

# Ravenloft

## PLAYER'S HANDBOOK

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# Chapter One: The World of Ravenloft

*Searchers after horror haunt strange, far places. For them are the catacombs... and the carven mausolea of the nightmare countries. They climb to the moonlit towers of ruined... castles and falter down black, cobwebbed steps beneath the scattered stones of forgotten cities.... The haunted wood and the desolate mountain are their shrines, and they linger around the sinister monoliths on uninhabited islands.*

—H. P. Lovecraft, "The Picture in the House"



I am the Ancient, I am the Land. My beginnings are lost in the darkness of the past. I was the warrior, I was good and just. I thundered across the land like the wrath of a just god, but the war years and the killing years wore down my soul as the wind wears stone into sand. All goodness slipped from my life; I found my youth and strength gone, and all I had left was death.

My army settled in the valley of Barovia and took power over the people in the name of a just god, but with none of a god's grace or justice. I called for my family, long unseated from their ancient thrones, and brought them here to settle in Castle Ravenloft. They came with a younger brother of mine, Sergei. He was handsome and youthful. I hated him for both.

Sergei had plucked from the families of the valley one whose spirit shone above all others: a rare beauty who was called "perfection," "joy" and "treasure." Her name was Tatyana, and I longed for her to be mine. I loved her with all my heart. I loved her for her youth. I loved her for her joy.

But she spurned me! "Old one" was my name to her — "elder" and "brother" also. Her heart went to Sergei. They were betrothed. The date was set.

With words, she called me "brother," but when I looked into her eyes, they reflected another name: "death." It was the death of the aged that she saw in me. She loved her youth and enjoyed it, but I had squandered mine. The death she saw in me turned her from me, and so I came to hate death, my death. My hate is very strong; I would not be called death so soon. And so, I made a pact with Death itself, a pact of blood. On the day of his wedding, I killed Sergei. My pact was sealed with his blood.

I found Tatyana weeping in the garden east of the chapel. She fled from me. She would not let me explain, and a great anger swelled within me. She had to understand the pact I made for her. I pursued her. Finally, in despair, she flung herself from the walls of Ravenloft, and I watched everything I ever wanted fall from my grasp forever.

The fall was a thousandfeet through the mists. No trace of her was ever found. Not even I know her fate.

Arrows from the castle guards pierced me to my soul, but I did not die. Nor did I live. I became undead, forever.

I have studied much since then. "Vampyr" is my new name. I still lust for life and youth, and I curse the living that took them from me. Even the sun is against me. I fear sun and light the most. But little else can harm me now. Even a stake through my heart does not kill me, though it holds me from movement.

I have often hunted for Tatyana. I have even felt her within my grasp, yet she escapes. She taunts me! She haunts me! What will it take to bend her love to me?





beyond mortal senses, beyond your reality, there lurks a boundless plane. It permeates your world and fills the void between worlds. It is the border between the lands of the living and of the dead.

There, mind and matter become one; thought and passion, fear and yearning, can become more tangible than iron. It is the Ethereal Plane.

Somewhere, lurking deep within those ethereal mists, a dark and nameless dimension is ruled by dark and nameless powers. Some say it is a prison for the damned; some say it is a crucible to test the virtuous. Others simply call it home. It is a land of mist and shadow, love and death, sacrifice and seduction, beauty and horror. It is a land of whispered fears made manifest. It is the Realm of Dread.

Perhaps you have sensed its touch. At the bidding of the Dark Powers, tendrils of the ethereal Mists that bind this land reach out to caress the Material Plane. They stroke the skin at the back of your neck when a creaking floorboard warns that you are not alone in the dark. Their invisible fingers crawl down your spine when inhuman shadows rustle at the edges of your vision.

The Mists do more than merely caress. The Dark Powers are drawn to innocence and villainy, to loathing and desire, to obsession and to despair. They seek out squandered dreams and inner demons. They savor the decay of the spirit. Their Mists snatch up fiends at the moment of their ruin and steal upon heroes in times of doubt.

To what end do the Dark Powers add these souls to their tarnished collection? To torment them? To purify them? None can say, for few souls drawn into the Realm of Dread ever leave to tell the tale. Yet perhaps you will soon learn for yourself, for tonight, the Mists have come for you.

Welcome to the Land of Mists. Welcome to the crucible of virtue and the spoils of damnation. Welcome to the Realm of Dread.

Welcome to Ravenloft.

