# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Castle Ravenloft I - Overview

Welcome to the final dungeon! Castle Ravenloft is not only huge (over 50 pages of coverage in the campaign book for goodness’ sake), but also quite complicated in its layout.

For my chapters on this great and glorious castle, I've split up my recommendations into a few key chapters. Firstly, I cover some changes to the various rooms and encounters found inside the castle. In the next chapter, I'll cover the Castle's NPCs. And in the finale, we'll go over the showdown with Strahd himself. Let's get started!

## Approaching the Castle

### Numerous Visits

* + Castle Ravenloft is one of the few dungeons that players are recommended to visit more than once in a single campaign. Most DMs have that classic "dinner with Strahd" chapter long before the final confrontation. So, your players might already get a preview of this location long before they are expected to fight here.
    - However, if that isn't the case, don't be alarmed. My own group didn't visit Ravenloft until the finale and everything went wonderfully.
    - Why didn't they visit? Well, firstly my players were all dreadfully afraid of the place. In character, I'd made Strahd a rather terrifying individual and they didn't want to mess with him. Out of character, they knew the castle was likely an endgame dungeon and they didn't want to die while they were under-leveled.
    - And yes, I could have forced them into a visit by using a letter or a stagecoach or something, but the timing never really felt right. Instead of messing with a good thing, I let my players do as they pleased, leaving Ravenloft for the end. If you're stressing about having that mid-game Ravenloft visit, don't. If the event falls into place naturally, great. If it doesn't, then don't force it. Your players should be seeing Strahd enough already outside of Ravenloft anyway. ;)

### Mid-Campaign Visit

* + There is one thing I think holds true for most games that visit the castle mid-campaign: There should be minimal exploration and/or fighting during that visit.
    - Theoretically, players visiting Ravenloft before the endgame are there at the request of Strahd. You know, for dinner. So, it's unlikely the players will be unchaperoned during this visit. They likely won't get the chance to explore the castle very much. And even if they manage to sneak off, Strahd will likely know where they are anyway. The moment they cause trouble or start going somewhere they shouldn't, he'll come for them.
    - This first visit really shouldn't be more than a scary conversation with the big bad. If the players get impudent, Strahd will just kick them out. If the players get violent, Strahd (and anyone else in the castle) will TPK them, make sure the players are stable, then dump them on the doorstep just beyond the drawbridge.
  + ***The Dragon Skull Heist***
  + If you're thinking, "Mandy, what about the dragon skull?" Well, I actually moved that thing to Berez for Baba Lysaga to use instead of the giant's skull. Honestly, I don't think the castle is really suited for an infiltration treasure hunt. That mini-quest, in my personal opinion, makes the castle itself seem weaker, as it tells the players that they can get away with duping Strahd. Strahd should feel omniscient and God-like and his castle should feel like a fortress, especially mid-game. And this mission is more akin to a heist setting than a spooky, Ravenloft-y one. But again, that's just my opinion.

### First Impressions

* + Whether players are approaching the castle in the middle or at the end of the campaign, make that first impression memorable. There are a couple really amazing illustrations out there of Ravenloft, and showing them to your players can help set the mood. Otherwise, make sure to describe the sheer cliff sides that hold the building aloft and the two, towering spires that reach up into the dark clouds overhead.

## The Flow of Your Ravenloft Sessions

Most of my notes for this location assume you and your players are here for the endgame dungeon, the final showdown with Strahd himself. Like I said, most likely the players won't have the opportunity to explore much in their initial visit, so now is when things go down.

### Time to Breathe

* + With that idea in mind, don't rush your players into the final fight. You might think that there's no other way. Your players are on a mission and Strahd is sure to meet them, cue the epic music. However... that doesn't have to be true. If you want to give your players time to really experience the castle, there's more than one way to do so. And, personally, I would highly recommend it. A lot of history and love has gone into Castle Ravenloft over various editions of dnd, so skipping a good castle experience is a little bit of a disservice.
  + ***Strahd's Nature***
    - Even after the Fanes are restored and everything in Barovia is going the players' way, Strahd *still* has a major superiority complex. Even if things look absolutely dire, he's not the kind of person who would freak out and overreact. Though there might be a mob outside and the PCs are running amok in the castle, Strahd should always maintain his calm, cool, and collected demeanor. Even after everything, he's still not worried.
    - So, it makes sense that Strahd wouldn't charge the players in the courtyard, determined on stopping them. Between the traps throughout his castle and the other baddies lurking about, he figures that it's unlikely they'll even find him.
    - Strahd's natural overconfidence is a great excuse for postponing the boss battle to give your players time to explore Ravenloft.
  + ***Otherwise Occupied***
    - It also isn't hard to make up an excuse to occupy Strahd while the players explore. For instance, in my campaign my players pulled the card that said Strahd would be in his mother's tomb.
    - I made up the excuse that it was the anniversary of Queen Ravenovia's passing and that Strahd would be spending the day in her tomb in mourning. When the players met Escher and other Strahd consorts, they were informed why the master would not be joining them and that they were invited to stay in the castle until Strahd saw fit to deal with them. It was the perfect excuse to allow my players to wander the castle without interference from the big man and also ensured that the card reading would remain true, even if my players took a while.
    - Really, this excuse can be easily changed to match most campaigns, no matter Strahd's predicted location. Is he supposed to be Sergei's tomb? Well maybe it's Sergei's death day. Is Strahd in the spires? Strahd always spends the day he became immortal in quiet contemplation of the rolling clouds above. Did the card say Strahd should be at the overlook? Now it's the anniversary of Tatyana's death and Strahd will contemplate the long drop-in day-long reverie.
    - But what if the players *don't* find Strahd in a day? Well, that's fine too. They've already spent an in-game day in Ravenloft. So having Strahd come to them at that point isn't unreasonable. The point is, you fulfilled the card reading and gave your party the chance to really explore.

### Endgame Plot

* + So, here's a possible basic plot layout for tackling the castle at the end of the campaign.
    - Players arrive at Ravenloft. They can either go in the front gates or sneak around and climber's kit down to the catacomb windows. The second option is highly unlikely. Then, they'll either enter the castle through the front doors or the back servant’s entrance.
    - Upon entering the castle, the players should wander a tiny bit. Not a whole lot though, as they'll be intercepted by a chaperone NPC. This will most likely be Rahadin, but could also be one of the brides. I had Ludmilla be the main guide in my own game.
    - The chaperone will inform the players that the master is busy, but they've been invited for a meal in the meantime. Or tea, or whatever. They go to the dining hall and have some awkward conversations with Gertruda, Escher, and the chaperone. If your players already thoroughly met these NPCs in a previous Ravenloft visit, the chaperone might instead skip the meal and offer to house the party in a guest room until Strahd is ready to deal with them.
    - If you go through with dinner, the players are led to guest rooms afterwards anyway. These might be the rooms in the spire where Escher is introduced in the book, or the quarters where Helga the maid is. Or even the grand suite itself. Whatever you think is best.
    - Once left alone, the players are bound to explore. If they've been left in the master suite, Gertruda is probably there and the players will feel obligated to help her. The same can be said for Helga, though her intentions are far less pure. And if the players are left in the spire with Escher, well that's a super fun bit of role-play.
    - At some point in talking to the NPCs, the players should learn about the Heart of Sorrow and its general location. That'll give the party one good, in-castle quest to pursue. Other quests and encounters will likely pop up along the way, such as getting Gertruda or maybe the kidnapped Ireena out of the castle safely.
    - Now, the players are wreaking havoc. They've destroyed the Heart of Sorrow, rescued or accidentally harmed an NPC, maybe killed a minor consort or two, etc. Inevitably, Rahadin or the brides or Escher (if the players make him an enemy) shows up to stop them. Mini fight and the death of an evil NPC or two.
    - And when the players feel ready, they'll head off in Strahd's direction. The final showdown will happen. If the players take a long time, perhaps grabbing a long rest or something, Strahd comes to them the moment they're awake.
    - And that's the basic summary of a dungeon delve in the castle.

### Other Plot Lines

* + The above base plot outline is just one suggested guide to the castle, but it is most certainly not the only way things can happen. Your campaign might be *completely* different and require an alternate framework. And that's okay. But, if you're struggling for a way to even start Castle Ravenloft, I hope that guide helps.
  + Here are some other options to consider, depending on what your campaign will support.
    - ***It's more of an infiltration mission.*** Players put quite a lot of time and effort into planning and information gathering, so they can swoop in and find Strahd right away. So maybe instead of Gertruda, the players spend more time with the Martikovs, scoping out the castle from outside the walls. This option relies heavily on your players' ability to plan.
    - ***The party is captured by Strahd.*** In this possible endgame, Strahd is done with the party and has scheduled them for execution at dawn. Maybe he drugged them or charmed them. The players start off in the flooded dungeons and have to break out and hunt down their captor. This is a good way to fast-track players into the castle if your party seems to be floundering.
    - ***The castle is under siege.*** Through their various alliances and actions, the party has somehow inspired the people of Barovia. Mobs from all across the land gather at the gates to the castle and wait the players to lead the charge. This endgame would require a lot of management and the opposite forces would have to include many more vampire spawn, but it could be quite epic if played right. I would recommend a *Risk*-like mini game before the party splits off to fight Strahd on their own. Or perhaps a neat skill challenge.
    - ***There's a wedding at Ravenloft.*** Somehow, Ireena got captured by Strahd and he's setting up a grand wedding. The players are invited. Or, if you replaced Ireena with a PC, maybe she's being invited to her own wedding. ;) There's actually a whole module on this possible ending on the DM's Guild.

Now you should have at least some general outline for your Castle Ravenloft sessions. At the very least, I hope this section gives you some direction on how to proceed. Raveloft is huge, so getting a basic plan in place is the first step towards making this chapter great.

## Castle Layout and Maps

What the frigidly frack kind of architect made this place??? Honestly? From a functional standpoint, no one could actually live here comfortably. I mean, just *look* at those maps. You've got to go up to go down and then further down to go back up and the number of secret doors is obscene for every day, castle use.

Lol, I'm just kidding. I do understand it's meant to be a dungeon, not a country villa. But real talk, *get yourself some good maps and label them*. The isometric maps provided in the module are quite pretty, but hardly functional for real gameplay. To have a proper battle map, you're going to need that top-down view.

* I personally used this set from the DM's Guild. They're gorgeous, accurate, and worth every penny.
  + [Castle Ravenloft - Realistic Maps](https://www.dmsguild.com/product/198960/Castle-Ravenloft--Realistic-Maps)
* But here are a couple other options you might like:
  + [Castle Ravenloft Player Maps](https://www.dmsguild.com/product/236761/Castle-Ravenloft-Player-Maps-Fantasy-Grounds--Source-Maps)
  + [Castle Ravenloft hires color jpg maps](https://www.dmsguild.com/product/185990/Castle-Ravenloft-hires-colour-jpg-maps)

Once you find a set of top-down maps you like, make sure to print yourself a smaller, DM cheat sheet and color code your staircases. You'll thank the heavens you did. Then make sure to label each and every room according to the numbering in the book. I won't lie, it's tedious work. But being able to quickly flip to a section in the heat of a session is worth it.

## Fall Damage

Get these rules down, because you're likely going to need them. Whether it's from the walls or the various empty shafts that run through Ravenloft, somebody might fall from a high place. It happens. And, believe it or not, a PC with enough hit points can actually survive a pretty terrible fall by the end of the campaign.

