

Ravenloft I6 Playability Guide

Part II

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Editorial note. This guide works from I6 itself. Where it reaches beyond the module, it says so. The itinerant clan the module calls "gypsies" is named Rhenari throughout, following the convention set out in Part I Section 2. Direct quotations from the module retain the original wording.

1. The opening act, and a camouflage for it

The module's opening on p.7 is probably the most recognisable opening in the hobby. The party begins in an unnamed tavern in a nameless province, a gypsy messenger arrives with a sealed letter from the Burgomaster of Barovia pleading for help for his dying daughter, the party marches five hours through the Svalich woods, and halfway through the forest they find a dead villager holding a second letter that reveals the first as a forgery. The first letter drew the party in under false pretences. The real letter, arriving too late to act on, asks them not to come. By the time they have the information to decide, the gates have closed behind them.

This opening works. It has also been read and played often enough that a player who has encountered I6 before will recognise it the moment the boxed text begins. What follows is a camouflaged version of the same opening that reaches the same points in the valley by a different route, offered as an interpretation a DM can fit to any of the published-setting placements or homebrew equivalents set out in Part I Section 1d.

1a. What the camouflage preserves, and what it changes

The module's opening delivers four things to the party. It places them on the road into Barovia. It gets them through the gates. It gives them the Burgomaster's letter, which names Ireena, names the threat, and points them toward the village. It establishes that the path in is closed behind them. Everything the adventure needs from the opening is in these four deliveries.

The camouflage preserves all four. What it changes is the mechanism of the hook. Instead of a forged letter delivered to the party in a tavern, the hook becomes paid escort work offered by a band of Rhenari musicians who happen to be at the same tavern the party is passing through. The Rhenari are the guide's name for the itinerant clan the module calls "gypsies," introduced in Part I Section 2. The party accompanies the Rhenari up the mountain road, crosses the gates without registering the moment, camps inside the valley with their employers, and wakes to find them gone and a possession taken with them. The Burgomaster's letter, in this version, is the only letter, and arrives on the road after the

crossing rather than before it.

The deception shifts from textual to social: not a forged letter, but an employer who turns out to be their enemy. Both do the same structural work.

1b. The hamlet, fitted to the placement

The camouflaged opening requires a place the party can plausibly be the evening before they walk up the mountain road. The module does not supply one. Part I Section 1d places Barovia in three published settings and offers a generic frame for homebrew, and the hamlet the camouflage needs fits any of them without adjustment because it is generic to low-density frontier country.

The hamlet sits a day's walk below the mountain road that climbs to Barovia, inside whichever of the surrounding nations the setting places there. Provincial, largely autonomous, rarely visited by the militia. One farm works the land, split across two sites because the geography requires it, with crops on one and a vineyard and orchard on the sunny slope, supplying the tavern and a weekly market. One or two small shrines. Cottages with gardens. The tavern is the hamlet's gathering hall and the only place a stranger would sleep.

The distance matters. Part I Section 4c sets Strahd's operational envelope at what he can reach in a night and return from before dawn. A hamlet a few hours from the gates falls inside that envelope. A hamlet a day away falls outside. When the party later considers retreat, the hamlet remains a safe point in their mental map, and the knowledge that help is a day's walk they no longer have is part of what the valley costs them.

The hamlet sells the basics any travelling hamlet sells. Food, drink, and beds at the tavern. Eggs, cheese, bread, root vegetables, salted meat, cider from cottage gardens. Rope, candles, oil, and a few arrows from whichever cottage keeps them. The weekly market, when it falls, brings tinkers and pack merchants with a wider selection. What the hamlet does not stock is specialist adventuring gear. A party arriving undergeared leaves the hamlet the way they came.

1c. The Rhenari and the offer

The Rhenari at the tavern front as travelling musicians, and the front holds because it is also true. They play, they resupply, they move on. Their commerce in the area is long-standing and the hamlet treats them as familiar outsiders. Nothing in the evening's performance signals what they are underneath the music.

The offer is made through the Rhenari leader, who approaches the party's table after the set in the ordinary way a performer approaches appreciative patrons. His people are leaving in the morning on a leg of their route that crosses the mountain road. The road is dangerous, he says, and they have lost members before. He is willing to pay well for an escort on the crossing. He is evasive about the destination, which reads as ordinary reticence about the patrons on the far side, and he does not name Barovia.

