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Forging the Realms Archive | 6/18/2014 **New!**



Masks of the Dragons

Forgotten Realms

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.

Although many legends tell (tantalizingly little) about ancient and powerful dragon masks named for and associated with specific chromatic dragon colors (a *White Dragon Mask*, a *Red Dragon Mask*, and so on), many magical dragon-related masks have been crafted down the ages.

Some of them ward off dragon breath powers, some give a measure of influence over dragons, some attempt to duplicate draconic powers, and some merely evoke the looks and might of dragonkind in attempts to impress.

As the adventurer Avaril Throneborn once said (speaking of spiders, but his words could apply to dragon masks just as well): "In the heat of the fray, when your sword cleaves away a trophy from the foe and you hold it up dripping in gore for the few instants you have before the next attacker charges you, it's hard to tell specific tiny details of what you're holding—it's all one dripping bundle of blood, death, and danger."

Or, to put it more bluntly, all these dragon masks are dangerous, because the Cult of the Dragon seeks all of them—and they want to eliminate anyone who might know the secrets of how to use them. In their eyes, this includes anyone who owns or has owned one. Be warned.

Longsnout Masks

First seen by adventurers fighting their ways free of the clutches of many monsters in the beast-realm of Veladorn, these masks resemble the forward-swept-horned heads of black dragons, only with long teeth-lined heads like the upper half of a crocodile's skull (the lower half is missing, leaving the wearer's chin and throat on view). These masks are usually fitted with stout, wide, flexible chinstraps to hold them firmly on—and at least two have been seen worn with gorgets (throat armor plates).

The wearer of a *longsnout mask* can take on the shape of a black dragon of the smallest size—or a marble statue of that sort of dragon, of the same volume as their own real body or larger—but this illusion "curdles" and falls away the moment they move (in other words, it is a hiding tactic only). The effect is entirely illusory; beneath the illusion, the wearer is completely unaltered and cannot even see the illusion (they "see out through it" as if it isn't there at all).

This illusion appears to be a side effect of such a mask, as is its automatic and ongoing ability to mask the scent of a wearer, even if they are bleeding or reek from contact with dung or swamp mud or other foulness. The true purpose of a *longsnout mask* seems to be that it gives a wearer limited command of reptiles, allowing them to force reptiles away and to push them into moving in a specific direction (a power usually used to bring reptiles into conflict with other creatures in their way when such forcible movement occurs). The mask seems effective against all sorts of reptiles except those as sentient and strong-willed as a mask wearer, and it works against up to a dozen reptiles at a time.



Who first made *longsnout masks* and why can only be conjectured, but they are numerous; at least forty and probably twice that number are in current use and circulation.

The Masks of the Master

Of old, in the then-new realm of Thay (circa 926–946 DR), there briefly flourished a Red Wizard (one Harglupt Thlarlamn by name) who called himself the Master of Dragons. He claimed to have tamed more than a dozen dragons, and, as proof, he often rode a large black dragon as his aerial steed. He sold several trained dragons as flying mounts to various powerful wizards. It's believed the first and most gigantic black dragon steed owned by Manshoon of the Zhentarim was sold by Thlarlamn to a little-known wizard named Varaunt, who was briefly Manshoon's tutor, and who in turn either gave or sold the dragon to the then-newly-confirmed First Lord of Zhentil Keep.

The Master of Dragons wore a full-head-covering mask that closely resembled the beaklike head of a white dragon (emerald eyes and all) whenever he was in public, and he owned multiple such masks (because one was blasted off his head and scorched in a spell-duel, and he replaced it "in the space of six breaths"—according to an awed witness—with some sort of summoning spell). Thlarlamn was widely rumored to have his dragon masks hidden in caches in various high places (caverns, ledges, or crevices within the tops of mountains) in and near Thay. After he perished in a duel with a rival Red Wizard in 946 DR, his tower was plundered but none of his caches were ever found—or at least, no public word spread of anyone finding any of them.

A mask of fitting plates that entirely enclosed the wearer's head in a "disturbingly lifelike, only smaller than the real thing" white dragon head was seen worn by a wizard in Raurin during a spell-battle in 1354 DR, and an identical mask—or the same mask—was offered for sale (for a fantastic sum, which was paid by an unknown cowed purchaser) in the summer of 1358 DR in an auction held by an impoverished noble in the countryside of Chessenta. Thereafter, several reports of such masks being seen around the Vilhon and in Innarlith and Scornubel surfaced over the next two decades—and, far less frequently, from time to time ever since.

