

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Lost Tharkul of Thar

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.

Of old, the lands north of the Moonsea coast were what human chroniclers call "the Land of the Beast-Men," or "the great gray land of Thar."

Thar is a land of gray stone, tumbled boulders, and loose scree heaped and scattered everywhere across open wilderland. Rolling hills are split here and there by sharp, sinuous stony ridges "like the tails of gigantic dragons frozen forever in stone," as the human sage Gharoanrus of Tsurlagol put it.

In the days before the rise of Zhentil Keep, this region was "a-crawl with orcs," being the northernmost reach of the orc realm of Vastar, but before that it was a kingdom of the beast-men, or ogres—and before that, a realm of giants.

A succession of Tharkuls ruled the ogre kingdom of Thar, and they wielded a great hammer that only a large and strong ogre could hope to swing. No ogre could be Tharkul without the hammer, but no ogre could hold the Tharkul-seat for long without the respect of the ogre elders—and many would-be usurpers always lurked, for the Tortured Lands were near at hand. That difficult terrain of stone needles, upthrust from the rock like the bristles of a thistle, offered hiding for hundreds of hardy creatures. Caves riddled the area, with ice in the deep and shadowed places. Here, cold-tolerating creatures served as ready food, from small birds to large stalking and slithering monsters.

Many Tharkuls fell in battle or died of the wounds they took when defeating a challenge from another ogre seeking to be Tharkul. A few succumbed to disease or the ravages of advanced age and died as sitting Tharkuls.

Yet only one Tharkul, as far as is known—in chanted ogre-lore as well as human sagecraft—voluntarily relinquished his seat, fleeing no menacing challenger or outside threat, and simply walked away from Thar.



The Tharkul Who Walked Away

The Tharkul who renounced the Tharn Throne was known as Halangarog the Four-Armed, for he had two pairs of long, strong arms, and hulking shoulders that were as wide across as any two ogres of typical size. He left the hammer on his throne when he walked away from the ogre capital of Tharniir, heading south ostensibly on a hunt, and it was some time before the Tharran ogres realized he was gone for good.

Halangarog slipped away from Tharniir in the spring of 322 DR. With him, he took the Arroth, also known as "the Speaking Stones." Ever since, he's been known as "the Lost Tharkul," and the ogres retell legends about him to this day.

The Speaking Stones

The Arroth are four irregular natural rocks roughly spherical and about the size of a large ogre's head, from which voices issued on rare occasions—voices the ogres regarded as utterances of the gods, and sought to interpret and obey. Several elves and human sages (the latter quite possibly merely repeating the surmises of the former) believe these magical stones came from the ancient giant empire of Ostoria, and the voices are those of a handful of giants using other Speaking Stones, elsewhere in Faerûn. These communications are also (unknown to those giants) broadcast so as to emanate from the Arroth.

The ogres fiercely cleave to the belief that the voices from the Arroth are those of their ancestors, speaking the tongue of giants, and are to be intently listened to, remembered, and interpreted for guidance. Some ogres curse Halangarog for the loss of the Arroth, but many believe he vanished with them because he heard and obeyed the voices of the ancestors, and so should be blamed for what he did.

Tharniir

The ogre capital consisted of crude buildings made of blocks of stone heaped up by the ogres and mortared. These ugly homes and halls entirely covered an island at the center of what the ogres called Urglim, and is today known as Lake Thentar. The halls here served as warehouses, workshops, meeting places, and taverns; the homes were almost all cylinders wider at the base than at the top, but of varying sizes, from two-floor small family dwellings to fortress-like towers as much as eight floors tall.

Tharniir was a damp, misty place, joined to the shores of Urglim by three floating bridges of log rafts linked by timbers that rose and fell on vertical wooden pins. These bridges were constantly rotting and were usually treacherously slippery, especially in the spring thaw and the fall frosts, when the rafts iced over but the lake itself hadn't yet frozen. Several Sunderings of the first bridge while ogres were carrying valuables across it led to early Tharkuls having multiple bridges built in hopes that at least one would be sturdy and serviceable at any given time.

Tharniir was built on the low, scarred rock island of Url because the isle was the warmest place in all of Thar, thanks to a volcanic cleft at its heart. Around and about the cleft were many caverns and fissures that the ogres used as the cellars of the buildings they raised. The heat rising from the cleft warmed the buildings of the capital through those cellars, but also made the place reek (as ogre wastes of all sorts "baked") and caused the everpresent mists.

The cleft eventually proved to be the ultimate doom of Tharniir. The great black wyrm Iyrauroth attacked the city in 451 DR, striking underwater first to destroy the bridges from beneath and trap the ogres on the island. Somehow the attack caused a rupture in the rocks of the island that brought the cold lake waters into direct contact with the heat of the deep vent.

The result was a series of steam explosions that shattered the island and flung Tharniir into the skies in small fragments, to rain down for miles. When the boiling waters of the lake finally subsided into relative calm a day later, no trace of the island could be seen by anyone on the shores of Lake Thentar—just as none can be seen there today.

When Halangarog Vanished

The ogres of Thar were an ambitious people, proud and stoic and given to rivalries. They called themselves "the Morokh," which means "people of this place," for they distinguished themselves not just from other races—such as the orcs they enslaved and the hobgoblins they loathed and slew on sight—but from ogres who dwelt elsewhere.