* **Fall Damage According the PHB**
  + "At the end of a fall, a creature takes 1d6 bludgeoning damage for every 10 feet it fell, to a maximum of 20d6. The creature lands prone, unless it avoids taking damage from the fall."
* **Falling Speed According to Xanathar's**
  + "When you fall from a great height you instantly descend up to 500 feet. If you're still falling on your next turn you descend up to 500 feet at the end of that turn. This process continues until the fall ends."
* **HOWEVER**
  + Some dude did the math and estimated that real fall speed is probably about 190 ft per turn (32 ft a second). However, I fully admit that I don't math. A long time ago, I was good at math. Now, without a calculator, it might as well be clicks and whistles. So maybe said dude is wrong and I'm misreading. ¯\\_(ツ)\_/¯
  + But at the end of the day, falling 500 ft per turn or 190 ft per turn isn't a big difference. You're still falling a holygoodnessrollthed6s long way.

## Various Battles and Encounters

Long story short, there are too many extraneous battles in Ravenloft. If you've read my other work, you'll know I'm notorious for nixing battles in locations and dungeons to better suit the story. And I did the same for Ravenloft.

* Frankly, the sheer number of encounters and possible fights that can happen in the castle is too much for any DM to keep track of, especially if you're also rolling random encounters. Every room does not need an encounter. Every single hallway does *not* need to be interesting. Sometimes an old guest room is just a guest room. Keep things simple and clean for both yourself and your players and your sessions will run much more smoothly.

### Suggestions, Not Rules

* + To that end, use the bold-faced enemy encounters in the book as suggestions, not hard fact. Maybe go through and choose your favorite encounter for each major area and only run that one.

### My Own Recommendations

* + ***Zombies in the Basement (K76)***
    - I kept the water zombies. I used the Strahd zombie stats, but just ignored the limbs traits. Having limbs go off everywhere is a lot to keep track of in a large group, so it was just easier that way.
    - It was also a good encounter because it was a large arena, taking place in the dark and half submerged. The battle began when a player stepped on a zombie and felt "something move by their feet." It gave them a brief and effective scare before the battle actually began.
    - Overall though, this encounter is super unbalanced for players at late stage in the campaign. Level 10+ characters can easily cut through them, but they'll certainly feel accomplished for having done so.
  + ***Invisible Stalker***
    - This is personally one of my favorite encounters. The stalker is hardcore. It can do great damage and is great against a party who's gotten comfortable in combat. Plus, if you have a rogue, they can't do squat when a target is invisible. If you're looking for a good, memorable battle before story relevant stuff, this is a good option.
  + ***Spider Hall***
    - This is another good, small encounter. However, it's incredibly difficult to instigate and/or find. I actually had Strahd lead the party into the spiders so he could retreat to heal. At this point, the spiders don't do much damage to a high-level party, but they can be a fun distraction.
  + ***Barovian Witches***
    - These are enemies I DO NOT recommend you place in the castle. I've said this before in other posts, but quite frankly, they just don't thematically fit with Castle Ravenloft. Get rid of them.
  + ***Black Pudding***
    - I'm personally a fan of giving players new enemies to face so the campaign keeps feeling fresh. The same old undead and vampires can get boring in my personal opinion. Things like the Invisible Stalker and Black Pudding are great new enemies to encounter.
    - If you choose to use this encounter, don't be afraid to move it to anywhere in the underground levels. It doesn't have to take place in just that barrel room. The players go walking by and suddenly some weird sludge starts to come from the wall. Dun dun DUN.
    - Also be warned about the Pudding's corrosive traits. Normal weapons and armor can get permanently reduced during this fight. However, by the end of the campaign, it's likely that most of your players will have magical weapons. And as far as AC goes... well, the fighter in my campaign ended with an AC 21. A point or two off wouldn't have been the end of the world. XD
  + ***Shadow Demon***
    - This guy also has the potential for an interesting, new fight. Instead of just in the basement or just with Rahadin, don't be afraid to move the demon to another area of the castle for an encounter should you decide to use him.

## Areas of the Castle

In this section, I'll go over the various changes I made to the different rooms in Ravenloft. And boy there are a lot of rooms. Buckle your seat-belts, kids, cause we're in for a ride. O.o

### Drawbridge

* + I got rid of the command word on the drawbridge, making it almost completely manually driven. I did so for the sake of simplicity.
  + The only one who can move it magically is Strahd, which I explain as an extension of one of his Lair Actions. Remember the one that says Strahd can open, unlock, close, or lock any door he sees? Well, he can do that to the drawbridge now too. No more silly command words.
  + When players approach the castle, give them a minute to assess the drawbridge. They won't know how to cross the chasm before them and will likely start to debate on their next course of action. And, just when things get heated or they call out to Strahd, *creeeeeekkkk*, the bridge lowers. ;) It's a great little spooky touch to let them know they're being watched.

### Entrance Area

* + Ignore the wyrmling and the gargoyle encounters. Unless you need something in this area to fit the flow of your story, they're unnecessary. I'm sure Strahd's consorts have used the front doors over the years, so they shouldn't be attacked just for trying to go outside.
  + If, for instance, the party is fighting Strahd and Strahd needs to retreat to heal, he might run through this area and summon the gargoyles to occupy the players while he regenerates. That is a proper use for these encounters. But don't summon these enemies just because the book tells you to.

### Dining Room

* + This room is fine as is, really. It's only going to change based on the NPCs you introduce or gather here.

### Chapel

* + I've said this before and I'll say it again, *don't give your party magic items they don't need*. Some items sound great. But if there's no one in your party that would find such a thing useful, then don't have it. Having a scene of the party finding and investigating such an item and/or weapon will only waste time.
  + If you have a player whom you know will appreciate the Icon of Ravenloft, then fine. But if you don't, then take it out. The same goes for the dead guy's mace of terror and his fancy armor. If you know no one in the party will like a mace, then why mention one?

### The Heart of Sorrow

* + I gave the Heart 100 HP instead of 50.
  + Reminder: The drop from about the Heart's level to the ground is 190 ft. That's 19d6 of fall damage if a player tips over. However, level 10+ characters might actually be able to survive such a fall. Crazy right?
  + Reminder: The heart takes no actions on its initiative count. Instead, the tower shakes and pitches as the heart lets out a magical beat. Any standing creature makes a DC 10 dex save. Failing means they fall. Players who lie prone automatically succeed.
  + Reminder: The halberds have 10 ft. reach.
  + You may want to get rid of the vampire spawn in this encounter. The threat of the fall is honestly super intense by itself.
  + You may optionally want the third missing winery gem be inside the Heart. If so, when the Heart breaks and rains blood on the tower, a single, palm-sized, red gemstone rolls out too. As the players pick it up, the red corruption leaks away and it turns green.

### Cheap Scares

* + There's more than one gimmicky scare in the as-written castle. And gosh do I hate them. They make the castle feel more like a carnival fun house than an endgame dungeon. And I can't see Strahd being the kind of guy who pulls juvenile pranks.
  + Remove these funhouse scares:
  + K19, the Grand Landing. There are suits of armor on a trigger to flail around. Bleh.
  + K27, the Upper Hallway. The flying Strahd mannequin. I can't even begin to describe how much I dislike this encounter.
  + Various skeleton fakeouts. More than once in the castle, there's random hanging skeletons or knights or whatever just lurking in corners for kicks. While there's nothing openly wrong with such decor, describing them to your players will inevitably take time. The players will think something is up because you, the dm, have taken the opportunity to describe the anomaly. So, the players will investigate. And then be disappointed. It's honestly just not worth it.
  + The rug of smothering in K47. So maybe this is actually an excellent fight and it's really stressful for the players. Maybe I'm totally missing something. But all I can imagine is the carpet from Aladdin having a go in a classic horror campaign and I just burst into giggles. Definitely a no in the intense endgame.
  + K79. There's a major illusion of Strahd that goes "bwa ha ha" and scares the players for yet another fake initiative. Boring and useless.

### Lief's Room

* + I'll put a bit more on Lief in the NPCs chapter. But for now, know that I changed the summoned enemies to the Invisible Stalker alone. If Lief is threatened, he pulls the bell and one round later, the stalker comes after the SINGLE PC that upset him. Even if other players are nearby, I made the stalker focus solely on the player who aggravated Leif.
  + Additionally, I made this event reproducible. So, if one Stalker dies, and the players return to harass Lief, the old man can summon another. However, there can't be more than one stalker in Ravenloft at a time. I don't really know how or why Ravenloft has an invisible stalker generator bell, I just thought it'd be a better encounter than just some more shadows and vampire spawn. ;P And I was right. My players won't soon forget this baddie.

### The Elevator Trap

* + A lot of time is spent going over the elevator in text. And honestly, I'm still confused after reading it all. Here's the quick version:
    - The elevator is an elevator. It's got a giant stone block as a counterweight. Easy.
    - The elevator is automatically in K61 in the basement. It's not obvious it's an elevator, only that the walls and floor are metal for some reason. If 3-4 players stand on the same spot at the same time, the gates slam shut and the elevator goes to the top, K47. The counterweight slams to the bottom. This ascent should only take a turn. So, it's super-fast.
    - It's possible this could split the party. Fine. Makes things interesting. ;)
  + I personally got rid of a lot of the grimy details involving this trap. They simply felt like too much to deal with, especially since I was still confused after the whole thing.
    - So, I got rid of the sleep spell effect because it seemed meaningless. If even a single player succeeds, they automatically wake the others. It just seems like more effort than it's worth.
    - And I made the trap door obvious because finding it is sort of a foregone conclusion. Why make players search for the one and only exit they can possibly find? The only thing a roll would do is help determine how long it takes to find an exit. But them getting out of the trap isn't really time sensitive. And lastly, if other NPCs actually use this elevator, why would the only exit not be obvious? A lot just doesn't make sense here.
    - And, lastly, I got rid of the damage. Because it says that players are "crushed against the ceiling of the shaft." But, if they're in a metal box, how does that work exactly? Does the momentum of their ascent slam them into the ceiling? Is that even plausible outside of a looney toons episode? Or is it implied that this isn't actually an elevator, but a gravity enhanced compression device? That seems very weird to just exist in a castle. So, on no level does damage make sense here.
  + Yes, I know, I basically took out all of the 'trap' part of the elevator trap. But frankly, it made things easier. There's plenty else going on in the castle that can destroy the party. Instead, this device is a simple elevator that has the chance to split the party. Done.

### K36, the rotted banquet.

* + Like I mentioned before, I moved the invisible stalker encounter to Lief's room. He summons it instead of the other enemies.

### K55-56, the witch's area.

* + Since I wouldn't recommend using the Barovian Witches in this location (see above), these rooms might instead be Strahd's workshop. He's had lots of time to experiment in the arcane after all.