## Why a New Edition?

While the Ravenloft Campaign Setting brought this game world into line with the d20 System, the **Ravenloft Player's Handbook** updates that information to correspond to the many changes wrought with the 3.5 revisions. Further, we have added exciting new material to make the Ravenloft setting even more enticing than and different from any other campaign world. Character classes have

been altered to reflect the particular atmosphere of the Ravenloft setting, along with changes to some spells and feats. New information has been collected and disseminated herein. These are in addition to the systemic changes in the Dungeons & Dragons version 3.5 rules, which has cleaned up murky rulings, made significant changes of its own and fixed what was formerly broken.

As with the previous edition, it is our intent that whole campaigns be played within the Ravenloft setting. While the Realm of Dread can work for a "weekend in hell" for outlanders, the setting has been made more internally consistent and suitable for extended games. It is, by nature, a darker world this time around, but still evocative of the fantasy environment. While the focus is not on introspection or florid horror, we do hope that you occasionally jump or cringe at Ravenloft's terrors as you gather around the table to play. It is a world of Gothic adventure, ready for your heroes to brave its dangers. Much less emphasis is placed on getting in and going home; this edition presumes that your exploits in Ravenloft occur on a much longer-term scale.

## How to Use This Book

You now hold the **Ravenloft Player's Handbook** for the d20 System, version 3.5. It contains all the guidelines you need to play in a Ravenloft campaign or to apply its Gothic atmosphere to any setting of your own creation. You need the Revised Third Editions of the **Player's Handbook**, **Dungeon Master's Guide** and **Monster Manual** to make full use of these new rules.

If you plan to run a Ravenloft campaign, you may find the **Ravenloft Dungeon Master's Guide** and the upcoming **Denizens of Dread**, both compatible with the 3.5 versions of the d20 System, useful as well. The **Ravenloft Dungeon Master's Guide** is filled with forbidden lore for the DM, including campaign suggestions, magic items, prestige classes and prophesy, while the **Denizens of Dread** is a compendium of the most chilling and lethal creatures known to lurk in Ravenloft's misty realms.

## Chapter by Chapter

This chapter introduces the Ravenloft setting, including a lexicon of common terms used in Ravenloft campaigns.

**Chapter Two: Player Characters** provides all the changes needed to reshape heroes for Gothic adventures. This chapter also introduces a new







race, the giomorgo, and new skills, feats, religions and equipment.

**Chapter Three: Ways of the World** offers the game rules that form the foundation of Gothic adventure campaigns. These include new rules for fear, horror and madness; laying curses of vengeance; powers checks; and the changes to spells and magic items.

**Chapter Four: The Dread Realms** provides a player's guide to more than forty of the domains that compose the world of Ravenloft.

**Chapter Five: Horrors of the Night** offers expanded rules for the most infamous creatures known to haunt the Realm of Dread, from vampires to lycanthropes to hags. A DM uses these rules to ensure that her players never know exactly what to expect from their foes. This chapter also details Ravenloft's mysterious gypsies, the Vistani.

**Chapter Six: The Ravenloft Campaign** offers advice to players and DMs on how to explore the themes and concepts inherent to Gothic adventures.

## Early Gothic Tales

Early Gothic novels were tales of mystery, romance and brooding horror. They were typically set in earlier times, though their authors were more concerned with instilling an atmosphere of decadence and decay than with achieving any sense of historical accuracy. At the heart of these early tales sat the vast and crumbling Gothic castles that gave the genre its name. These ancient citadels were more than mere scenery. Their slow descent into picturesque ruin reflected the spiritual decay of their masters, their secret passages spoke of ancient mysteries, and the specters that walked their halls decried old crimes, neither avenged nor forgotten.

The master of the castle — and villain of the tale — was a murderer and usurper who had unwittingly sacrificed all hope for happiness in a relentless, Faustian pursuit for knowledge, power or pleasure. The protagonist paled in comparison, usually assuming the role of a lovely and innocent young maiden imperiled by the villain's desires, or a brave young man laid low by a stolen birthright.

Gothic tales were infused with an atmosphere of supernatural dread. Ancestral curses and mournful ghosts manipulated events and eroded the characters' sanity. Unnatural deformities such as scars, strange birthmarks, or hunched backs turned men into monsters, apparent punishments for the crimes of their fathers. Gothic tales evoked subtle horrors, deriving terror from foreboding, not gore — the knowledge that the coming sunset will free a vampire from its crypt, not the grisly details of a werewolf's rampage. Indeed, the supernatural was presented so subtly in early Gothic novels that it was often explained away entirely once the tale's central mystery was resolved. In the brightness of day, ghosts became tricks of the light; eerie creatures became mad hermits.