The offer is plausible because it is ordinary. Travelling performers hiring escorts for a dangerous stretch is frontier business of a kind the party will have seen before. The DM's job is to make it attractive: the pay good, the employer professional, the risk apparently manageable. A party that declines the offer breaks the camouflaged opening, and the DM is back to the module as written.

No seer travels with the Rhenari at this point. No fortune-teller, no mystical dressing, no archetype a reading player could map to a Ravenloft adventure. Madam Eva is at Tser Pool, which is where the party will meet her.

1d. The crossing the party does not see

The road climbs through the day. Farmland thins to pasture, pasture to foothills, foothills to wooded slopes. The Rhenari travel at a working pace and keep it.

The woods thicken through the afternoon and the fog thickens with them. At no identifiable moment does the country change. The trees get taller and darker, the road more deeply shadowed, the light more grey, the silence more insistent. Somewhere in this stretch the road passes between the Barovia gates. The iron gates open for the Rhenari and close behind the last wagon. A watchful character might register the gates as one piece of infrastructure among many, but without context they read as an old boundary marker on a road with many.

This is the crossing, and the party does not know it has happened. The fog is in their lungs the moment they breathed the valley's air. The quiet horror of the camouflaged opening lives here. Part I Section 4d's first principle, that Strahd chooses when he attacks, finds its opening move not in an ambush but in an unnoticed threshold.

The module's dead villager is on the road somewhere before the gates or shortly after. The Rhenari know the body is there and time the party's pace so it stays out of sight. The body will be found tomorrow, on the same stretch, when the party walks it alone.

1e. The camp and the Rhenari departure

The Rhenari stop for the night in a roadside clearing inside the valley, a spot they have used before. The evening is quieter than the last, and the mood has tightened slightly without anyone naming why. Watches are set. The Rhenari take the last watch of the night, offered as a courtesy.

They leave during that watch. The watchman is theirs, and lets the rest pack and move out without waking the party. Horses are led rather than ridden until the road bends. By dawn the Rhenari are gone, the wagons are gone, and one of the party's possessions is gone with them. The item is the DM's choice, calibrated to fit what the party is carrying: a signet ring, a sealed letter the party was delivering elsewhere, a prisoner in transit, a weapon of sentimental value, a pack animal with its load. The requirement is that the party wants it back but can continue without it.

The theft does three things. It gives the party a grievance, which is motivation. It gives them a thread, which is direction. And it sets up the Tser Pool encounter in Part IV, where Madam Eva handles the confrontation and offers the Fortunes reading as recompense.

1f. The body, the letter, and the arrival

The party has one road. It leads west, following the Rhenari tracks, and they take it.

Within the first hour or two of walking they find the body of a villager on the roadside. He has been there for days. Claw marks on the clothing, paw prints of worgs in the clay, a crumpled envelope in one hand. The letter is the Burgomaster's plea the module gives on p.9 continuing to p.10. Kolyan Indirovich, Burgomaster of Barovia, sealed with a large B, a week old. Ireena is dying. A vampire has held the valley for more than 400 years. The

Burgomaster asks the recipients to seal Barovia from outside and save the world from its fate. There is wealth in the community for those who do the work.

In the module's as-written opening this letter is the second letter and reveals the forgery. In the camouflaged opening it is the first and only letter, and its function shifts accordingly. It is not a revelation of betrayal but a dispatch from a dead man telling the party where they are and what holds the valley. It gives them a destination, the Burgomaster's village, where Ireena is, and a nature of threat, a vampire holding the valley for over four centuries. The Burgomaster's instruction to seal the land from outside reads in this version as information the party will file away, because they are not trying to leave and do not yet know that leaving would kill them.

The body on the road is self-explanatory. A villager tried to get out with a letter. The worgs caught him. The letter stayed in his hand until someone came down this road.

Later in the same morning, or by the early afternoon at latest, the road descends and the woods thin. The village of Barovia becomes visible through the fog: cobblestones, shuttered windows, a church on a rise at the base of the cliffs, Castle Ravenloft on its pillar above. The party enters.

2. The first day inside the valley

The party wakes with three clear prompts: the missing Rhenari, the missing possession, and the open road. The party should not be allowed to stall in the clearing trying to solve the whole deception. The road supplies the next answer. The body supplies the next answer after that. The village supplies the one after that.

The stolen item gives them a grievance. The road gives them direction. The dead villager gives them context. The village gives them their first fixed destination. These four beats land in that order.

