

Ravenloft I6 Playability Guide

Part III

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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. Arrival in the village

Part II ended with the party walking into the village of Barovia on the east road, tired and short on certainty. The church and the castle were the two sightlines visible above the rooftops. Part III opens at the first cobblestone.

1a. The village's geography, east to north

The village is a small grid of cobbled streets, shuttered houses, and a single active square. The main road runs east to west into that square, then bends and climbs north out of the village toward the cliffs, the church, and the road up to the castle. The party enters from the east. The square is a few minutes walk from the first shuttered houses. The church stands on the rise at the north end, against the pillar-stone. The Burgomaster's house sits on the north road between the square and the church rise. Mad Mary's townhouse is off a side street within earshot of the square.

1b. What the square delivers, and what it does not

The sounds of the village are specific and few. The cobblestones underfoot. The fog that smothers carriage noise. The creak of shutters against weather. And from the direction of Mad Mary's house, a woman's sobbing that the module's own wording calls a mournful sobbing that echoes through the streets from a distance. The tavern's light is visible in the fog from most of the square. The mercantile's is visible from the square itself. Everything else the village contains is either shuttered or absent.

Part II Section 3c already framed the village as a community in active late-stage attrition. Arrival at the square is where that framing becomes visible.

2. Walking the village

The order below is the order a party walking in from the east and exploring outward will find the locations. Ismark's offer at E2 can short-circuit that order, and in the module's designed sequence usually does: a party that accepts his offer goes directly from E2 to E4 with him, visiting E1 later or not at all. Both orderings work. The walk pays more. The funnel gets to Ireena faster.

2a. E2, the Blood of the Vine Tavern

The tavern is the only lit commercial building the party sees on arrival, and the module's own description has it thrusting a shaft of light into the main square. For a party new to the valley this is the natural first door.

Inside is thin. Arik, the barkeep, cleans glasses in a dull rhythm, takes orders in a hollow voice, and ignores questions. Three Rhenari sit at a table near the door, owners of the tavern and its standing enforcers with customers who do not pay. The Rhenari are the guide's name for the itinerant clan the module calls "gypsies," introduced in Part I Section 2. They are otherwise disinterested in the party. Ismark the Lesser sits in the shadows to the right, sipping wine, waiting to be approached.

The tavern is a meeting-point, not a place the party learns much by sitting in. Arik gives nothing, the Rhenari give nothing, the patrons cower. What the tavern delivers is Ismark. He is the Burgomaster's son, and he reveals that on approach. He takes the party to the Burgomaster's house (E4) to meet his adopted sister, Ireena Kolyana, who has been bitten twice by the vampire and can no longer be protected in the village. He is tight-lipped on everything except what concerns his sister.

A party that shows Ismark a letter purporting to be from the Burgomaster gets an immediate reading of it. In the module's as-written opening, Ismark confirms the tavern letter is not his father's hand. In the camouflaged opening from Part II, there was no forgery to confirm, and Ismark instead confirms that the body-letter is his father's.

2b. E1, Bildrath's Mercantile

Bidrath's is the other lit building on the square, across from the tavern. It sells the module's entire AD&D shopping list except religious items, livestock, and transport. Everything is ten times the normal price. Bildrath trades regularly with the Rhenari. Anyone else is an opportunity he prices accordingly.

This matters practically. The party is about to spend the next phase of the adventure on a road that is hunted by night and then inside a castle that kills by design. What they need in their packs (torches, oil, rope, arrows, iron rations) they can get here, and only here, at ten times book. A party that tries to haggle gets Parriwimple, Bildrath's stock-boy and enforcer, a 9th-level fighter with 50 hit points and damage that breaks characters who test him. Bildrath does not bargain, does not offer sanctuary, and does not engage with the village's crisis. He serves himself.

The mercantile is not a place the party lingers. It is a tax on underequipped arrival, paid once.

2c. E3, Mad Mary's Townhouse

The sobbing the party heard from the square leads here. The house is boarded up from the inside. Mad Mary sits upstairs in an otherwise empty bedroom, barely registering visitors. Her daughter Gertruda was hidden in the house her whole life and has escaped. Mary fears the worst.

Mary fears correctly. Part I Section 4e's resource layer noted Gertruda's location: the Bedchamber (K42) in Strahd's personal apartments, untouched so far because he is intent on his current plot and is saving her for later. A party that notes the mother's name and the missing daughter's name will recognise Gertruda when they find her in the castle. The thread does not pay out in the village. It pays out in K42, and the payoff is proportional to whether the party has met the mother.

For play in the village, Mad Mary gives nothing the party can act on. She is a condition, not a quest.

