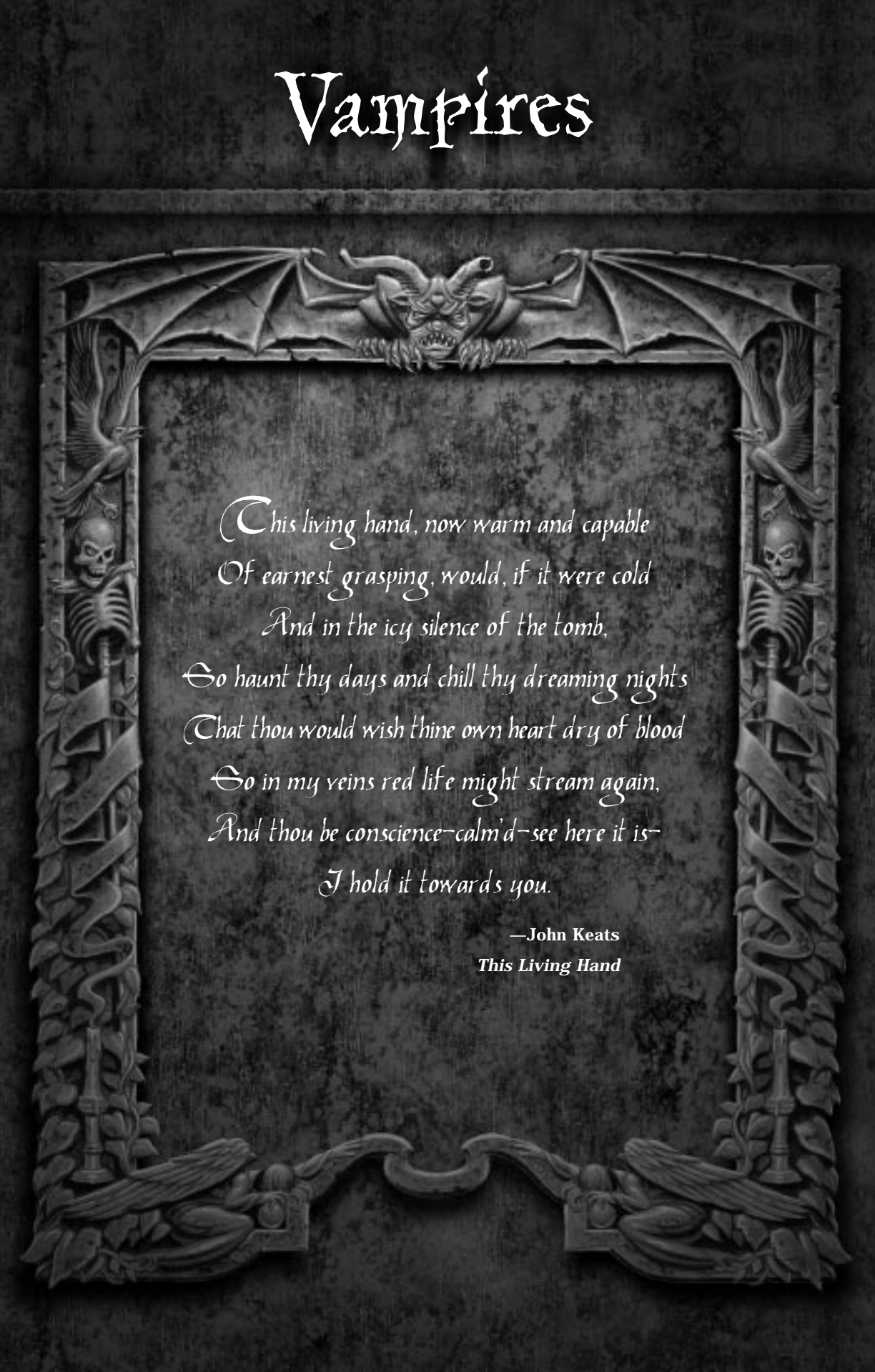


Vampires



*This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
I hold it towards you.*

—John Keats
This Living Hand

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*But 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

INTRODUCTION



My name is Dr. Rudolph van Richten. By my background, I am a scholar and a doctor. As I was growing up in the land of 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, was forced into an act of such trauma, that my entire direction in life was forever changed. Even though it still pains me to recall, 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 golden-tressed 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. My son was set upon by Vistani—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 the domain of Barovia. 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.

To this day, I still 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. His minions escorted me from his property.