2a. What the party should understand by noon

By the time the party reaches the village, they should understand four things.

First, they have been brought somewhere under false pretences.

Second, the road behind them is no longer a simple road home.

Third, the valley is held by a vampire with a history measured in centuries.

Fourth, the village ahead is not a neutral settlement but the centre of the present crisis.

That is the practical work of the opening, whether the DM uses the module as written or the camouflaged version. If one of those four has not landed by the time the party reaches the village, the opening has not yet finished its work, and the missing piece needs to land before Ismark opens his mouth.

2b. The body and the letter

The dead villager works best played plainly. He is not a mystery beat, and there is no theatrical flourish to find in him. He is there to tell the party what kind of place this is and what happens to people who try to carry messages out of it.

The letter is the party's first clean statement of the problem. It names Barovia. It names Ireena. It names the vampire. It tells the party that the valley has been under this condition for more than four centuries. That is enough. The party does not need full cosmology here. They need a destination and a threat.

A careful player will notice the letter's date (a week old) and the state of the body (several days dead) and draw the obvious conclusion: the villager who carried this letter tried to leave, and something in the woods stopped him. That conclusion is correct. It is the party's first direct evidence that the valley is hostile to departure.

2c. The road and the first sight of the village

The descent into the village should be played as compression. The woods thin, the road narrows into settlement, the mist stops being merely atmospheric and starts feeling inhabited. The church and the castle are the two sightlines that matter. One promises sanctuary. The other promises the source.

The party arriving in Barovia should be tired, suspicious, and short on certainty. If the woods have already drawn blood, the approach is stronger for it. Arriving too fresh weakens the module's opening pressure. A DM who has steered the party carefully through the crossing and the morning walk does not need to smooth the final approach. The party enters the village under the weight of what they have already learned, with the castle visible above and the absence of any other visible road behind them.

Part III takes the party into the village proper from here.

3. How to run the valley once they are in it

The valley has a day register and a night register, and the transition is absolute. By day, Barovia is oppressive. By night, Barovia becomes actively lethal. That is the governing distinction, and the DM's handling of everything in the valley that is not a specific scene in the module follows from it.

3a. The fog

The fog functions as atmosphere inside the valley and as doom at the boundary. It is not a constant active hazard during ordinary travel, and mechanically it is not doing that. The horror of the fog is retrospective. The party has already breathed it, and the danger is attached to exit, not to ordinary movement within Barovia.

Its use at the table is for sightlines, muffling, and mood. Spent too early, with every outdoor scene treated as poison gas, the effect is exhausted before it matters. The real terror is the later discovery that leaving now kills, and that terror is diluted by every scene where the fog has already been made to feel like the threat.

Madam Eva's potion is the only way out short of Strahd's destruction. The module states directly the party cannot discover it. On Strahd's destruction the fog dispels entirely. The party does not need a cure for what the fog has done. They need the source, and the mechanic resolves itself.

3b. The gates

The gates function as threshold, not wall. A party that tries to go around them should be allowed to. The seal is enforced by fog and worgs, not by invisible masonry.

Map 1 shows no adjacent walls. The gates stand between stone buttresses that anchor them to the woods, and the woods continue past the buttresses unbroken. A careful player who realises this is rewarded with consistency. The seal holds without the gates needing to be walls, and a DM who insists on a physical barrier loses the player's trust at the moment that trust is most load-bearing.

3c. The village

The village is a community in active late-stage attrition, not a neutral quest hub.

The module's figures on p.8 are specific. Sixty percent of houses are occupied, usually by a man alone, sometimes his wife, rarely children. Shuttered windows. Claw marks on walls. Looted shops with nothing left in them. Only Bildrath's Mercantile and the Blood of the Vine tavern still operate. The church is held open by Donavich's constant prayers. The Burgomaster is dead. Ireena is the vampire's target.

This is the state of a community several steps into its last chapter. It does not need to be overexplained. The state of the village explains itself on sight, and a party walking through it for the first time reads it correctly without prompting.

The villagers themselves reinforce the reading. They never attack first, flee if possible, and at night hold lawful good holy symbols before them. The symbols work. Part I Section 4e noted the Tower Chapel radiates a feeling of good strong enough that vampires cannot attack there, and the same logic runs through the village. Symbols in the villagers' hands are not superstition, they are accurate threat assessment passed down through generations of proximity.

