

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Tales Hanging by Threads

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.

Some folk in the Realms use the words "minstrel" and "bard" interchangeably, but there's a general sense that bards are superior to minstrels. This is, in the main, true, as bards have benefited from thorough formal training, and any bard worthy of the title has a vast and deep memory of lore and tales they can call upon at any time, in rich detail—whereas minstrels (and just anyone can call themselves a "minstrel" or "teller of tales") may need to resort to books or other methods of aiding their memories.

One such lore-retrieval method is the "ballad cord." This is a cord (which may double as a belt, garrote, pack tie-down, or weapon peace-binding) that's knotted in such a manner that the patterns of knots, and the particular types of knots used, act as memory aids for a story. A teller of tales operating in the dark or in the dim light around a campfire or in a tavern lit by a single candle-lamp, late at night, can draw the cord through his or her hands and "feel" the knots to aid in tale-telling.

Closely related to the ballad cord is the "tale sash." As the name implies, these are customarily worn as sashes. Rather than being knotted, they are strips of cloth (or sometimes leather) in which symbols (crossed swords for a battle, a moon for nightfall, a crown for royalty, a claw or monster head for the appearance of a beast, and so on) and/or actual pictures that can be shown to a close-up audience (typically the faces of persons or beasts, or castles, doorways, bridges, or other important-to-the-tale locales and features) are drawn, stitched, or burned into the strip, in the sequence of the story, so a teller moving along the strip encounters reminders of what happens next.

What May Be Hidden

Both of these story reminders have been used to carry coded messages, a practice that's now reviving in popularity. Hidden meanings are often conveyed in ballad cords by the way in which knots are tied (for example, right-over-left stranding, rather than left-over-right), and in tale sashes by the eye hues of the faces, beast heads, and so on depicted on the sash (yellow, red, and green, and the patterns of these colors, meaning something other than a default blue color).

A courtier gifts a minstrel (or a merchant selling an assortment of sashes) with a ballad cord or tale sash, and adds a fee, with instructions to deliver it to a particular individual elsewhere, who will tender a more handsome fee.

In a few cases, the bearer of the cord may not suspect that they're carrying something that identifies them as knowing something or someone. Down the centuries, many a minstrel who happened to know a Harper—but may not have known that their friendly musical instrument repairer or maker of harp strings or seller of old sheet music had anything at all to do with Those Who Harp—has carried around ballad-cords that told any Harper who saw them that this minstrel knew, or at least had met and done business with, a particular Harper.

Moreover, both ballad cords and tale sashes can carry magic. The better ones radiate protective magic anyway, to ward off rot, mildew, and flame—but under such mundane enchantments, ballad cords may have enspelled knots in them that unleash spells (typically healing magic, but sometimes *wraithform* or even fiery or lightning-related spells) when undone.

Tale sashes that store spells that can be called forth are rarer than ballad cords, but they do exist, and almost all of them operate by the same mechanism: a "token" (a small stone in which a rune has been graven, very similar to the ward-tokens widely used in past centuries in the Sword Coast North) must be touched to a marking on the

sash that is identical to the rune on the token, rune directly to rune. There will be a bright flash, knowledge of the magic will flood into the mind of the person holding the token, and their will directs how and where the spell is unleashed. Typically the user must decide such matters in an instant; “hanging” the spell—that is, holding its unleashing in abeyance, to be used later is not possible.

The Lost Cord

Rumors have recently arisen that various shadowy hired agents of a Waterdhavian trading house, Red Hawk Holdings (of Castle Ward, westfront Snail Street, five doors north of its moot with Soothsayer’s Way) have been searching frantically for a ballad cord that has gone missing.

The body of a minstrel, Aldegund Ruthlorn “The Rough Horn,” was recently found in some bushes just off a privy trail that leads off the main coastal trade-road, not far south of Waterdeep. Ruthlorn, an aging and rough-voiced “salty” performer popular for his endless and amiable collection of coarse jests and because he traded in small, useful items hard for many to find (love potions, lockpicks, false documents, and the like), had been stabbed eight or more times, and robbed. One of the things he was evidently carrying that was not found on or near his body was a ballad cord he was carrying on behalf of the Red Hawks. Who it was bound for—beyond the obvious inference that whoever it is must be located south of Waterdeep, almost certainly in one of the coastal ports, such as Baldur’s Gate—isn’t known, and the Red Hawks aren’t talking. Their agents (who include adventurers, known thieves, mercenaries, and a few traveling merchant traders of success and long standing) have offered both bribes and violence in attempts to learn the whereabouts and fate of the cord. This in turn means it’s important, or at least that a certain importance is attached to its message not falling into the wrong hands.

The current rumors about this matter convey a sense of mounting urgency, and indicate that others, including traditional rivals of the Red Hawks such as the Dragonjaws Trading Coster and the Vigilant Caskers, are becoming interested and are setting their own covert agents to investigating. Some of the investigators may well be independent opportunists, who scent the possibility of a monetary reward from the Red Hawks in return for the surrender of the Lost Cord.

Malath’s Sash

At least one tale sash was worn for years by a merchant, not a minstrel, and served to snatch its owner from peril when the successful (and increasingly stout and sedentary) trader was cornered by murderous thieves. Tothen Malath began trading in carts, wagons, and large “cargo” snow-sledges out of Neverwinter in the 1440s DR, and soon relocated to Scornubel and Waterdeep, where he specialized in cheap, reusable casks and strongchests sold to clients on a “trade back in for half price” basis. He expanded into sales of tools and of wheels of cheese from Secomber and the Dales, and then into inexpensive but sturdy fully-sewn clothing that gained great popularity among shopkeepers and laborers, becoming very wealthy and opening warehouses and shops in Waterdeep, Baldur’s Gate, Athkatla, and Scornubel. His attempts to expand inland through Crimmor and beyond, however, met with stiff resistance from traders already dominating those trade runs, and culminated in Malath’s encounter with a gang of knife-wielding street thieves in Crimmor—whom he escaped from, even as they broke down the door to rush in and stab him, by using a token on his sash to teleport himself away to an unknown elsewhere.

Malath hasn’t been seen since, but certain orders and activities within his trading organization suggest he has changed his name and presumably his appearance, and he is pretending to be someone new taking over his own holdings. His alias and current whereabouts remain mysterious, but he seems to be in or near either Scornubel or Elturel.

Celandrath

Rumors are spreading among merchants in Cormyr and the Dales of ballad cords fashioned of fine, dark blue-dyed rope that all contain three or more minor enchantments, magic that is labeled and governs the price of the cords. These are sold covertly by elf and half-elf traders, and are purportedly made by “Celandrath,” an elf—



though who and where this maker is remains unknown (even, in many cases, from the traders reselling them, who know only an intermediate they purchased the cords from). Typical enchantments include magic that offers brief invisibility or flight, and minor healings or mendings.

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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