One supernatural presence could not be denied. Behind the scenes, the forces of divine Good and Evil duelled to drive the tale to its conclusion. Most early Gothic tales adhered rigidly to the same story arc. The tyrannical villain has committed a terrible crime and escaped justice, but his sins have made his existence corrupt and hollow. The innocent young protagonists arrive in the villain's realm. Incensed by their purity, or fearing that they will expose his guilt, the villain persecutes the young innocents. As the tale unfolds twists of fate and spectral interlopers reveal the villain's crimes and the young hero's stolen birthright. It is the villain's own foul deeds

## The Gothic Mystique



*t might be said that the Gothic novel is a primitive detective story in which Deity or Fate is the detective.*

— E. F. Bleiler, editor, *Three Gothic Novels*

Imagine a scene set in an earlier age, resembling a highly romanticized version of our own medieval era. It is a world still beholden to ancient superstitions. A meager handful of valorous young men and women explores an ancient ruin, seeking to uncover the sinister web of mystery locked within its maze of secret passageways. In these shadowed halls, our heroes face many supernatural threats — but none are so terrible as the powerful and corrupt master of the keep, who sits at the center of both the ruin and its mystery.

These images, familiar to any dungeon-crawler in modern fantasy roleplaying, first burst to literary life with the birth of the Gothic genre in the late 18th century. The father of this genre was Horace Walpole, a dilettante author enraptured with his romantic vision of the Middle Ages. His novel, *The Castle of Otranto*, laid the thematic foundation that all early Gothic novels would closely observe.







and the divine forces of justice — far more than the hapless protagonists — that drive the villain to his final ruin. In the end, all crimes are avenged, evil devours itself, and true love emerges victorious.

### The Late Gothic Tradition

The Gothic genre blossomed in the early nineteenth century. New generations of authors broke through the rigid formula of the early Gothics, adding layers to Otranto's foundation. The hapless protagonists of the early tales were pushed aside, now serving as mere witnesses to the villain's downfall. The Gothic genre now belonged to the villains: sophisticated antiheroes both repellent and compelling, possessed of amazing potential squandered through painfully common mortal flaws. Such Gothic villains included Victor Frankenstein, whose hubris doomed his divine ambitions, and the caliph Vathek, who pursued his lust for power into an Arabian hell.

The nebulous curses and haunts of the early tales now became all too real. The later Gothic authors reinterpreted ancient legends to invent archetypal new horrors. Mary Shelley created the flesh golem, giving life to the dangers and responsibilities of parenthood. John Polidori modeled the

world's first aristocratic and charismatic vampire on his associate, the famed poet Lord Byron.

The ghosts and ghouls of the Gothic tradition were, above all else, allegorical doppelgangers: reflections of human evil. When Frankenstein rejected his monster, he rejected the terrible consequences of his own profane actions. Those same deeds would return to haunt him in the form of his forlorn creation.

### The Victorian Revival

As the 19th century continued, the Gothic tradition writhed beyond its roots. As the genre came to a close, Edgar Allan Poe added tales of dementia and obsession, and in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" carried the Gothic sense of unnatural dread into his new creation: the "consulting detective."

The Gothic genre flared to life once more at the century's end. New authors applied the societal fears of their day to the old staples. The burgeoning fields of evolution and psychology threatened to prove man no more than a beast wrapped in the thin veneer of civilization. From these fears of repressed passion and self-betrayal come Dorian Gray, who hid a portrait of his true depravity; Dr.







Moreau, who sought to make men of beasts and a deity of himself; and Dr. Jekyll, whose struggle with suppressed savagery would form the foundation of the Gothic werewolf.

As the 19th century gave way to the 20th, one aspect of the early Gothic tradition started to make an unexpected comeback: the hero. The protagonists of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* pursued their immortal foe across Europe to end his evil unlife. The consulting detective came home to create "occult detectives" such as Le Fanu's General Spielsdorf, Stoker's Van Helsing, Blackwood's John Silence and Hodgson's Carnacki. These characters studied the occult not in the pursuit of personal power, but to combat its evil — these virtuous scholars plunged their Faustian counterparts deeper into darkness.

With his tales of the Puritan witch-hunter Solomon Kane, Robert E. Howard even carried the Gothic staples into the fantastic worlds of pulp adventure, the same genres of swords and sorcery that would one day spawn fantasy roleplaying.

