

Tome of Strahd - Expanded



Item Description

Tome of Strahd

Adventuring Gear

The *Tome of Strahd* is an ancient work penned by Strahd himself; a tragic tale of how he came to his fallen state. The book is bound in a thick leather cover with steel hinges and fastenings. The pages are of parchment and very brittle. The book is written in complex ciphered shorthand that only Strahd employs. Stains and age have made much of the work illegible as well, but several pages remain intact.

Reading the Tome

To decipher what's left, a character can spend time closely examining and transcribing the text.

For every **2 hours** spent examining the tome, that character can make a **DC 19 Intelligence (Investigation) check**. On a successful check, a new page of the tome becomes available to read.

Special Advantages

Some characters may have certain abilities that make reading the *Tome of Strahd* easier:

- A character with the *Linguist* feat can make this check against a DC 14 instead of DC 19.
- An *Order of Scribes* wizard can reduce the time it takes to transcribe the text to 2 minutes per successful Investigation check instead of 2 hours.
- A character with the *Eyes of the Rune Keeper* eldritch invocation doesn't need to make the check, but must still spend 1 hour transcribing the text in order to clearly read it.

Influences

I've read all of the following novels and modules, incorporating details and pieces of lore from them into the tome:

- **"I, Strahd: Memoirs of a Vampire"** by P.N. Elrod (which goes over Strahd's relationships and life before and after his descent into vampirism)
- **"I, Strahd: My War with Azalin"** by P.N. Elrod (which details Strahd's first encounters with Madam Eva and Azalin Rex)
- **"Vampire of the Mists"** by Christie Golden (a peripheral read that explores the nature of Tatyana and Barovia through the perspective of another vampire, Jander Sunstar)
- AD&D's **"Ravenloft II: The House on Gryphon Hill"** (in which the domain of Mordent and Azalin's character are first introduced)
- 3rd edition's **"Expedition to Castle Ravenloft"** (in which the Heart of Sorrow and the Fanes are first conceptualized, among many other ideas)
- 4th edition's **"Fair Barovia"** (which explored proto-Vallaki and some ideas and characters that were later changed for Curse of Strahd)
- The various expansions and alterations made by wonderful users like MandyMod, DragnaCarta, and others.
- The **original Ravenloft module**, which is honestly almost lifted wholesale into Curse of Strahd, so there's not much that can be expanded with it.

Campaign Changes (Spoilers for some of the novels!)

To make these changes work, I had to figure out what was “canon”, which forced me to cut some things. I also added a few ideas of my own which have been well-received by my players. Here are some of the changes I made to the campaign that are supported by the text in the tome:

- **Kavan** and the **Bloodspear** existed only a few centuries ago, not thousands of years before Strahd.
- The **Heart of Sorrow** was constructed using blood crystals grown from the roots of the Gulthias Tree. Furthermore, the entity that gave Strahd the idea for it was none other than **Khyristrix**, a devil responsible for maintaining the Heart of Sorrow in the module “Expedition to Castle Ravenloft”.
- The **Fanes** all function similarly to DragnaCarta’s version of them.
- The character of Alec Gwylim from “I, Strahd: Memoirs of a Vampire” is functionally replaced by **Rahadin**, whose loyalty to Strahd prevented him from being killed like Alec was in the book. Rahadin also slaughtered the dusk elves after Patrina’s death (on Strahd’s command, of course), partly explaining the screams that follow him.
- **Patrina’s spirit** is not trapped in the crypts of Castle Ravenloft as a banshee - instead, she is **tethered to her brother Kasimir**, speaking to him inside of his head and in his dreams.
- **Liches are rare** - Strahd was not aware that Khazan was trying to turn himself into a lich, and Exethanter was dormant for so long that Strahd didn’t meet him until after the near century that Azalin dwelled in Barovia. Thus, Strahd’s first encounter with a lich was Azalin, whose magic disguised him particularly well, even from the discerning eyes of Strahd.
- Azalin’s laboratory is no longer in Marina’s old house in Berez - instead, he has a **secret lab with an extendable tower built onto the bottom of Lake Zarovich**. The tower extends out of the water’s surface during lightning storms to charge up power and use it towards Azalin’s many experiments.
- In the campaign, the tower is now occupied by **Dr. Thredra Aranax**, a character who was first introduced in “Expedition to Castle Ravenloft”. In this campaign, she is a mad scientist creating special flesh golems for use by Strahd, and is currently in possession of the **missing blue gem**. Just as with the red and green gems being used to animate creatures, she uses the blue gem as a conduit, channeling lightning strikes through it to empower her creations with new abilities.
- The **Mad Mage** only appears to be Mordenkainen, but this is a disguise. She is actually my own character - a necromancer wizard that I once played Curse of Strahd with. After she is defeated by Strahd and plummets down Tser Falls as per the module, she is then captured by Dr. Aranax in secret. The doctor takes her to the secret lab and holds her captive, wanting to probe her mind to gain mastery over necromancy and golem crafting.

