.

## The Nursemaid

### Make her a character, not a monster!!!!

* + I can’t stress this enough. Your party is level 1 when they meet her. They don’t need to be fighting a specter, especially with everything else they have to face.
	+ I personally named her Margaret and had her actually converse with the party. I played her as tragic and shy, pressing her beautiful, ghostly form into the corner of her room in order to hide from the party. Margaret is a very confused ghost. She knows that something bad happened to her, but she doesn’t actually remember dying. In fact, she frequently jumps between knowing and not knowing she’s dead, between past and present.
	+ Margaret speaks fondly of Mr. Durst, saying that he’s a very kind man, but doesn’t mention their affair out of propriety. If the players ask her outright about Walter being her child or of her relationship with Mr. Durst, she tells them, “It’s not my place to speak of such things. I’m very sorry...” She also smiles beautifully if asked about Rose, Thorne, or Walter, claiming them all to be wonderful children. It should be obvious that she loves them very much.
	+ If the characters ask Margaret about Mrs. Durst, her smile fades. She doesn’t say anything outright bad about her mistress, but players should be able to sense from her mannerisms and answers that Margaret is actually afraid of Mrs. Durst.

### Approaching the crib

* + As written, Margaret should get violent if players try to go to the crib. I took this out. Instead, she simply asks them to be quiet since the baby is sleeping. When the players approach the bundle in the crib, it unfurls revealing nothing but the cloth and Margaret is gone.

### Her Body in the Attic

* + If the players find Margaret’s body, I didn’t have her ghost reappear. She should have given them all the clues they needed by now anyway.
	+ The corpse appears curled up in the trunk. If the players investigate, they’ll see the front of Margaret’s dress has multiple stab holes, indicating her murder.

## The Basement

By the time your players get into the basement, they should have a pretty good idea of what’s going on. They should know that there were some creepy sacrifices going on and that Mr. and Mrs. Durst were probably pretty twisted. They probably also suspect that baby Walter is as dead as his siblings. Nonetheless, they’re officially level 2 and they’re here for answers!

### A Few Things

* + Don’t forget to mention the distant chanting that players can hear throughout the basement level.
	+ Up until this point, the party has only fought the animated armor. Now, they might encounter the swarm of insects in Mrs. Durst’s coffin and they WILL encounter 4-6 ghouls depending on their party size.
	+ I made the Strahd statue just an eerie object they can observe. If they touch it in any way, it secretly sends a message to Strahd letting him know that the party is in Barovia. A chill goes down the party’s spine.

### The Underground Master Bedroom

* + This is where the party will find the hanging corpse of Mr. Durst. Don’t forget the suicide note in his pocket after the following confrontation is over.
	+ After a moment, Mrs. Durst in her ghast form will burst from one of the earthen walls. Unlike the other ghouls who outright attacked the party, Mrs. Durst can actually speak. She’s retained her memory but has also completely succumbed to her dark whims. Her lips and gums have gone black with rot and she smiles madly at the characters. When she introduces herself, tell the players that after closer inspection they can see the vague resemblance to the portrait of her in the main house.
	+ Mrs. Durst has gone completely mad. She’s arrogant and believes herself better than everyone, looking down on the players. She shuns her dead husband and calls him a lecherous traitor who deserved to die. She has even fewer kind words for Walter and the nursemaid. She even writes off her own children as bothersome nuisances. Don’t be afraid to be vulgar when voicing Mrs. Durst. Try to give her a hissing, gargling voice and use some language you wouldn’t use in front of your mother. It’ll make the party hate her all the more.
	+ Should the players ask what she did to Walter, she grins and tells them, “Why don’t you go down even further and find out for yourself.”
	+ Mrs. Durst eventually tells the players to get out. But most likely, your players will feel inclined to end her. Good. She’s meant to be utterly repulsive and killing her will make them all feel really great.

## The Altar Room and the Final Confrontation

Here’s where things get really gruesome, folks. First of all, I’ll admit that I rigged this final encounter to happen whether or not something is sacrificed in the “One Must Die” bit. Don’t tell your players it’s rigged of course. But believe me, having this final encounter will give a better sense of fulfillment. Not having it may leave them feeling like there are loose threads or something missing.

### Summoning Walter

* + If the players refuse to kill anybody during “One Must Die”, Lancelot the dog included, the cult spirits are angered and summon Walter.
	+ If the players do sacrifice something/someone, the cult spirits chant victoriously and summon Walter.
	+ Either way, your players should feel like they’ve just made a grave error.
	+ Also, go ahead and change the final summoning chant. Lorgoth the Destroyer is very wordy and eye-roll worthy. I changed the chant to, “Come, demon! We awaken thee!” Simple and to the point.

### What’s happened to Walter

* + Through the Dark Power that came to the final sacrifice and changed the cultists into ghouls, Walter has been turned into a horrible monster. He’s essentially a modified shambling mound that I call, The Flesh Mound.
	+ When summoned, the dirty water that fills the chamber seems to ripple as something moves beneath the surface. A gathering of bones, flesh, and body parts come together and rise out of the water as a giant, moving heap of gore.
	+ The Flesh Mound is far too powerful for a group of level 2 players to take down. In fact, they probably all sense that this thing is going to flat out kill them. Luckily, I put in a loophole. Throughout the battle, the Flesh Mound will try to grapple and swallow players, absorbing them in the gore. This can definitely do them damage, but at the same time give them the answer. At the center of the Flesh Mound is a small cavity containing the body of baby Walter, a crying corpse attached to the rest of the mound by sinuous ligaments. A swallowed player will have the chance to see this infant form. Severing the ligaments or killing the baby (this should feel more like putting Walter out of his misery), will cause the whole Flesh Mound to fall apart. When the mound dies, all that’s left is the corpse of the baby, which the players can put to rest in his crypt if they please.

### Trapping your Players in the Altar Room

* + Like I said, I really wanted this encounter to happen. It’s a final boss after all and it puts a nice cap on the story, telling the players what happened to Walter as well as getting rid of "the monster". Missing it is like not reading the final chapter in a book.
	+ I made the chanting spirits responsible for keeping players in the room so that they couldn’t miss this encounter. I gave the spirits the Shadow stat block and made it so that they only attack players who have left the altar room. I also gave them the ability to pass through solid objects like it was difficult terrain so that they could cut off fleeing characters by passing through walls.

### Flesh Mound Stat Block

* + Here are the stats and traits that I gave to the Flesh Mound. I used the shambling mound as a base and modified it from there.

And that’s that! Once Walter is defeated, the curse is lifted from the house. The players can safely move throughout the house, though the first two floors are no longer preserved, appearing as dusty and old as the third floor and the attic. They can put the rest of the Durst family to rest if they like, and the character that does so may deserve some inspiration. Otherwise, your party should be effectively horrified and ready to move on to the Village of Barovia. Well done! Stay tuned for the next installment.

-Mandy Mod