Power in Thar was held by the Tharkul and his Tharar (personally loyal, sworn to him warriors; to break an oath to the Tharkul was to be outcast by all, so coups and assassinations of Tharkuls by their own Tharar were almost unheard-of), and by the elders—that is, the heads of the largest and most dominant ogre families, and the very oldest ogres ("whitesnouts," so called because the skin around ogre noses and mouths grows pale with great age) of all families. It should be noted that well male elders might well be philandering bulls and savage, respected war-leaders—but the wiser elders were the females, who remembered family lore, held grudges, spoke more between families and so negotiated and decided justice in the land, pacts and agreements—and came up with the nastiest and most devious strategies, too.

At the time of Halangarog, and for roughly half a century before and after, there were six dominant ogre families: the Babras, the Cularyk, the Durruk, the Farrask, the Kurruuth (pronounced "Kur-OO-th"), and the Marlakh.

At first, Halangarog's disappearance was thought to be misadventure—he had been wounded or killed by either the creatures he was hunting, or by more fearsome monsters, such as wyverns who then hunted the area in pairs or trios, that had happened upon him while he was hunting. His Tharar searched for him long and hard, beseeched by the elders—for the elders knew that if the Tharkul wasn't found, or if the notion grew and spread across Thar that the Tharkul had been slain by agents of this or that family of the Morokh, the realm was likely to erupt in a bloody civil war that might shatter it forever. They wished to avoid seeing the Morokh as scattered handfuls of survivors, very much at the mercy of their own orc slaves and the monsters that always lurked in Thar and the nearby mountains and Tortured Lands.

When no trace of the missing Tharkul could be found, rumors arose in Thar that this or that family had covertly murdered him. It wasn't long before open accusations flew, skirmishes broke out in many places, and the six dominant families armed for war.

Smaller Tharran families began to opportunistically support this or that great family, but this so frightened the female elders Maraera Babras, Tulaika Cularyk, and Nereska Marlakh, that they met and made fervent pact together, deciding to name Orrusk Lorklor, a smart but small ogre from a poor, minor family, as Tharkul "until Halangarog's return."

Although many other elders initially resisted this, seeing Orrusk as the puppet of three families determined to "steal" the Tharn Throne, the three Pactmakers placated them by offering to establish a council of all interested elders to meet regularly with Orrusk, so no handful of elders could use him as their tool; he would serve them all.

What Orrusk thought of this is not recorded, but he, and all Tharkuls after him until the fall of the kingdom of Thar, ruled "until Halangarog's return."

The Legends of the Lost Tharkul

There were Tharkuls—that is, ogre war-leaders who wielded the hammer and proclaimed themselves "Tharkul"—long after the ogre's realm had fallen and orcs held sway in what had been the lands ruled from the Tharn Throne. In their time, and in all the long years after that down to this day, ogres all over Faerûn have told and retold tales and speculations about the fate of the Tharkul Who Walked Away, and legends in plenty have arisen.

The three most popular are these. First, Halangarog was taken by the gods and will return when the Morokh (a term now used by all ogres, everywhere, to mean themselves as a race) most need him. Or second, Halangarog fell through a hole into the Underdark, where he had many adventures until he either finally died in glorious battle or blundered into "the powerful deep magic that glows in the depths" where he stands frozen still, to be freed at a time of great cataclysm, when he will come seeking the Tharn Throne and his hammer "with fury unmatched," and all Morokh should be ready or they'll suffer the same doom as anything else in Faerûn that stands in Halangarog's way. Or third, Halangarog sacrificed himself, offering himself to a great dragon that he met, who threatened to devour all Morokh. Some versions of this last tale say he serves the dragon still, as a slave, waiting for Morokh to find and free him by slaughtering the dragon; others say he was devoured whole, and cut his way out of the dragon, but its magic transformed him into its replacement; and a few versions of this story say Halangarog fought the dragon until it fled from him, through a "way into another world," and he chased after it into that other world, which is a place the Morokh should seek, for there they will flourish and have dominion.

There are crazier tales, too, of Halangarog becoming a shapechanger and lurking in various monster shapes to watch over Morokh everywhere, judging and sometimes covertly aiding them, to this day—or of Halangarog mating with this or that beast to found this or that race of monsters, or even of Halangarog slaying many elves until one elf desperately turned him into an elf with magic, so he lives on as a maverick lone elf, wandering Faerûn, his memories of being Morokh slowly slipping away . . . but most ogres dismiss these wilder tales.

Where Halangarog Went

As to the full truth behind the Lost Tharkul's disappearance, no one knows for certain, but the god Azuth once told Elminster that Halangarog went out on his hunt and met with a deity—that Azuth refused to name—who entreated the Tharkul to willingly bind his people into service to the deity. Enticed by this offer of a better, brighter future for his people, but knowing it would mean a new life the entrenched-in-their-ways Morokh elders were certain to refuse and repudiate, Halangarog prevailed on the deity to magically disguise him, a guise he could drop and reassume at will, so he could in secret visit each elder of the six dominant ogre families and confer with them.

According to Elminster, Azuth swore that this was done, and Halangarog visited the elders—only to vanish. Whether one of the elders slew him in rage or fear, or all of them renounced the new life he described and he

departed in anger, sorrow, or despair, Azuth could not or would not say.

Which means, for now at least, the Lost Tharkul—and the Speaking Stones—are still lost. Until, as Elminster put it, "chance, or the valor of adventurers, reveals more."

About the Author

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