

DRAGON®

CONTENTS

3 MISTY MEMORIES

By Stan!

This month we raise Ravenloft from the dead. Boys and ghouls, you're in for a treat.

4 STRAHD AND VAN RICHTEN

By Sterling Hershey

Rudolph van Richten is the D&D game's most esteemed vampire hunter, but one legendary vampire has so far eluded him.

11 TWISTED BY DARKNESS

By Doug Hyatt

Because of your brutal deeds, the dark powers have turned you into a misshapen horror. It's not as bad as it sounds.

16 THE LIFE OF SOTH

By Claudio Pozas

Brace yourself for a tale of love, honor, corruption, and terror from beyond the grave.

23 IN A VAMPIRIC VEIN

By Walter Kammerer

Vampire heroes need more than blood to survive. Here's a collection of magic items popular among children of the night.

25 RAK TULKHESH, THE RAGE OF WAR

By Keith Baker

Rak Tulkhesh was destroyed long ago. But in these grim times, it won't be long before the Rage of War is reborn.

28 THE AWAKENER OF GOLEMS

By Ed Greenwood

A mysterious figure wields the power to bring inert golems temporarily to life under his control. But to what end?

33 THE WITHERING ONES

By Rodney Thompson

Kalak kept a horde of zombies hidden below Tyr. Now that he is dead, do these undead horrors pose a threat to the city above?

Sample file

ON THE COVER *As envisioned by artist Tyler Jacobson, Count Strahd von Zarovich looks every inch the Barovian noble and cunning vampire lord as he welcomes you to his home, Castle Ravenloft. The count's assistant might have a disturbing appearance, but Strahd assures you the little fellow is harmless enough.*

DRAGON®

416

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Misty Memories

By Stan!

With all the wicked thoughts that October inspires, it seemed like the perfect month to dive into the mists of Ravenloft® for a little D&D® with a tinge of Gothic horror.

My first job at TSR was as an editor on Ravenloft, polishing the tombstones on the Grim Harvest series of adventures. I've had a taste for the spookier side of D&D ever since, so this issue's theme is right up my dark and threatening alley.

For those who don't know, the Demiplane of Dread has its origins in the classic 1st Edition D&D module, *Ravenloft* (I6). Soon after that, it was transformed into a whole campaign setting. The Ravenloft setting was a place where exceptionally vile villains from any number of worlds were brought by mysterious forces known only as the dark powers. Each villain was made the darklord of a small demesne, with great powers over the land and anyone in it. This power came with a price, though; each darklord was trapped by the mists and suffered under a unique curse that ultimately denied his or her heart's true desire. These lands came to be known as domains of dread.

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Although Ravenloft as a whole did not make the leap into 4th Edition, the concept of domains of dread did. Rather than existing on the Demiplane of Dread, though, domains of dread now are said to be isolated realms within the Shadowfell. It takes only a bit of retrofitting to imagine the whole of the campaign floating somewhere in that dark, misty corner of the cosmos, and that opens up a world of possibilities.

In this month's issue, we bring you a creepy collection of macabre musings—articles that you can use when your campaign wanders into a dark and scary place. Whether it's the Shadowfell, beyond the mists of Ravenloft, or just in the darkest corners of the human heart, you'll be glad to have these pages tucked away in your satchel.

First among the darklords is Strahd von Zarovich—the villain of *Ravenloft*, and the most iconic vampire in all of D&D lore. It was from Strahd and his cursed existence that the Ravenloft campaign setting sprung, and this month's History Check article explores the links between this monster and the ultimate monster hunter, Rudolph van Richten.

Another darklord can be found among these pages, too. Lord Soth is the only character in the annals of D&D to be a key figure in two campaign settings—first as the lord of Dargaard Keep in the Dragonlance® setting and then as the Lord of Sithicus in Ravenloft. Learn his woeful tale in "The Life of Soth."

The lords who rule domains of dread aren't the only ones that the mists have cursed. When good people do terrible things, they draw the attention of the dark powers. "Character Themes: Twisted by Darkness" enables you to make characters who literally bear the marks of their past transgressions.

Bloodsucking fiends are powerful, but so are the adventurers who hunt them. "Bazaar of the Bizarre: In a Vampiric Vein" presents a collection of monstrous magical items that the children of the night can use to get an edge on their enemies (mortal or otherwise).

The days are growing shorter, there's a chill in the air, and no one knows what unholy creatures stalk the dark of the night. So, roll up a fresh character and march boldly into the mists . . . if you dare.




