

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 6/25/2014 **New!**



## Cult Maraudings

### Forgotten Realms

By Ed Greenwood

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*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.*

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he Cult of the Dragon is an organization on the ascendant, rising to power and grasping for more with a haste and fervor not seen for a century.

Up and down the Sword Coast, the cult is chasing a great goal (that adventurers can learn more about in the *Tyranny of Dragons*). Yet that pursuit doesn't consume the cult; it is by no means single-minded and unswervingly unsubtle.

Rather, the cult engages in many side missions that distract local rulers and those spying on the cult or actively working against it from learning more about, or effectively opposing, major cult goals. These distractions also serve to test novice or low-ranking cult operatives—so more senior cult members will spy on them, to judge their performance—and to give them valuable experience.

Harpers have dubbed these cult activities “maraudings” and have identified some of the cult's current list of such missions, though not who's working on them. What follows is from their spyings and scryings, and so is voiced from the viewpoint of cult members talking to other cult members.

### Dark Horizon

By attempting to blackmail, buy the loyalty of, or covertly slay and replace at least two independent ship captains in all major Sword Coast ports (Luskan excepted, as it's considered not worth the danger to try to establish anything permanent in that den of strife), the cult wishes to establish a hidden fleet. These ships can serve to ferry cult agents and material up and down the Sword Coast at the cult's convenience, rather than having to bribe or cajole shipmasters into altering their schedules. Cult-controlled ships will carry “cover cargoes” so as to minimize the risk of being exposed for what they truly are, and to enrich cult coffers in an ongoing manner.

Cult agents will spy on the doings and finances of independent ship owners who skipper their own vessels, looking for leverage (misdeeds that can be reported to authorities) or weaknesses (indebtedness, large loans

Coming due, recent losses) that can be used to “persuade” targeted shipmasters. The right manner of approach will be determined in consultation with cult superiors, in part because such consultation can lead to increased pressure through loans being called in, false (cult) customers buying hold space and then cancelling at the last instant leaving a captain with an empty hold and no income, when other valuable opportunities have passed, large warehouse thefts or fires, and so on.

Likely targets include Trasker Arraskran, master of *The Storm Shark* (a stout old cog berthed in Waterdeep); Holdrark Mrael, master of *Holdrark’s Pride* (a fast and spanking new caravel he could barely afford to have finished, and is stretched with large loans to pay off, berthed in Neverwinter); and Gustarlus Harounshar, master of the great galleon *Wave Walrus*, berthed in Baldur’s Gate (“Gusk” is a massively fat drunkard and gambler who makes good profits but lately loses them all at the gaming-table).

### Biting Blade

These undertakings include assassinating key hostile-to-the-cult border guards, caravan inspectors, and government and guild harbor spies throughout the Sword Coast—particularly in places such as Scornubel and Secomber, where cult agents or cult-subverted underlings are poised to step in as replacements. Wherever possible, such deaths are to be made to seem the result of skullduggery on the part of the murdered, either personal (vengeful husband of someone they seduced, for example) or illicit (they tried to double-cross smugglers or kidnappers they’d been working with, and paid the price). These deceptions as to the reasons for the killings must be fashioned so as to divert attention away from possible cult connections—and ideally, toward rival organizations or government officials who’ve given the cult trouble in the past.

The first target to be taken down should be Drenneth Tragarl in Scornubel, a gruff, stolid old retired warrior who refuses all bribes and works diligently to collect every copper he can for his city, in duties on restricted goods, such as weapons and war helms, and fines for “frowned-upon” wares such as known poisons and the wine known as laethkiss (known to cause temporary paralysis in elves). The delay here lies in arranging strong and believable false evidence for corrupt dealings on Tragarl’s part.

The second should probably be the halfling Belsz Harramavur of Secomber, who has a spy network of his own and the sly mind of a swindler and smuggler, and seems almost to smell Cult deceptions before they even reach him. He must perish in a way that admits no hint of the Cult having a hand in his demise—a fatal fall when escaping the bed of



someone whose husband came home early, perhaps. The problem is that Harramavur seems to have no bed-partner at present, nor to be seeking one.

Another alternative is the laconic, horse-faced, veteran Harper agent Emryl Elarrask of the Upper City in Baldur's Gate, who for too long has delighted in exposing or sabotaging cult activities in that city. The complication here is that Elarrask trains young Harpers by letting them spy on him and then report what they observed—and at any time, two or as many as six novice Harpers, not known to the cult, will be watching him.

