

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 8/1/2013



The Moondark 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.*

In the Sword Coast North, human prospectors, explorers, and traveling traders share many tales over tavern tankards or campfires. Among their favorites is the mystery of the Moondarks, set down in print in the popular guides penned by the notorious Volo, and in rather more sedate form in the writings of dozens of human (such as Thars Melendrikh of Athkatla, in his *Folk Legends of the Sword Coast*) and half-elf (Althreenra Bowstorm of Silvermoon, in her *Tales Told by the People*) sages.

None of the surviving sources agree on just which mountains of the literally thousands of peaks visible from the upper reaches of the valley cut by the River Surbrin are the Moondarks, but all versions of the tales agree on this much: that the tall pines of the lower forested slopes of some of these mountains hide the slender spires of long-abandoned elven citadels—at least seven, and possibly as many as sixteen—full of powerful magic and great wealth.

Some tales go farther, specifying that these tall, slender stone mansions have deep cellars connecting with natural passages and caverns within the mountains, from which the elves pumped drinking water, and in which they tended herds of gulguthra mining their wastes. These accounts insist the elves departed precipitously, leaving behind spellbooks (their pages sheets of burnished blue electrum, stamped and graven with incantations) full of mighty spells that are unknown to today's wielders of Art, and rune-graven enchanted swords that can fly (carrying their bearers) and spit battle-spells from their tips.

A few tales add to this bracers that heal wounded wearers or permit them to fly, rings that can sheathe their wearers in full plate armor "out of nowhere" and make it vanish again in an instant, crowns and diadems that can hurl bolts of felling force, scepters that can unleash claws of rending force, or whips of life-draining energy, and even a fell rod that can encase foes in stone—and then hurl them to shatter against obstacles, or sink them in rivers or ponds, to drown.

Some accounts say the elves departed because of a great evil unleashed by one of their number, and that those who couldn't get away in time perished under the claws or tentacles of that evil. Others say the elves of these citadels "sailed the stars," as they call it, never to return, and they did so in skyships of their own devising. One or two stories claim that because some elves perished rather than escaping, that a handful of these skyships remain—ships, those same writings insist, that are alive.

Of course, the Realms hosts countless treasure tales, with endless stories of ancient lingering magic and lost, long-abandoned ruins. Even if a tenth of all these grand tales is true, why care about this particular lost and hidden site? If long-dead elves departed a few mountain citadels hidden in the harsh heart of rugged mountain peaks centuries upon centuries ago, what can possibly still be there that might be of interest to anyone?

Well, Elminster finally capitulated to the queries of some esteemed scribes and sages and revealed "a small part of what I know to be true—just to prune away some of the more grandiose fabrications, ye understand."

Here, then, is what the Sage of Shadowdale revealed.

The Moondarks lie to the northwest of the headwaters of the Surbrin, in the heart of some very rugged mountainous terrain. They comprise a dozen small peaks nestled amid much higher mountains, and they are infested by all manner of monsters, including the gulguthra (otyughs and related creatures) mentioned in the tales—and some very powerful undead.

The Moondarks do indeed harbor powerful magic of the sorts described in the tales, and more besides (not to mention "a great wealth in loose gems"), but it is all guarded by these undead, who are of two sorts: baelnorn-like incorporeal elves who are now the sentient, speaking "spirits" of the skyships they are bound to (perhaps four in number), and a fell, malicious undead dragon that can take human or dragon form.

To understand how these strange ruins came to be here, and why they retain an importance that matters in Toril today, Elminster adds, "one must suffer through a short smattering of history."

Specifically, this history is relevant to the topic at hand: Long, long ago, the Moondark citadels were founded by just six of the fifty elves of Tintageer who came to Toril through a fate. These six decided to depart the eyries of the avariel after fighting the red dragon Mahatnartorian (parting ways with the Sharlario Moonflower and the bulk of the Tintageer elves), because they thought that becoming further enmeshed in the doings of Faerûn would ultimately end in disaster. These six preferred to shut themselves away from the world, build their own contented society in remote wild fastnesses, and devote themselves to perfecting magic, so they could never be defeated magically again.

The leader of these six was Talaerlo Moondark, and his name survives in the name of the citadels and in Moondark Hill in Evereska (popularly thought to be called as such because neighboring and higher Eastpeak casts a shadow that keeps it in darkness for most of any night when the moon is full), under which he is buried.

This charismatic elf is remembered among a few elves as "Mad" Moondark, because of the obsession that doomed him; most prefer to forget him and have done so with such effectiveness that the majority of elves alive in Toril today know nothing of his story at all.

Simply put, the Moondark six were "a happy hold, all their own," as the tale goes, for some centuries, building the citadels and skyships, developing much magic, and having children (until six became sixteen). Then Moondark became obsessed with what he saw as the destiny of superior elves—which was to breed with dragons, and so become mightier as a race (by acquiring the affinity for magic some dragons possess).

All but one of the Moondark community thought this idea was crazy and repugnant, and ultimately (Elminster admits he knows little of the details), fourteen elves hastily departed in one of the skyships—while Talaerlo Moondark was himself "with a dragon," and only his loyal consort, Belaerrauna Moondark, sobbingly tried to stop them. Where they went, and what became of them, no one of Faerûn knows.

What is known is that the Moondarks pursued this idea, that the undead dragon still lurking in the Moondarks is thought to have been their longtime "mate," and that their activities left a legacy in the Realms to this day in this manner: Certain elves and half-elves, utterly ignorant of their heritage (called "the Taint" by some elves, and "wild talents" by certain human sages of the Art), may in moments of stress exhibit unreliable, unpredictable magical powers—such as the *earth glide* and *submerge* powers of a xorn, although various tales claim a huge range of powers, from mighty spellcastings to ongoing shapechanging.

Obviously, either the elf or the dragon must be able to take a physical form compatible for bearing the young of their partner of the other race to accomplish such breeding. Most accounts say the dragons took elf form, but the tales disagree sharply on just which sort of dragons were involved, and their motives for doing so.

Tales also differ as to how Talaerlo Moondark died, but his widow Belaerrauna took his remains (said in some accounts to have been "dragon-blasted") to Evereska and buried him beneath Moondark Hill. She dwelled quietly in Evereska for some years thereafter before being snatched aloft one moonlit night by a great dragon and never seen again.

I deliberately left much of this strange tale mysterious—because my players love mysteries.

It was my intention from the outset that I could have fun with magic from other systems than the core rulebooks. I used overpowered artifacts whose outward format I altered so players familiar with the rules couldn't immediately identify them, then placed them in these citadels (and limited their use by having them steal life energy (hit points) from the wielders—so someone relying overmuch on an awesome new runesword would literally waste away, visibly more with each kill made with it).

The skyships are well rooted in the forest and can't be operated without the cooperation of their spirits, who are difficult to conquer in a fight without destroying the ships they're linked to, so they can become interesting acquaintances for the player characters to converse with, but will have to be convinced (and aided) by the PCs if any PC use of a skyship is to be possible.

And finally, the dragon was intended to be a wise, sly, very powerful ongoing adversary of evil nature, who prefers to lurk, learn all it can about foes or potential prey (such as the PCs) and then strike them down when it can catch them alone—or capture them to use in its own creepy and magical experimentations.