Sample file

History Check: Strahd and van Richten

By Sterling Hershey

Illustrations by Tyler Jacobson and Miles Johnston

Welcome to the latest installment of this continuing series featuring iconic characters from the settings of the Dungeons & Dragons® game. Each History Check article recalls some of the game's classic characters and events, while adding new insight. Sidebars in the text provide guidance to Dungeon Masters and players as to what a character might know of these stories with a successful skill check.

This installment descends into the dark horror of the infamous lord of Ravenloft, Count Strahd von Zarovich, and brings to light the glimmers of hope provided by Strahd's rival, the master monster hunter Dr. Rudolph van Richten. It begins with a passage from the viewpoint of the sole survivor of a brutal attack, who escaped with a damaged copy of a mysterious book. . . .

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A Desperate Approach

"Madam Singer! I've searched for a Vistani caravan for weeks. It took many days to catch up with you. You are obviously in a hurry, but I beg you, please, I need information that only the Vistani can give. . . . Yes, I can pay. . . . Yes, I would be honored to ride with you inside the wagon as we talk. I do not wish to slow you down this gloomy night. . . .

"Madam, please put away your tarokka cards and crystal ball. I didn't chase you across many leagues for a reading or a prophecy. You see, I am the last of my family. A month ago, our estate was attacked in the dark of night. When I heard the screams of my family and friends, I panicked and ran into the countryside. When morning came, I returned home, ashamed of my fear and cowardice. I found everyone from the servants to the eldest of our noble house brutally slain. When I saw their broken bodies, anger and a thirst for vengeance replaced my shame and fear. While searching the house for any survivors, I ran across the charred remains of this book in the fireplace of my father's ruined library.

"As you can see, it is all but destroyed. All I can read is the title, Van Richten's Guide to Vampires. *My father seemingly ran afoul of one of these evil creatures and was researching how to destroy it, before it found him that frightful night.*

"People say the Vistani know much of vampires. Please, tell me how to defeat them. Tell me of this van Richten—does he know the means of their destruction?"

The First Vampire

"Oh, yes, young one, we know about vampires. Some would say too much. I'm sure you were warned to beware of the Vistani.

"Now, you are foolish to so quickly dismiss my mystical powers and the importance of the reading of your fortune. After all, how else did I know you were coming? Lucky for you, I foresaw your arrival, your desperation, and the weight of your purse. Otherwise, this caravan would be worlds away by now, and you would be wandering a long and empty road.

"Your father was incredibly fortunate to obtain one of van Richten's tomes. I foresee great shame will fall upon your family for its being destroyed while in your care. Not all will mourn its loss, certainly not the vampire who destroyed it. Perhaps not even the Vistani . . . well, not *all* of the Vistani.

"Van Richten is a name we know well. The Vistani are responsible, after a fashion, for setting him on this path. If not for our relatives, then van Richten's hatred of vampires, his unending battle against the supernatural, and his detailed tomes would not exist. He has saved countless mortal souls. His texts have enabled others to destroy thousands of terrible monsters and unholy beasts. Despite his good works, he would not thank us for providing his inspiration. As you will learn, he has every right to hate the Vistani.

"Van Richten is a famous monster hunter. He is the archenemy of vampires, werebeasts, the undead, and others who terrify an entire populace merely by their arrival in the area. These are van Richten's subjects of study, as well as his eternal foes.

"But to understand van Richten, you must first understand his greatest enemies—the vampires. If you want to take on your vampire, I can place you on the right path. Can you handle it? We shall see.

"Now, young one, we must start with the so-called first vampire. You're right to be skeptical of the title. He's unlikely to have been the first vampire to walk the world. On the other hand, it's said he's the first to be created by death itself. He certainly was the first vampire in his now famously tormented land, Barovia."

Sample file

The Zarovans

Madam Singer, the narrator of this History Check, is a member of the Zarovan tribe of the Vistani. The Vistani's mysterious caravans travel vast distances and visit distant places, such as the Shadowfell and lands beyond.

More information about the Vistani can be found in *Player's Option: Heroes of Shadow,* the boxed set *The Shadowfell: Gloomwrought and Beyond*, and the Vistani articles in *Dragon* 380.

Triumph and Tragedy

"Count Strahd von Zarovich is the Lord of Barovia. The Vistani know him even better than van Richten does. Our people travel many lands, and some of them prefer to reside in Barovia—to be close to Strahd.

"Yes, young one, we know vampires. We know the most famous one of all very well. Personally, some might say. . . .

