

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Just a Typical Night in an Inn

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 new weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

o let me tell you about a long-ago play session in my "home" Realms campaign, when . . . Hey! No yawning back there!

This is not going to be a grand heroic saga, but something more on the order of "a day (and night) in the life." I'm relating it not (I hope!) to bore socks off, but to illustrate the layers upon layers of intrigue that abound in the Realms, and the play possibilities that hidden alliances, spying power groups, and covert activities offer.

We're probably all familiar with D&D sessions involving a night in a creepy inn where there might or might not be a murderer creeping around. Such clichés exist because they make great stories and D&D game sessions. Yet characters can have so many more options, and players can get so much more deeply interested, if there's more than that going on. *Lots* more than that.

So, to the tale . . .

The Knights of Myth Drannor were once traveling home to Shadowdale after a visit to Arabel (that they had successfully undertaken to transfer a prisoner to Cormyrean justice, do a little shopping, and conduct a few private trade deals with certain Arabellan merchants).

Their homeward journey along the trade road through Tilver's Gap was rough, featuring a day filled with skirmishes against prowling monsters and ambushes by what the Dales and northeastern Cormyr call "highroad blades" (brigands). As afternoon turned to evening, the weary Knights could hear bugbear bands, on the hunt, calling to each other (patterns of hoots and grunts that, in these parts, unlike in central Cormyr where local Purple Dragons would respond, the bugbears didn't trouble to disguise as natural beast-calls). They heard hobgoblin horns, too, and had traveled the Moonsea Ride often enough to know that the bugbears and the hobgoblins were both keeping watch over the trade road, seeking easy prey and good times to attack. It didn't take a veteran adventurer to know there'd be no safe camping in the open that night.

Just before nightfall, the Knights reached one of the isolated, fortified way-inns along the Ride, an old robber baron's keep remade decades before and named the Helm and Hearth by some retired Purple Dragons, soldiers of Cormyr invalidated out and given "dog pay," a lump sum of 100 gp per year of service plus rank bonuses. (The term was born of the minstrels' expression "Go and live out your years lazing like an old dog by the fireside.") Old age had claimed those Dragons one by one, leaving the inn in different hands.

Like most such vital shelters in dangerous wilderlands, the Helm was cold, drafty, crowded at certain times of year (particularly the spring and fall "runs" on either side of winter), and always expensive. After all, when the likely alternative is death, paying a stiff rate for a night of shelter suddenly seems a lot more tolerable.

(In the Realms, lots of little hamlets and villages, wayside inns and taverns, and favorite camping sites exist that don't appear on any maps. Please create such elements and place them where your adventure needs them. Or make them unusable—overrun by recent orc raids or razed by fire, and temporarily abandoned—when their absence is a challenge you want PCs to face.)

The desperate sometimes pay to stable horses and shelter a wagon or a cart in a way-inn, but try to "keep a few coins warm" (pinch pennies) by letting the strongest and best-armed members of a traveling band sleep in the trees—or, if they can manage it, sneak onto the roof of the inn or its stables to sleep, spending the night without paying, to keep costs down.

The Knights weren't that "hardcoin" (hard up). They paid the ruinous rates and took rooms.

The common room (where guests ate, drank, smoked, played games, and just hung out together) proved to be a tense and unhappy place, thanks to a roster of guests who would have swiftly drawn daggers if not for the vigilance of the numerous, well-armed inn guards (whose necessary cost, by the way, is the reason always given for high rates in way-inns).

There were a handful of dwarves who didn't think much of the house ale, and were saying so; several traveling traders who were bitter rivals; Sembian merchants and factors (trade agents) on the way to or from collecting debt repayments from Cormyrean shopkeepers, who regarded the traveling traders with open contempt that was richly returned; and a family fleeing Hillsfar for reasons they wouldn't discuss, obviously carrying all their valuables and just as obviously regarding everyone else as would-be thieves circling like vultures, best resisted with the threat of ready and deadly force.

None of these patrons regarded the adventurers kindly—and the Knights felt the same way about their fellow guests, in large part because they knew some of the traders and factors to be agents of the Zhentarim, and suspected a few more of similar loyalties. Jhessail thought the family from Hillsfar were professional poisoners fallen from favor, and suspected at least two of the traders of being adventurers who had been hired to capture or kill that family.

Florin recognized more inn folk. He knew some of the guards as veteran Purple Dragons—and recognized the innkeeper's face, too, as the same one belonging to an unburied corpse he had spotted at the north end of Daggerdale earlier. (The fighting thereabouts generated a lot of bodies in those days, but few remained intact for long, given all the hungry wolves and scavengers.)

