

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Gem in the Wall

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 of what an urbane Waterdhavian merchant might call "deceptive delivery and deployment methods" are too useful and effective to go unused for long, though every few generations they become so overused that they fall out of effectiveness (and so, favor) for a decade or three, before rising in popularity again. One such is "the gem in the wall."

Tantar's Fang

Recent reports suggest that an old custom has been revived with new malice by Tantar's Fang, an opportunistic cabal of thieves who have no formal base, but seek to enrich themselves through many illicit activities up and down the Sword Coast. The elder-days habit is the hiding of an enspelled gemstone in a wall with dark intent, but the new wrinkle is that the Fang are coercing innkeepers to help them "hide" gems that are meant to be found.

Consider a room rented by a traveling party of player characters. Somewhere in its walls is an ill-concealed little door. Behind the door (or noticeably unmortared, loose stone, if it's a stone-block wall) is a recess in which rests a small coffer, inside of which is a moonstone or other low-value gem carved so one side of it is a sigil (if used with wax, it can emboss a seal on documents, and the like). The gem has been placed there for adventurers to find, and it bears a tracer spell enabling Fang wizards to know the gem's location—so they also, they hope, know the whereabouts of characters, and can ultimately report the gem stolen to local authorities and use it to frame the characters as thieves. In the meantime, they can manipulate the characters into conflicts with Fang rivals, or get them blamed for thefts, vandalism, arson, killings, and the like by repeatedly performing such activities in the close vicinity of the characters.



Tantar's Fang is a small group of heavily indebted and unscrupulous rogues, wizards, and merchants who want to get out of debt and lead comfortable lives, and they are willing to do many underhanded things to achieve such personal prosperity. They prefer secrecy, swindling, and subterfuge to open violence that will easily lead to their being identified and sought by lawkeepers. Most of them are cunning and prudent, and they are led by a brilliant and utterly amoral young man: Imharl Tantar, the heir to an Amnian shipping family who lost almost all of its fortune in the troubles that recently beset Amn. Imharl inherited debts incurred by older relatives, as well as angry pursuit from others desperate to recover their own losses suffered in the collapse of the Tantar fleet and shipping business (ironically known as "Tantar Bright Futures Trading"). He lost everything and was reduced to living on rooftops and in sewers, and stealing food by night—and he is now fiercely determined to become someone well-fed and powerful, but unknown to polite society and ruling authorities alike.

Tantar has hit upon the strategy of scapegoating adventuring bands and mercenaries for the dark deeds of his fledgling organization (which avoids contact with local thieves' guilds, and uses a wide and everchanging series of aliases when buying needed supplies, such as lockpicks, grappling hooks and long ropes, garrotes and the like, from established shady dealers and fences of stolen goods in largely lawless Scornubel).

Nor are the Fang members the only lurking foes an adventuring band in the Sword Coast area has to worry about. Using the Fang ploy as cover, other and more sinister lurking menaces (such as several mind flayers hiding in human guise in various Sword Coast ports, operating entirely independently of each other and working through small gangs of rogues and evil adventurers) have taken to reviving darker uses of "the gem in the wall."

Older, Darker Uses

As long ago as 1344 DR, Khelben "Blackstaff" Arunsun warned senior Harpers that certain Calishite wizards had taken to hiding enspelled gems behind loose stone blocks in tomb walls. These gems were the foci for spells that animated daggers (usually poisoned and triple-bladed pinwheels) to fly about tombs and attack intruders when *magic mouth* spells linked to the gems were triggered (so the triggering conditions for the magic mouths were employed to govern when the blades animated). The magic mouths usually uttered "Go back!"

warnings (for example, "Disturb not the resting place of Auhmund Ororaun, vizier most wise and fondly remembered!").

In elder times (the mid 1200s DR and earlier), gems hidden in walls were the foci for wraiths and other incorporeal guardian undead that were intended to attack all living creatures except for individuals wearing enchanted rings or talismans that conferred specific immunity to these guardians. Moving such gems brought the undead along with them (and by this means, a traveling party could "set" a ring of undead to guard them or their valuables as they slept).

This custom fell out of favor when it was discovered that shattering such gems by a blow or hurling them into a hot fire freed the undead to rampage at will, rather than harming or destroying the undead.

Other sinister uses for gems hidden in walls were enspelling them to explode (largely in one direction, like a real-world "shaped charge"), or by means of a spell "switching" them for monsters (gem teleports to monster and monster teleports to replace gem—magical effects triggered by actions of unwitting intruders who disturbed the gemstones).

Gem Spiders

Although these creatures are neither gems nor spiders, they resemble astonishingly large (the size of a human head, or even bigger) faceted gemstones attached to eight spiderlike legs upon which they scuttle about. As a result, they have always been called "gem spiders."

What they are in truth are automatons; the animated, semi-intelligent results of special variant *stasis* spells cast upon dragon eggs. Sages of arcane lore say the magic protects the eggs against all but the most ferocious extremes of heat and cold, and against most blows and crushing weights.

Gem spiders don't attack anything, or breathe, or do anything much except remain immobile for long periods, then they hurriedly move away from lights, sounds, and movements, always seeking dark concealment and immobility. Since such objects were often hidden by their creators (certain Netherese archwizards, and more recent arcane spellcasters who inherited or found the writings of the Netherese mages) in recesses behind walls, they have become confused in legend with other sorts of gems in walls, and in rare instances they have been found with them.

Obviously, the "gem" that forms a gem spider's body is much smaller than most dragon eggs (which are the size of what a Faerûnian innkeeper would term a "goodly sized" wine cask, or a small rain barrel). For years, modern spellcasters believed the *stasis* spell that transformed an opaque dragon egg into something akin to a translucent faceted gem crystal also compressed it in size, but the wizard Alatheir of Memnon proved (first to a small circle of colleagues in the 1350s DR, but later to a larger audience of skeptics at a MageFair) that the eggs are actually put into stasis in an extra-dimensional space, such as that created by the well-known *rope trick* spell, and the "gem" spider body was actually the Faerûnian end of the magical conduit (the "rope," if you will), linked to the "otherwhere" that held the intact, full-sized dragon egg. The conduit protected the egg from heat, cold, physical attacks, and most magic by absorbing or deflecting them before they could reach the extra-dimensional space where the eggs were stored.

Interestingly, the sage Talgoneir of Teziir, writing in tomes that remained secret until long after his death (he perished in 1376 DR, but the books, hidden in caves well outside Teziir by fearful servants, fleeing after his death, weren't found until 1462 DR), advanced the idea that the spells that created gem spiders and protected dragon eggs in hidden "otherwheres" were created by dragons. Talgoneir, an expert in dragons and draconic lore, further asserted that the extra-dimensional spaces created by these spells are among the safest and most stable of such magical constructions, and they have never been known to have been plundered (or their contents damaged) by extraplanar creatures.

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.