## To the Grave and Back

As the 20th century dawned, the horror genre advanced. The Gothic tradition gave way to the weird tales of authors such as H. P. Lovecraft, who retained a Gothic aura of decay while creating fearsome alien entities, reflecting a society humbled by scientific discovery and the inhumanity of the Great War. Vampires, ghosts and werewolves were soon dismissed as threadbare clichés.

But they always come back. A few decades passed, and then the Gothic tradition burst back into the world, like Mr. Hyde too long repressed. With each Gothic revival, new writers twisted the old archetypes, applying the anxieties of their age. Every era has a disease that can walk in a vampire's shoes; every generation has seen the cautionary tales of Frankenstein and Moreau come one step closer to reality.

The Gothic genre refuses to lie quiet in the grave. Its horrors — vampires, madmen, ghosts — continue to resonate within us because they are us.

We invite you now into a world of Gothic adventure where innocence battles corruption, where love destroys and redeems, where magic cannot overcome morality and where divine justice comes to all.

## The Realm of Dread



It will  
this world.

*evil is... a moral entity and not a created one, an eternal and not a perishable entity: it existed before the world; it constituted the monstrous, the execrable being who was also to fashion such a hideous world. hence exist after the creatures that people*

—Marquis De Sade, *L'Histoire de Juliette, ou les Prosperites du Vice*

Ravenloft is a world unlike any other. It is a construct, an artificial pocket realm endlessly prowling the trackless Ethereal Plane. The implacable Dark Powers crafted their realm from the hidden fears of the innumerable worlds of the Material Plane, and shape reality to reflect their sinister sensibilities.

This section introduces the core concepts of the Ravenloft setting; further details can be found in Chapter Three.

## Tenets of Terror

On the surface, the Realm of Dread seems much like any low-magic setting (see Chapter 5 in the DMG and Chapter Three in the *Ravenloft Dungeon Master's Guide*) found on the Material Plane. Spellcasters are rare, and common folk seldom witness the supernatural, understanding it only through folklore (though that folklore is frighteningly prevalent). However, few of Ravenloft's denizens know that the natural laws of their world have been insidiously rewritten.

## Good and Evil

Spell effects that detect ethical alignment (alignment on the law–chaos axis) perform normally, but no magic can directly detect moral alignment (alignment on the good–evil axis). By shielding evil, the Dark Powers force mortals to rely on their own judgment. Although some people in Ravenloft come to dismiss the concept of absolute morality as an antiquated myth, Good and Evil remain vital and omnipresent, locked in eternal struggle. Characters who preserve their innocence are subtly protected from the forces of darkness, while those who commit evil acts risk falling to these eldritch powers, their minds and bodies slowly warping to reflect their inner corruption. People who wholly embrace the lures of evil may eventually find themselves trapped in prisons of their own making.







## Necromancy and the Undead

Forces that tap into the corrupting power of the Negative Energy Plane are potent and perilous in Ravenloft. The vile undead — creatures trapped in a twisted mockery of life — become more powerful and are often shielded from magic that would reveal their true nature. Those who dare command the undead must take care, for with increased power comes increased resistance to control.

Necromantic spells are similarly enhanced, but few forces carry greater risks of tainting the caster's soul than those that disrupt the natural cycle of life and death or deny the spirits of the dead their final reward.

## Divination

The Realm of Dread does not easily surrender its mysteries. Divination is untrustworthy in Ravenloft. Magic that would reveal a creature's true nature, portend future events or reveal the desires of the deities often produces skewed results or even fails entirely. Only the Vistani, a nomadic, gypsylike race, can reliably reveal the future's secrets, and they only reveal such to others for their own mysterious reasons.

## Travel

The Ravenloft Mists often cause travelers to lose their way, or they abandon them in strange lands. Even magical forms of transportation must contend with the Mists' misdirection. Only powerful magic can transport subjects from one domain to another, and not even the most powerful of spells can grant escape from a closed domain. (See Domains, below.) The Mists even restrict planar travel: unless the Mists allow it, no force short of a major artifact or the direct intervention of a deity can provide passage to other planes.

## The Near Ethereal

Although characters in Ravenloft cannot readily travel to other planes, they can reach the Ethereal. Even then, these travelers can access only the Near Ethereal — the border between the Deep Ethereal and other planes — like waders on the shores of a vast and bottomless ocean. Ravenloft's Near Ethereal is a realm of restless spirits, its landscape shaped by the lingering passions of the living.