The Mad Mage and Vasilka

Dr. Aranax was commissioned 10 years prior by **the Abbot** to create a golem that looks like Tatyana (after the Abbot tried twice and failed to create anything close). While the doctor can make all sorts of dangerous, destructive flesh golems, she struggles to make things of beauty. Even with the blue gem (stolen by the Abbot as part of the trade) she just doesn’t have the finesse to create what the Abbot requires.

The Mad Mage, however, does have the skills needed to create such a golem. So, the doctor offers the mage a sham deal: *“make for me a beautiful golem with auburn hair, and I will set you free.”* The Mad Mage knew this was a lie, but saw an opportunity. She agrees and spends the next 6 months crafting this golem - with vibrant, youthful skin and stitching so fine that the seams are nearly invisible. And as the golem is animated, she uses the blue gem to create something never seen before - **an artificial soul!** (*“It’s alive!!!”*)

Thus, **Vasilka is born**. She awakens with her head covered, beholden to a master whose face she does not know, but whose voice she does. The Mad Mage gives her these orders before being dragged away: **“Do not help Strahd or his servants. You will be delivered to an abbey. Do as the Abbot says, until you are no longer in their care. When you are no longer in the Abbot’s care, seek out those that oppose Strahd, and return to free me!”**

Afterwards, with the last of her magic, the Mad Mage actually **makes herself go mad** by casting modify memory on herself to forget about Vasilka and what really happened (she recalls memories of my old campaign, which in this world never happened) and then casts mindblank on herself to prevent anyone from probing into her mind.

In frustration, Dr. Aranax locks her away in an antimagic stasis cell that makes anyone inside of it unconscious (one of Azalin’s inventions). The doctor can’t appeal to Strahd about what happened, since he believes the mage is dead, and would surely punish the doctor for keeping her alive all of this time. So in stasis she remains, while Vasilka quietly learns etiquette and dance from the Abbot, waiting until she can seek out her master once more.

Tome Chapters



1 - The Beginning

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, routing out many evils alongside my allies. Of them were loyal Rahadin, who served my father faithfully as an exceptional soldier, and who protected me after I was born.

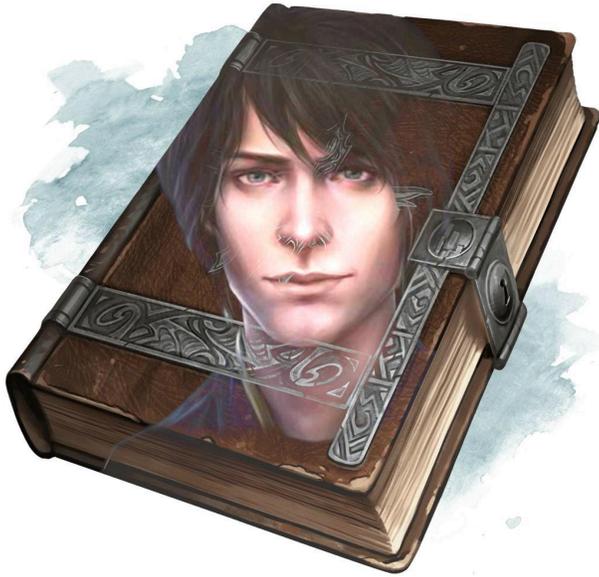
Alas, the war years and the killing years wore down my soul as the wind wears stone into sand. All goodness slipped from my life. I found my youth and strength gone, and all I had left was death. The beauty of this valley was my only comfort then, so it was here in fair Barovia that I decided I would retire from war. I disbanded my armies, and took power over the valley in the name of The Morninglord.

The architect Artimus built for me a mighty castle upon the ruins atop the pillar stone overlooking the valley. I then called for my family, long unseated from their ancient thrones, and sought to bring them here to settle within the new Castle Ravenloft, named for my mother, Queen Ravenovia.

My mother passed away of illness during the journey, and my honorable father, King Barov, died before even receiving my invitation. I named the realm Barovia in his honor. The tragedy that neither were able to see this wondrous land I had conquered for them still pains me to this day.

