

THE STRATEGIC STRAHD GUIDE

Utilizing Strahd's Full Capabilities

Introduction: Strahd is a formidable opponent, but the level of interactions with the PCs can vary. This guideline will help you utilize all of Strahd's capabilities as written, and includes a new list of spells which Strahd prepares before the final encounter

A series of encounter guidelines for 3rd-10th level characters

by CHRISTOPHER LAMERE



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Playing against the Party

"I have been so long master that I would be master still, or at least that none other should be master of me."

—Bram Stoker, *Dracula*

Strahd as "god"

There is a temptation to make Strahd the DM's direct hand in the world. In some ways, the *Curse of Strahd* adventure even encourages this. NPCs obey Strahd and feed him back information on the party. He is more powerful than any one PC, and can deal enough damage in a single round to down a party member in a flash. However, I feel like it is extremely important to play by the rules with Strahd. But: he is NOT a god. He has been elevated by the dark powers to his position of Lord, but he is not all powerful, though that is the image he seeks to portray. I'm going to relate the experience which inspired me to write this guide.

The PCs encountered Strahd in Vallaki during the feast of the Blazing Sun. Strahd successfully scried Ireena and found that she was out of Saint Andral's church, and decided to abduct her. Strahd was moving so quickly and doing so much in a round that the whole party nearly gave up, believing the scene to be a scripted encounter where Strahd abducts Ireena. Only the fighter, who had sentinel, really didn't surrender. He got an attack of opportunity on Strahd, which stopped his movement and pulled Ireena from Strahd's grasp. The sorcerer, finally understanding that I was not fudging the rolls or ensuring a certain outcome, dragged Ireena into the church, dispelling the charm. Strahd, weakened by the Sunsword and denied his prize, tossed a fireball at half the party and fled before Rictavio arrived.

I believe that the first encounter I ran where my party encountered Strahd rather directly encapsulates the importance of following the rules. The figure of Strahd is built up throughout the entire adventure as this force of absolutely unstoppable evil. This is an image which Strahd intentionally cultivates. But, if Strahd has all the capabilities of the Dungeon Master, he cannot help but win every single encounter unless the Dungeon Master wills it. If, on the other hand, Strahd is merely played intelligently, coherently, and to the best of his abilities, the players can coordinate tactics based on what they know about the vampire. Don't make Strahd a god. Make him Bruce Wayne with a Green Lantern ring. If the party gives Strahd time to prepare, he should absolutely overwhelm the party in a toe to toe fight. If the party plays by Strahd's rules, they lose. Get the party out of the "do a lot of damage per round" box. Strahd

can not only out-damage the party, but out-maneuver them while doing it.

Strahd's Strengths and their Weaknesses

Strahd's Mobility

If Strahd takes the dash action, he can move on the ground or up walls at tremendous speeds. His legendary actions allow him to move faster than dashing horses, and his lair actions can get him from one end of the castle to the other in a single turn. His nightmare allows him to range over Barovia much faster than the PCs. However, this mobility has its limits.

While in mist form, Strahd cannot take any actions, including Lair actions and legendary actions. This means that he cannot travel at the tremendous speeds which make him such a threat in combat. If Strahd drops to zero hit points, he must return to his coffin within one hour. This means that the vampire needs to be within about six miles of his coffin to engage in combat confidently. It has been suggested that Strahd may keep additional coffins with the vistani, or secreted around the countryside, but the existence and location of these is outside the scope of this guide.

Further, Strahd cannot use his Misty Escape ability while in sunlight or running water. Once the PCs have acquired the sunsword, they have the opportunity to destroy Strahd without the final confrontation in his tomb. A DM may rule that such a discorporation is only temporary, but again, this is outside of the scope of this guide.

Strahd's Intelligence and Counterintelligence

Strahd has an innate sense of everyone inside of his domain. However, he has still taken Scrying. This indicates that while he has a sense of those around him, he does not know their specific locations or exactly what they are doing at any given moment. I imagine it like a sort of empathic sense.

