# Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Argynvostholt

## The Map

### Big and Empty

* + The map for Argynvostholt is beautiful. It's multilayered and intricate and takes up two whole pages in the book. But and it really pains me to say this, it's not really needed.
	+ To put things frankly, Argynvostholt is a large location with very little actually going on within it. Most of the rooms are vacant with a few choice encounters and not much loot. So, if you lay out the map (like I did) and let the players move their tokens and explore, most of that exploration ends up feeling empty and unrewarded. You can easily waste a good portion of your session just saying variations of, "This room has stone walls and debris." while your players mindlessly wander around for a couple minutes. It's not very exciting.

### Theater of the Mind

* + If and when I run this campaign again with another group, I'm definitely going to use theater of the mind for Argynvostholt. Yes, it feels like a waste of a gorgeous map. But it also will make the location run more smoothly. And that's my recommendation to you guys.
		- Describe each room or main hallway they enter and the selection of doorways. If the players choose to enter a door with nothing behind it, just speed past it so it isn't boring for you or your players. A simple, "You find what appears to be an old bed chamber, looted long ago and in disrepair. There's nothing really of interest here. Where would you like to go next?" will do.
	+ Theater of the Mind also helps negate that completionism in most gamers. If you can't see a door you didn't explore, it's much easier to forget about it in the long run. And in Argynvostholt's case, most of those doors aren't very important anyway.

### Battle

* That's not to say that the map is useless. Far from it. There are a few choices, significant encounters in Argynvostholt where battle can most certainly happen. So, bringing up the map and slapping down some tokens is great when a fight breaks out.

### Alternative Interest

* + If you wholly disagree with what I just said and want to keep the map, I do have an alternative for you. Or rather, u/DragnaCarta has an alternative for you. In Dragna's post on this location, he instead focused on adding a new encounter or point of interest to just about every room in the fortress.
	+ On one hand, this gives Argynvostholt the feeling of a proper dungeon delves, with monsters, traps, and loot waiting around every corner. Exploration won't be nearly as boring.
	+ On the other hand, this might also detract from the story as a whole, making that exploration more important than finding Vlad or Argynvost's ghost. It will also make the location seem less derelict and also definitely stretch the amount of real-world time your party spends here.

## The Flow of Argynvostholt

### As Written

* + On paper, the main goal and plot line for Agynvostholt is pretty straight forward. Undead knights are evil because they've forgotten goodness. Players must restore the beacon to help put them to rest. Easy-peasy. Or, it's supposed to be.
	+ I honestly think that the story behind this location is totally solid. However, I also believe it suffers from the same disorganized messiness that much of this campaign possesses. All the pieces of Argynvostholt are there, but they don't seem to connect in a way that makes it easy to run. So, I've taken the time to stitch together those pieces and smooth out the wrinkles. Here's what I've come up with.

### The First Two Floors

* + Once players enter Argynvostholt, the first floor is largely uninteresting, save a couple battles. And that's okay, especially if you're going Theater of the Mind like I recommended. The two possible fights with the giant spiders and the revenants in the chapel are interesting enough to hold things up on the first floor. And then there's the cool trap fight on the second floor.