My younger brother Sturm, clinging to our past glory, denied my invitation. He'd rather oversee the meager remnants of our family's holdings instead of join me in something grand and new. His loss.

Regrettably, in his place arrived a different brother of mine, even younger, with whom I had never met: Sergei. He was handsome and youthful. I hated him for both.



2 - The Unwelcome Brother

Those first few years should have made me content. Instead, they were torturous. The pain of my parents' passing hung heavy on my heart. And while I grieved, a menagerie of out-of-touch nobility from near and far joined my court. Many desired a piece of the wealth I had gained. Some even desired my hand to cement their own statuses. Short sighted and boring, the lot of them.

Sergei's presence made things no easier for me. The boy was to pledge himself to the Morninglord and become High Priest of Barovia, as is the custom for the youngest son in our family. This would have been after the previous High Priestess, Ilona Dorovnya, passed on. I had no objections to this - it was a role that needed to be filled, and I did not envy the position.

It became a problem when, in his naïve desire to do "good", he freely gave away tax revenue I had collected to any dirty peasant that asked! That blasted fool openly undermined me and disgraced our family name continually! I reprimanded him fiercely. I told him that the treasury was not a charity, and what it would mean for me as Lord were I to drain our coffers for the benefit of the unwashed masses. In defiance, he left the castle.

My anger cooled in his absence. Ultimately, I knew he was playing his part, albeit poorly. He was too kind for his own good. Unlike my advisers and military comrades, his young face lacked the telling scars of a hardened warrior. He had much to learn about the way the world worked, and I didn't have the patience to teach him.

Regardless, tradition dictated his role, as it did Sturm's, and as it did my own. I pitied him, knowing he could never marry or sire children. It seemed I would end up much the same. For a short time, I tolerated his foolishness with this in mind.



3 - Tatyana Federovna

Sergei returned to me one evening, babbling on and on about a girl he'd met. This held no interest for me, at first, until he declared his intention to abandon the priesthood to be with her.

Imagine! A prince and some harlot he picked up out of the mud covered streets! I made clear my view on the matter, but the boy wouldn't listen to reason, as usual. He left, vowing to bring her to the castle.

Then quite suddenly, my heart had been taken! Of the peasant families in the valley, one 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 soul. I loved her for her youth. I loved her for her joy. But she spurned me!

Her heart went to Sergei. They were betrothed. The date was set.

"Old One" was my name to her - "elder" and "brother" also. 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 turned her from me. And so I came to hate death - my death.

My hatred was unending, gnawing at my soul like vermin at a carcass. Was this to be my fate? To watch the only one who could capture my heart marry my oaf of a brother? Was youth all that mattered? Was death all that was left for me now?



4 - That Fateful Night

I would not be called "death" so soon.

I searched and uncovered hidden secrets in this land. I made a pact. A pact of blood and darkness.

On the day of the wedding, I killed Sergei, my brother. I watched his confused face lose all color as the knife pierced his chest, and my teeth, his neck. The pact was sealed with the blood of my kin: an undeserving fool that trusted me completely.

In the chaos that ensued, I blamed assassins for Sergei's murder, and searched for Tatyana. Yet it was as if the very gods themselves were trying to interfere with our love! The young lord Leo Dilisnya had been scheming with the Ba'al Verzi to overthrow me that very night! It might have been a convenient stroke of luck for me if they had only targeted Sergei, yet instead they staged a coup against me during the wedding ceremony.

Arrows and blades from the treacherous castle guards pierced me to my soul, and my heart stopped beating. But I did not truly die. Nor did I live. I became undead, forever.

With dark strength flowing through my body, I slaughtered all in my path. I drank deeply from those traitors, and that coward Dilisnya fled in defeat. Killing him would have to wait. I had to find my love! I had to find Tatyana!

I saw her weeping atop the castle walls, north of the chapel. Yet when I arrived to comfort her, my love fled from me. I continued to pursue her to the edge of the precipice. I needed her to understand the pact I made for her!

When I finally reached her, I told her what I had done, and why it must be so - yet she would not listen! She trembled and sobbed, even pointed my brother's sword against me. I lunged to grab hold of my dear Tatyana, but before I could reach her, she flung herself from the walls of Castle Ravenloft in misguided despair. I watched in agony as everything I ever desired fell from my grasp.

It was a thousand feet through the mists. No trace of her was ever found. Not even I know her final fate. It was as if that very day, she vanished from this world.

That wretched day. The day the mists came and made me their prisoner.



5 - My Curse

I became a distant ruler. Few survived the massacre, and the small handful that did either knew of my power and remained loyal to me (and were summarily dismissed), or remained in my dungeon. Only faithful Rahadin remained on staff at the castle.

