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Curse of Strahd: Reloaded

A Campaign Guide by /u/DragnaCarta

Chapter 0: Adventure Hooks

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Chapter 0: Adventure Hooks

An Analysis of *Curse of Strahd* Hooks

While perfectly serviceable as generic openings to the *Curse of Strahd* campaign, each of the four adventure hooks presented in the original module leave much to be desired ***if the DM and players are looking for a more narrative- and character-driven experience.***

- *Plea For Help* serves only as a trap to lure the PCs into Barovia, leaving the thrust of the campaign feeling hollow, as if their very presence in Barovia is a foolish accident - an adventure to be regretted, rather than relish.
- *Mysterious Visitors* is perhaps the most useful of the hooks, drawing the PCs into the grander narrative of Strahd's corruption and the curse upon Barovia, and presenting them with the campaign-long task of defeating Strahd and laying his troubled soul to rest. However, it is neither personalized nor grounded, leaving the PCs as generic participants in a cookie-cutter campaign and introducing the players to the adventure while within a wholly irrelevant setting (Daggerford).
- *Werewolves in the Mist* fails as a hook for two reasons. First, it fails to tie the PCs into any meaningful grand narrative (as the Werewolf Den is the location in Barovia most divorced from Strahd's curse and storyline). Second, while it is not a bad idea to involve some element from a PC's backstory in the hook (the factions), the fact that the factions will never come up again (and that the werewolves have very likely never heard of the Harpers or Zhentarim) can leave the entire experience feeling hollow.
- *Creeping Fog*, while admirable in its simplicity, utterly fails to invest the PCs in the adventure they are about to undertake.

Of these, *Plea For Help*, *Werewolves in the Mist*, and *Creeping Fog* are clearly intended to serve as traps for the PCs - once the PCs willingly (or unwillingly) enter Barovia, they will soon find that there is no way out without slaying Strahd. As a result, each of these three hooks sets “survival horror” as the tone of *Curse of Strahd*, whether or not you meant to run it that way.

Moreover, *Plea for Help*, *Mysterious Visitors*, and *Werewolves in the Mist* seem to assume that the PCs have already been travelling together for some time - and in the case of *Mysterious Visitors*, already accomplished some notable task for the Duchess of Daggerford. A long-term campaign can easily begin with a three-session attack on a horde of goblin bandits outside of Daggerford, and cleanly segue into a short “arc” thereafter. However, the *Curse of Strahd* module is far too long to serve as a brief “arc” in a broader adventure, leaving any earlier adventures (like one in Daggerford) dangling off into irrelevance like a vestigial limb.

Designing a New Adventure Hook

Given all this, it is our goal to design an adventure hook that meets the following criteria:

1. Solidifies *Curse of Strahd* as a self-contained campaign from level 1 (or 3) to 10, without any need to refer back to previous adventures;
2. Gives the PCs a “true” reason to enter Barovia, in order to preserve their agency and make them feel that they chose to begin this campaign of their own volition and with full knowledge of the potential consequences;
3. Invokes the backstories and desires of the PCs in order to allow the players to drive the campaign by developing their characters and accomplishing long-term goals;
4. Promotes the “gothic opera” tone of *Curse of Strahd*, encouraging the PCs to emotionally invest in the narrative and questlines of the campaign; and
5. Creates a beginning-to-end throughline across the entire module to give the players a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment upon completing the finale of the campaign.

Adventure Hook: Secrets of the Tarokka

This scenario works to incorporate each of the above design goals by giving each PC a personal goal that they can achieve while in Barovia, shaped and foretold by Madam Eva’s predictions and promises. Over the course of their adventure, the PCs grow to rely on one another, helping each other in their individual quests and, ultimately, accepting their destinies to defeat Strahd and lift the curse upon Barovia.

Crafting a Backstory

As you work independently with your players to create their characters, encourage them to develop hidden tragedies, impossible goals, and regrets into their characters’ pasts. Your PCs don’t need to be “dark and edgy,” but they should have some great desire informed by past mistakes, losses, or failures. These will likely fall into one or more of three broad categories:

- This PC is a broken creature searching for healing or redemption.
- This PC is a lost soul searching for kinship or purpose.

- This PC has lost or been abandoned by someone or something important to them, and are attempting to regain it.

Your players may be tempted to create traditional Dungeons & Dragons PCs - a bard whose ultimate goal is the seduction of every creature he meets; a wizard whose only goal is the acquisition of power for power's sake; or a rogue who steals from others in order to become wealthy. While these are perfectly fine for low-investment parties, they will actively detract from any group that aims to create a high-investment, narrative-driven experience. Barovia, at its core, is a dark and broken land that attracts dark and broken people.