### Pidlewick in the Rafters

* + I moved Pidlewick out of Ravenloft and to the Vallaki Vistani camp.
  + I also got rid of the Pidlewick I ghost encounter.
    - When my players met Pidlewick II, they both loved him and were terrified of him. His morbid humor was super interesting to them, but they also understood he was a devious little imp. And then they saw that he was the second of his name and commented that holy goodness if he's like this what was the first one like?
    - Even the suggestion of an evil first edition of the Pidlewick puppet sounded much more interesting than the real story. I felt like revealing the ghost would be a letdown after their own imaginations were doing so much better. XD

## Areas of the Dungeon

### The Trapped, Flooded Dungeons (K73-75)

* + The trapped hallway and corresponding cells were amazing in my campaign. My players spent a lot more time there than any of us were expecting. And I think the rogue fell into the same exact trap floor at least four times.
  + My first recommendation: have the trapped floors reset immediately, not after 24 hours. It's so much funnier that way.
  + ***Water***
    - The water in the hall and large torture room is 3 ft. deep.
    - The water in the cell blocks is 5 ft. deep.
    - The water throughout the flooded area is completely opaque, meaning players can't see more than an inch or two beneath the murky surface.
  + ***Door Locks***
    - Let's be real, a level 10+ rogue rolls thieves' tools check above 20 all the time. They get an obscene bonus by that point. Depending on the situation, don't be afraid to change the DC or the locking mechanism entirely to better suit your campaign.
    - If players end up in cells while an initiative is active, then the as written stuff is fine. 1 minute with a DC 20 thieves’ tools check OR 1 action with a DC 25 Strength check.
    - But if you particularly want players imprisoned for a while for whatever reason, maybe suggest the locking mechanism is instead a latch/deadbolt of some sort, negating the presence of a pickable lock entirely. That way, players will have to be cleverer to get out or they'll have to wait for other players to rescue them.
  + ***Emil***
    - I had a great time with this NPC in my endgame, mostly because my players didn't remember that Emil was Zuleika's supposedly dead hubby. So, they didn't remember that he was a werewolf. hehehe.
    - I've covered Emil as an NPC in my Werewolf Den post, but don't forget this guy if you care to use him.

### The Brazier Room (K78)

* + This is one fun friggin device. If players are looking for a quick way to get Ireena or Gertruda out of danger, the Ravenloft Goblet of Fire is a great suggestion to feed them.
  + A quick note: The Iron Golems hit *hard*. They are brutal enemies, but only summoned if the brazier is harmed. If, by chance, a bride or other Strahd minion wishes to stop the players from using the brazier, they themselves might attack the device to summon the golems. Cue the evil DM smirk. ;)
  + Other Mechanics
    - The hourglass has AC 12 and 20 HP. Immune to poison and psychic damage. Vulnerable to thunder damage.
    - The brazier has AC 17 and 25 HP. Immune to poison and psychic damage. Resist all other damage.
    - The fire is magic and not hot. If dispelled, it only disappears for an hour before regenerating.
    - The teleportation orb lasts 5 rounds before the flames turn white and the thing resets.
  + Teleportation Locations
    - I changed the locations to better fit the rhyme and my other changes to the campaign. Some of the as written clues are a bit too off base in my opinion, even if they are meant to be misleading. And other destinations simply made little sense, like the Abbey. If Strahd would never accept Vasilka as his bride, then why program his portal to her?
    - Here's the new destinations. Some are the same, others different.
    - ***Violet leads to the mountain spire***. Tsolenka Pass
    - ***Orange to the castle's peak***. Ravenloft spire K60
    - ***Red if lore is what you seek***. The great library in the Amber Temple.
    - ***Green to where the coffins hide***. The center of the catacombs in Ravenloft K84
    - ***Indigo to the master's bride***. Marina's Shrine/grave in Berez.
    - ***Blue to ancient magic's womb***. Yesterhill, standing before the Gulthias Tree.
    - ***Yellow to the master's tomb***. Strahd's tomb K86

### The Catacombs and Crypts

* + Long story short, I am NOT a fan of the as written treatment of the catacombs. I feel like the book spends far too long and uses too many pages to describe the intricate crypts of various NPCs that the players will likely never encounter, meet, or recognize. The whole section is just a blur of meaningless names and most parties will just walk past them after reading one or two.
  + So instead of long dead architects and painters, I simplified the whole area.
    - The crypts are now filled with Strahd's various consorts/brides.
    - Most are vampire spawn, commanded to stay in their crypt once Strahd grew bored of them (this is the eventual fate that Escher fears). Though the crypts are unlocked, the spawn can't leave because of Strahd's command. The whole catacombs are basically Strahd's trophy room, where he collects his beautiful and interesting consorts, even after he obtains newer models.
    - Some of the consorts are dead and skeletons. Maybe these are spawn that died or a consort that didn't make it long enough to become a vampire.
    - And some of the crypts are empty and unmarked, waiting for future interments. Namely, there would at least be five empty crypts. One for Ludmilla, Volenta, Anastrasya, Escher, and Helga respectively. Ireena would not have a crypt because Strahd expects her to stay with him forever.
  + All the interred vampire spawn has gone mostly insane from blood starvation. They're vampires, so they can't die, but they certainly know thirst. Remember Doru's own bloodless insanity? Well, this whole group is that to the extreme. If players open a door to a starved spawn, there probably won't be much talking involved.
  + The bats in this area are really cool. If you can logically swing it, have a moment when the giant flock of bats either enters or leaves the catacombs. It doesn't have to be right at dawn or dusk. Maybe the bats return late morning or leave in the early evening, when the overcast sky makes Barovia dark anyway. It's honestly just a really cool, thematic moment as the overwhelming swarm billows around the room.
    - On a grosser note, don't forget the bat guano. XD It should cover the floor down here and that it some flavor text to live for.
  + ***The Teleportation Traps***
    - Go ahead make yourself a quick battle map for the inside of crypt 14. You don't need anything fancy. Just a room with 15 coffins spaced out in neat rows. Choose a corner for the ladder up and out.
    - This was one of the encounters I was afraid would be too complicated to properly track. But actually, it was quite fun. Just remember to keep those scary details; the flash of light and suddenly you're laying on your back in a closed, stone coffin. The PC has to force off the lid and stumble around while the rest of the party deals with a single wight, not knowing that PC is in a lot of danger. It was interesting to say the least. So yeah, recommended. ;)

### Strahd's Tomb

* + Sergei and Strahd's crypts should be mirrors of each other. One is white marble, the other black marble.
  + On a larger note, *don't* put the 3 brides here. I've preached about the treatment of the vampire spawn since Doru in the Village of Barovia. Spawn are not mindless monsters like skeletons or ghouls. And while a blood starved vampire spawn might act like a beast, normal ones should be intelligent and thinking beings. The named and illustrated vampire brides in the book are too darn good to just toss aside. So don't make them rise out of the earth like, "Boo!" These gals are NPCs, not monsters. I'll put a bit more on them in part 2.
  + Also, why in the world is Strahd's tomb the only place with a soft dirt floor? It's like the dirt was placed there for the sole purpose of burying the brides and scaring the players. But the catacombs are built into a stone mountain and this is the crypt of the *king*. Dirt floor not required.

### The King and Queen's Tomb

* + ***The Forcefield Thing***
    - I kept this obstacle in my game and I can say with confidence that it's probably completely unneeded. The mechanic is very difficult to figure out as a player and there's no "aha!" moment for them to figure out. Plus, the likelihood of having a lawful good PC is rarer than you think. What if you have a party like mine, with no such PC?
    - Over all, I would recommend just removing the forcefield. The statues are cool and can stay. But otherwise, the barrier is just anticlimactic.

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Okay! I think that's it for the general areas of Ravenloft. Phew! I'm pretty sure I must've missed *something*, but hey that's what trying to summarize 50 pages does to you XD. I hope you guys find this helpful and I'll get to you with part II soon!

<3 Mandy

# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Castle Ravenloft II - NPCs

Ok guys, I'm here for part 2! This time I'll go over the NPCs in Castle Ravenloft.

## The Vampire Brides

For this section, I'm not talking about the three pictured brides in the book. I'm talking about all of Strahd's brides/consorts in general. And there have been *many*.

### Strahd and his Spawn

* + As a quick recap from one of my opening posts on Strahd, the lord of Barovia has a penchant for collecting consorts. He finds individuals that he thinks are interesting and beautiful. He then woos them, using the person as a blood supply.
  + After a time, he marries them and turns them into a spawn. The new bride/groom lives on in Castle Ravenloft to serve Strahd's whims (sometimes physically). But eventually, Strahd grows tired of his bride and finds them boring. He then seals them away in the underground crypt, never to be set free again. They are then nothing more than part of his collection at that point (though he himself doesn't see it that way).
  + Is this incredibly morbid? Yes. But again, reference my previous write-up for a deep-dive into Strahd's mindset and how he justifies his behavior to himself. His actions are deplorable, but he is far from a, "bwa-ha-ha," mustache-twirling villain.

### People, Not Monsters

* + I feel like it's important to note that vampire spawn are not intrinsically monsters, even though the stat blocks are there. They're technically people; humanoids who just so happen to have a rather horrible condition.
  + To that extent, I don't like playing spawn as personality-less killing machines. Sure, if a scene calls for a horde of spawn to run around causing havoc, then fine. But if the players ever meet one or two spawn at a time, I feel like they should have personalities and backgrounds. These backgrounds may never come to light and that's perfectly okay. But they should still exist. If player attempts dialogue to avoid a fight, having that personality ready is a godsend.
    - That being said, remember that vampire spawn in this specific campaign should have a few things in common.
    - For one, they have all been wooed by Strahd to some extent. That's how they ended up as spawn in the first place. Whether or not they were completely complacent in that wooing or not is up to you. Strahd may have used his charming abilities to brainwash them, for instance. And maybe they're quite mad about that. Others might be genuinely in love with Strahd and seek to make him happy.
    - For better or for worse, all the spawn in this campaign is very much trapped in their monster-hood. They quite literally have to obey Strahd, whether they want to or not.
    - All vampire spawn also has that insatiable need for blood. Even if they find it horrible to drink from a human being, the longer they avoid doing so, the less in control they are. Spawn who has gone too long without drinking will most certainly be more out of their minds. The coffin shop spawn would be pretty far gone, for instance.
  + Here are some quick vampire spawn personalities to use in a pinch if you ever find yourself in need. These actually come from my post on the Feast of St. Andral, but I think they're worth reposting here.
    - **Eren** - Was once a young farm girl. The sight of blood used to sicken her before she was turned, so she actively avoids drinking. However, her constant hunger has slowly whittled away at her sanity, making her unstable.
    - **Vadu** - Was once an uneducated peasant with abusive parents. After being turned, he viciously tortured and murdered his family. He now revels in his vampiric power and will happily do anything Strahd says. Strahd is his liberator and his king and he is loyal to a fault.
    - **Tereska** - An honestly cruel individual who lives for the kill. Being a spawn in the best thing that has ever happened to her and she will never submit. If and when Strahd puts her in the catacombs, she'll be pissed beyond reason, yet unable to disobey her creator.
    - **Ulrich** - Was a middle-class young man who happened to catch Strahd's eye several decades ago. He entertained Strahd's affections for fear that his family would be hurt if he didn't. Since being turned, he has come to hate himself and wishes to die, but Strahd has commanded him away from the suicide he so desperately craves.
    - **Nimira** - Was once a middle child in a very competitive family. She grew up feeling as though she was never good enough. Strahd was the first to tell her that she was special and worthy, and she desperately seeks Strahd's approval in all things as a result. She follows Strahd's orders religiously and will do anything to make him happy.
    - **Rivia** - Insane. She has no mind of her own and follows her most beastial instincts. She's a true agent of chaos and barely speaks beyond muttering to herself in cyclical madness. Strahd found her madness fascinating and her chaotic nature fun to watch, so he turned her.
    - **Liliana** - Delusional and vain. Like the Evil Queen in Snow White, she revels in her everlasting youth and beauty. She tries to murder any girl she thinks is prettier than she and seduce/bite any man she finds exceptionally handsome. Ugly people are below her regard.
  + Even though the vampire spawn are people with history, remember that they should still be evil for the most part. Though there are sympathetic spawn and those who never asked for their vampirism, the majority should be evil. They're Strahd's brides, after all. Even if they have tragic backgrounds, their time as monsters should have warped their personalities for the worse.

