

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Lost Lavandril

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.*

Waterdeep is a bustling, cosmopolitan, lively city built on trade into and out of its port. Where merchants hold sway, knowledge—particularly "inside knowledge"—is power. Gossip runs swift and deep, and there is always news, and lots of it. Over the years, my players have learned to keep ears cocked for tidbits of interest in the ceaseless flow, because their DM uses what I dubbed "current clack" (back in my early Realms short stories, some years before **D&D** existed) not only just as a way of making the setting seem alive around them, nor to parade adventure hooks under their noses until (like hungry fish) they bite . . . but also to signal trends and upcoming events they might profit from.

If, that is, they do what real-life successful entrepreneurs sometimes manage: look above and beyond the petty problems of the passing day and see what's most obviously of interest right in front of them. These folk occasionally ponder not just what goals they should be working toward, but what the Realms around them seem to be moving toward. So if they successfully anticipate a trend, they can position themselves to be in the right place at the right time, and, as real-world financial traders say, "Make a killing." (My players use that phrase too, but most often to mean literal death and blood, not raking in coins.)

Over the years, a handful of characters have retired rich, and they have become benevolent investors and even bankers, using formidable new fortresses they've built to store valuables—including incriminating items, not just wealth—for adventurers. They have gained their fortune by getting large amounts of something suddenly vital to the right spot, or by "throwing in with" the right nonplayer character inventors.

Yet these are both rare achievements and a trifle boring to write about, because ultimately they're accounts of leaving adventure behind. (Or, the Realms being the sort of place it is, trying to.)

Instead, let's look at the sort of unfolding mystery that a DM can use to gently drive home the point to players that looking for future consequences or likely explanations can be a desirable, even profitable habit to fall into.

One such, unfolding right now in Waterdeep, is the matter of "Lost Lavandril." The tale is juicy, even salacious news at first hearing, but of course it is not what it initially appears to be.

Consider Lavandril Talmost, a naughty young rake of a Waterdhavian noble who achieved brief public notoriety (in burst after burst of gossip of what some of my female players rather primly refer to as "har har har" gossip) thanks to the number of noble bedchambers he visited in swift succession.

After months of this behavior, the news spreads that Lavandril has suddenly gone missing. Of course, the word on the street is that his disappearance is due to an angry husband catching up with him.

Logical assumption, end of tale—but wait! There's more! Now, all of the (supposedly) cuckolded husbands are going missing, one by one.

Hmmm. This is odd. So, what's going on?

Disappearances continue, and what begins as juicy mystery becomes rising consternation. Where will it end?

Anxious nobles lock their gates, surround themselves with bodyguards, or depart in haste for their country estates—and those who lack strong enough gates or bodyguards, or have reason to remain in the city (for instance, lacking suitably defensible country estates), hastily hire adventurers—such as the player characters—as protectors.

They fear being next to go, obviously . . . but no attacks come.

What does come, instead, are courtiers from the Palace, with invitations from the Open Lord to a private meeting. Some nobles think this a trap and refuse to go—so eventually the Open Lord comes to see them. Others reluctantly answer the summons, but bring along their hired adventurers as a heavy-duty escort, and insist on being personally guarded during the meeting.

Either way, any player character adventurers—or if they aren't directly involved, any player characters who later wind up on the receiving end of excitedly whispered gossip from an adventurer who was—can soon learn more about the disappearance of Lavandril.

It seems young and dashing Lavandril was no ladies' man at all, and there was no succession of willing noble wives waiting in bedchambers. Rather, he was an envoy to the various nobles he's reputed to have cuckolded, from a mysterious cabal that the Palace would very much like to know more about. This group can be the Fist of Stars, or the Night Hand, or the Lantern Banner, or call it what you will. These named groups all happen to be cabals currently flourishing, half-hidden but increasingly talked about, in the City of Splendors—but which is which, and what are they all up to? These are matters for DMs to individually decide.

