# **Fleshing Out Curse of Strahd: Tser Pool, the Vistani, and the Ultimate Tarokka Reading**

After leaving the Village of Barovia, your players should come across the encampment at Tser Pool. For goodness’ sake, please don't skip this. The Vistani are amazing and the fortune telling session is always fun for PCs. Skipping Tser Pool is like completely ignoring a cornerstone of the campaign.

## I'm Gonna Ramble About the Vistani Now and No One can Stop Me

Okie dokie, I absolutely positively hate the way the Vistani are portrayed in the campaign book. In fact, I find their representation pretty insulting and downright culturally insensitive. As it reads, all Vistani are evil spies, liars, cheats, drunkards, and gamblers. I've gone through great lengths to change this.

## Vistani are Fictional Gypsies

* The Vistani are literally an interpretation of the real-life Romani people, more popularly known as gypsies. "Gypsy" is technically not politically correct, either, but it's a euphemism that's so widespread people are more likely to recognize the name over "Romani." I'm not an expert on Romani culture, not by far, but here are few things I do know about them:
	+ Originating in southwest Asia, Romani are most typically known for their darker, cinnamon colored skin and their black hair. They often dress is fabrics of bright colors and intricate designs.
	+ The Romani people are historically nomadic and often moved around in large tribes made up of several families. Their people put a very heavy emphasis on clan unity. Sort of an insiders versus outsiders kind of mindset.
	+ Unfortunately, Romani got a pretty terrible reputation over time for being swindlers and cheats. This was an untrue stereotype that got a lot of Romani unjustly persecuted.
	+ One of the most popular examples of the Romani people comes from Disney's *Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Remember Esmeralda? She's a Romani.
	+ However, we did get a lot of fun things from the Romani people, whether wholly true or not. Fortune telling is often associated with their people, and we sure as heck see that in CoS.

## The Vistani are NOT all Strahd Spies

The book goes out of its way to tell us that just about all Vistani work for Strand. There are very few exceptions to this, namely Ezmerelda. This is a pretty sad thing to do with such an amazing people. After all, Strahd is pretty much synonymous with "Evil." He's the big bad guy in the campaign and by saying that all Vistani work for him, you're saying that the entire culture is evil too.

### The Real Relationship is Respect

* + Instead of being totally in cahoots, Strahd and the Vistani share a mutual respect of one another. The Vistani showed Strahd kindness and saved his life when they certainly didn't have to, impressing Strahd. Strahd made a vow that all Vistani would henceforth be welcome in his land, so long as they did not openly antagonize him. Because Strahd is a man of his word, he's honored his vow over the centuries. This gives the Vistani certain perks in Barovia:
		- The Vistani are not attacked or targeted by the normal threats in Barovia, such as wolves and werewolves.
		- The Vistani CAN NOT leave Barovia, just like everyone else. The book often implies that the Vistani can exert a certain level of control over the mists. In my version, this ability lies solely with Strahd himself. However, Strahd would never deny passage to a Vistana that asked to leave. All they need do is say the word and Strahd would open a gate for them through the mists, no questions asked.
		- Strahd doesn't hunt for either blood or consorts among the Vistani. If a Vistana becomes a vampire spawn, it's because they pursued Strahd, not the other way around.
	+ However, this also means that the Vistani don't have any problem with Strahd either. Unless Strahd actively does something to hurt one of their own, the Vistani won't cross him. The PCs can beg and plead, but the Vistani will not act against someone who is not their enemy.
* Otherwise, the Vistani will treat Strahd with the same hospitality that they'd show anyone else. They freely give and take information, no matter who's asking for it. So long as the info isn't overtly harmful or incriminating, the Vistani believe that sharing and caring go hand in hand. ;)

## Vistani Culture

### A Welcoming People

* + In my game, the Vistani are the kings and queens of hospitality. If you are not their enemy, you are their friend, even if they just met you. The Vistani will treat visitors with open kindness, feeding them from their table and making sure they have beds for the night.
	+ The Vistani can also be quite loud and boisterous. They're fans of wine, music, and dance and often indulge in all three. They believe that these things are medicine for the human soul and push visitors to join them in their merrymaking. The more crest-fallen the PC, the more the Vistani will gather around them and push wine into their bellies and try to make them laugh.