Strahd also has spies throughout Barovia. Baba Lysaga, the druids, the werewolves, wolves and dire wolves, night hags, bats, and vistani all report back to Strahd. Some of these creatures cannot speak, perhaps they give an empathic sense of the location that an interaction takes place. Many of them are intelligent, and should attempt to steal hair or personal effects from the PCs to make Strahd's scrying attempts simpler.

Once the PCs have caught Strahd's attention, by foiling one of his plots and receiving an invitation to dinner, acquiring one or more of the Treasures of Ravenloft, or by entering and escaping Castle Ravenloft, He should begin scrying on the character who he thinks could be his successor or consort. If successful, Strahd should

always attack the party. The scale of the attack should reflect Strahd's feelings about them, as well as the distance from the castle. Within six miles of the castle, a frustrated Strahd should bear down on the Characters with his full might. If the party is beyond Strahd's "Safe Zone," interrupting their rest with a volley of fireballs to drain resources, delay them, or even kill a few members of the party. Burning most of his spell slots is well worth it for Strahd.

Scrying does have a major downside. Strahd only has one fifth level spell slot per day. Casting Scrying means that he won't be at full strength until his next full rest. If Strahd knows the players are heading towards Castle Ravenloft, he will not cast Scry.

Strahd's Allies

Encounters with Strahd below level 4, barring extraordinary circumstances like charging into Castle Ravenloft brandishing the sunsword, should not have Strahd as a major focus of the encounter. He might throw a few cantrips, but should mostly focus on charming PCs and staying out of range of their attacks. Any time Strahd is encountered outside of his tomb and his prophesied location, Strahd shows up to an encounter with allies, and can summon more. Strahd should spend most of his time messing with his chosen PC or attempting to abduct Ireena. He may even leave the fight after his children of the night arrive.

Strahd can summon his Children of the Night once per day. These are perfect to add to an encounter with Strahd. Summoning them takes 1d4 rounds, and if the PCs don't get the drop on Strahd he will try to delay the PCs with clever conversation. After taking his action to summon the Children of the Night, he will simply attempt to charm PCs every round. Using a timer for this is good. If Strahd can charm a whole party, he will begin taking items from them. From artifacts to silvered weapons, just because they can't harm him in any way.

Children of the Night

Bat Swarms

2d4 Bat Swarms, 2,200 to 8,800 XP

"We can't stop here
this is bat country!"

—Hunter S. Thomson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

I contend that getting Strahd Right means getting his bats right. Strahd's bats are an extension of his personality, and a direct extension of his power. If Strahd gets the drop on the PCs, he

should always take the four rounds to use children of the night to prepare for battle. During combat, Strahd has a few priorities for his bats

Defense:

Strahd uses bats to fill the squares directly in front of himself. Strahd gains cover, and at the DMs discretion and with enough bats, obscurement. Fighting Strahd in melee means taking multiple attacks from multiple swarms, putting aside the attacks from the Lord of Ravenloft himself. The Bat Swarms can pass over the melee combattant's square, though can't stop there.

Attack:

Strahd's bats can utilize the "help" action on their turn. This is useful, especially when the PCs have both the Icon and the sunsword. Two different bat swarms would have to help to negate the disadvantages, but this is well worth it. Another attack option combines the swarms with fog cloud, making an area which is full of bats which Strahd can gain advantage while fighting in while at the same time negating the effects of the sunsword

Scouting:

The bats have the powerful ability "blindsight." Invisible foes can be detected. Bat Swarms not within Strahd's cloak of night should roam the battlefield, attempting to disrupt concentration and searching for stealthed foes.

Core Stat: lorem ipsum

Core Body. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipisicing elit, sed do eiusmod tempore ut labore et dolore

Wolves

3d6 Wolves, 150 to 900 XP

The wolves are the hardest Children of the Night to adjudicate properly, simply because the number of them can range from three to eighteen. All eighteen wolves is a challenging encounter for a group of five level 5 PCs, but 3 wolves are barely a blip for the same party. Strahd choosing to summon wolves is more of a gamble than any of the other options, because the capabilities of the wolves are unknown until Strahd actually summons them. Wolves are good for a

siege if Strahd has a good understanding of the layout of the area which he is sieging. Wolves can also only be summoned outdoors.

