

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 5/9/2013



The Cargo that Bites Back

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.*

layer characters in most Realms campaigns don't start out independently wealthy. They need money like everyone else, and thanks to their particular skills and experience, they're uniquely suited to earn it as caravan guards. Many situations arise where adventurers are transporting caged, live monsters to a patron, or are guarding a caravan that is moving dangerous beasts that inevitably escape (if my play experience is anything to go by).

Although such cargoes do literally "bite back," when I penned the title of this column, I was thinking not of monsters with teeth but of nonliving cargoes that have the strong likelihood of visiting nasty complications on their guards.

For example:

In the business of delivering vital cargo from point A to point B, fans of fantasy are overly familiar with that cargo being a war-preventing treaty or diplomat, or a prince, princess, or other heir, and for the journey to be made against the constant threat of ruses and ambushes. We're almost as accustomed to encountering the VIP who doesn't want to be delivered safely to B and is actively trying to escape or aid his or her "kidnappers."

I'd like to suggest some slightly less-worn alternatives to these cozily familiar tropes.

The vital missing object, for example: the wedding ring, crown, or other gewgaw that an inheritance or ritual demands or that proves someone's guilt or innocence. In *The Three Musketeers*, for example, this is a large diamond stud missing from the Queen's jewelry. In a fantasy setting full of magic, the missing object could be a magical command word or rune, or a key or talisman that allows safe entry into an area sealed with magic or guarded by monsters where a will, royal writ, or dynastic regalia have been stashed for safekeeping.

Perhaps the cargo is a different sort of Missing Object: something mundane that is desperately needed at its destination because of a shortage, so it temporarily commands outrageous prices there. If pure profit isn't a strong enough motive, delivering the object or commodity could also derail a villain's plan or defuse an explosive threat at the destination.

The cargo might be perfectly legal and innocuous, but if a competitor is sitting on a heavily guarded supply in the destination region and charging ruinous prices for it, there's a golden opportunity for profit. When PCs arrive with a caravan full of the stuff, they bust the monopoly, drive prices down (but not until after they've reaped the benefits of the initial high prices), and make themselves a rich, well-connected enemy, if the competitor didn't hate them already.

Then there's the perfectly innocent and above-board cargo that for some reason presents a threat to a rival business, faction, or noble family. Characters who deliver it wind up in someone's bad graces and become foes to be shunned, harassed, or eliminated. The adventurers might not realize their danger until it's too late. Such hostility can lead to future adventures, as the characters are framed for misdeeds, put in harm's way, or find that they are only offered the most dangerous and dirty jobs by employers who fear the characters' enemy.

The subject of "dirty work" brings us to the Illicit Cargo. This can be wares that are banned in a destination, or that are banned in land the caravan must cross to reach a destination, or that draw heavy import or export duties that the shipper would like to avoid paying (with or without the characters' knowledge). In short—smuggling.

Real-life news stories about contraband can offer up plenty of ideas. Here are just a few:

- Gems hidden inside glued-together walnut shells from which the nuts have been removed, hidden in large sacks of real walnuts.
- Clay jars of wine or olive oil that have coins baked into their bases.
- Corpses being transported home for burial inside kegs of cheap wine for preservation. Drugs or other contraband are hidden in clay balls stuffed inside the corpse.
- Fish packed in oil with gems or other small valuables stuffed inside them.
- Fine wool packed among hides, or rare hides packed with wool, or finished garments rolled up along with raw textiles (all examples of hiding high-tariff items inside low-tariff items that are similar in form).
- Metal lanterns that have daggers, arrowheads, spearheads, or darts worked into their frames (weapons are restricted in many places, from time to time anyway).

Then there's the Swindle or the Swap, wherein characters serve as decoys (willing or otherwise) carrying a fake cargo meant to draw attention away from the real cargo, which is traveling under light guard by a different route.

Fans of the Tintin books (serialized comic stories that became bestselling "graphic novels" long before that term was coined) may remember the Captain with a taste for the bottle and his consternation in one adventure when he discovered, at sea, that someone had replaced his cartons of whiskey with cartons of metal plates—which turned out to be a disassembled submarine that was a key tool in solving the mystery of *Red Rackham's Treasure*.

In a fantasy setting where magic works, all sorts of interesting wrinkles are possible in the story where one sort of cargo turns out to be something similar but different, or even something else entirely.

Then there is the Dangerous Cargo. Consider the standard "vital contract;" it's familiar and boring. But if it bears a curse that silently leaches memorized spells or even life force from those guarding it, handling it, or just standing too near ("Don't open the box; bad things happen to those who open our boxes!"), then it becomes interesting again. Perhaps it's an undead creature or some other monster with the ability to slowly and gradually trade consciousness with a living character, or perhaps it merely—merely!—drains the magic from an adventurer's magic items.

Perhaps the cargo is something mundane that's been treated with contagious, deadly spores that can transform humans into monsters. The victims might become rampaging killers, or they could melt into helpless blobs whose main threat is spreading more of the contagion.

Or perhaps—and here we circle back again to biting monsters—the cargo is something alive but temporarily quiescent. It could become active only at night, when it emerges from its crate to feed on the most convenient source of fresh meat, which might not be the caravan's horses. Dragon eggs have got to hatch sometime

There may be nothing sinister at all about the cargo, but it has the potential to change the world. In the Realms, such cargo could be the detailed plans for a new sort of easily-constructed skyship or an artifact that establishes a new portal when properly sited and activated—a portal linking to a spot where powerful forces or monsters are awaiting the opening of the portal to trigger their invasion. This world-changing cargo might be something that anyone (including, of course, unscrupulous player characters) might copy and use to their own advantage or pilfer and resell ("Surely they won't notice if just one is missing!").

Then there's orphaned cargo. Cargo is orphaned when the person it should have been delivered to dies or is murdered before the delivery is transacted. Now the characters are stuck with a package (perhaps a wagonload of packages) with no one to take it off their hands. This can be especially fun if the cargo is something strange and exotic, perhaps intended for an alchemist. Jars full of basilisks' eyes or black pudding might be hard to explain and harder to dispose of.

In short, the stuff that's inside the wagons or the ships' hold can provide endless adventure possibilities. The DM can keep such surprises in reserve until an adventurer gets too inquisitive for his own good or stumbles onto a secret cargo by mischance. If this is the heroes' tenth or twentieth such journey, they might realize that they've been party to something illegal, dangerous, or even realm-threatening for a long time without knowing, and their unwitting participation has contributed to a huge threat. (If you discover you're smuggling beholders, illithids, or doppelgangers on your thirtieth delivery to the palace, then how many have you brought in before, and how much of the blame must you bear for the downfall of that dynasty?)

The repercussions of such adventures can go on for years. I know this to be true, because in the "home" Realms campaign I run, they have, and do. Some of it, my players even know about

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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