

Alex's campaign – sessions 21, 22 and 23

Session 21

Starting Date: 28th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

They left Alistair in the afternoon, expecting still a full two-day journey. Much to their surprise, they travelled much faster and when they stopped for the night, Ingelberg was much nearer than anticipated. Yuri profited the calm of the night to brew a healing potion before going to rest. On the morning, they set out again towards Ingelberg. The voyage was completely uneventful which, after the many events of the previous day, came as balmy bliss. It even looked suspicious, as if the land had a will of its own and, after wanting to delay them, were now speeding them forward. Surprisingly, they arrived to Ingelberg on that selfsame early afternoon, still with plenty of sunlight. The time for decisions, then, had come. Where would the group go next?

Yuri had no problems making his first choice. He knew Ingelberg well, and headed to one of the two Ezran temples in the city. He pointed the others to an inn nearby and told them he'd meet them there in the morning. He then walked in without delay and asked to see Monseigneur Jezermain. Ingelberg's clerics were more aware of status considerations than Hauptmarsh or Kirien had been. Ingelberg was a larger city, the key piece for Irvanikan trade and, while Keshgel was more foppish and artificial, Ingelberg had real political intrigue. In such an environment, upholding one's status was crucial and demanding proper title acknowledgement, essential. Yuri shrugged as he mused on this. He had never been one to like those who flaunted about their titles. He respected the hierarchy and esteemed its ideals, but Ingelberg was a place where the title counted more than the man that bore it. Many used it simply as a social tool, and this displeased Yuri highly, but he knew full well that even other people who felt like him were constrained by circumstances to play the hypocrisy. And in this society, the elder clerics of Ezra were Monseigneurs and so that was the way to call them. Jezermain, though, from what Yuri remembered, was a nice person, caring and responsible at heart, more adept at teaching and looking after his community than getting involved in complicated affairs. Intriguing, warring and confrontation disgusted him, and for a moment, Yuri pondered if he had done well to come see Jezermain. But then, he was the highest ranked cleric in Ingelberg, and the eldest too, and the High Temple was now too far behind to go there tell his news, so he quickly dismissed his clouded thoughts. As an added afterthought, Jezermain was actually quite deserving of his title.

Monseigneur Jezermain arrived quickly, affable as ever, but he feigned a circumspect look as he always did when he met a stranger. It was only after Yuri prompted his memory that he remembered that this was actually no stranger at all.

"A bit strange to be so forgotten of me when I've left barely three weeks ago", thought Yuri, "but then again, I didn't come here that much and... yes, he's always been a lot on the forgetful side".

After a quick exchange of greetings and reacquaintance, for neither of them had much time to spare, Jezermain led Yuri to a private room and asked what had brought him back so suddenly and with such a troubled face. Yuri recounted the events in Keshgel, from the death of Josep Kirien to the more worrying death of Tersis Hauptmarsh, due to the fact that this had almost been witnessed by the populace. That, in and of itself, would not be a problem, but the scene of the death was bizarre, and in Yuri's opinion, very much prepared by a killer. It looked like black magic scenery, and although Yuri believed it was fabricated, the fact is that the population was led to believe that Tersis himself was a dabbler in the forbidden arcane and died as a result of his own misdoings. Fickle as crowds are, this led to a sudden surge of hatred directed towards the church. Yuri had to leave Keshgel covertly, leaving behind a strong resentment against all Ezran priests. Jezermain listened with growing apprehension, and reached the conclusion that now would be a bad time to send someone into Keshgel to try and rework the populace towards their side. For both men, it was impossible to tell who would be pulling the strings to stage such a blow onto Ezra's hierarchy, but the fact was that they had succeeded in removing the Church's influence from the city. Jezermain decided to warn the High Temple and asked Yuri of his plans. He told the Monseigneur that he had some friends in need of his help who afterwards might help him track another lead about Kirien's death and since they both suspected these two deaths were closely connected and part of some master plan, uncovering each little clue became a detail of vital importance. He then told Yuri to go, that someone else would be more suited to take the message to the High Temple. Yuri was a capable piece that should be left to wander on the chessboard and disappear for a while.

After leaving Yuri at the church, the band continued to the inn, where they bought rooms for the night. They had dinner and prepared to spend the night. Nikola remained awake for a long time, thinking and pondering. His motives to come to Ingelberg were simply to start a new life. He didn't yet think of himself as suited for adventurous pursuits. All the others were more bent to it: Gregor had a purpose in Barovia, Gheata was probably better off outside Irvanika and, to tell the truth, the farthest he would be from any one, including themselves, from any city or even the smallest barely civilized hamlet, the better for everybody else. As for Eva, she was bound to be always a mystery. She would probably want to be with Gheata, after all, or was she as light-minded as him? Anyway, she said she would go on to Barovia too. At last, sleep caught up with him, but he still dreamt about what he should do in the morning.

30th September 751, 6th Night of the Waning Moon

The day came early for them, weary as they were of the journey. After leaving the church, Yuri had gone to the School of High Studies, where he still had his room and belongings. He hadn't expected to come back so quickly, but neither did he think his stay in Keshgel would last until the end of the semester. His sleep was tranquil and the

following day he went to await his companions at the inn. They took the breakfast together, but when they were setting on to move, Nikola broke the consensus

"You go, I'll be staying behind."

Not one of them had expected that decision, so they stared at him questioningly. He continued

"I want to try to settle down. The road is not for me, at least not while I believe I can live a serious life like anybody else."

It was clear Nikola was determined. The bonds between them were not that strong, after all. Yuri tried to reason with him and offer motives to continue journey, but Nikola was pragmatic and simply answered

"At least, I know what I can expect here in Irvanika, even if I've never been to Ingelberg. But, what about Barovia? What is it like, what do you know of it? Aren't you just going blindly into some unknown land you know nothing of and may very well be a lot more dangerous than you are willing to face?"

They tried to argue with Nikola, but as each tried to tell him what they thought Barovia was, and how much better it should be than Irvanika, each one of them reached the conclusion that Nikola was right: they didn't know the slightest fact about Barovia, all they knew was some very bland rumours about the land, and it didn't seem any more attractive than what they knew. All they thought they knew was that it was a backward country, and possibly people wouldn't be warm to foreigners. Yuri, ever the active problem solver, decided to lead them to the library of his School.

"I'm sure we can find more about Barovia there, Nikola. You'll see."

These were his words, but after one or two hours of effort, they found nothing worthwhile and were back to facing their true ignorance. It was then they took their most daring decision this far: they would go on to Barovia, tempt the destiny and dare their fate. They had come this far with that idea in mind, they would go... all, but Nikola, who stubbornly still refused to give in. They parted, not knowing if they would be seeing each other ever again, but deep inside, each felt they would.

Nikola spent that day and the next looking for work. He wanted an honest life, for a change, but soon found out why some people turned out for the road. Work was hard and badly paid, especially for an unskilled labourer as himself. He was offered work at the docks as a carrier, at 6 copper pieces per day, plus the possibility to sleep in log houses cramped with forty other people, sweating and smelling. He was disgusted at the prospect. He could also have chosen to be a cook's aid by some 12 copper pieces, logger by 8 and even a scout to commercial caravans, but that entailed leaving the city and Nikola did not, by any means, want to try that. In the end, he found work as a clerk earning 15 copper pieces per day. It was the best he had found, and it was safe and

definitely not overtaxing. It suited his physique. The problem was that by earning one and a half silver pieces per day he was very far from meeting his current daily requirements of seven silver pieces for dry, stale trail rations and a reasonable bed in an inn. This was no way of life, and he had to strive for a better way to survive financially.

The others set on the road with the very last commercial caravan of the year heading to Barovia, the very last before the winter.

Session 21 – DM notes

After Rebirth, I wanted the players to reach Barovia as fast as possible, expecting to spend the minimum time in Ingelberg. So, on that day, the land helped their travel and they got near Ingelberg much faster than expected.

In Ingelberg, Yuri was at home and he made best use of that, sleeping in his room at the University, where he was still enrolled, and visiting his superiors at the Ezran temple. Yuri's comment about Jezermain's forgetfulness was actually a comment made by his player to me after the session. As it happened, it was I who had forgotten that in game terms Yuri had left Ingelberg not too months earlier. Since the campaign started years ago, I quite easily had lost track of it. The summing up of the clues with the Monseigneur points once more in the direction of the master plot behind the campaign. The main point is that someone successfully eradicated Ezra from Keshgel, but I don't know if the players have grasped the importance of this fact.

On the next day, Nikola's player dropped a bomb, with his staying behind. I had not expected this move, nor any of the other players, and it forced me to accommodate a different storyline from then on. Up to the current time when I write this (session 40), Nikola has not yet joined the group, although he must be near to doing so. From what his player told me, this was an attempt at a role-playing challenge: he thought playing solo would be interesting and he wanted to give it a try. And I complied. I always like to try different things and provide what the players find amusing, as long as it doesn't detract from the story I have planned. Besides, the in-game justification was extremely consistent. And it even exposed the sometimes unrealistic ease with which adventurers go here and there without knowing what awaits them. But anyway, that's what makes them adventurers, different from everybody else. In fact, when each PC said what they knew about Barovia, Yuri remained tactfully silent: I had given each player some information on superstitions, history and geography, and Yuri's player reasoned that what he knew about Barovia would only give more reasons to Nikola to stay in Irvanika (I do love his role-playing!).

So, as will be apparent in later sessions, this separation gave me the chance for some interesting scenes. On the other hand, Nikola's lycanthropy had to be revealed in a way different from what I had planned. I had George Weathermay ready to meet them and a whole plot-line focused on Nikola, Natalia Vorishkova and 2 or 3 other werewolves between Nikola and Natalia in the line. I still hope to do this later in the campaign, though.

Nikola's first worry was to find a job and I gave him a little trouble to find at last a job, but paying badly. This was needed to spur him to further adventures since I didn't want Nikola to stay in one place for long. That would be ending the adventure too early. Nikola's thread is retaken only in a later session, as the player could not attend many sessions in a row. Meanwhile, I developed the story-arc he would go through and asked the player for a bit of cooperation.

Some people may object to this, but I found that if it helps the story and if it does not go against the PC's character, there is no problem in asking the players for a bit of cooperation. At any rate, I don't say what's in store for them, I only ask them not to be too suspicious and accept the suggested hooks. It worked well with Nikola, and now it has turned around, with Gheata's player informing me in advance of things he's planning to do without the other PCs knowing. This only enriches the story and is a nice way to surprise some of the players.

Finally, a note on the caravan that goes to Barovia. The text says it is the last one departing before winter... In fact, it is after the last one to depart. This is not a normal caravan.

Session 22

Starting Date: 30th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

The day was cold, heralding the young autumn. The persistent clouds of that morning warned everybody that the sunny days of summer were now not more than a memory. Although it was not raining when the caravan departed, no traveller doubted that it would before long. Usually, the departure of a caravan from Ingelberg towards the south was noisy and busy, but this was the last one of the year and, besides, it wouldn't return before spring. "One-way only", had the caravan master told Yuri when he inquired for places, and he now mused, as they pressed on, if that could have a second, ghastlier meaning. He shrugged off his depressing thoughts and turned his attention to his travel mates. With some surprise, he read in their faces the very apprehension that he was feeling, but eventually he attributed it to the weather, for it helped greatly for a depressing mood: a grey light filled the day, and a light fog clouded the view after fifty metres. Either because the mist itself also shrouded the sounds, or because every living being muffled its own voices or noises, the air around seemed strangely quiet. There were not the usual cries prompting the animals forward, or towards a companion looking for some lost piece of equipment; nor the lively conversations about the happy farewells of the eve, round a friendly table playing and drinking; nor the loud bragging about the latest conquest and the merits of the last town's wench. No, this was different. But still, not in the least suspect.

The morning aged slowly as time passed, but the fog remained low and uncomfortable, leaving everybody sagged and downtrodden, and things only became worst when, near noon, the sky let down the first rains. The rain was not steady, but rather in short episodes

of ten or twenty minutes. The road, muddier and wet, however, did not seem to slow the horses, and the band continued on at seemingly the same speed, until about three hours after the midday, the rain stopped completely. It was not until half an hour later, though, that the sky opened at last and let a glorious sun shine through the haze of the day. With the warm rays, at last the fog began to lighten and dissolve.

The group gave a cheer of contentment, but it was so short and cut so abruptly that the four friends, that followed all together, looked around to the caravan and received the greatest shock of their lives, as they stopped dead: if indeed the rest of the caravan had cheered the sun as they had, they now could not do it, because they seemed not to be there. As the fog became hazier, lighter and more transparent, so did the people dissolve equally as fast within the mist, aging as they did: children became adults, adults became old, shrivelled, and then bone clean of flesh, steadily decaying as they became vague diaphanous images dancing in the light, light fog. It was only this diffusion that spared them the full shock of seeing the persons that had accompanied them the whole morning turned suddenly into skeletons. The last images of people, horses or wagons disappeared in one, perhaps two minutes, just like the mist, and the four adventurers remained stranded on the road, utterly alone. The sun was falling in the sky, and it promised no more than two hours of light. The shock was so sudden and the horror so great, that they lost their mind for some time: Eva broke on a desperate run eastwards, while Gheata and Yuri sped to the south. Gregor remained in a catatonic, trance-like state, frozen in place without knowing what to do.

Gregor was the first to recover. When he finally became aware of his senses again, he saw three mounted figures running away from him: identifying Eva as one of them, he deduced the other two should be Yuri and Gheata and went after them. But these two only came to their senses one or two minutes later. They stopped and tried to reason about it all.

"Wow.... what was that, Yuri? Did you see them disappearing?"

"I did. I don't know, but I don't like this place. I want to leave here."

"Yeah... what about the other two? Should we go looking for them, or move on?"

"We could do either, Gheata. But to tell the truth, it was not even us that wanted to go to Barovia. I think we should return to Ingelberg... Funny, the sun is on our right. We've come south, Gheata, but I swear I had turned north."

"Hmmm. So did I. I don't understand."

"Perhaps we were confused. Let's turn back now, then, and see about the others..."

They continued north and met Gregor in no time

"Gregor, good to see you're well. Where's Eva?"

"Eva? I don't know, but I think I saw her running east. Let's go catch her."

Eva, meanwhile, had found herself alone, when at last she recovered. Judging her orientation, and recalling that further east lay a river, she turned back, heading northwest and decided to return to Ingelberg as fast as she could manage. She'd speed through the muddy plains so she could profit of the light, but she couldn't help notice that, while the soft wet ground seemed not to have disturbed the horses and carts when going south, it now seemed more adverse than its looks suggested, as she tried to go north. Worried about the ground, not to injure her horse, she began to pick her way carefully and thus slowed considerably. Then, she heard a familiar cry, someone calling her name.

"Eva!"

It was Gregor. She looked up and saw her three friends in front of her. She looked up to the sun and, bewildered, concluded she had been moving south-westwards instead.

"Gheata, Gregor, Yuri! What happened to us? Why am I going south?"

"You too?" asked Yuri, incredulous. They came to the conclusion that somehow the land had reversed their directions without their noticing. When he perceived this, the knowledge about folk lore that Yuri had acquired at the School of High Studies of Ingelberg, in the previous two years, came to his aid:

"It makes sense! It all makes sense now!", he exclaimed with a determinate interjection, while clenching his fists.

"It's the Mists! The famed mists! This land is alive, hear me, or very near it. It has sentience, it has a Will! It wants us to go south... See, when we were at The Walking Knight, they told us it would take us three days to reach Ingelberg, but we took two. And do you remember, as we rode, that what seemed rugged hills from afar were, after all, gentle slopes when we reached them? Do you remember that, unlike our previous travels, there were no broken branches on the road, no depressions that could harm a horse, no treacherous pools of unknown depth? Nothing, there was nothing to prevent our movement. We came as fast as we could, and perhaps even faster, even without trying. And then, we decide to leave Ingelberg exactly on the moment that the last caravan is leaving, as if it had been waiting for us... Or, better even, as if it had been put there precisely for us, so that we would not be discouraged from travelling south! That's why we had fog all day, the caravan was an illusion, a manifestation of the mists, and it dissolved when the sun cleared the fog and it could no longer support the scam. And now, if we turn north, we end up running south."

Yuri shook his head and continued

"I think we should go North, but I fell we're impotent to do so. The land wants us to go south. Grand Scheme or Greater Powers, I know not what is directing us, but they want us South of Irvanika."

"Bah, we have to go south and that's that. We don't have time to reach any place back north before night, so let's see what is ahead."

Yuri looked up at Gheata and shrugged

"I'd rather go North, if I could."

"Much that I want to go to Barovia, I'm for going North too", suggested Gregor, immediately supported by Eva. Only Gheata insisted on their going south, but since the rest of the company went North, Gheata followed, reasoning to himself that this was no time to be alone. Yuri led them North with a faint hope that he might have been wrong, but he said not one minute later

"Just what I feared. That is precisely the last thing that was missing."

The others looked to where Yuri pointed, and saw a grey, bleak, menacing bank of fog moving rapidly in their direction. It enveloped them in a scant few seconds but it was not normal fog. They were dazed for a few seconds and knocked to the ground. When they got up, they felt their feet soaked into a muddy, slimy surface, not unlike a shallow bog. The air clung to their clothes and skin and it felt viscous and nauseating. It vibrated with the intensity of a palpitating heart, and even the sound of their own's beatings echoed amplified. And then the screams began. Horrifying screams of men, or beasts, of things they had never seen or imagined. Hurrying shadows of black horned creatures sped in front of them, just a few metres away; furry legs tripped them and tentatively climbed to their knees; heavier clouds of grey mist blocked their view and they lost contact with each other; a fetid, putrid smell filled their nostrils as sounds of scythe cut the air and a skeletal black caped figure, heaved under its weight, wielded the utensil with harvesting motions.

They cried, they cried as never before and blackness filled them. They never knew how much time the voyage through the mists lasted, but when it lifted and they returned to conscience, they had been deposited in a dark, oppressing, watchful forest road. It was night, the sun well below the horizon. The moon was faint, almost completely dark. However, their eyes grew used to the night, and with the feeble starlight and moon, they soon could perceive their surroundings. It was not, however, enough to grasp any details, so Yuri lit his lantern.

They found they were in a cramped road bordered by massive forest on both sides, with the trees hugging so densely that in some cases there was not space for a person to step between two trunks. In front of them, a plaque, nailed onto a tree, read:

Old Svalich Road

<~~ **Vallaki (1 day) / Barovia (1/2 hour)** ~~>

To their right, a massive gate towered above them. Two stone statues, depicting crude, strong armed guardians, held the old and rusted ironwork of the gates. The heads of the statues had fallen to the ground and their bearded faces now looked powerless at the four adventurers. When closed, the gates barred the road, but they were open towards them, beckoning their steps onto the road on the other side.

They turned to Barovia, through the gates. The road coiled through the woods like a snake, never following in a straight line for more than a few metres, until they reached a junction. The dense trees became slightly sparse at that single spot, which allowed them a view into the dark horizon. They could see the stars and the small moon, and into the distance, to their left, and above, a dark ominous outline of blackness, tall and imposing, covering the beautiful skyline. Countless smaller shades, like small birds, waved around it in the distance.

Yuri said

"I reckon that should be Castle Ravenloft, from what I have seen in the library at Ingelberg. Hard to miss such a landmark, once we know it is near the village of Barovia."

"And those little shapes that fly around it? Night creatures?" asked Gregor.

"Bats more likely. I recognise those shrieks easily" answered Eva. "We had some in the forest around The Walking Knight when I was small."

"Then, let's go there. Better a castle than the night outside."

"No, Gheata, I'm definitely against it.", said Yuri, adamant. But Gheata was not convinced

"Look, there's a castle over there, why shouldn't we go there? They'll give us shelter and point our way."

"I doubt it, really. Do you see any light? I guess at least some little guard lamp should be lit, but it's as good as dead. For me, it's abandoned."

"Yuri, it's late. They're asleep, that's no reason."

"Well, then check the path" said Gregor, suddenly noticing it. "That road is well more unkempt than the right one. It's as if no one had passed there for ages..."

The others followed Gregor's gaze, and this definitely made them decide. They turned right, on the well trodden path, and away from the ominous silhouette.

They continued as silently as they could, menaced by the dark solemn majesty of the old decrepit trees. This forest seemed more primeval and more threatening than any they had been through, more alert and unforgiving. Only the road, somehow, offered them some

safety and confidence. They went on, following Yuri's determined step when Eva broke a warning

"Did you see that?"

"What?!" they exclaimed, startled.

"I... I don't know, I thought I had seen a figure over there, through the corner of my eye... something white, as Yuri turned the lamp."

Yuri illuminated the woods for a while, but they could see nothing.

"I don't like these woods", he said, "let's move on and see if we can reach some safe place to rest".

They went on and a few minutes later, Eva and Gregor, almost at the same time, nearly cried again

"There... there she is!"

Yuri looked around, dumbfounded. Gheata, too, had had some impression of whiteness but he hadn't seen anything. All he could grasp were some shades ahead of them, about three metres tall and almost one wide. He didn't understand what they were, but they were not moving.

"What did you see, Eva?"

"It's a woman... a woman dressed in white."

"Can you see it yet?" he asked, while walking and nudging the others to follow him quickly.

"No.... erm, yes. It's right behind us, I saw her again."

"Then follow me, quick."

He moved to the shades, hoping that they would provide some kind of shelter. He frequently waved the lamp to their rear, and then it became clear that they were indeed being stalked or pursued by the fragile figure of a lovely girl, barely twenty years old, if at all, dressed in strange attire: all she wore was a white slender night gown that let them hint at her flesh scarcely hidden below. She moved barefoot, but still was faster than them.

"Wait, wait please. Help me!" she said.

"Move on, move on" countered Yuri. "Do not listen to her!"

"Why do you flee? I'm lost and I need your help".

The girl was nearer, but so were the shades. They could now clearly see that it was a stone circle, a construction of ancient times. It was formed by some ten or twelve standing stones, and a large slab lay in its middle. The vegetation seemed well-tended inside, and the slab kept meticulously clean. Gregor touched one of the stones, closed his eyes and murmured

"I like this place, I feel well here." but Eva brought him out of his reverie

"Then, should we move inside? I don't trust that woman and she's right on our heels".

She was right. She was barely ten paces away and kept calling for them. Yuri ordered

"Get inside the circle, I feel it won't harm us."

They had no time to think. Gregor's feelings and Yuri's urgency brought them all inside the circle, just when the girl closed on them. She, however, remained outside.

Listening at her closely, Eva and Gheata understood she moves while not making any sound. They now could see her clearly. She was red-haired, with full lips and a heavy bosom. Her hips were generously round and she gave forth an air of lusciousness and abundance. Gregor asked her

"What's your name, and why are you here?"

She looked clearly disorientated and replied simply

"I'm Josefa, and I'm lost."

"Where do you come from?"

"From the village, from Barovia! I was here with my friends, but I don't know why, they left me alone and now I can't seem to find the way back. Can you help me?"

Yuri murmured to himself, just loud enough for the others to hear

"I don't trust her. What is she doing outside, in the night, dressed like this, without fear of strangers?"

Josefa stretched her arms towards them once again, but still remaining completely outside the circle.

"Help me, please!"

Yuri chanted lowly, asking his goddess for guidance, and an image formed in his head.

"She's not alive... I already expected."

A sudden change overcame her, as Yuri recognized what she was in front of them. She had felt his inspection, his violation of her nature. She hissed violently, and her looks became feral and uncontrolled. She looked at them quickly in succession, and Gheata felt some foreign will fighting against his own, trying to displace his own conscience. A mental onslaught, something Gheata had never felt before, but this was too present, too strong to ignore. Gheata fought back and remained in control. He knew not what that foreign will wanted but he never yielded and remained in place. Meanwhile, Gregor and Yuri held their holy symbols and chanted their prayers. Eva huddled behind them.

They remained well inside the circle, and as they expected, Josefa couldn't move in. Gregor finished his chant, but crestfallen understood that the gods had left him without answer once again. Yuri, on the other hand, let a small cry of triumph escape his lips, as a blue glowing sword formed in the air between him and the creature. Issuing his thanks to the Goddess, he watched as the sword cut the air and waved at the woman, but she was too fast and avoided it easily. She hissed in furious frustration as she acknowledged the protection the circle gave them. She couldn't bring herself to step in. She tried, once more, to focus her will on one of them, but Yuri's sword kept attacking her and she lost concentration trying to evade it. Gregor, then holding his holy symbol with less than good confidence, cried with all his power

"Go, beast! Leave us!"