The pact I forged was made deep within an ancient and secret temple made of marbled amber, a place of forgotten lore and dark power. It was on that terrible night I took the name "vampire". And I have learned much since.

I still lust for life and youth, and I curse the living that took them from me. Food turns to ash in my mouth. Water and wine tastes of foulest vinegar. The only thing that can sate my eternal hunger, if only for a short while, is the red warmth of fresh blood. And of course, it can not be just animal blood, as I've come to learn. Only the blood of a person grants me any measure of relief.

Worse yet, I cannot leave Barovia. I can't even bring myself to enter the mists that surround it. It's as if some magic wards me from them, yet no magic I know of can do such a thing on this scale. I am trapped here, for the time being.

I now reside far below Ravenloft. I live among the dead and sleep beneath the very stones of this hollow castle of despair, and must do so every day. I have sealed shut the stairs that none may disturb me. When I do venture out to feed, I have become a figure of terror to all. The peasantry have begun to calling me "the devil."

Even the sun is against me. It is the sun and its light I fear the most, but little else can harm me now. Running water sears my flesh, only to be healed moments later. A wooden stake was driven through my heart once, but even this does not kill me, though it holds me from movement.

But the sword! That cursed sword of Sergei's! I bade my court wizard Khazan dispose of that awful tool before he retired to his tower, but I fear that one day a similar weapon might be brought against me.



6 - Of the Vistani

The Vistani used to travel through Barovia in the days before the mists encircled it, and left in haste when my armies conquered the valley. Before even that, I experienced their generosity firsthand. A band of Vistani saved my life as a mortal. I was nearly dead, behind enemy lines, and a small group hid and protected me at great personal risk to themselves. Since then, I had found their people to be sensible, if not incredibly peculiar.

I was surprised the day that they returned to these lands. It was soon after the mists had cut us off from the rest of the world. I had felt something new. A change in the mists. I could sense when someone was entering my domain.

I waited by the border mists. I remember that day clearly... the sound of many steady hoofbeats and cart wheels behind that wall of swirling white, then a man in colorful attire emerging unperturbed from the mist, like it was nothing, addressing me as "Count Strahd von Zarovich" and asking for permission to set up encampments in Barovia once again.

They knew who I was by name and title, which I admit intrigued me. I agreed, and I watched as multiple caravans effortlessly manifested from that poisonous fog unmolested. The obvious question: how were they able to safely reach where they intended to go, when all others become trapped or lost?



7 - The Prophecy

I met with their eldest, a seer named Madam Eva. She seemed familiar, yet I can not place where I might have met her before. We discussed the debt I owed her people for protecting me all those years ago. I agreed to allow the Vistani to freely travel Barovia's roads and mists in return for their past kindness. Madam Eva desired I not feed on her people as well, but for that, I would need more.

First, I inquired directly how the Vistani were able to travel the mists - a feat no other could accomplish. Her answer was infuriating: that it was a gift to their people alone. Then she told me to accept that I am trapped here! That this is my fate! I was very close to tearing her limb from limb for her insolence. Instead, I let go of my rage. I felt a strange connection with this insufferable old woman, despite her apparent desire to be killed by my hand.

She went on. Evidently, the Vistani themselves do not know the origin of this gift, and they are not particularly bothered by this mystery. She then revealed that it was she that knew of me and who led her people here, and offered to prove her clairvoyance by performing a Tarokka card reading for me.

It foretold many things that would come to pass... the arrival of a dangerous necromancer that I would eventually war with, the success of my quest for an artifact that could protect me from the sun, and most enticing of all... that I would see my darling Tatyana once again!

I considered the possibility of deception, but I felt the truth of her words. I offered her a final deal: that the Vistani provide their services as my eyes and ears outside my realm as within. If a path through the mists was ever found, they swore an oath that they would lead me to it. In exchange, I would pay them and refrain from feeding on their people. An accord was struck.

Since then, their ability to traverse the mists has proven invaluable for gathering information from outside of Barovia. The services they provide are in many ways far more useful than that of my undead and bestial minions. Madam Eva's motives are inscrutable, and I'm not sure how she clings to life as the centuries have passed, but since neither she nor her Vistani have made any moves against me, I tolerate their continued presence in Barovia.



8 - The Loss of Magic

Through my will, clouds cover the sky during the day, but it is not enough. I desire protection from that which I hate most, and my skills alone would not be enough to find the answer. After he disposed of Sergei's sword, I intended to speak with Khazan once more, but the old wizard destroyed himself in some sort of failed magical ritual. Clearly, he would not have been skilled enough to help me.