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 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, speaking 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 Two, “Vampiric Powers,” so vampire movement rates appear at the end of that chapter within a gray-screened block of text.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE BACKGROUND OF VAMPIRISM



In almost every world, tales of vampirism exist to strike fear in both small children and grown adults. Sensible people generally consider these tales folklore, 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 Land of Mists, that I know them only by story and rumor, share many tales 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 begin? 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 used to play my songs in the local taverns and people would dance and

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sing. Now they seem satisfied just to sit and drink and to talk in hushed whispers. There is a dampness over their souls, like a dreary autumn day.

November 2, 453: I am on to something. It seems that my feelings about the people of Barovia have not simply been my imagination. There is a source, a spiritual suppression if you will, behind the changes. I have no means of verifying this, no magical detection devices that will lead me to it; I have only my heart and my love for the land and its people.

March 29, 454: For nearly five months I have searched for the answer to the puzzle. Barovia is in danger and no one else seems aware of it; I would swear to it. But it is not a danger to which people respond, not a physical enemy at the gates of a city or the border of a land. The enemy is within, within the hearts and minds of the Barovian people. Just last week I purchased some supplies from the market. The merchant packaged the items, handed them to me, and then turned away before I could pay him. It was as if he cared not about being paid. Very odd, almost self-destructive behavior pervades Barovia.

I have many suspicions. Many would call them paranoid, would say that my mind has become unbalanced. On certain days, when the sun warms the land and the birds sing in the trees, I myself doubt my certitude. But then I find my eyes drawn up, up to the castle on the hill,

Castle Ravenloft. What mysteries do its walls hold within them—walls that are tall and unyielding like the secrets of an old man's heart? Strahd von Zarovich has ruled Barovia for over a century and has not been seen in half that amount of time. Each day, the knowledge comes upon me with more certainty: I must learn more about this dark enigma of a man. And I fear I must do the unthinkable: go to the castle itself and investigate its enigma first-hand.

April 8, 454: Fear—cold and dripping, like blood from a hanging corpse—has been my constant companion for several weeks. The closer I get to that accursed Castle Ravenloft, the stronger I feel the grip of terror's icy hand. There can be no doubt now as to the source of Barovia's plight.

April 10, 454: I need search no longer. The object of my quest has not only appeared to me, but sequestered me away within his foul domicile! Late last night, he appeared in my room like some silent apparition from the grave. Ordering me to take up my quills, inks, and parchment, he seized me and leaped out my window to his waiting coach. This confirmed my suspicions that Strahd von Zarovich is other than a natural man, you see, for my window is four stories from the ground!

April 15, 454: For five days and nights I have literally been Strahd's prisoner in Castle Ravenloft. Strange how the castle seems so warm and cozy inside, not the lurking horror its external visage portrays. I have discovered many things about Strahd and may scribe them later in a tome dedicated to such an endeavor. I feel, however, that this task will never be accomplished, for how can this man allow me to live when I know such dark secrets about him. He has shared himself, all his intimate secrets, with me as if I were his dearest friend.

Not a man, Strahd walks the land as a vampire—a once-living creature that now feeds on the blood of the living! Although there are endless details about his actions, mannerisms, and appearance that I wish to portray, in this journal I will pen only one aspect of him: his transformation from living to undead. And I will do so immediately, lest I forget the smallest detail.

It is a great testament to the sleepy, lethargic nature of Barovia that no one

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has questioned the rule of Strahd von Zarovich. He rarely, if ever, shows himself publicly. Hence, it has been puzzling that he has ruled Barovia unchallenged for more than a century. I now know the answer to this riddle, but I am no more comforted.

In life, Strahd was tossed upon a sea of emotion and jealousy. His greatest jealousy was toward his brother, Sergei, who was young and handsome. To add to this, Sergei had the love of a beautiful girl named Tatyana. Envy swept over Strahd like a breaking sea, for he, too, loved Tatyana. As time passed, these natural emotions twisted into grotesque forms. His love became an overwhelming need to possess the object of that love, and envy grew into spite, and eventually into hatred.

At first, Strahd merely intended to frustrate Sergei's plans to marry Tatyana. But then Strahd's mind, apparently already twisted, broke, and he decided that only the death of his younger brother would give him what he wanted: sole possession of Tatyana. He planned this assassination, this fratricide, in private and—so he thought—in silence. But in his overwrought state, Strahd was given to speaking aloud as he strode his chambers alone. An officer of the guard, who was a personal friend to Sergei, walked the battlements just beyond Strahd's window and overheard the elder von Zarovich's plans. Stricken with horror, he knew he had to warn Sergei at once. He turned to leave his post at the battlements, but as he did, the scabbard of his sword struck the stonework.

Strahd heard the faint sound! Immediately, he snatched up his own weapon and hurled himself out the window, onto the battlement. With a curse, he aimed a whistling cut at the guard's head. That officer was a veteran swordsman, however, and parried the blow. Although he had no

desire to harm Strahd, his master, the officer was now forced to defend himself.