### Argynvost's Ghost

* + The battles aren't going to really hook your players into this location story-wise. Instead, your main goal as the DM is to introduce your players to Argynvost. Or, rather, what's left of him.
	+ ***Living Fire***
		- This is my alternative to the fire dragon battle on page 132. I honestly don't like the idea of the little dragon battle, especially when the creature gives its little speech upon death. I believe that it can put players off the main quest. Think about it, why would you want to help something that just attacked you without provocation or reason? I feel like the quest progression doesn't feel natural.
	+ ***The Ember***
		- As PCs explore the ruins, they'll come across a number of fireplaces. Pick one. Heck, you could even have it be the open stove in the kitchen on the first floor. Whatever works for the flow of your party's exploration.
		- The fireplace (or oven or whatever) is completely soot choked and clogged with piles of ash. However, though the fireplace is obviously long abandoned and shows no recent signs of use, there's a single ember struggling for life among the ash. Upon closer inspection, players can see that the ember sluggishly pulls bits of ash towards itself, as if it knows it won't survive much longer but is unwilling to give up.
		- If players try to put out the ember, maybe by smacking it or scooping some ash on top of it, the ember seems to panic and roll around in a desperate attempt to escape. It crawls away from the players.
		- Try to make the ember seem sad in your descriptions and get your players to feel sorry for it. I personally imagine little Calcifer from Howl's Moving Castle. The point is, you want one of players to get the bright idea to feed the poor little ember some tinder, wood, cloth, or otherwise.
	+ ***The Fire Ghost***
		- Once given some fuel, the ember busts to life, growing furiously and assumes the shape of a small dragon with wings made of smoke. The flaming figure also glows a peculiar white-blue and feels cool instead of hot.
		- This is Argynvost's ghost, though it still hasn't gained enough strength to talk. The dragon suddenly takes off, soaring past the players in a flurry of cold air and choking smoke.
		- Players can easily follow the ghost's scorched path upstairs, where it ends in area Q33.
	+ ***A Chat with Argynvost***
		- Once players make it to the third floor, coming from whatever direction their natural progression lead them, they'll absolutely round the corner to see the dragon ghost they rescued. But.... it's not so small anymore. Instead, Argynvost's ghost sits upon the pile of rubble in Q33, dusting the debris beneath his ethereal form with frost, as a massive, imposing dragon. He's not quite his full size as he was in life, but he's certainly more imposing than the little parrot-sized phantom the group saw earlier. The ghost dragon stares intensely at the back of the throne in Q36, where Vladimir Horngaard sits (unknown to the players so far).
		- Even if the players approach stealthily (perhaps in preparation for a fight), Argynvost knows they're there. As they get close, he says, "Hushhh. We must speak, but not here. Come, my dear guests." He then floats/walks through the large doors to his study (Q40). Players can either follow him, or investigate elsewhere. It's really up to them at that point.

## The Beacon

In the following bits of exploration and role-play, players will learn the truth about the beacon of Argynvostholt, modified a bit by myself. Here's the gist of it:

### Argynvost's Tomb

* + Argynvost's tomb is no longer in the graveyard. Scratch that entirely. Instead, his bones have been put to rest in the tower, where the beacon should be.
	+ If players enter the tower, they see the enormous skeleton laid carefully around the tower with reverence. It's not hanging together like some dinosaur in a museum, but rather it's laid out as if the body had been moved there in respect. It's an obvious sky-high grave.
	+ Of course, the skull is quite noticeably missing.

### The Perseverance of a Dragon's Soul

* + Because of the desecration of the dragon's grave, the dead knights tied to the Order have lost themselves to the natural hatred laced into the valley. As a Demiplane of Dread, Barovia is already prone to corruption and the knights were not exempt from this in their deaths.
	+ But the sheer, fairy-tale-like goodness of his soul kept Argynvost around. And he begs the players to restore the beacon and save his order from damnation.

## Argynvost

### Role-Play

* + Argynvost is super fun to role-play. Or, at least he was to me. I personally imagine his voice as something between Mufasa from *The Lion King* and Smaug from the Hobbit movies.
	+ He's wise in that otherworldly way that dragons are and speaks in short, semi-enigmatic sentences. He chooses his words with great care and in doing so never really over speaks. If you can, try to mix in a couple spiffy vocab words into stark sentences and speak slowly and deeply.
		- "This... was my Order. A brotherhood of the valorous.... And we battled corruption. We could not have known we would fail."
		- "We are dead and yet we live, macabre profanities of nature, only slightly better than Strahd himself."
		- "My knights can no longer hear me. But I can hear them. Their hatred burns like a brand against what is left of my soul."