Strahd in the Crypt

Strahd spends most of the campaign putting on pretensions. Acting like a deity. Pretending he controls every aspect of the tiny world the PCs find themselves in. As play continues, you should introduce the cracks. This final fight, where Strahd pulls out all his nastiest tricks, is Iconic. The Final Boss in his true form. In this case, a dark and lurking thing which remembers being a man.

Getting Strahd to the Crypt

Strahd has Limitations. The biggest one is that Radiant Damage completely halts his misty escape. Once the PCs get their hands on reliable radiant damage, Strahd should always take extra precautions. He may even avoid leaving Castle Ravenloft, once they've acquired the Sunsword.

Strahd can only travel 6 miles away from his tomb safely. Outside of that area, a misty Strahd will die en route to the castle.

Getting the Players to the Crypt

The race to the Crypt should be tense. Unless the PCs have already found it, they are in danger of letting Strahd regenerate before they can kill him that final time. I think that the best way to handle this is to count it out. Don't say "it takes 'About x time,'" figure out exact measurements. This is a great time to break out the exhaustion rules for running. I plan on using M&M candies. The players won't know exactly how many M&Ms there are in the bowl, but they'll know when their time is almost up. This can lead to a frantic dash past and through guardians and traps.

Bat Swarms in the Crypt Within Strahd's crypt are thousands of bats. If the PCs fight Strahd here, he should open up with fireballs, sacrificing the spell slot to hit even just one PC but also trying to hit as MANY squares as possible. Each 10 ft square produces 2d4 bat swarms. This means that a single cast of fireball produces 26d4 bat swarms. Though each bat swarm would take damage from the fireball, even a maximum roll isn't enough to kill a single swarm. Though Strahd won't have had time to reprepare spell slots [unless the PCs took a long time to arrive], he may be at his most powerful while in the crypt. Strahd's strength comes from his allies.

I stopped writing after this point, but here's the bit where i talk about redoing strahd's spells

Fog Cloud is an important spell for Strahd, not just because he controls the mists of ravenloft, but because it gives him protection from the sunsword and (as I've detailed elsewhere,) it's good to fill with bats.

Strahd's level 2 spells are mostly good. Mirror image doesn't require concentration, which is quite a nice buff for our vampire lord. Gust of wind is another spell which can keep the sunsword away from him. Detect thoughts might be a good spell for strahd to cast if he is aware that the PCs are coming for him, so he can know if they have a secret plan to deal with him. One alteration which I might suggest, but am not going to give to strahd myself, is Levitate. It offers Strahd MORE ways to keep the sunsword away, but its another concentration spell. maybe swap out gust of wind.

Level 3 spells: In my party's first encounter with strahd, he was having a bit of trouble. the tanks got up in the front line and were messing him up with the sunsword (that's the reason i decided to write all this,) while the backline peppered him with arrows. Because I always like intelligent, controlling wizards, I don't tend to have my NPCs throwing around fireball willy nilly. However, a single fireball was enough to demolish the entire back line of archers and mages, forcing the front line to retreat and giving strahd a chance to escape. Don't discount fireballs ability to control the terms of the fight.

Nondetection is Non-negotiable. Strahd casts this spell at the crack of dawn when he goes to sleep, to ensure that no erstwhile adventurers scry on his lair.

Animate Dead is another spell which seems alright for strahd when he's terrorizing villagers, but not so good when he's fighting adventurers. I suggest swapping it out with Counterspell. The painting of strahd can cast it, why not the man himself?

I'm a big fan of Polymorph, just for the cinematic effect of Strahd turning into a big ole Monstrous bat, Castlevania Style. It's another concentration spell, and it's easier to dispel than strahd's other concentration spells because Strahd doesn't get to keep his +4 constitution bonus while he's a t-rex. Others have discussed using polymorph to turn a PC into a rat, then having strahd bite them. I'm not sure that I like this, but it's yet another way to get the sunsword away from Strahd.