Josefa turned to him and looked at his symbol, in spiteful scorn, but forgetting for a split second about Yuri's mystical sword, she felt the divine blade bite into her flesh. The agony was new for her, and she turned away, vanishing into the night. The whole scene was so fast that Yuri greeted Gregor:

"You were impressive, friend. Congratulations!"

"It was fluke, Yuri. I had no power over her. She laughed at my feeble attempts... Oh, I really do hope the answer for this emptiness is in this land. I begin to despair of myself. Will I be priest yet?"

Yuri patted him, but said nothing. He knew full well Gregor's internal anguish, but he couldn't understand what was going on. Instead, he addressed the others:

"This circle has given us protection against a mighty creature of the night. No less than a Vampyr. This is as good a place as we can find, and we should spend the night here."

Everybody else felt the same way, and they finally granted themselves some rest in a long and very difficult day. At last, they were in Barovia.

Yuri Azimov - Lost thoughts in the wild

We rested within the stone circle, waiting for the sunrise. I found myself recalling vivid memories from my time spent at the University. The knowledge I acquired there is invaluable. It allowed me to perceive greater forces at work around us when the Mists formed, and to suspect of this appealing child of the night, this Vampyr. It is important to know, to have a clue.

This stone circle reminds me of an archaic temple. The altar in the centre of the circle is carefully preserved, the vegetation well trimmed as not to hide or overgrow the stones, and everything feels well tended. An archaic temple, but a temple still in service. A temple with some mighty blessing in place to keep the Vampyr at large. According to professor Erbius, some temples were warded with powerful dweomers. Incantations were placed as marks of invisible force and authority that only magic or heightened sensibility of some rare individuals can reveal.

Marks. Why didn't I think of this before? The spider rose flower could be a mark in Kirien's room. It would allow an outsider to pinpoint the location of the room. Kirien received the flower two days before his death. At that time it was red, but then changed appearance to white with red lines. It is a rare flower, and would be easily spotted if placed near a window. And even if it was kept inside, there are magical ways to locate hidden objects from a safe distance. The flower would be a good choice due to its rarity in Keshgel. I suspect there is a meticulous plan behind all these occurrences. The murders were planned to the finest of details, leaving nothing at chance. I pray Ezra will enlighten us so we can stop what evil is afoot.

Session 22 – DM notes

In the time between sessions 21 and 22, I planned the manner in which they would reach Barovia, and I decided to use the Mists for the first time, to have them placed quickly and introduce the most famed feature of Ravenloft to the players.

Although at the time there was nothing strange with the caravan they boarded in the last session, the new plan called for a wholly different experience. It was to be a ghostly caravan, a kind of mass illusion that affected them and all the people that the PCs may have spoken to about the Caravan. They were not probably many.

The scene of the disappearance of the caravan was totally unexpected for the players and affected them quite a lot. I made them all fail automatically a fear check (perhaps heavy-handed, but it was consistent with the players' reactions) just for colour, that is, I selected harmless effects. Yuri and Gheata did intend to go north, as that was the intention the players manifested. But I had the land play a trick on them, and shift their directions on purpose, just like some traps in the old computer games of the Eye of the Beholder series. Since all of my players have played those games, this was not that far-fetched for them. Still, after Yuri explained what was happening (his player knows a bit more about Ravenloft than the others, and Yuri himself has studied superstition at the University, so he has heard of the Mists), all of them wanted to go north except Gheata, who reasoned that they would never reach Ingelberg before night. After all, they had been riding south all day.

When the Mists finally took them, they were deposited on a road without their horses. I simply forgot about them, as it happens so often with NPCs, familiars and animal

companions in a party. When the players protested it would be impossible to lose the horses without their feeling it, I knew I had to explain it somehow when I wrote the log for that particular event. Hence, they were somehow knocked to the ground.

The plaque nailed to the tree is just a convenient way to tell the players where they are, even though they don't know of Barovia village and have never heard of Vallaki. For them, Barovia is just the country. But it tells them that they must be near their objective. In the session, I actually made them read distances in the plaque, but when writing the log, I guessed that it would make much more sense to have times inscribed there. It didn't seem reasonable that people in this time and age would go about measuring distances, but they would certainly know the average time to get from one place to the other. But that implies a certain speed, which is not referred in the plaque. But the people would only inscribe the time taken by the most common means of transportation, and in this region it would probably be a horse. Travelling on foot through a forest was surely discouraged and merchants take horses and carts with them. So, they were at about 6 miles from Barovia village.

The girl that follows them in the forest, Josefa, is a vampire indeed. Her attire and figure are taken from some of Hammer's movies on vampires. The protagonists of *Twin Lovers*, while in their night shirts, are an extraordinary model, for example. The back story of Josefa was never told to the players, but I needed it to justify her actions: she had been turned into a vampire only two days ago. She does not yet understand what she is and she sees the group, she is honestly asking for help. She is truly lost, and she doesn't understand why: she simply cannot approach the village of Barovia yet and is confused, feeling intermittently another will imposing above her own.

But when Yuri understands she is undead and she perceives they are turning hostile, she lets her instincts take over her mind and even without understanding well her actions, she becomes aggressive. She first tries to dominate Gheata, being the most obviously physical male in the group, which calls to her basic physical almost animal-like instincts. She tried to enter the circle, unaware that it was a barrier against her, and she failed, adding to her confusion. She finally fled when Yuri's Spiritual Weapon hit her. Gregor's Turn Undead had no effect.

The box text included at the end of the previous session log is a bit of text written in character by Yuri's player. It supposedly relates Yuri's thoughts within the Circle about the happenings in the session. Yuri's player is keeping a diary of what happens and I welcome eagerly his writings in the account of the campaign, but unfortunately, this is the only one he has given me to date.

The section about 'Marks' in it probably has a deeper meaning, although I can't speak for him in this. As it happens, he had told me that he wanted to take his next level as a Wizard, for he had planned Yuri to be a magic assistant to the party, providing them with divine healing support and their own magic items. As such, the problem arose of how he would learn arcane magic. So I told them before the next session that there would be something in the circle for him to find. Written a posteriori, those 'Marks' are probably the first in-character hint that Yuri has about something that may be hidden in the circle.

Session 23

Starting Date: 30th September 751

Starting Domain: Irvanika

After the creature's escape, the group fell to the floor, emotionally exhausted. They were sure that the assailant was a minion of the night, and this close contact with a supernatural entity of some kind was still a new and frightening experience for them. Looking at each other for support, they babbled for a while without real purpose, in a simple release of tension, until they simply sat there, almost in silence and retreating within themselves: Eva played with some pebbles, absent-mindedly; Gregor checked his belongings and counted his money, weighing his needs and planning carefully what he could afford; Gheata looked in the distance, at the forest, trying to pierce the darkness around them; Yuri looked fixedly into the night, but thinking deeply and ignoring everything his eyes registered: his mind laboured tirelessly trying to understand what was there so powerful about that circle that had kept the creature outside.

He rose suddenly, with a surge of energy

"There must be magic here! Some kind of magic! Oh, Ezra, please, guide me!"

He then concentrated in a prayer, while the others all looked at him, startled by his sudden outburst.

Yuri's mind filled with divine revelation. As he expected, there was some magic focused on the tall menhirs as if it spewed from them inwards, filling the whole space inside them. But to his amazement, there were two other auras that came from the middle of the circle, from the stone slab that lay there on the ground. Yuri almost lost the focus on his spell, as he acknowledged these, but he held to it and carefully studied each one of them. The one that covered the whole circle was the strongest, so strong that he had kept a vampire at bay, but even so, Yuri was awed when he learnt it was actually overwhelmingly strong! He had never, in his life, conceived of such a strong raw power. Surely, no man on earth could ever muster the power to put in place such a strong magical effect.

Still stunned, but methodical, he forgot about the powerful effect of the circle and examined the slab. One of the auras was now evident to him: a mark etched in the stone, that had been invisible up to now, glowed revealingly to his eyes - a K inside a circle, its main stem long enough for a dash to cut it and thus form a cross. It was completely unknown to Yuri, and suggested him no more than a simple personal sign. But below the slab, within the earth, he could sense another kind of magic: just a faint tingling of the magical fluid, something of a protective nature, was there below the stone block.

The stone was about thirty centimetres in width, and half a metre long, and less than ten centimetres above the ground. Yuri tried to move it and felt it give way slightly. He dug around its edges finally uncovering a slit all around the block: it was, after all, simply atop a second stone. He tried to push it and asked for Eva's help, but they couldn't nudge it. Resting for a while their sore fingers, they gave way for Gregor to try his luck. With his imposing rotund figure, Gregor gave a confident push and the stone began moving: it was a lid! Below it, Gregor found a small cavity about thirty centimetres deep wherein a

very old-looking wooden chest rested. It was reinforced with metal corners, and despite its venerable age, it was still in good condition.

"So that's what the magic is for: to protect that chest" exclaimed Yuri, excited.

"I guess you should be the one to open it, Yuri", stammered Gregor, hesitantly.

Yuri took hold of the chest and tried its lid: it was unlocked. He raised it slowly, anxious but suspicious, to reveal a book almost the size of the chest still in perfect conditions with this title:

**De Studium Magiae Arcana, sedendum tractatum introductorius ad totius spiritus pureus de inclinatio
divine quid non obstante suas fede et credentia veras in essentiam dibinam magiae recognoscent existentiam in
nostro mundum alterem practicarum dignem de studio**

Inside, the same inscription with the added lines

Scriptus pro Altissimo Patri Niri

Calendarius Barovianus 350

The writing wasn't immediately clear for Yuri, but it was without any doubt in an ancestor of the sacred tongue of the Ezran church, for long the language of choice in academic literature and from which Mordentish itself had evolved. It bore enough resemblances for him to be certain of the meaning of the last line

"Holy goodness, this book is 400 years old!!!"

He paged carefully through it, caressing the pages to prevent any harm. It seemed to be a treaty on arcane magic, but he had to study the book in deep detail. For now, all he could try was to decipher the long title and a one-page introduction that read like this:

*Explorator secreto occulte, tu quid trovavisti istem liberem sape quod tempos nigres adproximant. Andral
sedet grande et dirigerit me in constructii Symboli Sacratia Pavenitae sed multu in istem mundum
habe videtur et oia ste certus que causas habet quod fugent explicatio divine.*

Non devies iam oculi tui. Audi me ad fini sine me proquod istus sacrilegio negare.

*Ipsu proquod istem liberem abscondere et si ille indagavisti, si ille trovavisti, tu tam bene habere sentitus
istum iam debes: ill existet alteres magiae, impuram, mundanam, periculosam sed existens.*

*Adverere tibi quod illa non sedet plus potente que illam divinam sed sedet diversa et de naturae quod dei
non cognoscent et non incaleant, pagan sedet, sed existet et quale receptaculis spirituaris deorum quod
mundum gubernant, sedet nostram obligatio cognoscere illam.*

*Tu, patre quod leges istem liberem hic disceperiras differentis fundamentalis inter duos mundis et
quomodo imitari studium istus regne prohibite.*

Yuri was transported, but Gregor interrupted his ecstasy

"I think we should get ready to sleep, but we're in an unknown land and we should mount some guard. I can do the first shift."

1st October 751, 7th Night of the Waning Moon

There was not much arguing. They agreed on four single-person shifts through the night and prepared to sleep it away. The night passed uneventfully. Eva had the last shift, and when dawn finally came, she woke her companions

"Come on, it's high time to be moving. Plus, I hear some neighing!, so we might yet find some horses."

They got up and had breakfast. Yuri and Gregor spent about an hour communing with their deities, although Gregor did it with a mixture of disappointment and hope. This was Barovia, after all, and the solution for his spiritual problem was here, but he couldn't help feel that the divine had already abandoned him too much and he contemplated the hypothesis that it might no more return. Setting his doubts aside, he dutifully completely his prayers as well as Yuri and they departed for the final stretch of their journey, to the village in front of them.

As Eva had said, they found some horses nearby. She recognized them at once, "Kal, my dear mare. Come here, come here girl."

There was no doubt: they were harnessed and in the very same attire of the horses they had brought from Ingelberg. Surely, the mounts had been transported by the mists as they had, only they'd been dropped somewhere else entirely.

"Well, so much for the better! We have horses again", said Gheata with a contented smile, "Let's go get them."

But the horses were in no mood to stop grazing and allow someone else to mount them. It took Eva all the best of her skill to finally appease them and soften them enough to be mounted or led by their rope. Cheerful and filled with hope again, they followed the road. It was a cold day, but the sky was clean. A small river flowed through the forest and where it most approached the road, it was but some ten to fifteen metres away from it. It was at this point that the light of the sun was cut by a bank of light fog that stretched over the road and entered the green forest, to the sides. Gregor hesitated

"Will this be normal fog?"

"Bah, Gregor, it is, surely", said Eva confidently, "the day is cold and the haze climbs from the river. Don't see bad things everywhere, now come on."

They crossed the fog, which spanned no more than a fifty metres length, and just a short walk ahead they saw a few buildings which formed, no doubt, a village. This was Barovia! Yuri was the first to speak

"Well, we're here. Where to now?"

"I think we should find a temple, if there is one" answered Gregor, "but I'm not overly confident..."

"Why?" Eva wanted to know.

"Because these Barovians are a quite cynical lot, not very religious at all", said Yuri.

"Ezra never set foot within this land, as far as I know of."

"But the Morninglord has", countered Gregor. "In fact, the cult of the Morning Lord was born here... but Yuri is right in one thing, Barovians are not very religious. The pure

Balok Barovians, that is."

"Huh, what's that?", questioned all the others.

"I know one or two things about Barovia that I learned when I studied the language. There are two major ethnic groups here, the Balok and the Gundarakites. Balok are Barovians, pure and simple, it's the name of the primitive racial stock since the times of foundation. The other group are the Gundarakites, who are strongly oppressed by the Balok majority. And these Gundarakites, they are adepts of the Morning Lord with fervour. It's one of many differences between the two races. Even the languages are completely apart: Gundarakites speak Luktar."

"I can see you can still surprise us from time to time", commented Gheata. "And what kind are these Barovians here, Gundarakite or Balok?"

They were moving slowly as Gregor told them this, but they had entered the main street towards the square they could see not long ahead. Gregor gave a look at the populace they could see

"Balok, I'm afraid. And they don't mingle if they can avoid it, so I don't think we'll find any Gundarakite here."

"Gregor, those Gundarakites, do they live everywhere in Barovia, or just in a small region?"

"Huh.... mostly in the south, I guess, Yuri."

"Then, if this is the village of Barovia, it is well in the centre of the country, from what I saw in the library, and if it is named as the country, it might well have been the first population centre. It is therefore the core, the heart of it, and it isn't likely that the ethnic minority lives well within the middle of the country. Do you know why there is a minority here? Were they conquered, or did they always exist?"

"Now that you ask, I'm not sure, but I guess there was some kind of war and they lost."

"Then, we're in cynicals' territory", concluded Gheata, finally remarking "It suits me."

"So, all of this just to know if we'd ever find a temple here, right? Why don't we just look for it?", asked Yuri. "There's an opening there ahead. I wager that's the main square. Let's go there and see if we can find something more."

"Wait!"

"What now, Gregor?"

"Don't you want an apple? Those fruits over there look really enticing."

"You've just had your breakfast, Gregor" exclaimed Eva "not even half an hour ago."

"I know, but I fancy an apple."

The apples were in exhibition with many other kinds of fruits, in particular a large dark skinned plum that was displayed with great pride: "the best for Burgomaster Tuika", it read, and also "the choice of Raven's Crest Tuika". Despite his knowledge of the language, Gregor was not accustomed with the Barovian customs, so he couldn't quite guess what Tuika referred to. They filled several crates in a stand leaning against the wall of a house, in the street, the first of several until the main square, as was usual in the village. This was, after all, the market.

While the other three waited in the middle of the street, Gregor approached the seller, a young woman with a full, voluminous figure. Her face was pretty, but she was not entirely cheerful. Gregor noticed a certain air of sadness on a visage well-suited for laughter and party. He bought her the apple almost guiltily, when a man approached the awaiting trio. He was dressed in black, quite uncommonly for a Barovian: he wore large

boots over black wool trousers, but despite the cold morning air, his shirt was unbuttoned in the upper half of his torso. A golden medallion hanging from his neck contrasted vividly with the rusticity of a hairy chest in plain view. He was tanned and his skin was parched and dry from the sun. Completing the picture, he wore a large moustache and a narrow-brimmed hat and carried with him two or three knives and a sack over his shoulder. He should be around forty-five, at most fifty years of age. Upon seeing the group, he immediately began a loud noise, pointing at his knives suggestively. The three shrugged and looked at each other. Gregor, turning back with the noise, listened attentively and warned his friends

"He's trying to sell you knives."

But the dark seller was smart, for he immediately addressed them in reasonable Mordentish with a broken accent

"Foreigners?! Ah, beautiful wares, mosta beautiful wares I hava to sell. Gooda knives, exceallent knives, perfect blade, tha best, tha best you'll find around. And more, I hava more. Come and see, I hava mirrors, I hava pans, I hava combs, forks, cuttallery, pots whatever you wish... Ah, but I also hava weapons and beasts, if your interest is more open-minded. I hava everything, everything you may wish for. Everything at my camp, if you wish. And all good quality, there's no better in tha whola village".

Gheata was piqued.

"Weapons, you said? Do you know a certain kind of sword that is to be wielded two-handed?"

The other responded almost exhilarant

"But of a course! What are you asking, me, a master seller, if I hava a two-handed sword? But of a course, of a course I do. I hava everything, I tolda you. Notta right here with me, but I hava such a one at my camp!"

"And can we go there?"

The man broke his animation mildly

"Notta right now... I still wanna try a bit more, but we canna meet here at noon, va bene? Ah, allora it's agreed. Noon will do. Or I'll even bring you the sword."

With this, the man continued his way towards the square, leaving them unsure of what to think. Gheata was the only one with clear thoughts in the subject

"I want that sword, no matter what."

As Gregor frowned at Gheata's remark, the fruit seller confounded him even more with a sudden sigh

"Ah, the Vistani! Wish that I were as free as them, and not lost in this rotten place. The Vistani are really free: they sleep under the stars and don't fear the night. Oh, how much I would give to be able to do that too..."

She shook her head, and sat in a bench behind the stand, despondent. Gregor couldn't find the words to cheer her, and decided to continue his way. They went until the square and there looked around. A street came from the left, at an acute angle with the one they were following. Rising slightly, it led to a building that stood apart from every other. It had a very distinct structure, with a cross plant and a bell tower that had seen its better days, most notably lacking any bells. The whole building was in a miserable state of disrepair, betraying abandonment, disinterest or lack of resources.

They climbed the street up to the building and walked around it. It was, or had been, a holy building of some kind. The bell tower and numerous engravings suggested it, but the graveyard in the back attested that fact beyond any doubt. A man in his middle forties was working in a small plot of land near the church, where he was tending to some cabbages, tomatoes, beans and other kinds of vegetables

"Hello, there, looking for something?", he said, leaving his work temporarily.

Gregor answered, as he was the only one who knew the language

"Hello. Is this a church, sir?"

"Why yes, and I am the priest. Are you in need of guidance from the Lord of the Dawn?"

He wasn't quite expecting to see a holy man in what he took at first for a simple gardener, but Gregor disguised it well

"Yes, in fact I believe I came just to the right place."

"Then please, enter. Let's go inside and make ourselves more comfortable."

He gestured to the other three but as they didn't move, the priest understood

"Are you foreigners?"

"Yes, yes. From Irvanika."

"Ah, Irvanika..." said the priest. Then, turning to a barely remembered Mordentish, he repeated

"Then, please, come in, we'll be more at ease inside. By the way, you can call me Donosty."

Donosty led the group to the church. It was sparsely furnished, and the signs of poor maintenance were everywhere.

"I get to do all the work by myself, so this is a bit decayed. But the important is the spirit, not exactly the house... Although I'd prefer to revere the Morning Lord in a proper temple", he added almost apologetically.

"We'll have to sit in the pews. The other rooms are too crammed for all of us, so please, sit."

"People here are not very pious, are they?", asked Gregor, not a small bit worried.

"Huh, no, not indeed... I have to concede you that. They don't come to church much... in fact, I have a very small flock. They barely fill the front pews."

"And why are you still here?", questioned Eva, intrigued.

"Because I know the Morning Lord will reach these people's ears. Because while I'm here, they are protected from the night, and they too will understand the message of hope my god brings. In time, they will embrace the sun and the religion. But for that, I must keep working tirelessly every day. I will not abandon them, as the Lord does not abandon me. But enough of me. Now, we turn to you, Gregor. Why, tell me, why have you said this was the right place for you?"

Gregor had been waiting for this chance. He told the priest his story, which his friends, too, were hearing for the first time.

When Gregor was a little child, his parents were forced to deliver him to a monastery, for lack of means to support him. The monastery belonged to the Church of Ezra. With time, Gregor took the vows and entered the order, but in his late adolescence, he met a man that was being helped by the brothers of the monastery. He was old and frail, and although he did not follow the teachings of Ezra, he found support at the monastery.

Gregor befriended this old man, and heard his teachings reverently. The man died not long after, but he sown a seed in Gregor's spirit: the faith of the Morning Lord. This, Gregor took heartily, and he felt with true sincerity that this was his calling. Ezra's faith had been imposed on him, but this was different: the Morning Lord smiled at him with a light he wanted to meet. But, the sad truth was, he was not a priest of the Morning Lord. Gregor left the Monastery and proceeded to Keshgel, the nearest city. Upon arriving there, he understood that Ezra was leaving him, although at a slow pace, which caused him no small affliction. He's been ever since tormented with the thought of permanently losing his connection to the divine. Each day he feels hollower inside, more distant from divinity, more tempted to follow his baser and more mundane instincts. But still, he's been holding to a light that was shown to him in Keshgel

"Your answer lies in Barovia! The solution for your problems is in Barovia!"

And so, he undertook the voyage to this country in search for answers.

Donosty and all the others listened attentively. They had never understood Gregor's difficulties with divine intervention, but only now did they understand his real sufferance. Donosty smiled reassuringly and compassionately

"You've really come to the right place. I can help you, but not entirely. You have to be ordained a priest of the Morning Lord. Only then will the radiant sun fill you completely, only then will you know the joy of the contact with the beautiful god of the Morn. The first step I can perform on you: you have to be baptized. It can be done only at daybreak, so we'll have to leave it for another day. The second step, though, is the most important one: you have to be confirmed within the church, you have to be anointed, and that can be done only in the Principal Temple of Krezk. It's in the direction you came from, after Vallaki, through the Old Svalich Road."

"Well, so I have to wait until tomorrow, at least, isn't it?"

"If there is sun tomorrow, yes. That becomes a rare commodity at this time of the year."

"And what do I need to bring?"

"Nothing much. I will provide for you. You have to be here one hour before dawn, to pray and eat a holy wafer. I will give you a vest, a simple tunic, which must be the only thing you'll be wearing during the whole ceremony. As the dawn approaches, we'll go outside, to the east wall of the church and you'll kneel on the floor. As the sun rises, I'll perform a prayer to invoke its blessings upon you. When I tell you so, you'll stand, and walk around the whole perimeter of the church with your eyes lowered in the first half, and then looking at the sky in the second half. Finally, I'll bless you with the holy symbol that will become your own, and replace the one you're using which, I'm afraid, is only a makeshift one and must be left behind. After that, you will be baptized."

"Simple enough. And do I have to say anything?"

"Right, yes, you have. You have to learn the words beforehand. Baptism is a magical ceremony, so you have to learn them well. Otherwise, you may not receive the blessings."

"And how do I know if I do?"

"You will feel it, quite simply. Light will invade your spirit, you'll feel more confident and energized. Perhaps you should come two hours before dawn, then."

"It's set. Oh, by the way, we met a gypsy down there in the street. He's got a few things we want to buy, but he said he's got them in the camp. Is it safe to go there?"

"Safe? Usually so, I think. But they don't take visitors that frequently. Still, selling expensive merchandise is one of the few things that make them grant some hospitality. But he may yet change his mind and come to you with a cart and a donkey and his entire load there. Ahahah!"

"What's so funny?"

"Sorry, nothing. Just a thought, really... Well, since we're at it, there's something I have to tell you. Remember the fog you crossed to enter the village?"

