

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Feather Guilds

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.*

any cities and city-states in the Forgotten Realms have guilds, which are collectives of craft workers or merchants who seek to control local trade in their fields of endeavor. Guilds typically set standards (such as units of measurement, from sizes of garments to how much firewood is in a "cord" and what volume a particular sort of keg holds). They also seek to control or at least influence supplies of goods and services, both by restricting guild membership and seeking to control who can (typically guild members) and can't (usually non-members) engage in a trade, and by controlling imports and exports or influencing governments into doing so (by outright ban or stiff tariffs). Guilds are concerned first and foremost with the welfare of their members, so they tend to try to set prices, either formally or through their control over supply (scarcity driving "what the market will bear" prices up), and their presence results in higher—but more stable—prices.

Guilds are inherently useful to a Dungeon Master running a campaign because they can serve as an opposing force to government, and their members aren't necessarily identified by bloodright (as nobles and rival royal families are) and thus easily imprisoned or trained or both. Guilds also can more easily make contacts with outlanders and folk of all walks of life. They are also useful to anyone in the Realms trying to change any society, because their obvious interests and needs make them easy to manipulate or anticipate. It doesn't take bright wits to figure out how most guilds will react to, say, a scarcity of this raw material or an attempt to change that law governing what the guild does.

In the "home" Realms campaign, guilds in the Sword Coast cities have often been at each other's throats (in part because of the skillful manipulations of city rulers) and locked in various ongoing struggles for power with costers, fleets, and other merchant shipping organizations. Noble and temple and independent wealthy sponsors who patronize various guilds (and costers, and fleets) get into the mix, and the result is an ever-shifting, ongoing game of "I'll get rich if I get my way, and stop you getting your way." In which any and all players can resort to hiring adventurers to carry out anything shady or dangerous, from guarding vital cargoes and serving as menacing deterrents to warehouse arson and factor (trade-agent) kidnappings.

This is the everyday state of affairs for guilds. The history of Waterdeep can be told through the histories of its guilds, who are bound up in the daily work and lifeblood of the city while the city's nobles and Masked Lords dabble in daily civic doings, taking time to pursue personal interests, sideline concerns, and outland politics far more than "the grasping guilds" do.

There are, however, a handful of unusual guilds in the Realms—"rogue" guilds, if you will. These guilds long ago departed Cormyr and Sembian cities after various disagreements with the authorities (mostly involving taxes), and relocated to Featherdale. These "Feather Guilds" are the Fellowship of Coachlamp and Coachwhip Makers (formerly of Arabel); the Tusk Council (breeders of Boars and Oxen, formerly of Daerlun); the Loom-makers Guild (once of Selgaunt); and the Mapweavers (formerly of Yhaunn, where they were locally famous for weaving large carpets that were ornamental on the usually-seen side, and detailed maps of an area of the client's choice on the underneath).

Today, all these guilds still serve their members in their official trades and concerns—but all of them are increasingly notorious for their new sidelines: smuggling, fencing and warehousing stolen goods, kidnapping, and sheltering thieves (providing disguises, hideouts, false identities, and false documents).

The mastermind behind the exodus of the guilds to Featherdale is the charismatic and clever head of the Mapweavers, the imperious and compelling Asplara Flaene. She has deftly managed the cooperation among

the guilds, various mercenaries, and hired adventuring bands, which has kept agents of Cormyr and Sembia from destroying them. Her cunning maneuvering has also prevented the Zhentarim and others from conquering them.

Born into a Sembian servant family, Asplara's stunning good looks as a child initially earned her much unwanted attention from many males whose gazes chanced to fall upon her. One of them happened to be a kindly aging seneschal, who told her frankly and privately that her looks, when used wisely along with her native swift wits, were a valuable asset (or weapon) in life, and that this and that tactic might serve her well.

Flaene followed his advice subtly and skillfully. Her glib tongue and sharp intellect allowed her understanding of the finer details of daily Sembian and later Cormyrean society to deepen quickly, and she rose rapidly in life, gaining ever-better (and better-paid) positions in service in grand households. Never hesitating to depart one employer for another, Asplara worked not just for nobles and wealthy commoners, but toiled for various merchants, both caravan masters and shopkeepers. The cut-and-thrust of commerce intrigued her, and desiring to dabble in investments and make her own mountain of gold, she risked her modest savings in the only way she could find: through the Mapweavers Guild, who were then in chronic need of funds (owing to purchases of guild products always lagging behind the expenses of making them) and so were allowing many small investors to "go in" on guild property purchases and business loans.

Asplara made surprising amounts of coin very quickly, but when one investment went bad, found herself with nothing—the money of guild members was protected by the guild, but the coins of non-members were not. So Asplara Flaene decided to become a guild member, and she launched an all-out assault on the closed guild ranks by using her native intelligence and skillful way with words, then marrying her way in when she was spurned as an "opportunistic non-weaver." To this day, it's widely accepted that her husband Trulbro Tastelmore and Asplara genuinely loved each other, and they each embraced the other's open waywardness.