### Beliefs/Religion

* + The Vistani don't worship any gods, but instead believe in something they call, the Threads of Fate. They believe that all actions have reactions and that fate's wound its strings around everyone.
	+ Rema (the Vistani word for Karma, essentially) is one of the core tenants of Vistani faith. They believe that kindness breeds kindness and hate breeds hate. If you are kind to them, they are kind back. If you hurt them, they will hurt you back. Simple, really.
* Here are a couple fun terms used among the Vistani. Some of these are canonical, others I edited or made up for my own lore:
	+ Giorgio - Someone who is not Vistani. A general term for outsiders.
	+ Giogoto - An outsider who has done something so profound, they're basically honorary Vistani. They're accepted as one of the Vistani, though they weren't born one.
	+ Shae - a generic term for an honored elder.
	+ Raunie - A Vistana with an exceptional gift for seeing the Threads of Fate.

### Travelers

* + The Vistani are nomadic in general. They always have a plethora of horses and barrel-top wagons at the ready, and can pitch tents like it's nothing.
	+ Throughout the campaign, you might want to throw in that the players spot a few Vistani wagons on the move on the road. Or if they're in the woods and need a break, they come across a small encampment.
	+ That being said, the two main camps mentioned in the book, the one at Tser Pool and the one south of Vallaki, are always present. The two locations are sort of like Vistani hubs, where different traveling families are in constant rotation. The families that the players meet the first time they stay at Tser pool won't likely be the same ones staying there a couple weeks later.
		- Arrigal and Luvash are permanent installments south of Vallaki, however. Other families may come and go from that location, but the brothers stay as the local leaders and act as liaisons between them, Vallaki and the Dusk Elves.
		- Madam Eva stays permanently at Tser Pool, but not for the same reason. She's so old that travel is pretty hard on her, so she's stays put. Because she's been around so long, most Vistani make it a point to visit Eva at least once in their lifetime, sort of like a pilgrimage.

### Storytelling

* + The Vistani are excellent storytellers. They collect tales of all kinds and share them almost every night around their campfires.
	+ When visitors come by their camp, they pretty much demand a story as payment for their hospitality. If a visitor is obviously too uncomfortable for this though, they don't push the issue and instead tell one of their own. Time in a Vistani camp should never feel tense or awkward.

### Family Units

* + The Vistani believe that family comes first and foremost. And to them, family isn't just the people you're related to by blood. Family is all the people around you, from extended family to friends and their families. Your BFF's mother is your mother too in Vistani culture.
	+ ***When a Vistana leaves their Tribe (Remanio)***
		- If a Vistana decides to leave their tribe to say, go live in Vallaki, this isn't shunned. A Vistana is free to go live their lives away from their people if they choose. They won't become outcasts or hated by Vistani if they do so.
		- Instead, when a Vistana decides to leave the tribe, the Vistani treat it like a death. They actively mourn the loss of the Vistana and send prayers to the fates for their safety away from their family. This ceremonial mourning is almost identical to a funeral in Vistani culture.
		- The Vistani refer to someone who has voluntarily left the tribe as a Remanio, one who has been cut off from the Threads of Fate.
		- Ezmerelda is a Remanio.
	+ ***When A Vistana returns to their Tribe (Vani)***
		- If a Remanio is returned to the Vistani, they are welcomed with open arms and usually copious amounts of tears and hugging. This can happen if a Remanio decides they've made a mistake in leaving, or if they've accomplished their goal and are ready to come home.
		- There's also a chance that a Vistana might get separated from the tribe by some happenstance or another. In my campaign, my Rogue is half-Vistani and doesn't know it. He grew up far away from the Vistani and is technically a Remanio.
		- When someone is returned to the Vistani, they are called Vani. Vani is a term loosely meaning, "someone brought back from death."

### Outcasts and Enemies

* + Boy oh boy, you don't want to be an enemy of the Vistani. The Vistani don't necessarily hunt down their foes in a bloodlust or anything, but if you've done wrong to a Vistani, the whole people will know it.
	+ There is literally no redemption among the Vistani. If you're their enemy, you're their enemy forever. There's nothing you can do to get back into their good graces. Vistani never forgive and never forget.
	+ ***Mortu***
		- Mortu is a term for an outcasted Vistana. This is someone who was born Vistani, but did something so awful that they were cast out. A Mortu loses all their Vistani powers, like the Evil Eye and their ability to curse others. If possible, before being exiled, a Mortu receives a small cut under their left eye that will leave a scar. This scar marks them forever as Mortu.
	+ ***Mortio***
		- Mortio is a term for an enemy of the Vistani. A Mortio is an outsider that did some harm to the Vistani and became their enemy. If a Vistana comes across a known Mortio, they will actively try to curse them before chasing them away.

