

Van Richten's Guide to the Mists

Author's Notes

by Rucht Lilavivat

Cursed from the Beginning

On a “humorous” note, I have to tell you that the Guide to the Mists was cursed from the very beginning. And by cursed, I mean in the sense that the Hope Diamond is “cursed.” All sorts of incidents and drama happened that delayed its release.

It was first delayed during the fallout between the Kargatane and the Ravenloft developers. Because of the fallout, the book lost one of its authors. Thereafter, the other author suffered a car crash, which prevented her from finishing the project as well.

That's when it fell into Carla Hollar and my lap. A number of personal disasters slowed our own progress with the work. Carla's house flooded, for example. However, we kicked our butts over the product and I'm glad we could give Ravenloft a good send-off.

Generating Idea:

The original concept for the Guide to the Mists was for it to be a sourcebook for Mist creatures like the Mist Ferryman and Mist Horrors. Unfortunately, I was not particularly inspired by this premise. I didn't see lots of Ravenloft fans simply drooling over a guide to mist critters. I felt it should be more than just a rehash of Mist creature ecology.

But then – what to do? What all can you do with a bunch of Mist creatures? That's when Carla contacted me about an idea she had. What if the Mists were like the Bermuda Triangle? What if they could capture and keep people in a sort of time warp?

That's when the lightning bolts hit. It was a genius idea and I ran with it. We weren't going to write about things people already knew about the Mists. People could look up that information in the core books. We were going to take the Mists in a new direction.

At that point, I came up with the idea of Mist creatures being a way to bring urban legends to life. If the Mists could act like a Bermuda Triangle, why couldn't they snatch up strange and vile beings from all over – releasing them in the realm at their whim?

That led to the numerous Mist abilities and Mist feats listed in the book. I tried to make powers that could apply to any creature, no matter the type.

The Suffering of the Twins

In *Van Richten's Guide to the Walking Dead* and *Van Richten's Guide to the Shadow Fey*, I began by writing the introductions to those works. By writing the introduction pieces, I could really get into the setting of Ravenloft and really get behind the characters involved in the book. As I wrote the Introduction for the Guide to the Mists, I began to realize something:

If Ravenloft were a real place, could someone closely examine the Mists and walk away unscathed?

In my mind, the answer was no.

That's when I realized – something bad had to happen to the twins.

It was about that time when Carla hit me with the next thunderbolt. She wanted to create the idea of “mist pockets.” A mist pocket could be something like a small shop that appears on the street one day, or a grove of trees that appears in a forest. They were small realms where terror lived. And they would be different from a simple pocket domain in that these places would not have a domain lord. Perhaps they were small pocket domains where the Darklord had died? I suggested using the name “Oubliettes” since I had used that term in the Guide to the Shadow Fey. I told her that we could expand on the idea of Oubliettes mentioned in VRGtSF and see where it went from there.

That's when the idea of a visit to Richten Haus hit me. The twins had supposedly been looking for some sing of dear old Uncle Rudolph for three sourcebooks now. Surely they must have found *something* by now? At this point, I *knew* that it was time for the twins to visit Richten Haus. Why? Because they were now exploring the Mists with true earnest.

At this point, Carla and I talked about the final chapter and what would happen. I wanted one or both of the twins to get to Richten Haus, but to tragically be denied the opportunity to get inside – to find out the final fate of Van Richten. After all, that's was Ravenloft is all about. In the end, you don't get to find out your answers. You don't get to solve the mystery. Ravenloft is about the unanswered question, the great unknown. Carla then suggested that I put the twins into a position where they had to make a choice. And, voila, that's how I came up with the last chapter.

I've heard a lot of great discussion about whether Gennifer failed a powers check or received a mist power. I've seen compelling evidence for both. I had a clear idea of what I wanted to happen, but I did make it deliberately vague. After all, if Ravenloft was a real place, something like a powers check or a mist power would be vague. People don't walk around saying, “Man. I really blew that powers check. I'm on Stage One, now!” or “Wow. I missed that check by 2 percent!”

The Telling Man

I really kicked my ass over this one. After Toben the Many, I deliberately avoided putting another feature character in Guide to the Shadow Fey. Why? Because I was afraid that feature characters would become expected and trite if they showed up in every new VR product.

However, I was surprised at the number of people who really wanted a feature character in the Guide to the Shadow Fey. So, I started working on one for the Guide to the Mists. It just goes to show you that fans make a difference.