### Human or Dragon?

* + I would personally totally avoid Argynvost's human form. In a way, it seems to lessen him. I actually had his ghost dragon form transform into the human one (mostly just cause the book said so) and all my players let out a collective, disappointed, "oh." That hurt, but I also understand. XD
	+ As a dragon, Argynvost is *cool*. As a human, he's just another old dude with magic. If you're worried about the logistics of fitting a dragon into the castle, just size up the castle a bit. Make the ceilings super tall and the windows to the study purposefully wide and open, devoid of glass. Argynvost doesn't have to go everywhere the castle, but more like he owns the large, major areas.
	+ Also, Argynvost is a big boy, but he's not Smaug big. His head is about as big as a medium sized creature after all.

### What the Dragon Knows

* + Argynvost's soul has been slowly slipping away over the centuries (which is why he was no more than an ember). So, he knows all the history of the castle, but he's pretty unaware of more recent news.
	+ Argynvost can tell the players all about the Order of the Silver Dragon. He can tell them about his battle and defeat at Strahd's hands. He can tell them how Strahd's soul was taken by some dark god and that is why he's a vampire (hook to the Amber Temple).
	+ Argynvost also knows that there's some kind of ethereal corruption in his castle and that it stems from the darkened beacon in the highest tower. He's relatively sure the corrupted beacon is what's causing his knights to go crazy and stick around as undead, but he doesn't know what actually caused the corruption.
		- Argynvost is actually completely unaware that his bones are in the beacon. His own magic once kept the light going when he was alive and he was sure it would be sustained after his death. Whatever is broken must be fixed.
	+ Argynvost *doesn't* know that his own desecrated grave is the cause of the darkness. He also doesn't know his skull was stolen by Baba Lysaga long ago. He only wants this everlasting nightmare to end and to see his Order finally laid to rest.

## Vladimir Horngaard

### Meeting Vlad

* + Vlad is a cool figure to introduce. He's a corpse hunched over a really pretty sword while sitting in a throne.
	+ Step one is *not* to reveal him too early. Don't make him get up and wander around, obviously alive like the revenants downstairs. Don't make him acknowledge the players as they approach. Keep him *dead*. Of course, I'm sure there are spells and traits to reveal undead that your players can use if they're careful. But, for cinematic reasons, don't move Vlad until the time is right.
		- In my own game, I stole a page straight from *Bloodborne* with the introduction of Lady Maria. As the rogue reached in to steal the super pretty sword from the dead guy, Vladimir suddenly reached out and grabbed his arm, pulling him close. "A corpse..." he grumbled. "Should be left well alone." It was a pretty good moment. ;p

### Personality

* + Vladimir is also quite fun to role-play, I think. Simply because he's so temperamental and illogical. Crazy people are always interesting and its fun throwing your players for a loop.
	+ Here are the main things to remember:
		- Vlad hates Strahd. Strahd is evil and caused the death of Vlad's brothers and sisters in arms, his master Argynvost, and his crusade against the darkness.
		- Vlad does not want Strahd to die. He also doesn't want Strahd displaced from the throne of Barovia. As far as Vladimir is concerned, Strahd is in his own personal hell of his own creation and the vampire should stay there.
		- Vladimir doesn't want *anything* to change about Barovia. Even if players bring up the suffering townsfolk, Vlad considers them unfortunate sacrifices to Strahd's damnation.
	+ Vladimir is an interesting and somewhat tragic character. He's been so overcome in his own grief and loss that his sorrow has turned into pure, bitter hatred. His own memory of the good ideals from the Order has been all but forgotten. If pressed to recall his old oaths, he claims they are as dead as himself and no longer matter. But in truth, he can't really remember them. Wrath has tainted his memory so thoroughly that he can't even remember his own lover, Godfrey.