## Domains

The Realm of Dread is composed of scores of small pocket “nations” not too far removed from planes themselves, like the cells of a honeycomb — or the cells of a prison. Each of these artificially constructed countries, called domains, is the prison of a singular evil entity: its darklord. A domain may stand alone, an “Island of Terror” surrounded by the Mists of Ravenloft, or it may join seamlessly with other domains in clusters to form a continuous landscape.

Every aspect of a domain, from its climate to the creatures that call it home, is a subtle reflection of its darklord, offering painful reminders of the transgressions that forged the darklord's doom. The size of a domain may range from a single room, to a lonesome manor and its grounds, to an expansive dominion containing numerous towns and a thriving culture. Some occult sages believe that a domain's size may be a measure of the darklord's force of personality, his squandered potential, or even of the tragedy of his tale. However, the Dark Powers may grant a less compelling darklord a vast but sparsely populated domain, furthering his isolation, or they may trap a powerful darklord in a smaller domain, concentrating his evil.

## Domain Borders

In regions made up of more than one domain, the edges of a domain may be recognized as political boundaries, or they may be indicated only by physical landmarks — a brook, perhaps, or the edge of a forest. In some cases, however, a traveler may have no way to tell that she has crossed into a new den of evil.

Even worse, that traveler may find escape impossible, even if freedom is just a few paces away. Almost all darklords can close the borders of their domains at will; if a darklord cannot close his domain, the cause often lies in the nature of the curse that binds him to the land. When a darklord closes his domain, immensely powerful supernatural effects manifest at the borders to prevent passage. As an example, many travelers in Ravenloft have heard tales of the poisonous vapors that sometimes surround Barovia, choking anyone who attempts to leave. No mortal magic can overcome the effects of a closed domain border, nor can a dice throw.







## The Mists of Ravenloft

Thick fog blankets the melancholy moor of a Gothic tale, confounding travelers and washing away the world. A film of vapor seeps along the headstones of a graveyard, concealing hidden dangers. In Ravenloft, these Mists assume a life of their own. The Ravenloft Mists act as the claws of the Dark Powers. Every child in Ravenloft knows of the Misty Border, the churning walls of Mist that surround and isolate domains and clusters.

A traveler who enters the Misty Border hoping to reach another domain quickly finds herself engulfed by a netherworld of obscuring white fog. Even the ground beneath her feet fades away. Direction and distance become meaningless. Unless a traveler uses a Mistway (a current in the flow of the Mists) or is escorted by the Vistani or a powerful anchorite (a cleric of a goddess said to have merged with the Mists), she has no control over where the Mists deposit her.

The Mists can even rob time of its meaning. Within the Misty Border, night blends seamlessly into day, and no turning of the moon occurs. Legends are told of travelers who emerged from the Mists weeks or years after — or even before — they entered.

The Mists are not limited to the netherworld between domains. They can appear anywhere and at any time in Ravenloft, boiling up from the earth to snatch up creatures and place them where they will. Rumors also speak of more insidious appearances by the Mists. Whispered tales tell of folk who wandered lost for days in a small grove of trees, or of back alleys that became twisting labyrinths, or of a house that contained more rooms than it physically could. People who encounter this phenomenon are said to be “Mist-led.” Opinions differ on whether the Mists disorient these folk by fogging their senses or by imposing true, ephemeral changes to reality.

Regardless of how the Mists manifest, when they come, no force can stop them.

The Mists appear as a bogeyman in countless legends. Ravenloft’s folk blame any bad luck on the meddling of the Mists and often refer to the Misty Border as the World’s-End Mists or the Mists of Death. The Misty Border is the legendary home of countless unfathomable horrors.

At the best guess of sages and scholars, the Mists are a manifestation of the Near Ethereal, strands of the cobweb that binds the Realm of Dread — but the Mists are indistinguishable from







normal banks of fog, even under magical scrutiny. The Mists may also take other subtle forms. For example, in deserts they often appear as clouds of dust or rippling waves of heat; in lands cloaked by winter, they may appear as blinding snowstorms. Even the merest ripple in a calm sea may indicate a parting — or closing — of the Mists.

### Outlanders and Other Worlds

Ravenloft's insular folk have many equivalent terms for "outlanders," travelers who hail from foreign domains beyond the Misty Border. On rare occasions, these stragglers may even claim to have come from lands beyond the Realm of Dread.

The Mists can stretch their tendrils into any world with ties to the Ethereal Plane. In game terms, an outlander is any creature that has been drawn into Ravenloft from one of these worlds. The Mists usually reach into other worlds to snatch up evildoers; indeed, many darklords are rumored to be outlanders. The domains of these outlander darklords are often reminiscent of other worlds on the Material Plane.

