

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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## The Friendly Monster

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 **D&D** campaigns end up using a play element that seldom gets talked about, almost as if it's a guilty little secret: "the Friendly Monster," a beast (sometimes small and weird, like a faerie dragon or a smart-mouthed flying skull, but more often so large and formidable that novice PCs will be reluctant to attack it) that aids PCs, often with timely advice, and even befriends them.

The Friendly Monster can become a recurring source of lore ("That fragment you're holding looks very much to me like it came from the power gauntlets I once saw Princess Raudraera wearing, when she rode past this cave of mine, to do battle against the orcs in yon mountains"), a later adventure hook ("The dragon is gone and the gates of its lair stand open! Flooding out of them is a river of smoking blue blood!"), or a temporary battle ally or rescuer if PCs get in over their heads and you don't want to slaughter them ("The Eagles! The Eagles are coming!").

Or a Friendly Monster can generate adventures for the PCs by passing on news or gossip or even lore it fabricates because it has its own agenda, and wants to manipulate the PCs into becoming its agents. Sending them down into a nearby dungeon or ruin to bring out some item it dare not go after itself, or having them eliminate its enemies or rivals. Some "friendly" monsters are just good actors, feigning friendship to make PCs its pawns—or handy scapegoats.

And of course, like all seemingly friendly NPCs, the Friendly Monster can later turn out to be a spy for a shadowy evil organization or the government (keeping an eye on adventurers and other potential troublemakers in a particular area, for the distant ruler). It can even *be* the government, shapechanged and undercover. One of my favorite moments as a DM was watching the faces of players as their adventuring PCs arrived in a Border Kingdom throne room to eagerly report to their queen that they had used their hard-won magic swords (which dealt wounds no healing magic could readily deal with) to sorely wound a terrible dragon marauding in their corner of the kingdom, "hacking its shoulder clear off"—and discovering the pale-faced Queen, thin-lipped with fury and pain, sitting on her throne swathed in bandages. With most of her shoulder, under the bandages, hacked away.

Ooops.

Yet Friendly Monsters can also be true and valued friends who give PCs advice, shelter, or secure storage for loot or inconvenient, better-off-hidden items. Who race to the rescue or provide alibis or honest witness, who loan items or arrange employment or vouch for suspicious-seeming PC adventurers.

Whether real or fair-weather in friendliness, a Friendly Monster can be useful to both DMs and PCs by epitomizing the locale they dwell in, and deepening its attachment and value to mobile adventuring PCs, giving them something to fight for. ("I *know* it's not our home village, but stlarn it, it's where good old Phirauz lives! You want Phirauz dead, or homeless? I certainly don't want to live in a kingdom without him!") Their presence can also make a place memorable, so it stands out from others. ("Yes, I *know* there are thirty-some villages along that road. I don't mean the village with the mill that has a blue roof or the one where the mill has a working sluice and wheel but a decaying, broken one right beside it, nor yet the village where the main road-moot is always muddy—I mean the village that has that talking worm at the bottom of that big bottle at one end of the tavern's bar.")

Friendly Monsters can also be, as they are in so many fairy tales and modern children's fantasy fiction, part of age-old conflicts between powerful and seemingly immortal creatures that humans get caught up in

accidentally. In a typical **D&D** campaign, such ongoing conflicts are most interesting if they're largely unknown (and mysterious, in the few details that PCs are aware of) and a little more complicated than clear-cut "good versus evil" conflicts. Or to put it another way, if there are obvious Good Guys and Bad Guys, relationships between PCs and those they encounter can be reduced to pretty basic "help or hack" choices. However, anyone the PCs encounter whom they can't pigeonhole, and who is intriguing enough to make the PCs want to find out more about, is instantly more interesting.

For example, in my original Realms campaign, Zhentarim fighting foresters and farmers in the Dales (who eventually had the Knights of Myth Drannor at their sides, against the Zhents) often saw a mysterious flying figure, standing (and flying about) upright, on empty air. The figure wore ankle-length black robes over boots and probably black armor, and concealed its face within a closed-visor black great helm. This apparition ignored or avoided (by gliding or *teleporting* aside) attacks (sometimes reflecting spells back at their sources) and just watched, saying nothing. The Zhents often tried to destroy this apparition, believing it to be a *projected image* or similar manifestation of a spy for Cormyr or some other foe. Seeing those reactions, the Dalefolk treated the figure as a friend, offering food and drink and a place at their firesides. The figure silently refused with head-shakes, but took to writing (in fire ash or loose dirt or sprinkled water on a contrasting surface like dirt or stone) cryptic, short answers to matters the Dalefolk were speculating aloud about. It eventually turned out that the apparition was a forest beast—a wild boar—whose shape and appearance had been altered by far-off mages in Amn, who wanted to spy on Zhent attempts to conquer the Dales because of how this could affect prices of goods and flows of trade. The distant wizards magically controlled the boar, "saw" through it, and could even, when pushed far enough, unleash spells through it—as several Zhentarim learned, at their cost. To the Dalefolk, it was a "friendly neutral," fighting only to defend itself. To the Zhents, it was a mystery they *had* to solve, and a major irritation or potential threat.

Any Friendly Monster who's part of a larger, ongoing conflict can serve as a gateway for PCs to get caught up in that struggle, potentially providing a campaign with a new "backbone" driving force and behind-the-scenes structure. Humans might see dragons as isolated monsters—but dragons may well see humans (and even human kingdoms) as pawns in long-term ongoing strife (or social-dominance sport) between dragons who manipulate humans. (You can see hints of this in *The God Catcher*, the superb novel Erin Evans wrote in the "Ed Greenwood Presents Waterdeep" series.)