"How do you know we crossed it? You don't know when we arrived..." asked Yuri suspiciously. In reply, Donosty exited the church and invited the group to follow him. Stretching his arm, in a wide circular motion, he pointed at the horizon and said in a solemn voice

"Do you see the fog there, and how it extends past the limits of the village? Do you see how it forms a rim, a circle around the houses and the fields? That is the ominous, terrible fog of Barovia, and it has been there for four-hundred years, without having been lifted one single day! It is not always as is today. Most of the time, it encircles also the Castle high there atop the cliffs. It crosses the Old Svalich Road somewhere within the forest, between the Gates and the bridge over the Ivlis. But it is known to shrink and expand, now and then. That fog is the reason why this village is a prison! That is why the folks here are depressed and devoid of belief! That is why this old village has been for so long forsaken, miserable, wretched. That fog, which breathes from the earth, is poisonous. Any person who enters it and breathes it inhales a latent poison which triggers only when he or she crosses the fog again. Then, it expands, filling the lungs and depriving it of their life's blood: air! The person begins to choke afflictively and unless she returns to the village, will die of suffocation."

His words sunk deep within the group, but before they could react, he added, in a lighter but ironic tone

"But!, as you will learn during your travels, the Vistani know mysteries no man can understand. Masters of the land they're not, but neither is the land their mistress for they can thwart its most basic imprisonments. Even this fog that defies all mortal intelligent beings has been overcome by them, for they know an antidote for that poison. And what's more!, they sell it liberally to whomever wishes it. In fact, it has become an exit toll from the village of Barovia: 5 gold coins per head, and you're free to go. Black-hearted Vistani, always ready to make a profit no matter how dire the circumstance!"

He breathed in deeply and then continued

"Which reminds me of another thing they can do which also befuddles me: they don't fear the night! I tell you, if I decide to sleep outside this building, even if it is but ten metres away from it, I wager eight to ten against you that I won't live to greet the morning. And yet, the Vistani have always slept outside any protective walls, in the middle of the forest, sleeping even on the hard ground, for not all of them have their vardos. And no one ever heard that they had been attacked by foul beast of creature of darkness because of it. I simply can't fathom it."

"They sleep in the open because that's their place in the Scheme of Things", said Yuri. Donosty had been talking for so long without interruption that he was almost surprised by Yuri's comment. He looked at him trying to understand his words, but only murmured "Scheme of Things?" Then his thoughts wandered and he asked all of a sudden

"By the way, where did **you** sleep last night?"

This time, it was Yuri to answer

"We found a circle of stones. We thought it would be a good place and we camped there."

"Oh, the Circle of Stones. Mighty ancient magic there, yes. Come in, come in again. Let me show you a thing about that Circle."

They followed Donosty inside once again

"There is a small room we keep aside for books and records. It's got just a few, but there is one that may excite your interest."

They entered a small room with an old oak table in the middle and one bookshelf against a wall. There was barely space for them to move, and no chairs or stools.

Donosty surveyed the shelves and quickly found the one he was looking for. He opened it over the table and spoke

"This book was handwritten by Sasha Petrovic, the second priest of the Morning Lord church. He told part of his life in this book and of how he came to know the Morning Lord. When he was a child, he dared one day a friend of his to go spend the night in the woods. He was a half-Vistana on the part of his father, so perhaps that justifies this silly idea. Children's play, insensate by all accounts but it saved Sasha's life. Sasha and his friend spent part of the night within the very same circle you yourselves did. It was old already by then, and already by then it was sacred to some god. It had a fame that no bad thing could enter it and truth be told, nothing harmed them. They spent some hours there, until a strange glow that came from the village alerted poor Sasha. He ran back to Barovia, even though it was still night, to find that his house had been burnt to the ground and all his relatives killed inside. He was despised and abandoned by all, because of his father, no less. He had been tolerated only because his mother was the daughter of the burgomaster, but with all of them dead, he was simply outcast. The only person who took him in and gave him shelter was the mad Martyn Pelkar, who had been for some months lauding a new god no one ever had heard of: the Morning Lord, Master of the Sun and the Dawn. This was three-hundred years ago, give or take ten.

Sasha grew in Martyn's care and helped him rebuild an old temple, now reconverted to the Morninglord's cult, in fact, this very same church where we are now. When Martyn died, it fell on Sasha to continue his work. Sasha's faith was enormous and he never wavered in his beliefs. He is the true father of the Cult, and the model we all follow.

Martyn never garnered another friend or follower in his life, so without Sasha, we wouldn't probably be here today. So you see, that Circle is intimately connected to the Church of the Morning Lord.

But in fact, there is more to tell about it. This book here also tells of another important thing in the history of Barovia, but belongs to the realm of myth and legend. It tells of the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind. It is important to note that there is a whole section of Sasha's life that he deliberately occults in this book. It is precisely when he comes to talk of the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind. He tells us that old myths spoke of a piece of the sun that was buried in Barovia and that could help the day vanquish the night for once and for all. He suggests that this refers to the Symbol and that it was found in that circle exactly, but that it was lost soon afterwards and that no one knows where it is. That's when he refuses to say more. He resumes the story some years later, and we note it is a different Sasha that writes it: more mature, more adult, less emotive and colder, more factual and without a great deal of his younger enthusiasm. He has been marked by some great grief we shall never know and he's more measured in his words. But I have read this book quite a few

times and with excruciating attention, and I have come to conclude that perhaps, just perhaps, reading between the lines and imagining his feelings, that Sasha still managed to find, in these years that he conceals, the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind, that he saw it in his grasp but that he failed to ultimately recover. Where it was then, where it remained, what force so great overcame it and kept it, and strangely important, it seems, who were his allies, Sasha won't tell and prefers to forget."

Session 23 – DM notes

Session 23 began with Yuri searching the circle for something. I had agreed with his player that he'd need to find a book somewhere in the circle to be able to begin his arcane studies so that he could take a level of wizard in the future. So, without any other player understanding what was happening, he cast Detect Magic and began inspecting the slab when, ordinarily, probably he wouldn't do that.

At any rate, it was well-integrated with the background. The purpose of Yuri's spell was to determine the magic of the circle, not the hiding place of the book. The overwhelming magic of the circle did surprise the players. But in a certain sense, it was put there by a god, so it makes sense.

The inscriptions in the book are one of the things that gave me most pleasure to do for this campaign. I love languages, anyway, and cryptograms and such, so I decided I wanted this to look old. I made the parallel with our real world and made it look like Latin and like the books written in Europe around the 1500 to 1700. One of the things that always struck me about these books were the long titles that many times were a perfect summary of what came inside, so this one also has that.

In game terms, the language represented by this mock-Latin is the religious language of Andral. I suggest in the text that it is an ancestor of an archaic Mordentish, still the official liturgical religion of Ezra, so that people who speak it might get a glimpse of what the text says. This mirrors the fact that my players are Portuguese which is a Latin-descended language, and so we can many times guess, untrained, at the meaning of isolated Latin words. Since the PCs speak Mordentish, this is the correct effect. As it happened, Yuri's player understood the general meaning of the whole text except for the before last paragraph.

The whole text reads:

“On the study of Arcane Magic, being an introductory treaty for all those pure spirits [as in soul, people] of divine bent who, notwithstanding their true faith and beliefs in the divine essence of things, still acknowledge the existence in our world of other practices worthy of study”

Written by the Most High Priest Kir
Barovian Calendar, 350

Explorer of occult secrets, you who found this book, do know that black times are coming. Andral is great and guided me in the construction of the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind but much in this world have I seen and now I am certain that there are things that evade a divine explanation.

Do not avert your eyes already. Listen me to the end without denying me because of this sacrilege.

This is why I have hidden this book, and if you have searched for it, if you have found it, then you must also have felt this: there is another magic, impure, mundane, dangerous, but extant.

I assure you that it is not more powerful than the divine one, but it is different and of a nature that the Gods do not know and do not understand: it is pagan, but it exists, and being as we are spiritual receptacles of the gods that govern this world, it is our obligation to know it.

You priest who read this book, here will find the fundamental differences between these two worlds and how you can begin your study into this forbidden realm”

You can infer from this text that at the time Arcane Magic was very badly regarded in Barovia, so Kir is extremely cautious with this book. But I glossed over the fact that other people but priests could find that book.

Now, to how I did it (you can skip this whole section if you feel bored by grammar and languages). I picked a Portuguese dictionary and for the words I wanted to have in the text, I found the etymologic term that have originated it. If the word in cause did not come from Latin, I picked a synonym. Eventually, you'd find a Latin-derived word. I also picked a Portuguese grammar to know the correct Latin forms of the pronouns and get a glimpse of the cases and endings in Latin. I also picked a Latin grammar for this. Then I made a table of endings for case, number and morphological class. I tried the best I could to retain accurate endings, but I had to make a few on my own. I made different tables for three morphological classes: nouns, adjectives and pronouns. There was also a class of invariable words. I considered four cases only (Accusative, Nominative, Genitive and Dative) with only Singular and Plural. I did not consider Gender to simplify the rules. The resulting language is completely regular.

For each word, I made a list (a small dictionary) with meaning, the theme of the nominative version of the word and the ending: none in some cases (explorator, Andral) and at most two letters in the other cases. There were 6 possible endings for nouns (plus the empty ending), 5 for adjectives (no empty ending allowed) and 6 for pronouns (again, no empty ending).

Then, I considered verbs. I made all verbs end in '-re' and allowed only three different vowels before '-re' ('a', 'e' and 'i'). This is the theme vowel. Whatever comes before it is the root.

To compose the conjugated verb form, I took the root of the verb (which comes before the theme vowel), wrote if followed by an appropriate transformation of the theme vowel for each tense and person and then this was followed by the appropriate ending for theme

and person. Usually, the theme transformation is independent of the person, but there was an exception: the tense corresponding to Simple Past usually changes in the plural third person. Then I made four tables for the verbs, one for the endings and one for each theme transformation. I had 9 rows and 13 columns in each, but most cells were empty because some columns were just fake persons (for gerundives, participles and such things).

As an example:
Andral guided me

Andral is a name without ending. Since it is used in the nominative, it simply stays
'Andral'

To Guide was decided to be 'dirigere' (to direct). Theme vowel 'e', root 'dirig'.

The tense is a simple past (Perfect Past in Portuguese direct translation), the person is 3rd singular. Checking the tables I made, the theme transforms to 'evi' (if it were plural, it would change to 'eve') and the ending for 3rd person in this tense is 't' (it is always 't').

So, this gives **'dirigevit'**

Finally, 'me' is considered an invariable pronoun so it doesn't change.

After Yuri found the book, Gregor proposed for the first shift. His player had warned me before hand that he was in need of money and he would steal it from his mates. He asked what would be the best way to do it. I tried to demote him because I knew that if the others found out I would be the one to take the blame, but I do not tell my players what to do, so he went on with it. He took first shift, alone, so he could do that. I rolled the dice and he succeeded. To this day, none of the players ever found he had been robbed. I don't remember who the victims were, but I guess Gregor took the money from Gheata and Eva.

The next day, I brought the horses back to them. It would make things too unfair for the players. Eva had to roll a successful handle animal, but since she's a skilled Ranger, that was not a problem for her.

The fog they crossed over the river was actually Strahd's Choking Fog. Although I was tempted to remove it entirely, I still decided to oblige canon, bent as I am on a campaign to introduce Ravenloft to unknowing friends.

The scene at the apple seller was planned but not imposed. I just know that Gregor likes to spend his time around shops, so I figured that if there were stands he'd stop by. But it was actually the player's idea to buy an apple, without any input from me. I love it when they unwittingly help me... The purpose of this scene was to convey some information from the point of view of a village inhabitant about the Vistani and the feeling of oppression in Barovia, and to let them be approached by a Vistani knife-seller. The description of this man is taken from several gypsies I saw through the years in the street or in the bus.

The Vistani seller had been planned to give back a Great Sword to Gheata. Since he had taken a Weapon Focus (Greatsword) feat, its loss was hampering him. As any tradesman worth his salt, he immediately identified the PCs' language and spoke it well enough for

them to understand him. In game, I used an Italian / Slavic (heavier bent on the Slavic) accent, and I tried to reproduce that in these logs (only the Italian part actually). I made good use of many street-sellers I met in my honey-moon and my players found it a very appealing performance. It's small moments like these that make a DM's life worthwhile.

Donosty is the priest of the village. I took him from House of Strahd, but I found Donovan to be a too well-known name and with too much a Western feel to me, so I changed it. I did the same to Bray Martikova later, turning him into Bran Martikova.

The purpose of Gregor's voyage was to be ordained priest in Barovia. But what the prophecy meant was the country Barovia, not the village Barovia. I had decided the ceremony had to be done in Krezk, and initially I thought that's where the players would land. But in this tour through Ravenloft, I really couldn't miss the most famous village of all. So, Donosty helps him a bit. Gregor had been accumulating 1% of spell failure with each day that passed. After Donosty initiated him, that failure chance no longer increased, but it was only removed when Gregor completed his ordainance in the Sanctuary of First Light in Keshgel.

The restrictions of the sun being present were introduced (and the weather manipulated) to guarantee the PCs remained in the village enough time for me to play out all the scenes I had prepared. I had a long list of things I wanted to do in Barovia, and I had to plan well not to miss any. With the knowledge of twenty sessions past, I can happily say I hit them all.

Donosty's 'thought' that made him laugh was a thought I really had at the time which seemed funny to me, but I never wrote it down, so I can't tell what it was. It stayed in record, though.

The game is not funny if the players do not learn the secrets one by one, and Donosty is a good source of information. I feel there's quite a lot that he told them, but I do not regret it. And it was about time they actually learned the effects of the Fog. It wouldn't be funny to watch them die of suffocation for something they simply did not know. Yuri's interruption is a firm belief of the character: the Grand Scheme of Things that the Gods know more or less and that mortals have to find bit by bit how it affects them.

The book Donosty shows them is a book supposedly written by Sasha about the events in Vampire of the Mists. This was just a way to tell them about the Holy Symbol of Ravenkind (and tie it with the writings in Kir's book), the story of the Morninglord

Alex's campaign – sessions 24, 25 and 26

Session 21

Starting Date: 1st October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia

They rose and bade farewell to the priest. The sun was reaching its highest point in the sky and they wanted to keep their arrangement with the gypsy. But as they were leaving, Donosty called them one last time and added, almost as an after-thought:

“In case these things interest you, there’s going to be an execution in the village this evening.”

Donosty looked uneasy

“I myself won’t be going, but I think you should assist, just so you know what country you’re in now”.

Donosty turned back to his affairs, but Yuri and Gregor questioned him further

“Who are they executing? And Why?”

“It’s just a petty thief. He had been at it for already some time when they finally caught him. He was tried and found guilty and in the middle of the audience he insulted the burgomaster and especially the Count quite vigorously. He was immediately sentenced to death. It is today” he added sadly.

The conversation died then and there. They turned back to the village and to the centre square where they could already devise the gypsy and his donkey. While they descended the slope, Gregor and Yuri conversed about the execution that would take place at dusk

“I kind of agree with it, if he really did insult the governor before everybody.”, offered Gregor. Yuri shrugged and replied

“I just want to be sure he really was caught deservedly. What if he was being tried for theft yet he really didn’t do anything? Will he have been framed?”

“I think perhaps you’re making a conspiracy where there is none, Yuri, but we can find that easily enough later today.”

As they reached the square, the dark man advanced in their direction with a boisterous welcome

“Friends, coma here! Let as go, let as go. I’ma gonna show you tha besta blades in the country. Nah, even in tha whola Core.”

Gheata took the lead and said dryly

“Take us there!”

The Gypsy led them out of the village. They crossed the fields, passed a cliff that sprang from the pillar stone of the castle and behind it, against the tall rocky wall, they came to a small green expanse by a spring that shot from the river they had crossed before. The forest loomed just a bow shot length in front of them after the spring. In the middle of this green yard, a lone wagon served as home for a small family: a woman cooked outside while four children played carelessly. There might be more people inside but they couldn’t see. The Vistana exclaimed

“Welcome to my Vardo, my home! Come, let me show ya this fina collection of blades”.

He went to his vardo and uncovered a large bundle whence he drew a dozen of swords, knives and daggers, all of different sizes and shapes

“You’re lucky, I still hava all these to choose from! All tha finest, all tha besta. You’ll never find equal ones in tha whola Barovia! See this longsword, or this shorta concealable one if you’re discrete”

He handed them to everybody, clearly trying to entice his visitors to take the most of his wares. But only Gheata was interested, and he knew definitely well what he wanted

“Do you have a greatsword?”

“Sura I do! Sure, sure!” and he handed one to him. “Take your time ta admire thisa beauty! It’s a magnificenta sword!”

Gheata concurred. It felt well balanced and good material. Gregor, who had been inspecting the rest of the wares (which included all kinds of metal pots and pans), was at once interested by the sword. He gave it a look, weighed it in his hand and with an approving wink he said

“Looks good!”

Finally, Yuri too asked to see it.

“This is not the kind of weapon I use, but I know good material when I find it. This”, he said, while he admired the blade and felt his weight, “is exceptional make, never seen as good a sword as this.”

“How much do you want for it?” asked Gheata.

“Wella, how much do you hava? We can try to find a fair price for you anda me.!”

“Well, will you take five coins?”

“What? Scandal, blasphemy! Five pieces, for such a good thing? Oh sacrilege. Let’s call it off, for the sake of my Mamma I canna sell it for thata price.”

Yuri intervened

“It’s pretty good material. I’d say it’s worth about 250 or 300 coins”

“More, more, ita has to be more. 400 at least.”

Eva let a sigh escape her lips

“That’s really high!”

“All right, all right. 350 and that’s over”

“Look here, I really don’t have that much. Will you sell it by 100?”

“I cannot, I cannot. But hey, I want you a happy customer, you want the sword. Let’s make a deal. I’ll keep the sword for you, you come back later when you hava money, I sell it then. Or, ... you can pay me in service.”

“What kind of service?”

“Oh, only the Raunie can say. But here, take thisa wristband. It’s gotta magic. When you meet any of Vistani, they’ll know ya and know ya have agreed to help them. Go see the Raunie and she’ll tell you what kind of service she needs. The wristband will force you to it.”

Gregor and Eva shook their heads in discomfort.

“I don’t know, to agree to do something we do not know... I wouldn’t accept”

“Very well, very well. One last offer thena. Bring me a dagger. A silver dagger with black blade, a hilt of hide decorated in red and gold. I’ll trada tha sword for that.”

“And where do I find this dagger?”

“Uh... I think you shoulda speak to my wifa. It’s her over there.”

Gheata approached the woman. She stopped what she was doing, looked up at him, and without saying a word questioned him with his eyes.

“Uh, did you hear what your husband told me about a dagger? What can you tell me about it?”

The woman stood upright, went back to the Vardo and came a minute later with a slim deck of cards in her hand. She drew four cards: the Moon, the Hanged Man and the Justice upside down. The last card was the Ace of Swords. At length, she spoke

“This is a special deck. It’s made only of the aces and the Major Arcana. Its meanings are therefore rather strong, they tell you of the essence of things, not of circumstances or probabilities. This ace means that whatever this is, it will be near you in the very near future. Its function is only the time. The other three, now, they describe this dagger.

The Moon is an ambiguous card. It represents the Night, the Dark, the Hidden. It is Evil, but it can also simply be Emotion, Spirituality or Love. The cards are not clear, they never tell you the whole story, but they give you fair warning. You’ll have to find what the true meaning of this card is.

Now, the Hanged Man suggests it is associated with some kind of Execution, or some kind of Yielding. It can also mean Contemplation and Change, but the vibrations I feel from it lead me more towards the execution.

Finally, the Justice upside down. This is connected to some act of distorted justice or something completely arbitrary without any substantiated reason. This is what the cards can tell. You alone can decide what to do and decide upon these words.

Now go in peace.”

Gheata approached the group again. He quickly told them of the reading and said to the Gypsy

“I’ll find the dagger. Keep the sword for me”

and turning to the rest of the group

“We can go now.”

Before leaving, and remembering the words of the priest, they profited to buy a potion for countering the effects of the fog for each of them. Then, they returned to the town and decided it was time to look for some place to stay for the night. Barovia was a small village. It didn't take them much to understand there was only one boarding house, an inn called Blood on the Vine, right in the square of the village. It was mid-afternoon. The common room was not packed full, but it had a few groups. The wide open windows did their best to illuminate the room, but there were not few sombre corners that the light barely reached. Behind the bar, a large burly man adjusted some garlic hooves hanging from the ceiling. He turned from his business when he saw potential customers. Eyeing them quickly he exclaimed

“Ah, foreigners! You'll be needing rooms, I wager?”

Gregor replied

“Yes, we'd like to stay the night. How much is it?”

“Ten silver pieces for room, two people for room.”

“And if we stay one in each room?”

“Ten silver pieces for room, one person in room.”

“You're not a man of much word, are you?”

“It depends. How many rooms is it then?”

Gregor told them the prices.

“We could stay two in each room.”

“Hmmm...”, said Eva, “that means I'll have to stay with one of you. Gregor, I'll sleep with you.”

Gregor's face lighted as a child who's given a candy.

“Alright! Two rooms then, isn't it?”

“Certainly not”, said Yuri, “I want a room just for me.”

“Guess that puts me in a single room then”, said Gheata.

“What about you, Eva?”

“No need to change. I'll stay with Gregor.”

This then addressed the innkeeper.

“Well, it will be three rooms then. How much is it if we stay longer?”

“You want to stay longer? Then I can make you a better price! Three gold pieces for a room for five nights.”

“Please, take care of our horses.”

“Here are the keys. Your rooms are turned to the back of the house, but they’re clean and comfy.”

They paid for the rooms and sat for a reinvigorating drink, while a boy took their mounts to the stables. Gregor listened on to the conversations around them while the other spoke of the execution

“I bet this dagger has something to do with this”, said Gregor.

“Perhaps someone will be wearing it, no? Let’s keep our eyes well open.”

“Yes, Eva, and not only for the dagger. Keep attention to your purses too, the last thing we need now is to be robbed. We’re not exactly rich.”

“I’d really like to know if this thief was any thief at all.”, continued Yuri, almost thinking aloud.

“Gregor understands the language. Let him ask a few things”, suggested Gheata.

Yuri nodded, but did not reply. They finished their drinks and rose

“It’s time, let’s go outside.”

It was still relatively early but the people were arriving. As they watched the crowd slowly forming, Eva asked Gregor what he had got from the conversations in the inn.

“Well, lots of interesting stuff. First, to answer Yuri, he was indeed a thief. I heard a few of the men complaining of things he had stolen from themselves proper, not hearsay. So I think that may clear your worries. What I found most interesting comes now. Did you know that the Burgomaster is behaving oddly? They say he’s been cocky, these last weeks, too opulent, arrogant and even showing off. They say he’s challenging Strahd himself, who doesn’t like extravagancies. I don’t know, if that thief is being killed for an insult, this Burgomaster may get a warning if he doesn’t change his ways. Oh, true, he

takes taxes too. People complain they're too high because this year they won't have anything to give him. Bad weather and all... Curiously, a few of them were saying that the taxes stay all with the burgomaster, but he collects them in the name of the Count. Is it me, or is he wasting riches he should be keeping and warding for Strahd? I don't know, really."

"Well, seems like an interesting character, but he should be careful. Do people like him?" asked Yuri.

"I don't know, really. They didn't show much emotion, and spoke of him quite factually. They pay taxes to him, it's a fact of life, undeniable, unquestionable. It doesn't draw hate from them, I guess, they must be used to it. But there was more. They say a girl was kidnapped, one named Olya, daughter of Piotr. She was still young, but disappeared. In fact, one of them said she was sent for: Van Holz came in a black carriage and took her to the Castle, to the Count. They give her up for dead, and they say his father is set in deep melancholy. He might not live long.."

Eva echoed everybody else's thoughts "Well... then we should be careful at night".

Meanwhile, a large crowd had assembled in the square. They remained away from it, watching everything from the distance, to the exception of Gregor who preferred to watch from a nearer spot. He mixed with the mass and did so well that in some time he was in the front row. Just at his side was a large burly man, dressed with a pompous coat trimmed with quality fur. He was tall and finely appointed, a severe contrast among the drab and nearly destitute people of Barovia. It wasn't hard to recognise the Burgomaster. But this latter was absent-minded. As the executioner brought the sentenced man and laid his head on the trunk, the Burgomaster murmured, thinking no one was listening

"Oh, I wish I had the courage to say the things this man said. That bastard of a Count surely deserves to hear a few things."

He wasn't aware that Gregor heard these words and took good notice of them.