2d. E4 and E5, the Burgomaster's home

The house sits behind a rusting iron fence on the north road. The module's description is specific: gates twisted and torn, one cast aside and one swinging crazily, weeds choking the grounds, claw marks on the walls, great black blottings of old fire, every window barred with planks. A path has been worn in the weeds around the house, as if something has been walking its perimeter. This is the state of the place Ismark is taking them to.

Inside, Ireena bars the door. She opens it on recognition of Ismark or on conviction that the visitors are not Strahd's. Inside is well furnished but wearing: overuse of holy symbols in every room, shutters nailed, and in a side drawing room the Burgomaster Kolyan Indirovich lies dead among candles, ten days gone. The stench is the stench of a body kept indoors too long.

Ireena is what the adventure has been pointing to since the Burgomaster's letter first named her. She has been bitten twice. She remembers no past before the Burgomaster found her near the pillar-stone. She carries nothing of the holy symbol that once protected her, because it was stolen. The wolves and the vampire do not attack her, which means the house has been quiet at night, which is why her father died of fear rather than claws. The party is her only remaining protection.

Ismark's request is three-part: the burial of his father, the safe relocation of Ireena, and their accompaniment while the first two are done. The module assumes she will leave with the party. Where she goes is not specified. The two natural choices are Tser Pool, where Madam Eva's camp sits and the Rhenari offer a neutrality the village cannot, and the church, where Donavich's sanctuary is real if limited. Both put the party on the road north, which is Part IV. The contradiction that Part I established, that the Rhenari are in Strahd's service, sits quietly under the Tser Pool option. Ireena does not know it. The party probably does not yet either.

For play, the guest house (E5) should not be treated as equivalent shelter to the main house. This matters if the burial ceremony runs slow and night falls on them.

2e. E6, the Church

The church stands at the far north end of the village, on a rise at the base of the castle's pillar-stone. The module describes it as sagging, worn, bell tower hanging to one side, light shining through holes in the roof. Inside is a shambles, with overturned benches. At the altar is Donavich, hoarse from a full night of prayer.

Donavich is exhausted because his prayers are the only thing keeping the church a place of good. Part II Section 3c noted the church's standing protection. The village church should be understood as the nearest village-scale analogue to the castle's sacred spaces, not a fortress, but a place whose sanctity matters while it is actively maintained. He has been praying every night for longer than the module quantifies.

He gives the party three things. First, the church's sanctuary for Ireena if she wants it. Second, a piece of information that reshapes the adventure: there is a book in the library of Ravenloft that may hold the means of destroying Strahd, because Strahd kept meticulous notes on everything he did, and some weakness may be written there. This is the village-phase lead toward Strahd's own writings, which the adventure later concretises as the Tome of Strahd. Third, the origin of Ireena: she was found as a girl at the edge of the

Svalich woods near the pillar-stone, by Kolyan Indirovich, and adopted. Ireena does not know this. Donavich does.

2f. E7, the Cemetery

The cemetery is quiet by day. At midnight a procession of one hundred spirits rises from the graves and walks up the road to the castle, where they climb to the peak and throw themselves down the shaft (K18a). This is a nightly event. The spirits cannot be damaged, communicated with, or turned. They will not engage the party.

The cemetery is atmosphere rather than encounter. It tells a party who watches it at midnight that the dead of the valley are not resting, and that Castle Ravenloft is where they go. Part I Section 4e's geography note tracked the spirits up the chapel staircase and through the High Tower Shaft. This is the origin of that traffic. The cemetery is the gate through which the valley's dead leave every night.

3. What the village gives the party

The walk through E1 to E7 hands the party three durable threads. They are what Part III is actually for.

3a. Ismark's proposal

Ismark wants his sister moved somewhere safe and his father buried. He asks the party to help with both. This is the adventure's immediate hook once the opening has landed. It gives the party a named NPC they are helping, a stated destination, and an in-fiction reason to take the north road out of the village. Ismark also comes with them, at least until Ireena is lodged. He is a minor fighter with decent stats. He is not a second party member, but he is a familiar face on the road.

3b. Donavich's knowledge

The church is where the party first learns that Strahd's own writings may contain the means of destroying him. A party that does not visit the church does not learn it exists. This is the only place in Part III where the party gets told, in plain language, that a specific object in the castle may hold Strahd's weakness. It is the reason a party that might otherwise run straight at Strahd with fighters and a cleric has a reason to search the castle methodically instead.

Donavich's knowledge of Ireena's origin is the smaller second gift of the visit. It is not actionable in the village phase. It is information the party will use later if they are paying attention to Tatyana as she returns to the story.