I was then approached by Patrina Velikovna. She was a dusk elf with great talent in magic who had briefly attempted to court me before I met my true love, Tatyana. Now, after I had lost everything, she offered herself once again. Her skills with the Weave had grown dramatically, so in exchange for sharing with her the location of the temple of amber, I expected her assistance in finding a solution for the sun and its wretched light.

I planned to make her loyal to me by turning her into one of my growing number of vampire spawn, but my plan was cut short. Of all those that could defy me, it was Patrina's own idiotic people that stoned her to death! Though I sent Rahadin to slaughter the women and children, even their blood could not temper my rage towards that pitiful brother of hers. Forever shall the men remain prisoners here with me, doomed to watch their people slowly die out.

Without a master of the arcane arts like Khazan or Patrina to aid me, my progress on this endeavor halted. I had nothing but time and silence left to me, so I took up the study of magic independently, and traveled the furthest corners of the valley in search of other means of bolstering my power.



9 - The Fanes

This land is ancient and mysterious. It holds knowledge and power far beyond the comprehension of the peasants of the valley. I alone have plundered its depths and explored its secrets. I alone have taken its ancient power for my own!

During my travels, disguised as a lowly adventurer, I encountered a hunting party of wild peoples near the slope of Mt. Ghakis. I charmed them into revealing the location of their secret encampment, and spoke with their elder.

Unable to resist, she shared with me the legends of her people. While much of it was superstition and nonsense, I did discover something promising: the existence of an ancient, untapped source of power.

It was said that three ladies of the wilds - archfey that these barbarians revered - had their worshippers build circles of stone called "fanes" many millennia ago. These megaliths tap into the power of ley lines deep within the land, and channel that power upwards and out, feeding Barovia with vitality and prosperity. It was no wonder then why this valley had captivated me so!

I investigated the locations where the fanes were said to reside, and their power exceeded my expectations! Their connection to the land was deep. I had to attain this power for my own! I quickly learned their rites of consecration, and devised a brilliantly simple way of corrupting them to serve a greater purpose.

I have since desecrated the fanes and taken their power for my own. My power over the land is now unmatched, further securing myself as ruler and lord of this domain. Yet, for all these boons, none offered me that which I truly desired.



10 - The Gulthias Tree

I worked tirelessly to devise a way to create the artifact from the prophecy. The core principle of the idea was that, through a connection with my blood, this magnificent object would shield me from any harm: including that of radiance and light.

After summoning various extraplanar entities for insight, it was a barbed devil named Khyristrix that proved most useful. She informed me of the existence of the Gulthias Tree.

As it was told, this tree grew from a wooden stake stabbed through the heart of a vampire called Gulthias of Nightfang Spire. Left to its own devices, the tree consumed and corrupted life around it unchecked, creating the first blights. What most didn't know was that blood crystals form along its roots which could be harvested as a material to create the artifact with.

Unfortunately, this tree was destroyed long ago, and was unreachable besides. Yet, the process to create one seemed simple. If the blood of this lesser vampire Gulthias could create such a thing, then surely my own would create one of even greater power.

It was then that I descended upon Yester Hill, where those wild fools of the forest still held their meaningless rites. I used my might as dark lord and the power of the fanes to convince them of my divinity. As the last act of this demonstration, I bade their leader, Kavan the Grim, to drive his spear through my heart and into the old oak atop the hill, "killing" me.

I let my essence bleed out and into that accursed tree. Then I became but a cloud of mist, and reappeared nearby. Completely convinced of my godhood, the idiots agreed to worship me in place of their long forgotten archfey, and their druids agreed to feed the tree regular blood sacrifices.

This was a move of brilliance on my part - the new Gulthias Tree will be nurtured, while the blood simultaneously reinforces the desecration of the fane beneath it. I will have to look further into delegating this task for the other fanes. All that was left to do now was to wait.



11 - The Wizard King

After nearly a century since the mists took Barovia, my hopes for an arcane master were restored. Madam Eva's prophecy was correct. Rumor reached me that the bodies of several missing youths were found outside of an abandoned house near Berez. I quietly investigated, and after an unpleasant standoff met the only person that I can admit ever posed a real threat to me since becoming the dark lord of Barovia.

Azalin Rex.