The execution was brief, without much ado. The herald read the sentence, proclaimed and passed by Count Strahd and enforced by the Burgomaster Idril Kolyanovich. Then, the executioner raised his axe and let it fall with violence on the wretched man's head. The populace watched with reverent fear, understanding these public displays were more deterrents and assertions of power than punishments for a crime. They were severe warnings, Strahd was not known for his mercy. As the axe fell, the silence was broken for a brief moment, when a collective cry of relief and redemption issued from every mouth. Then, they disbanded quickly. Only two servants of the burgomaster carried the decapitated body to the limits of town and left it there.

Yuri was appalled

“They’re leaving it to rot there!”

“It won’t have time to rot, Yuri,” said Eva, “it will surely be gone in the morning”.

Still, Yuri asked Gregor to question a late passer-by on it and the answer was short and simple

“He’s a criminal, they don’t get to be buried in the graveyard.”

They had dinner in the inn. As they ate, they talked about the afternoon, and although each of them observed with close attention, none could see anywhere a dagger like the one they were searching. Gheata, now convinced that they had lost their chance, borrowed some money from Gregor to buy the sword the next day. At night, the inn was packed full. The garlic hooves were now much more evident than in the afternoon, hanging from the ceiling and windows. They noticed the people in the room clearly avoided them, altogether ignoring they were there. Suddenly, the Burgomaster himself entered the room. His cheeks were red, and he looked somewhat disturbed, worried and with slight traces of fear. He surveyed the room and approached the table where the group was.

“Are you foreigners?”

Only Gregor understood him

“Euh... yes”

“Then this is for you”, he said, taking a letter from his pocket. He left the inn at once, without saying another word. There was a moment of silence, but it stopped right afterwards. Meanwhile, they looked puzzled at each other. The envelope bore the name Lord Strahd, in an extremely elegant cursive handwriting. It was still sealed with a raven crest bordered by two swords. They copied the seal and then broke it. Gregor translated the letter to them

“Greetings from Lord Strahd von Zarovich, Count and Ruler of Barovia,

It has come to my knowledge that your group has arrived to the village of Barovia. You are clearly no common travellers, for you bear weapons and have a confident military bearing. Do not fear, I will not prevent you from the use of your weapons, as long as you do not strike any of my subjects nor any of the Vistani. Rather on the contrary, I have a

need for your services, for very seldom do we have such adventurous groups here around.

I invite you to visit me in Castle Ravenloft in two night's time, so that we may discuss business. You will be well rewarded. I stress that I do expect you to come.

Strahd von Zarovich”

They exchanged puzzled glances, wondering who exactly was this Count Strahd and how did he know so much of them. But most importantly, why did he invite them to join him at night. Yuri, at least, seemed well determined not to set foot in the castle without ample daylight, but if he knew something concrete about the Castle or its prominent inhabitant, he hid it well from the others. They decided to postpone a final decision and decided on the plan for the morning. Gregor was going early to the church to prepare in advance for his ritual. Eva and Yuri decided to accompany him: even a five minute walk through a deserted Barovia, despite the faint light of the dawn, could be dangerous.

That night, before going to bed, Yuri pored over the precious book he had found in the morning. He began to read it, patiently and earnestly, delving into the first secrets of arcane magic. Three hours he spent at that before finally collapsing to sleep. Meanwhile, in the room next to his, Gregor couldn't sleep. He was excited about the ritual that awaited him in the morning, the beginning of the solution for his spiritual problems. He turned and turned on his bed, trying to meet sleep, still a bit frustrated at Eva's adamant resolution that they should sleep in separated beds well kept apart. He had had his hopes, but now he endured the disappointment with the conviction that the morrow could bring an important renewal for him. There was just a little pang that anguished him: his knowledge of the weather told him that they were going to have a cloudy day, and with all likelihood, the ritual would fail.

2nd October 751, 3rd Night before the New Moon

Gregor rose early, and woke Eva. When they went down to the common room, Yuri was already there. He had awakened a servant who was preparing hot milk and bread from the oven. It was a simple but strengthening breakfast.

They covered the distance to the church in quick strides, arriving there without incident. Donosty was inside, already preparing everything. He gave Gregor a robe and a parchment with the words he had to learn. They waited anxiously for the time. Finally, it came and Gregor performed the ritual as well as he should. Alas, the sun did not rise clean and bright. The sky was overcast and the day was lost.

“Well, Gregor, there is always tomorrow, as the Morning Lord teaches. Do not despair, for light will come. You needn’t come so soon tomorrow, you already know what to do.”

As Gregor, Eva and Yuri turned their backs on the church, they could see a large commotion down in the village. A crowd had assembled on the street going to the burgomaster’s house, quite in the opposite direction from the church relative to the square.

Gheata slept fast through the night. As he reached his bed, he fell sleeping like a rock, but he was rudely woken by the cries in the street. Curious, as ever he was, he came down and followed the crowd in its natural motion. He did not understand the words, but he could guess something of a scandal had happened.

Eva, Yuri and Gregor ran to the square while Donosty went down simply at the same step as he did all mornings, chanting and crying aloud the virtues of the Morning Lord and calling all to faith. They left him behind, oblivious as he was to anything out of the ordinary. As they reached the Blood on the Vine, a stout young man, tall and vigorous, no more than 25 years old, coming running from the opposite direction as everybody else, bumped into Gregor and nearly threw him to the floor. Never stopping in his run, he entered the inn in a swift quick motion. Gregor and Yuri, finding the behaviour strange, followed quickly after him into the inn, while Eva decided to follow the commotion. She soon found Gheata and the two did their best to peer amidst the crowd and understand what was going on.

The common room was empty. Only the innkeeper was behind the bar with an air of anxious expectation, broke quickly by the young man:

“The Burgomaster! Ba’al Verzi”

The innkeeper opened his eyes in alarm, but that reaction lasted only a moment. Resolutely, he signalled at the man to follow him and they entered a door behind the bar, never noticing that Yuri and Gregor had just entered and witnessed the scene. Intrigued, these followed them through the door, to end stupefied in a small storage room with no other door... but it was empty. There were only shelves and shelves of bottles and crates, certainly wares for the inn. They diligently looked for a trapdoor, a shifting panel or concealed door, until after almost twenty minutes Yuri found a fixed, but moving, bottle. He hesitated for a while, then pushed it. A section of the wall slid to the side, but the noise was enough to alert the two other men. A cry of alert came from below. Yuri and Gregor didn’t wait to see how many more people were down there and they ran away into the street. When the innkeeper reached the door, they had successfully mingled with the

populace. They soon reached the Burgomaster's house but the confusion was too much. They waited patiently for something to happen. Nobody clearly knew what was going on, but some strong men were keeping the people away from the house. They didn't have any look of authority, but were clearly following orders of some older respectable men. In the middle of all this confusion, they found Eva and Gheata and even Donosty.

“What's going on?”

“As far as I can tell, the Burgomaster has been murdered. They say he's in the hall of his house, staring at the ceiling with a dagger plunged in his chest up to the hilt.”

They opened their mouths wide. They pressed Donosty for more details, but this was all he could say. They looked around them once again, until they saw, in a corner, the innkeeper and the young man, in a group with a girl and another man. Gregor approached them furtively. They were whispering, and it looked as if the innkeeper and the young man were lecturing the other two in a rather secretive way. They moved away from the house, but Gregor's fine ears perceived an excerpt of their dialogue:

“It was the Ba'al Verzi”.

“That is a Ba'al Verzi dagger?”

“Yes, one of those gold, red and black.”

“That means they're active again. We have to be careful.”

“But.... they were always against him, weren't they?”

“They were, but past deeds do not guarantee present intentions”

Session 24 – DM notes

When I moved my campaign to Barovia, I made a checklist of things I wanted to do in this domain, mostly taken from all the books and films about vampires that I had contact with these last years. It included several things, some of which I abandoned. The ones that made the final list were:

- to have general misery in the village due to the abduction of a girl
- a lynching mob against an innocent, namely, the abducted girl that is returned to the village still human
- the Ba'al Verzi, in some form
- the Blood O' the Vine Inn
- the Ravenkin / Keepers of the Black Feather
- Gregor being ordained priest of the Morninglord (this, of course, was the only motive for them to be in Barovia)

- the Village of Barovia and the ring of fog
- seeing the Circle
- being attacked by a vampire in the forest at night
- Jacqueline Montarri
- betrayal and death of a burgomaster
- harshness of Strahd towards thieves
- Jezra Wagner
- the Gundarakite rebellion
- the latest incarnation of Tatyana

It was a huge list! From the points above, only Jezra Wagner doesn't have many chances of being played out, as the players ignored or didn't get to be exposed to the suggestion of going into the mountains to look for a magic sword. Some of the others were merely cameo appearances thus far, but may become more relevant in the future, and the thread of Tatyana is still to happen in a second phase. But most of the rest was achieved, and began being achieved in this session.

The execution scene was supposed to give them a feel for Strahd's character and also to give a suggestion to the burgomaster's future problems. The whole suggestion of theft of the tax money is taken from a novel, perhaps I, Strahd, perhaps Vampire of the Mists.

The Gypsy dealer was set for the specific purpose of giving Gheata back a great sword, which he had lost in Irvanika, while at the same time to create more possibilities for the future. One of them was to trade the sword for the obligation to pay a favour later, which would have allowed me to kind of force them into The Evil Eye adventure later on. They refused that option, wisely I may say. So, I made the gypsy trade the sword for the dagger. This was an improvisation to come out of a difficult situation for me, but served two purposes: to remove a powerful weapon from the players, although initially it was meant to tempt Gheata into a path of evil; to complicate the thread relating to the Ba'al Verzi.

Unfortunately, the players never paid much attention to it and I haven't found a good way to make that story obvious to them, but the fact is that this dagger is being looked for all around the Core, as will be apparent in some sessions, and Strahd may now have it... or the Vistani may have kept it for them. Whatever best suits my purposes later on. It is even possible that this same dagger is used in an assassination attempt on one of the PCs.

The sword Gheata thus bought is masterwork, as was apparent from the prices suggested. Gheata's player really offered 5gp, which could elicit no other reaction than the appalled look of the salesman.

This whole scene was very enjoying. The players were convinced by the accent I gave the gypsy and by his speech proper, and it stayed in their memories for a long time.

The reading in this session was fabricated, I mean, I chose the cards I wanted to come out. It was sort of unexpected and I didn't want to improvise, so I picked cards that suited what I wanted to tell them. The meaning of the reading should be obvious after reading the rest of the session, at least for those who know the Ba'al Verzi.

Regarding the choice of rooms for the PCs in the Blood on the Vine, at this moment there was clearly a situation of flirting between Gregor and Eva. He had tried several times to seduce her, and her choosing to sleep in his room was a deliberate provocation of Eva's player... but nothing more.

The disappearance of Olya, and later of Irina, is also a set-piece situation. Another item in my checklist. I wanted to have a disappearance due to a vampire. Rather, this time, the victim returns, and still alive. In game terms, this is a bored Strahd who decides to test the villagers in a cruel manner, sending them the stolen child almost as good as before which, however, will not be believed by the mob. When they are almost to lynch the girls, the PCs will be prompted to action. I'll tell you more of her story in the session when she appears.

The letter Strahd sends to the PCs also has more than one objective. The obvious goal is to invite the PCs to the castle. As happened in the game Strahd's Possession, the Count shouldn't be a danger when they first go there, but this would give them a chance to ride the phantom carriage, cross the chasm into Castle Ravenloft and spend a night there. At least in theory, this would give them a lot of thrills.

Story wise, I wanted them to be mercenaries for Strahd for a while, so he'll commission them to investigate the Gundarakite rebels in the south. At the same time, it gives Strahd the possibility for executing another item in my Barovia checklist: killing the burgomaster. While the latter is out, Strahd disguised as Van Holtz takes a Ba'al Verzi dagger to his house and hands it to Irina, the burgomaster's daughter. He charms her in a way that later in the night, as the burgomaster wanders the house with insomnia, she mistakes him for a thief and plunges the dagger in his chest. There is even a possibility that is helped by the dagger's own malevolence. She flees hurriedly as she finds the truth. Strahd achieves two points with this: killing a defiant burgomaster and sending a signal to the current leader of the Ba'al Verzi that he is after them. This is the declaration of war to them: a Ba'al Verzi murder that was not approved by the head of the organization. The back story is that Strahd wants to wrestle the Ba'al Verzi to his side to aid in the war against the rebels and then use them as his special assassins. A kind of elite force. Strahd doesn't know who the leader is, and he wants him to make a mistake. By making a Ba'al Verzi assassination public, he knows their leader will become worried and hopes to make some of the current assassins more visible. As they become so, he will murder them and put a replacement in his place loyal to him instead, with the Ba'al Verzi outfit and dagger. Eventually, he hopes to find the identity of the leader as the guild becomes more and more harassed and then he will simply destroy him and take control of the organization, ending the distance they always kept to him.

Gregor's ritual means that his penalty for divine spells will no longer increase. It will still not eliminate the penalty completely, so that I can force the players to travel more: this time, to Krezk. But I needed about 4 game days to do everything I wanted in Barovia, so I couldn't have the ritual work on the morning. Knowing my players, they'd probably leave the village at the first opportunity, and miss on all the other things I had prepared for them.

The scene where the Burgomaster shows up dead reveals that there is a secret society operating in the inn. It is the Keepers of the Black Feather, but the PCs haven't worried with them so far. This is just a cameo for the story, unless Strahd, in his guild war against Nicu, begins murdering people from the Keepers thinking they are something else.

Session 25

Starting Date: 2nd October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia

Some time later, the crowd had dispersed, sent away by the elders. They too conversed for a bit of time and entered the house better to talk in privacy. The band profited to approach it and sate their curiosity of what had happened. Donosty too had left, and they were practically the only ones that hadn't moved away. What words or threats had so effectively cast the population away, they did not know nor could they affect them.

The house was large and well-appointed, considering the miserable village where it was set. It was clearly out of place, nearly opulent. It was surrounded by a large but badly tended lawn where two distorted trees grew. It was surrounded by an iron spiked fence in the front side that turned into a stone wall two metres and a half high in the rest of the perimeter.

They thoroughly examined the exterior of the property for signs of entrance but could find none. So, they moved inside the lawn. The few men that had been there were out of sight, so they could examine the fences once again undisturbed. After a detailed search, Eva found, on the left side wall, marks of someone that had climbed them from the inside. Yuri was near, and they found footprints leading to that part of the stone: the steps were short and highly marked in the front, but there were almost no traces of the heel. There seemed to be marks of toes. "Clearly", said Yuri, "they belong to someone with small feet, short, barefooted, who was running and..." he turned to the wall and studied it meticulously. There were several spots where the vines had been broken, and a few places where a bit of the stonework seemed to have crumbled

".... and he or she had difficulty in climbing this. Come Eva, we need to find the tracks on the outside. They are most surely there." Gheata and Gregor joined them and they discussed briefly on what this could possibly mean.

It was at that moment that someone interrupted them.

“What do you think you are doing here?!”

They turned around and saw a brute ill-mannered man.

“Get out, you have no business here!”

The man looked threatening but an elder approached him and said

“Leave this to me. You can go, Penev”

The man left and the old man addressed them in a much politer way

“So, why are you here?”

Gregor, as the only one in the group who understood Balok, explained him that they had heard the burgomaster had died and that they could probably help in an investigation. The man did not seem overanxious about the solution. In fact, he spoke in a tone that seemed to indicate that there was not much else to uncover. The man had died and the mysterious dagger seemed to be proof enough to all there needed to be known. This was definitely something Gregor could not understand, so the elder said

“Come with me, I’ll show you the scene.”

He led them inside. There was no one left of the other men that had been conversing there.

“Do you know anything of Barovian History?”

Gregor and Yuri shrugged uncomfortably

“Yes, a bit. What kind of history do you mean? Old, culture?”

“Hmmm... more like its general culture. Any way, that dagger you see there is a Ba’al Verzi dagger.”

This seemed to be it. This fact alone seemed to conclude any investigation, as if that could explain all that had happened.

“I don’t understand.” stammered Gregor to Yuri to which he replied

“It seems they don’t want us to investigate, they prefer to drown and forget all this as soon as possible.”

The man inquired

“Don’t you know about the Ba’al Verzi?”

“Who were they?”

“Ah!... then your culture isn't complete. Never mind, the majority of the folks in Barovia don't know them either.... Not anymore.... Surely the elders will remember old tales, but they're as old as time. The Ba'al Verzi have disappeared hundreds of years ago.... four hundred, some say. Not more than two hundred and a half, according to others. That's not important. They were silent for ages until now and that's what is worrying. They're back!”

“But who were they?” they asked all at once.

“They were assassins. Ruthless, deadly efficient --- the worst. They were the enemy in the night, the secret shadow that stalked without warning and never was caught. He could be your kin, your wife, your daughter, your own father. You were never safe from the Ba'al Verzi, for their damned alliance to their killings was stronger than any bonds they could have to you, be it blood or friendship. You could never know if your most trusted friend was a Ba'al Verzi who might one day kill you. For the Ba'al Verzi did not try, they simply did do it, without hesitation of remorse of any kind. Sacred was their gold and their black oath!”

“I see... So, you want our help to investigate?”

The man gasped, nearly smiling

“Investigate what? It was a Ba'al Verzi, that's all there is to know, that's all we'll ever know! You cannot tell them from others, they have no marks, no signs. Except for their dagger and this one left it on the victim. Pay attention, if you follow that road, you may well repent in the end.”

“Nevertheless, please tell us what you can. Who lives here?”

“Burgomaster Dimitar was a widower and he lived here with his daughter, Irina. Apart from them, only the servants and the butler live here.”

“I see. And can we speak to the daughter?”

“Now, that's interesting. She seems to have disappeared too.”

“She did?” broke Yuri abruptly when Gregor translated the words to him. “And how old is she? Is she about this tall?”, he added, mimicking a height with his hand.

“She's 15 and yes, that's about her size.”

“Then we must find her. Come Eva!”

Yuri and Eva left the house and proceeded to find the tracks on the outside. Gregor and Gheata stayed to interrogate the staff. While Gregor exchanged a few more words with the old man, who was called Shuri, Gheata took the dagger from the body. Shuri seemed to flinch at this motion and looked at Gheata disapprovingly.

“I fear your friend will learn more of the Ba’al Verzi’s lore than I’d care to know.”

“Why?”

“Because so; I don’t wish to talk any more of these matters.”

Turning to Gheata, Gregor said

“I think you should best put the dagger back. That doesn’t seem a good thing to me.”

“But I don’t see any reason to put it away. I got it, and I want it to me. It’s mine now.”

Shuri motioned his head negatively and added.

“Look, the servants are here. You can question them now.”

There was not much they could tell. They all had gone to bed at the usual time. Only the butler said the master had left and returned late and that he went to bed but seemed to have some difficulty sleeping. As for him, he closed all doors and windows, adjusting the precautions for the night, and went to bed later. The body was found in the morning by the first maids entering service. He was lying right on the carpet in the entrance, near the stairs for the top floor. His eyes were opened and he gazed at the ceiling, bewildered and surprised. There was only one blow that had been fatal, for it had pierced right through the heart.

The butler could confirm that one side door had been found open in the morning, with the key turned on the lock, from the inside, but they could find nothing more.

Gregor and Gheata left the house. The latter said

“Well, guess I’m going to trade this for my sword.”

“Fine, I’ll go with you.”

They looked for the gypsy in the same area where they had found him the previous day. He was not there, but after a while, the familiar peddling of knives and pans reached their ears. They followed him to his caravan and once again he offered to trade the sword for the Ba’al Verzi dagger. Gheata hesitated for a short while, feeling something in him that resisted to delivering the dagger. But the desire for the greatsword was too strong and he

made the trade. With nothing left to do, they went back to the inn and waited for the nightfall.

Yuri and Eva worked diligently. She picked a track a few metres away from the house and they followed it until it reached the Ivlis. It looked like the one they were falling had swum across, so they went to the bridge at the entrance of the village and crossed. Once again they picked the track which, this time, led into the forest. With ample daylight, as the sun was in its highest point, it didn't look that much menacing. They went amidst the trees and began following the track once again. But, to their disbelief, their quarry seemed to be always ahead of them. Four hours past, and after having lost the track several times, they began feeling uneasy. The forest was dead silent around them. Neither birds nor beasts made a single noise, and the trees looked oppressively still, except.... except that their positions seemed to shift. Eva was the one to give the alert.

“I don't like this. I think I felt a tree move.”

They began walking slowly, purposefully conscious that they might be being watched. Eva kept her eyes wide open and suddenly she gave a cry!

“That tree has a face on it!”

It seemed to, indeed. There were features on it that reminded a face, and definitely not a kind one. Yuri cried, in all the tongues he knew, that he meant no harm, but they moved only slowly fearing the fury of the man-tree. As they retreated, two or three more of those creatures seemed to watch their steps and close behind them. The forest was covering her secrets.

They returned to the village as dusk was settling in and hurried to the inn.

“Five minutes later and I wouldn't let you come in for the night. Be warned!” said the innkeeper in a disagreeable manner.

The dinner was uneasy. It seemed that all the other patrons were looking at them suspiciously and mumbling in their backs. Gregor couldn't pick the mixed conversations, but words like Vrolok and Witch appeared now and then. He couldn't tell if they were referring to him and his mates, but he wasn't too comfortable. Fortunately, the people departed sooner than usual and he had still time to peacefully savour a grog of Tuika that he decided to experiment with an excuse of cultural curiosity.

When he went up, he found Eva lying in his bed, asleep. He lay by her, thinking that she had waited for him purposefully. That, however, had not been her intentions for when she awoke with his touches, she immediately cast him away and went to her own bed.

“Still, she hasn’t been as ruthless as yester night”, he thought.

“Well, better sleep. I have an important ritual in the morn.”

3rd October 751, 2nd Night before the New Moon

He awoke soon, in time to prepare for the ceremony at the church, but he was baffled by Eva who, few minutes later, entered the chamber with a tray carrying breakfast.

“I was rude to you last night, so I thought I might bring you breakfast!”

She smiled and Gregor thought that perhaps the Gods were returning to his side.

“I’m sure the sun will rise today, and I’ll be there to greet it!”

He was right. Once again, he, Eva and Yuri made their way to the church still before dawn. Donosty was looking serious and solemn, all prepared for the event that was going to take place.

“Be firm, Gregor. This is serious, you are going to be accepted by the Morning Lord. I can tell we’ll see the sun soon enough, so do not fail on your words and your feelings.”

Gregor changed into the ceremonial tunic Donosty had lent to him. He knelt and as the priest sang his chant, Gregor took a holy wafer from him.

“Receive this wafer as a sign of purification of your body. Recite now the words that will cleanse your soul.”

Gregor rose and murmured his part of the ritual. Then he performed one turn around the church, the first half looking downwards, the second half looking at the sky. As he completed the turn, and came to the point where Donosty was standing and invoking the Morning Lord, the sun rose from the trees and filled the horizon with its pure luminous rays. Donosty bade Gregor kneel and blessed him. Then he commanded Gregor to rise and spoke aloud the last words of the ritual, using a mirror to make the sun shine on his forehead.

“Tell me, Gregor, do you feel the Morning Lord’s grace within you? Can you feel his blessing?”

Gregor felt his soul fuller than ever before. There was a new warmth in his spirit, a new confidence. He could only reply

“Yes, I do...”

“Then I welcome you, Brother, as too the Morning Lord has done.”

His friends clapped in applause. Then, Donosty spoke again

“I think you should stay with me two or three days more for me to teach you the basics duties of the priest, your basic duties, now.”

Gregor thought for a while and then agreed to it.

Eva and Yuri went back to the inn. There was not much to do so Yuri studied his book and Eva whiled her time away. Gheata was still sleeping.

Session 25 – DM notes

Curious as all of them are, my PCs tried to investigate the murder. I actually wanted them to, so that Gheata could get the dagger for himself. The initial intention was to place the PC in danger, but now it was simply a tradeable item. Shuri is not at all unfriendly because I prefer to tell my players all the background and story I can, and I need friendly NPCs for that.

Eva and Yuri wanted to find Irina promptly, but that would go against my own plans for her and the other kidnapped girl. So, I made it difficult for them to find her. Since I could not fudge their rolls, I made good use of the headstart the girl had to say that she was still away from them. When day was beginning to end, then, I used a scene inspired in the book ‘Forest of Doom’ from the ‘Fighting Fantasy’ series, where the hero battles some trees that actually move and attack. During that whole scene, the drawing of the trees in that book was always in my mind (that was my first book in the FF series: to this day, it’s one of my strongest influences for forest scenarios).

