

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The House of the Falling Axe

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.

he decadent, largely lawless city of Scornubel, "home to far too many of the shady and unsavory dregs of the mercantile trade from every corner of Faerûn," as Open Lord Piergeiron of Waterdeep put it a century ago, is still "a colorful crossroads cesspit," according to the Harper veteran Andruuth "Hardharp" Hardryn today.

The "colorful" part of Hardharp's comment speaks to the many eccentric individuals and wide variety of monster-human crossbreeds who call Scornubel home or who are rumored to lurk in its back rooms and cellars—but it's also due to interesting city establishments any traveler can visit and do business with, like Durward's Trophies (famous for its stuffed and preserved monsters; many strikingly lifelike, large specimens hang in its domed central hall, for its premises were once a temple of Ibrandul); The House of Tentacles (a nightclub whose provocatively clad human and half-elf staff all have extra appendages, in the form of working tentacles, and that may or may not be owned by illithids); and The House of the Falling Axe.

The Axefall

This establishment is known to regulars as the "Axefall" and is an adventurers' club in unfashionable northeasternmost Scornubel, out among the oldest and smallest warehouses where refuse litters the streets and discarded wagons rot amid the charred remnants of burnt-out structures. Those whose coins are few indeed squat in the ruins. It's an unlovely marriage of three ramshackle warehouses joined by a stout but untidy wooden annex painted flat black and adorned with a starting-to-peel painting of a silver horizontal, double-bladed head on the left axe, butt far to the right and ending where the front entry door starts.

This door is never locked, because the house behind it never closes, no matter what the hour.

And this is a good thing, considering that a few patrons arrive to drink and are never sober—and never outside the Axefall—until their coins run out.

Begun by a motley many-houses group of young, opportunistic, down-on-their-luck dwarves, some of whom are still alive a dozen summers later to run it, the Axefall is a dimly lit place of massive wooden furniture, flagstone floors, many fireplaces that throw off more smoke than heat, and endless ale.



The place serves good ale, in the judgment of most Scornubrians, not to mention stouts and buttered barley beer and beer-and-broth "sister tankard" deals (one tankard of beer, and one of hot stew broth; a choice of venison, beef, boar, or mixed small fowl). Here, one can get skewers of smoked just about anything, from ox-meat to silverfin and brown arlung from the river that bisects Scornubel, to horsemeat, deer, and even wolf—not to mention "mystery meat" that's rumored to be anything from squirrels and rats to orcs who wound up on the sharp end of some dwarf's hurled axe. Food is heavy, hot, and hearty, and prices are low; if the place was in the center of the city, better lit, and had a safer reputation, no one would ever be able to find an empty booth.

Common Ground

Although the Axefall has a reputation from being far from savory, it does not welcome brawlers, and it is something of a fairly safe common ground where dangerous individuals meet as equals, in uncouth but fairly relaxed company. The "amiable, unless they need to be crisp" (Hardharp's words again) dwarves who run the place are swift to arrive and dispense very hard stares, to grapple patrons who ignore such hints, and to hurl tankards, axes (sharp or bludgeoning end first, at the thrower's discretion), stools, or anything handy with swift accuracy if need be. Such needs peak annually in the spring, after the roads have dried out enough to allow traders to run caravans north, and prospectors and miners to wander south out of the frozen backlands of the North. Everyone collides at the Axefall, but swiftly trail away, with the result that this is one of the safer places to spend a night drinking and dining in Scornubel.

Patrons of the House of the Falling Axe enjoy the facilities of a labyrinth of small booths, all cocooned by stout partition walls that are separated by serving-passages the staff trudge along more or less constantly, and rendered more private by deep thudding drum music provided by dwarf children in their attic nursery/bedrooms overhead. A dark booth is empty and can be taken by anyone, whereas one with a hooded red lantern hanging at its doorway is occupied and is approached only by the staff, someone very bold, or someone who knows they're welcome. A typical booth consists of a round table with a half-moon of continuous carved wooden bench built in around its innermost arc, and a few stools and chairs around the rest of it, which get taken away or added to as needed.

In such booths, patrons can meet with and hire adventurers; adventurers can hire warriors and dicker with weaponsmiths, armorers, and outfitters; and merchants can meet to hammer out all sorts of deals, from trades of small sundries that don't seem to be selling up to orders for metals that will be made into arms and armor that will take a dozen caravans to shift from seller to buyer. Who is most likely to win a war has often been decided in the smoky back booths of the Axefall, by determining which side will clash in a hostile manner plated in the best armor and swinging plentiful blades of high quality, and which side will have to make do with whatever they already possess.