The precise powers of the Master's masks are unknown, but they are believed to be capable of being imbued with several spell effects that can then be unleashed by a mask-wearer by act of will, as breath weapons—discharges of spell effects that differ from the natural dragon breath of all known sorts of dragon. The masks are also rumored to have protected wearers against cold-based attacks.

The Masks of Maaril

The infamous Maaril "the Dragonmage of Waterdeep" was a mage deeply interested in dragonkind. An evil and eccentric recluse of the City of Splendors, Maaril long wielded the Dragonstaff of Ahghairon (retaining it in part because the Lord Mage of Waterdeep, Khelben "Blacksstaff" Arunsun, wanted him to do so, for reasons as yet undisclosed). He was known to be ruthless in dealings with other wizards, slaying many who challenged him or had disagreements with him—but he went mad in the Spellplague, disappeared, and is widely presumed to have perished.

Recent mutterings state that it appears he went mad and died—insofar as he lost his body—but his deranged, malicious sentience lives on, lurking amid a dozen dragonface masks he crafted and enspelled, to be worn by his servants. Legend ascribes a series of beautiful, self-effacing female apprentices to the Wizard of the Dragon Tower, but he always had at least two apprentices at a time: a female companion and a male novice of fledgling powers. The males Maaril sent out into the city, often by night, to run his errands, picking up and paying for purchases they had arranged for on earlier forays, delivering messages (often ultimatums) from their master to various guildmasters and shopkeepers, spying, and sometimes doing dirtier work. While outside Maaril's tower, these agents were under orders to wear and never remove their dragon masks, which are "hardshell" (paste-hardened painted and sculpted leather over a metal layer) representations of a green dragon's barbed or spined head, but are slate gray in hue, with translucent ruby-red eye lenses, securely held on by an adjustable head harness with chin strap and collar the mask can dangle from—if removal is necessary.

The enchantments on these masks enabled Maaril to see through the wearer's eyes and speak his will as words heard only inside a wearer's head. He could also hear all a wearer said or heard. Reputedly, the masks gave him no greater influence than that over a wearer. Reports differ over whether Maaril could cast spells from a distance through his masks, but Elminster says records he's seen (observations written down by Khelben's apprentices) state that the Dragonmage could not cast spells through one of his masks, but could "preload" a mask with a lone spell that a wearer could unleash with a spoken command word or when preset conditions

became fulfilled.

It is now rumored that Maaril survives as a deranged, powerful intellect that can dominate the minds of some wearers of his masks, forcing them to do his will, casting magic through them, and speaking through their mouths. What's left of Maaril is cruel, capricious, and apt to arrive and vanish abruptly, not caring a whit for the safety of mask-wearers.

The Dragon Tower has been looted more than once since Maaril's disappearance. His dragon masks were all taken, and they are now scattered across the Heartlands; at least two remain in or near Waterdeep, and one is at least as far away as Sembia.

The Whispering Mask

This ivory-white, hollow mask seems made of polished bone, and it is the right size and shape to be part of the skull of a huge red dragon. Some sages believe it consists of many real red dragon bones, fused together to form an entire upper half of a red dragon's skull.

The WhisperingMask is sentient, has existed since at least the early 1200s DR, and has flown about Faerûn for all that time, pursuing unknown ends.

It can fly with great precision and utter silence, usually gliding from shadow to concealing shadow or moving by night. It floats quiescent for long periods, watching or lurking, and it usually shows itself to lone mortals when it desires to whisper to them—or to scare or manipulate. It speaks most human tongues and those of elves, dwarves, gnomes, and halflings, as well as the language of dragons, and most sages believe it contains the sentience of a dragon—or perhaps is the messenger of a dragon god, or the remnant of a dragon god.

Whatever the mask truly is, it seems to have a malicious sense of humor, and it delights in manipulating intelligent beings—in particular, rulers, nobility, and individuals who can work arcane magic. It gives them warnings about their enemies, hints of intrigues happening around them, and suggestions about undertakings that might benefit them. It avoids giving its own name or revealing its motives, parrying questions as adroitly as any veteran glib courtier. Whatever it's trying to achieve, it keeps to itself.

More than one ruler and Harper spy have teased Elminster that the Whispering Mask seems to operate very much as he does, but he denies any connection to it—or to have ever spoken with it, claiming it seems to not just avoid him, but to energetically flee and hide from him. "One more mystery of this world," he adds darkly, "that bids fair to continue."

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.