

FOREWORD: RAVENLOFT REVISITED

WE TURNED THE CORNER, AND THERE WAS a vampire.

I groaned and rolled my eyes.

It was 1978, and I was playing in one of my first dungeon adventures. It was being run by a friend I had known in high school, John Scott Clegg, and it was typical of the type of adventure that people played in those days. It was all about exploring a hodgepodge collection of rooms connected by dungeon corridors, beating up the monsters that we encountered, searching for treasure, and gaining experience points.

Now we were face to face with random encounter number thirty-four: a vampire. Not a Vampire with a capital V, but a so-many-Hit-Dice-with-such-and-such-an-Armor-Class lowercase vampire. Just another monster in the dungeon.

I remember thinking at the time, What are *you* doing here? This creature seemed completely out of place with the kobolds, orcs, and gelatinous cubes we had seen thus far. This was a creature who deserved his own setting and to be so much more than just a wandering monster. When I came home from that game, I told all these thoughts to Laura.

That was when Strahd von Zarovich was born.

Strahd would be no afterthought—he demanded his own setting, his own tragic history. Laura and I launched into researching the mythology and folklore surrounding the vampire. We started with the vague, black-and-white image of Bela Lugosi in 1931, but found so much more.

The first “modern” literary foundation of the vampire was penned by John William Polidori based on a fragment of a story by Lord Byron. It was while at the Villa Diodati—a rented house next to Lake Geneva, Switzerland—that Byron and Polidori met Mary Wollstonecraft

Godwin and her husband-to-be, Percy Shelley. One night in June, Byron suggested that they each write a ghost story. Mary Shelley’s contribution to the effort would later become *Frankenstein*. The short story “The Vampyre,” published in 1819, was Polidori’s contribution. He was Byron’s personal physician, and the first of the so-called “romantic” vampires under Polidori’s hand was actually modeled after Lord Byron.

Byron—like the fictional vampires that he inspired, from Polidori’s Lord Ruthven down through the penultimate work of Bram Stoker—was a decadent predator, an abuser hidden behind a romantic veil. He was a comely and alluring monster—but a monster nevertheless. The romantic vampire of the earliest years of the genre was not just a spouse abuser but a spouse killer, the archetype of abuse in the worst kind of destructive codependency.

For Laura and me, those were the elements that truly defined Strahd von Zarovich—a selfish beast forever lurking behind a mask of tragic romance, the illusion of redemption that was ever only camouflage for his prey.

Initially we were going to title the adventure *Vampyr*—one of a series of games we called Nightventure that Laura and I were self-publishing back in 1978. The castle was called Ravenloft, and when Halloween came around each year, our friends asked us if we could play “that Ravenloft game” again ... and so the better title won out. It was, in part, because of this design that I was hired by TSR, Inc., to write *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* adventures in 1982. Soon thereafter, *I6 Ravenloft* was published.

Since then, fans of *Ravenloft* have seen many different creative perspectives on Barovia (a country which, by absolute coincidence, is featured in a 1947 Bob Hope movie called *Where There’s Life*). It continues to be one of the most popular *DUNGEONS & DRAGONS* adventures of all time. In its various incarnations, each designer has endeavored to bring something new to the ancient legend of Strahd, and to each of them we are grateful.

But the vampire genre has taken a turn from its roots in recent years. The vampire we so often see today exemplifies the polar opposite of the original archetype: the lie that it’s okay to enter into a romance with an abusive monster because if you love it enough, it will change.

When Laura and I got a call from Christopher Perkins about revisiting *Ravenloft*, we hoped we could bring the message of the vampire folktale back to its original cautionary roots. The talented team at Wizards of the Coast not only graciously took our suggestions but engaged us in a dialogue that delivered new insights on the nightmare beyond the gates of Barovia.

Now we invite you again as our guests to pass through the Svalich Woods if you dare. For here the romance is tragically dangerous ... and a true monster smiles at your approach.

Tracy Hickman
May 2015