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Blight is my least favorite spell on strahd's spell list. It seems like a flavor spell, strahd striking out with his necromatic energy, but it doesn't exactly do heavy damage. on average, it deals 32 necrotic damage. Strahd can do 21 damage with ONE unarmed strike. If the PCs are a bunch of plant monsters for some reason, definitely keep this spell. otherwise, place it gently into the trash bin. A better single target spell which has the potential to deal more damage over time and control movement is Phantasmal Killer. It's ANOTHER concentration spell, but has the potential to remove a PC from melee combat with strahd, the phantasmal force interposing between strahd and the melee combatant.

I think that the better choice, however, is not another direct damage spell but a buff spell, this one WITHOUT concentration. Fire Shield punishes PCs for getting into melee with strahd further than "you're going to get bitten and it's going to hurt." Because this spell and Mirror image don't require concentration, I'd suggest stacking them with polymorph to create a sort of "This isn't even my final form" sort of combat, with strahd in T-Rex form, dealing passive damage to anyone who manages to hit the correct monster. For fifth level slots, animate objects is sort of out of place. I can see it making sense with the whole "I am the Ancient, I am the Land" situation, but I feel like it doesn't give quite enough utility to really function. Instead, I'd replace it with Telekinesis. Strahd attempts to scry Ireena every night, so he won't have access to this spell until he's in the castle. his best option is to start trying to take the vampire relics (probably starting with the weakest player since telekinesis is opposed by strength) and hurling them from the tower.

And that's all of the spell levels! I hope people find this useful. Strahd in the Greater Barovian Region

Strahd has the capability to destroy low leveled players with relative ease when encountered in Barovia. However, he shouldn't appear every time the PCs stick their noses outside during the evening. Strahd has a powerful capability to regenerate while within about six miles of his crypt, meaning that the closer to Ravenloft Castle he is, the stronger and more confident he should be. beyond that range, Strahd should not gamble, and should be used as an encounter generator.

The book has a few reasons why Strahd would harras the party. first, if they are accompanying Ireena. This gives the party an early opportunity to encounter strahd, if they stay the night at the burgomeister mansion in the town of barovia. This encounter has the potential to be deadly, but strahd is not expecting to encounter the PCs so he takes a similar tact to his previous attempts to breach

the mansion and takes a mostly support role. roll to see what allies strahd brings to this fight. Strahd then goes to the graveyard by the church. Perhaps a ringing of the churchbell gives players a chance to prepare for the assault. This should catch them in the middle of their long rest, so give them a short rest and don't allow them to regenerate their capabilities. fully. at this point, strahd has certainly used his Scry, so he has no 5th level slots active. He then goes to the graveyard and raises a mixture of zombies and skeletons, depending on what random allies are generated for strahd. It is likely that Strahd has frontliners like wolves and ghouls. If, on the other hand, he has brought bats or vampire spawn, he may raise more zombies. he burns two of his level 4 spell slots on this, generating six undead which he needs to use a bonus action to move. Strahd knows he needs to bite Ireena one more time to turn her completely, and he's confident that the two aren't enough to shut him down. Strahd summons bats (or wolves, if bats are his random allies) as he's walking up the street to Ireena's house. He has a bouquet of flowers. He hopes to charm her or Ismark, but intends to use his undead to bash open one of the windows and drag one of the other out. For this encounter, use the map for one of the mansions in Vallaki. When combat begins, strahd sends his swarms of bats into the windows of the mansion, and has his skeletons begin pounding on the windows hoping to shatter the barriers. He casts fog cloud on the entrance to give his minions cover, and flies to the roof. The minions are a diversion. He hopes to send ireena running for cover on the second floor. After the fog cloud ends (10 rounds), strahd uses his last 4th level spell to transform into a tyranosaurus (a monstrous bat), loosing his vampire weaknesses and crashing through the roof. Strahd attempts to grapple Ireena and remove her from the premises. He then attempts to charm her, and if successful, carries her to the pillar of ravenloft,, spider climbing to the castle itself.