By Strahd's account, the battle was fierce and will make for a great song, should I live to compose it. Both men were excellent swordsmen—Strahd from his years as a general and the officer from his constant training. Yet Strahd's madness gave him the edge, and he finally struck down the officer . . . but not before he himself had taken a wound that would have slain a lesser man instantly.

Strahd von Zarovich was as good as dead. In his mind he knew that, but his hatred and rage would not allow his failing body peace. As the lifeblood poured from his body, Strahd made a pact with Death. He reached over, grabbed the dead guardsman, and drank the blood of the corpse.

Strahd would now live free from Death forever, cheating that dark and shadowy figure! But the pact required another act to be complete. He would have to kill his brother Sergei on his wedding day to finally seal the wicked contract.

Strahd hid the guard's body, awaiting Sergei's wedding day. As the time passed, Strahd found his charade more and more difficult to maintain. The daylight hours were becoming increasingly uncomfortable and the naked rays of the sun physically painful to his eyes and skin. He also found it difficult to eat food, which hardly satisfied his hunger. The transformation to whatever creature Death had in mind for him was beginning.

On the day of the wedding Strahd sought out Sergei and instigated a fight, intending in this way to give himself some justification for killing the young man. Strahd expected his young and fit brother to be a challenge to defeat, but quickly found that his physical strength had increased far beyond its previous limit. With but a single, cruel blow Strahd felled his

brother and his pact with Death was complete. Strahd von Zarovich had become a vampire!

No doubt perceptive readers will have noticed the same gaps in this narrative that I spotted when it first came to my attention. For instance, how exactly did Strahd von Zarovich strike a “pact with Death?” As “Death” is merely a cessation of life, what possible manifestation of this natural condition could propose or accept such a pact?

It is questions such as these that force me to doubt the complete veracity of Gregorri’s tale. Perhaps this famous bard could not resist the urge to embellish upon the tale told to him by von Zarovich (although the diary entry shows little of the internal consistency and stylistic brilliance characteristic of tales known to have been created by Gregorri Kolyan). More likely is the possibility that von Zarovich lied to the bard for his own reasons. This might explain Kolyan’s eventual escape or release: the vampire wished to use him to spread misinformation. Or, in the perhaps most likely interpretation, von Zarovich lied, but not only to Kolyan. Aging humans often color or alter their memories of events that were less than flattering to them. In humans this tendency appears in just a few years. How great may the tendency to embellish be in a creature that has lived for centuries and can expect to live forever? This interpretation raises a major question: how much trust can we put in anything spoken by Strahd Von Zarovich . . . or by any of his unholy kind?

The “Necrology” of Vampires

It should come as no surprise that a vampire’s metabolism is not like that of a mortal; in fact, strictly speaking, a vampire has no metabolism

whatsoever. Although all of the biological systems present in a living mortal are also present in a vampire, most of these systems are changed in function. For example, most vampires do not need to breathe, and can function equally well in an airless crypt or in the vacuum of a void. Provided that immersion in water is not deadly to them, they can function unimpaired on the ocean floor. Vampires do retain the use of their lungs, but only for speech.

Because vampires have no metabolism in the normal sense, metabolic toxins and poisons—ingested, inhaled, or insinuated—have absolutely no effect on the creatures. This is not to say there are not certain substances which, when insinuated into the body of a vampire, cause it serious or even lethal damage. These substances, although they may seem to function like poisons, are more like allergens and are usually specific to individual creatures. For example, I myself have dispatched a vampire that was sensitive to holly, and I have heard that the ash of burned alder wood is lethal to another certain vampire.

Some examples of other vampiric allergens are yew leaves, rose petals, salt, rice, silver, mistletoe, and lilies.

The digestive tract of a vampire is greatly modified from that of a living mortal. The stomach is frequently reduced in size, often to the size of a man’s clenched fist, simply because no vampire needs to ingest large volumes of solid food.

There is wide variation among vampires with regard to the ability to eat solid food. Some vampires are unable to eat normal food at all, and any attempt to do so results in immediate regurgitation. Others can eat solid food with no ill effects, although they extract no nourishment from the food, and pass the material through their bodies over a course of hours, as mortals do. In the middle

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ground, there are some vampires that can eat solid food, but must regurgitate it within a period ranging from minutes to hours. This issue may seem incidental, but it obviously has significant effects on a vampire's behavior, should the creature try to masquerade as a living creature.

The circulatory system of a vampire is little changed. The heart still pumps blood throughout the vessels of the monster's body. There are some differences, however. Because vampires have no need to extract oxygen from the air, their blood absorbs nothing from the lungs. This renders them completely immune to noxious gases that must be breathed to be effective. A vampire might inhale the gas—that is, draw it into its lungs—but the toxic chemicals in the gas would not cross from the lungs to the blood.

