

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 3/8/2013



New Ships of the Air

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.*

From ancient Netheril through Halruaa to the notorious Five Companies, humans have built skyships in the Realms for centuries. Elves have fashioned or grown airships for even longer. During troubled times, they've become vitally important means of war, escape, swift far travel, and trade. As strife and storms and accidents claim some aerial vessels and the means of replacing them are lost, forgotten, or beyond the resources available to those who know the methods, they have become ever more rare.

It's always been intentional that airships would be rare treasures in Faerûn, never the decisive face of warfare. I want the Realms to stay a place where individual, on-the-ground heroics always hold sway.

Yet as the sage Alaundo said so long ago, "The days and years roll on, and cycles of power turn, and new things ever arise."

This is as true for skyships as anything else, and new ships now sail the skies of the Realms.

In Calimport, the wizard Ithru devised spells that enact prolonged *levitation* on bars of a particular alloy ("prolonged" meaning a little more than a day, in this case). Build a sandwich of two decks to enclose enough of those bars (with little "windows" or trapdoors allowing spellcasters on the upper deck to touch a bar while renewing its magic). Attach to this deck railings and a tripod mast, a wideboard rudder for steering, and some cross-spars for sails, and you have a hovering raft. It can be moved horizontally by sails or "rowing" in the air with large paddles (rowing wings, essentially) and anchored to the ground or made to pivot by using droplines with grapples.

Ithru's "floating wagons" are most useful for carrying cargoes across rivers and gorges, and to lift large and heavy items aloft, such as when ballistae need to be raised onto the battlements of castles. They have also been seen being towed along roads by teams of horses in fair weather. There are even reports of Ithru's wagons being used in castle assaults on dark nights.

Blustery weather makes these wagons hard to control or to keep on a roadway. Storms can wreak havoc on them, hurling them like leaves across great distances to shatter on mountainsides, crash into treelines, or smash their way through narrow city streets. Keeping even a modest cargo aloft for days requires repeated castings of Ithru's spells (known to but a few) and possession of precious bars of Ithru's secret alloy (known to even fewer). Many rulers and wizards' cabals have sent agents to try to capture Ithru. He now lives in hiding, since there are those whose attitude is, "if we can't control him, it's better that he be dead than alive." Only a handful of apprentices (and those who tortured secrets out of them) now possess the secret of the necessary spells and bars of alloy.

"Useful thing, but *hardly* skyships," Elminster pointed out. "More like aerial rafts for children, painters, or roofers to play about with, if ye see them as I do."

The Sage of Shadowdale then shared with me news of some *real* skyships—rigged hulls whose skilled crews can alter a complex series of sails (and rush about the craft shifting ballast and cargo) to catch the wind, bank, dive, and climb. These "bold birds" are three slender caravels that can sail both the seas and the skies. They were recently built by intrepid adventurers who used magically buoyant, float-by-themselves *glowing globes* as the levitating engines. Unlike the once-common light sources of the same name, these sturdy electrum spheres are as large around as one-to-a-wagon-sized ale casks.

The adventurers, Baerlum's Boldblades, were a motley band adventuring out of Ankhapur. They discovered some ruined wizards' towers adrift in the sky, caught between needle-sharp peaks in a tiny mountain valley among the western Cloven Mountains. The wizards were dead or fled, but their shattered homes were still guarded by deadly warding magics and deadlier constructs. The adventurers managed to escape with their lives and some minor magical treasures by netting the globes in tapestries and using them as parachutes.

Whereupon they were wise enough to abandon their accustomed lives of adventuring, and instead turned their effort to parlaying these floating spheres into lasting careers.

Each globe can barely lift the weight of a heavy man, so a cluster of more than thirty is necessary to lift their small caravels. Magical light leaks steadily from dozens of seams and gaps in the hulls, and the craft can carry only small, light cargoes. The three ships (*Morning Bird*, *Highwing*, and *Storm Bird*) are now captained by Baerlum and his fellow former adventurers and crewed by their henchmen, apprentices, and families, who earn good coin shuttling light but valuable cargoes (a few passengers, treaties, contracts, messages, maps, small coffers of gems, precious fresh fruit in the depths of winter, and a few sacks or chests of coins) between Sword Coast and Inner Sea destinations, outpacing caravans that carry larger and heavier bulk cargoes and with complete safety from run-of-the-mill banditry and ground-bound monsters.

Rumor has it that at least one of the ships has been captured by a cruel wizard who now magically controls the ship's captain and crew and who puts the vessel to darker uses (kidnappings and smuggling of poisons and stolen magic)—or perhaps he's using spells to give his cronies the appearances of the former crew. No one can agree which Bird has "gone dark," however, and this new Dark Master is continuing to make the same voyages and offer the same services—but, as Elminster puts it, he is "plucking the choicest cargoes that come within reach."

The last of the new sorts of skyships is another wizard's unscrupulous vessel: the *Arrow of the Skies*, a long, troughlike barge of the air roughly but sturdily built of heavy timbers, that ascends slung beneath three enspelled wyverns who are ridden by the mages who enchanted them to obedience. These wizards are Marandur Kalthur (formerly of Chessenta) and two companions he met while adventuring, Hamandrar Illuk (from Estagund) and Narlgar Chelith (once of Turmish).

This trio hit upon spells that could bend the wills of wyverns or force them into slumber, and experimented—perilously—until they had mastered three strong, intact creatures. They put these steeds to work hauling smelted metal from the most remote mines north of the Moonsea down to the Sembian uplands, and later, as a shadow fell upon that land, on the upland farms of Impiltur, where they could be swiftly and easily conveyed to ports for sale elsewhere. In the air, they overtake and pass slower, riskier, and costlier overland metal caravans, and compete with the underways of the dwarves.

The *Arrow* doesn't fly often. As word of its existence has spread, attacks on it by rival mages (and at least one dragon, motives unknown) have become more numerous. It remains to be seen whether its aerial career will end in an inglorious crash or if it will be taken elsewhere and used in different, less overtly mercantile ways by its owners. It is an open secret that they are being courted by Thay and almost certainly by other rulers, too.

So look to the skies—where you'll not see aerial vessels often, but as Elminster warns, "just often enough to make things interesting for adventurers—and terrifying for everyone else."

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.