The main point of the session was probably Gregor's initiation. Also note that Yuri has begun reading the book he has found in the Circle. For each hour of study, he rolls an Int check with DC 18, and if he passes, he subtracts 1 point from the initial 50. There are 10 points he cannot pass on his own, this is, he needs instruction from a proper wizard. When these 10 points and the regular 40 reach 0, Yuri will be ready to take a level in Wizard. That will take a while, but he'll make in time for the next level increase.

Session 26

Starting Date: 3rd October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia

Gheata rose for lunch. Along with Yuri and Eva, he ate at the inn. Then, he dressed up, donned his armour, and went for a walk through Barovia. The sun was still shining, and he quickly saw the whole village. Faithful to his wantonly needs, he had been looking for girls, apparently unaware that such kind of market would be very much unpopular in such a small town where everybody watched everybody else closely. The open practice of such a profession would surely attract a fair deal of prejudice upon the unfortunate one. Gheata, however, was not the thinking type. He was simply a man of desire and at that moment, all he cared for was the satisfaction of his needs. He made two, nearly three, full visits of Barovia. Always the same result. But he couldn't help notice that every time he crossed with someone else, he was looked upon quite despondently or, most often, even ostensibly ignored. Not a good omen, but he always discarded the warning passed to his subconscious: they had overstayed Barovia's hospitality.

Gheata went back to the Blood o' the Vine. It was empty at that hour in the afternoon. People were working in their fields and daily lives. Only at night, near dusk, would the inn fill with the accounts of the day. For now, there really was nothing to do, so he sat at a table and ordered his first round of Tuika.

"Ah, let's see now how strong this is. On with the brandy!"

Bran Martikova, the innkeeper, brought him a glass of Tuika and then went back, sombrely as always, to his affairs. He stayed behind the bar profiting to clean a few glasses, opening a new barrel, and checking some notes in a small pocket pad, but he didn't even disguise his distrust of Gheata, always watching him carefully. Had it been someone else, he probably would have kept notice the innkeeper could read and write. In such a village as Barovia, it immediately placed him in an elite of some kind. But Gheata was oblivious to all that. He ordered another Tuika. Over the course of the afternoon, he ordered a few more, savouring them one after the other as a true connoisseur. As Gheata asked for the third one, the innkeeper commanded him, in a much distorted form of Mordentish and with plenty of body language, that he show his money. Gheata simply put his pouch on the table and said

"Take what you need... *burp*."

Bran eyed him suspiciously again, but he only took his fair share.

The afternoon was boring for Eva too. She liked action now and then, and didn't quite enjoy the idleness she had to endure today. She too went for a walk through the village and the fields outside. She returned to the inn, and there found Gheata drinking. His purse was on the table, and his head swung as he sang merrily and carelessly. He looked well past sober, but he still could recognize Eva. In a slow, dragged voice, he called her and invited her to drink, offering to pay for her drinks.

At that moment, Yuri came down from upstairs. He had stayed in the room studying his book for the afternoon, and now that hunger stabbed at him, he came for a little bread and fruits. He looked at a stunned and dizzy Gheata and shook his head in disapproval, but he went on. He could well see the innkeeper was vigilant, caring that nothing serious would happen, but well happy for making good business with this careless visitor. He bought his food and retired for a separate table.

Meanwhile, accepting Gheata's offer, Eva sat in front of him, but said immediately "I'll keep watch over your purse, so that you don't get robbed Gheata."

"Oh, that's fine.... I trust ye... Now, come and drink with me."

They ordered two more drinks, and then Gheata still asked for another one. He was now clearly drunk. Eva thought she'd better take him away from the table, and thinking of no better way to distract him, threw, without giving a clear thought to the consequences

"You've drunk enough, Gheata. Don't you want to come to bed?"

She intended to take him to his bed... quite alone. But this particular phrasing was alluring and had an immediate effect in her companion's quite clouded mind.

"Shure!.... Let's go!"

"Well, it's working so far", she thought. Perhaps she should find a way to put him asleep. She led him to the upper floor and, at the top of the stairs, still considered, mischievously, that he'd probably fall asleep and fall indeed he did from the stairs. All it took was a slight tripping him. He was robust enough to take the fall without problem, but then...

"What a bother, I'd have to carry him up and he's heavy."

So she thought, and she concluded that it was better to lure him to bed. She opened the door and getting behind him, pushed him onto the cushion. But she tripped in the bedside rug and fell over him. Completely focused only on Eva, as his mind was unable to take anything else, Gheata reacted quickly like a cat. He turned around and making use of his weight rolled over and got on top of her, tearing her dress in the process. Now, things had taken a turn Eva hadn't expected. But they got worse. Gheata was really intent on taking her, and she realized at last that her proposition might have been imprudent at best. Her dress had slipped to the floor and she was now lying beneath Gheata dressed only in a corset and her culottes. Then, he picked a dagger he had in his boot and, with a skill impaired but not completely destroyed by the haziness induced by the alcohol, he shredded her corset completely. He ogled at her breasts for a moment. Eva tried twice to escape his grip, tried to turn around, but he was stronger. Things were really desperate now

"I don't want to fall for you a second time!", she thought. She battled to leave his grasp, but he overweighed her. At the same time, he began feeling her breasts, drooling over on top of it.

“Now, this is too much!”, Eva thought. Making use of all her self-control, harnessing the strength of all her muscles, she became tensed and with agile body motions, she managed to hit Gheata in the face. He was surprised at first, but was too drunk to react. She released a hand and punched him directly in the face. Two punches were enough for Gheata to fall to the side, unconscious. He was bleeding from the nose and a bit from the mouth, red blood dripping on the sheets. She didn’t even care. She took her clothes and Gheata’s own cape, and concealing her almost naked body in it, went as quickly as she could to her room.

Yuri, on the other hand, savoured his light meal oblivious to anything but the comforting pleasure of a full stomach after an intense study.

When she arrived to her room, Eva evaluated the situation. She hadn’t been exactly raped... almost, but not completely. She had managed to resist him and knock him out which, at the least, and considering he would remember it, would make him think twice before trying that again in the future. On the other hand, she had lost one of the two corsets she had and her dress was ruined. But, after a closer inspection, she determined that the lower half could still be used as a skirt and, with a little needle-threading, she could make it suitable for that. She dressed and sat in her task.

Gregor spent the whole afternoon at the church. When the sun began approaching the horizon, he took his leave from Donosty and headed back to the inn. It was more crowded now. Seeing none of his friends, he went up to his room, where he found Eva dealing with her dress. He didn’t pay much attention to that. Other matters were preoccupying him more

“So, we’ll go to meet the Count, today?”

“Yes... think so” she responded absent-mindedly

“I’ll go call the others.”

He went first to Yuri’s room

“Hey, get ready. We have to meet the Count.”

“Right, I’ll leave in a moment.”

Then, he went to Gheata’s room. He knocked at the door and, as no answer came, insisted. Twice without reply made him double on his efforts, knocking more and more loudly, which attracted Yuri’s attention. Gregor tried the door and, as he found it open and entered, Yuri joined him.

The first thing Gregor saw was Gheata bleeding on the bed. Then, he felt the smell

“Woosh, he drank ‘til he passed and bumped his head on the bed enough to make him bleed. Oh dear, will you ever learn?”

but Yuri was more observant

“There’s blood in the sheets but no where else. Knocking sheets doesn’t make anyone bleed... oh well, whatever.”

Gregor woke him up with water and finally he came to his senses... but he was with a severe hang over still. Gregor shook his head, and with an air of disgusted but resigned sense of duty, invoked his new deity’s power to cure him, at least partially, of his “illness”. Eva arrived, then, and nonchalantly, feigning she knew nothing of it, simply asked what had happened.

Yuri looked at her suspiciously

“You are in quite an interesting state this afternoon, Eva. Are you sure you have nothing to do with this?”

Eva looked at him, and affecting a ladylike air, simply shook her shoulders

“You shouldn’t be asking that to a girl.”

He didn’t care anymore either what these two did, so he let the matter fall.

They all had supper later. The eyes of the room were on them all the time and they began feeling some discomfort which only really passed away when all the patrons had left and they were left alone. It must be nine o’clock, or thereabout. They waited anxiously, impatiently. A question dangled in their heads

“If we haven’t spoken to the burgomaster ‘cause he... well, he died before we could, how does the Count know if we’re going or not?”

Gregor voiced it, and Yuri mused

“Perhaps he’ll just send transport anyway. Let’s wait. If no one comes, we can simply go to bed and go about our lives in the morning.”

So wait they did, but they came not to need their lives to go on only in the morn. When it was just a few moments before ten, a sound of hooves and carriage wheels could be heard in the yard in front of the inn. The innkeeper rose, half-alarmed. He looked through the slits in the wooded shutters and went to check the bars and locks almost instinctively. He rose to double lock the door when Gregor asked him

“Wait! That might be for us.”

The innkeeper paused, obviously caught between two wills. Then, mumbling something that looked to Gregor to be “better not offend this Van Holtz, after all”, he opened the door wide to receive this late-night guest.

The man peered inside and seeing the adventurers, addressed them

“I am come to fetch the visitors to the Lord Count and take them to the castle”

The innkeeper flinched imperceptibly and blanched subtly. Clearly, he was a man of big self-control, but he said no other word. Yuri picked his lantern and lit it. The group stood and exchanged the light of the room for the truly dark darkness of the night. It was almost new moon, after all.

As they came out, they saw a tall man in front of them, elegantly dressed in black, with a cape over his shoulders and a hat that covered most of his features. He was slim and his hands looked of a noble paleness, the kind that aristocrats so jealously prize. Behind him, a finely appointed coach stood with the door open, inviting them. It was as elegant as the man, with velvet red cushion seats. A team of two pure black horses was pulling the carriage, and Eva approached them to snuggle the animals. Surprisingly, they reacted unfriendly to her touch, even startling her. The coacher said

“They don’t like strangers” in an apologetic tone, and made signal for her to enter.

Gheata was the first to enter. As the others followed him, Van Holtz closed the door and took his place in the driver’s seat. They immediately departed at breakneck speed, dashing through the village’s streets. They were deserted, no other sound was heard and the heavy darkness was only pierced by the two spotlights the coach carried by the driver. The fast clop-clop of the horses through the dead-like empty and dark streets couldn’t but echo sinisterly on their ears, to the point when the beating of their hearts mixed into the rhythm.

They covered the distance through the forest at that same impossible speed, even in the tight corners the road made, even on the unkempt ground after the crossroads. With each pounding of their hearts, they saw the trees whisking before them and occasionally they even had glimpses of a large shadow ahead of them. At last, they stopped. Abruptly! Yuri peered at the window, waving his lantern to illuminate a bit of the way. Ahead of them, was a chasm, fog-shrouded and apparently bottomless. It was dark, menacing and terrifying. It was at least fifteen metre wide, between the Balinoks' cliffs and the mass of Castle Ravenloft's walls ahead. The sense of a great power fell over them, some kind of force seemed to exude from the large pit. Spanning it was a decaying drawbridge. It didn't look solid at all, but it might be a trick of the night. The carriage moved forward and led them beneath the portcullis in a bastion tower. Two turreted guardhouses flanked the gate, and winged bipedal gargoyles perched on the walls watching the night, guarding.

They came into a yard that felt quite pleasing and comforting, despite the ominous sense of foreboding that emanated from the castle. Two large double doors were open, in an inviting and rather welcoming manner, spilling a warm light into the night-shrouded ground. Van Holtz climbed down, opened the door and invited them into the hall. They left the night outside and entered a magnificent room decorated in a splendid, albeit old, taste. There were many paintings on the walls, mostly dedicated to war and battle scenes. The majority represented events from before 350, but there were also more recent depictions. A large crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling, illuminating the whole room as well as clear sunlight. Van Holtz directed them to a study, and left them to wait while he fetched the Count.

The study was comfortable and warm. A large fire crepitated in a fireplace in the corner and several plush couches invited the guests to sit. They did so and admired the cosy room. There were several bookshelves, mainly decorated with things other than books. The whole setting was relaxing and induced sleep, but they didn't have to wait long. Soon enough, a tall elegant and finely dressed man opened the door and greeted them with enthusiasm in a thoroughly correct Mordentish, but with a heavy Balok accent: "Ah, good evening, dear guests, I'm so happy you could come. I am Count Strahd von Zarovich, Lord of Barovia. I would invite you to follow me to a room where we can speak more at ease, but if you are comfortable here, I will happily oblige you."

They shrugged and looked at each others and decided to go to the other room. Strahd led them up the stairs to the first floor, and into double doors guarded by two one-metre-high columns with a classic warrior on top. They entered into what looked like a war room of sorts, full of maps and figurines, charts and battle plans. There was a table at the end of the room where most documents lay, and several chairs where Strahd commanded his guests to sit. He took his place behind the table. Then, with an air that betrayed a long experience as general, he addressed his motives to invite the group:

"As you know, I am ruler of this country, and that means I must worry for my people. Right now, I have a problem between hands: a cruel rebellion that festers in the south and is gravely damaging my people. These rebels are led by one Ardonk Szeriezka and they respect nothing: they burn villages, kill women and children and even attack the churches of my people. I have dispatched several groups down there, but they have thus far been unable to control these despicable outlaws. They hide in the woods, attack furtively and wage a covert warfare that is, by all standards, unfair. My soldiers aren't accustomed to

the woods and thus can do battle only at their disadvantage. What I need is a special group, a commando that is not known to be affiliated to me, someone no one can identify. Well, that's where you come in. You are foreigners, no one can associate you with me, and besides, you are used to weapons, as your acceptance of my hospitality with sword and shield clearly shows. But let's waive that mild insult to me and my courtesy. Recently, these rebels have come more north than ever before. My commanders in the field have tried to contain them, and are currently holding the rebellion at the peaks near Zeidenburg, but a village past them to the north, Borgodyna, has been recently attacked. It is just south of the Dreadpass, but more importantly, it is at the gates of the Luna Gorge that flows between the Balinoks into Vallaki and Lake Zarovich. That point they must not pass!, but I don't even know yet who they really are, how many they are and where they're hidden. That's what I need you to find: if you manage to, kill or capture them, but it is of vital importance that you return with a report. Do not wage a battle if you cannot escape it, I need information more desperately than I need a group routed. Remember, who they are, how many they are and where is their base. Do you accept?"

They had listened attentively, and all of them seemed to receive the commission willingly. But they were going to play hard

"You said we would be rewarded."

"Yes, of course. What is your price?"

"Well, I was thinking 100 000 gold pieces for each", said Gregor.

Strahd didn't flinch. He merely looked compassionately to Gregor and said in a patronizing tone

"Now, now, you are definitely not being realistic. I was thinking more about 1000 each of you."

Gregor blushed. He knew he had ventured a silly amount. What Strahd was proposing was more or less what Eva had thought, and probably the others too, but

"We are going to need equipment", said Yuri.

"I can provide you with weapons. You'll be able to find almost anything you wish here, bar magical things of course. I've met many adventurers in my day, and they all expect me to have magical items. As if I would partake with them willingly, in a world where even the lowliest magical dagger is a rare preciousness. I've heard in Darkon it's quite another tale, but I wager that's more myth than reality, by any means."

"Well, then we can pick whatever equipment we wish?", asked Gregor, hopefully.

"You sure like to beg. I don't enjoy beggars over much, be warned. You can speak with my armourer, but I'll deduct whatever you take from him from a total of twelve hundred gold coins each of you. That's final."

"Very well, we accept", said Yuri, "but we are going to need a place to sleep."

"You are welcome to sleep in the castle. Besides, I wouldn't let you leave at this hour of the night, lest you be prey for wolves and worse. My chamberlain will take you to your rooms. Farewell, and have a good journey."

Session 26 – DM notes

Bran Martikova, the innkeeper, is taken from I6, but I changed his name: Bray sounded too English to me. This was to be a slow day for the PCs. There was nothing to do, and I had only one event scheduled: the visit to Castle Ravenloft, which would happen only at the end of the day. So, Gheata wasted the hours drinking to an alcoholic stupor. Eva did take the chance to keep his money, and to this day still hasn't returned it. Although his player knows this perfectly well, Gheata ignores that he was stolen. He had an inkling of doubt but the others talked him out of that.

The almost erotic scene between Gheata and Eva happened more or less as written. Eva's player had the idea of the whole situation and in the end it almost cost her. All her die rolls were bad enough to allow Gheata to control her and strip her above the waist. When at last she had success in her unarmed attacks, she got free only because Gheata's player chose not to respond. He told me afterwards that he had done it for consideration to the other player, for if he had played Gheata according to character, he would have raped Eva without much remorse.

When Gregor finds Gheata in the room, of course the player knew what had happened, but since Gregor couldn't imagine that, he gave the next best explanation.

When they entered the carriage and Eva carressed the horses, she was making use of her Handle Animal ability. But these horses are Nightmares instead, and so I only gave a clue that they were not subject to her skill. And for those who are not aware of Van Holtz's true persona, he really is Strahd in disguise.

The scene in the castle is important because it provides the whole motivation for the further stay of the PCs in the domain of Barovia. So, Strahd paints the rebellion with really cruel colours. As rightful rules, his request is legitimate and they don't suspect yet that he's as evil as he is. And even if they knew it, one can be evil and still be right sometimes. But of course, the real motive for them to accept his proposal was the material gain in it. My players are a fine bunch of mercenaries, most of the time.

Alex's campaign – sessions 27, 28, 29 and 30

Session 27

Starting Date: 3rd October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia

They spent almost two hours with the armourer, rummaging in the warehouses in the prowl for good weapons and armours. When at last they were satisfied that nothing could be found better, they were ready to retire to their rooms. Strahd had given instructions to the chamberlain to prepare four rooms, one for each one of them, but they were all two-bedded and the group didn't need that much hospitality. Yuri and Gregor advised that they should stay in pairs, but Gheata, as was becoming a habit, insisted to sleep alone. Of the other three, Gregor refused to sleep in the same room as Eva, still sore from her denials, as he put it, the previous nights. Eva was so abashed by the comment, that she decided to stay alone, lest she offend Yuri's feelings too.

The three rooms were ample and finely decorated. They had certainly been made for distinguished guests, but despite the appearance of luxury, it became evident, after some scrutiny, that it was all becoming a façade. The walls were showing their age, and almost seemed to murmur the many tragic tales they had seen in century upon century of lonely history. It seemed as if each stone echoed a sigh of anguish or stifled a cry of pure fear. The beds each had a fine silk canopy, and these at least seemed to have been renewed a few years ago. But the paintings in the walls were fading away, the rare statue in one of them had its features barely discernible and the fireplace seemed to have lost the grandeur of other times. But some of this loss was compensated by the fact that in each room it crept with a warm fire that barely disguised the coldness the castle exuded. They entered. At last, free from the presence of the Count, they could retire into themselves and let the thoughts they had been suppressing the whole evening take full force in their minds. They didn't speak among themselves. Each went to his own room and thought quietly to himself, but in each mind the feelings were similar: the Count inspired a feeling far stronger than unpleasantness. It was sheer fear! They felt their hearts gripped by some unnatural force, some power of will stronger than they had ever felt and more so, a sort of aura of command over the whole castle itself, over themselves, like a shadow that loomed always behind their back menacingly close, always threatening to attack. And now, alone in these rooms, with all those centuries of decay around them, with a window that gave onto a cliff more than a thousand feet high, they felt not only afraid, but... vulnerable, dated, as if by dawn they would be no more than a memory. The heavy stonework of the castle weighed on them as the boot of a giant upon one's chest. They had known the rumours, they had seen from the garlic in the village inn, from the cries of the people for poor Olya who had been abducted, from the way people averted their eyes from the castle that Evil should live there. They had probably even had more than an inkling that the Count might not be entirely natural, but they had never really admitted that. And now, they had marched to his abode. Was he everything that their panic now screamed at the ears of their mind? Was he really a feral predator of the night, and they, his hapless prey?

But no, the Count needed them, he had contracted them, he had called them for a service he needed.... or, how stupid they were! Did he really need a service from them, or did he just need them, and all else was merely a pretense, a ploy to attract them? And they had come easily!... Restlessly and unquietly, it's true, but they had dutifully come. Oh, this was surely going to be a long night!

They prepared for sleep without delay. The three rooms were all on the same side of a corridor, and Gregor and Yuri took the centre one. Their room had a door that communicated with Gheata's room, but Eva's had none of the kind. They contemplated the hypothesis of sleeping in their armours, but then decided they should at least have some proper rest, so they took them off. Yuri, however, was decided to stay awake, and he sat on a chair. Despite all his training, he was afraid... Due to all he had learnt in his studies, he was now painfully aware of all the danger signs they had ignored. He could not, by any means, fall asleep...

“Aaaaahhh!”

A woman's cry startled Gregor from his sleep. Yuri too, sat on the chair at the end of the bed, sprang up suddenly in surprise. He hadn't resisted the fatigue. Instinctively, he brought his hand to his neck, almost without noticing. Gregor exclaimed “But, that was Eva!”

Eva had gone to bed. Sensitive as she was, the atmosphere of the castle had pressed heavily on her. She had, as all the others, carefully locked and barred door and window, but she could not bring herself to sleep. She kept looking at the fire that provided some scant measure of comfort when, suddenly, she saw fine tendrils of mist seeping through the gap between the window and the stone. One picture formed in her mind: a malevolent creature entering her chamber in the form of a gaseous cloud. She gave a cry at once.

Meanwhile, Gregor had left his room in a hurry and knocked at Eva's door:

“What is it?”

“Help me!”

“Well, open the door!”

She unlocked the door and let Gregor enter the room.

“Look, that mist, is that natural?”

In his room, Gheata too couldn't sleep. He too saw the mist entering in his room, but he tested it with his hand and it seemed moist as normal fog. He inspected the window and noticed that erosion had forced its toll upon the stone: there was a strong wind outside and it was pushing the fog into the building. He went back to bed and tried to sleep.

Gregor and Eva saw the mist enter and dissipate slowly. After studying the windowsill, they reached the same conclusion as Gheata did, and making use of some towels that were carefully arranged on a chair, they tried the best they could to prevent the fog and the cold night air of entering the room. Gregor retired to his quarters, visibly upset at Eva's easy frightening. When he came back, Yuri had just sealed the window with the same idea and put another log in the fire.

The night passed slowly, at first silently, but then filled with interminable cries and the sound of wings.

“Bats!”

thought Yuri, after some carefully listening. Eva and Gheata knew them at once, used as they were at sleeping near or in the woods. It could be a bad omen and they pulled their sheets more and more protectively to their necks. They slept, at last.

4th October 751, 1st Night Before the New Moon

Gregor awoke with a sudden start, but it was only a bad dream. He looked at the window and saw the sun would be rising in no more than an hour. He awoke Yuri and prepared for his prayers. Eva and Gheata woke later, with the first rays of the sun. One hour after sunrise, they were all in the courtyard, looking around to see if someone was going to bring them breakfast. The Count may have been courteous and correct, but his servants, so unused at having guests of any kind, had forgotten any law of hospitality. Surely, they couldn't even understand the Count's instructions towards their guests, and so they now felt simply cast away in a place where they did not belong.

Three men, who on closer inspection looked like gypsies, were tending to the duties of the castle. In the middle of the yard they could see a well, and further away the stables. Gregor approached the gypsies and asked if they could take them back to the inn. The other man looked him up and said

“I can, for one shiny gold coin.”

Yuri thought this was extortion, and he vaguely remembered Strahd, or Van Holtz saying something of bringing and taking them back. But he was not exactly in the mood for a discussion. Still, it was very possible that the Gypsy was merely taking the chance to get one more coin. These people never lost one opportunity. Yuri asked

“How are you going to take us?”

“Oh, there's the carriage down there...”

“Go fetch it.”

“Very well, very well... just a minute sir.”

He made a sign to his two mates and they went to fetch the carriage. Gregor gave the other one a coin and the gypsy drove them back to the village.

Back in the village, Gregor went to speak with Donosty, and enquired about his training. The priest told him that Gregor should spend at least one more day trying to learn the basic rites. Two would be the ideal, but since he was in a hurry, one alone would do. Gregor agreed and spent that day in the church, drinking from Donosty's teachings. The other three went to the inn and prepared for the journey. Yuri bought food at an exorbitant price without even arguing. After all, that was the only place in the whole town, and there was not much he could do. After that, he spent the day in his room studying his book, with few breaks for nourishment.

