

Van Richten's Guide to Vampires



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Special thanks: to Bruce Heard, for tossing this my way.

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ISBN 1-56076-151-2

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INTRODUCTION

*ut first on Earth as vampyr sent,
Thy corpse shall from its tomb be
rent,
Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
And suck the blood of all thy race.*

—Lord Byron

My name is Dr. Rudolph Van Richten. By my background I am a scholar and a doctor. As I was growing up in Darkon, I believed it was my destiny to heal people, to treat sicknesses of the body with the herbal cures I learned from my grandmother.

Yet Fate flaunted my beliefs. I suffered a personal loss of such gravity, and was forced into an act of such trauma, that my entire direction in life was forever changed. Even though it still pains me to remember, it is important for the sake of what will follow to recount those unhappy events here.

My life in Darkon was placid, enjoyable. I was married to my childhood sweetheart, a goldentressed girl named Ingrid, and I thought my joy was complete when I learned that my young wife would soon bear a child. I still remember the birth of my son, whom I named Erasmus, meaning “beloved” in a little-known tongue, as one of the happiest days of my life. He possessed the radiant fair looks of his mother, and from me he inherited a quickness of mind and a sense of honor that set him apart from other children.

For fourteen summers Erasmus was my pride and joy. And then, tragically, he was taken from me—not by the arms of death, but by purely unnatural agents. While I was treating a woman in a nearby village, my son was set upon by *vistari*, the gypsies who wander the lands and travel the strange Mists, and swept away. When I returned home and found him gone, my panic-stricken wife bewailed the circumstances of the dangerous people who had stolen our child.

I swore an oath to myself that I would never rest until Erasmus was freed from whatever unholy fate possessed him. Leaving my affairs in the capable hands of my understanding Ingrid and committing my future to the search, I set off in pursuit.

The details of my journey are immaterial here. The trail was cold and difficult to find. Suffice it to say that I finally tracked the *vistani* caravan to Richemulot. Erasmus was not with them, but I *extracted* his whereabouts from the gypsy leader. They sold my son, I learned, sold him into servitude, to a local landowner who styled himself “Baron Metus.” I hurried to the home of the Baron and demanded that he return my son immediately.

I can still, to this day, recall my first glimpse of Metus. He was a tall man, slender and graceful in his movements. His pale face was fine of feature, and his eyes were as black as pools of ink. As he heard my demand, his thin, expressive lips curled in a smile that could only be described as exceedingly cruel. He laughed coldly and turned his back on me. I was escorted from his property by his minions.

I camped that night just outside the walls surrounding Metus’ land, and darkness and despair enfolded me. But then, around midnight, Erasmus came to me! He had evaded the Baron’s soldiers and climbed the wall. He had something horrible to tell me.

I think that I knew the truth even before he spoke the words, as soon as I saw the ivory pallor of his face under the moonlight, as soon as I glimpsed the dark pits that were his eyes. The words he uttered only confirmed what I already knew.

My son was dead.

Yet still he walked! Life in death, death in life—such was his destiny. The Baron was a vampire, and he had passed on that dark gift to my only son! I wept there in the night, cried the inconsolable tears of a terrified child.

But the worst was yet to come. My son had something to ask of me. The dark gift had only recently been given and his thoughts still ran in

INTRODUCTION

the patterns of a mortal mind. He felt more kinship with me, with the living, than he did with the Baron and others of his kind. But, he told me, he could feel those old patterns of thought slipping away. Soon, he believed, the horror he felt for his condition would fade, and he would forget what it was like to be a mortal. He would become a monster like the Baron!

And so Erasmus begged me to save him from this fate. He begged me to destroy him, right then, that very night. He had even brought with him a sharpened wooden stake and a mallet with which to pound it through his chest!

I doubt that anyone can ever truly understand the torment I suffered. My son was dead; in my mind I knew that to be true. But here he was still, standing before me, talking to me. How could I find the capacity in my heart to kill him? And how could I not? How could I damn him to an eternity of torment?

For several hours, as the moon sank toward the distant horizon, we talked. We relived together the joyous times we had shared, the poignant memories. We cried together. And then, as the harbinger of dawn tinted pink the sky, Erasmus Van Richten lay himself down upon the bosom of the meadow and wordlessly handed me the stake and the mallet. Our gazes met for one last time, then he closed his eyes and composed himself as if for sleep.

