

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Dream of Empire

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.*

Over the passing centuries, many empires have risen and fallen in the Forgotten Realms—a place that seems to dislike empires. Or rather, seems to tolerate them for only a short time, unless they are small, contiguous, and dominated (not just controlled) by a single race. In recent times, alliances are more common than empires, humans dominate most of the surface of Faerûn but share their cities and towns with many races, and power and wealth are so scattered, amongst so much competing lands and city-states, that it seems unlikely rivals of the sprawling empires of old will ever arise.

That stops very few megalomaniacs from trying, however.

From fanatical priests to power-hungry orc war leaders, the dream of empire is alive and well. What is meant by "empire" may vary wildly from one would-be emperor to the next; what Elminster calls "the truly deluded" envisage vast territories transformed from the way they are now into regions dedicated to what the wannabe-emperor holds dear, from the breeding of ever-larger cucumbers to the straightening of rivers and roads with geometrical precision, and from the elimination of some creatures (the stingfly, for example) to the taming of others (dragons as aerial steeds for everyone). More worldly dreamers just want to take over this or that throne, crush a rival realm and absorb it, and call the larger result an empire—a recurring process Storm Silverhand first sung about circa 412 DR in her mocking ballad "New Kings For Old."

Many adventurers have conquered a few woodlots and adjacent cow pastures in the Border Kingdoms and proclaimed themselves such things as "Lord High Emperor of the Eternal Realm of Twostumps," or "The Most Dread Overlord of Muddy Middens," a practice that highlights the ridiculous nature of overblown titles. Yet the more dangerous aspirants to emperors usually have a foe (an individual, a family, or the membership of a priesthood, guild, or ruling cabal) they desire to destroy. Stepping into the power vacuum left by their removal and clinging to it to prevent their replenishment or rebirth will be how the new empire comes about: a byproduct rather than the central goal. The cause of many rebels is to avenge wrongs and throw down oppressors; becoming in turn the New Oppressor is rarely a self-admitted goal.

Rather than look back over the many, many lost empires of Faerûn, the adventurer of today, in search of employment and opportunities for enrichment, would do well to survey the landscape for energetic attempts (not just wistful dreams) at establishing new empires.

So let's do that.

Moreover, let's look beyond the obvious to see some lesser-known bids for empire—bids that haven't risen to general attention yet, or haven't really got going. What Vangerdahast, in his days of seeing to the security of Cormyr, used to call "troubles whose brewing hasn't yet sent forth any steam the citizenry at large have noticed."

In other words, schemes and strivings still small and secretive enough for a lone adventurer, or a small band, to make a difference in abetting—or thwarting.

The Tamer

One bid belongs to Thaemur Harthansor, a glassblower and shopkeeper ("Harthansor Sundries/exotic household curios from afar") in Proskur. A short, thin, self-effacing man described as "timidly polite" by his staff, Harthansor is both shrewd and a superb actor. He maintains a meek front for the world to see while he schemes and makes connections, for his dream of empire to come. Known as "Thaemur the Tamer" to a few caravan

merchants who are partially aware of his ambitions (because he is a master at learning what can move and control a person, and making use of such controls, thus far to ensnare capable merchants to his cause), the glassblower plans much. He seeks to establish a long, narrow empire of cities dominated by merchants armed with poison gas and venom. These vendors would shuttle regularly along the trade routes that link the cities, eliminate anyone crossing them, and give orders to city rulers—orders enforced by a cabal of wizards (whom Thaemur hasn't yet recruited, though he's building up a list of unwitting candidates) whom he'll control by means of a dragon (whose very existence he's thus far kept secret from everyone). This wyrm will be the true emperor, and Thaemur intends to happily and loyally serve it, as long as he can fashion the empire he envisages (to Thaemur, his prize is the society he'll create, not being its commander).

The dragon is an ancient red dragon of small size and many scars (suffered in battle against larger dragons who defeated her and took her hoard) named Klaroartha (Klaroarthanangalor in full) that lairs in the southern Sunset Mountains. She tricked two more powerful dragons into a feud and recurring battles, until one slew the other but was sorely wounded—whereupon she ambushed and finished him, then took his lair for her own. Hungry to achieve something she can take pride in, and long a collector and user of many magic items (that she can control by the use of a Netherese "battle web" artifact she found, that enables her to discharge multiple wands, rods, and other items, sited in different locations, at once), Klaroartha used some of her items to spy on Proskur, became aware of Thaemur and his schemes, and met him one night. Over time and many meetings, Thaemur went from terrified to reaching agreement with this "gift from the gods." Both of them are patient and careful, so their path to empire has thus far been slow—and almost entirely unnoticed by neighboring lands and powers.