Although no one truly knows why, the Mists sometimes draw other folk into Ravenloft as well, be they hapless bystanders or mighty heroes. If the DM approves, players can create outlander player characters. Outlanders are rare, but they have no special advantages or penalties in relation to native characters.

### Masques

Whether ordained by the Dark Powers or not, occasionally, some force from Ravenloft reaches out to interact with and influence other worlds in ways different from the norm. The Mists may project an aura of evil over a land not of Ravenloft, stretch out a domain to overlap an existing world on the Material Plane or release an entity to bring corruption to such a land. Such occurrences are known as Masques. While extremely rare, a Masque can change any world it touches, altering the very fabric of reality to conform to whatever differences the Mists bring and changing that world's future forever.

The phenomenon received its name from the masques and the masked balls popular among the nobility of some Ravenloft domains. Masques are theatrical productions, often ones that feature convoluted plotlines that incorporate mistaken identities, secret relationships, hidden treasures and dangerous tricks, magical or otherwise. Occasionally, the supernatural forms a significant part of the story, with family curses, strange birthrights, hidden agendas, long-lost inheritances and star-crossed love affairs leading the way in popularity.

Masked balls also figure into the equation because of their nature — those attending such entertainment wear masks, sometimes even elaborate costumes — usually meant to delight, but also to confuse, trick or frighten the other attendees. Though it's often the case that many of those attending recognize their friends and neighbors, this isn't always so. One of the points of such masquerades is fooling others and being unrecognizable to those who may see you every day in ordinary clothing. The greatest benefit to a masked ball, however, lies in the ability of those who have adopted successful disguises to engage in intrigue and seduction without being unmasked.

These themes intertwine throughout the land wherever a Masque occurs. Whatever a world's former culture and society, it alters to conform to the new pattern laid over it by the Mists. Once a Masque takes effect, where there was nature, there now exists the supernatural, magical knowledge changes to dangerous sorcery and any power becomes sinister and suspect. The culture may essentially stay the same, yet becomes oddly twisted, tainted by the touch of the Mists and usually left with some great power to oversee its continued existence. Most people in such masked worlds never realize that things were ever different. Their memories alter to fit the changes wrought.

Yet, always there are some, a few who see through the deceptions, who disbelieve the lies. Whether the patterning is flawed or incomplete in some way, a few souls sense the truth. These brave people become heroes battling the terrible powers left behind to rule their now-tainted world.

While it is unknown whether any within Ravenloft's borders know any lore concerning Masques other than that they are rumored to exist, it is thought that there have been at least two such Masques that occurred within the Dread Realm's history. The Masque of the Red Death is thought to have affected a world of a cultural level





## Chapter One

unknown to the Land of Mists, while the Masque of the Jade Dragon is believed to have occurred in a strange, exotic land where mythic creatures of ancient legend once ruled.

Masques provide ways to take Ravenloft into new dimensions, creating the perfect vehicle for using the system in crossover games of all types. Theoretically, it's possible to utilize Ravenloft and Masques to flavor any setting, from the most savage to a high-tech horror chronicle set in outer space. While some skills, feats, weapons and spells might need adjustments, the essence of the game — Gothic horror — would still infuse the setting, bringing to it a style and character recognizable to fans of Ravenloft. Characters used to their own worlds find new challenges and unexpected developments as a Masque sweeps their world and changes everything they thought they knew. Conversely, characters from Ravenloft may somehow obtain their escape from the Land of Dread only to find themselves in unfamiliar territory where everything is different but the threats and dangers remain dishearteningly familiar. Even mixing two such groups could happen when the Mists creep stealthily across the lands with the evils of Ravenloft drawn in their wake.

Note: Though DMs and players can utilize the concept themselves, the first Masque setting for version 3.5 — a complete reworking of *Masque of the Red Death* (originally published in 1994) — will debut in 2004.

### Darklords

Darklords are the seed of evil at the heart of every domain, but few of Ravenloft's denizens are aware they exist. Heroes have no infallible means of detecting who or what is the darklord of any given domain. Some darklords control their domains openly, acting as political rulers, while others skulk in the shadows, their very existence a secret. Indeed, the very concept of a "darklord" isn't one that the average citizen of Ravenloft is aware of.

Most domains are inhabited by a single darklord, though on rare occasions the Dark Powers may grant a single domain to a small group of evildoers. These darklords are usually linked both by blood ties and their crimes.

