

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Halarkenblood Mystery

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.*

ot every family of note in Cormyr is noble. It just sometimes seems that way.

In sinister, mist-shrouded, mildew-infested Marsember, one non-noble but longtime-resident local family rose to the notice of adventurers in my home Realms campaign very slowly.

Meet the Halarkenbloods.

The men of this family tend to be potbellied, beak-nosed, long-haired, and unlovely (their genes overriding those of the women who married into the family, who were and are of all body types), and they also are quiet ("sullen" was the word most often used by fellow traders). The Halarkenbloods make many short, secretive journeys to Sembia, as valuable-goods couriers (carrying small and very precious items—such as jewelry and land deeds, contracts, and other documents—often under heavy guard). These activities soon aroused the suspicions of customs officials in both lands, and Halarkenbloods were regularly searched and questioned.

Yet nothing was ever found to be out of order or deceitful. The various Halarkenbloods always paid full duty on what they transported. There were never any discrepancies regarding goods or cargoes going missing, and as the years and then decades passed (and Halarkenblood fathers and uncles gave way to sons and nephews and daughters and nieces), lawkeepers and customs agents got tired of fruitlessly searching and detaining, and largely let these quiet traders be.

The Knights of Myth Drannor might well have done the same thing, but for something they witnessed through a window once, by pure chance (well, admittedly, their presence aloft on a steep roof in Selgaunt late one night wasn't chance, but otherwise...). From their unusual vantage point, the Knights saw a priest and two herbalist healers tending a Halarkenblood in a bed, surrounded by blood-soaked rags and other signs of very recent surgery. Intrigued, they started to covertly watch this particular Halarkenblood, and they were soon greatly interested in the movements of various family members, because everything they learned spurred them to want to know more.

The stay-at-home Halarkenbloods were scribes and coin-clerks and shopkeepers (of family establishments selling "exotic sundries from afar"), but traveling family members always went from Marsember to nearby inland secluded (and fortified, and very well guarded) country estates in Cormyr, and from there to the even better-guarded country estates of various very wealthy Sembians.

So the Knights took to spying even more diligently.

And eventually, to cut a long saga of many adventures short, our intrepid characters stumbled upon the secret of the Halarkenbloods: the Marsemberian family served as dragon couriers. That is, they regularly underwent surgery to hide dragon eggs or even magically-put-in-stasis tiny dragon hatchlings inside their bodies, and physically carry them to clients, where they were cut open to yield up their cargoes (and sometimes accept into the same body cavities payment or other things, such as very "hot" stolen unique items), healed, and sent on their way home (to be cut open again and repeat the cycle, as necessary for business). In this manner, they brought dragons from secret breeders to a variety of wealthy clients in Sembia and to at least one dragon tamer and reseller: the mysterious sorceress Alandra "the Arlark" Thardolphyn.

The Alark

The Arlark dwells in Thardolphyn Hall, a walled and turreted rural mansion, and is most famous in Sembia for making and selling small, intricate, and beautiful automatons: tiny metal birds that trill and flap their wings, turn their heads, and open their beaks. For a time, they were "the rage" among the wealthiest Sembian ladies as jewel-box adornments. The Arlark has long been rumored to have something to do with dragons, and even Shadovar agents avoided Thardolphyn Hall, after some fatal initial encounters with its various guardian dragons. Although the Arlark looks like a very tall, very thin human or half-elf female (she has very large eyes, but lacks pointed ears), who is more exotic than beautiful, some Sembians whisper that she isn't human. Others insist she uses magic to control dragons, and they say she has the ability to teach magic to dragons. They further talk about how, through the use of this ability, she built up her own small, secret band of draconic allies—so that to cross her can be to make enemies of an army of dragons.

The Arlark is very wealthy, owning many heart-of-the-city rental properties in Saerloon and Selgaunt (some occupied by businesses, and others being palatial residences). She has a small staff of roving trade factors, of whom the most senior and famous is the fat, surly, grizzled old man Masdrigo Houloon, who wears large, piratical gold earrings, expensive clothing, and a halo of floating magical stones of unknown powers (not *ioun stones*, some insist, and able to project attacks and emit defensive wards, others say).