## The 3 Named Vampire Brides

Ludmilla, Anastrasya, and Volenta are the pictured brides that appear in Strahd's Tomb as written. However, I would highly recommend using them elsewhere in the campaign as agents of Strahd. They're sort of like his extremely loyal, fanatical counsel members. I fully stole the backgrounds for these three ladies from [this post](https://www.reddit.com/r/DnDBehindTheScreen/comments/79gx9q/the_brides_of_strahd/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3) by [u/JonathanWriting](https://www.reddit.com/user/JonathanWriting/). However, I'll do a very basic summary here for you guys.

### Ludmilla Villisevic

* + Ludmilla was born in Faerun just over 200 years ago. She sneaked into a Vistani caravan when she was a child and accidentally ended up in Barovia. She then took to the streets of Vallaki thereafter and learned to survive using her quick wits and inherent magical talents.
  + Rahadin discovered her as a young woman and presented her to Strahd as a potential bride. Under Strahd's attentions, Ludmilla was able to develop her magic even further and she came to admire her new husband. However, she learned that Strahd would eventually tire of her and seal her away in the catacombs. In an effort to avoid this fate, Ludmilla has dedicated herself to being as useful to Strahd as possible. She's been quite successful in this endeavor.
  + It's recommended that you adapt Ludmilla's stat block to include stronger magic, intelligence, wisdom, and charisma so that she stands out from other spawn.

### Anastrasya Karelova

* + Anastrasya was a former Vallakian noble of exceptional beauty. Vain and arrogant, she delighted in her elevated status. Ludmilla, having head of Anastrasya's beauty, recruited the woman to Strahd's court in an effort to keep Strahd entertained. Strahd was quite taken by Anastrasya for her looks and her elitism and turned her.
  + Anastrasya has taken to the vampiric arts stronger than any other bride. It's recommended that she be given abilities similar to Strahd's vampiric charm as well as an ability to summon swarms of bats.

### Volenta Popofsky

* + Volenta was a prostitute in the Village of Barovia that would murder and dismember her customers. When the authorities found out, she fled to Castle Ravenloft. Impressed by the sheer depths of her sadism, Strahd turned her.
  + Volenta is an actual psychopath with extremely manic behaviors. She's convinced of Strahd's love for her and that it will never end. Because of her wild ferocity, it's recommended that you buff her stat block with extra physical attacks, dex, strength, and HP.

## Escher

Escher, for some reason, has quite the following on the sever discord. I'll admit, I never really understood that. He's an alright NPC, but why all the fanfare? Well.... I've since had the chance to play him with my party. And, it was super fun. XD

### Role-Playing Escher

* + ***The Posh Socialite***
    - I made Escher one of the few sympathetic spawns in the castle. He drinks blood willingly, so he's maintained his mind, but he takes no joy in battle. He's a lover, not a fighter.
    - Escher is extremely well dressed, if a bit overly so. He loves fine clothes.
    - Escher is a very social individual. He loves talking to people and is very open and confident. He's actually been quite downtrodden over recent years, since Castle Ravenloft has few people worth talking to.
  + ***Escher's Insecurities***
    - In an initial meeting, Escher should come across as overly confident. He speaks his mind, is open about his sexuality, and overall knows he's a hot dish. However, longer conversations and/or additional encounters should reveal his inner workings.
    - Escher is, first and foremost, lonely. He doesn't get along with any of the castle's current residents and Strahd has most certainly grown tired of him, which Escher suspects but doesn't know for certain. He knows what Strahd will do to him in the end (seal him away in the crypts) and it absolutely terrifies him. An eternity without human interaction or everyday comforts would be hell to Escher.

### In-Game Interactions

* + Escher's deepest fears are being unwanted and unloved, both of which are coming true. And that terrifies him. This motivation can go one of two ways with your party. Either the players become a source of friendship to Escher, offering him better connections than his vampiric ones and Escher therefore switches sides. Or, Escher's desperation to remain unforgotten by Strahd will turn him into an enemy. Whichever happens will depend on your players' interactions with him.
    - Should Escher switch sides, remember that he's still a spawn and must obey Strahd's orders. He's clever enough to work around the wording of different commands, but he'll make it clear to the party that his actions cannot always be his own, and he's very sorry about that.
    - Should Escher switch sides, Strahd just might put up with it for a little bit. It's probably the most interesting thing Escher's done in a while in Strahd's opinion. However, the end result will absolutely be Strahd crushing Escher. Such a blatant traitor will have to pay in the end. Unless, of course, the players deal will Strahd fast enough to save him.
  + ***In-Game Flirting***
    - In general, always be careful when you put romance in a dnd game. And that's romance of any sort, not just here with Escher. Make sure you know your players and what they are and are not comfortable with so that you don't cross any lines. Romance can be a real picky subject in dnd, so just tread lightly.
    - However, if you *do* have a party that's comfortable with flirting and whatnot, Escher interactions are the absolute best. If there's a particularly attractive male in your group of PCs, Escher will totally flirt with them. Remember, Escher is lonely and seeking companionship, even if it's meaningless sex. Heaven knows Strahd's not much fun right now.
    - Having Escher come on to a guy in your group can be something right out of a sitcom, and it was hella fun for my players and I. Just remember that if the players continue to converse with Escher, his true personality should come through. Escher is far more than "the gay, horny guy" and players should be able to see that.

### Other Things About Escher

* + If Ireena or the Ireena PC is around, Escher hates her. As far as Escher is concerned, Ireena is his replacement and the reason Strahd has almost forgotten him. He doesn't want her around, but can't outright hurt her or send her away without angering Strahd. Escher would most willingly work with the party to protect Ireena from Strahd as a result.
    - The same can be said of other competition, like Gertruda. Though Escher would be far less worried about that particular bride.
  + I made Escher's rooms areas K49 and K50, where he's introduced in the book. Though this is technically his suite, it can also serve as a guest room. If Ireena is captured, she'll be placed here, much to Escher's chagrin.
  + I changed the contents of the bookshelves in K49, filling them with cheap romance novels of the Barovian variety. I thought this would be a fun little detail for my players to discover. There would be a whole series written by a Fiona Whicker (an alias of course ;)) as inspired by [this post](https://www.reddit.com/r/CurseofStrahd/comments/a2mafu/lets_make_some_books_for_barovia/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3) listing out some titles.

### Escher's Optional Background

* + ***Wereraven NPC***
    - I totally stole background for Escher from "Dice, Camera, Action!" on YouTube. I've mentioned the show in my series before, but in case you're unfamiliar, DCA is a dnd game similar to Critical Role, but run by Chris Perkins, the primary writer and creator of CoS. The first season takes them through CoS and I learned so much from watching the series when I first started running this campaign.
    - Anyway, DCA added a reoccurring wereraven NPC to the game named Falcon. In my own game, I named him Hawke. (Irony is fun ;P). This NPC didn't do anything too crazy. He was the raven outside Old Bonegrinder who tried to warn away the PCs. Later, he might show up in Vallaki as a liaison of the Inn. And later still, he might have been recently captured by Baba Lysaga in Berez and shoved into one of those cages.
    - The point is, wereraven NPC is a character that pops in and out of the campaign, helping players and being an overall good guy.
  + ***Escher's Boyfriend and True Love***
    - But the truth is, Hawke and Escher were lovers in their youth. As a member of the Keepers of the Feathers, Hawke always had to hide his lycanthropy, which caused a lot of discontent on Escher's part. The two ended up fighting and breaking up over the secrets.
    - Escher, heartbroken, ended up with Strahd and was turned into a spawn about 10 years ago. But Escher and Hawke still care for each other deeply, though they haven't seen each other in many years. Escher would give up Strahd in a heartbeat to be with his lost love again, especially if the lycanthropy is revealed.
    - This backstory goes hand in hand with Escher's personality. All Escher wants is to love and be loved in return. Though he knows the world isn't perfect, all his cynicism hides a hopeless optimist who dreams of happily ever after.

## Gertruda

* Remember dear old Mad Mary from the Village of Barovia? Do your players? In all likelihood, your players will have written off Gertruda as a dead girl. She's just a name in their notes they haven't looked at in quite literally months. So, if a player does remember poor Mary's request and makes the connection that this is her missing daughter, give that player inspiration! Cause gosh dang!
* Finding Gertruda will complete a giant circle for one of the campaign's first side quests. So let's talk about her. :)

### Personality and RP

* + Gertruda is both very fun and very sad to role-play. I didn't just make her sheltered. I made her borderline delusional because she was so sheltered. Her ignorance and vapid personality can come off quite funny to players at first. But the more they talk to her, the more they should realize just how much her view of the world endangers her.
  + ***Naive to a Fault***
    - Gertruda is very black and white. To her, all people are either good or evil. But no person is automatically evil when she sees them. When she first meets the PCs, she'll automatically assume they're guests of Strahd and future friends.
    - Conversely, Gertruda will make snap judgments based on appearance. A mongrelfolk, for instance, would likely cause her to scream in terror. No matter how kind or civilized the creature, orcs, goblins, and the like are automatically monsters and should be kept away.
    - If Gertruda had a PC character sheet, she would just cross off the Insight skill all together. She will take every single person at their word and contradicting information causes her to borderline break down.
  + ***Stupidly Loyal***
    - Gertruda trusts Strahd. Like a lot. To her, he is a prince and princes are never evil. Also, Strahd is her fiancée, and that elevates him terribly in her eyes. Gertruda is basically a child who believes all her dreams are coming true. She lives in a castle with a handsome prince who will soon be her husband and they will live happily ever after.
    - The PCs can convince her, through a lot of confusion of course, that Strahd is actually evil. But remember, if Strahd finds her again, that she is ridiculously easy to brainwash. "Oh, my dear, you mustn't listen to their lies. You are my beloved bride and I swore I would keep you safe and happy. Have I broken a promise to you yet?" And then Gertruda swoons and falls into Strahd's arms. XP
  + ***Sheltered World View***
    - Gertruda has spent her entire life sheltered by Mad Mary. Now, you could play that as a Mother Gothel/Rapunzel relationship, where Mary convinced Gertruda that all the world was evil, instilling her daughter with fear. But that almost seemed too obvious to me.
    - Instead, I made Mary a hopelessly indulgent mother who discouraged curiosity to protect Gertruda from herself. For instance, Gertruda doesn't believe in vampires. Even if they did exist, there's no way her beloved, handsome, brave prince could ever be such a creature. There are no monsters that live under beds and the monsters that do exist in the world will always be vanquished by brave do-gooders. Evil never wins in Gertruda's mind. She just doesn't know what evil is.
    - If Gertruda sees her beloved Strahd act monstrously, baring his fangs or otherwise looking evil, her sheltered understanding of the world will shatter. It's up the PCs to protect her at that point, but to be honest, her chances of survival are quite low.

## Lief Lipseige

Lief Lipseige is the old accountant found in K30. While he plays a small part in the overall plot and chapter, he can be a fun little mini encounter for the PCs. Per usual, I expanded and changed a few things having to do with Lief and his background.