I positioned the point of the stake over my son's heart . . . and brought down the mallet. With each blow, the agony in my heart could have been no greater if the stake had been sinking into my own breast. When it was done, I lay beside the body of my son and wept again. I wept until the first rays of the sun touched his young body and reduced it to ash.

It took all the effort of my will to not lie down beside the dust that had been my precious son and slip into the darkness of death. Only the thought of Ingrid, waiting anxiously at home, prevented me from taking my own life. I turned my back on the horror and bent my steps to the weeks-long journey home.

But I found that horror followed me—in fact,

preceded me. When I reached my home, I found my beloved Ingrid dead! There was a note from Metus, stating that matters were now in balance. I had taken something from him that he valued—I can only presume he meant Erasmus—and so he had taken from me something that I valued.

It was at that moment, as I knelt weeping beside the cold, white body of my beloved Ingrid, that my destiny was turned. I had always prided myself on my ability to rid the body of disease or poison. Now I knew that this was as nothing compared to the importance of ridding society of a most evil “disease and poison.” On that terrible day, I swore myself to a new career: the pursuit and destruction of those creatures such as the one that had taken my son and wife from me, that feed on the body of society as a cancer feeds on the body of man. And I swore that my first quarry would be Baron Metus!

It has been almost three decades since that fateful day. Over the intervening years, I have learned much about my quarry, about the enemies that threaten us all.

Today, I feel my advancing age and I can sense the chill wind of mortality blowing through my soul. It is time to pass on what I have learned, so future generations may pick up the stake and mallet when I am forced to lay them down. Thus, I am setting pen to paper in the hope that this tome will preserve what I have learned at such great cost.

Remember: The fight against creatures of darkness is a difficult, and often painful one! But it is a good fight, and one that must be fought. If this work inspires but one person to follow in my footsteps, then I have succeeded and my life's work has not been for naught.

Editor's Note: Game applications of Dr. Van Richten's guide appear at the end of each chapter, in gray-screened text. For example, Van Richten discusses the inhuman speed of vampires in Chapter III, “Vampiric Powers,” so vampire movement rates appear at the end of that chapter.

THE BACKGROUND OF VAMPIRISM

In almost every culture, on almost every world, tales of vampirism exist to strike fear in both small children and grown adults. These tales are generally considered folklore by sensible people, and indeed it seems that the existence of the living dead is both implausible and impossible. Why then, do cultures so separated by distance and time that they have not even the smallest commonality, share nearly identical tales of supernatural creatures that drink the blood of the living?

I have recorded tales of a place called Krynn, and a race of sea elves who claim that if one of their race is buried on land, it will rise from the dead to seek vengeance on its brothers by drinking their blood. A native of another world, called Toril, tells a tale of a great undead beast that used to be a man. This beast roams the plains



and searches for lone people to attack; the tale relates that it eats the internal organs of its prey. From still another place, called Oerth, a man has told me of a family curse that causes the first-born male in every twelfth generation to rise after death to drink the blood of the family unless the body is burned at burial.

These three worlds, so far from the lands of mist that I know them only by story and rumor, share many tales speaking of once-living men walking the land and slaying the living. Can this be coincidence? Rather, it would indicate that these tales can only be the truth, speaking as they do of undead lords who tread upon the domain of the living.

The Question of Origins

How did vampirism get its start? If new vampires are spawned by other vampires, as virtually all tales would have us believe, how then was the first vampire created? These questions have plagued sages as long as the undead monsters themselves have plagued mankind. Perhaps the answer lies in Barovia.

The gift—or curse—of immortality was not thrust upon Strahd Von Zarovich, Lord of Barovia, by another vampire; rather, he stole it from the lips of death. I quote the following text from the diary of the Bard Gregorri Kolyan, who supposedly was captured by Strahd only to be released sometime later with the complete story of the creature. I do not know why Strahd allowed Gregorri to leave with this vital information. Perhaps the vampire felt a need to have his story told after years of exile and secrecy.

September 8, 453: Barovia is a stranger place now, although I cannot exactly put my finger on any changes. There is a physical nature to this change: colors are not as vibrant, sounds not as immediate; but the major change is in the people, in the life-blood of the land.

As near as I can tell, the change began about two years ago. I can remember a day when I