The Idealist

In Mintar, longtime swordsmith Sharrarra Duthmere was widowed when a shadowy Calishite merchants' cabal decided to cut their costs by eliminating creditors. Sharrarra has spent years slaving at the hot forge while men, men, and more men have shown up to deal with her husband, and his murder under the knives of the cabal brought her to the view that men holding power is a bad thing, because they always misuse it.

So she has decided to found an empire led by females—halfling, half-elf, dwarf, gnome, and human females. She plans to set herself up as empress, and she wants to occupy the Lake of Steam area and Calimshan. Sharrarra doesn't hate men—she just thinks things always go badly when men are in charge, so she's willing to try the alternative. She doesn't believe women are inherently superior, but she does think that they're more sensible and often concentrate more on matters of daily personal importance (food, shelter, enough coin, family and community ties and co-operation) and less on making war and besting others in ruthless business dealings. She thinks her empire will swiftly gain popular support from commoners desiring to join it when they understand that she seeks steady good food for every belly, peace, order, and fairness, and law enforcement by locals, for locals.

Sharrarra grants that this dream may be very naive, but she is willing to try to make it real. Her first step is to hire adventurers (male, female, and of any race) to eliminate local rulers, corrupt administrators, and "magnates" (by which term Sharrarra means the heads of extra-legal power groups and cabals). She sees the second step in founding her empire to be installing the right individuals (mainly females) as replacements for those her adventurers eliminated.

The Organizer

In Athkatla, the senior priest of Waukeen Maszarlra Yondrith recently "lost her faith." She still believes in the existence of the goddess and that the primacy of her worship over others is still preferable, but she no longer believes that she personally should devote her life to that holy service when she can do more good by organizing "the sword-swingers and death-dealers" into a force that will conquer Amn from within.

She will then sway her "New Amn" into embracing "wizards and their ilk" (sorcerers, warlocks, and so on) as openly and fully as other lands of Faerûn do, and conquering Tethyr and the northern Sword Coast to found an empire. She will be empress and commander of the empire's armies, and the faith of Waukeen will be the state religion, given primacy over other priesthods.

In Amn, Yondrith was a behind-the-scenes administrator for the Church of Waukeen, in charge of what we in the modern world might call "human resources" and "logistics" or "quartermastering," so she rightly sees organizing and running things (civic administration) as something she's skilled at.

Yondrith believes most conquerors trying to found a kingdom or empire proceed too quickly and violently, creating much suffering, tumult, and unrest—whereas slow, patient steps (both in conquering Amn from within, and in expanding thereafter) will win maximum public support and give her citizens the best lives possible, by avoiding famines and food shortages, and great loss of life and therefore agricultural production. She fully expects to die of old age while "her" empire is in its early stages, passing on "something of worth" to successors.

The Conqueror

Darauth "the Damned" Neldor is a heavily scarred, disfigured (noseless and with a scar-twisted mouth that's "all up one side of his face," as one merchant put it) mercenary warcaptain who led several mercenary companies over the years. Now embittered but growing mighty of thew and height (the same merchant recently described him as "nine feet tall and getting taller, with shoulders as broad as three men, when for years he was but six feet in height") due to potions he found in a dungeon and drank, Neldor intends to muster a large army of the disaffected in his current base of Delzimmer. He hopes to found an empire by battling his way north and west across the Realms, choosing verdant, wealthy lands and city-states to conquer.

He intends to co-opt capable guildmasters and minor local officials he encounters, and reward them by elevating them in rank, power, and pay within his new empire, as administrators to run things in the wake of his armies. His secret weapon is his steadfast life companion Belmar Ornan, a man from Turmish who has a natural "wild talent" that allows him to read thoughts from nearby; Ornan will safeguard against possible treachery on the part of these "officers of the empire" Neldor appoints.

Darauth has begun gathering suitable warriors. He intends to lead them against Cathyr as a test, and if they perform well, his first real target will be Chessenta. Then he intends to go on to Threskel and begin building (or more likely seizing) a fleet to invade his choice of coastal lands about the Sea of Fallen Stars.

Darauth earned his nickname of the Damned when a mercenary company under his command slaughtered everyone in a monastery dedicated to Malar—and the angry deity sent wild beasts and marauding monsters after the mercenaries until every last one of them was dead except Darauth, who begged for forgiveness, and faithfully fulfilled the three hard penances Malar directed him to do.

These are just four of dozens of current schemes of empire that have moved past the stage of being mere dreams. None of them may ever come to anything—or they may all burgeon, and collide.

To quote the old saying: Only Dungeon Masters know how the winds of change will blow . . .

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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