

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Horl, Breeder of Mules

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.*

The Realms is a vast and varied world full of interesting and ambitious people, some of them human. Adventuring characters should of course take center stage in your own **D&D** campaign, but to make the Realms seem alive and real around them, plenty of interesting nonplayer characters should be busy with their own lives and strivings, all the time, in the published Realms—just as they have been for well over forty years in my "home" Realms campaign.

Some of these "mover and shaker" NPCs are the familiar mighty kings and awesome mages, but most are less powerful but more colorful.

One such is Horl, Breeder of Mules. Horl isn't a ruler, nor someone who wields powerful magic, or wants to; he's just a successful entrepreneur who's changed the Realms, albeit in a smaller and less violent way.

Horl has built a flourishing business over a dozen years by producing mules by the thousands for peddler and small caravan use. He doesn't actually breed mules, of course, since those reliable and sturdy pack animals are sterile. He breeds jacks (male donkeys) with mares (female horses) to produce mules.

As sideline sources of income, Horl sells donkey, horse, and mule dung and carcasses as fertilizer to nearby farmers, mule urine to tanners and dyers, and occasionally also freshly slaughtered mules (when injured but not diseased animals have to be "put down"—diseased stock gets burned) to halfling cooks who have a taste for mule flesh.

A less-well-known side business that Horl provides to a few trusted—and shady—clients is passing on messages to specific passersby, and holding items for clients that are sometimes meant for other clients to pick up, but more often for the owner to retrieve later. These items are often stolen goods, but they get buried deep under the churned earth of mule pens, usually under the dung piles. Horl has never minded getting messy.

Horl is an ordinary-looking, rather quiet, brown-haired man of average build, but seems able to find female companionship whenever he desires (merely by going into town). He's acquired a reputation as a man genuinely curious about how all sorts of businesses work, who is happy to sit and talk with older men and women rather than brawling and drinking in bars with younger ones.

Most often to be found in Rassalantar or Berdusk or traveling between them, Horl checks on all of the far-flung holdings of his business, visiting each one every few months—except during the coldest months of winter, every year, when he disappears. On two such occasions, fatal accidents have befallen employees of his who thought Horl's absence could be exploited in ways that benefited them personally.

Starting with a ranch just outside Rassalantar (north of Waterdeep) and expanding to a paddock south of Zundbridge (south of Waterdeep), Horl has slowly expanded to "outposts" (palisaded paddocks and breeding yards, from which he sells stock to passing customers) outside Berdusk, Red Larch, and Secomber. He's contemplating adding outposts in Iriaebor and Scornubel, but only if he can find staff he trusts (a slow affair, because Horl tests and spies on hirelings to see for himself just how far they can be trusted—and seems to root out the untrustworthy swiftly, the worst of them just . . . disappearing).

Horl has been successful because his prices are fair to low and his animals plentiful and good—hardy and as trained as young, bred-for-sale mules get, anywhere in the Realms. He has expanded only when he's ready,

which in his case means when he can open new facilities without borrowing funds from anyone.

No one moves caravans in the icy, howling heart of Sword Coast North winters, but the routes are hard on draft beasts and pack animals at any time, with severe weather (especially flooding that weakens riverbanks and the verges of watering holes) and prowling predators making casualties frequent. The more ruthless merchants see no point in feeding beasts over a winter when they can be sold for stewpots and fresh ones bought from breeders in spring—so for reliable, strategically located breeders, business is brisk every spring and summer. And Horl has made it his business to be both reliable and strategically located. He also seems to suffer fewer losses than other breeders, quickly foiling thieves or monsters hunting by night by somehow procuring the particular monsters these threats will most fear and flee from. These particular monsters disappear after the need for them is over, as if by magic.

That's led a few people to believe Horl is a wizard who can summon monsters—but Elminster says that's not true.

Oh, and just between you and me, and according to Elminster, Horl has a secret. A big one. He's really a doppelganger, just pretending to be human. All the time. (Except when he's being a "particular monster" to drive off a specific threat to his stock.)

That's right, Horl is another of those fell shapeshifting creatures who long ago decided it could have an easier life hiding among humans (using its ability to shift shape only to evade responsibility for "bad things" it did while in a specific human shape), rather than preying on humans in a particular locale for short periods and then moving on, as most of its kind do. (Along certain stretches of caravan routes in the Realms, doppelgangers preying on and replacing anyone they can catch by themselves is now the primary reason why no one answers a call of nature alone and unarmed.)

Elminster doesn't know Horl's real name, but remembers it as one of the three doppelgangers who slew and impersonated three guildmasters in Darromar just long enough to steer the guilds into an alliance that wrung major changes to that city's laws and guild codes (allowing half-orcs and other halfbreeds to become full citizens, guild members, and property owners). As a result, Darromar is attracting an underclass of what would once have been deemed "monsters." Horl's two fellow doppelgangers are flourishing there, but Horl disagreed with the too-swift, too-high-profile changes they are continuing to push for, and anticipates a harsh backlash, and soon. So he departed that city, though he maintains hiring contacts there, notably a young rope maker named Danuth Taerrel (and Elminster suspects he is also a doppelganger).

Elminster suspects that Horl's winter disappearances are when it adopts a variety of human (or other) shapes and goes spying on individuals it considers the true "movers and shakers" who drive business changes, fads and fashions, and the like in the western Heartlands and Sword Coast region. Whereupon, El believes, the Breeder of Mules shifts its own business resources accordingly.

This in turn frees Elminster from such spying—except on Horl. Which is why the Sage of Shadowdale judges the doppelganger "all in all, gratifyingly useful."

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.