After the inn guests retired to their rooms that night, not much sleeping went on. Instead, everyone was creeping around in the dark or holed up with weapons at the ready.

The Knights bolted their doors from within and promptly abandoned their rooms in favor of the roof—a favorite tactic for avoiding unpleasantness, which tonight proved a wise move. Someone bundled kindling, wet leaves, and a few logs together in a passage rug and set a fire against the door of one of the Knights' rooms—and when the resulting thick smoke drove a guest out of the room next door, choking, that guest quickly collected a crossbow bolt in the face.

By then, half a dozen small conflicts had erupted, all over the Helm. A larger fire was set at the other end of the building—and promptly quenched by magic, though there had been no visible priests or wizards among the inn guests.

The Knights decided to occupy the stables so they could guard their horses until morn, not to mention prevent any mounted escapes in the dead of night.

Spells were soon cast in the kitchen and pantries that drew Jhessail there to hurl counterspells, in a tense confrontation that almost escalated into a spell battle that would likely have destroyed the inn.

The mage in the kitchen turned out to be a War Wizard, part of an "under the cloak" (undercover) force from Cormyr visiting the Helm because they had long known it to be vital to smuggling in the area—and suspected that it had now been taken over by the Zhentarim. (They were wrong, but a tenday later would probably have been right.)

One of the reasons they suspected Zhentarim involvement was that they had arrested the innkeeper—yes, the same one Florin had noticed lying dead in Daggerdale a few days earlier—more than a month ago. He was at present securely manacled in a Tilverton jail, yet somehow at the same time was running the Helm. Surely an impostor, using a magical disguise . . .

Surely not, as it turned out.

Some tense roleplaying of arguments and interrogations unfolded, until the Cormyreans and the Knights between them uncovered most of the truth. Ownership of the Helm had passed into the hands of the Irlstral family, a longtime mercantile clan, whose "family heirlooms" included six magical masks. These malleable face-coverings (that could be donned or doffed at will) clung to the flesh of a wearer—and altered that wearer's face to always look like a particular person. So six people could have identical faces. The identity of the original owner of that face remains a mystery, thus far.

The Zhents had recently killed the eldest Irlstral for refusing to relinquish the inn to them. That dead man had long ago lost his wife, but three sons and two daughters survived him. It was the oldest son whom Florin had noticed lying dead in Daggerdale, the second was the one imprisoned by the Cormyreans, and the third was

the innkeeper on the night of the Knights' visit—now reduced to sobbing fear under interrogation. (The daughters ran the inn kitchens, and never wore the masks.)

The War Wizard seized the three masks that were on hand and sent some Dragons galloping off to recover the fourth from the prisoner in Tilverton. That left one mask probably in Zhent possession somewhere, and one more either lost in Daggerdale or also in Zhent hands. The War Wizard also wanted the Irstrals arrested. The Knights objected, pointing out that Cormyr might want to hold sway over the inn though it was not on Cormyrean soil; that the Knights could readily overpower and destroy the War Wizard and his force; and that any big battle for control of the Helm would cause great tension between Cormyr and the Dales. (Not to mention Hillsfar, Zhentil Keep, and Sembia, if guests from those places were killed or wounded in such a fight.)

For their part, the Knights wanted the good night's sleep they had paid for—and for *their* part, the Irstrals wanted to stay alive and out of Cormyrean jails (and thus eagerly accepted an offer from the Knights to establish their lives anew in Shadowdale).

Terse negotiations followed, but in the end the Knights took their horses, the Irstrals, and draft animals and wagons enough for vital family belongings, and barricaded themselves in the inn granary for the rest of the night and most of the day that followed.

The Cormyreans scoured the inn, fighting and slaying all Zhent agents they could identify, and in the morning expelled the remaining guests and emptied the Helm of all the smuggled goods they had found, before departing for Tilverton.

The Knights made it safely home to Shadowdale—and within the tenday, a Zhentarim force stormed the inn (which various travelers had taken to camping in) and burned it down.

So, we're left with two masks unaccounted for, the Irstrals looking to hire a band of adventurers to get their brother out of a Tilverton prison, and certain Cormyreans quietly intending to let that brother escape, in hopes he would lead them to the missing masks, which could be useful in their ongoing intrigues against the Zhentarim.

As it happens, those missing masks are . . . still missing. Or being used, somewhere beyond the notice of the Knights or Cormyr.

Were the masks created for a deeper, more sinister purpose? Can their maker possess, or control from afar, anyone wearing one?

And that's how intrigue upon intrigue can make things more interesting during a simple night in an inn.



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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