### Background

* + ***Mr. Tax-Man***
    - Lief is a prodigy when it comes to math and numbers. He's one of those people that can immediately multiply large numbers in their heads without a modicum of effort. Because of this inherent talent, Strahd employed him when Lief was very young to help keep the monetary ledgers for Barovia.
    - Lief also has a rather impeccable memory for names. He's able to recall the names, lands, and titles of the various homesteads of Barovia and their owners, down the smallest house in Vallaki. In fact, the numerous ledgers in his office are all the records of Barovia and its residents, the vast majority of which Lief wrote himself.
  + ***A Little Stockholm***
    - When Lief was first brought to Castle Ravenloft, he was quite adverse to giving up his life down in the Village. I like to imagine that he was a young man, perhaps an early teenager, when he was first "employed."
    - However, after numerous failed escape attempts, Lief lost hope of life outside of Strahd's service. And however terrible it was to be forced into servitude, Strahd was always a gracious host to Lief, making sure he was well fed and comfortable.
    - As the years turned into decades, Lief became dependent on Strahd with a medium case of Stockholm Syndrome. While he's never been in love with Strahd, he respects the Lord of Ravenloft and will defend his honor and name against the party.

### Strahd, The Ever-Gracious Host

* + ***Strahd's Justifications***
    - I've mentioned in previous posts about Strahd's tendency to justify his own actions so that he never sees himself as the bad guy. I imagine he did the same when it came to Lief. Yes, Strahd may have had to force Lief to take the position initially, but surely Lief is leading a better life now. And isn't that the responsibility of Strahd, as Lord of Barovia? To make sure that talented individuals of his realm live up to their great potential? Lief's eventual acquiescence to his role as bookkeeper only reinforced this idea to Strahd.
  + ***A Vampire Spawn***
    - Because Strahd respected Lief as an employee and wanted to make sure he was comfortable, I imagine there were times when Strahd offered Lief the immortality of a vampire spawn. But Lief, each and every time, adamantly refused. Even though he had come to depend on his servitude as a cornerstone of his identity, deep down Lief understood that death was his one and only true release. And growing old in the service of his master was surely the best thing for his life at that point.
    - However, as Lief grew older and older, Strahd was faced with the idea of loosing the best accountant he had ever seen. The coffers were always full and the documents accurate and well kept. And so Strahd had a dilemma: lose Lief and his prosperous keeping, or make sure his kingdom was always financially secure. And Strahd chose his kingdom.
    - Strahd turned Lief into a vampire spawn (and you can give him the accompanying stat block), and then modified the old man's memory so he wouldn't see the injustice. Strahd makes sure that Lief is delivered blood each day to sustain him, but uses prestidigitation and other magics to change it to the flavor of wine. Otherwise, Lief's great work ethic makes him not really realize that he no longer needs to eat, sleep, or use the restroom. After all, his office has no windows to show the time of day. And if Lief ever does start to realize something is off about his life, a little Suggestion or Modify Memory can easily fix that.

### Summary of Personality

* + Overall, I played Lief as a normal, if overly formal and technical, banker character. However, certain triggers bring out his nervous psychosis. Offering to remove his chains, for instance, turns him into a stammering puddle of objections. Remember that he's become mentally dependent on his job and his servitude and a detachment from either may bring the man to a panic attack.
  + He may have other lapses in social decorum that you can reflect in his speech patterns. After all, enough mind magic can cause mental lapses. Maybe he starts saying a sentence, stops half way with a very awkward pause and then suddenly switches subjects, for instance. Or maybe he repeats information he's already said. Just remember that while his social decorum is a bit broken, his mathematics and record keeping is wholly intact.

### Lief's Interactions with the Party

* + ***The Perceived Prisoner***
    - When players first encounter Lief, they'll undoubtedly first see him as some curious bookkeeper or librarian. Make sure that Lief is overall formal, but nice enough to not immediately suspect of evil. As far as Lief's concerned, the players are there for some sort of unscheduled business meeting. While it's unorthodox for individuals besides "the Master" to arrive unannounced, he still welcomes the party.
    - During this welcoming, make sure you have Lief stand up from his desk and shake the players' hands. This little bit of movement gives you the opportunity to describe a metal tinkling sound and direct their attention to the chain around Lief's ankle, attaching him to the desk. This small bit of description will immediately change the flow of the players' interactions with Lief. He's no longer some random NPC, but a victim in need of rescuing. And who better to do the rescuing than them, the great heroes? ;)
    - What the players don't know is that Lief is now perfectly happy being a slave. In fact, the chain around his ankle isn't even very strong or magically enforced. But if/when the players try to convince Lief of liberation, Lief frantically objects. If pressured, he may break entirely and pull that handy rope.
    - While yes, Lief's predicament is inherently unjust and the PCs will feel the need to save him, he's meant to represent a character that is beyond saving. No matter what they do, Lief is a tragic NPC they can't truly help.
  + ***Owing Taxes***
    - This is where interactions with Lief can be pretty funny. So welcome to the bright side. XD
    - There are a few names that Lief will recognize instantly (not faces, names). For instance, if you went with the whole "Izek is a PC's brother" thing, Lief will know the Strazni name and comment on it. "Ah, Strazni, you say? The Vallaki Strazni? Always timely taxes, I must say."
    - Or, to the PC holding the deed to Old Bonegrinder: "Ah yes, [PC name]! I've heard you recently came into possession of a new property? A, ah, windmill I believe? If you please, I'd like to see the deed and have you sign a form recognizing your claim on the land? Remember that taxes are due in four months!"
    - How does Lief know the players have a new deed or a long-lost family member? Who cares? Maybe Strahd's many spies and magical abilities distribute information to Lief's office. The point is, this is usually a funny interaction with the party.

### A Fight

* + As a quick reference to my Ravenloft Chapter I, I changed the fight that happens if the rope is pulled to that with an invisible stalker. The fight is quite fun and I would highly recommend it.

### Treasure

* + Instead of the lost key, I had Lief have a separate key for each chest on a ring in his desk drawer. These chests are sorted by currency for tax purposes. So while it might be easier for us to say a gp amount instead the mound of cp, in makes perfect sense from a story standpoint.
  + I didn't have Lief know the location of any of Strahd's treasures. However, he does have detailed records of the existence and worth of those treasures. It probably won't come up in game, but you can bet your butt that there's a ledger there with a list of all the great jewels in Ravenloft and their exact appraisals.

## Cyrus Belview

I actually didn't change much with Cyrus' personality. He's an insane mongrelfolk that laughs at inopportune times, tells inappropriate jokes, and otherwise makes the PCs feel uncomfortable. He's sort of like that creepy guy at a bar that just makes you feel icky for being around him.

### Encountering Cyrus

* + Cyrus generally patrols the underground levels of Ravenloft. If your party is wandering around and you're itching for an encounter, feel free to make Cyrus walk around the corner and find them.
  + If Cyrus finds the PCs wandering around unsanctioned, he'll offer to take them to an alternate location. First, he'll ask if they're guests of the master. If they say yes, he'll offer to escort the party to Escher's tower. If they say no, he'll tell them they shouldn't be in the underground and will offer to escort them to the front door.
  + However, Cyrus has no intention of helping the party. He's insanely paranoid and knows the best place for strange guests is in the dungeon, for someone else to deal with. He has no intention of incurring the master's wrath by believing strangers.

### It's a Trap!

* + Cyrus will attempt to trap the party in the water-logged dungeon using the various traps.
    - He might lead the players to K81, the long hallway with the trap that slides the players down to that one cell. If he goes this route, he'll try to send the strongest PCs out front, so that they step on the trap first and fall. If they activate the trap, Cyrus will attempt to shove the weaker back line PCs onto the trap after. He might do this by saying that, "Nononono, the webs here are itchy and I don't like, do not LiKE them, nonono. You! You are big. You go first! Beat them back so itty-bitty Cyrus doesn't itchhhhh."
    - Cyrus might otherwise lead the party to K73, with the water portal traps. He'll try to maneuver the party using the same crazy talk.
  + If the entire party isn't dumped into a cell, the remaining PCs might get angry and try to attack Cyrus. If you have to roll initiative, fine. But tactically, Cyrus *does not fight*. He runs. He does everything he can to get the players to chase him to the other trapped location. So, if he starts in the hallway, he'll try to run around to K73 and get his pursuers to fall into the traps, and vice versa. You might want to modify his stats to have 35ft of movement or something to keep him ahead of the party.
  + Also, it's possible the party refuses to follow Cyrus in the first place. If that's the case, he'll try to goad the party into chasing him anyway, so that he can hopefully trap them. "Intruders! Wake the house! Wake upupupup! Gotta get the big boom! Gonna make you all go *splaatttt*!" These are idle threats, but if the party goes, "Oh no, we have to stop him!" then you're doing something right. ;)

### The Hag's Eye

* + On a final note, I wouldn't include the hag's eye. Ideally, the coven was dealt with ages ago and are no longer a story point. The eye pendant seemed redundant to me.

## Rahadin

Rahadin is one of the few characters I didn't alter very much in my campaign, but not because I found him perfect as written, but because I simply didn't find him very interesting.

### Mr. Evil Pants

* + There's no question that Rahadin is evil. He didn't like his own race, so he aided King Barov in a war against them that nearly made them extinct. He then served as a powerful General in King Barov's armies, slaying countless people in battle with enjoyment. And then he killed all the women of the remaining dusk elves to ensure their extinction.
  + But why? The only reason we're given for Rahadin's terrible deeds is pure sadism and a strange, one-sided loyalty to the Zarovich line. And maybe that works with more minor characters, like Volenta Popofsky, but Rahadin is clearly supposed to be a more prominent character in the game. But as an archetype, he just seems like a shallower version of Strahd. He doesn't have any reasons for his behavior or a goal that he's aiming for. He simply exists to be a murder machine and twirl his mustache behind Strahd.
  + So Rahadin is evil. The PCs get to kill him. Yay. I find this incredibly boring.

### A Personality Overhaul

* + In my own run of CoS, I barely used Rahadin. He showed up a couple times to be evil and monotone and then the PCs finally killed him and things moved on. He was one of my least favorite villains in the campaign and it showed.
  + But of course, that's not okay. If we can make characters like Fiona Wachter more interesting, surely, we can do something for Strahd's bad wannabe. What I've done is try to give some motivation to his actions.