If the players are travelling the Svalich road past nightfall with ireena, strahd will swoop in with swarms of bats and attempt to charm Ireena. Flying in the swarm of bats grants strahd partial cover (+2 to ac) and imposes disadvantage on attacks to hit him. If he succeeds, he implores Ireena to escape from "These Brigands" and seek out his allies so that they might be together. Strahd then leaves, and Ireena seems to snap out of it. In reality, she is still spellbound by strahd and will attempt to escape for the next 24 hours, seeking out Vistani or other servants of strahd to escort her to the castle.

If strahd believes that one of the PCs may be worthy of becoming his successor, he will use similar harrying tactics to test them from a

distance. Skeletons and bats and strahds randomly generated minions attacking the party in places they're resting, safe from vampires, Strahd ordering his vistani minions to curse the player whenever they see him and so on.

If Strahd discovers that the players have found the journal, he decides to destroy them. If they are outside his "safe zone" (6 miles from castle ravenloft, the furthest distance which strahd can travel from his tomb and safely being able to recover with misty escape), have him scry them every night, fly out on his Nightmare, drop a fireball or two on the party and fly off, leaving his minions to try and mop up. If they are WITHIN the 6 mile radius at night, a violent thunderstorm brews, and strahd comes down from castle ravenloft in all his fury. He fights without restraint, getting into melee and trying to kill the pcs.

Tactics for Strahd's randomly generated allies

Encounters with strahd vary wildly outside of the two places he is encountered alone, simply because he brings very different allies to every fight. Outside of the 6 mile radius, these spells should primarily be between strahd's allies and the party.

Dire Wolves: Strahd summons the 3d6 normal wolves before engaging in this combat. he then polymorphs one of the dire wolves into a tiger, sending it through the forest to attack the PCs back line. Strahd then sends the rest of the wolves into combat, hitting the front line and focusing their attacks on one target trying to trip them. Strahd casts ray of frost on enemy combattants, but mostly holds back and waits for the tiger to strike. When the party has divided into a front and back line, strahd drops a fireball and then the tiger pounces on whoever looks the most weakened by the attack. Strahd retreats after taking 50% of his HP damage.

The ghouls: if strahd rolls for ghouls, he has a major advantage. characters who are paralyzed don't need to be grappled to be hit by strahd's bite attack. Strahd may summon bats to obscure his precense and wait for a PC to fail a paralysis save, or may summon wolves to give the ghouls an advantage in their attacks. PCs not expecting to encounter strahd can easily fall here. It may also be an ideal time for strahd to use his greater invisibility.

strahd zombies: If strahd has prep time [always give strahd prep time], he piles the bodies of his zombies in the middle of the road, summons some rats, and calls up a fog cloud and waits. If the PCs aren't careful, the zombies will leap up and try to restrain them, giving strahd a chance to bite. If the PCs are using a carriage, one of the strahd zombies might attempt to hide a body part in the carriage, giving strahd an automatic success on future scrying attempts.

bats: strahd summons more bat swarms and then turns into a bat. he attempts to charm the entire party, though these rolls should be attempted in secret. within the swarm of bats, strahd has partial cover and

A favored tactic of strahd is interposing the bats between the party and strahd. many partys see targetting the bats as a waste of an action. It effectively grants him a wooden shield against ranged attacks.

Additionally, if strahd has at least 4 swarms of bats, I ruled that it grants him obscurement as well as partial cover as long as the bats are within 5 feet of him. This means that if the bats are in between the wielder of the sunsword and the vampire lord, Strahd doesn't take the radiant damage, though your mileage may vary with this ruling.

vampire spawn: Strahd summons 3d6 wolves, pairing the wolves with the vampire spawn. the wolves attempt to trip the PCs, and the spawn attempt to bite them once they're down.

Wolves: Strahd Summons more wolves, and tries to get the PCs in a pincer movement. If he manages to drive them off the road, he takes great pleasure in hunting them down with his "hounds"

with his sharp

mind and his heart dark, Strahd von Zarovich is a formidable foe. Courage and lives have been lost to him.