Eva, on the other hand, spent the morning looking for a new dress and eventually found a seamstress that was willing, with some difficulty, to sell her one. It was not fashionable nor much beautiful, but if fit and Eva was in need of one.

Gheata slept for most of the day. When he woke up, he looked for the money he remembered leaving in his room, but found nothing. Angry, he descended the stairs and went menacingly to the innkeeper

“I was robbed. Who was in my room?”

The innkeeper replied in a very broken Mordentish that he didn't know, and that no one had been in Gheata's room. This became more and more aggressive, never believing the innkeeper's word but this, also losing his temper, just said that Gheata had been drunk and with the woman of his party. Then, realization came to Gheata's head and with a very rare apologetic word, he walked off and traded the inn for the outside. He went for a walk. It was not sunny, and soon it began to rain gently, but that didn't detain him. He enjoyed the rain, from time to time. As he was leaving Barovia by the way they had first come, he saw coming in the distance, from the woods to the north, two girls. They advanced slowly, almost painfully, tentatively stepping forward, trying not to fall. The taller one was naked, save for a mere cape she was sharing with the other one. But that was scant shelter from the weather and Gheata's avid eyes. The other one was not much better off. Her dress was torn in several places, bloody in sundry spots and it clearly revealed more than it had been its first intention. The girl had a full leg in view, and the upper part of one of her breasts. By her shoulder, the sleeve had fallen, ripped, it seemed, by feral teeth. Those meagre clothes, more like rags, told a grim tale about the two of them. Gheata approached, and could now clearly see that the girls were in great pain or shock, crying as they advanced. Gheata was at a loss about what to do. He controlled his instincts and decided the better he should do was to try to take the girls to safety. As he decided this, he looked around and saw a man, in his small plot of land, gazing stupefied at the girls. He shouted something to his wife and then bolted off in the direction of the inn, crying one single word repetitively as he tread by the streets. Gheata never understood what it was.

He could stand there no more. He walked resolutely to the poor lasses, but these, visibly afraid, held each other seeking instinctively what meek protection the other one could give. Gheata stopped, and with gentle words and gestures, as sensibly as he could, tried to convince them that he meant no harm. He gave one step forward, then another, and they knelt on the floor, begging for his mercy. He reached to them and said, in Mordentish, “I just want to help.”

To his surprise, the smaller girl, whom he assumed to be younger, replied in the same tongue

“Please, just do us no harm.”

The other girl seemed to have fainted. She was in a deep state of retirement, a kind of mental collapse Gheata had never seen. He took her, put his own cape around her and carried her in his arms. At first, he thought of taking them to the inn, but at the last minute, he decided the church should be a much better place to harbour them and took a back street that bordered on the fields and avoided the main one.

Meanwhile, the peasant had reached the inn's door. The sun was just sinking below the horizon.

Gregor was resting from the day's studies in the inn's common room with Eva when the man burst in crying

"Olya, Olya, she has returned."

He had no time to think before the commotion started. Immediately, some men stood up crying in frightened voices

"Vrolok! We must burn her"

and

"Witch, witch... bring the ropes, bring the torches!"

A few voices tried to bring the angry men to reason, but already one of them had left and began rallying the village to the cries of "Witch!" and "Vrolok!". Her name was not even spoken. The innkeeper tried all the best to pacify the mob that was forming, but his potent voice had little to no effect.

In his room, Yuri was alerted by the huge fracas downstairs, and as studying became impossible, he decided to come down and see what was happening. The crowd was now moving to the main square and converging around the scaffold, carrying their tools as improvised weapons. They looked for the girl (the peasant never spoke about the second one, which he had not time to recognize) and tried to decide where she could be and how she should be captured. Drawing the innkeeper aside, Gregor tried to understand what was happening

"It's Olya, she has come back. Ordinarily, that should be good news, but as she was abducted and taken to the castle, presumably, I'm afraid she must now be... one of them. But still, before we know for sure, we should never burn her."

"Aye, I'm with you. Let's do what we can to calm this populace".

"You do it. I'll come back in a second."

Bran went back to the inn, while Gregor, Yuri and Eva spread among the mass of people that had formed. Reasoning with them managed to send about a half home. After a while, Gregor could see there were only five really fanatical men who were bringing all the others, now a scant few eight. After appropriate conciliating words they were only six. The situation was now getting more controlled. The inn keeper arrived and this time he brought with him two younger but massive youths that imposed respect.

Gheata arrived to the church in a short time, but it was already dark. He knocked furiously, and Donosty came to open, surprised at the haste. As he opened the door, he looked puzzled at Gheata carrying a practically naked woman and a barely dressed one following him. Gheata gave him quick words

"I found them on the street. They are suffering. Can you help them?"

Donosty had not come without precautions. As he always did after the sun set, he opened the door with his holy symbol, a clove of garlic and a flask of holy water by him. He looked at the girls and easily recognized them.

"Go home now, Gheata, I'll stay with them."

Gheata looked puzzled for an instant

"But, I brought them here, I want them to be safe."

"I said what I said, Gheata. This is no business of yours, and I must tend to them. There are grave matters here."

As Gheata returned to the village, Bran Martikova had climbed to the scaffold and was trying to calm the mob with sound words, but they were proving futile. Gregor joined him and tried to show them that they had no proofs that the girl was a vampire and that no innocent should be murdered without full certainty of their guilt. But once again, these words fell on deaf ears. More people were joining now, as the pacifists' efforts were turning to naught. Gheata joined Eva and Yuri in the confusion, and drawing them aside, asked what was going on.

"They found a girl they claim it's Olya, and they are going to burn her. They are just trying to organize a search, but Gregor and the innkeeper are trying to stop them."

"I see... Well, I met two girls a while ago in pretty bad shape, at the entrance of the village. I took them to the Father at the church. Do you think it's them?"

"Yes... most probably."

Eva interrupted.

"And did you leave the priest alone with them?"

Gheata simply shrugged.

"He wanted to do so, and he was well protected.... I trust."

Inconspicuously, Yuri made a signal to Gregor for him to join them again. He left Bran leading the harangue and came to know what Yuri wanted.

"Gheata here says he found the girls, and took them to the temple."

"Well, then we can pretend they have gone somewhere else, and lead them off on the wrong track. That'll give us time to find the truth."

"It's well thought. Do that. We'll then make them taste their own medicine."

Gregor climbed to the scaffold again and in his most persuasive voice he cried.

"Hear me!, hear me!. A friend of mine here says he saw the girl. She's gone to the castle! Leave the square then and go after her!"

But he was immediately cut.

"Liar! She was **coming from** the castle, not going there."

Gregor's bluff backfired. Gheata climbed the scaffold and lacking the means to express himself in a manner they would understand, he simply drew his sword and made a horrible face. Gregor added.

"See, she was scared by him."

But the mob only grew more vicious and angry, and one of them threw a lit torch upon the scaffold where Gheata and Gregor stood. Reacting instinctively, the latter jumped to their middle and in a mighty swing of his sword he hit so violently the man that had thrown the torch that he fell to the ground unconscious. Then, it all happened very fast. Gregor and one of the innkeeper's companions tried to hold Gheata before he could do more damage. Meanwhile, the innkeeper and the other young man tried to hold the angry men, barring them from reaching Gheata. But one broke off through the barrier and with his scythe managed to graze Gheata. His reaction was so powerful that he slashed the man to the ground. He didn't move, and if he was alive, he'd be mauled for life.

Meanwhile, Yuri and Gregor focused now on trying to save the wounded, while Eva watched passively and the innkeeper managed at last to stifle the anger that crawled like wildfire. Truth be told, Gheata's imposingness with his mighty sword instilled much fear in them, but it was an uneasy truce at best. Profiting of this transitory calmness, Yuri signalled to everybody that it was the dead of night and they were outdoors, and that

meant very unsafe ground. The people complied and all went back to the inn, save one of the innkeeper's assistants. That one followed to the church.

In the inn, emotions toned down a lot. Gregor and Yuri managed to revive the two fallen peasants, and this made the locals not look so harshly upon them. The air was still tense, but a round of spirits eased them. Half an hour later, the stout man came back with Donosty, and the two girls with him. The locals blessed themselves instinctively and then awed as they understood that another girl had come back too

“But.... that's Irina!”

Donosty did not lose any time. He said sternly

“These girls were brought to me at the beginning of the night. Surely, when they reached the village it was still day. That alone should have you convinced, but since you're so hard-headed, here!”

and he performed in front of their eyes all the common sense precautions against vampires: he put garlands of garlic around their necks, sprayed them with holy water and ostensibly showed them his holy symbol. Nothing, they did not react in any special way. A cheer erupted from the tables and another full round passed through the tables. Gregor went to the kitchen and cooked a special celebrative dinner, and what had been a gloomy tragic night soon turned into a joyous and memorable feast, like few others that village had seen in the last decade.

After the meal, Donosty drew Gregor aside, and Yuri joined them, but Gheata chose to follow Irina instead. He addressed her in his most gentle way which, by other people's standards, was still overtly direct.

“So, you are the burgomaster's daughter? People here think you killed your father!”

This blatant accusation, as it seemed to her, almost threw Irina off her self-control. She looked around for a place to hide, but Gheata continued

“I believe that only someone very stupid or very smart would come back to the village after killing someone and since I don't believe you to be either, I think it was not you who did it.”

Irina was puzzled. Gheata's words were shocking, but it seemed that, after all, he wanted to be on her side. But how little did he understand of other people's minds. Where else could she go, even if she had really killed her father? Where else could she escape? For good or bad, the village was the only point she could return to, and there she'd have to endure the anguish of being exposed some day. Irina just looked up at Gheata, uncomfortably. What else did he have in his mind?

“I thank you for your support, but I don't see the point of this conversation.”

“No? What will you do with your life? Donosty told me you have no more family, and if you stay, they'll burn you sooner or later.”

She cringed at the thought.

“I don't know, maybe I'll stay at the church for a while, like Olya.”

“You know about your life, but this village is not a safe place for you to stay. More so with a bunch of guys who get violent so easily.”

“What do you mean? This is my land, I don't know any other!”, she blurted out as she began to weep.

“After I left the temple, when I reached the square they were gathering a crowd to go after you and the other and skin you both.”

“Please, stop! You’re making me upset. You look like a brute speaking!” her voice trailed off, and she added in a low tone

“But I believe you, it has happened before.”

Gheata held her arms and almost shouted at her

“You have to be a brute to survive!”. Seeing the alarm in her eyes, he added in a rare soft tone

“I lost my family too. I know what it is.” He paused for a couple of seconds and added, warmly

“You can come with us, if you wish. I’ll teach you to use a weapon for your defence.”

Irina couldn’t say a word. She just stood there, weeping. She managed to say, between sighs

“But I’m no brute, I don’t like violence. I just want my father back...” and she broke off crying even more.

Gheata put his hand on her shoulder compassionately. And in a tender voice few people had ever heard from him he said

“I too wanted my sister back, but we have to go on living... and surviving.”

Irina looked up at him, her wet eyes beautiful and innocent as a doe’s. She wanted to believe him, that he could be her saviour and lead her away from a village where she had so dark memories. She seemed to recall episodes from her past, things that up to now had been inexplicable to her, blackouts she had felt now and then, and murmured:

“But it was really me... and that is what is horrible!”

This phrase left Gheata totally astonished. He clearly hadn’t expected the rumours to be true, that this frail young girl could really have done it. He stood there, immobile, mouth agape, looking at her, not knowing what to do. He was just trying to figure how and why she had done it, and he couldn’t understand. He didn’t even move when Irina left him and climbed the stairs to weep alone. This had taken a turn he really did not expect.

Speaking in a conspiring tone, so that only Gregor and Yuri could listen, Donosty began “There is a grave story behind all of this. I want you to learn because you can be of help. And perhaps you can be helped too. That young girl, Irina, is the daughter of the burgomaster.”

Yuri watched her carefully across the room, speaking to Gheata. She matched the size of the footprints, and was probably the girl he had been chasing in the forest after her father’s death.

“This girl is under a heavy guilt now, and she feels horrible about it. She was the one who killed her father, but she doesn’t quite remember it. She claims she just saw herself there, holding the dagger in her hand, looking at her dead father still pierced in his heart. She says she lost all reasoning and began running, running without direction.”

Yuri exclaimed with a stern punch on his hand

“The dagger! I never liked that dagger! Gosh, that must have been what bewitched Irina. How frightening that such evil things exist.”

Donosty nodded and mused for a second, and then continued:

“She entered the forest and after a while, she could not find her way back. Then, she was followed by wolves the whole evening and through the night, wolves that on occasions

arrived to bite her, but she could always escape until she found a cave, a few hours before dawn. She entered, but the wolves remained outside. She spent that day and night there, until just before dawn, Olya came to her, almost mute and in shock. She only said "Let's go home", but in such a state of apathy that poor Irina felt for her life. She awaited the morn and then came to the brink of the cave and saw no wolves. More, she climbed to the rock that formed its roof and from there she located Barovia again. They had to dare the cold, the rain and the immodest, at best, attire in which she arrived at my temple. I'd better not describe it here, but suffice it to say that not even a prostitute would dress like that. Irina carried Olya with her the whole way, a heavier burden than only her lithe frame would imply. She depressed Irina and she constantly feared that the wolves would arrive to finish their meal. At length, they reached the village and that's when Gheata found them."

"And what can you tell us about Olya?"

wanted to know Eva.

"Olya is perhaps even a darker matter..."

"Why?"

"Whatever happened to her, she doesn't remember. There's a blackness in her mind, a whole period she has forgotten. All she remembers is a cold stone chamber, being naked on a bed and has an extreme repulsion for men. Something happened to her that was very, very strong and overpowered her mind. I fear she's lost for us now.... one more to join the ranks of the Lost Ones."

He shook his head sadly.

"I'll be taking care of her in the church, of course, and see if I can improve her condition. But I have no hopes.... but about Irina.... there's something you should know, that perhaps will even be useful to you."

"What?"

"That girl has something. I have suspected this for some time, there were tales, murmurs and soft words about her."

"Yes, but what?!"

"Well, she blacks out now and then, and then things happen... and she doesn't remind a thing! And when we were at the church, a while ago, she got frightened with something and suddenly the shelf behind me fell to the floor. She doesn't remember this, but I saw a ... how shall I put it, a ball, some wave of energy coming from her and hitting the wall."

"Have you thought that could be magic?" asked Yuri.

"Yes, that's precisely what I thought."

"I see... I had heard stories of that before, but I had never thought they could exist. But now, it seems it's true, there are such people around with innate talent for magic."

"Look", said Donosty, "Irina shouldn't stay here. Sooner or later people are going to talk, and they'll begin venturing that Irina killed the Burgomaster. That this is true they must not know at all! They would never understand it was not really her who did it, so you can not give them chance to suspect of her. The best thing she could do now is to disappear completely from Barovia and their memories."

"I think she could come with us", said Gregor. "What do you think, Yuri?"

"It seems well, by me. She could even become very valuable for us. How old is she?"

"She's fifteen."

"Almost a woman, then. Very well, she can come with us."

“It’s set then... do you leave tomorrow?”

“I’m afraid so.... we don’t have many conditions to stay here... and, quite frankly, we’ve done everything we had to do here.”

“Can you give us any advice, Donosty? For the journey?” asked Gregor, suddenly anxious at the departure.

“Hmmm... not much, I’m afraid. You take the Old Svalich Road, whence you came here, and follow it straight until Vallaki. After Vallaki, you follow the road straight to Krezk. It’s a three days ride and unlike the journey to Vallaki, it will not be through a forest road: you’ll be very much inside the Balinoks, within dark passes and deep gorges. It’s high and dangerous up there, so get prepared for mountain travel in Vallaki.”

He hesitated a small while and then he added

“About that journey to Vallaki...”

“Yes?” inquired Gregor.

“You’ll have to go through Svalich Pass. You’ll probably reach it by the mid-afternoon if you get out early, but you should take still about four hours going through. It ends at about one hour from Vallaki. Do whatever you will, do not Cross Svalich Pass by night. Do not! I shudder to tell you this, but it is ... haunted, to say the least.”

“I’ll heed your words, Father” agreed Gregor, “but now, if you could only tell me, what is Vallaki like?”

“Vallaki? Hmmm... It’s mainly a fishing town. Much larger than this forsaken village here. Its inhabitants live off their catches on the Zarovich Lake all the year round but curiously, one thing that stands out in Vallaki is the number of bookshops there are. In a country where most of the populace cannot read, it makes you wonder, doesn’t it?”

“And what about Krezk? What do I do there?”

“When you arrive to Krezk, go to see the Harbinger of the Rosy Dawn, at the Temple of the First Light. That is High Priest Samuel Valentin. He’ll be more than happy to confirm you in the Church and give you full status as our brother. And now, Gregor, good luck on your travels. May I see you yet some day as a full cleric of the Morninglord.”

As Gregor prepared to move away, Yuri, who had been wondering for most of the final part of the conversation, turned to Donosty and asked him.

“What kind of dagger is this, after all, that made a daughter kill her own father?”

“Yuri”, was the solemn reply, “there are mysteries in Barovia that should rather remain hidden for ever.”

They separated and a few minutes later, it was the turn of Bran Martikova to come to speak to Gregor

“I mean you no ill-will. I thank you for what you did tonight, saving those two girls and preventing the blood shed. But the people here are suspicious, and they don’t like strangers at all. They no longer consider you guilty nor do they keep hard feelings at you, but still they think you’re too violent and quick-tempered, and perhaps it would be better for us all if you left Barovia as soon as possible... that means tomorrow morning.

Remember, strangers are not well liked in Barovia, much less so those that commune with the Count...”

Session 27 – DM notes

The PCs got to spend the night in Castle Ravenloft. I wanted this to be safe for them, but not uneventful. Even though they shouldn't be endangered, I thought they should be afraid. The only thing I did for this was to allow natural fog to enter their rooms. They imagined all the rest. I'm not against playing with what my players know even when their characters don't.

For this day, there was one event scheduled: the return of the missing girls Olya and Irina. As has been said before, Olya had been abducted and Irina had run away after murdering her father. The whole story regarding the girls is this.

Olya was abducted by Strahd a week ago. However, she was not meant to sate his thirst for blood, but rather his hunger for carnal pleasure. My precedent for this is I, Strahd, where he gets one night of sex with one of his burgomasters, Dagmar Olavnaya. In my story, Strahd is bored and wants some pleasure. Olya is taken for that, and left locked in a room of the castle... clotheless. He also shallow feeds on her now and then.

Over the week, Olya's miserable life was dedicated only to Strahd and she eventually failed a madness check. She can not recover for herself and there is no one in Barovia who is skilled enough to do it. Since the PCs will not take her anywhere where she could be cured, the net effect is that Olya will remain a Lost One victim to Strahd. But I'm going too fast. First, the connection with Irina.

When she escaped, Strahd saw he could play a cruel game with the villagers. He watched her during the whole night and controlled the animals of the forests to frighten but not to kill her. Revelling in her fear, he saw as she found a cave a couple of hours before dawn and collapsed there, exhausted. She slept there for most of the day. On the following night, Strahd took Olya with him and led her to the cave where Irina was. He left both there, telling Olya that she was free. Of course they both went back to Barovia as fast as they could after day break. Irina shared her cape with the poor Olya, who was still naked, for Strahd didn't lose any of lusciousness with his undeath, and she herself had her dress torn enough to reveal her legs and shoulders.

This was to entice my players and also provoke the villagers with the usual association of sex with evilness and witchery. I admit, and it must be obvious by now, I like to suggest sex in my games. On the other hand, I have been amply influenced by all the art by Clyde Caldwell and Larry Elmore.

The idea with these two is that when they arrive to Barovia is to cause serious agitation. The PCs should have a chance at seeing them first in order to offer them some protection before the crazed mob took hold of them. For that, I had an encounter set to draw one of the players to the outside of the inn, but it wasn't needed as Gheata decided to take a walk. He was the first to see the girls, and at the same time a villager saw them too and gave the alarm. Irina, the burgomaster's daughter, is smart enough to speak Mordentish because I wanted her to be in the party as arcane magic support and that would ease communication.

When the news got to the men in the inn, mob psychology took over and they decided to burn the girls. Bran Martikova is, in my version of Barovia, the most or second most enlightened person in the village (the other being the priest) and he tries to calm people

down. But even imposing and something of an authority as he is, he's powerless to detain the angry people. It is up to the PCs to stop the wrong execution with a bit of Bran's help. The players really tried to make a good plan and give ideas on how to stop the mob, but Gregor's player fumbled with his bad diversion excuse. True to his character, Gheata tried to solve things with violence instead of reasoning which nearly cost them a bloodshed.

During the whole time, the people ignored that Irina had come back too. In general, no one knew that Irina was the murderer of Dimitar, save probably the butler and Bran, so Irina was not the problem. For them, she had left out of fear, been lost in the woods and come back at last. Although that does not explain why no one went to search her that day. When Gheata told her that people thought she was the murdered, he was lying. There had been some rumours, but they were not widespread. He was merely intimidating her. But he really believed she was innocent.

All in all, it was an entertaining session.

Session 28

Starting Date: 4th October 751 / 1st October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia / Irvanika

With this last statement, Bran Martikova broke off, leaving Gregor worried. It had looked vaguely as a threat of some uncertain kind. Yes, perhaps leaving truly was the best thing to do.

5th October 751, Night of the New Moon

In the morn, they were ready. They left early determined to reach Vallaki as soon as possible, though Donosty's ominous words about Svalich Pass didn't leave their minds. The morning was filled with a hazy dense fog of a milky white, and as they slowly paced the square, the sound of the horses' steps echoed eerily within the mist, distant and distorted. They sounded like the footsteps of ghosts and horses of distant times.

But it was only an impression. The fog soon cleared enough to let them see the whole square, and in the corner with the exit way of the village, there they saw a woman waiting. As they approached, they noticed it was more a girl than a woman, and they recognized Irina. She almost spoke no word. She held a mare by the reins and held a sack in her hand. At her side, she had a short sword. She said

"I've come to go with you. I've taken some things from my father's, what I could find most useful, though I'm not sure about it... I've brought a sword and a silver dagger, if that's useful..." she added doubtfully.

They welcomed her and let her ride in her midst, but no one spoke much. The day was cold and depressing. Uncertain that they would notice the mysterious fog that had

surrounded the village at all times for the last four hundred years, they drank their potions then and there and trotted on until the village disappeared and gave way to the forest's ground. They continued without a word until they passed the gates they had seen before, on the road to Vallaki. Ominously, they heard them close shut with a loud languorous clang, following a long, dolorous screech. That sound sent shivers up their spines, but they felt more or less relieved that Barovia, and Castle Ravenloft, were now behind them. But, what would the road bring?

It didn't bring much. The day passed absolutely uneventfully, save for bands of birds that high up in the sky seemed to accompany them. Try as they might, they could not find what kind of birds they were, so they went on until at mid afternoon, the forest on their left side disappeared completely, gave turn to hard rock which a short while after became a veritable wall: the road now cut right in the middle of two tall cliffs which greeted them with distorted, dark and menacing shapes: this had to be Svalich Pass!

"Donosty told me it would take about four hours to cross the pass", said Gregor discouragingly. "Perhaps we should camp here".

"Not so soon", countered Yuri. "Eva, Gheata, do you think we have any chance of getting through this at double pace so that we reach the other side before night? Do you think the horses will hold?"

Eva looked at the priest in a rather negative tone. "I doubt Yuri, and we can't risk killing the horses. Heavy as we are, we'd have to leave everything behind and still it would take us a long walk until Vallaki".

Gheata was of the same opinion.

"Well, then we camp", Yuri said, shrugging his shoulders.

They looked for a place to stay and, a fair distance before the pass, found a cave that was large enough to hold all of them. They lit a large fire at the entrance and mounted watches. Mercifully, nothing disturbed them that night.

6th October 751, 2nd Night After the New Moon

The next day, they went through the pass. The rock was tall on both sides, and the passage narrow enough to give room only to a cart and one or two more people abreast. There were loud sounds of birds occasionally and their echoes bouncing on the walls scared them more than once. There were many small caves up above, and Gheata even noticed some nests even higher, but nothing else disturbed them that morning. By noon or a bit after, they finally left the Pass and could see Vallaki in the distance, no more than an hour away. Still farther, a large blue expanse of water glimmered under the sun's rays. That was Barovia's renowned Lake Zarovich. For long times, this had been the favourite spot for Barovian nobles to pass their holidays. A favourite vacation spot for the high classes that came here to delight in the pleasures offered by the lake, the mountains and who could even find good game in the small forests nestled on the other bank. These wealthy families had dotted the landscape with large mansions and summer houses. And within all this prosperity, Vallaki was born and grew fair.