Unlike powerful, numerically strong groups like the Zhents, a clan of dwarves, or a particular family or settlement of elves, individual Friendly Monsters interact with PCs as, well, *individuals*. Attitudes between character and monster can range from hostility to love, change often over time, and—just like a real-world friendship or business arrangement—require management on the part of the PCs. The wisest players will see value in building up firm friends and staunch allies who can be called upon for aid, or that PCs can call in favors from, or manipulate foes into coming into conflict with (such as the hungry dragon, the ettercap with prepared traps galore, or merely a beast fiercely defending its lair or its vulnerable young). A Friendly Monster may be part of one of the aforementioned deeper, largely hidden ongoing conflicts, or it may be a loner—and PCs may never know which is the case unless the DM needs to reveal a larger, behind-the-scenes conflict, because Friendly Monsters, like PCs, will often keep their deepest secrets to themselves.

Until, of course, they're dying, and reach out to PCs to act for them after they're dead. It might come as a surprise to learn that the jovial innkeeper was really a shapechanged monster. It may come as an even bigger surprise to the PCs to find a dying message from the innkeeper written to them, pleading for them to avenge his death and promising a hidden-treasure reward if they do.

As violent conflict tends to shorten or end relationships and chop short mysteries clinging to a foe, Friendly Monsters work best (or at least last longest, and hence give more color to ongoing campaign play) when their status is something like the relationship between, say, Gandalf and Tom Bombadil in *The Lord of the Rings*: powerful individuals who are allies because both of them care for the territory they inhabit. Most keep to themselves, and stay in their favorite locales in the world, acting as local deterrents, kingpins who send NPC adventurers to do things, or the powers behind thrones. Only a rare few travel (and meddle) widely.

In the Realms, Elminster and his fellow Chosen of Mystra, along with organizations they founded and support (such as the Harpers) are those busy traveling meddlers. They work best when they're mysterious and offstage, so they neither overshadow nor get in the way of PCs—but the characters are still mindful of what these powerful beings might do if the PCs behave irresponsibly toward whatever Elminster and Company hold dear. That influence works to curb the player (or for that matter, the NPC Zhent or Red Wizard or brigand leader) who, whether out of irritation or malicious whim, proclaims, "Let's just slaughter the whole town because we feel like it—after all, we're great adventurers and they're just everyday citizens with knives and a few hammers, so they can't stop us! And if the town ends up empty, who cares?"

Well, Elminster—and local Friendly Monsters like him—care . . . and they can stop you.

Still and all, Friendly Monsters hold comparatively few attractions if used as sticks. (No one wants Elminster or

anyone else to show up every few minutes to tell PCs what to do, complete with ready threats if they defy or disobey such orders. Nor do most players enjoy seeing their characters saddled with curses, dooms, and destinies that snatch away free will.) Friendly Monsters work so much better as carrots. For instance . . .

If Aunthordryn the treant suddenly rumbles to life to share an age-old secret with PCs, or . . .

If the ghost of Hondryre the Emperor—who was once a dragon, and now rules nothing—haunts the characters by night to deliver a grim warning, or . . .

If Marlondur, a guardian naga now roaming at large (because what it guarded has been taken), seeks out adventurers to warn them that the ancient magic items it guarded until recently have been seized and awakened, and their fell magic is now being used by an evil cabal of doppelgangers bent on slaying and impersonating rulers all over Faerûn. or . . .

If the normally haughty Anlarahlatha, matriarch of a proud old local elf family, suddenly needs the PCs to aid her or her family, and must try to befriend them, or failing that enter into a trading or an "I'll give you this if you'll do that" relationship, in a desperate hurry (but also needs to treat a rival adventuring band the same way, so they'll be her backup if the PCs fail her) . . .

. . . then things get interesting fast.

All of the above Friendly Monsters have done the things mentioned here in my home Realms campaign, back in the late 1980s, but not one of them has been mentioned publicly until now. I wanted my players to have their fun (if that's the right word) first.

In my home campaign, many more Friendly Monsters are still active or waiting in the wings, their adventure hooks yet un snagged, but my players have learned one lesson very well down the years: Attacking a "monster" on sight without talking to it first is all too often a bad career decision.

And that is the essential takeaway from Friendly Monsterdom: that monsters are so much more than foes to be slaughtered in combat. They are powerful local inhabitants who can spur adventures, serve as the colorful supporting cast of NPCs, and even become allies.

If, that is, the DM manages, by deft use of Friendly Monsters, to make players regard monsters as much more than enemies to be slain for their treasure.

And if deftness seems elusive, consider this episode . . .

The Knights burst into the bedchamber of a beautiful drow priestess. Caught unarmed and alone, she strolled to a decanter surrounded by wine glasses, looked around at all the glittering blades menacing her, started to pour glass after glass, and asked, "Aren't we at least going to *talk*, before you slay me?"

Into the silence that followed, she held out a filled glass to the nearest Knight, and added, "After all, there are so many things I could warn you about."

Now, four game years later, she and the Knights are friendly enemies who visit or send word to each other often. She warns them of threats to Shadowdale because it's in her interest to do so. They correctly suspect that she often overstates a situation to get them to attack a particular threat at a particular time, when removal of that threat will benefit her, but say nothing, seeing it as the price of enjoying her "early warning system."

The Knights have become veterans, but even a novice band of adventurers should begin to see that the Realms holds far more such "Scratch my back, and I'll scratch yours" relationships than it does wars.

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## 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.