-Curse of Strahd, p.239

Strahd is an opponent with unique and varied capabilities, but with several glaring weaknesses which the players are aware of. Strahd is as slippery as a kobold in its lair, and fearsome as a dragon in his rage. This suppliment is meant to give you, the DM, creative options to keep up your sleeve. I've done planning for you, so that Strahd isn't caught off guard by a new player tactic.

Strahds Mobility

If Strahd takes the dash action, he can move on the ground or up walls at tremendous speeds. His legendary actions allow him to move faster than dashing horses, and his lair actions can get him from one end of the castle to the other in a single turn. His nightmare allows him to range over Barovia much faster than the PCs. However, this mobility has its limits.

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Strahd's Information Gathering

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Scrying does have a major downside. Strahd only has one fifth level spell slot per day. Casting scrying means that he won't be at full strength until his next full rest.

Strahd as a "God"hybguyhhhhh

There is a temptation to make Strahd the DM's direct hand in the world. In some ways, the adventure even encourages this. NPCs obey Strahd and feed him back information on the party. He is more powerful than any one PC, and can deal enough damage in a single round to down a party member in a flash. However, I feel like it is

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Strahd's Lair Tactics

While within Castle Ravenloft, Strahd has powerful abilities which can be used to dismantle a party.

Passing through walls: for an entire turn, Strahd can use all of his movement to pass through walls. This ability not only allows him to traverse the entire castle in a single round of combat, but gives him the opportunity to get total cover. Simply by stepping through a wall, Strahd can avoid line of sight and damage from the sunsword. When he does this, continue initiative order, wait for the several rounds where strahd is hiding and recharging his hit points, then have him burst out of the wall, spells flying. Simple, Effective. When the players first encounter strahd in the location foretold by the taroka deck, he should close the door behind the first rank of the party. Typically, the strongest PCs walk in the front of the line, as well as the PCs with the lowest wisdom saving throws.

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Locking them in a room with strahd gives the vampire a round of actions to attempt a charm [preferably on the PC with the sunsword], and forces the strongest PCs in the party to choose between opening a DC20 door and trying to fight a vampire who might be physically stronger than them.

Strahd can also summon a specter for a single attack. this option is best while strahd already has his jaws locked around a player, further lowering their maximum hit points.

Strahd's most dangerous lair attack is the ability to animate a Character's shadow. It does not directly harm the PC, but it does grant strahd something else, numbers. When strahd succeeds in this action, make the character's shadow slither towards strahd, and coordinate attacks against the melee characters engaging strahd. Strahd should attempt to have these shadows survive. If a shadow goes below half health, strahd sends it to the crypt to lurk near the teleport pads for the last stand.

The Last Stand of Strahd

If Strahd falls and is not in sunlight or running water, the vampire has one hour to return to his tomb. Track where strahd is in Castle Ravenloft, and do not leave initiative order. Once Strahd enters his coffin, he has 600 rounds before reviving. If Strahd did not die in the crypt, the PCs may not know where the vampires tomb is. This leads to an exciting sort of chase, with the PCs charging through the castle unable to spend the time on fighting the monsters which show up. Use some kind of counter. This could be 1d6+2d10, or you could count out 600 small candies and have a player eat one per round. because of the length of time that this encounter, I suggest ending the session when strahd reforms in his tomb and beginning the next session with the new timing encounters mechanic. Between the first level of the castle and the depths of the crypt are dozens of rooms, each with a potential random encounter, perhaps a hundred individual monsters, and four or five traps which aren't exactly deadly, but take a significant amount of time to extricate from. In the crypt, strahd should not hold anything back. Though it is likely that he has spent many of his spell slots, make sure he holds a third or fourth slot in reserve. If Strahd awakens before the PCs make it to Strahd's tomb, he doesn't goof around pretending to be unconscious. He begins shooting bats from the ceiling, activating 2d4 bat swarms per round. If he can catch the PCs in a fireball at the same time, all the better. If the PCs arrive too late, the entire crypt should be swarming with bats thirsty for their blood