

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Blades of the Unicorn

By Ed Greenwood

*How and where and when did the **Forgotten Realms** start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs **D&D** adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.*

he Realms have never had any shortage of secret societies, hidden cabals, and underground cults. I know; I put most of them there.

It hasn't come as a surprise to me how much gamers have loved these mysterious power groups down the years, either. Long before the wider world knew about the Cult of the Dragon or the Zhentarim—and by "wider world," I mean both the real wider world and most of Faerûn, in the Realms—the players in my home Realms campaign were fascinated (nay, obsessed) with finding out about the many mysterious organizations, large and small, mighty and trivial, operating in the shadows all around them.

Behind its bucolic country charm and the leafy vistas of its surrounding forests, Shadowdale was alive with secretive gatherings, and as Mirt the Moneylender once said, "If you could sneak up on certain streets in Waterdeep and pluck the buildings up like a titan to shine a lantern on where they'd been, masked and cowed conspirators would be swarming like maggots in their haste to get away back into the safer darkness again."

I could literally fill years of this column detailing one shadowy group of the Realms after another, and still not get through them all—and when I finished covering just the vitally important eighty or so, it would be time (like the crews that work constantly painting various huge bridges all over the real world) to start at the beginning all over again, and cover them again. Because each column would of necessity be a brief snapshot, frozen in time—and in the Realms life goes on, things change, and power groups rise, fall, alter (sometimes markedly, such as changing sides in a conflict, or undergoing internal power struggles that leave their memberships and aims very different), or even fade away or get exterminated.

The words above are a roundabout way of saying you probably won't see any sort of exhaustive or even comprehensive coverage of secretive organizations of the Realms here.

This time around, though, I do want to take a look at just one.

They are called the Blades of the Unicorn, and I haven't written one word about them in the published Realms canon before now. (Yes, the group name echoes the monikers of other established power groups, and it may well get confused with those groups. That happens a lot in the Realms. Sometimes even unintentionally.) So long-bearded loremasters and shining-eyed novices, both in the Realms and in our real world, stand on equal footing when it comes to this group.

In short, the Blades of the Unicorn are a new, small, hitherto-unknown secret society. Their membership is almost exclusively human, and it is largely young. Blades tend to be bright, ambitious, and fed up with current ways and rulers. Their shared goals are to break down class barriers and established "privilege" (of law and custom) everywhere in the Realms (their own localities first), and let coins and success "talk louder."

Their assets are their energy, sharp wits, connections, and the "Dances." In terms of connections, many of them are members of guilds or noble families—specifically, junior guild members dissatisfied with how cozy guild leadership is with, or toadying to, authorities; and younger children of high houses who are not in line to inherit anything much unless or until many older relatives, including their own siblings, perish.

The Dances are the Blades' term for gates or portals, which they like to speak of in a sort of cryptic shorthand in case they've ever overheard by nonmembers as being "the ways the unicorns use" or "where the horned horses ride," with the entrances being "where unicorns dance." (Hence, the approaches to portal entrances are

"dances.")

The group uses portals they know of to swiftly jaunt between near-Athkatla and near-Waterdeep, from near-Suzail to the rural heartlands of Chessenta, and from those same heartlands to the wild hills of easternmost Amn. At least one of the Cormyrean portals is in the cellars of a countryside noble mansion, and the Blades were quick to recruit certain members of that family to their cause. Just which family, and which country hall, isn't yet known to the War Wizards (though those mages are becoming aware of the Blades, and that they may soon move from being a mere curiosity to a threat to be watched closely).

The founding members of the Blades, a small group of Chessentan wealthy well-breds, decided to pass themselves off as unicorn fanciers. If their late-night meetings and doings were ever noticed, the plan was to claim to be hunting and observing unicorns, to learn their breed-lines, to find out if some of their fabled powers are truth or mere legend, and to see if folk beliefs about their leading mortals to hidden magic treasures are fabulous or something that can truly enrich persistent people.

One founder was the handsome and charismatic Lylas Mhaerlidon, a ginger-bearded young rake skilled with the lute and at hiding his true thoughts (behind a sardonic, drawling manner), which include a burning hatred for decadent nobles who misuse their inherited wealth and position. Another was his sometime lover Traece Tantabbar, an exotic beauty and professional courtesan who by her twentieth summer had been married six times to rich old men who died and left her their wealth. The third was the impish and perpetually-in-trouble highborn wastrel Aumados Ilkryn.

