

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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How to Haunt a Castle

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.*

here are undead galore in the *Forgotten Realms*—and no particular shortage of castles, either. Many adventurers can attest that the two go together all too often. Haunted castles—and mansions, and inns, and for that matter outhouses—are plentiful.

Yet here and now I'm not writing of such too-familiar hauntings. Rather, I want to examine something unscrupulous merchants (and thieves, and priests, and—oh, yes, adventurers) have accomplished more often than your average array of evening tankard-emptiers in a tavern would believe.

Fake hauntings.

Deceptions done by the living, sometimes with the aid of a little magic, to keep folk away from a fire-damaged or otherwise insecure house, or a place that's temporarily serving as a smugglers' storage cache, a thieves' guild meeting-place, a lovers' rendezvous, or a kidnap victim's hidden location. Or the haunt is being used to drive down the price of a building that's for sale or keep most would-be purchasers far away.

This is by no means an instruction manual or an exhaustive examination of the topic. Rather, it's the tale of how a particular band of adventurers set about scaring the vitals out of a greedy local lordling so that they could keep a disused castle for themselves.

Our scene is mountainous northeastern Amn, and the greedy lordling is the younger Lord Anthrun, heir to a huge expanse of craggy wilderness and thornvine-choked bog that encompasses more than a score of struggling sheep ranches and three mixed-vegetables farms. The elder Lord Anthrun, Baron of Sharlsards, is a gruff old miser and womanizer, now given to fireside and flagon and the company of hired doxies in his declining years, leaving his son restless and eager to expand Sharlsards—and squeeze every last coin out of it, so some of them can drop into his own purse on his way to yield up his takings to his father.

Sharlsards is mountain country, which means very occasional border skirmishes, occasional brigand troubles, a few persistent pairs of local thieves in the warmer months (who retreat to Crimmor or Athkatla when winter comes down), and prowling monsters. The latter includes some everpresent wily goblin raiding bands and some marauding handfuls of trolls and hobgoblins, who tend to raid livestock by night and swiftly move on to avoid the bows of angry ranchers.

The baron dwells in Sharkeep, an aging fortified stone manor house attached to a lone watchtower. He maintains a handful of surly, underpaid warriors posted at Firetree and Gulkyn's Falls, which are two outlying hill-forts that are little more than stone cottages with slate roofs and stout wooden palisades. The Baron's bodyguards (a retired adventuring band out of Athkatla formerly known as Darshaw's Dread Raiders) patrol the roads between the forts and Sharkeep, linking together the feeble defenses of the barony. Together with the hardy local farmers and ranchers (whose ranks include more than a few retired mercenaries and caravan guards), they're usually all the defenders Sharlsards needs.

Until, that is, Barl Anthrun, the younger lord, casts covetous eyes on the failed barony next door, the former holding of Ghellowmir. The last Lord Ghellow died of winter fever six seasons ago. Wolves persuaded the last five ranchers to abandon their hardscrabble lives for better, warmer land along the southern borders of Amn. Also, the ramshackle castle of Ghellowdar—better known locally as Wolfkeep, because the marauding pack of wolves took up residence in it after the last humans left—stands empty.

The castle stands west of Sharlkeep, so close to the seat of the Anthrums that if a tall ridge wasn't in the way, one could see the battlements of one keep from the toptop of the other.

Barl rode to inspect Ghellowdar, promptly and precipitously fled back home pursued by a menacing muster of wolves, and vowed to hire the next handy passing adventurers to scour the place out for him.

A few good archers and a sunny afternoon ought to be enough to end the wolf peril, and then Sharlsards could double its size westward, taking in a swift stream that could power a mill (if the derelict Ghellowmir mill could be rebuilt). Lord Barl Anthrun could then ride triumphantly to Crimmor and recruit new farmers and ranchers, all the while hoping for Anthrun's coffers to swell, which would allow him to replenish his father's wine cellar before the elder Lord Anthrun discovers his son has surreptitiously drunk it almost dry.

Enter Olone's Swords, an all-female adventuring band (humans, half-elves, and halflings) formed around the tattered remnants of the ill-fated Company of the Bold Boar. The latter was a chartered adventuring band of Cormyr who took on a few too many fell wizards hired by evil men in Westgate and Selgaunt to "take care of" anyone who disagreed with their brutish business methods.

Olone lost her husband and her brother in those battles, as well as her taste for tangling with wizards or tarrying anywhere near Sembia or Westgate. Not wanting to work in a realm policed by mages (Cormyr) and preferring a land where wizards who hurled spells in public were frowned upon, she led her new group of adventurers west into Amn.