### Player Interaction

* + Vladimir is a very temperamental character. There's a very real chance a fight could break out. But it doesn't have to. If players lie and say they agree with his ideals, Vladimir is usually appeased. Even if the players seem unsure and only weakly rebuke Vladimir's statements, he might accept it by saying something like, "It matters little. The years will pass and you will see the truth as I have seen it."
	+ But maybe you've got those players who are filled with righteous fury. And maybe they make grand proclamations ("Just you watch, we're going to prove you wrong!") and they actually sound genuine and the party looks capable enough that they might actually one day kill Strahd permanently. Well... there's not much you can do for them then. Vladimir will want to stop their quest.
	+ If your players do end up fighting Vlad and the phantoms that join him, don't hold back. Beat them and wipe Argynvostholt's floors with them. Why? Because this fight shouldn't be a TPK. There are simply too many plot-y ways out of player death in this situation.
		- Maybe they wake to find Godfrey nursing them back to health in an old barracks, sorrow in his cold, dead eyes.
		- Or perhaps as they fall, a cold wind blows through and Argynvost's dragon ghost saves them. They wake up in the study if they haven't had their conversation with the dragon yet.
		- Heck, this might even be your chance to introduce Ezmerelda to the party.
	+ Of course, maybe your players will actually be strong enough to take Vladimir when they meet him. But, it's unlikely. This fight is pretty brutal. The PCs are also more than capable of running away. Vladimir will only pursue them so far before he considers the lesson learnt.

## Sir Godfrey Gwilym

### Godfrey in the Plot

* + Sir Godfrey is actually the most helpful NPC in Argynvostholt, especially for plot-y information. He's the only one with all his memories between the three big characters here.
	+ Sir Godfrey knows that Argynvost's crypt is in the beacon. He also remembers how many centuries ago, a band of enchanted plant creatures lead by a small coven of witches tried to tear down Argynvostholt, brick by brick. The undead managed to drive them back, but the southern part of the castle suffered greatly.
		- On a side note, that I'm not entirely sure goes with the text or not, I imagine that Argynvost's death and the fall of the Order happened on an actual battlefield in Barovia, not in the castle. The knighthood leads a charge against Strahd and his army and lost. The destruction of half the castle happened afterwards, at the hands of Baba Lysaga.
		- If this is totally false based on the text, I still think this works better for a proper Berez hook.
	+ Though the witches' attack failed, they still managed to put out the beacon by stealing Argynvost's skull. Godfrey doesn't know where they went with it.
		- Players can track down the skull by asking any semi-normal Barovian about local witch sightings. As I mentioned in my Berez post, most Barovians have a local superstition (that's actually very real) about women going mad and turning to devil worship in the ruins of old Berez.

### The Helpful Dead

* + Godfrey, I personally feel, should be introduced after either or both Vladimir and Argynvost have already been spoken to. The natural distribution of information makes it flow nicely.
	+ Godfrey is the one who'll come to the party's aid should they fall in combat in the castle. He's also the one willing to lead the party safely through the castle and around his revenge-bent comrades.

### Personality

* + Godfrey is quite opposite from the other confrontational, in-your-face characters in Argynvostholt. He's soft-spoken and kind. He's very careful about people's feelings and is likely one of the most open-minded characters in the campaign.
	+ That is not to say that Godfrey is weak. If anything, Godfrey totally exemplifies one of those fairy tale type knights in white armor that rescues damsels and kisses babies. He's strong in a fight, but isn't underhanded in his tactics. He never breaks his promises and is a very poor liar.
	+ Basically, Godfrey would be sickeningly cliche if he weren't so obviously broken. Godfrey lives in a world where he can't escape his own defeat. He is living (sort-of) proof that good can lose and that there are no happy endings (yet, hopefully). And not only has he lost faith in the Order, but he exists in a perpetual limbo where the man he loves doesn't even remember him.
	+ Godfrey has quite literally lost everything. And yet, he hasn't succumbed to his grief or turned to bitter hatred. Instead, his personality has survived his own tragedy and he still manages to be kind. In a way, that makes him all the more tragic.
	+ As players converse with Godfrey, they should see that he seems surrounded by a constant aura of sadness. Though he smiles at them, when he's not paying attention, his eyes gaze forlornly at nothing.
* If your players currently lack a helpful NPC/travel buddy, Godfrey is a great option to consider. Plus, his undead state will make entering townships very.... interesting. XD If he believes there might be hope for Vladimir, Argynvost, and the other knights, he'll loyally follow the party to hell and back.