Mindless, slaving beasts do not become darklords. Mere evil is not enough to earn a domain. Despite their corruption, darklords share the same motivations as countless other folk: they hope for love, crave respect or even yearn for acceptance.







Yet, darklords are not poor, misunderstood souls damned through no fault of their own. Their selfish natures pervert simple wants into obsessive lusts, and they earn their domains through committing horrid crimes. Darklords are all the more monstrous for the empathy one might feel for them, not in spite of it. Even when forced to face their transgressions, most darklords remain obstinately blind to their own failings, lashing out at the world for perceived wrongs.

A darklord is both the warden and the ultimate prisoner of his domain. A darklord can trap others in his domain by closing the borders, but he can never leave. Some of Ravenloft's darklords have spent centuries striving to escape from their Mist-veiled prisons, to no avail. The curse that binds them to the land offers them little rest; not unlike Tantalus in the underworld, they are tormented by their greatest desires.

Should a darklord be destroyed, his domain ceases to serve a purpose. If another evil creature in the domain has earned damnation, the Dark Powers may appoint it the domain's new darklord. Lacking an obvious ruler, a domain in a cluster may be absorbed by its neighbors, expanding the prisons of other darklords. If neither of these events occurs, the domain dissolves back into the Mists from whence it came.

## The Dark Powers

The Dark Powers are the ultimate masters of the Realm of Dread, and its ultimate mystery. They have created an entire world in their own image, but not even the most powerful divinatory magic can unveil their true nature. Few of Ravenloft's denizens are aware that the Dark Powers exist, blaming sinister events on the Mists or their deities. Occult scholars who try to pry open the Dark Powers' secrets typically end up pursuing the phantoms of their own minds.

What are the Dark Powers? Are they true entities or something more akin to an elemental force? Mystics have proposed that they may be a banished pantheon of deities, or strange and ancient foes of the deities, or even some dark aspect of the divine subconscious. Some philosophers have even claimed that the Dark Powers do not exist, that they are actually a sentient manifestation of human sin. None of these theories is anything more than idle speculation, however.

Are the Dark Powers many or few? This book refers to them in the plural, but this is a mere

convenience. If the Dark Powers include multiple entities, do they act as a unified whole, or are they fractious? Does the same force both punish and empower evil, or are the Dark Powers locked in an internal struggle between light and darkness?

This in turn leads to the greatest mystery surrounding the Dark Powers: are they good or evil? Some sages point to the outlander darklords. The Dark Powers have forever imprisoned these foul villains in realms of eternal perdition. The Dark Powers never actively seduce the righteous into evil; they merely react to those who have already succumbed to inner wickedness. The Dark Powers do not behave like demons; they do not corrupt souls through malicious trickery. In this sense, the Dark Powers are a force of austere justice, reserving their cruelty for the cruel.

Other sages, however, claim that the torment the Dark Powers inflict on darklords merely drives those villains into an agonized frenzy, inflaming their corruption. Perhaps the Dark Powers seek to raise an army of darkness to one night unleash on the Material Plane. In this context, the Dark Powers are a sadistic engine of suffering.

What of the innocents caught in the Dark Powers' clutches? What of the villagers who fall prey to the horrors of the night, or the heroes who must do battle with the forces of evil? Do the Dark Powers delight in watching the destruction of innocence, or do they flaunt these pure souls in the faces of the darklords as reminders of the path not taken?

Are the Dark Powers good or evil? Are they deities or monsters? What is the ultimate goal of their grand and awful experiment? The truth may transcend mortal comprehension.

## History



*History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors*

*And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,*

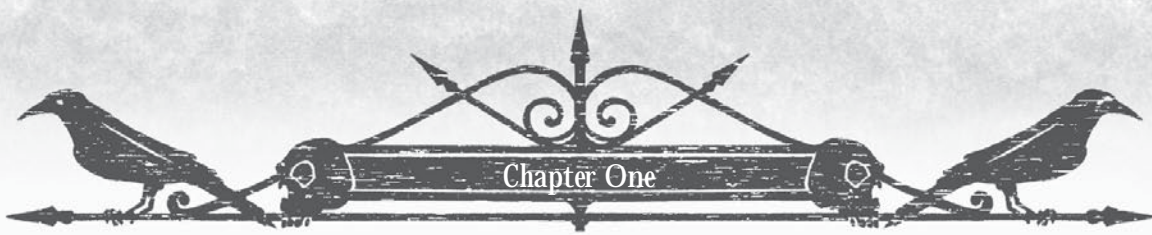
*Guides us by vanities.*

— T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion"

The study of Ravenloft's past can prove a maddening exercise. When a new domain forms in the Mists, its denizens appear with complete memories of full lives, and their culture may record a history that stretches back centuries before the domain's actual creation. Whether these false histories are real and drawn from other worlds or







entirely fabricated by the Dark Powers is a matter best left to the philosophers.