Some of the traditional character archetypes can be tweaked to better fit this mold (e.g., Caleb Widogast of *Critical Role*), but your overall goal should be to help your player craft a backstory whose driving goal *can only be fulfilled within the borders of Barovia*. See below for some sample PC goals:

- A draconic sorcerer has forsaken his home and his people, and is searching for a means of understanding his ancestry and finding a new land to settle in.
- A dragonborn cleric was abandoned by his tribe at birth, and hopes to one day find them and rejoin his people.
- An aasimar paladin destroyed her church in a fit of zealous rage and hubris and Fell from grace; now, she searches for a way to redeem herself in the eyes of her god and sire.
- A tiefling rogue was orphaned as a child, and desperately longs to find a family that they can love and trust.
- An elven ranger watched her forest suffer and die to a dark, creeping corruption, and longs to gain revenge against the evil that created it.
- A human monk was forced to abandon his adventuring party when a great injury waylaid him for a year and a day; now, he longs to rejoin his friends and ensure their safety.
- A halfling wizard was abandoned by his mentor many years ago, and hopes to find them and prove his worth.

Notably, while the player will not know this explicitly until informed by Madam Eva, each of these goals can be tied to a specific location, quest, or character within Barovia:

- The draconic sorcerer is a descendant of Argynvost, and is tasked by the dragon's spirit with sanctifying the memory of the Order of the Silver Dragon before founding the Order anew.
- The dragonborn cleric finds a small collection of other dragonborn amongst the berserker tribes on Mount Ghakis - the first of his kind that he has ever seen - and is welcomed into their tents with open arms.
- The aasimar paladin learns that she must recover the holy symbol of Tasha Petrovna as an exercise of penance; upon completion of this task, her wings will be restored to her.

- The tiefling rogue was whisked away at birth by a caravan of Vistani after the death of their parents; in truth, their trueborn sibling still lives in Vallaki - Izek Strazni.
- The corruption that destroyed the elven ranger's forest blossomed from a seed of the Gulthias Tree, empowered by the blood of Strahd von Zarovich before it was carried into the world beyond the mists by the werewolf pack.
- The human monk learns that his adventuring party was swallowed up by Barovia's mists soon after his injury; by following their trail through Barovia, he can discover their fate and rescue his sole living companion.
- The halfling wizard's mentor is Dr. Rudolph van Richten, famed vampire hunter, who abandoned the halfling for fear that his curse would strike his pupil down, and so fled to hunt Strahd von Zarovich instead.

Some other potential hooks might involve the werewolf pack, the Abbot at the Abbey of St. Markovia, the Ladies of the Fanes, or Strahd himself. As with the dragonborn barbarian and the human monk, don't be afraid of adding in small elements of your PCs' backstories into the RAW setting. Modules are built to be personalized, and your players will be thrilled to see their backstories transform the world that you run.

Madam Eva's Promise

As the campaign begins, the PCs are wholly ignorant of one another - or, if their personal quests overlap, they may be already travelling together in pairs. Two weeks before your adventure begins, each PC receives a mysterious dream sent by a strange crone clad in red robes: Madam Eva. Eva invites each PC to visit her in order to have their fortune read, promising to each PC in turn that she alone can show them how to achieve their goal. For each of our sample PCs, Eva promises the following:

- Draconic Sorcerer: *"Find me at the crossroads of Tser Pool, and I will share with you path to uncovering the power of your bloodline - and the true nature of your heritage."*
- Dragonborn Cleric: *"Come to my tent, and I will guide you to the hearth of your people."*
- Aasimar Paladin: *"Journey through the mists of Barovia, and I will whisper to you the key to regaining your honor - and the favor of your god."*
- Tiefling Rogue: *"You are not alone in this world. I can tell you the name of the one that shares your blood - but only if you travel to my fire and speak my name."*
- Elven Ranger: *"You hunger for vengeance, but your eyes are blind. Journey past the mists, and I will help your eyes to see your enemy."*
- Human Monk: *"The ones that you love have wandered astray, and their lives may hang in the balance. Find me, and I will show you to them."*
- Halfling Wizard: *"The teacher you love is not as far as you fear - travel to the encampment at Tser Pool, and I will show you the place where he hides."*

In each of these instances, Madam Eva speaks the truth. She does so, however, for ulterior motives - through her Inner Eye, she has looked out into the world to find individuals whose

potential for power and goodness is great, and who may be easily lured to Barovia of their own will. She sees through her foresight that they may accomplish their goals if brought into Strahd's realm - and, if guided properly, may accomplish her own goals as well.

For more ideas on potential quests your PCs can have, see the **Personal Readings & Quests** section [here](#).

Getting the Group Together

It would be easy for any person to dismiss such a vision as a hollow dream. However, the experience is vivid enough to leave the PC shaken, and each PC should be desperate or lost enough to grab for Madam Eva's promises with gusto. To solidify her promise, and to make it clear that these dreams were true dreams, each PC then awakes with a single Tarokka card in their lap.

Each Tarokka card should be personalized to each PC, and is preferably different from the cards that you plan to use for the Tarokka reading proper. This card can reflect the PCs' background, stature, weaknesses, or abilities. Madam Eva then describes to each PC that cards that the others hold, as well as their "signs" - one or two identifying features that help each character stand out in a crowd.