Right now, the Open Lord isn't sure if the vanishing nobles are members of the cabal, in cahoots with the cabal, or its victims . . . and he's looking for a few good adventurers (not already known in the city for being his undercover agents) to find out.

One way or another, the characters are hired to learn what they can.

Almost immediately, they're going to find out that Lavandril was unscrupulous and the sort of superb natural actor that our modern real world often describes as a "con man." Moreover, however much he might have personally wanted to bounce on scores of beds in as many bedchambers, not alone, he's entirely too wary to pursue older married noblewomen who have powerful and wealthy husbands who would inevitably become powerful and wealthy enemies.

Yet however the racy rumors got started, the characters learn that Lavandril did indeed visit noble mansion after noble manor ("villas" are so last-century in Waterdeep, these days) in swift succession—and, yes, the homes he visited are the ones now missing patriarchs, or matriarchs, or both.

Servants at any of these grand houses will, if characters question them adroitly rather than with a line of questions racing the slalom of a preconceived notion, disclose two common threads: their missing masters have recently shown signs of being coin-poor, and muttered mentions of one of the cabals were overheard.

Most players being what they are, characters soon hit the back alleys and taverns of the City of Splendors to try to glean information about that particular cabal.

Waterdeep being what it is, those inquiries soon lead to ambushes and other attacks on them by toughs (from out-of-work drunkards and sailors, to other adventurers) hired by said cabal to frighten off questioners—or failing that, silence them forever.

Which will quite likely drive surviving characters to more vigorous questioning and anti-cabal activities. Whereupon adventure gets lively around the gaming table, and characters worth their mettle should discover more about the cabal.

They can do this by somehow uncovering and speaking with a noble in hiding; a lord who was contacted by Lavandril, refused the offer the young Talmost made him, and a few nights later was almost killed in an apparent accident or mischance. This could be followed the next night by an obvious and almost successful assassination attempt—that the noble was astute enough to immediately follow up on by disappearing.

Eventually, the characters should piece together enough to get well beyond these barebones facts: Lavandril Talmost is no bedchamber rake, but he was making offers to desperate nobles on behalf of a cabal of merchants and fell wizards. The cabal wants to seize rule over Waterdeep in a coup, but is well aware that to hold the city after they've seized it, they will need the support of a substantial number of nobles. The Open Lord, Palace bureaucracy, and Masked Lords have their faults and grumbling detractors, but they are what the city has been used to for centuries now, and they cannot lightly be replaced.

So the cabal identified nobles in financial trouble who don't smile upon and aren't loved by the Open Lord or the courtiers at the Palace, and sought their support. Those who gave it are now being assembled in hiding so they'll emerge unscathed from the coup an unwitting city is now rushing to encounter. The bait for these nobles is that the cabal has promised that their debts will be entirely paid off. (And those nobles who spurned the offer are being silenced, one by one, to keep word of the coming coup attempt from reaching the Palace and the

Open and Masked Lords.)

All this can easily be a lively background that occasionally smites and frustrates characters more interested in their own dungeon delving, shady investments, and "honest day jobs"—but at the same time it ups the stakes and excitement for everything the characters do.

After all, Waterdeep can easily ignore adventurers engaged in their own forays into Undermountain or the beast-roamed wilderlands, and still more easily dismiss or overlook adventurers boasting of heroic exploits over tankards in taverns south of the Market or Castle Waterdeep.

But characters being hunted by agents of a shadowy cabal, or by the liveried bodyguards of half a dozen missing nobles, or for that matter openly working for the Open Lord or taking orders from Masked Lords, are quite likely to themselves be a central feature in the latest current clack racing from one end of the city to the other (and growing with each retelling, of course).

As one of my players said, in character, "I quite like being ten feet tall, leaving a trail of bodies in my wake, and surviving a curse sent from the Nine Hells as I deal with dragons—all before I even get out of bed in the morning and pull my boots on!"

Whether her character will quite like going up against the nastier wizards in the cabal is something that remains to be seen. Soon.

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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