The blood of a vampire is also somewhat different from the blood of a mortal. When viewed normally, it has the same rich, red color as a mortal's blood. When it is viewed by transmitted light, such as when a vial of vampire blood is held up to a light source, it has a distinctive golden color. Blood drawn from an undestroyed vampire can manifest a wide variety of powers. In some cases, the blood is highly caustic, causing severe acid-like damage to anyone who touches it. In other cases, the blood bursts explosively into flame when exposed to sunlight. In still other cases, anyone who touches so much as one drop of the blood with bare skin instantly falls under the mental sway of the vampire. It is impossible to predict beforehand what effects the blood of a particular vampire might have, if any. There is one common factor: at the instant a vampire is destroyed, any samples of his blood immediately become completely inert, and frequently become rancid within seconds.

The sensory organs of vampires become much more sensitive than

those of their living analogues. If they did not already possess the power in life, vampires gain the ability to see in total darkness (infravision), typically with a range of some 90 feet. Their hearing also becomes much more acute, as does their sense of touch and smell; a vampire is exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to surprise.

Because a vampire does not require oxygen and, as is usually the case, must feed only once per day, where does it draw the energy required for the prodigious feats of which the creature is capable? Many sages disagree, but my own belief is that the creature has an innate link with what sages refer to as the Negative Material Plane.

Whatever the reason, vampires are much more resilient and robust than living creatures. They seem generally immune to exhaustion and to the debilitating effects of pain and exposure, and seem able to shrug off the negative consequences of many magical effects. They are totally immune to the effects of *sleep*, *charm*, and *hold* spells, and to other magical or psionic effects which mimic these spells. They are also totally immune to any magical effect that *specifically* causes paralysis. It is important to stress the word "specifically." While a vampire would be immune to the paralyzing touch of a ghoul or the dweomer of a *wand of paralyzation*, it could be affected by a potent enchantment, such as *alter reality* or *wish* that emulated the effect. (Any mage capable of casting such powerful magic would almost certainly choose an effect more significant than paralyzation, of course.) Like many other types of undead creatures, vampires sustain little damage from any effect based on cold or electricity, whether caused by spell, item, breath weapon, or even the elements.

Vampires are totally resistant to several beneficial spells as well. The creatures are completely immune to the effects of priestly curative or healing magic, such as *cure light wounds*, *heal*, etc. Because the failure of such spells might well give away the monster's true nature, a vampire masquerading as a mortal will often go to great lengths to avoid exposure to such magic.

A vampire's hair will never turn gray, nor will the creature show any other physical signs of aging unless it already had before death. In general, as long as the creature is well fed and functions according to whatever other restrictions are relevant to its existence, it will never appear any different from the way it did on the day of its mortal death. This does not mean that vampires will flaunt their unchanging appearance, because doing so will certainly attract too much unwanted attention. A vampire that chooses to live within or on the outskirts of the society of men will, in most cases, go to great lengths to masquerade as a normal human or demihuman, pretending to age and even to "die" to remove suspicion. This deception is discussed at length in Chapter Twelve, "The Facade."

Vampires of Different Racial Stock

Most of this guide's discussions about "typical" vampires generally refer to vampires that were (demi)humans when alive. There are some differences between these once-human vampires and those that arise from different racial stock.

Again, as with discussions of human vampires, these paragraphs refer to "typical" cases. A dwarven vampire (for instance) may exhibit specifically dwarven characteristics, may more closely resemble the human vampires, or may show attributes totally different from both. Perceptive readers will

Vampire Blood

Caustic vampire blood causes 1d6 hit points of damage if it contacts bare skin.

Explosive vampire blood (in a vial), when exposed to sunlight, inflicts 1d3 hit points of damage on anyone within 3 feet.

Vampire blood possessing a *charm person* effect has a saving throw penalty ranging from -1 to -5, depending on the age category of the vampire, beginning with Old.

Surprising a Vampire

In most situations, the chance of surprising a vampire is one-half the chance for a normal creature of the race and character class of the vampire while it was alive.

observe that a certain symbolism plays an integral role with most of these vampires. Their weaknesses and strengths are generally highly symbolic of the creatures' natures while alive. For example, some dwarven vampires may be highly reactive to weapons made of mithral, especially if they coveted the metal in life. This kind of symbolic significance is a common feature with vampires of all races and natures.

Compilers' Note: We have determined that, since Dr. van Richten penned the passage above, that each demihuman race does indeed exhibit "uncommon" abilities for vampires. Further, many of these abilities seem consistent within a racial stock; in other words, many dwarven vampires, for example, possess similar powers.

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