In these dreams, Madam Eva directs the PCs to travel to an inn in Daggerford called the Nightmare's Stable; there, she promises, they will meet their companions and find directions to Stanimir, a "man of many colors" who can guide them to her. A PC's full dream may look like this:

For the past moon, you have suffered strange dreams of a woman, her voice rasping behind a darkened veil. In each dream, she speaks of secrets of your past - knowledge buried so deep that not a single other soul could know. She speaks of answers to your questions, and the fulfillment of your fate. She speaks of inheritance and magic, and promises both - and more. She speaks in riddles, and whispers in tongues.

In the final dream, she spoke thusly:

"Seek the Thief, the Soldier, and the Monk," she told you. "You will know them by their signs - the Devil's horns; the blinded eyes; and the setting sun's scales. You will find them in the home of night's steed, behind the walls of the dagger's ford.

"Once you have found these companions, seek out the travelling man of many colors. His song will guide you to me."

When you awoke, the moon still high in the night's sky, you waited for the dream to fade from your mind. Instead, you felt the visions solidify, clarify - and felt a weight in your lap. When you looked down, you saw a single playing card resting there: the Beggar.

The next morning, you packed your possessions and prepared for the journey. After consulting a map, you decided your destination: the Nightmare's Stable, in the town called Daggerford.

The road lay before you, and your past lay behind. As the sun rose above your head, you steeled your will, cleared your mind, and let fate guide your step.

In this particular example, the **Thief** is the tiefling rogue, the **Soldier** the aasimar paladin, and the **Monk** the dragonborn cleric. This dream is relayed to the dragonborn sorcerer, the **Beggar**, whose sign is “the dragon’s mark.”

Upon arriving in Daggerford, the PCs soon find each other to be the only other inhabitants of the Nightmare’s Stable, and can easily detect their companions by their signs. The barkeep, a sour man named Kelrick, can inform them that a troupe of Vistani recently arrived in town to perform and share stories in their encampment, a fact that is advertised on a flyer just beside the bar.

Inform your players ahead of time that you encourage them to keep their personal quests and backstories **private** until such a time as they become directly relevant to the story. It is a common temptation for many new players to introduce their characters by revealing their true appearance (“My arms are secretly covered in dragon scales”), their hidden motives (“I’m the lost heir of a great kingdom, and I want to reclaim my throne”), and their personal tragedies (“I got my entire platoon killed in battle. I regret it every day”). **Do your best to keep your players from doing this.** Their personal quests are much more enriching and interesting to the other players and NPCs if they are revealed piecemeal, with each delicious hint and secret dropped bit-by-bit over the course of the first two-thirds of the campaign, rather than dumped on the table all at once.

The Road to Barovia

Upon arrival at Stanimir’s camp, the PCs are greeted warmly by Stanimir’s children, as if the party’s arrival has been expected. After introducing himself, Stanimir invites the PCs to sit by his fire and share a story or experience “that can make a man laugh, or make a man weep.” Vistani trade in stories, not money, and this is an ages-old custom for guests invited to sit around a Vistani fire. As a roleplaying exercise, each PC may then relay a personal tale of joy or sorrow, keeping it as brief and vague as desired.

When each PC has delivered their tale, Stanimir then relays his own story of Barovia’s “dark prince,” as depicted in the *Mysterious Visitors* hook of the original module. Notably, however, he does not ask the PCs to defeat Strahd or break his curse; rather, he changes the story to subtly draw comparisons to the PCs’ own hidden backstories, and concludes by informing the PCs that Madam Eva has seen their destinies intertwined with Strahd’s own.

The PCs are welcome to sleep overnight at the Vistani camp. The following morning, the Vistani pack up and guide the party to Barovia through the misty woods beyond Daggerford. After a full day of travel, it becomes evident to the party that they have “shifted” en route to a different forest entirely, slipping into the space between planes. Stanimir leaves the PCs at Barovia’s gates, confessing that Madam Eva has banished his caravan from Barovia for some offense many years ago, and that his service in transporting the PCs is part of the payment for his transgression. He bids them luck, and tells them to stay on the path, and to beware of dangers that may far overpower them.

Tarokka Readings & Beyond

When the PCs arrive at Madam Eva’s tent, they are presented with two readings: their individual readings (as described [here](#)), and the standard reading involving the three artifacts and ally. After completing the personal readings, Madam Eva informs the PCs: “Your fates are intertwined, and your hands will be those that free this land from darkness,” and proceeds directly to the standard reading.

As your PCs make their way throughout Barovia, accomplishing each task in turn (e.g., restoring Argynvost’s skull, reclaiming Petrovna’s holy symbol, or bringing down the Gulthias Tree), consider bestowing them some boon or charm as a reward for achieving this milestone. For example, the draconic sorcerer may receive a gift of flight from Argynvost’s spirit; the aasimar paladin may be allowed to shift her subrace from fallen to protector; or the elven ranger may receive limited power over plantlife from a thankful Lady of the Fanes. While you should take care to keep these boons from being overpowered, you should also enjoy the experience of tailoring them to your players and their sense of fun. *Curse of Strahd* has few true moments of accomplishment, and this is a rare opportunity to truly reward your PCs for their deeds.