I started with a character that I had in my notes for a long while – the Black Skald. You’ll see he’s mentioned in the current Guide to the Mists. The Black Skald was this haunted man who always showed up before great disaster and tried to warn people. The problem was this – a GM might use a character like that once or twice in a campaign. That’s it. Furthermore, why bother to stat out such a character? Finally, was somebody like this...creepy? Nope.

The next iteration of character I created was Myrus Tell – The Telling Man. In this version, Myrus Tell was an old, decrepit man who was a prophet of sorts. He had a small congregation of followers of his own brand of twisted religion. The problem with this version was, again, such character wouldn’t be much use in most campaigns. Plus, this iteration of the Telling Man just sounded like a rehash of the Gehenna domain. I needed something that *any* GM could use for *any* kind of campaign, no matter where it was set. Also, old Myrus just wasn’t creepy enough.

So, I tried to think of a simple concept that any GM could use in a campaign. The answer? A killer. Plain and simple, a GM can always use a killer. So, how to make a killer? I started with personality. I’m very tired of the old, arrogantly evil villain. I wanted something a bit...different. I thought to myself – what about someone effeminate? Not gay, necessarily, but effeminate? Now *that’s* something you don’t see in today’s RPG villains, who deck themselves out in black armor and flowing capes.

Well, how do you make effeminate frightening? And I thought of two people: Buffalo Bill from *Silence of the Lambs* and Ed Gein. Ed Gein, the real-life serial killer who wore a dress made of human skin and danced with it on in the moonlight. Yeah. That’s the kind of sickness that I was looking for. Thus, the Telling Man was born.

My Mistake

By the way, Salizar’s appearance and the misspelling of his name in the book is totally, completely, my fault. A week after I submitted my half of the Guide to the Mists, I woke up out of bed and suddenly remembered...he was already mentioned in Gaz II. “Oh well,” I told myself, “when it goes to development, I’ll mention it. And we’ll fix it.”

Of course, that stage never arrived, because soon after we were told the Ravenloft line was cancelled and we were forbidden to talk about it publicly.

If you want a “Marvel Comics” explanation for why Salissar appears in the Guide to the Mists, I would say that the Requiem split the meazel into two beings – the original resides in Il-Aluk. His other half wanders through the Mists, quite mad because of his fractured brain. Perhaps the only way Salizar and Salissar can ever truly find rest is if both of these beings meet each other or if both are destroyed at the same time.

The future of the Twins

As some people have stated, the Weathermay-Foxgrove twins are a necessary bright spot in the Ravenloft universe. They’re a nice, refreshing break from the rest of the world which can become dark after a while.

My personal vision for the future of the twins was to try to keep them as a bright spot, but for them to undergo some real tribulations. After all, if Ravenloft was a real place, and you pursued the career that the twins did...could you really remain free from the consequences? Probably not.

What I had envisioned for Van Richten’s Guide to the Serial Killer was going to be a dark chapter in the twins’ lives, but one they were meant to win and become stronger.

The book would have started out with an introduction explaining that Gennifer Weathermay was missing. The idea behind it was that Gennifer had gone after Natalia Voriskova herself, and did not tell Laurie where she had gone – simply because she wanted to spare Laurie from what she had to do.

Gennifer would still appear in the Guide to the Serial Killer, of course. But it would be understood that by the end of the supplement, she would have gone off on her own, presumably to return in the next book.

My hope would be that by the next book, whatever it was, Gennifer would have gone through her dark crucible, but come out stronger for it. This would definitely have made the twins very different people at this point and given the Van Richten’s Guides a bit more spice.

Natalia Voriskova

When I first conceived of VRttSK, I took a long look at Natalia Voriskova - simply because she was the cause of Gennifer’s curse. However, as I continued to examine her character and story, I began to see what a significant character her was.

First of all, consider that Natalia has been around since the Black Box. Then, consider the fact that she is considered to be a nemesis of Van Richten. She’s one of the few opponents of Van Richten who *outlived* him. That’s a pretty significant feat.

Then, we look at her in Van Richten's Arsenal. She dupes George Weathermay in that guise – one of the realm's greatest heroes. And she doesn't just fool him a little. She fools him big time. Think about someone who can convince a dedicated enemy so far that they proposed to you in marriage.

All of this was shaping up to tell me that Natalia Voriskova was probably not just a capable killer, but one of the worst that you could ever meet in Ravenloft.

But as interesting as Natalia is, she's not a serial killer. To her killing might be fun or it might be a means to an end. For a serial killer, however, killing is a *compulsion*. It's something they have to do.

So my angle was this – Natalia Voriskova is a killer who creates other killers. She finds people who are on the verge of becoming serial killers, people who are trying to resist walking down that road, or children who show that "potential". Then, she gives them a few nudges in the wrong direction.