## In Summary

So, the long story short, Argynvostholt's exploration should go something like this:

* Players creepy enter and possibly fight some spiders or some undead spooks.
* Players come across the dying ember and wake the ghost dragon.
* Players follow the dragon upstairs, maybe getting into a trap or fight or whatever along the way.
* Players either
	+ Follow Argynvost's ghost to the study and chat with him.
	+ Take a curiosity driven detour towards the throne and meet Vladimir.
* After getting spooked or fighting Vlad, they meet Godfrey (put him wherever he needs to be) and get the last clues they need to help Argynvostholt.
* Through these interactions, the players find out that:
	+ The dead knights aren't evil, but are pretty much under a curse.
	+ They need to relight the beacon, which can lift the curse. The beacon is sustained by Argynvost's soul, which is attached to his remains. The beacon is also his crypt.
	+ The beacon is out because of Argynvost's missing skull. The skull was stolen by a coven of witches.
* Players leave with this quest and come back with the skull (after who knows how many sessions, lol). The beacon is lit and there are lots of great buffs and happy endings. Yay!

## Battle Notes

### Giant Spiders

* + Most of these notes aren't really required for the spider fight, but I felt they made a simple battle feel more horrific and overall fun. ;p
	+ ***Size***
		- For some reason, I've always imagined giant spiders like those horrible things from *Jumanji*. Giant for spiders, but really no bigger than an average dog. But no. These bad boys are classified as *large* beasts. That means there are nine horse-sized spiders in the ruined ballroom. XD This isn't really a note, but more like something that surprised me and wanted to share with you folks.
	+ ***Environment***
		- I really used the environment to push this battle, going a bit beyond what the text entailed. I made the whole room so clogged with webbing that seeing the details of whatever the room used to be almost impossible. Even opening the door was a struggle, where I emphasized how the players had to force in to open through the thick webs.
		- Additionally, I made the room difficult terrain for anything that wasn't a spider (or didn't have the spider climb ability).
	+ ***Hidden Enemies***
		- I also made the spiders initially hidden in the webs. Logically, this makes sense since real life spiders often hide in a corner until something flies into their web. As players looked for enemies, I rolled their perception/stealth contests. This allowed me to keep some of the spiders hidden, striking unexpectedly in the middle of the fight.

### Revenants and Vlad

* + ***0 HP, but not down***
		- Remember that even if a revenant is struck down to 0 HP, it'll still get up at the start of its next turn due to its regen trait. This can only be stopped if the damage dealt was radiant or fire.
		- If you really want to mess with your players, have a fallen revenant stay down for more than one turn, pretending to be dead while it regains HP. Then have it get up and rejoin the fray.
	+ ***Vlad the Smart***
		- If players fight Vladimir, remember that he's a pretty smart guy. He was the best knight of the Order and therefore a skilled, experienced fighter.
		- He shouldn't fall for petty tricks or play stupidly to the players' goading. Instead, he uses his overwhelming strength to barrel through the melee PCs and get to the mages. In a long-term fight, a magic-user will do him much more damage than a martial character. So, it makes sense that he'll bear a few sword slashes to the back in favor of getting rid of that pesky wizard or sorcerer.
		- On that note, remember that the first time Vlad takes damage, he's joined by SIX phantoms. XD
		- Vlad is also pretty fanatical in his fighting, much like a barbarian when they turn on rage. He isn't afraid of opportunity attacks, as his regen trait heals him, and he isn't afraid of death because he knows he can't die.