Regulars

Once the core regulars of the Axefall were exclusively dwarves, but the Stout Folk now make up about half of frequent patrons. The loudest and most popular of "the Axefall beards" are Galgurt Galehammer and Yaelandra Halvar, but the most useful to adventurers are Dorn Forgebar and Klardrym Hornhand.

Galgurt Galehammer (CG male dwarf fighter) is a garrulous old retired adventurer with a prodigious capacity for drink, who's missing one eye and wears an oversized eye patch; he owns several adorned with little dangling charms of dragons or axes or forge-anvils, all of which hang from short lengths of fine chain rooted in the center of the patch. In his adventuring days, he ranged all over the Sword Coast North with one ill-fated adventuring band after another (such as the Fiery Glaive and Haelbustard's Bastards), but all his tales should be taken with large handfuls of salt. "Galehammer," for instance, is an entirely fictitious dwarven house, invented by several clanless outcast dwarves who wound up in Scornubel in the early 1300s DR. Galgurt is good-natured and full of treasure tales and useful contacts in Scornubel, but his adventuring days are behind him. He's well loved in the Axefall, however; those who attack him will discover dozens of dwarves won't hesitate half a breath to leap out of the dimness to his defense.

Yaelandra Halvar (CG female dwarf rogue) is a burly dwarven equivalent of a slinky human tavern dancer; she's good-looking, knows it, and displays a lot of her curves when her fur wrap falls open—which is the way she generally wears it. Clad in skimpy and tight leathers beneath her fur, she'll happily trade a dance or a cuddle for a full tankard, but no one should be foolish enough to mistake her for either a "favors for coin" lass or an emptyhead. She comes to the Axefall for companionship—and to ply her real trade, which is to use her cuddling as a cover for receiving and delivering messages in a discreet murmur. Many dwarves use her message delivery service (which is an open secret among the Stout Folk), but increasingly, merchants of other races are employing her as a go-between in shady business or dealings it would be awkward for them to be openly involved in (a junior member of a merchant cabal needing to do business with a traditional rival of that cabal, for instance). Behind her ready smile and relaxed, flirtatious manner, Yaelandra is no fool at all, but a shrewd judge of character who notices the smallest details and forgets nothing. Even those she doesn't work for can benefit from her recall by sliding over a few silver or gold coins (Harpers do this often).

Dorn Forgebar (LN male dwarf fighter) is a customarily expressionless, glacially calm young dwarf who speaks in a terse monotone. He represents about three dozen dwarves (skilled miners, experienced adventurers, and good fighters) who are looking for work, and he bargains carefully and fairly on their behalf. Trying to threaten him seems to be about the only way to make him angry, but even when furious, he doesn't let his ire show. Some patrons have mistaken him for simple-witted, but he's smart and notices nigh everything.

Klardrym Hornhand (NE male dwarf warlock) is an active adventurer who presents himself as a fighter—though increasing numbers of the Axefall's regulars know he's not—and who acts as the agent of a dozen or so thieves, assassins, and evil fighters who will do decidedly unlawful and dangerous work, swiftly and discreetly, by anyone who pays them sufficiently (three-quarters in advance). Klardrym himself won't be among them, but often skulks along to spy on what happens—so he can betray triple-crossing (and worse) clients to foes and what passes for "the authorities" in Scornubel.

Faces Among the Staff

Two aging, gray-bearded, weather-beaten, "seen it all" dwarves work shifts as the "master of the house," and their names are Belarbur Alehand and Lhorthin Waelforge. Both are good-natured and patient, but they have a small arsenal of weapons behind the bar and won't hesitate to use them if trouble erupts. They enforce a "the current occupants of this booth don't welcome your intrusion, please leave now" rule.

Nor will the three enforcers among the dozen-some servers be slow to armed violence. They are the young, handsome, and beardless (though he has magnificent side-whiskers) Darbittur "Darby" Wolfhammer; the middle-aged and horribly scarred (an orc blade cleft his nose and left a deep slash across his cheeks) Guskur Lodefindex; and the rotund but nimble and cheerful Braund Goldfist.

The other prominent staff dwarves are the grotesquely fat head cook Lethmoin Ironhand (deadly with a hurled cleaver, and not welcoming of intruders in "his" kitchens!) and the stablemaster, the hardy, stocky, always-cheerful beardless female dwarf Darbethra Stonescar, who says "Ho, now!" so often that many non-dwarf

guests call her by that name.

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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