Alas, Barovian nobility had been almost extinct for a hundred years now, and all these houses were left in abandon, decaying, silent testimonies of grander days, grander but

long gone. Vallaki, though, persisted. Its population dedicated itself to fishing and the Lake continued to reward its workers as always it had, with steady catches all year long. To some extent, Vallaki's now decaying past gave it a charm that even attracted more people, and so it was one of the most important cities of Barovia.

As the group entered the city, they came to know its geography quite rapidly. There was a lake front street, which was the centre of the city, where the oldest houses crowded. After, came a long row of bars and taverns and then a beach that however was deserted of people, due to the cold and the wind. Instead, it was filled with fishing boats and drying nets. Behind this street, some low hills rose and there stood the high town, where richer and more recent houses stood. On the western side of the hills, there was an old Citadel of the prehistoric times of Barovia that had been converted into the ruling centre of Vallaki, the residence of the Burgomaster Nicolai Ionelus.

They had almost the whole of the afternoon ahead of them, and Gregor and Yuri chose to look for bookshops, where they could find interesting things. They found them in the rear streets behind the lake front, nestled on the foothills of the high town. They watched the books in exhibition at the window, but not finding anything that stirred their attention, they decided to enter and study the shelves more carefully. Gregor was looking for mediunic and spiritual matters, books about the supernatural, but was less than disappointed: the only thing he could find were treatises on religions.

Yuri, on the other hand, looked for arcane writs, but of that, there was veritably nothing. He found, though, an Atlas that he thought might be useful. He turned to the book seller and bought it for one gold piece, and then asked if he had something more... suited to magicians. The bookseller inspected him closely and made him a few questions about the Art, as he called it. Yuri responded almost evasively, and tried to sprinkle his answers with things he had gleamed from Kir's book. At last, the seller was satisfied that he knew at least something of the Arcane and so that his interest might be genuine enough to buy him a book. So, he led him and Gregor to a small room whose door was hidden behind a shelf and there they saw new stacks of precious carefully arranged books. They were not many, but they all looked special. There was a small table, and a man was already sitting there, piling a few books and looking for some more. Yuri read their spines: all the books in the room were dedicated to the Magic Arts.

The man greeted them warmly and Yuri and Gregor responded and studied him. He was tall, with a long white beard and bald in the top of his head. The hair, though, grew on the rest of it, and fell down the back in disarrayed curls. He wore a simple black tunic, with a cord around the waist, and simple leather sandals.

* * * * *

01-10-751, 7th Night of the Waning Moon

Nikola woke up early, determined to find a job that very same day. He wandered through Ingelberg intent for the whole morning, but nothing could be found that suited him. At last, when the sun was reaching its zenith, he found a house with a brass plaque hanging

by the door, with the lettering **Eberhardt van Kruger – Financier**. Nikola decided to try his luck.

Eberhardt van Kruger was an old distant man. He looked crippled from age and moved with difficulty. His eyes were deep and seemed acutely vigilant, like a hawk's. But the man was very correct and professional. He seemed interested in Nikola and admitted that he could well use another assistant. This was music to Nikola's ears. He was to work as a simple clerk, responsible for noting the deposits that people came to make in Van Kruger's house. He was also to check the credit notes that were presented to the House. As a clerk, he should be able to pay them, but being new, Van Kruger decided that Nikola wouldn't have that responsibility yet. There was another clerk in the house and that should be the only one with access to current coffers. In parallel, Nikola was also responsible for some administrative tasks of the house. Everyday, he was to receive the fret-boy of the grocer's, Finn, who would bring fresh milk, bread and vegetables. Occasionally, he would bring other kinds of merchandise that the house would need. The job appealed to Nikola. It didn't demand much of him and above all, it was the best pay he could find so far: 15 copper pieces a day. However, it still didn't cover his expenses with lodging and food.

02-10-751, 3rd Night Before the New Moon

The next day, Nikola went eager to his work. There was not much movement, but he had still much to learn and he never felt the time pass slowly. Eberhardt van Kruger didn't usually spend his time in the clerks' room, so Nikola was alone with the other man. Early in the morning, the boy Finn came. They exchanged brief words and presented themselves. Finn was a 17-year old skinny lad, fair-skinned and almost reddish blond hair. He was very outgoing and nice, causing a feeling of easiness in Nikola. The next day, Finn tried to know Nikola a bit better and began asking him a few questions. Soon enough, he was at ease with Nikola as if he had always known him and began telling him the rumours that ran the street. He told him of Eberhardt's bad fame in Ingelberg. "He's a correct sort, you know, but he's so selfish! Cripes, you couldn't trust him to help his mother. He's greedy and wants all for himself, always alone there in his house. You never see him party, you never see him giving someone a gift. And yet, he's rich! At least, people say he is... Filthy rich. Mind you, he's an honest fellow. He'll always pay you what you're due, but not a single penny more! Besides, he spends as little as possible. See what I bring him? There's always yesterday's bread and one or two fresh loaves. He eats the dried one. He used to give it to his employees too, but they complained so much that he had to allow for something fresh for them. But you'll never see him eat meat. Most of the time, not even fish. Well, you get the idea. He never comes out either. I well trust I'm the only link he keeps with the outside world... besides you and the other clerk, of course. But then, I guess his illness doesn't help. Oh well, he's not a nice person at all, but fortunately, I've never found any of his clerks to be like him." Nikola found the information useful, but did not want to delve deep into a conversation about his employer. Instead, he asked about the town "Oh, there's mighty interesting things happening here, you know? There are talks up and down about some mysterious happenings by the river. You know, now and then, there are bodies that come up there, coming from the sewers. There's marks on them, you know?"

Like teeth! They say it is people that fall in the river from the canal. That they drown and then the rats bite them. If they're alive when they fall and they try to swim, those bloody accursed rats will bring them down and feast on them until they're done. Those we never see again. The lucky ones are those that float down just barely touched. I bet it must be better to drown than be eaten alive, but then again, that's just me!

You know, only yesterday another one came up. He should be around 20, all filled with small cuts here and there, some chunks of flesh missing and all that. The rats, they say. Just between you and me, I think it must be a bit more than that.

He made a protection sign and then added

"Well, I have to go. See you tomorrow again."

Over the next week, Nikola grew accustomed to his work and to the endless prattle of Finn. He came to be a welcome visit every morning. The first clerk, meanwhile, ceased to come, but Nikola never asked why. On his third day, Van Kruger came to spend the afternoon in Nikola's room. He sat in a high chair in the back, immersed in the gloom of the room, and observed, silently. He did the same the next day, and then the following day. He was usually silent, asking few questions about Nikola's life, but on that day, he addressed Nikola in a curious tone.

"Nikola, my boy, you are diligent and I like that, but I worry for you. I've been watching you and I notice you don't have friends..."

Nikola gasped, trying to guess at where Eberhardt wanted to go

"Look at me... crippled, old, alone. Do you want to be like me? I'm rich, yes. But do you think that is all?"

Nikola stared, trying to conceal all his expression.

"You have a gambler's face, Nikola. You must be cold, as I also am. But look at me, and think of this as a warning. You wouldn't like it here, and I can at least tell you how this happened to me. It's up to you to decide if you want to come the same way or not.

I'm rich because I was clever and diligent. And I was always clever and diligent because I must! I was ugly in my youth, not deformed but ugly. At any rate, women were never attracted to me. You must know what pangs we feel when we're young, when love courses in our veins and has no outlet, no one to whom to be given. I was that! People in general thought of me as distant and arrogant because I could read and knew arithmetic, and they avoided me. But women, they mocked at me! How daring of them... And they mocked at my lack of grace, at my insecurity among them, at the holes in my shoes and at my patched trousers. They mocked at my working so much. And despised me.

You know what one feels after a time? That it's useless. If that's the way it is, I'll show them. And that's what I did. I worked hard, very hard. I was young but I had strength in me. I worked with late Mr. Franz Gillingher. And he taught me a lot. I earned money, good money even. I dressed better, but I found I still couldn't mingle with the others of my age. I discovered I simply did not know how: I didn't know their words, couldn't understand their talks, didn't find their jokes funny and in short, had no past history with them. No one knew of me, what pleased me and what made me laugh. And I, I knew nothing of them, what were their interests, what were their social codes. I had been too far apart for too much time. And when I tried to laugh, I found I couldn't. It wasn't in me any more. I had grown sombre, cold.

And then, something happened of strange. Women came to me at last. That was like a beam of light, but it ended all too soon. I was intelligent, I could see! When they were

with me, it was not at me that they looked, it was not with me they wanted to talk or be with. They were always expecting some gift, some present, some favour. They could be with me or with my dead uncle, it would mean the same to them, as long as they got the money! Yes, now I was rich, no more patches and dirty clothes! I was ugly still, but it didn't matter! Now, I was acceptable, now I could have their company... for a price. Oh, but I have my dignity, Nikola. When you're poor as I was, that's the only thing you have. And I always made sure that the money I earned did not steal it from me. I always kept my honour. I sent them all away. As soon as I understood their intent and could learn what their ilk was, I shut myself from them for ever more. I shut myself from the world. So, that's the world, is it? Well, it won't drag me in. If now I have to pay for what was denied me when I should have had it, if even then I will not be considered an equal, then why try? And I decided I would only be a spectator, if at all. A rather uninterested spectator of the comedy of vice and virtue that is our society. Instead, I'm the one that society will come to to feed its needs and lewd desires. I'll give them the instrument of their decadence: the money they covet so much. But at the same time, they'll feed me with it. They want indulgence, they'll have it, but they'll have to pay too. Years passed. I grew distant and fed ever anon the pit I had dug. They did the same too. But I tell you, when you're young, this is a choice you think you can make and endure for the rest of your life. Money is power and if you have the money that controls the society around you, then you're the be all end all of that society. You're important, you matter, even if you're not liked, you are the most vital point in their lives. But age teaches some truths that are concealed from young eyes. You feel lonely, and loneliness is more difficult to endure than poverty. Oh, so much more. You don't know what it is to be alone for years and years in a row. Decade after decade. And now, I regret so much that choice I've made that I'd like to go back and have a friend at least, someone to talk to. Alas, it's too late now. So all I can do is to tell others my testimony. Avert their eyes from the path of perdition. You, Nikola, you seem to be on that path. Learn from me, and avoid it. Trust the people around you or at least give them a chance. And don't try to do everything alone."

That day, Nikola considered carefully what he had heard. It had been a strange confession, but it all made sense when, by the end of the week, on the 8th of October, Eberhardt came to him with a proposal.

"Nikola, I am old and crippled. I can not write for long any more, and I want to write my memories. I trust I don't have much time in this world already, and I need your help. Will you work as a personal secretary for me? You'll keep your duties as a clerk, and on top of it, I want you to write for me. I pay you 3 gold coins per day and you can sleep and eat here in the house."

Nikola accepted without difficulty. The following day, Finn invited him to go to the pub at night. At first he was reluctant, but then he decided to go. For Nikola, it seemed like ages since the last time he had been in a pub having fun with other people. They weren't his friends yet, but they were good drinking companions.

09-10-751, 1st Night of the Waxing Moon

The next day Nikola went to work a bit later. He was not with a hangover, but he was nearm to it. But Finn insisted with him to go out that night again, saying there was one he wanted Nikola to meet.

That one was Nancy Butler, a dark-haired beauty as few Nikola had ever seen. She was charming and slightly shy, but it was obvious to everyone that there was some chemistry between the two. That week Nikola went out with the group a few more times, more out of interest for Nan than for anything else.

16-10-751, 3rd Night Before the Full Moon

Finn came suddenly to Nikola, later than usual.

“You don’t know what happened! Nan is missing. And another boy from the docks too!”

“Missing? How missing?”

“Missing! Gone! Nobody has seen them! She didn’t come to the pub last night” (Nikola hadn’t gone either, he now remembered. The excesses early in the week had left him exhausted and he couldn’t indulge any more in those long nights) “and today we went to look for her at her house, but she didn’t sleep there. She’s missing, completely!”

Nikola didn’t know what to say. Finn, with his head completely lost, quit him and went to give his news to someone else. The police, perhaps. But then again, the police only worked when the victim was known or rich, and neither was the case with Nancy Butler. Nikola felt his usual self taking over. His chronic detachment, his killing of his emotions, his blunt spirit conspired to tell him that Nan would appear, eventually, and she wasn’t that important to him yet. After all, he had known her for a week at most. There were people more suited to look for her and worry about her than himself. He went back to his work and shut Nan out of his mind.

19-10-751, Night of the Full Moon

Nikola twitched uncomfortably, keeping his eyes closed. It was morning already and he felt the light entering the room, but he felt something strange. The bed sheets seemed to be moist, and they made a noise of having been wet with something denser than water... something that made them cripple. He opened his eyes and sat in his bed. As he looked at himself, he could barely muffle a scream. The sheets were red all over! He threw them down and looked at himself. He was naked, completely naked, and he had wounds all over his body. Small wounds, true, but he too was all drenched in blood. No way could that amount of blood have come all from him. He sat immobile for some minutes. He didn’t remember anything at all. That last three days had been as normal as the others before them. He had gone to work, eaten, written for Eberhardt and gone to bed. Only that his morning his awakening was all that different. His first thought was to conceal what had happened, whatever that had been. He washed himself and the sheets. Then, he noticed his clothes were draped on a chair and he put them on. He checked outside the door. It was unlocked. There were some blood drops on the floor from the door to the bed, but they were not footprints. There were some drops in the corridor too, but they disappeared a bit after. Decided to find out if possible if something strange had happened, he went to the clerks’ room as nonchalantly as possible and waited for Finn.

He didn't disappoint him. As usual, he brought not only the food of the day, but also the news of the day:

"Have you heard the howls last night? People are frightened today! Everybody speaks of it."

"Erm... yes, I heard. Dreadful". Prudence commanded that Nikola lied.

"You know, a man has been found just outside town. Ghastly sight it was, with his entrails all out. Ripped from top to bottom, long rakes of long claws quite visible... People say it can only be one thing..."

"Werewolf", completed Nikola absently. His words were just what Finn was thinking, but Nikola was rather echoing his inner thoughts, his comprehension of what had happened to him.

"So, it is revealed at last", he thought to himself. All since Tersis' strange measures towards him after the wolf's assault, almost two months ago now, Nikola had suspected he might have been infected. And now, it appeared, that was confirmed. He answered only absently to what Finn said, nodding here and there, but his mind was somewhere else entirely.

That day passed slowly. He was distracted, and fortunately Eberhardt was not in the room, for he made many mistakes that day. None were serious, but he was eager to go back to his room and be alone.

That night, he pondered well on what he'd do. This had just been the first night of the full moon. Two more he'd have to endure. He remembered those dreadful three days last month, when his tempers were way out of measure. His insults to everybody, his untempered violence brought upon him and the others a lot of troubles, but at least he didn't kill any one. He couldn't quite say that, this time. He locked his window. He locked his door securely. He hid the key beneath his carefully laid clothes. He just wanted to be sure that if he could leave the room in the fore coming night, at least he'd be aware of it in the morning.

20-10-751, First Night After the Full Moon

Nikola awoke. He was still in bed. It was Sunday and he didn't have to work.

All seemed normal, the door closed, his clothes undisturbed. But his mind was not. A dream still wavered vividly. Every minute detail still reminisced in his mind with absolute clarity. And it disturbed him.

He recalled his nightly visions. He was in a room with sand in the floor. A round cage of about five or six metres of diameter stood around him. It was an arena. He was naked, and in the middle of the arena, two more girls were with him, young and also naked. They were engaging in bloody sex acts, in a blatant and quite violent sado-masochistic orgy. They were mutually torturing each other with whips, chains, spikes and lit candles. Black curtains hang from the outside of the cage but they let see a figure completely cloaked in red and black sitting in a very high chair. The figure had a whip and commanded to the three naked victims what they should do, how they should touch each other, how they should harm and how they should moan, how they should lie passively or actively bittersweet-excite the others. The whole scene was strange to Nikola's eyes, but

he wasn't sure he disliked it. The commanding figure, however, seemed to be doing that for its own pleasure and needs. They were merely the three slaves.

This was not a good way to start the day. Was it an allegory of his new condition? But why was he the slave? Could it be that the figure was simply a representation of his bestiality, of the Animal Within that wanted to get through, and be free at least unconsciously? Did that mean that he had successfully repressed the transformation that night?

Session 28 – DM notes

In this session, they crossed Vallaki Pass. The birds that followed them before Vallaki were falcons. Some of them were spying for Strahd and it can be assumed that for the rest of the time the PCs spend in Barovia, Strahd will have some animals spying on them. After all, he has paid them nicely and he wants a service performed.

I really had something prepared in case they decided to cross it by night, some vampire bats or wraiths. But they seemed to be learning to heed advice and wisely chose to stay out. But they saw the caves where multitudes of enemies could be hidden to come out only at night.

When they reached Vallaki, the priest went to look for books. I still needed Yuri to find a wizard that could instruct him in the arts and even give him his first spellbook so that Yuri could take a level of wizard in a few time. And I needed to do it before they got enough experience for the next level: the player had warned me that if he couldn't multi-class now, the classes would be too unbalanced for him to do it later and so he'd stay a cleric. So I thought the best place really was to make an acquaintance in some place as a book shop instead of having them walk to a too obvious tower on the hills. I doubt Barovians would let such a tower and respective wizard live for long, so Sandor is merely a respected citizen with a secret basement in his house that doubles as laboratory or workroom and doesn't draw suspicion.

After I had led the main group far enough into what I wanted them to do, I turned to Nikola. His player had been absent for some sessions and would be absent for many more yet to come, but he came to this one and I wanted to give him some action, since he had been away. At this point in time, I already wanted him to join the group, since I never wanted to have players separated. But it had been the player's will and I can't override that, so I crafted a story that would make him believe that he was somehow cursed and that he could trust no one except perhaps his former companions. The idea was to let him settle down, begin what looks like a normal life, trust someone and then be betrayed by that person. Also, something will happen to him that will make it very difficult to remain in that town. Nikola was designed by his player with an ingrained mistrust for everyone else. The one person who tried to help him in his life, barred his mother, was Tersis, but Nikola didn't understand nor appreciate that. He never trusted the other PCs and decided he wanted nothing to do with them, that he didn't have enough motivation to roam the world in search of adventure. This stay in the city will show him that he can't live in

society, however, and will give him a person he can trust. At the end of it, he'll find the other PCs again and they'll accept him despite the danger he'll bring them, which may be enough to make Nikola trust them somewhat more. As I write this, this isn't still clear. This session marks only the settlement of Nikola in Ingelberg as an honest citizen, and shows him the hardship of city life, namely, how hard it is to survive and why some people with courage turn to the road and weapons for sustenance. It bears noticing that during these sessions Nikola's and the group's calendar will never be synchronized until they meet finally in session 49.

The man that gives Nikola work is Eberhardt Van Kruger. He is modelled after Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge, and his name is a play the latter's. Although that is not clear by now, he is a villain, although a sympathetic one. I took from the original the avarice, the job and part of the early story of his life, but there are no Christmas ghosts, nor poor crippled Tom nor anything of the kind. Eberhardt is not to be redeemed, rather he is a mirror of what Nikola may become if he insists on drawing himself away from the others, from society as a whole.

The whole street story about wererats in the sewers is false. In fact, the murders are related to Eberhardt, but Nikola only finds that really late. The citizens will learn it only later though Nikola's actions. The last man that disappeared, in fact, is a clerk that worked for Van Kruger and whose place Nikola took. The other clerk ceases coming but not because he's been murdered. He's simply been fired, as Nikola will find later. When Eberhardt speaks to Nikola, this is the first hint of what function I want this NPC to perform. Confront Nikola with his own personality.

The crucial point in this story was when Eberhardt made the proposal to Nikola for him to work as his secretary. This was vital for my plan, that Nikola should live in the house. And fortunately, Nikola accepted... The player tried to play in character. He always does. But I confess I asked him, before the game, to trust me, the DM, and that he'd have a great story if he didn't oppose the suggestions I would place him. I'm happy he agreed, and that he could reason that Nikola would do that in character even without my asking. The 9th of October marks the appearance of another interesting character: Nancy Butler. I took the name and some of her character from a TV Series called *The Velvet Touch* about a poor country girl who goes to London when she falls in love for another woman. She works as a prostitute, becomes a show biz star, changes her name to Nancy King and is betrayed by her friend. I don't recall how it ends, but she's the inspiration. In my game, she likes men. And will fall for Nikola. She is a painter, an artist, who like the character in the series decided to leave her small country town because it was too small for her ideas. And she dares the big city. Here she is a vagrant, a bit like *La Bohème's* protagonists, without fixed home or income. Until she meets Nikola and then disappears. Her life is about to take a wild turn again. A very **wild** turn.

For the rest of this story, I had to count the days very well. The next main point would have to come on the full moon nights and I made a detailed table of the work Nikola began performing for Eberhardt. I made things so that there were about ten days between the time when Nikola began writing for Eberhardt and knew Nancy to the crisis that is the major point of the adventure. I felt confident this was time enough to make the actions of the characters believable.

The scene on the 19th is the first major scene in this story arc. This was a trick I played on my players. I had suggested to Nikola's player that he was a werewolf. The players

suspected this for a long time, and although I asked Nikola's player not to, he had given the news to the other players. So, I designed his awakening on that day as incriminatory as possible. When Finn tells him that a man has been found dead probably by a wolf, I know all the players think: it was Nikola! So, he takes precautions for the next night. The end of the session reflects a dream Nikola had. It could be interpreted in the way put here, but what Nikola doesn't know at this point is that rather than a dream, it was pure reality.

Session 29

Starting Date: 6th October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia

Yuri studied the man. His looks were amiable and frank, those of a man who has no more worries in his life. After a short time, Yuri was convinced he could trust the man, who introduced himself as Sandor. Yuri told him of his recent studies in Magic and of his difficulties, relating how intriguing this new field seemed to him. He did it so well that Sandor agreed to teach him in a few subtle points, if Yuri could afford the time and the money. Yuri accepted the proposal and suggested that Sandor could also teach Irina, apparently a budding magician, and so they settled on four gold coins a day for each of them.

Meanwhile, Gregor looked at the shelves and, finding nothing to his satisfaction, he decided to go back to the main room. Amid the several books on dubious esoteric works, he found three volumes that seemed serious and carefully written, and bought them for ten gold pieces. They were about the Pre-History of Barovia, namely, the Terg occupation, about the sinister religion of the Lawgiver, and the third was about the more backward, primitive cults of Forlorn.

At length, Gregor and Yuri left the bookshop and met the others in the street. Looking for an inn, they couldn't help being sent to the Blue Water Inn, the finest lodging house in all of Barovia. It was an ancient hunting estate on the banks of the Zarovich Lake, which had belonged to the Velikovna family. It offered extraordinary amenities, like free drinks in the room, exquisite foods and a spectacular view of the sunset over the lake. The service and drinks were of the best that could be procured and accordingly its prices were steep... too steep, in fact. They had no choice but to turn their backs on it and stay in a more modest inn.

They spent the night without incidents. Gheata, as usual, was only concerned with finding a wench to bed and he did it without much trouble.

07 – 10 – 751, Second Night After the New Moon

The following morning, Yuri and Irina went early to Sandor's house and there spent the whole day. Sandor was a kind but strict master, trying to bring out the best he could from his pupils in the shortest possible time. He knew they couldn't stay more than a few days and he truly wanted to help them understand and control their magical skills.

Gregor, Eva and Gheata, on the other hand, spent the day collecting information on the road to Krezk and preparing for the journey. They learnt that it could take up to three days in normal weather, but that it could mean much more now that the winter was coming. They bought some winter clothes, shovels, climber's kits and Eva profited to exchange her long sword for a more manoeuvrable short sword. Yuri, too, at the end of the day, sold his excedentary shield and armour.

Session 29 – DM notes

This session was almost a routine part of the story, a necessary interlude in all the things they have to do. With at most 2 hours of gaming on each one, there are times when sessions can't be that interesting.

The main point in this one was the studies with Sandor. Yuri will make enough good checks to clear all the special points to become a wizard. Irina, thus far a 1st-level commoner, will become a 1st-level Sorcerer after the studies with Sandor, and then will begin being useful to the party. Although, as an NPC, she always stays a lot in the shade. The rest of the group prepared for the way ahead. I took the chance to take them for mountain terrain to try my hands at that environment and I warned them fairly to get properly equipped.