Once a member, Asplara didn't hesitate to both make herself energetically useful as a guild scribe, general dogsbody errand-runner and work-drudge. Her enthusiasm for the work and innate charisma won over guild member after guild member. As her rueful husband said, "My Little Flame had every jack in the guild pining after her, as drooling and mournful as a pack of smitten younglings."

Although Asplara is of average height, the nickname "Little Flame" has clung to her from that day to this, with Tastelmore long in his grave and Flaene grown old and wrinkled.

Thrice down the passing years she sought to become guildmaster, and thrice others (men of senior years and guild service) were voted into office (by the usual secret ballot) over her. When GuildWeavemaster Rargult Lember died abruptly of heartstop during a summer lightning storm, the membership finally gave Flaene her chance. It's known that many had misgivings, being more than a little afraid of her and what "wildness" she might do to them and to the guild rules and side businesses, but she proved as astute and able as any of the richest Sembian investment magnates, and so she began to foster secret alliances and trading relationships with many other guilds—so much so that the rulers of both Cormyr and Sembia started to keep a close eye on her.

Had Asplara Flaene harbored even the slightest political ambitions, their fears would have been well founded. As things are, the Little Flame wants stable government in whatever place is home to the Mapweavers, and she defines such stability as avoiding war whenever possible (and other "troubles" that make trade difficult and interrupt the daily process of craft workers getting swiftly richer), and taxing lightly and fairly evenly across all endeavors, rather than playing favorites among trades and indulging in open corruption.

That's why she eventually got fed up with various "special levies" (taxes) in both Cormyr and Sembia, and relocated her guild to Featherdale, where she could politically dominate and so (in her eyes) "get her taxes' worth" by having local authorities treat her guild as she wanted it to be treated.

Once settled in Featherdale, Flaene promptly encouraged other guilds to join her so as to make government reprisals against the Mapweavers (such as import bans or stiff tariffs) impractical and less likely. A few of the more corrupt guilds, who'd been earning their own troubles with governments by their behavior (notably the notorious Fellowship of Coachlamp and Coachwhip Makers, widely known to be rife with counterfeiters, smugglers, and fences of stolen goods), took her up on her offer.

The aging circle of Masters who collectively ran the Fellowship (known as the "Coachgoblets" due to their fondness and prodigious capacity for expensive wines and liqueurs, displayed at every guild meeting) were captivated by Flaene's clever suggestions and engaging charisma. With their support, Flaene easily dominated both local Dalefolk and the "Tradelord Protector" that Sembia had installed as a sort of ambassador-cum-local-ruling-bully.

When the Tusk Council arrived in the dale, Tarlas Dorndown, a former Zhent battle commander (said by many

to still be taking secret orders from Zhentarim mages in hiding), promptly took it over. He arrived out of nowhere to duel one Tusk Councilor to the death and was helpfully present when "accidents" befell the other three, one by one. Flaene faced him down, too, and ended up with one more admiring collaborator rather than a rival. The aging and corrupt Ondekuth Boreld, Guildmaster of the Loom-makers, respected her from their first meeting. As he put it, "She commands the youthful energy I've lacked for half a century, has the looks I've never had, and bids fair to wallow in corruption without being besmirched by it or becoming ever-hungry for more of it. In short, the perfect guildmaster."

And so Flaene has proven, with the Feather Guilds becoming a daily force for getting illicit things done alongside legitimate trade, enriching everyone in the process—and making themselves too darned useful for any ruler, from those on thrones to the shadowy wizards who lurk behind them, to be bothered to eliminate.

To the common laborer and small shopkeeper in Cormyr, Sembia, and the Dalelands alike, the Feather Guilds aren't just where you can covertly hire someone to get even with someone who cheated you. They are where you can place modest investments and see small but steady returns, with a guarantee that your original invested sum is safe. The Little Flame has never forgotten what happened to her, and she is determined that it won't happen to the common folk.

In return, the common folk have made it clear to the high and mighty in Cormyr and Sembia that if they ever get any "foolheaded" ideas about harming the Feather Guilds and their shrewd leader, bad things will swiftly happen to their height and mightiness.

Yet the Little Flame is getting old, and some within the Feather Guilds are growing ambitious. There are dark rumors that certain guildmembers might want to hasten her demise, and it's open knowledge that particular guildfolk want to end up in her position of dominance after she's gone. Wherefore lots of Feather Guild members are hiring adventuring bands and doing adventurers favors right now—including Flaene herself—in hopes of calling on adventurers if things come to open violence.

As some anonymous wag put it in a rhyme now sweeping Faerûn along the caravan routes:

The Little Flame is growing old
Watching whisperers getting bold
Some for power, some for gold
Waiting graves ever cold
Yes, the Little Flame is growing old

Asplara Flaene herself has been heard to murmur this ditty, in recent months. But then, she is growing old.

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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