

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 9/5/2013



## Stealing a Crown

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.*

lenty of exhausted, bitter, poor and just plain lazy folk in the Realms dream of being a king or queen. Or a high lord or lady, emperor or empress, or other "head honcho." The grand titles are many and varied, from Sceptanar to Crowned Tyrant.

They daydream about ruling a realm or city-state large and wealthy enough that they can lounge most of many days away pursuing idle interests, feasting on mountains of the best food to be had, and devoting most of their concern to devising new ways to stave off boredom.

For the good life and a lot of other reasons, the individuals sitting on thrones want to stay there. In a good many cases, a lot of their subjects or fellow countryfolk want them to stay there—or they can be forced, cozened, or swayed to fight to keep them there. (No one wants some "strange, unwashed outlander" to walk in, sword good old King Horlus on his throne, take the crown, and start giving strange, unwashed outlander commands to everyone.) Still less will they welcome someone from a neighboring land that is seen as a rival. Many of the nobles in Cormyr may grumble about the ruling Obarskyrs, but they'd muster arms right quickly if a rich, jumped-up Sembian merchant dared to make a bid for the crown of Cormyr. A *Sembian* on the Dragon Throne? **NEVAHH!** (This must be envisaged as being accompanied by swords being ringingly whipped out of scabbards and brandished. Angrily.)

It follows that most external attempts to seize rulership are going to be met with stiff resistance. These external attempts are made by anyone other than a fellow family member with a good existing claim to the crown, who can manage the removal of the incumbent by means of illness or an accident that isn't too obviously arranged or "helped along"—and so the person pulling this off avoids being suspected of having anything to do with the unfortunate unpleasantness.

And the resistance? It is armed. This form of confrontation may well impoverish or heavily vandalize the prize being sought. Raising and feeding armies can empty larders, barns, and treasuries quickly, and besieging and burning down a castle makes it a poor place to lounge around in. It also creates unrest and gives anyone who is unscrupulous dangerous ideas. ("Well, if she just waltzed in and took the crown, why not me? I can be just as good a waltzer, particularly if she's asleep and my dagger is sharp . . .").

So why not steal a crown instead, and avoid all the unpleasantness and the perilous running around with swords while arrows fly and catapults hurl boulders? That is, why not put yourself in place of an incumbent ruler without anyone beyond the unfortunate rulers noticing?

Why not, indeed? It has been done many times before, and for good reasons involving the availability of ways and means. The Realms has both shapeshifting creatures (such as the everpresent doppelgangers) and magic that can readily aid in impersonation.

Impersonation does come with the irritations of having to act like the personage you're taking over the role of, and inheriting their feuds, problems, critics, and enemies. Still, people change over time, and you can slowly migrate the role of the queen or king from what the incumbent made it, to how you'd like to behave, perhaps even placating some enemies and ending some feuds in the process.

And if you're not a shapeshifter but have to work with one to manage the theft of power, be aware that although being a power behind the throne can be a lot more enjoyable than actually ruling (in our real world, compare the duties of, say, the ruling family of England with those of a non-royal duke of the same country), you share the

secret of what's been done with the shapeshifter—who will probably want to remove any chance of that secret not being kept by eliminating you.

In the Realms, the gods do watch mortals, so any secular ruler who gains a position through deception should bear in mind that angering any deity overly much could quickly result in the entire mortal priesthood of that deity being told—by a source they believe and obey fervently—all about that deception. If they've ruled well, this may not be a large and swift concern, but their future will be far bleaker if they aren't well liked. So someone who steals a crown had best treat all gods and their priesthoods even-handedly and even generously. This might not pose a problem for someone even-handed and generous, but it will be a definite impediment to anyone with tyrannical tendencies.

Moreover, any throne worth fighting for tends to have an existing power balance around it. Noble families of this faction might be arrayed against noble families of that one (perhaps each one controlling rival heirs or other claimants to the throne, and awaiting any good chance to put "their" candidate on the throne). Guilds or a rising merchant middle class, any locally powerful members of the aforementioned priesthoods, and anyone else that holds power in the region (a lairing dragon, for example) could all have the throne caught in between them, kept more or less stable and stationary by the countervailing shoves of this endless tug-of-war. This can mean two things: the wearer of the crown may not enjoy that life of idleness the crown-stealer was seeking, and he or she may be unable to act with freedom and lack of care.

Or as Relguld, an impoverished gravedigger operating outside the walls of Suzail during one of the periods of Cormyrean history in which crowned heads fell and rolled frequently, famously said (between bouts of spitting): "Suddenly makes spending your days digging in the mud and shifting the bones of the dead look a whole lot more desirable, don't it?" (That sentence entered the local lexicon, and it can be heard as a comment on just about anything in daily converse in Suzail to this day.)

Yet the drawbacks of removing and impersonating a ruler haven't stopped lots of ambitious individuals and conspiracies from trying. I would be usurping one of the more entertaining sides of being a DM by revealing too much about just who, sitting on a throne in the Realms right now, is an impostor or the (unwitting or otherwise) descendant of a successful crown-stealer, but let's just say there are more of them than one might think.

Certain locales even have ruling systems almost tailor-made for such impersonations. The Masked Lords of Waterdeep serve as the most obvious example, but impersonations are relatively easy in many places across the Realms during certain festivals (when costumes that include masks are many) or rituals (the dim lighting of a moonlit vigil, for instance). Sometimes—and many powerful noble families have discovered this—all that's needed is a temporary impersonation, so a ruler will make the right decision or utter the right decree at a crucial moment. A hated visiting envoy is treated with almost affectionate politeness and a vital trade agreement reached, for instance, because the real king who hates the envoy is lying abed somewhere hidden in a drugged sleep. Having been given treated wine and more treated wine to keep him that way, the king remains insensible to the world, which allows an impostor to meet with the envoy.

My intent in this column wasn't to discuss what the infamous Volo once referred to as "your actual theft of an actual crown," because giving tips and techniques for thievery is rarely socially helpful—but in some situations, just "borrowing" a real crown will be enough to carry off an impersonation. Most of the inhabitants of Cormyr in Marsember or east of Wheloon seldom or never saw King Foril Obarskyr in the flesh, so someone who looked "close enough," acted regal, and wore the proper crown might fool them.

As Storm once asked a young Harper, "The question is what is your deception for? Is it to get through a guarded door that would otherwise be closed to you, receive deference from someone who'd otherwise cut you dead, or have haughty folk kneel to you? Or is it to deceive someone into marrying you, ceding control of a mighty fortress, or serving you for the rest of their days? The first sort needs little more than momentary success and the good favor of the gods, but the latter sort requires an investment of much time and effort that may change your life."

Aye, there's the rub. If you wear the crown long enough, when does the crown start to wear you?

## 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.