Session 30

Starting Date: 8th October 751 / 20th October 751

Starting Domain: Barovia / Irvanika

08-10-751, Third Night After the New Moon

The following day, Irina and Yuri went again to Sandor's house, and they did so well that by the end of the day, Sandor told them they were free to move on, that the most complex part they had already achieved. "You can find the rest for yourselves", he told them. Meanwhile, the rest of the group idled time by, waiting patiently that the next day would come so they could finally be on their way.

09-10-751, First Night of the Waxing Moon

Early on, they made their way out of Vallaki. The road ahead, they knew, was difficult, winding up the mountain in the cold. As they advanced in the day, they climbed higher, breathing with more difficulty. The road was bordered by soft slopes here, dangerous cliffs there, but for most of the part, it simply advanced in the middle of plain. Everything was covered in snow, making their advance difficult.

In the afternoon, they crossed paths with a group that came in the opposite direction. Five men came on a covered wagon which trailed a cage with a curious animal inside: a huge cat, with white fur. Evangelina exclaimed

“Wow, it’s, a panther! They come only from Valachan!”

Gregor stopped to talk to the men:

“Nice creature you have there. Is she ferocious?”

“Yeah.... I wouldn’t pet it, if I were you”, the man grinned sarcastically. Then he added in a more serious tone:

“It’s an albino panther, from Valachan. Very rare, even there. But hey, we’re specialized in hard tasks.”

The “we” referred, no doubt, to the company whose markings the wagon bore: the Red Vardo Traders. Gregor and Gheata shrugged, not recognizing the name.

Gregor asked for advice

“Well, we’re going to Krezk. Any advice that you can give us? Can we come to meet wolves?”

“Well... the usual thing.... There’s a nasty weather ahead of you. You won’t get lost, Krezk is just the next stop. But stay warm. No, there are no wolves here, but you may cross white bears and there are those that speak of the Yeti.”

“Can we scare the Yeti with fire?”

“Ahahahaha.... How should I know? Many people talk of it, but no one ever saw one or fought one, rather. So, if you do meet one, you’ll have to try and experiment, right? Well, so long, we have to go.”

The groups continued their ways. As night approached, they found a hunter’s cabin who offered them stay and food for the night. He told them the story of the Queen of Ice, a spectre that lived around Mt Baratak, but which on occasion came down to this road. He told them as she had died freezing in the mountain, decades ago, and as since then she relentlessly came looking for the warmth of the living beings to cast away the unbearable cold that torments her undeath. Gregor shivered, remembering the one time he had been hugged by a ghost. He remembered the cold.

“We will mount guard tonight!”

“Hey, it was just a story”, said the hunter, slightly admired with the impression his story had had. “Though in fact, to tell the truth, I think even I once was nearly taken by her. I was transfixed in place, she looked at me with her transparent, crystal-like eyes. I was fallen in the snow and unable to move and she was nearly, nearly embracing me. I closed my eyes and awaited her cold touch. As it took a moment too long, I opened them again and saw her fleeing. Behind me, the sun was rising and gave my thanks to whatever god protected me that night, for I could have stayed there.... Like many others that are found in cold sunny mornings all frozen, sometimes like balls of ice.”

This did not ease Gregor. They kept shifts and watched through the night.

10-10-751, Second Night of the Waxing Moon

The next day passed without incident, but the weather grew fouler. Wind became more intense, and the snow deeper. By the early afternoon, they reached a pass that cut between the Balinoks. Passes like these were the only thing that allowed the Balinoks to

be crossed, and they only existed in Barovia, giving the country strategic importance. They saw no living soul, although during the day Irina thought she had seen the Yeti in the distance. Yuri and Eva also saw a shape, a white figure that moved quickly out of site apparently in upright position, but with all the falling snow, it was impossible to tell. When night came, the only viable refuge they could find were some caves in the cliff face. They chose one with adequate room for air, not too deep and which, apparently, was not being used by bears. Gheata, though, thought they would be safer if they set a fire at the entrance of the cave. He and Eva went to look for firewood. There were not much trees, but they were experts in this kind of exploration and returned with enough fuel for a good fire. As he was lighting it, Gheata saw a bear in the distance, walking in the snow. "Hmmm... We'll have to keep watches yet again tonight."

11-10-751, Third Night of the Waxing Moon

When they awoke, the fire was out and the watch was asleep. Fortunately, nothing had disturbed them, but outside the wind had grown to a strength that wouldn't let them walk. Snow fell with heaviness and they anxiously watched the day grow old without their being able to move out. They set for another night in the cave.

* * * * *

Nikola looked at himself. Everything was normal this time. The door was locked, his clothes were folded. No, he had not gone out this night, he was sure. He went to the pub that day and met Finn there, as ever listening to gossip and counting it back to everyone else. But he wasn't as cheerful as usual.

"People are scared. Another man was found dead this morning. Again, on the outskirts of the city with his insides out."

"The werewolf again?"

"Yes... I heard him, and made sure I stayed well locked inside."

"And what about the police? Aren't they investigating? Isn't there a band of adventurers to give it chase?"

Finn looked up, with an incredulous look.

"Give it chase? Would you come with me, Nikola?" he asked, doubtful and challenging. He wouldn't go, but he was testing Nikola. This didn't answer so Finn continued, shrugging.

"And what about the police? It's been no one important, has it? If it were, people might budge. But we're just hoping it away. It came suddenly, it may go suddenly.... or just be around in the full moon. If that's the case, there's only one more night to go. I know I'll stay locked."

Nikola went back home only in the evening. He went to his room and left his door unlocked. In a way, he was relieved

"So I'm not a monster, after all. But then, what was all that blood? I can't piece it."

21-10-751, Second Night After the Full Moon

In the morning, Nikola heard the news from Finn. Still no signs of Nancy, the howls had been heard but this time no one had been caught. Besides that, the day passed uneventfully and so did the following ones. On the night of the 24th, though, when it was around eleven o'clock and Nikola was already in bed, he heard a knock on his door.

"Who is it?"

"It's me, Eberhardt. I need to show you something. Come with me."

Nikola found it a bit strange, but donned a night robe and followed Eberhardt. He led the way to a chamber besides his room and opened a closet which covered a door etched in the wall. It led to a musty dark staircase that led down. The air was stale.

"Come, we have to go down."

25-10-751, Third Night of the Waning Moon

Nikola hesitated. He sensed not everything was right and he doubted strongly of Eberhardt's attitude. But then, just as he was going to contest, he watched as Eberhardt's lips were moving and completing an incantation that caught Nikola by surprise. Suddenly, he felt there was nothing strange in going down those stairs, and that something good could be down there. He eagerly accompanied his master down. Eberhardt followed behind with a lantern clearing the way. It was very moisty and there were no lights of any kind in the staircase. At their base, a small tunnel led into a closed door. Nikola opened it and stepped through, and heard the door close behind him. Everything was dark.

Moments later, candles lit, one by one without anyone lighting them... apparently. Nikola was in an arena, the same he had seen in his dream. There was a tall iron fence around them and an open trapdoor in the middle. There were two people there, kneeling on the ground and with their heads and hands fastened to wood blocks. They had been clearly beaten, savaged, brutalized. There was a boy who seemed to have passed out and a girl who moaned softly. She looked up and Nikola recognized Nancy Butler with horror in his face. A voice to his left startled him. "I want you to be yourself again. This you must do consciously."

It was Eberhardt, releasing Nikola from his spell. He was dressed with a red tunic down to his feet and holding a whip in his hand. In a cold, harsh voice, he said

"She has been caught fornicating with that boy there. I can't abide that. Take this whip. Undress her and beat her. Whip her!"

He was angry and violent. Nikola didn't know what to do. He was shocked with the absolute turn the events had taken. He looked at Nancy and he couldn't stand seeing her there, let alone spank her. She recognized him too and cried to him

"Oh save me, save me from that pig. He's been torturing me, he wants to kill me. Free me, Nikola, free me!!!"

She pleaded, she cried, she asked for mercy and tried to convince Nikola by all means she could to let her go.

Nikola turned to Eberhardt and asked, amazed

"Are you responsible for their disappearance?"

"They did not disappear! They're here, where they belong."

Nancy outburst

“Liar, liar. He took me by force, he dragged me into here against my will!”

Nikola continued.

“But why me? Why do I have to do this?”

“You must, Nikola. You have to! You are to be my friend, I need you to do this. This is a ritual, and it must be you! You must punish her, you must learn how to punish people. I need you to do this, I want you to do this.”

“You are demented”, Nikola continued unbelievably, “You are sick. I can’t let you do this.”

Nikola was afraid that Eberhardt might enchant him again. But he was quicker than the old man, and stronger too. He could easily overpower him. Meanwhile, Eberhardt’s anger grew and at Nikola’s refusal, he raised the whip and stroke Nikola. But this was faster and avoiding the blow through Eberhardt to the ground, wrestled the whip from his hand, immobilized him and tied him fast. He then freed Nancy and went to look for the boy. He was dead. He turned to Nancy who cried frantically of relief. He tried to calm and soothe her and at length he could talk to her. She told him she had been abducted by a pack of big dogs, or wolves, that had attacked her in the street and dragged her away. When she awoke, she was in these dungeons, in a cell. Another boy was there, already, and two other girls. She didn’t know how many days had passed, but it seemed like an eternity. Over those days, Eberhardt came frequently and took the other two girls. She watched once, as the two of them and a man that looked like Nikola himself were forced to practice despicable acts. She never saw more of it, but the other girls told her that Eberhardt came more times to force them to do... things. She too was forced quite a few times, and beaten, but she never did anything with the boy except what Eberhardt made them to. She saw one of the girls come dead to the cell. She then never saw anything of the other one. These last few days, she and the boy were the only ones in the cage and today, they had been taken to the arena and tortured with cruel knives and exquisite minute blades and razors.

Nikola was appalled, and didn’t know what to say. He questioned Eberhardt over his motives. The man was tormented, his eyes reflected remorse and internal anguish, but at the same time, he stubbornly refused to speak. All he said, at length, was “Read my diary.”

Nikola locked him in a cell. He told Nancy to go to his room and try to sleep, while he would look for Eberhardt’s diary.

He took her up by the same stairs he had descended and let her rest in his bed. Then, he went into Eberhardt’s room. There was a huge bed there, with a wooden canopy above it. Opposite it, an ornamented chair stood before a support where an open book lay. Beside it, an ink tray and a pen. The book still had a number of white pages. This was clearly Eberhardt’s diary. Nikola wondered why he needed a scribe if he could write, but then he understood Eberhardt wrote just a scant few lines a day. He scanned the diary and read the events of the last month.

12-09-751

Time goes on, and everything alike. I’m still in this empty life where almost nothing fulfils me. I feel buried in a deep melancholy whence I can not come out.

18-09-751

I feel bordering on despair. Yesterday I was in the office all the afternoon watching people go by. These afternoons rekindle thoughts within me forgotten and repressed. I want to be with people, I want to be among them again, but I almost can no longer leave this chair. If I stand up and make two steps towards the door, I feel a shadow gnawing at my spirit. I can't imagine what it would be if I were outside, on the street. My legs shake.... Oh, but certain desires are so difficult to contain!!!

22-09-751

I was in the shop today again. I had the secret hope to see again that woman of the other day. At least I could admire her while she was there. She hasn't come today.

25-09-751

She came today, she's called Anna. But she left too quickly. A light in my night.

27-09-751

Josken left us today. This house is emptier again.

29-09-751

It pains me so much to write, but it's my only outlet... well, almost only. But I'd rather write, despite the pains... I'd like to write my memories, but I can't. If I could find someone...

30-09-751

I saw some interesting people. There was a new girl there. What a difference to Anna. Anna is elegant, mature, a lady. She could be a company. This girl... she's something else. But I can't go that way. No, THAT way, I can't go. I must stop thinking on that.

01-10-751

I hired a new guy. Nikola.

04-10-751

I fired Helsmaar. He was robbing me. I watched Nikola the whole afternoon.

05-10-751

Still with my eye on Nikola. He's strict and correct. Reminds of me when I was younger. Even the same sad distrusting regard.

06-10-751

I've been thinking about Nikola. I find him too similar to me, and I even sympathize with him. I don't want him to go down the same spiral that caught me. I don't want him to acquire my vices and iniquities. I talked to him. I'll see if it made an effect. Oh, true. I heard Finn commenting, looks like Josken has come up. Rats, they said... again.

07-10-751

Nikola is a good worker, but I can see he's getting slimmer each day that passes. He also seems to be having sleepless nights. He could be ideal to write my memories. But I feel slipping. This could be a bad time... for him mainly.

08-10-751

I made him a proposal and he accepted. I went down there, yesterday. I'm losing myself again. This new presence, the lack of Josken, the life I feel outside... all together, they're taking me again.

10-10-751

I went to see them again. Miserable they are, there locked. They're becoming so thin! I did nothing to them, but in a way I felt better.

12-10-751

I've been working with Nikola. He writes well and fast, but I lose myself a lot in my thoughts. I go back innumerable times. But how to explain things well? How should I tell my life in a way that people understand me and what I am, what I am like, why I am like this?

13-10-751

I relieved myself with them. I beat them, I licked them, I forced them. Ah.... how I need this. I've repressed myself for too long.

14-10-751

It must be the moon that is coming. I feel desires under my skin. I've been with them once again. So docile they are, so friendly. I must initiate Nikola. They know how to do it.

He is good at work. But I need more, I need him for other things.

15-10-751

Today, Kirina almost succumbed. But I wasn't too severe this time. I want to stop, but I can't. I need this as I need bread for the mouth, at least while this tension does not go away. I miss Pauline... Years ago, it was. I miss Marien, Olga, Yvette... They were the best, the ones that held longer. They've all gone, they all go. These will go also, but I must spare them meanwhile. After I bring them Nikola and they teach him, they will be allowed to go.

16-10-751

Ah... my dear friends brought me new flesh... Nancy, they told me she's called... him, I don't know, I'll call him Tom. I'll keep them for a few days. I have everything planned. In the full moon I'll take Nikola down there. Kirina and Else are waiting for him.

17-10-751

I went down to the arena, but only to watch. Here, I am myself, I fulfil me, I lose my fears. But this hurts, and it hurts me too. I know I only do this because I couldn't have sex

in any other way. Sometimes I ache for them, but there is no remedy. The fault is theirs also.

18-10-751

It will be today. I will initiate Nikola. He will be my intimate friend, but I must do the ritual on him for that. I have to initiate him. I have instructed Elsie and Kirina. They will be gentle and tender with him, for him. I want them to do him everything and to give him everything. That he learns what there is to learn. Ah, Nikola. I hope you last for more than Josken and that it doesn't hurt you much. I like you very much, like a father I only want what is best for you. But I have to do this. I know you wouldn't understand it, but it can't be any other way. I need to use special measures so that he doesn't wake up. My old spellbook will come in handy.

20-10-751

I'm at peace with myself. Nikola did well. He didn't wake up and yesterday he said nothing. Probably he doesn't even remember. He must have found it odd, when he woke up. Curious presage: a wolf howled the whole night, Finn says it is a werewolf. There hadn't been any so near for years. I'll read the stars, this does not seem a good augury.

21-10-751

Weakness, weakness, weakness! I didn't resist once again. Kirina went away. Time to bring Nancy and Tom.

23-10-751

I must complete the task. Nikola, my friend, I'll take you down still today. I'll explain what you have to do.

What do I do, what do I think? Is it me who writes this, who thinks this? I've harboured Nikola to protect him, to prevent his following my steps and now I'm dragging him with me to perdition. Stop, stop Eberhardt! Oh, curse these desires! Who are you who dominate me in this way? Who clutches my heart like a claw and makes me lose reason in these nights of black enchantments? Stop! Leave me! I want to be a person, I want to be Good, I want to leave these demonic vices.

24-10-751

I read yesterday's nights and they defeat me. I want to, but every time I come here, to this room, the old memories come to haunt me.... and I give in once again. I couldn't resist, my flesh is weaker and weaker, but the spirit is being carried by it even faster. I'm old, I feel old and time slipping away, and each day that passes I feel more and more that I miss something... that all my life I've missed something and that in the time that I still have I need to find it, by force if need be. Nikola, I wanted you to be my friend, I wanted to be your friend protector, but I think I'm not up to the task. I can't resist my basest instincts. You will be my friend, yes, but in a rather different way...

After he read it, Nikola meditated, shaking his head. There were still many doubts, but he felt sorry for him.

“I can’t kill him”, he thought, “though he will go on killing people like he’s always done if I don’t do anything about him. But he’s tormented, he’s ill, not just in body but in spirit too. What must I do?”

He decided to talk to him once more. He took him food and water. Eberhardt was lying on the floor, miserable like a rejected dog. As he saw the food, he devoured it almost like an animal, without concerns for any decency at all. Nikola shook his head and asked, in as warm and assuring a tone as possible

“Eberhardt, talk to me. What is it that you crave in your life? What is it that makes you suffer so much?”

Eberhardt looked up at him and an air of deep sadness and regret came over him.

“I have wasted my life, I lost it.”

“You lost what? What did you want to have?”

“People, Nikola! Don’t you see? People! A woman.... I’ve never really had a woman in my arms, I never pressed my body against hers, never felt or gave caresses. I missed love.”

“And was it that made you look for it in this way? For sex, instead, and violently?”

Eberhardt didn’t know what to answer. His replies didn’t come coherently. In fact, not even he was aware of what had happened to him. But as he grew older, his strengths gave way and his needs pressed heavier. He understood the choice he had made when he was young, of forgetting people and finding compensation in money, was too unbearable. Money was no substitute for people and no compensation for solitude. He needed to vent his frustrations. He began to kidnap people. Girls at first, but then also boys. But he was not able himself to touch them, to engage with them sexually, so he made them enact his own fantasies, the things he would like to have done. But as he himself had suffered, he was only happy if he could see the others suffer and so he inflicted pain on them. Years and years had passed. Each time he grew more and more insensitive and he had to craft more and newer fantasies, with more people even. But he also lacked a twin soul, and so he began to choose young men who could be his executioners, his incarnations inside the arena while he watched. These were his “friends”, as he called them, but he had to torture them first. They had to be cleansed, initiated. And after that, they could inflict that same torture on Eberhardt’s victims. Nikola was just going to be the next on the line.

“Just to make things clear: how did you kidnap people?”

“With my familiar. It’s a wolf, and with his pack, they drag them here.”

“And what do you do with the bodies then?!”

“I throw them into the trapdoor in the arena. They lead to the sewers”

“Ah, so that’s where the bodies come from, that they see in the river. And all this time, people thought it was just rats.... Instead, they were torture marks.”

Nikola left Eberhardt and joined Nancy. It was dawning outside. Nikola decided to keep the shop closed that day and he asked Nancy what she was going to do now.

“Escape” she spoke in a resigned voice. It was all she could think of doing. She had fled her home and village to come to the big city. But now, without family here and after all this, she didn’t know what else to do.

“Even so”, said Nikola, “I think you should not be seen. People will ask what happened to you, but I doubt anyone will believe. Perhaps the populace would like to burn his house and steal his money, but the powerful ones more likely need his talent to raise funds for them and will protect him. I think no one can help you here. I’ll take you to the edge of the city. But it will have to be at dawn, before people come out and see us.”

Session 30 – DM notes

The first day in the session was quickly put away to move for more interesting things. The players lacked combat. A long time had passed since the last one, so I prepared some encounters in the mountain. The first one was the fabled Yeti. This is not particularly gothic, but it is fantasy enough that it can happen in Barovia. Since I couldn’t find stats for it in my books, I used an Ogre as basis and made some alterations.

But before that, they crossed paths with a white panther from Valachan. The point of the encounter is for them to hear about the Red Vardo Traders, and learn they deal with some exotic and probably very expensive cargoes. This is because the RVT will become important later, especially when in the future, if all goes well as planned, **they** will be the prey the RVT will look for. I have four scenes prepared around them. This is the first one. The second happened in Krezk and the third in the forest after they left Krezk. The fourth hasn’t happened yet. I’ll tell you more as these scenes happen in later sessions. These scenes implement two of the items in my Barovia Checklist: Jacqueline Montarri and Tatyana’s latest incarnation.

The story the hunter tells them in his cabin is that of Jezra Wagner a bit sprinkled with the Web Enhancement about her for the hunter’s own encounter with her. I thought at first of making them confront her. Then I thought they were too low-level, and then I tuned some abilities down. But at this point there was really no reason for Jezra to appear. There was a chance after they reached Krezk, but they didn’t take it.

However, the main problems in the mountain were not monster, but rather the weather. I made sure the shovels and clothes they had bought came to good use, and I had them stay stranded in the snow so they would have to spend one more day of ration. I wanted to focus on survival, this time, survival in a hostile terrain. But this will unfold in the next session, for after they were safely in the cave, I shifted attention to Nikola, whose player was again present.

Nikola’s precautions were not full-proof, but apparently he was not the werewolf responsible for the murders. So the players were again in doubt. Was he a werewolf or not? If not, why had been all bloodied in bed the night before? And what of the dream? As for the whole question of the police, I see it as portrayed in the film Sleepy Hollow: largely brutal and arbitrary. That’s what Finn tries to tell Nikola.

The night from 24 to 25 is the turning point in the story. This is when Eberhardt, overcome by his urges and personal demons, takes Nikola for an ‘initiation’. This is when

Nikola understands that Eberhardt is something more than a crippled old man and must act and take a stand. He does so.

To ensure that Nikola followed him, which probably he would not, Eberhardt cast a charm spell on him. First revelation: Eberhardt was a Wizard. Specifically, a level 5 Enchanter. Second revelation: He was quite mad. Better said, he had a darker side, a certain sexual mania that made him torture people. He is quite out of his rational mind when Nikola confronts him, and he refers him to his diary for explanation: he is too ashamed to talk about it.

When Nikola found the diary, many questions were answered and I gained my day, and indeed many more, when the player told me

“I feel sorry for him, I can’t kill him.”

He also told me he loved how Eberhardt had surprised him with his entries about Josken, and how he is so used to death. ‘Josken has left us’ seems all too innocent at first, but gains its full meaning when he comments a few lines below ‘Rats... again.’

That meant the story had been well done, that meant everything had hit where I wanted. Despite being quite daring for our games, it worked just fine (and may have been the reason why months later my players gave me the “120 days of Sodom” by the Marquis de Sade for birthday) and it is up to now one of the finest moments in my campaign.

Just to conclude, here are a few things more about the villain. He is 68 years old and suffers from a perversion. He is mainly a voyeur and little more. He’s totally incapable of engaging in the act himself, probably even is repulsed by the contact with human flesh since he has never had an intimate relation with anyone in his life. His sexuality is completely morbid: he enslaves young people of both sexes to enact the fantasies he has in his own mind, which are for the most part violent. On the other hand, he does torture them personally. The marks in the bodies appearing in the river are not marks of tooth or claw. At least, not all of them. There really are wererats below, but most marks are rather made by razors, knives and other torture implements.

The only exit from the dungeons below his house, apart from the staircase Nikola descended, is the trapdoor in the middle of the arena, that gives to the sewers. In order to avoid suspicion, Eberhardt picks his victims well: prostitutes (and Nancy has to stoop to these activities too since painting is not enough to sustain herself, although that is never referred) and dock workers, who are usually very poor people and mostly foreigners who haven’t been in Ingelberg for a long time. These are quite likely to go unnoticed.

Eberhardt does have emotional needs. He tends to grow affectionate towards boys, and after he has ‘initiated’ them in his pain games, he makes them close friends who hear his confidences. These boys then become sort of his avatars inside the arena, and that’s the purpose of the initiation: they must suffer the acts they will inflict later on others. It is true that Eberhardt developed feelings for Nikola. They are not necessarily erotic feelings, but are a certain addiction to that person. A certain affection, a certain preoccupation, well-meaning.

When Nikola arrived, Josken had died, which happens regularly due to the tortures to which the ‘avatars’ are also submitted now and then. Nikola took his place. The post that he is offered later, that of personal secretary, is a respectable position: a sort of butler or valet. It is not, as the players thought at the time, something suspicious.

When Eberhardt takes Nikola down for the first time, he drugs him with a magic potion: during this time, Nikola is hypnotized. He does things which he does not remember later.

There is truly a werewolf around, but that is not Nikola. Who he is, is not important at the time. So, is Nikola a werewolf? Yes, but that will be revealed only in a later session. At this point, there is nothing more than before that suggests Nikola is a werewolf. Full moon has come and gone and he hasn't transformed.