Azalin appeared as a man of five decades, wearing pristine red robes, with a dark aura about him. He claimed to be a wizard king who fled a war that was not going well, and became lost in the mists before ending up here. He had an unbearable sense of his own superiority - a pride that made even I look humble by comparison. He made clear immediately his disgust with my domain, insults leaking from his teeth like water into a sinking ship. I made clear immediately that his disgust and former titles mean little here. In Barovia, I am the Ancient, I am the Land; and I am its only Lord.

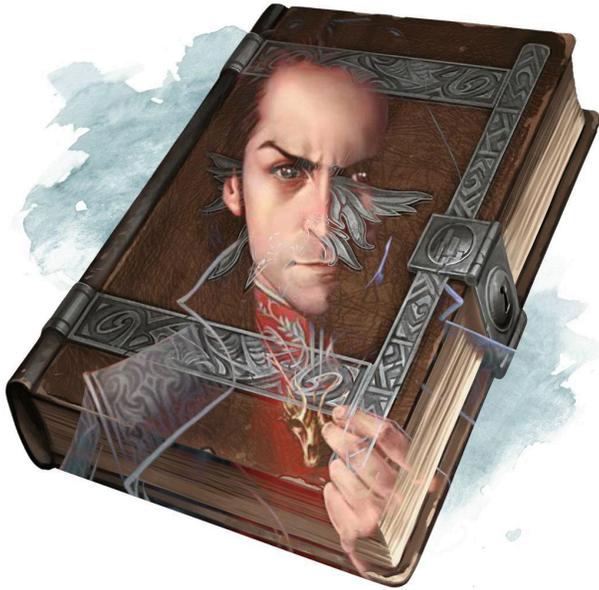
Despite his rudeness, I needed him as an ally, as a battle between us before learning the extent of his power would have been quite dangerous. I could see that, as a noble, he acted according to a code of ethics. Thus, I parlayed with him as "host" of Barovia, treating him as my "guest" - a promise of non-aggression and compliance from both parties.

The deal was made, and it worked splendidly in my favor, since any attempt to harm or betray me would violate that code of his, and he was far too proud to resort to that. My first victory against him.

Azalin and I would cooperate to reach our common goals - namely to find egress from the mists. I had discovered early on that I can allow or deny others passage to and from Barovia, however he had attempted twice to leave my realm since arriving and was turned back, through no effort on my part. He was just as trapped as I, it seemed.

Having him stay in the castle made me wary, so I commissioned for him the construction of a secret tower - a clockwork marvel of Azalin's design that he called a "laboratory". It was built at the bottom of the black Lake Zarovich, beneath the notice of the pests that lived near the shore. Magically warded and sealed, he would conduct his research and experiments inside this laboratory under the lake, using a teleportation circle to travel back and forth.

The necromancer had arrived. Time would tell if Madam Eva's prophecy would come to pass.



12 - An Uneasy Alliance

Azalin revealed himself to be a poor leader of men. He was quick to anger, as any perceived slight or insult was met with white hot rage, if not spell craft, in retaliation. Vistani refused to work with him, and the few hapless Barovians that were pressed into his service chafed under his tyrannical personality.

I have been called a tyrant, yet even I do not deal with those beneath me in such an impatient, brutish manner as he. His arrogance was matched only by his knowledge of the arcane, which was absolutely unsurpassed. Indeed, all prior wizards I had met were hedge-mages by comparison.

Years passed, and after multiple tests and experiments involving the mists, I began to notice something rather odd: he was remarkably forthcoming in teaching me the ways of magic. I learned all that I could from him, of course. Many of the clever tricks and traps within Castle Ravenloft are thanks to our collaboration. Yet I still thought it strange that he did not more jealously guard this knowledge, as Khazan and others have done in the past.

Then, it dawned on me. Though I did not know it when he first arrived, he had been afflicted by a peculiar condition upon entering my realm. He took great pains to hide this weakness from me, but I was eventually able to deduce the truth.

Azalin Rex, the self-proclaimed “wizard king”, could not learn new spells or magic. Not even a cantrip.

I was relieved. After all, if war with this necromancer was inevitable, then any advantage against him would be invaluable. Yet, it was not as debilitating as one might have thought. His knowledge was already so vast that by presenting what he did know, a fresh set of eyes could put the pieces together like a puzzle. And, despite his handicap, Azalin Rex was certainly full of machinations that he couldn't see through on his own. Schemes that needed someone to cast the spells necessary for them to work. Someone like me.

Of course, I kept this epiphany to myself. Better he think I a fool and underestimate me than realize I am aware of his weakness. I suspected that the amber temple might hold the power to lift his curse, and so I made sure not to share the knowledge of its existence with him. The less he knows, the better.