### Altered Backstory

* + ***Paved With Good Intentions***
    - The first of Rahadin's crimes is his betrayal of the Dusk Elves. According the book, he aided King Barov in obliterating his own race during the King's conquest wars.
    - Instead, let's say that the wars had already been going on for a while and that the Dusk Elves were clearly losing. Rahadin was part of their High Court and a general for the elvish armies. He knew that their defeat was imminent and pleaded with the Dusk Elf royalty to surrender. But the current Dusk Elf ruler refused to listen, preferring that the war go on to the bitter end.
    - Rahadin was a pretty good general and he knew the high casualty cost that would incur if the war continued. So, he went to King Barov and negotiated a truce with the human ruler. Rahadin lead Barov's armies into Dusk Elf territory and the elvish royalty was executed. The Dusk Elves hated Rahadin for his betrayal, but as far as Rahadin was concerned, at least they were alive to hate him.
    - With nowhere else to go, Rahadin joined King Barov's court as a military advisor and did his best to steer the human armies away from any more bloodshed to his people.
  + ***Patrina Velikovna's Influence***
    - Eventually, King Barov died and Strahd took over. Rahadin continued to serve him.
    - When the Dusk Elf enchantress, Patrina Velikovna, came to court, she intended to seduce Strahd into an alliance. She hoped to marry and then outlive Strahd (either by murder or simple old age) so that she could use Strahd's entitlements to see the Dusk Elves restored to their former glory.
    - As Chamberlain, Rahadin was able to uncover Patrina's plan and did his best to advance her efforts in service of their people. The two became secret confidants. But instead of Strahd being charmed by the lovely Patrina, he saw right through her seduction. Luckily, he knew nothing of Rahadin's own betrayal and told his Chamberlain of his rather horrible plans for Patrina.
    - Rahadin panicked. He quickly recruited Tatyana to court in an effort to distract his master from Patrina. And fortunately, it worked. Strahd's failed pursuit of Tatyana gave Rahadin enough time to sneak Patrina out of the castle and arrange the exodus of their people out of Barovia, using the Vistani as transport. But before they could escape, Strahd became a vampire and the mists descended on Barovia.
  + ***The Annihilation of the Dusk Elves***
    - Strahd, a newly made vampire who just saw his beloved torn from his grasp, was mad with fury and eager for vengeance. He intended to punish Patrina for her attempted manipulation, but found her gone. What was left was Rahadin's betrayal.
    - Through a bit of interrogation, Strahd finally understood the depths of Rahadin's loyalty to his people. So Strahd offered Rahadin a choice: Either all the Dusk Elves would be executed for their treason, or Rahadin could execute half of them (the women, in honor of Patrina's own betrayal) himself. It was a horrible, impossible choice, but in the end Rahadin did what he could to give his people a chance.
    - Rahadin went to the Dusk Elf encampment and executed the female populace. The Dusk Elves already considered him an evil traitor, so he could play the role again, he figured. He could endure their resentment. But worst of all was Patrina. Right before her death, Patrina cursed Rahadin for his supposed deception, breaking their friendship. She used a surge of powerful sorcery to ensure that the angry voices of the dead would follow him ever more.

### Rahadin Now

* + Rahadin is an older elf that loves his people, but has spent the majority of his lifetime with their disdain on his shoulders. He's made decisions and done terrible things because he consistently chose the greater good over individuals.
  + Though this revision makes Rahadin much more sympathetic, it's important to note that he is still definitely not a pure good guy.
    - Yes, he betrayed the Dusk Elves during the war to save lives. But he still betrayed them. He swore fealty to the elvish rulers and then broke his word. An honorable PC might object to this. Is it worth dying for honor? Just because Rahadin decided it wasn't does not mean it was unambiguously the right thing to do.
    - Yes, Rahadin killed all the Dusk Elf females so that Strahd wouldn't kill the whole race. But he still walked into their camp, and executed them. He wasn't under an enchantment and he wasn't crazy. He made a choice and murdered dozens of women and young girls in cold blood. You could just as easily say that standing by their side and dying with them would have been the right, loyal thing to do.
  + Rahadin bares a great weight on his shoulders. But while he feels terribly about the things he's done; he does not regret his actions. He cannot afford to regret them, for risk of a complete mental break. And the constant screaming of the dead does not let him trance well.
  + For the duration of the campaign, Rahadin obeys Strahd. He's been mentally beaten into submission and fears reprisal. However, it is possible to convince him to help the party if they offer to help the Dusk Elves in some way, in particular with the ability to resurrect Patrina. On the other hand, if the players make no overt comments about the Dusk Elves, Rahadin will defend and fight for Strahd as he has done for centuries.

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That's a wrap for the main NPCs of Castle Ravenloft! I hope you guys find this useful and otherwise have a great time in your campaigns! Until next time!

- Mandy

# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Castle Ravenloft III - Fighting Strahd

Alright everyone. This is it. This is the fight that the entire campaign has led up to from the moment you and your players read the title. Sure, there might be a bit of clean-up or epilogue once Strahd has been vanquished, but that's nothing compared to this fight. Let's. Do. THIS.

## Prepping your Players

Before really getting into this post, I want to tell you guys what I told my players: This fight will be *difficult*. This isn't another standard enemy or minor boss. This is Strahd von bloody Zarovich.

Before the ending sessions with the Strahd fight, I sat down with my players and had a talk with them. I told them that not only would this fight be tough, there was a real chance that they would fail and die at the end of this campaign. It's one thing to have a PC die and then bring in another in the middle of the campaign. It's another to do so in the final fight. Strahd is a powerful villain and there's a reason he's been in power for so long...

BUT. I also made sure to tell them that I was rooting for them. Even though I have to play as Strahd, there's a line between Strahd wanting to kill them and me wanting to kill them. Though we'd already had this understanding previously in the campaign, I wanted to make sure they knew I really, really wanted them to win. But I also couldn't go easy on them, especially in this battle.

Maybe your table doesn't need a chat like that, or maybe it really does and you yourself don't know it. Either way, I think it's a healthy talk to have, just in case. :)

## Strahd's Location

Way back in my Tser Pool post, I recommended that you stack the deck a little on the card reading, so that the final battle with Strahd would begin either underground or in the castle spires. That way, players have to actually traverse and explore the castle a bit before showing down with our resident boss. Ravenloft is a wonderful location and traditional to dnd in general, so skipping some exploration in favor of an immediate fight never sat well with me.

If you go a similar route, remember that Strahd does not need to stay in that location. Eventually, he'll finish whatever business he has in whoever's crypt or whatnot and go confront the players. By the end of the campaign, you hopefully have a decent handle on pacing and know when it's the right time to begin the big showdown. Trust your judgement. Or, if it helps, trust Strahd's judgment. Strahd knows when it's time for the gloves to come off. ;)

## Before the Battle

### Everything So Far

* + At this point, your players have finished their exploration of Castle Ravenloft. Or, at the very least they've done as much exploration as you can feasibly allow them before Strahd gets pissed and comes to them.
    - Maybe they did the Heart of Sorrow side quest. Or maybe they've had an awkward dinner with a bride or two and slayed them. Maybe they tracked down Gertruda and successfully got her to an exit point.
    - Or perhaps you went with an alternative flow for Castle Ravenloft. Perhaps the party arrived for a wedding and now everyone is gathered in the chapel. Or maybe they stormed the castle with a peasant mob behind them singing, "Kill the Beast!"
  + No matter how the players have gotten here, they now encounter the Lord of Ravenloft and are ready to fight.

### A Calm Prologue

* + Unless by some miracle your players manage to sneak up on Strahd (I honestly can't even imagine the planning and skill that would allow such a thing XD), Strahd will confront the players openly.
    - Note that I'm not talking straight stealth rolls here. Sure, a party with *invisibility* + *pass without trace* can beat Strahd's passive perception pretty easily. But do you really think a man like Strahd would allow such a thing? If Strahd is in a crypt mourning his mother and hasn't set *alarm*, a first level spell for goodness’ sake, on the entry way, then you are doing something horribly wrong. And let's not forget the variety of other divination spells Strahd might use to protect against known assassins in his home.
    - What I'm saying is that PCs should not be able to sneak up on Strahd unless under extreme circumstances. If your players have been plotting and planning for several sessions with other NPC/NPC factions for a surprise attack, then maybe they'll get a shot. But a Rogue saying, "I hide!" should do feck all to earn a surprise turn on Strahd flipping Zarovich.
  + Instead, what I would highly recommend is a very calm meeting that has an almost business-like undertone. My own players had been in the castle for over a day when they finally met Strahd. Strahd grew tired of them wandering around and had a servant lead them to his study in K37. There, he had them each given a shot of expensive brandy ("You needn't worry. You have proven yourselves worthy adversaries. I would not do you the dishonor of feeding you poison.").
  + He and the party then exchanged a few (un)pleasantries before he concluded in a little pre-written monologue. In that monologue, I calmly detailed the crimes that the party had committed in the castle, lamented about the untimely death of the brides they had killed (Ludmilla and Gertruda, which was an unfortunate accident lol), and finished by telling them that his patience was at an end.
    - "While your escapades in my realm have been entertaining, I'm afraid I can no longer allow your crimes to go unpunished. I, Count Strahd von Zarovich, son of King Barov von Zarovich, sentence you to death." *Strahd gently places his wine glass on the end table beside his chair. Then, head held high and never breaking eye contact, he rises. With a quick, steady hand, he draws his sword*. "Shall we begin?" *Roll initiative*.

### Why a Calm before the Storm?

* + I personally like this kind of prelude to the final battle for several reasons. The main reason, however, is that I feel it is an excellent show of Strahd's personality.
    - No matter how horrible the situation or chaotic the surroundings, Strahd is confident of his own victory. Even if the peasant mobs are ransacking the castle, he is not worried. Even if the Heart of Sorrow is gone or if Ireena stands against him, sword in hand, Strahd knows he will win. He has nothing to panic about.
    - Strahd's complete confidence can serve to both infuriate and unnerve the party. They're here to kill Strahd, after all. So why isn't he at least visibly preparing? Is he really that powerful? They may be level 14ish, but perhaps they're still completely outmatched. That sort of mental game is a very Strahd thing to do.
    - Additionally, a direct confrontation plays right into Strahd's sense of honor. As evil as he may be, he is an extraordinarily lawful individual. Meeting his enemies face-to-face, as a gentleman might in a polite duel, is of more moral value to Strahd than stabbing them in the back, especially when he believes he can win.
* Yes, this is a bit more specific advice that I usually give. But it worked very very well for my campaign.
* It's absolutely okay to come up with an alternative however. Or, you might wish to alter this scenario for a different location in Ravenloft. The point is, I feel that a calm, collected introduction to the fight feels more thematically on point than Strahd bursting into a rage or sneaking up to shank the players. Plus, what grand finale is complete without a bad guy monologue? ;)

## Becoming Strahd

This is perhaps the single most helpful thing I did to prep for the final boss battle: I stopped thinking of it as a fight between my players and a NPC. No, for this particular battle, it is *you*, the DM, versus your players. In this single instance, you are not the DM with a thousand characters and plot points to remember. Your player-character is Strahd von Zarovich and your mission is to *win*. Talk about method acting. XD

### Strahd, the All-Knowing

* + This particular mindset works for many reasons. For one, Strahd is a very controlling, over-powered ruler. Strahd has been watching your players since the beginning of the campaign. He knows who they are and he knows how they fight. Strahd knows when the PCs were scared and he knows when they were confident. He knows their favorite spells and the battle tactics they fall back on.
  + Strahd *knows* your players. And guess what? So do you. In real life, you have probably seen their character sheets. You know the combinations of traits/attacks they favor. You know that one has a spell save DC of 19 and another still has a negative modifier on their strength.
  + While you've had to pull your punches before to stay in character (a rabid wolf will likely attack the nearest threat, even though that threat has a super AC compared to the mage standing a few squares away), but now you most certainly do not. If Strahd is not prepared to the nines for a fight with your players, then you are playing him wrong.
  + ***So, plan.***
    - Pick out spells for Stahd you know your players will have a hard time with.
    - If you know the rogue and cleric PCs have a wicked combo, make a plan to separate them.
    - Which PC has that stupid sunsword? How many ranged spells/attacks do you have to compensate for it? Or maybe you can inform some minions to wear that PC down?
  + The point is, Strahd is a centuries-old, battle-hardened war time General. If you haven't sat down and really come up with plans A, B, C, D, *and* E, this won't feel like a proper Strahd-battle.