3c. Ireena's state as timer

Ireena has been bitten twice. The module does not set a fixed countdown to a third bite, but the logic of the harassment pattern and Strahd's goals makes the trajectory concrete enough. Every night she is in Barovia she is exposed. Every night the party delays the window narrows. She is the reason the village is not a place to rest.

Her travelling with the party changes the composition of every encounter. The module is explicit that the wolves and Strahd never attack her. A party that realises this can use it. A DM playing Strahd coherently should not have him Fireball a room she is in. The worgs will go around her. This is not a shield for the party, but it is a piece of terrain they now carry.

4. The cost of staying too long in the village proper

Most of the village is not a fortress. A party that treats the tavern or the Burgomaster's house as one pays for the mistake in specific ways. The church is a separate case and Section 5 takes it on its own terms.

4a. The nightly harassment compounding

Part II Section 3f set out Strahd's nightly harassment: 4d4 worgs, 10d10 bats, five rounds [5 minutes], every night the party stays anywhere other than Castle Ravenloft. The village is anywhere other than Castle Ravenloft. Every night in E4 or E5 costs the party the same attrition.

The attrition is not hit-point damage alone. It is spell slots the cleric burns to patch up after wolf-breaches, arrows lost in the dark, food stocks run down because the village has none to share, and sleep lost to the bat-disruption of watch rotations. The party that leaves on day two is in better shape than the party that leaves on day five, materially so. The cleric's prepared list and the wizard's Magic Missiles come off the top of the pile that was meant for the castle.

4b. Strahd's intelligence cycle, and his learning window

Part I Section 4c's six-hour intelligence cycle runs four times daily, each check a 60% chance of giving Strahd the party's position. A party in a static location fails more of these than a party moving. By day three in the village, Strahd has had twelve chances to locate the party, and on average will have succeeded about seven times. He has had three nights of harassment, watched which spells came out and in what order, and re-memorised his loadout to counter them. Part I Section 4e's learning layer is live in the village as it is in the castle. The Strahd the party meets in K37 or wherever his Fortunes card placed him is already shaped by what he has seen them do on the village streets.

This is the cost the party cannot feel in the moment. It is the difference between a Strahd who leads with the spells the module prints and a Strahd who leads with Protection from Good and Mirror Image because he has watched the wizard burn four Magic Missiles trying to break a worg-pack on night two.

4c. Bildrath's prices and the purse

Every resupply run at E1 is a ten-times-book tax. A party that thinks they will live in the village and buy what they need, night by night, empties their purse before they reach the castle. There is no banking in Barovia. There is no recovery. Gold spent at Bildrath's is gold removed from the adventure, and Bildrath does not offer any of it back.

A single trip through E1 to outfit the expedition is a cost the party absorbs. A week of trips is a cost that bites.

4d. Ireena, and the third bite

The module does not print a number of bites after which Ireena is lost. The logic of Strahd's scripted strikes, his goals under the Fortunes reading (the bride goal most directly), and the charm-gaze-and-invitation mechanic combine into a clear enough trajectory. A party that delays long enough to give Strahd another clean approach to Ireena gives him another bite. Further successful approaches move her closer to the condition Strahd wants. The module does not print a neat countdown, but it gives enough pressure that delay should feel dangerous. The village is not a safe place for her in the way the road is

not safe, and the church only partially is. She travels with the party because the party is moving. A party that stops moving stops being a shield.

5. The church as a temporary hold-out

The church is the one position in the village a careful party may reasonably decide to hold. The protection is real. Donavich can accept them. The church is out of the way, above the square against the pillar-stone, and it has held against the valley for longer than any other building the party has seen. A party reading the situation correctly sees a defensible position with a known cleric on the premises, a sanctuary effect that binds Strahd personally, and a roof over Ireena's head that is not her father's house.

The case is strengthened by a finite-roster observation. Strahd's scripted strikes are one-use each. His castle forces (the witches at K56, the shadow demon at K72, Helga at K32, the 3,000 bats at K84) do not respawn once engaged. The monsters on the night encounter tables draw from a probabilistic pool, not an infinite one. A party that can sustain a defensive position forces Strahd to spend bounded assets against structural disadvantage. He knows this. Part I Section 4e's pre-cached layer puts "fight the whole party together in open ground" on his list of declined engagements, and a fortified church is the same shape of engagement with worse terms for him.

The threat to the church is therefore not the frontal assault. It is the set of non-player actions Strahd takes to compromise the sanctuary without storming it.

5a. What the protection covers, and what it does not

The protection is Donavich's. The church is a place of active sanctity only as long as he prays. He is a 2nd-level cleric with 10 hit points and was hoarse and weak the first time the party met him. The prayers are not a standing ward. They are active maintenance, nightly, by one exhausted man.