### Phantom Warriors

* + These are the real horrors your players can face in Argynvostholt. To be perfectly honest, the revenants are more tanky and predictable. Though Vlad himself is notoriously powerful, he *can* theoretically be whittled down by patient, smart players.
	+ The Phantom Warriors, on the other hand, are far trickier. You can use their abilities in a truly unique and dangerous order to annihilate a party. Here's how:
	+ ***Etherealness***
		- Start all Phantoms in the ethereal plane. PCs don't run into them. They ambush first. If it’s the trap on the 2nd floor or the battle with Vlad, the Phantoms don't just show up and charge the players. Make them stealthy buggers that blink in and out of existence.
		- "But Mandy, *Etherealness* is an action!" Yeah yeah, but Held Actions are a thing. *Use them*. Vladimir gets hurt, the Phantoms roll initiative and join the fray. They start in the ethereal plane and so start invisible. Move them into place, even if that takes two turns, let's say right behind PC Fighter. Then hold their action to enter the material plane for after PC Fighter attacks. Fighter attacks Vlad, Phantom appears behind them. On Phantom's turn, they multiattack PC Fighter.
		- You can then do the opposite as well. "Phantom Warrior 3 holds their action. When a PC moves within striking distance, they go into the ethereal plane to avoid attack." Or "When the Phantom takes damage, they go into the ethereal plane." Heck, for dramatics, you might even have the Phantom moan like they're dead after they fade away. Players think the enemy is dead, but instead NOPE.
	+ ***Numbers***
		- In most cases, Phantom Warriors are found in numbers. To keep with the same example of Vlad's fight, that's six of them right there.
		- However, if you're using the etherealness correctly and staggering their attacks, it's possible only two or three may even be visible at a time. This gives the players the illusion that they are fighting an unknowable number of enemies. And if you use the fake death cry as they fade into the ethereal plane, players might even believe that the wave of ghosts is never-ending.
	+ Though Vlad and the other revenants are beasts, the Phantom warriors are the real scary ones. They're the ones the PCs can't track or predict. They're the ones that see you when you can't see them.

## Other Notes

### I got rid of:

* + The dusk elf in hiding. At this point in the campaign, my players had tackled Vallaki maannnyy sessions ago, so his plot point didn't really make sense. He just felt extraneous in comparison to the rest of the cool stuff in Argynvostholt.

### Carrying the Skull

* + Once players get the skull from Baba Lysaga, remember that the thing isn't exactly *small*. Unless you've got a player with that stack of buffs that lets them carry a whole bunch, it's going to require at least two players to carry the thing. If they're on foot, they move half their normal pace. (So, in Berez where pretty much everything is difficult terrain, they move at 1/4 their normal speed). And for further perspective, a t-rex's skull weighs about 600 lbs. XD Imagine your poor players trying to get that up the stairs to the beacon lololol.

## The Dear Devil

Something interesting to consider might be to have a Strahd encounter after the players light Argynvostholt's beacon. After all, the beacon is basically a shining middle finger to the big man. If the players haven't been to dinner with Strahd yet, now's the perfect opportunity to have the empty, black carriage pull up the driveway with a fancy envelope sitting on the driver's seat. Or maybe Strahd attempts to abduct Ireena/the Ireena PC if he hasn't already. This may be a great time to "accidentally" kill poor Ireena and enrage Strahd beyond belief. Really, it's up to you. :)

-------

And that's a wrap, my friends. Before I sign off, I wanted to also say a big THANK YOU to all of you who have mentioned me, PMed me, etc. in the past few months. I was floored by the number of notifications my reddit had wracked up and I can't even begin to describe how much it means to me. I've said it before, but I'll say it again: You guys are the best! <3

Until next time,

Mandy