"Strahd excels at deceit and manipulation. Most of his subjects, the people of Barovia, believe he's a normal man. Even though they call him the "devil Strahd," they think he's simply an incredibly old man in the long line of von Zarovich. No matter how you approach them, they simply will not accept the truth.

"But believe me, young one, there is little about Barovia or its lord that you would consider normal. Long ago, Strahd arrived in Barovia as a strict but generally good-intentioned noble. He was a successful conqueror, and his army settled in the area. Strahd called his scattered family to join him at Castle Ravenloft, his new residence and his seat of power.

"You may not yet understand, but years of war and death weigh heavily on even the mightiest leaders. Strahd regretted the years of his youth that he lost to his efforts of conquest. A sinister darkness settled across his mind.

"Strahd ruled Barovia harshly. He was authoritarian, but not yet truly evil. It was a different kind of loss that pushed him over the edge.

"Do you know of love yet, young one? Yes? Unrequited love? Then you know the pain of longing, jealousy, and even madness that can befall those who are rejected by the object of their affection.

"Count von Zarovich, quite simply, fell in love. She was a young woman called Tatyana. He adored and pursued her. Of course, she rejected him. She called him 'old one' and worse. That treatment shattered his ego. Strahd knew she rejected him because she saw little but old age and death within him.

"Even worse, Tatyana fell in love with Sergei, Strahd's younger brother. From the moment Sergei had arrived at Castle Ravenloft with the family, Strahd had despised him for his youth and handsomeness. Word of their betrothal crushed Strahd. Jealousy and disappointment drove his soul down a dark path.

"But Strahd would not surrender, not even to death. No, he used his arcane powers to make a pact with death instead. On Sergei's wedding day, Strahd sealed the pact by murdering his own brother.

"Tatyana fled from Strahd, refusing to hear his attempts to explain himself. The castle guards shot the count during his pursuit. Consumed in grief and horror, Tatyana threw herself from the battlements of Castle Ravenloft. She disappeared into the mists a thousand feet below.

"The count should have died from his wounds, like any normal man. But the pact saved his life, in a way of speaking. He did not die because he could not. He became undead. He became a vampire, and his wrath fell upon the entire wedding party.

"Now, young one, you must understand that vampires usually are created by other vampires. Not so with Strahd. Such was the nature of his pact with death that when it was combined with his indomitable will, he was able to thwart the grasp of mortality itself."

Dreadful Transformation

"The land of Barovia changed when Strahd was reborn into unlife. Since that time, the fate of the people living there has grown ever darker.

"The borders of Barovia became enshrouded in an unnatural mist. The citizens discovered they were trapped, and they had little contact with the outside world. Any people who tried to travel through the mist found themselves back in Barovia . . . or were never heard from again.

"Any people except the Vistani, that is. We can pierce the mists when we desire, and the mists accommodate us. We can even take others with us at times, though those who know of this ability rarely ask for our aid. Travelers fear we'll leave them in an evil realm or abandon them in the mist. Those fears are not wholly unjustified. . . .

"The Barovians rarely try to escape. They fell into a peculiar mindset after the transformation, and thereafter had no difficulty in keeping to their own lands. Terrible creatures and powerful undead roamed the night. No one dared step foot outside their dwellings once the sun had set. No one ever opened their doors after dark, not even in response to screams or pleas for help from their friends and neighbors.

"We eventually discerned that Barovia had shifted into the Shadowfell, constituting its own realm enshrouded by a mysterious border mist. Strahd controls many aspects of his domain and can monitor some events. What's more, the mist has trapped

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Roleplaying Strahd

Count Strahd von Zarovich is one of the game's best known and most popular villains. He has been used extensively by DMs to directly attack, torment, and interact with the player characters. Strahd is a complex, classic villain, with multiple motivations at any given time. He often toys with his enemies, and then crushes them when he tires of the game, or if they legitimately threaten him.

The count pursues his goals ruthlessly. He will personally attend to important matters using stealth, intimidation, or violence. Because time means nothing to Strahd, he will retreat if events go poorly for him. Waiting for a better opportunity is rarely a problem.

His goals are mostly personal ones. Strahd is haunted by recurring visions of his lost Tatyana and still hopes that she, or her reincarnation, might one day become his bride. Despite his never-ending desire, he has not yet succeeded. Many years might pass between these opportunities, during which Strahd might occupy himself with other matters. He rarely cares enough about Barovian affairs to dedicate time to them, unless they directly support or interfere with his plans. He occasionally attempts to escape Ravenloft, and he pursues powerful magic items that could threaten or aid him.