All this seems to fit her profile to me. She's very intelligent and disarming. She's extremely charismatic (she would have to be to convince George Weathermay to propose to her). And she had a complete disregard for the rules or mortality.

My vision with Natalia was that one of the few people she was ever really close to was murdered by a serial killer. Since that time, she's been trying to understand the mind of the person who killed one of her few friends. Natalia is a sociopath, so she sees nothing wrong with studying the mind of the serial killer by creating them and watching them grow.

So that's my general vision for where the next book would have gone. Here's the actual outline that I submitted:

Van Richten's Guide to Serial Killers

Outline and notes

General Notes:

The Van Richten Guide to Killers is perhaps a more “edgy” look at the Ravenloft monster guides thus far. The guide entails a description of what a serial killer is and does. This guide is very specific in its scope. After all, it does *not* cover other evils, such as the mass killer or even the sociopathic killer. It covers one topic and one topic only...those who kill out of some strange compulsion. Those who have such a hole within the center of their being that they actually need to kill. Being a killer is part of who they are.

Introduction

This should be a compelling short, short story about a killer. It is suggested that Natalia Voriskova be involved somehow. My general vision of the book is that the Weathermay twins are writing this guide because they are now facing Natalia, who may or may not have discovered that Gennifer is an infected lycanthrope.

Chapter One: The Mind of the Killer

First and foremost, this section should define what constitutes a serial killer. What drives them to do what they do? Why do they go out and commit these horrific crimes? This section should also explain what makes a serial killer different from other possible murderers.

There should also be a very short section with an overview of the different types of serial killers.

Hallucinatory Killers: This rare breed of killers are delusional. They hear voices telling them to kill, or perceive those that they destroy to be demons or monsters. These people still qualify as serial killers because the destruction of others is essential to their psychological survival.

Mission Killers: These serial killers are on a singular mission to destroy a certain type of person. This particular type of person is blamed for all of the killer's faults and bad feelings. This kind of serial killer might hate women or men who cheat on their wives.

Hedonistic Killers: These killers gain some kind of pleasure from the act of killing. Their crimes are sexual in nature, but are also tied to the issue of control and power.

Control Killers: By far, the most common of serial killers, these individual commit rape, torture, and murder in order to gain a sense of power. Their self-esteem is so low and so base, that they feel powerless in some aspect in their life. In order for their psyche to survive, they must destroy others in order to gain a sense of control and order.

In these next chapters, the various types of killers will be detailed and expanded upon. Usually, the Van Richten's Guides have focused on next abilities that you can give your monsters. But here, we're talking about people – not creatures.

What I would propose here is that we give each type of killer *numerous Paths of Darkness*. That way, you can add interesting things to a killer (give him or her neat abilities) and you will have a variety of options available.

For example, the Hallucinatory Killer might have, as one of his paths, the Path of Delusion. Maybe after the first failed Powers Check, he can make ghost sounds. At stage two, he can create illusions (like Silent Image), and so on. Perhaps at stage five, he can create hallucinatory terrain or a phantasmal killer.

Each path should include suggested CR increases for each stage and the kind of deformities that one might suffer from the numerous failed powers checks.

Chapter Two: The Hallucinatory Killer

Chapter Three: The Mission Killer

Chapter Four: The Hedonistic Killer

Chapter Five: The Control Killer

Chapter Six: Deciphering the Agents of Evil

Chapter on criminal profiling, evidence gathering, and hunting down the agents of evil. Possible sailent weaknesses?

Chapter Seven: On the Hunt

Typical short story that accompanies the Van Richten's Guides. Here, however, is a great opportunity. If the Twins do confront Natalia Voriskova, then this section would probably detail it best.

Rucht's Note: My idea here would have been a confrontation with Natalia that would later lead to Gennifer's disappearance to handle Natalia on her own. The story would have then concluded in the next Van Richten's Guide.

DM's Appendix

There need not be a creature creation laboratory. However, a nice list of some insidious NPCs would be most excellent. Try to get an NPC to represent each flavor of killer. Then, talk about using the killer in a campaign. How does one set up a murder mystery? How about an adventure where they have to track down a signature killer? What's a good way to plan that? Last but not least, this chapter should include techniques on how to making a truly frightening killer for your campaign.

Last Words

There is actually a lot more information about serial killer and what I had envisioned for the book. However, I cannot reveal that information because it might very well appear in future gaming supplements.

And, actually, I'm working on a gaming supplement right now. No, it's not a Ravenloft product. That's about all I can say at this point.

Rucht Lilavivat