The Arlark's client list is utterly secret, but the Knights did find out where she sold some dragons (as small but trained-as-personal-guardians hatchlings): Westgate and Tsurlagol frequently hosted covert meetings with purchasers of her wyrms.

The Couriers and Their Lore

The most active Halarkenblood couriers now and in recent seasons are Balrasker (a dark-haired veteran "senior uncle," who has razor-pointed daggerboard sideburns, very cold and wise old eyes the color of steel, and some fearsome facial sword-scars), Halondren and his brother Amalkryn (suave, agile, saturnine "dashing rogues" when they want to be, but superb actors very experienced in convincingly portraying other sorts of men), the young sisters (and look-alikes; long auburn cascades of curly hair and twinkling smiles, softly drawling voices and a love of dancing) Raelarra and Shacelyn, and the even younger Mortlel (a devastatingly handsome young rake with a merry sense of humor and a prodigious memory for the smallest details of everything he sees and hears).

To try to keep this process as secret as possible, the priests and healers involved in courier openings and healings (referred to by the family as "the necessities") have almost all been Halarkenbloods, too.

To the great surprise of the Knights of Myth Drannor, certain priests of Lathander believe that dragonkind is the greatest natural source of cyclical renewal in the world, and so wants dragons to breed and proliferate and spread their influence across the Realms, and "the right" humans—that is, Lathanderites, not members of the Cult of the Dragon—to master dragons and work with them. (The Arlark has some sort of working relationship with some senior priests of Lathander in Sembia, but just what isn't publicly known, and both she and the priests seem to want to firmly keep matters that way.)

So it seems the family potbelly didn't begin as a genetic feature of the Halarkenbloods at all, but rather is a surgical modification. The Halarkenbloods have a history of poor digestion and therefore they carefully eat small quantities of bland foods. This could well be because their "guts" have been constricted into a smaller bulk than they should be.

Interestingly, some older females of the family who never got a chance to be couriers instead mastered the crossbow (and ways of poisoning crossbow bolts), and they have now taken to watching for anyone who seems to take too close an interest in the family—and eliminating such overly inquisitive individuals. Preferably by night, in Marsember, where paralyzed targets can fall into the canals and drown, the bodies serving as food for many aquatic lurkers and therefore generally just "vanishing," as far as humans are concerned. One gray-haired old family member, Eleskra Halarkenblood, is an outstanding archer who has made some truly astonishing kills.

"Halarkenblood," by the way, may refer to a family legend about an early family member (a long-lived and strikingly beautiful woman named Nerelle), who was the slave of Halarkenor, a blue dragon whose skill-at-Art rivaled that of many human archmages (and included mastery of taking human shape). Nerelle may have tried (and thankfully for the survival of the family, failed, without dying in the process) to bear Halarken's offspring. Such "Ancestor X bore the child of a dragon, so we have dragonblood in our veins" tales are far more frequent across the Realms than they are true.

Yet in the case of this old Cormyrean family, there might just be some truth behind claims of dragonblood lineage. There's a family rumor that the Arlark is a distant relative, too.

One bit of Halarkenblood family lore that is (to use the oft-used Cormyrean expression) "firmly and clearly true"

is the life of Dendras Halarkenblood (402-477 DR), who was a War Wizard of distinction. Dendras was an able adventurer trusted by Baerauble with safeguarding Obarskyrs and with the deepest secrets of the realm—and so far as is known, this trust was never betrayed. He became a friend and confidant of King Duar Obarskyr, and he was rewarded with a fortune that enabled his descendants to buy substantial land holdings in southern coastal Cormyr. Most of these holdings were squandered in later generations, but to this day odd parcels of land, mainly held by tenant farmers and orchard-keepers, are owned by various Halarkenbloods.

The Halarkenbloods are just one of seventeen non-noble families of interest centered in Marsember, who can be slipped into play the moment any character tries to make contacts, do business, or indulge in a little spying in that port city. Equip every city in your campaign with half a dozen such families—in no more detail than the Halarkenbloods are portrayed here—and you have hooks and elements for scores of adventures.

It's kept my home Realms campaign running for thirty-five-odd years, so far . . .

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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