These three traveled to Amn, and there they gained new friends and members among the not-quite-so-wealthy young of Athkatla and Crimmor. These people saw no place to flourish amid the sharp elbows and ruthless doings of the well-established wealthier.

The reinforced and emboldened Blades extended their reach north, bypassing Baldur's Gate, and started recruiting the disaffected youth of Waterdeep, notably the sons of senior guild members and guildmasters who hated the airs and excesses of the local nobles.

Now the founders, leaving a spiderweb of some seventy members behind them in Chessenta, Amn, and Waterdeep, have journeyed to Cormyr and are recruiting young women (and a few men) in Suzail who aren't noble, aren't highly placed at Court, and aren't friendly with the War Wizards.

Some of their known members in Suzail are Hothrae Plennitower, daughter and bookkeeper for the largest maker of small coffers, pots, and pans in the city; Maegold Derreth, widow of the cellarer for the Purple Dragon garrison, who is still head cook for the local troops; and the sharp-tongued and wall- and roof-climbing Chalace (pronounced "Shal-LACE") Haerohand, daughter of old Muskoleir Haerohand, "the Lord of the Docks" (who runs a dockside salvage, secondhand sail, rope, and cask business, and has always been the main and best-respected hirer and provider of casual dock loader brawn in Suzail). These three women are very different, being in turn close-mouthed and serious; jovial, beefy, and bustling; and tough, street-wise, and a habitual spy and thief—but they all want to see "all of us stand level, and the highnoses taken down a peg or three to make that daily truth."

The Blades want increased rights of commoners enshrined in law, so nobles will lose any automatic and assumed primacy or precedence in disagreements over boundaries, trade, positions at Court, and so on. They also want the most arrogant and corrupt courtiers and nobles booted out of the positions they currently hold, so merit wins out over family name or "who one knows."

The badge or mark of the Blades is a bearded unicorn's head, facing the sinister (viewer's right) with its jaws agape, and a dagger-blade jutting straight horizontally out of that open mouth like a tongue.

In recent months, the Blades have most energetically pursued the following endeavors. In Cormyr, the founding members and the younger nobles they've recruited are busy seducing other young, disaffected nobles to become members (and trying to covertly test all new converts to make sure they're not accepting Crown and War Wizard spies into their ranks). In Waterdeep, members are trying to stealthily raise a war chest through a combination of warehouse thefts and goods sales to unscrupulous outbound caravan-merchants, and to take advantage of an ongoing review and rewriting of civic laws at the Palace to institute some new wording that will reduce cronyism and noble privilege in many small ways. In Amn, members are seeking to frustrate the financial successes and curb the influence of the worst corrupt and overbearing entrenched masters of wealth. They seek to lessen barriers to others rising to provide real mercantile competition, and they want easings of "unwritten rules" so that servants and shopkeepers have more real daily power—and choices. In Chessenta, the Blades are lying low, but scheming to bring about "accidents" that will result in the unfortunate deaths of a handful of the worst tyrants who stand against any and all change.

The initial thrills many of the recruited Blades felt at being part of something illicit and important that could

change the world have faded, and they have begun to feel the cold winds of danger and realize that their causes will take long years of hard and perilous work. So some of the more impatient Blades have decided to hire—or manipulate—adventurers into doing some of the most dangerous work for them, reasoning that if handled correctly, the adventurers can become scapegoats if things go awry and thus take the blame for misdeeds that the Blades themselves can disavow all involvement in.

This is not by any means a new notion among those who hire adventurers, but as Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun once observed dryly, "The usual body count provides sufficiently high a turnover in actors onstage that there are always new adventurers available to be duped and betrayed."

Or as Elminster put it, "Get paid at least half upfront, and leave written evidence—a contract is best—that can drag your patron down with you. That will make some patrons less eager to send you down."

He judges most the Blades bright enough to be among the more prudent and less eager—which is why some of them just might succeed in changing the world.

About the Author

Ed Greenwood is the man who unleashed the *Forgotten Realms* setting on an unsuspecting world. He works in libraries, and he writes fantasy, science fiction, horror, mystery, and romance stories (sometimes all in the same novel), but he is happiest when churning out Realmslore, Realmslore, and more Realmslore. He still has a few rooms in his house in which he has space left to pile up papers.

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