## Arriving at Tser Pool

The PCs should get to Tser Pool right around dusk. They might approach the camp cautiously, but the moment a Vistana catches sight of the group, they call out and exclaim like they've just seen a long-lost friend. The PCs are ushered into the camp and seated by the campfire where they're given food and wine.

Meeting the Vistani should be quite unlike anything the PCs have encountered thus far. They've seen the horror of the Death House and the bleak, depressing Village of Barovia. Suddenly, they're thrust into a world of color, music, and laughter. Your players will love the Vistani.

## Conversations Around the Campfire

Go ahead and make one or two Vistana be the main NPCs in the camp. These NPCs will do the main talking with your players and make the role-play more streamlined, instead of trying to act out a whole group of Vistani at once. I personally had Arahja, a larger-than-life boisterous man whose laugh boomed and Rina, a quieter woman who spoke little, but what she did say was often profound and full of mischief. Arahja acted as my main speaker and every so often, Rina would bounce an idea or comment into the mix.

### Where are you from?

* + This is the first topic that's likely to come up. The Vistani will ask your players about themselves and where they're headed. Feel free to answer your player's questions through the Vistani about the land and Strahd.

### The Story of the Vistani and Strahd

* + The Vistani are happy to talk about how their understanding with Strahd came to pass. Do your best to show that the Vistani don't really have an opinion of Strahd and usually just keep out of his way.

### The Vistani from the Blood on the Vine

* + If the PCs mention the three sisters from the Village of Barovia, the Vistani spit on the ground and proclaim, "Mortu!" They advise the PCs to stay away from filth like that.

### Do NOT mention Old Bonegrinder in these conversations.

* + You're doing a lot to build false trust in the hags. Don't ruin that by making the Vistani warn the players about the windmill. Also, the windmill's name in ominous in and of itself.

### Trapped in Barovia

* + Through one conversation or another, the Vistani should make a passive joke about how the PCs are now trapped in Barovia. "Look at this one, Rina! His skin is so tan! Almost like Vistani, himself, eh?" "Yes, show it off while you can, Giorgio. The coming years without sunlight are sure to steal it from you."
	+ This should worry to the PCs enough to ask why and the Vistani will somberly tell them that no one leaves Barovia. Once in the mists, you're here forever. "So welcome to your new home!"
	+ The PCs will likely try to clarify and eventually the conversation will land on how one might escape this land. The Vistani NPCs don't know how, but they recommend the PCs go see Madam Eva. If there's a chance for them to get out of Barovia, Madam Eva will know it.

## Madam Eva

### Meeting Eva

* + When the PCs approach Madam Eva's tent, she calls for them to enter before they even announce themselves. She addresses all the PCs by name without having to be introduced, and uses their full name instead of nicknames. If you have a PC named Samantha but goes by Sam, Eva calls them Samantha. If you have a PC named Reginald, but goes by Batz, she calls him Reginald.
	+ When everyone has been ushered inside and is sitting around her table, she proclaims, "Took you all long enough! I have been expecting you. Are you ready to learn your fate?"
	+ If the players are super insistent on how she knows them, Madam Eva tells them that her cards grant her sight into the Threads of Fate that bind us all. They told her that champions were coming to the land and that she would guide them on their path.

### Madam Eva's True Identity

* + I completely rewrote Madam Eva's backstory and incorporated her into the Fanes of Barovia. For all the details on that, check out my Fanes Post, as the information there comes up multiple times throughout this guide.
	+ In short, Madam Eva is actually the Seeker of the Forest Fane, an archfey and old nature goddess of the valley. Long ago, Strahd stole the power of the Fanes, reducing Eva and her sisters into the forms of old crones. As a goddess, the Seeker is most often associated with ravens and the gift of foresight (seeing the future). So, this works out rather perfectly for Madam Eva.
	+ Madam Eva is hoping that the players will be the ones to restore her power as a Fane, but does not outwardly admit this. The Threads of Fate are fickle things after all.