There they found a vacant castle with enough farmland to easily support themselves wrapped right around it, and they set about hunting down the wolves that seemed to have overrun the place.

They then took stock and decided Wolfkeep would make a fine home once they saw to certain deficiencies in its chimneys (blocked and half-collapsed) and plumbing (nonexistent), and stocked its deep larder cellars. So they set out for Crimmor on a shopping expedition.

When they returned, they caught sight of the Anthrun banner rippling atop the Wolfkeep battlements when they were still two hills away, saw a motley array of enthusiastic armed men swarming through their castle, and did the sensible thing: found a well-hidden vale to camp in, and from there send out their best to stealthily reconnoiter.

That night, free drink brought by a friendly local wench who didn't mind flirting loosened the tongues of some of those encamped in the keep's tiny forecourt. She yielded up a more or less coherent tale of Lord Barl Anthrun's successful recruitment of the passing Blackdragons Blades adventuring band to "reclaim his rightful castle of Wolfkeep," as they stated to her. So here those intrepid swordmasters were, bolstering the Sharlsards warriors—who were tramping about warily and wondering where all the wolves had gone.

That friendly member of the Swords returned to the vale encampment and enlightened Olone, who sensibly decided to wait until the Blackdragons had been paid off and had moved on, and then set about ousting this lordling before he could get settled in.

The keep's well was a good one, but everything else needed work, and Olone rightly doubted the ambitious younger Lord Anthrun would be eager to dwell in a keep that lacked a sheltered cooking hearth, and no jakes but the nearest bushes. So he would depart to muster a work party back in Sharlsards, or even go and recruit workers in Crimmor.

He promptly did the latter, giving the Swords ample time to move back into Wolfkeep. They began by scaring the two already-fearful guards left behind to hold the place, by the simple ruse of wearing nothing but bedsheets and running barefoot around the keep by moonlight, calling softly and longingly for the dead Lord Ghellow by name and ignoring the hails of the startled guards—who soon fled.

Then the Swords set about haunting Wolfkeep. They moved all their gear and purchased material to a far better hidden place, examined the castle very carefully, and made their plans.

They hunted rabbits and kept the carcasses in pots so no blood would be lost. They prepared long lengths of black thread and hid them in certain recesses. They broke particular stones loose and then set them carefully back into place—atop hastily fire-blackened wedges.

When they saw Lord Anthrun's party approaching, banners to the fore, some of Olone's Swords made themselves very dark and hard to see, and others prepared to be seen vividly. All of them laid aside all hard footwear and metal scabbards, buckles, tools, and weaponry that could ring or clang. They went over the castle one more time, making sure everyone knew certain areas of it well, and then vanished.

The younger Lord Anthrun and his workers arrived, night soon fell, and the haunting of Wolfkeep began.

One at a time, without any warning, blocks of stone here and there plummeted down from high in the castle, to crash down beside sleeping workers or into their banked cooking fires. When the roused, angry workers were conferring, an eerie wail was heard. Some of those rushing to investigate tripped and went sprawling, no causes to be seen. More blocks fell. Then the corpse of a wolf tumbled down into the midst of the thoroughly frightened men. That started a general rush to the horses.

More wails from inside the castle hastened the departures, and as men struggled to saddle and ready their snorting, stamping mounts, blood started to drip on them from above. When they looked up, they could see dangling bodies of women hanging from the battlements, heads lolling at odd angles and bodies splattering copious amounts of blood down on the horses and frightening them into wanting to be elsewhere.

Lord Anthrun's workers decided a return to Crimmor was their brightest career choice, and they made it regardless of his shouts and entreaties. Not that he was tarrying anywhere near Wolfkeep, either.

Olone undid the underarms rope-sling she'd been hanging from, washed the last rabbit-blood off herself, and watched the Crimmans and Sharlsarders fleeing into the moonlit distance. Perhaps she could find a nice, meek back-alley lady mage in Crimmor whose spells extended to a few harmless but menacing illusions, for the next time Lord Anthrun came calling . . .

Realmslore records that she did that, because my players had so much fun with this play session that they pleaded for a return engagement. So I had Lord Barl try one more time—but on that occasion, they were really ready for him, and he got in so much frantic, shrieking cross-country running that he broke a leg halfway home, ending his territorial expansion ambitions for a year.

During which Olone romanced Barl's father and conquered Sharlsards without a sword being drawn. Comforted by Olone and amused by her Swords, Lord Barl Anthrun barely noticed.

Thus was Wolfkeep haunted.

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.