13 - The Mordent Incident

As the years wore on, Azalin and I would only meet when the occasion was of some importance. The man seemingly did not require sleep, and spent countless hours working in his laboratory. That was just as well. We learned that small talk only irritated us both, and I was focused on other matters at the time.

When Azalin summoned me to his tower on a freezing winter morning, I knew why. He had been constructing a device he called the "apparatus" which would presumably free us from the mists. I did not know how it worked, and any questions I asked were met with his usual barbs and scoffs. I should have known something was amiss, but I was curious, so I began casting the spells he required.

The apparatus was an utter failure. Instead of physically escaping, I was struck with visions of another realm within the mists called "Mordent". I experienced flashes of another life - my life, but as a mortal! I was an alchemist named Rastinon, happily married and enjoying everything in life that I, Strahd, am denied!

In a twist of fate that mystifies me to this day, this other "me" also built a version of the apparatus, of the exact same design as the one Azalin had built, and my visions ceased the moment Rastinon activated it.

When I awoke as myself again, the apparatus was a smoldering ruin. I was heavily injured. Simply getting up off of the ground took more effort than it had in a very, VERY long time. It was then that I had realized Azalin's treachery: he never intended the apparatus to allow my escape. He merely used me as a test subject! This was an insult that could not stand, but what I saw when I looked for that miserable wizard stopped me in my tracks.

In tattered red robes, I saw Azalin's skeletal body, dead skin hugging his form. Yet, it was not injury from the explosion that made him this way; that would have been messier. All at once it came to me - why he did not seem to ever sleep, eat, or pursue the pleasures and creature comforts that all mortal men seek.

Azalin Rex was not a mortal man.

Azalin Rex was a lich.



14 - The Lich's Treachery

I saw light begin to appear in his empty sockets, and I quickly laid down where I was before. I waited for him to rise first, giving him time to reapply his illusory disguise, and then pretended to wake. I was careful. I feigned being upset that the experiment was a failure. I made it seem that my rage was directed at his shoddy design, in a manner that was slightly offensive, but came across as bickering more than anything else.

He had used multiple spells to conceal his nature from me for decades, and I was not about to reveal to him that it just came undone. As I expected, he did not react as he typically would. He was uncharacteristically calm, no doubt thankful in believing that I had not discovered his true identity.

The time for war was fast approaching, and I knew it. He would be the most powerful enemy I'd yet face, but my connection to the Fanes and powers as dark lord granted me an undeniable advantage. He would eventually find a way out, but before he left, his wounded pride would bring an undead army against me.

It had been nearly two centuries since I last led an army in war, but it still felt routine. I made my preparations in secret, summoned what nobles and boyars were still left, and had them train new militias. None of them knew war like I did, but I needed no heroes - only competent fodder to hold the line. When his hordes came, I was ready. I had been ready for a long time.

Azalin and I would battle only once face to face. Our fight made the skies dance and the ground tremble. I knew I could not kill him without destroying his phylactery. By then, it was certainly out of my domain. I did not need to kill him, however, I only needed to drive him away like a dog with its tail between its legs.

In the end, I won that short-lived war. The only true war I'd fight as the dark lord of Barovia. I am told by the Vistani that he now dwells in his own prison realm called "Darkon", trapped just as before. A fitting fate. May he rot forever in anguish.



15 - Domains of Dread

The experience with the apparatus offered new insights into the nature of the mists, despite its failure to grant me exodus. Of course, I knew that there was still the world outside Barovia. The Vistani told me of other neighboring lands within the mist as well, each with their own "dark lord" that is unable to leave.

What I did not know was that each of these dark domains have origins wholly independent from MY former world. Simply put, they are not the lands that surrounded Barovia before the mists came.

After sending out some of the Vistani to verify my suspicions, they returned in short order and confirmed them: Barovia was no longer within the material plane it originated from. Castle Ravenloft and the surrounding valley disappeared from its original location, only to be replaced with supernaturally dense mist and fog.

That raised the question: if I am no longer in the world of my birth, just where did I end up?

I spent some time in the amber temple to find any information I could within the tomes there. There was a frustrating lack of definitive answers, and my patience began to wear.

Exethanter was of course no help either. Blast these infernal liches! If they are not betrayers, then they are senile! How that oaf became a lich in the first place, I'll never know.

Just as I was about to give up, the Arcanoloth named Nefaron revealed himself to me. I had forgotten that Nefaron was one of the extraplanar entities I had summoned in my quest to create the Gulthias Tree. He had somehow escaped my notice and taken up residence within the temple since.