### It's Your Castle

* + Similarly, study the map. I'll say it again: *study the map*. If you took my advice and went through all that trouble to color-code the staircases and figure out some top-down maps, you're already half-way there.
  + Strahd has lived in the same castle for hundreds of years. He oversaw its construction for goodness’ sake. Strahd should know where each and every door leads by muscle memory alone. So, use that knowledge.
  + Even if players acquired the blueprints to Ravenloft or a similar map, they won't know the place like you do. They don't know where the traps are or that the basement is filled with water. They'll have trouble navigating in mist-clogged rooms. You won't.
  + And it's not like the players will have the chance to study Ravenloft's map mid-turn. If they studied it prior to the whole fight, you can have them roll a history or survival check to remember general layouts or directions. But no player is going to know the castle like Strahd does.

## The Flow of the Fight

A really good, final boss battle has stages. If you've played a video game or two, you likely know what I'm talking about. You fight the monster and during the fight, break the creature's magic stone, and suddenly it sprouts wings and gets a whole new attack pattern. Yes, maybe that sounds a bit cliché, but it works better than you'd think, especially in a dnd game. Technically, we've already seen this in CoS. Mid-way through the fight at Yester Hill, the treant comes alive. When Baba Lysaga loses too much health, her hut pulls up its roots and starts wreaking havoc. If it was cool then, why doesn't Strahd have a cool stage or two?

With all that said, here's how I recommend the final fight goes down.

### Stage 1: A Gentleman's Duel

* + For the first part of the fight, Strahd's tactics should actually be rather restrained. He's not going all out and he's not willing to cross a couple lines.
  + For instance, he avoids the person wielding the sunsword and instead focuses on separating and eliminating the less pesky PCs. Additionally, he's using his sword, even though his claws are just as mechanically effective. But it looks proper and regal to use a sword.
  + Strahd sort of dances around the party, using a hit and run method to whittle them down. He doesn't use *fireball* in the middle of his study, for instance, because he's still concerned about the neatness of his home. And he deals enough damage to be scary, but hasn't really dedicated himself to absolutely wrecking the party yet.
  + It's during this stage that Strahd is more likely to use his Charm ability as well. He's trying to resolve the fight in the calmest manner possible. And Charm is one hell of an ability.
  + Lastly, during this first part of the fight, Strahd is avidly avoiding fighting or injuring the Tatyana reincarnation, be that Ireena or a PC. Though this character is trying to fight him, he's still trying to win her heart. Strahd might even be having a conversation with her between turns, which grows increasingly irrational and desperate.
    - "These people are poison, my love!" "I would give you the world!" "Don't you see? I would never make you pay for the sins which are theirs."

### Stage 1.5: Tatyana's Rejection

* + At a certain point in the fight, Tatyana's rejection finally sinks in. This happens in one of two ways:
  + Tatyana Dies
    - During the fight, Ireena, the NPC, is killed. If Strahd isn't actually attacking her (which he isn't), this happens due to some accident or another. Maybe she throws herself in front of a PC to save them. Whatever. Ireena dies.
    - Or, if Tatyana's incarnation is a PC, she dies through some similar accident. There are area-of-effect spells, big falls, additional minions in the castle, etc. In dnd, it's not impossible for the Tatyana PC to be killed in this fight, even if Strahd is actively avoiding harming her.
    - So, Tatyana dies, stolen from Strahd yet again. And he is enraged.
  + Tatyana Completely Rejects Strahd's Love
    - This is by far a more interesting option than Tatyana dying as a by product of the fight. Imagine it: There's a lull in the fight, and finally Ireena or the PC just breaks. She tells Strahd something along the lines of, "You are a *monster* and I will *never* love you!"
    - And for the first time in the whole dang campaign, Strahd takes a step back and *believes* her. Except, in true abuser fashion, he doesn't blame himself. Instead, he's angry with *her*. He was soooo sure that this time would be different; that this reincarnation would love him. And yet, everything fell apart.
    - So, give Strahd another mini, enraged monologue. Shout at Tatyana/Ireena/thePC. Tell her things like, "I have given you *everything*! And still, you judge me? You call me a monster!? How *dare you*! Do you realize how little your words matter? If you do not love me now, then you will in the next life!" He takes a little step back and starts to laugh. Like one of those deep laughs that comes from cynicism mixed with pure hatred. And then he says something like, "You think me a monster? *I will show you a monster.*"
  + At this point, Strahd purposefully drops his sword and he transforms a little. The PCs hear his bones cracking as his fingers elongate into claws. His face contorts, growing gaunter in the cheeks and more prominent in the jawline as his teeth seem to sharpen and protrude. The whites of his eyes flood black, making his red eyes seem to glow. He basically undergoes the change in the art below.

### Stage 2: The Devil Strahd

* + The turn order resumes, maybe with a slightly more intense music track. But now, Strahd is no longer holding back. He's not politely using hit and run tactics and complimenting the party on their abilities. He is using everything he possibly knows to completely kill them, including Tatyana.
  + Once Strahd goes full monster mode, remember that he still has his wits. He still thinks tactically and all that. He just no longer cares about who he hurts or what he destroys in his path. He'll attack the Tatyana reincarnation indiscriminately, knowing that when she dies, she'll just reincarnate and he can try to woo her again.
  + This is the real fight, using the full stat block and moving through the castle. I would advise that you try to move the fight upwards, towards the spires. Strahd has a bigger advantage with height, since falling isn't as much of an ordeal for him. He can literally walk on walls after all.
  + So, move the fight. Let Strahd bait the party and use the castle to his advantage. There may be times when Strahd gets some other minions to fight while he heals.
  + There might also come a time or two where Strahd truly hides to heal and the party just can't find him. Do not pause turn order without asking your party first. Dropping initiative, even temporarily, gives Strahd a huge advantage since he has some real time to regenerate. If your party consents to dropping turn order while they hunt him down, fine. But don't just do that.

### Stage 3: Vampyr

* + Firstly, I will *not* be going into the details of a Vampyr fight in this post. There simply isn't the space to include it all in one post. XP But I will touch on it here.
  + When Strahd falls to 0 HP, his body disintegrates into a cloud of mist. In the moment that this occurs, Vampyr is the closest he can be to the material plane. After all, it's his connection that keeps Strahd from truly dying.
  + While Strahd dies and Vampyr is close, the players have the opportunity to use whatever ritual or item or mechanism they gained from the Amber Temple to summon Vampyr to Barovia and attempt to either trap or kill the Dark Power. The following fight requires a lot of planning to set up. And I mean campaign wide planning. But if you can pull it off, it's worth it.
  + Once Vampyr shows up, the whole fight changes yet again, creating a sort of 'Strahd Final Form' vibe. And once he dies, Strahd dies for real and the campaign is won.

## Strahd Mechanically

Let's take a step away from that more abstract advice and talk about mechanics.

### A Note on my Suggestions

* + As written, Strahd is not strong. His stat block is... okay. But if you've taken my advice and upped the level of the campaign to about 14 or 15, Strahd’s stats are just plain weak. And then if you throw in something like the Sunsword.... well, he just doesn't read as a boss at that point.
  + That being said, the following adjustments are my **suggestions for a level 13-15 party of about 4 PCs**. But I am by no means an expert on CRs in dnd. So, I very much encourage you to take my advice and pick and choose what you feel would be best for your game.
  + Additionally, the following assumes the party only has the Sunsword. I reworked the Symbol of Ravenkind in my game as a key towards consecrating the Fanes and it was lost once the Fanes were restored. You can find more information on that in this Post. If you do have the raw Symbol in your game, along with any other sunlight creating items, additional adjustments might need to be made to your Strahd build.

### Stats

* + Upping stats is the most basic and uncreative way to make an enemy more difficult. That being said, sometimes you do need a bit of adjustment.
  + ***HP***
    - As written, Strahd can be easily killed in a single round if he's cornered. So firstly, make sure he's never cornered. XD But barring that, give him at least enough HP that he can't be downed in a single round if you mess up. One paladin spamming smites on multiattacks can *wreck* Strahd.
    - The tentative amount of HP I'd give him is about 300-450, depending on the average damage of your party.
  + ***AC***
    - Strahd's AC is absolute BS. *16*?? Please. Any PC above lvl 10 can dish out attacks over 16 pretty commonly. I'd personally make his AC about a 19 or 20.
  + ***Skills and Saving Throws***
    - I'd give him a plus to Athletics checks too. Vampires are strong, and he's the boss man vampire. His 18 Str is fine, but I'd give him about a +7 to Athletics and a +7 to Strength saving throws. That will help negate most tactical moves against him, like grapples or shoves.

### Abilities/Traits

* + Firstly, don't worry about Strahd's Shapechanger trait. It's not great in combat unless you have time for pure fluff. So, ignore it. Unless, you use it to hide. Transforming into a tiny bat among swarms of bats is a good way to regen but stay close enough to watch the party.
  + Do *not* forget his 3 Legendary Resistances. This is one of the most powerful abilities in dnd, especially against mage PCs.
  + Spider Climb is old school vampire XD. And honestly, it can be pretty great if you pay attention to the ceiling heights in the castle.
  + I got rid of the 'stake to the heart' weakness.
  + ***Regen/Sunlight Sensitivity***
    - These two traits are the two that you really need to keep track of, especially with the Sunsword around. Even the other Vampiric Weaknesses are all but negligible in the castle fight.
    - Firstly, Strahd has to be IN sunlight for it to hurt him. He takes a whopping 20 points of radiant damage at the start of his turn from it. AND it gives him disadvantage on attack rolls. So, for fecksake, if you start a turn in sunlight, use your movement to first get out of the sunlight.
    - And then, if you've taken that Radiant damage, not only do you not get your regeneration that turn. But you also don't have it the next turn either. Sunlight sucks for Strahd.
  + ***Misty Escape***
    - I changed this ability to correspond with Strahd's connection to Vampyr and therefore his immortality. In my version of Strahd, it reads as follows:
    - "Strahd's connection with Vampyr makes him truly immortal. When Strahd drops to 0 hit points outside his coffin, he transforms into a cloud of mist (as in the Shapechanger trait) instead of falling unconscious or dying. While he has 0 hit points in mist form, he travels to his coffin and reverts to his vampire form, unconscious and paralyzed. Strahd wakes with full hit points the following dusk."
  + ***Additions***
    - I would also add the following traits to Strahd's stat block:
    - *Magic Weapons* - Strahd's attacks are considered magical for the sake of overcoming resistances.
    - *Unholy Persistence* - Strahd is immune to effects that turn undead.