3d. The day register

By day, the valley is traversable. Worgs, villagers, Rhenari on the road, empty spaces, bad weather, distant signs of life. Day is when the party gathers bearings and makes decisions.

The day encounter table (Table 4, p.6) works less as a random generator than as a statement of register. Rolled every three turns [every 30 minutes] on d6, triggered on a 1. The table produces worgs, Rhenari, and villagers in varying numbers, nothing undead, nothing overtly supernatural. Nothing on it should make the players think they are in a dungeon crawl yet. The horror is present, but not fully open.

The table feeds atmosphere more than combat. An encounter with two villagers who flee on sight tells the party what kind of place this is. An encounter with four worgs in broad daylight on the road tells them what hunts here. The table is the valley introducing itself.

3e. The night register

By night, outdoor movement is a different category of risk altogether.

The night table (Table 5, p.6) escalates hard, and it should. Rolled every three turns on d6, triggered on 1 or 2. Worgs in larger numbers, zombies, bats in swarms, ghosts, ghouls, wights, wraiths. A 12 on the roll produces a vampire, and the vampire is not Strahd, it is one of his old victims still in the valley and still hunting. Strahd's predation across centuries has left a tail, and the tail is still on the ground.

The lesson is strongest the first time the party encounters it. A night encounter rolled honestly on session one does more work than three lectures about how dangerous Barovia is at night.

3f. Strahd's nightly harassment

Strahd's harassment runs every night the party stays anywhere other than Castle Ravenloft (p.6). He arrives with 4d4 worgs and 10d10 bats, attacks for five rounds [5 minutes], and withdraws, leaving his hollow laughter in the distance.

He is not trying to kill the party here. He is trying to fray them.

Worgs test thresholds. They attempt to breach doors and windows on a d6 roll of 1 or 2 per turn [per 10 minutes]. Bats foul spellcasting, forcing dexterity checks on material components. Charm seeks invitation. The invitation rule binds Strahd: he cannot enter a building until someone inside invites him in, and he works on charming a character into doing so.

This is how the party learns two things before the castle. First, Strahd attacks indirectly by preference. Second, the invitation rule matters, and a PC who fails a charm save and extends the invitation unlocks the building to him for the duration of the adventure.

The omission of Ireena is equally important. Neither Strahd nor his worgs ever attack Ireena Kolyana. The module is explicit. A player who notices that the worgs and bats harry everyone except her has seen one of the adventure's key truths before anyone explains it. Ismark will confirm it in conversation later (E2 and E4 in Part III), but the evidence is on the floor before he does.

4. The Svalich woods

On later traversal, the woods leave marks on the party. They are the pressure corridor between shelter and exposure, and the module's worg mechanics come into their own once the village is behind the party: the north fork to Tser Pool, the road west in pursuit, the road east in retreat.

4a. The worgs

The wolf howls function as tempo rather than as a cue to roll for combat. The logic sits on p.10. A d6 roll every turn [every 10 minutes]: on a 4 or higher, one wolf cries in the distance. Another cry joins each round [each minute]. After five rounds of howling, the worgs attack. The party hears wolves. What reaches them is worgs.

The sound gathers. The party has time to decide whether to stand, run, or prepare. The encounter is not mainly about danger by numbers. The point is that the road is already being hunted, and the party has time to hear it coming.

4b. The asymmetry

The module's logic is five worgs on the way in, twenty-five on the way out.

This is the module stating its directional truth in mechanics. A party that tests retreat learns the valley's direction by walking into twenty-five worgs on the road they came down.

The fog would have killed them if they reached the gates. The worgs make sure they do not reach the gates.

4c. What the woods are for

The damage should be allowed to land. HD 4+4 worgs do not overwhelm a balanced party at levels 5 to 7, but they cost hit points and spell slots, and they tell the party something a fresh arrival at the village does not know. The woods are not an obstacle to get past. They are the adventure introducing its terms.

5. Where Part II should stop

The clean stopping point is the first settled understanding of Barovia's operating rhythm:

the road in, the body, the letter, the village, day as oppressive, night as lethal, retreat as false option.

That is a complete Part II. The party is inside the valley, has a destination, has a threat named, has the valley's two registers distinguished, and has seen or at minimum can infer the cost of trying to leave. Everything else belongs to the village, to the road up, to the castle, to the climax.

Part III takes the party into the village proper from here, to Ismark, Ireena, the church, Bildrath, and the first social choices.

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