## The Fortune Reading

I slightly expanded the card reading for my group. It went really well, so I'd recommend you do the same if you can.

### Character Development Cards

* + The book tells us that there are 5 cards read for this event: Three for the legendary items, one for an important NPC, and one for where the final battle with Strahd will take place.
	+ I went ahead and added 2 extra cards for each of my players, one from the high deck and one from the low deck, that were meant to tell their personal fortunes.
	+ From the very beginning of my campaign, I already had an idea of how I was going to weave my PCs' backstories into Barovia. I used the results of the extra cards to give my players cryptic hints on those futures. The card from the low deck was a telling of a PC's problem or desire. The card from the high deck was a clue on how to fix that problem or accomplish that desire.
		- An example: My fighter PC with a monster hunter background is looking to avenge his dead wife, who was killed by werewolves, more specifically Kiril.
		- He randomly drew the 2 of swords: the Paladin, for his low deck card. "Ahhh, I see that you are a great warrior. You have defined yourself by your vows to purge the world evil. But you have suffered a devastating loss and seek to find your vengeance!"
		- He then randomly drew the Ghost for his high deck card. "Poor dear, you are chasing a ghost from your past. I see it scream and howl in the woods of the northwest! If you wish your vengeance, that is where you must go!"
		- Try to use the actual face of the card to direct whatever cryptic hint you tell them. You'll have to adapt a bit on the fly, but the results will feel really cool.
* This is the new layout for the expanded card reading (I have 3 PCs in my game). There are the normal 5 cards in the center, and then the pair of cards for each PC. (These aren't the actual cards my PCs drew, btw. I just threw them together really quick for the screen shot for this post.)



## Results of the Tarokka Cards

Cheat. Cheat on the main fortune reading, guys. There's no shame in fudging this to make a better campaign. You can let the character cards be random, but the rest, you should plan for.

### Why fudge it?

* + The randomly placed story items are a rad game mechanic. On the surface, it's amazing and you feel as excited as your players to see what the cards have in store for your campaign. However, much like a nat 1 dice roll, there's always a chance you could draw the most boring card in the deck.
	+ For instance, what if your players are drawing for the Sunsword, arguably one of the most important and powerful weapons in the game, and they draw the card indicating it's located right there in Madam Eva's tent? That means that a band of level 3 or 4 adventurers will get a Barovian lightsaber right at the beginning.
	+ There's also a chance that they'll draw cards indicating the items are right next to each other. You can't have your party getting all the cool stuff at once.
	+ It's best to spread out the locations of all the cards, the Ally card included, so that your players with have to scour Barovia to get them all. They'll also have more reason to go to certain locations that they may otherwise ignore.

### EVEN THOUGH YOU'RE CHEATING

* + Even though you already have the answers to the card reading pre-planned, still play things out like you don't. I feel like this is another one of those common-sense things, but just in case, I'll say my piece. When your players sit down for the Tarokka reading, let them draw their cards randomly and make sure to act all surprised on what they've drawn. Then just read the results you wanted anyway. Don't actually force your PCs to draw the cards you want them to by ordering the deck or something.

### Big No-Nos for the Card Reading

* + Before I give you my actual recommendations on each item, here're a couple results you definitely should *not* have.
		- Anything requiring backtracking, mainly anything in the Village of Barovia. Your players just finished that area and are in a hurry to get Ireena to safety. Don't send them back. Doing this will also irk the players, most likely.
		- DO NOT have any of the items or the Ally appear in Castle Ravenloft. Ravenloft is supposed to feel like the endgame boss dungeon. When they go to Ravenloft, they're there to kill the big bady, not search for mission items. Even if players go to Ravenloft prior to the final battle (which they likely will) the opportunity for hardcore exploration will be quite minimal. What's more, if the Sunsword were just sitting in the castle, don't you think that Strahd might know? It just doesn't make sense to have things appear in the castle.

### The Sunsword

* + The Amber Temple. This is the best and most story relevant weapon in the game, so it should be one of the last that the party obtains. The Amber Temple is a pretty climatic area, especially if you stick to my guides. It doesn't matter where exactly in the temple you place the sword, but make sure it ends up there.
	+ Under the Gulthias Tree. If you're following my guides on the Fanes of Barovia, making the Sunsword a reward for restoring the Ladies Three would work super well.