### **Stauntun's Haunting**

The cult also seeks to frighten a very rich but lowborn shipping merchant of Baldur's Gate, Beltaegur Stauntun, into sponsoring the cult. Stauntun is bedeviled by the whispering ghosts of his dead wife and father, who both constantly criticize his investments and decisions, and give him "firm and fierce" advice, but often disagree heatedly with each other. These ghosts must be destroyed, but replaced by cult-controlled voices of the unseen that Stauntun will believe are his father and wife still haunting him—and will obey, however grudgingly, in making key investments and decisions that will benefit the cult. No cult operatives who have sufficient skills and power can be spared from more important cult activities, so third parties (presumably in Baldur's Gate) must be found, and some means of subverting them decided upon and successfully deployed. Could the wandering-wits old wizard Armuld Gloathen of the Gate serve? He seems to spend much of his dotage trying to breed and train griffons, and reputedly knows a spell that allows him to temporarily take griffon shape; could this be of use to the cult?

### **Balaedrith's Mark**

Named for an idea "marked" as to be undertaken next but left undone by Waterdeep-based cult agent Indurs Balaedrith at his untimely death, this is the Stauntun undertaking writ large: the subversion to the service or at least financial support of the cult of an entire Waterdhavian noble family.

The authorities of that city, and other nobles, must at all costs not even gain a hint of this, or all efforts expended will be for naught. No one outside the cult must know that the noble family has been recruited—which means that the fewer cult members who know of it, especially at lower levels, the better.

The obvious impediment here is how to gain influence over a noble family of Waterdeep, and the answer is inextricably linked to that of a second question: which noble family? The cult needs one that retains sufficient wealth and influence to be useful, yet has a weakness it can exploit. Preferably not a house already suspected of serious breaking of the law or corruption by the authorities, because if so they will already be under surveillance and regarded with suspicion, which will sharply curtail chances of subverting them undetected and decrease their utility once under control, since family members will be watched and so cannot be seen to do "unusual" things without attracting even greater scrutiny. A family with valuable property holdings within the city is desirable, for they can serve to enrich the Cult with rents or by selling off the holdings judiciously.

The most promising candidates seem to be the noble houses of Phylund, Snome, and Zulpair.

House Phylund's traditional monster-selling trade has sagged due to recent disease-related deaths ravaging their stock, and the changing fashions; most noble houses no longer desire a menagerie of guardian monsters, and the rising rich "want to be nobles" largely haven't embraced the practice of giving house room to monsters. In more recent years the Phylunds have turned to building and renting out new housing

accommodation in the city, and to moneylending; the former with mixed success, and the latter disastrously. So they are nigh penniless and desperate. The current patriarch, Velmaeros, has a drinking problem and a weakness for spirited young ladies; his wife Mamaelra is an unbalanced many-maladies-embracer. There are three daughters and four sons, all of limited intellect and coarse, simple tastes. Ripe for takeover, but few holdings to exploit.

House Snome is wealthy, thanks to shrewd investments in the expanding areas of Waterdeep and the steady strength of their traditional brewing, distilling, and spirits importation business. The key here is the bullying, must-win-at-all-costs, enthusiastically feuding braggart who heads the house, Rorild “Rory” Raztaerart Snome. This brawling lion of a man is as much a fool as he is a blusterer, and he has steadily lost friends over the years; if he can be befriended by cult operatives who will have to be deft actors, to treat him always properly, he can be led into almost any foolhardy investment, stance, or activity—and where he charges, his house will follow. Should he fall, his wife Kalaerra and daughters Tamra, Hethildra, and Marlemoeve (the sole surviving son is a pewling infant) are all worn out, battered-down vessels cult agents can fill with any ideas it wishes embraced.

House Zulpair is the richest of the three families, but has suffered recent calamity: a fire at sea destroyed the newest and largest of their galleons, *The Swift Hart*, with the loss of all hands and the heir of the house, Paeradrus Zulpair. The grieving family is quarreling over who should direct the family’s property investments, with the ailing head of the house, Daerewros, facing heated opposing demands from his twin “second sons,” Ulmord and Alethtan. Alethtan is a romantic fool, but principled, but Ulmord is an oily, urbane weasel of a man ripe for corruption. The wife and daughter are both sickly and have worked themselves to the bone doing the real daily work of administering the extensive Castle Ward and Trades Ward holdings of this family (constant warehouse expansions and repairs in particular), and would seemingly welcome changes. Ulmord is the road in, so long as the cult gets the wife Nornessa and the daughter Illyth on its side.

The Harpers also report that the Cult of the Dragon is contemplating takeovers of some costers of middling size that actively run many short-haul caravans in the Sword Coast, but their plans are as yet so nebulous as to have no specifics at all—other than the fact that one constantly traveling caravan merchant, Flaeros Harthnel of Beregost, is a cult spy currently gathering information as to which costers might be the best targets, and more about their personnel.

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### 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.