The sanctuary's character can be usefully compared to the Tower Chapel at K15 noted in Part I Section 4e. Nothing attacks PCs inside while the prayer holds. Strahd has strong reasons not to test the church directly while Donavich's prayers hold, and the invitation rules give him better indirect tools than a frontal breach. The exterior follows standard rules. Wolves can attack doors and windows. Bats can foul spellcasting. The harassment pattern from Part II Section 3f runs at the church like anywhere else. What the protection prevents is successful attack inside, not the pressure that keeps the party from leaving.

5b. How Strahd takes the sanctuary without storming it

Each of the actions below is within Strahd's character and his capabilities. None of them requires him to enter the church.

Attriting Donavich. The prayers are active work by an exhausted 2nd-level cleric. Every night of harassment at the church exterior is another night's sleep he does not get, another day of recovery he cannot take, another prayer delivered hoarser than the last. Strahd does not need to enter the church to attack its protection. Wolves, bats, charm attempts, fear, lack of sleep, and the visible suffering of the village all work on Donavich as much as they work on the party. The failure mode is not sudden. It is an eventual night where he cannot sustain the prayer, and the protection lapses. Strahd does not have to predict the night. He has to keep the pressure on until it comes.

Targeting the invitation. The charm-gaze mechanic runs every night the party is harassed. A party sleeping in one place for multiple nights gives Strahd repeated attempts against

the same roster of saves. The church's protection does not prevent a charmed party member from crossing the threshold and extending the invitation from outside. Once extended, Strahd enters the building on a night when the prayer has lapsed or is weakest. The invitation is the only lever he needs to pull, and the party provides it for him by staying in place long enough for the dice to find a failure.

Running Ireena's timer regardless. The church's protection is a shield for those inside. It does not stop the valley from consuming her. She has been bitten twice. Her condition degrades whether she is in the Burgomaster's house, the guest house, the church, or on the road. Strahd's goal under the bride reading is explicit pursuit. His other goals do not remove her degradation, they only change what he intends to do with her at its end. A party that waits for Donavich to strengthen is waiting while Ireena declines.

Attriting the village selectively. Part I Section 4e's pre-cached layer excludes wholesale destruction of the village because Strahd needs the population. It does not exclude the removal of specific individuals whose absence pressures the party. Mad Mary in her boarded house. Arik at the tavern. The lone men in the 60% occupied houses. Ismark, if the party has released him. Each loss is ambient evidence that the shield extends only to those inside it, and that what the party is not protecting is being taken while they sit.

Starving them out. Bildrath is the only source of supply in the village, and his prices are ten times book. A party fortified at the church is not resupplying at the mercantile without exposure and purse-cost. Food, oil, torches, and arrows run down on a fixed schedule. Eventually the party sends someone out, and that someone is a resource on the road rather than behind the sanctuary.

5c. The asymmetry

The hold-out is not useless. A party that sustains it for several days has rested, recovered spell slots, and learned more about the valley than a party that moved through. They have watched the cemetery procession. They have seen Strahd's harassment fail against the sanctuary more than once, which is operational intelligence about his constraints. Any scripted strike or standing castle force he has spent against them is permanently off his board.

What they have lost is time on Ireena's timer, supplies on Bildrath's terms, and the tempo advantage against a Strahd who has been watching them fortify. Part I Section 4e's learning layer is live through the hold-out. Every night the party spends at the church is a night Strahd spends studying their watch rotations, their charm-save performance, and their spell usage under a repeated stimulus. The Strahd they eventually walk out to face is optimised against the party that held the church, not the party that walked through the village.

The hold-out is a legitimate strategic choice. It is not a safe one. The module supports it without punishing it arbitrarily. Strahd takes it from them by patient pressure on the conditions of the sanctuary, never by storming it.

6. Where Part III should stop

The clean stopping point is the party's departure from the village on the north road with Ireena and Ismark, carrying whatever Bildrath was willing to sell them, with the Tome of Strahd named, and with the cemetery's midnight procession seen or at least inferred. That is true whether the party walked the village in a single day and left the next morning, or held the church for a week before Strahd's pressure broke the position.

That is a complete Part III. The party has met the village's living NPCs, understood its condition, picked up the three threads the village hands them, and set themselves on the only outbound path the valley still offers. Everything else belongs to the road up, the Tser Pool encampment, and the castle.

Part IV takes the party north from here, through the road junction (F), to Tser Pool (G and G1), Tser Falls (H), and the carriage at I. It is the stretch where the Rhenari reveal themselves in full, Madam Eva runs the Fortunes reading, and the party crosses the last piece of mundane geography before the castle.

This document is a printable companion to the web version at vaultsoftheodd.com. Formatted for A4 and intended for table reference during play.