### The Tome of Strahd

* + I'd put the Tome of Strahd somewhere populated. Either Vallaki, Kresk, or the Winery would do nicely.
	+ The Tome is completely useless in battle and is primarily an info dump object. It's better for your PCs to gain a certain understanding of their enemy earlier on in the game rather than later, and they'll automatically be drawn to populated areas.
	+ Which of those 3 places you wish to place the Tome is up to you, but that's my recommendation.

### The Holy Symbol of Ravenkind

* + Out of all the locations in Barovia, two of them are the most difficult to get your party to explore: Berez and Argynvostholt. There aren't many story reasons pushing your players towards either location and both are fun and interesting. If I were a player in this world, I'd hate to miss them, so I don't want my players to miss them either.
	+ If you've liked my guides so far and find my ideas and modifications useful, put the Holy Symbol in Argynvostholt, under the direct care of Vladimir.
	+ OR. So long as the Sunsword isn't there already, you can put the Symbol in the Amber Temple.

### The Ally

* + Let's be honest, some of these NPCs are pretty stupid and/or boring (Sir Klutz? Really?). Others require a lot of trouble to obtain, and then aren't very useful to the party in the end. You're better off picking who you want to use as the party's ally from the beginning.
	+ I wouldn't recommend any one particular Ally for your game. Take a look at your players and evaluate which might be ideal for their sidekick. Every group is different, so one ally might be more suited to your party than another. Do your players need help in battle? A comedic relief? A moral center? Try to make sure your party's ally is someone that can be useful to them, not just a nuisance they have to cart around.
	+ That being said, here are a few suggestions to consider:
		- **Arabelle**, the Vistani child. Arabelle isn't a fighter, but she can be a good moral center for a party of murder hobos. Children automatically get more of our attention and we try to hide bad things for their sake. Arabelle herself also isn't stupid. She knows when to hide when there's danger and she most certainly isn't a crybaby. Also, her Vistani Evil Eye can come in useful in a pinch.
		- **Pidlewick II**. I moved this little cutie out of Ravenloft and into Vallaki. Since meeting him, he's basically become my warlock's son. I'm pretty sure she would sacrifice the whole party to save Pidlewick. He's not terribly useful in battle, but Pidlewick is the source of a lot of morbid humor in my campaign. If you think your players would appreciate that, go for it.
		- **Mordenkainen** (the Mad Mage). The Mad Mage is a pretty interesting character and can be a hoot to role-play. He's a paranoid nut job and an old geezer. If he ends up in your party, there're sure to be laughs along the way.
		- **Rictavio/Rudolph Van Richten, Ezmerelda, or Kasimir**. Any of these NPCs can have the same function. They're intense, determined individuals who'll be super useful in battle. If you've got a group that tends to get themselves in a lot of trouble battle wise, one of these characters would probably help them a lot and teach them a thing or two about strategy.

### Do NOT use the following NPCs for your Ally:

* + **Ireena**. If you read my last post, you know that technically Ireena is doomed by the Dark Powers. She's an intricate part of Strahd's curse, so no fate in the world should tell the party that she'll be their lasting ally. Also, she's already will the party. Don't throw away a quest like that.
	+ **Victor Vallakovich**. I would highly recommend using this guide to run Victor, should your party meet him in Vallaki. The guide makes Victor super unlikeable, though. So having him as your prophesied ally would be pretty unfortunate.
	+ **The Darklord Card** meaning No Ally. Come on. This card is such a letdown. Don't do that to your players.

### The Final Confrontation

* + The location of the final fight with Strahd isn't super important. It's going to happen in Ravenloft and should take the party through most of the castle anyway.
	+ However, I'd recommend that you have this card be either somewhere high, or somewhere low. In other words, the castle spires or the crypts. This'll force your players to do a little dungeon delving beforehand, which is always fun. Also, it makes sense. If Strahd so much as senses that the players are coming uninvited, he should prepare for them. Forcing the party to whittle down their resources before facing him is very Strahd.

## On the Road Again

After the fortune reading, Madam Eva shoos the party from her tent and tells them to go and have fun. The night proceeds nicely, with more wine and laughter. If you didn't remind your party about the Dream Pies when they stayed in the Village of Barovia, now's your last chance to do so! The Vistani then happily provide their guests with some bedrolls under one of their tents. The next morning the party sets off for Vallaki again... but not without coming across Old Bonegrinder first.