Wisely, he surrendered any pretense of hostility and recognized my authority. Then he spoke of the true nature of this realm.

Barovia - as well as Darkon, Mordent, and countless other places - were all taken by the mists from their planes of origin. These realms are all collectively known as the "Domains of Dread" by those on the outside who are aware of them. And they all occupy a cursed place within the Shadowfell.



16 - The Dark Powers

Nefaron also spoke of unknowable, god-like entities he called the "Dark Powers". I could recall brief mentions of them from various sources before: some Vistani spoke of them, as did Patrina while she lived.

Still, the Vistani only shared folk tales embellished over a campfire. They knew nothing - hells, they were even ignorant of the fact that they traverse in and out of different planes through the mists regularly! As such, even I did not know that Barovia had been spirited away into the Shadowfell until after Azalin's arrival, as the Vistani who visited before and after noticed no difference in their ability to reach it.

As for what Patrina knew... she took it all with her to the grave. Just as with my darling Tatyana, no necromancy of mine could reach her spirit. Her soul must have been cut off from this place. That, or these "dark powers" are keeping her from me.

I was a fool for disregarding it all as superstition. It all made sense now. The mist, the gloom, and my Tatyana, always just out of reach.

Was I being punished by them to forever dwell within a prison of my own making? Whatever their motives, I will not succumb to the whims of petty beings that hide in the shadows who fancy themselves gods! I will escape one day, and when I do, I will hunt each and every one of them down.

I swear it.



17 - The Heart of Sorrow

For centuries, I patiently waited. The druids tended the old oak faithfully, and the effort had paid off. It had truly become a full grown Gulthias Tree, freely spawning blights to protect its roots,

The druids, the blights, even the tree itself mattered little to me now. I only needed the blood crystals. I harvested enough material to begin the creation of the artifact, foretold by Madam Eva many years ago. I spent countless nights envisioning it, letting it take shape in my mind. With what I had learned, I knew I could accomplish something that none who bear the curse of Vampyr have ever done before.

It is done. The ultimate armor is mine and mine alone: a beating heart of crimson crystal, of which contains a darkness as deep as death itself!

Its pale, blood-red light nourishes me, granting me strength and vitality. I hunger less - I can even stomach wine, if I so wish it. I can go years between feeds, slumbering dormant while I wait for my Tatyana to return.

Best of all, the connection I have forged with the Heart of Sorrow, as I have begun to call it, now provides me protection from that which I fear most, even across great distances. So long as the heart beats, I am one step closer to true invincibility.

It is suspended in the north tower, a more suitable beacon to replace the one I extinguished in that old dragon's stronghold so many, many years ago. I have had all those who know of its origins and purpose silenced, save for faithful Rahadin. Even my hapless brides know not of its true value and potential.

The Heart of Sorrow is a treasure, a tool that I will guard most viciously.



18 - Undying Love

Throughout the years, I have hunted often for Tatyana. I move in disguise and procure tips - rumors of a beautiful woman with auburn hair - and where she was last seen. Tatyana has reappeared among the commoners about once each century since her death, just as Madam Eva prophesied. Somehow she returns, in all of her youthful splendor!

I have felt the warmth of her skin, tasted the sweetness of her blood. It takes all of my will to not drain her dry when I have her, and I always make sure that she survives. Yet every time I am nearly able to turn her, every time I am nearly able to make her truly mine - she escapes me!

No matter the tactic, no matter the approach! She escapes me, and then I must wait decades upon decades before she reappears once more, having completely forgotten who I am! Forgetting my eternal love for her! She taunts me!

Tatyana, my love! How can it be that you live again? If my undying love for you brought you back to me, why do you not accept me when I am before you?

What will it take to bend your love to me? How many more times must we repeat this cycle? How many more years must I wait? How much longer must I suffer your looks of disgust, of fear?

Worst of all, how can no power I wield bring you to my side?

With all the powers of the fanes, the countless servants I command, my absolute mastery over the land and sky, the Heart of Sorrow granting me dominion over the very sun itself - I am no mere king, no mere undead! I am the Ancient! I am the Land!

I have achieved so much, for you! And yet! I would never again desire escape from Barovia, my love. I'd abandon my campaign against those dark powers that trapped me here, I'd remain their prisoner forever, if only you'd love me! Your joy, your youth - I will have you, Tatyana!

And when you finally submit yourself to our love, I will see to it that we will live in eternal happiness, invincible to that which would destroy us. My Heart is yours.

Never again will you call me "brother".

Never again will you look at me and think "death".

Our love will be deathless, and you and I will be young together, forever, my Tatyana.