In an encounter with adventurers, Strahd is evil and lethal. He strikes suddenly, often with the help of wolves or undead allies. Breaks rarely fall the characters' way. They should feel fortunate to escape him and triumphant if they defeat him, albeit temporarily.

Strahd as effectively as everyone else. He, like his subjects, cannot leave. . . .

"It would be a mistake to think that Barovia is open only to Vistani travelers. Occasionally, the mist surrounding Barovia mysteriously appears on far-flung worlds or lands. Travelers enter a patch of ordinary fog or dense mist only to exit in Barovia. Most never escape and are forced to become permanent inhabitants. A few discover they might be able to depart by defeating the dark lord, Strahd himself.

"It might surprise you, young one, that over the decades, a few have even successfully fled. Though they might have won their freedom, Strahd has never been ultimately defeated. On occasions when he disappears for weeks or months on end, the Barovians continue living as though he is simply away, ready to return after any sunset. They know it can happen."

Enemies Not Yet Met

"Powerful people and evil creatures are never without enemies. If one's stature is measured by the quality of his or her foes, what does it say that Count Strahd von Zarovich and Dr. Rudolph van Richten are the fiercest of opponents? How does that change, when you consider that the mortal realm's most famous monster hunter has never personally fought one of his worst foes?

"Well, young one, the easy answer is that this story is not yet complete. Perhaps they will someday fight an epic duel—fangs versus mallet and stake. For now, it is accurate to say that they are already engaged in a more subtle conflict.

"In some ways, Strahd and van Richten are more alike than the good doctor would like to admit. Both prefer to outwit their opponents. Both use violence when it suits them. Both manipulate or recruit others to fight their battles, though their methods differ. It is said that van Richten has even entered Castle Ravenloft, but only to gather information, not to engage in combat with Strahd.

"I'm certain van Richten fears Strahd. Only a fool would not. Does this emotion stay van Richten's hand? I doubt it. Van Richten despises vampires above all others. I'm certain that despite his apprehensions, he is driven to find the means of Strahd's true and permanent destruction.

"The Lord of Barovia cannot be slain as normal vampires can be. In some corners it is said that vampires might be destroyed by the light of day. Indeed, Strahd cannot abide the sun and is dormant throughout the daylight hours. Even if he is destroyed by physical attack, magical force, or other violent means, he always, eventually, returns. As a mortal, van Richten has only one life to risk in such a confrontation. Even worse would be to fall to an undead foe and become one of them. So, he is right to be cautious with the devil Strahd.

"Which would the Vistani support in such a confrontation? Impetuous child! Do not insult us. Those that deal with Strahd do so in exchange for other opportunities. The Vistani need no such assistance. If Strahd were destroyed, the Vistani would go on. If van Richten were killed, the Vistani would not weep. The Vistani serve themselves.

"That last fact, young one, is why others warned you about the Vistani. It is why we are not trusted. They say we might sell anyone out at the first opportunity, if the price is right. Sometimes, they are right. Fortunately for you, your gold is good today. . . .

"Indeed, the Vistani know Barovia well, but we are not limited to that realm or anywhere else. Barovia is not the only dreadful domain to be claimed and held in isolation by the Shadowfell. In fact, there is a similarity between Strahd and the good doctor—because van Richten comes from another isolated domain of dread, one called Darkon.

"That place is out of Count von Zarovich's reach, but it is every bit as perilous as Barovia. Many of the same horrific, supernatural creatures lurk in both realms, as well as this world. Perhaps the mists are what provide them passage.

"Darkon's isolation is the reason I am not surprised that you had never heard of van Richten before you found this charred book. Your father's acquisition of it must be a long story at the end of a difficult journey. It is not the first of van Richten's tomes to reach this world, but such an event is a rare occurrence."

History Check

The following History check DCs assume the character making the check to be from a location outside Barovia or Darkon. Characters from those realms gain a +5 bonus when making a History check about Barovia or Strahd.

History DC 15: The character knows vague and dreadful tales regarding undead and supernatural horrors in a legendary realm called Barovia.

History DC 20: The character has heard rumors about Count Strahd von Zarovich and his harsh rule over Barovia. The stories imply that he is more than an evil human lord, but do not speak to his true nature.

History DC 25: The character knows that Barovia is a mist-enshrouded domain of dread in the Shadowfell, and is aware of rumored difficulties in entering or leaving the domain.

History DC 30: The character has heard tales that the Vistani of Barovia act as Strahd's spies and allies. The character has also heard that van Richten is interested in defeating Strahd.

History DC 35: The character has heard assertions of Strahd's true nature as a vampire and his status as the lord of his domain of dread.

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