Through long tradition, most lands of the Realm of Dread have adopted the Barovian calendar (BC) to mark the passing of the years. This book does the same. Isolated domains, such as those found in clusters or Islands of Terror, may still track time through their own reckoning.

### Pre-351: The Time Before

The true origins of the Realm of Dread remain a mystery. Vistani legends, as well as numerous creation myths, suggest that the Dark Powers and their sinister realm may be as ancient as dread itself. Though at times contradictory, common themes hint that the Realm of Dread may have existed for eons, forever ebbing and flowing in an eternal cycle of expansion and decay. If so, then the creation of the domain of Barovia merely marked the birth of a new cycle of torment — and the death of whatever came before.

However, the few sages who delve into Ravenloft's arcane origins note that no reliable record of a domain predating the creation of Barovia has ever been found. In their opinion, the creation of the Realm of Dread can be traced back some four hundred years to a single world on the Material Plane. Little is now known about this world beyond the name of one of its kingdoms: Barovia.

According to Barovian records, Strahd von Zarovich was born in the year 299 BC. As the eldest son in an aristocratic line, he obeyed tradition and entered the military as a child, rising steadily in the ranks.

In the same year Strahd became a general, a horde of pillaging barbarians, the Tergs, invaded Barovia and drove Strahd's family from their ancestral lands. Strahd rallied the tattered Barovian forces, driving the Tergs back in a grueling and bloody conflict that lasted decades. Strahd's youth had long since been spent by the time his weary army defeated the last of the Terg warlords. As the noble houses of Barovia struggled to rebuild from their homelands, Strahd claimed sovereignty over the lands he had liberated from the Tergs as his reward and settled into the mountain fortress of the last Terg, dubbing it Castle Ravenloft.

Count Strahd's new subjects hailed him as a conquering hero, but the decades of war and the endless parade of death had hardened Strahd's heart. His reign, like his war-torn life, held no room for compassion.

Strahd called for his scattered relatives to join him at Castle Ravenloft and reestablish the proud von Zarovich lineage. It was then that Strahd first met his youngest brother, Sergei, a handsome and charming cleric a full quarter-century his junior. In Sergei, Strahd saw himself before the coming of the Tergs, and for the first time, he began to ponder his lost youth.

While living at Castle Ravenloft, Sergei met a local villager named Tatyana, a young woman as full of life and beauty as himself. Their love was immediate and pure. Sergei brought Tatyana to Strahd, announced their plans to wed and asked for his eldest brother's blessing.

Sergei's words struck Strahd a more crippling blow than that dealt by any Terg warrior. Strahd was immediately enraptured with the simple girl, but she loved only Sergei, treating Strahd like a father. Tatyana's grace confronted Strahd with all the pleasures of life that war had denied him, and her love for Sergei tormented Strahd with his squandered youth. A desperate hatred for Sergei flared to life in Strahd's heart.

This was when Strahd made his pact with death, as recorded in *The Tome of Strahd*. Strahd's account of the doomed wedding is largely accurate, but it neglects a few vital facts. One of the many guests invited to Castle Ravenloft was Leo Dilisnya, patriarch of a mercantile family still struggling to recover after the war. His entourage came to the wedding concealing crossbows, plotting to eradicate the rival von Zarovich line.

The moment Strahd murdered Sergei with an assassin's blade, strange mists descended on Castle Ravenloft and flowed across the land, forming the domain of Barovia. When Strahd expressed his love to Tatyana, confessing his crime, she fled from him in horror, throwing herself from the castle walls. As Strahd watched her fall, Leo's assassins launched their attack — but Strahd's bloody pact had forever freed him from the indignity of death. As the poison-tipped bolts pierced his body, his heart ceased to beat and he became a vampire. All his hopes destroyed, Strahd had nothing left but fury. He rampaged through the castle, slaughtering guests and assassins alike. By dawn, not a single soul was left alive within the castle walls. The Realm of Dread was born.

### 351–469: A Private Hell

The domain of Barovia originally existed as an Island of Terror, alone in the Mists. Few records