### Actions

* + ***Attacks***
    - So, at this point, I actually haven't done much to increase Strahd's difficulty. He's got a larger pool of HP, a bit more AC, and the ability to stop grapples. But really, that's not much to a party of lvl 13-15 players.
    - I'm a big believer in tactics. The majority of the raw Strahd block can work pretty well if you use his abilities strategically. But, if you really are concerned, he may be too easy, I wouldn't up his + to attacks and/or his damage. Instead, just give him another multiattack. It's way less to keep track of.
  + ***Sword or Claws***
    - Most images we see of Strahd show him carrying a sword. And yet his stat block only shows his unarmed attack. So, what's the difference?
    - For the sake of simplicity, don't give them a difference. Really, it's just fluff. Strahd using a sword has a sort of eloquence to it. And we know how much Strahd prides himself on his gentlemanly nature. So, he uses his sword for a while, but starts using his claws when he starts fighting more monstrously. But all the stats are the same so you have less to keep track of.
  + ***Charm***
    - Strahd's Charm ability is actually pretty broken for an end game fight. It requires a single wisdom save to resist, and once you've failed, you don't get to make any other saves unless Strahd is stupid enough to attack the person he's charmed. The charm isn't concentration based and if Strahd fails to charm a target, he can just try again the following turn. And when charmed, you're charmed for a full 24 hours before it wears off without the ability or opportunity to shake the charm. Theoretically, all Strahd has to do is bait the party for a number of turns and charm them all, one at a time, to win.
    - So, we need something to negate this effect. The smart thing to do would be to give the players some kind of resistance as a boon from restoring the Fanes. Something like, "Blessing of the Forrest Fane - The Seeker has seen your worth and offers you, her thanks. When you use this ability, you become immune to the Charmed effect for 1 hour. This ability recharges after a short or long rest."
    - Beyond giving the players a way to thwart Strahd's Charm ability, you can give an additional mechanical out. Let the players retry their wisdom save at the end of each of their turns when charmed. Something like that.
  + ***Lair Actions***
    - If you're using a hardcover book, it's easy to forget Strahd's Lair Actions. Don't.
    - Lair Actions get their own turn on initiative 20 and even though Strahd is technically acting, they don't count against his turn at all.
    - The most important Lair Action by a flipping long shot is the first one, which allows Strahd to phase through walls, floors, and ceilings without interference. Combine that with some Legendary Movement (which doesn't provoke op attacks) and do you know how easy it is to go all Benny Hills with this ability?
    - The other Lair Actions - taking shadows, opening/closing doors, etc. - are pretty gnarly too, don't get me wrong. But in battle, being able to use all your movement to phase through rooms is pretty invaluable.

## Spells and Magic, Oh My!

Strahd is a very accomplished wizard. And he's been around a long time. Don't give him spells you won't use and/or you know won't be effective against your players.

Instead, give him TWO spell lists. One for every day (basically the rest of the campaign when he's spying on the party and all that), and one for combat. Open up the entire Wizard class spell list and pick and choose what you think would work best against this party.

### Thematic Spells

* + That being said, remember your limits. Certain spell combos are quite powerful, but may not be something that Strahd would use. Additionally, remember that planar spells don't usually work since Barovia is a closed Demiplane.
  + I also noticed that a lot of Strahd's raw spells were similar to Baba's. And while that makes sense because Baba taught Strahd magic in the very beginning, I also wanted to differentiate their fights to my players. I got rid of spells like *blight* and *polymorph*. Really, I tried to mix both function and theme with my spells. For instance, *Sickening Radiance* is a dang good spell. But it inflicts radiant damage, which is very counter to Mr. Vampire.

### Casting Level

* + As written, Strahd is a 9th level caster. Buuttttt if you have a particularly strong party (lvl 15, a large group, talented at tactics, etc.), bumping him up to about 11 isn't too unreasonable. He'll have access to 6th level spells and a couple extra slots. But I wouldn't actually adjust his spell save DC or spell attack modifier, or at least not by much.

### Combat Spells

* + The following are my recommendations regarding Strahd's combat spell list. Remember that none of this is law. Use your own best judgment for your campaign. Hopefully some of my suggestions or reasonings inspire you.
  + ***LvL 1 (4 slots)*** - *Feather Fall, Shield, Magic Missile*, +1 of your choice
    - Lvl 1 spells are pretty meh in a high-level battle. *Magic Missile* is a good standard distance spell, but really should only be last resort for a guy like Strahd, who has so many better options.
    - *Feather Fall* is an emergency measure. Strahd has a ton of movement and spider climbing and all kinds of defense against high heights. But just in case.
    - And *Shield*, which is also a reaction, can be used to prevent damage from radiant attacks in a last-ditch effort, or avoid emergency damage. Don't blow all your 1st level slots too quickly, but save them for when you need them.
  + ***LvL 2 (3 slots)*** - Choose 3 (My recommendations are *Mirror Image, Gust of Wind*, and *Web*.)
    - *Mirror Image* is a pretty good protective spell, but should only really be used if you need time to retreat to heal. Misty Step might not be needed with all the movement Strahd already has, but it can come in handy in a pinch.
    - *Blindness/Deafness* requires a Con save. Consider use against a PC that has low Con.
    - *Gust of Wind* and *Earthen Grasp* require Strength saves. Use *Gust* to blast a PC off a high height, which can be pretty interesting.
    - *Hold Person* requires a Wisdom save. Useful against PCs with low Wis.
    - *Mind Spike*. Technically a damage spell, which is alright. But it also requires a wisdom save, which is less great. BUT, if you have a PC that is partial to hiding, invisibility, or other sneaky tactics, this spell means they can't get the jump on you.
    - *Web* requires a Dex save, creates difficult terrain, is AOE, and restrains. Not bad.
  + ***LvL 3 (3 Slots) -*** *Counterspell*, *Fireball*, + 1 of your choice
    - *Counterspell* - personally, this is an absolute must against a PC spellcaster.
    - *Fireball* is one of the best spells in the game. Yes, it's straight damage, but lord it does just a little more than most any other spell. Plus, it's an AOE spell.
    - *Haste* and/or slow are amazing spells with the right combinations. With *haste*, you can cast a spell and attack in a single turn. And with slow, you can disable a bunch of enemies at once. These are two of my favorite spells and I use them as a player a lot too XD
  + ***LvL 4 (3 Slots)*** - *Greater Invisibility*, +2 of your choice
    - *Greater Invisibility* - This bad boy doesn't break after you attack or use other actions, thus potentially giving Strahd advantage on multiple attacks over multiple rounds. Invaluable.
    - *Dimension Door* is another quick escape spell. Black Tentacles and Ice Storm require different saves and create difficult terrain. Resilient Sphere requires a dex save and potentially completely incapacitates a PC for a couple turns. Fire Shield is defensive and useful if cornered.
  + ***LvL 5 (2 Slots)*** - 2 of your choice
    - *Wall of Force* - a good way to separate the party in a pinch.
    - *Miselead* - similar to *Mirror Image*, so useful for trick fighting and repositioning.

### Spell Tactics in Battle

* + ***Choosing Your Loadout***
    - After all that, hopefully you're picking up what I'm putting down regarding spell choice. Choosing spells has nothing to do with 'coolness' or the amount of dice you get to roll for damage.
    - Choosing spells is about function and exploiting your enemy's weaknesses. Most PCs have a weak stat, be that Strength, Intelligence, or otherwise. And there are usually spells that require saves in those elements and are therefore more likely to succeed.
    - Additionally, Strahd does a pretty good amount of melee damage. So if you're going to use a spell for your action instead of a multiattack, you need to be able to justify that action economy.
  + ***Disable, not damage!***
    - Okay, so most people's instincts when playing spellcasters is to grab all the damage spells and make things go BOOM! Yes, it's fun, but it's wholly inefficient. And Strahd should be smart enough to realize that.
    - So, for the love of blog, don't give Strahd all damage spells.
  + ***An Example:***
    - Let's compare two spells; a disabling spell vs a straight damage spell. In this case, *scorching ray* and *earthen grasp*.
    - Let's say Strahd focuses on separating the party. And for a single turn, he manages to get say, the Rogue, alone. Or at least far enough away that the rest of the party can't help. Rogues normally have low Str, sometimes even including a negative modifier.
    - So Strahd's turn comes around. And he casts *Earthen Grasp* on the rogue. The Rogue has to make a Str Save against Strahd's whopping 18 DC. The chances of failure are quite high. So, the Rogue fails and is restrained.
    - So far, Strahd has spent his action and a 2nd level spell slot. That's very little.
    - Throughout the rest of the round, Strahd has *three* legendary actions he can use to attack this Rogue. He'll have advantage on all the attacks because the Rogue is restrained. And the Rogue can't use any movement abilities as a reaction because their movement speed is 0. They're trapped there. With Strahd. XP
    - A single unarmed attack from Strahd averages about 22 HP a pop. Three of those comes to a potential *66 points of damage on average*. Plus, the initial damage done by *earthen grasp*. Plus, all the unarmed attacks are made with advantage allowing for a higher chance of a crit attack. And the Rogue can't get away.
    - In comparison, *scorching ray* requires three spell attacks against the Rogue's AC, which is probably quite high by now. You have a much less chance to hit them. Additionally, if you use all three of your legendary actions to attack the Rogue, you're making three fewer rolls than you would be if the Rogue was restrained.
    - Both are level 2 spells and both require an action to cast. And yet the potential profits from a disabling spell like earthen grasp are so much higher than just throwing fire at the enemy.

### Passive Spells (to be used throughout the rest of the campaign)

* + The following list is much shorter, since it's not terribly important for the final battle lol. It also has some gaps that you can fill in with a few of the battle spells if you'd like.
  + Lvl 1 - *Alarm, Disguise Self, Detect Magic*
  + Lvl 2 - *Detect Thoughts, Knock*
  + Lvl 3 - *Counterspell, Nondetection, Sending, Glyph of Warding*
  + Lvl 4 - *Arcane Eye*
  + Lvl 5 - *Scrying, Dream, Geas*

## Overall Tactics

### Retreat and Heal

* + Strahd heals quite a lot with his regen trait. 20 HP per turn for goodness’ sake. If you make Strahd just stand there and take damage from enemies, he will *die quickly*. So don't do that!
  + If Strahd is hurting (and I don't mean critically hurt, I mean like, maybe half HP. Take no chances) use some disengage and then legendary action yourself the hell out of dodge. Lead players to a castle trap or to a room where you know there are extra enemies to engage the players while you run off to heal. It doesn't take long to hit full HP again if you're careful. Plus, you can use your knowledge of the castle to sneak around and get a surprise attack or something.

### Move!

* + Strahd has a lot of movement. And his legendary movement doesn't invoke op attacks. I've said it three or four times in this post already: Don't let Strahd just stand there and get hit!

### Sticks and Stones

* + After you've retreated a couple times, your players will get wise. They may try to taunt you into showing up before you feel better.
  + *Don't fall for it.* Strahd is prideful, but he's also very, very intelligent. He knows that war and battle are not the places to let your emotions get out of hand. He will not be that Disney villain that bwahahas his way to his own demise because he fell for the hero's goading.
  + The players can call Strahd a coward or anything else all they want. Strahd does not *care*. As far as he's concerned, they will soon be dead and he will be alive. And that is that.

### "I hate my brother's fecking sword."

* + From taking my own advice and playing this fight as if I were Strahd, I can tell you with absolute confidence that that stupid sunsword is the most annoying thing in all Barovia. Good god I got so frustrated with the fighter in my campaign and that stupid sword. XD (Not with the player, mind you, but as Strahd trying to win the fight.)
  + Most of Strahd's attacks are melee. And the sword emits sunlight for quite the radius around the wielder. Its damage hurts and it disables your healing. It sucks.
  + On the other hand, ill preparation for this sword might be the loophole the party needs to win. And you can totally give them that. It fits the narrative so well, it's scary lol.

## In Summary

Hopefully, all this advice helps you provide a challenging fight to your players. No single stat block is going to work for every campaign. So, I *highly* encourage you to read through this and then pick and choose what might work for your game. Figure out your dice averages and then build/alter Strahd's stat block from there. How much does your Strahd need? More HP? More proficiency? Or just a different spell list? You've run almost the whole campaign by this point. So, trust your judgement. And then bwahaha your way through an awesome boss fight! ;)

***Okay, this turned-out WAY longer than I thought it would be. If you've read my in-depth analysis of Strahd's stat block, cheers! XD In the next chapter, I'll cover Vampyr and ending the campaign. Wow!***

***- Mandy***