

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 2/15/2013



The New Underways

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.*

more accurate title for this screed would be "New (Underground) Dwarven Trade Routes and the Clans Rising Because of Them," but that's a mite cumbersome.

Yet that's what I want to explore here, using the Realms as an example to illustrate effects that can pertain in any ongoing **D&D** campaign. Let us begin with a glimpse at the situation that pertained in the Realms just before the latest developments: In the human-dominated surface lands of Faerûn, dwarves were in the main a race of gruff, loosely associated smiths and craftworkers. They dwelt in a few holds and citadels in the North so as to defend rich mines and forging rifts, but everywhere else they were scattered, a race with a more glorious and socially prominent past than the dwarves enjoy today. (I touched on what is remembered of those bygone days when I wrote *Dwarves Deep* in the initial—2nd Edition—series of Realms sourcebooks.)

At the same time, much of the recent history of the shallow, or "upper," Underdark—those tunnels, lakes, and caverns that lie just beneath the surface—has been dominated by the ambitions of orcs in the Sword Coast North, and the drow there and practically everywhere else.

Svirfneblin, illithids, and all other creatures in the way have suffered in the strife, but it is the nature of both orcs and drow to fight fellow orcs and drow as savagely and as often as they offer battle to others, so the cycle of orc and drow dominance has moved from rising in fury to ebbing in power thanks to their heavy losses and ongoing internal strife. There are exceptions in some spots, but in general, the reach and power of the dark elves and the tusked vermin have both lessened a little in recent years.

This respite in hostilities has allowed dwarves and gnomes (the "Forgotten Folk" of the Realms) to rise again, or at least operate more freely in the uppermost Underdark. Only fools and the insane traverse the subterranean world unprepared for battle, but at present it is again possible to travel for purposes of trade and exploration (prospecting), not purely for war.

Which in turn means that some of the most enterprising and energetic dwarves of the Heartlands of Faerûn, and those parts of the Realm Below immediately beneath that region, have begun to establish and regularly use new trade routes, linking various surface human cities where they can sell their wares (most notably nice new manymetals tankards and copper pots, but also finely chased scabbards, gorgets, steel ankle guards and shanks [insoles] for hobnailed boots, and coil-rings and buckles for beast harnesses and human-worn belts).

Dwarves and gnomes patrol these routes, traverse them with narrow pull-sledges on which are strapped wares in sturdy carry-coffers, and prosper in businesses established at underground way posts and at the surface connections where the wares can be sold in dwarf- and gnome-run shops and market stalls. Times are good, new coins are being minted, and as the saying goes, "Dwarven curves shall be clad anew in fine-mesh finery."

So where do these new routes run, and which dwarven clans are rising in wealth, regard, and influence because of them?

Perhaps the most important, though not the best known, is the Sunder Run. It links shallow rift-caverns north of Melvaunt and Thentia (once the open, bone-choked graves where the beast-men [ogres] of Thar tumbled their diseased kin and the bodies of slain foes not worthy of pyres, and where a variety of carrion-gnawing monsters slithered and scuttled) with the western uplands of Damara, running beneath the Barrier Mountains and southernmost Vaasa. This route allows dwarves of the Sunder clan—who have swiftly become rich indeed—to

easily ship trade bars and ingots from newly opened copper and silver mines in the Tortured Lands to Impiltur and thence through the Sea of Fallen Stars to the wider Realms without going down the Lis and the Dragonreach. This in turn has shifted economic efforts in the area from enriching the traditionally Zhent-dominated Moonsea ports and "downstream" in Hillsfar and Sembia to enlivening prosperity and commerce along the Great Road and in Thesk, Impiltur, and Aglarond.

The longest and most perilous (and thus least used) new underway is the Blooded Axe Way, which links certain caverns in the Winterwood northeast of Ankhapur with the vast warren of caves and passages within the Orsraun Mountains west of Nonthal in Turmish (and there are surface connections along the way with several mountain caverns in the Cloven and Deepwing ranges). Metal-poor (and therefore metal-hungry) markets in Calimshan and more southerly locales make even slow and infrequent runs along this route profitable. Metal ore and goods have always flowed south in return for fair coin, but now the return journeys can earn modestly, too—thanks to the reclusive half-elf wizard Nareira Fallmantle of Darromar. She perfected a way of encasing bulk fresh fruit and vegetables in enspelled wax and thus slowing the decay of the goods for as much as five tendays, so they can be carried for long distances more or less fresh. As a result, trade is picking up along the Blooded Axe Way, and the fledgling dwarf clans of Immermede and Deveraxe are profiting.

Neither the Sunder Run nor the Blooded Axe Way is the best known of the new trading underways. That distinction is held by the Shiningdelve Road, which links dwarf-fortified caverns in the easternmost Cloud Peaks on the northern boundary of Amn with certain cellars in north- and south-bank Berdusk.

This relatively short route avoids many brigands and prowling monsters, and accommodates a huge volume of all sorts of goods (notably textiles, wines, and all sorts of mongery). In a very short time, it has lifted the ancient Longbeard dwarf clan from penury to great wealth.

That's a good thing for traders (and buyers wanting low prices) everywhere, for the flood of coin has enabled the Longbeards to hire adventurers from all over the region to safeguard Shiningdelve caravans. Well-armed escorts are increasingly necessary, for the Shiningdelve Road has attracted drow and all manner of strange and fearsome monsters up from the depths, to say nothing of outlaw bands venturing down from the surface.

There is a new spirit of hope and pride among dwarves everywhere in the Realms, and short, under-a-few-mountains underways are being opened up in many places and bringing modest new prosperity to many. Longer, grander routes are being planned afresh—and for the first time in centuries, these plans don't feel like mere forlorn dreams.

Emboldened dwarves everywhere are organizing and undertaking forays into long-lost clan holds and abandoned mines, to reclaim what is "rightfully" theirs and reestablish proud households "where they should be." Heartened gnomes are planning new businesses under or near human cities, many of those being warehousing and reprovisioning centers for the newly brisk underground flows of trade. Both the dwarves and the gnomes lack muscle enough, in the short term, unless they hire (largely human bands of) adventurers—and both now have the wealth to do so.

It remains to be seen if this upswing is a few-seasons-wonder (flash in the pan) or the start of a lasting change in racial fortunes and *The Way Things Are*, but one thing is certain: It offers new opportunities for heroes everywhere in Faerûn. Adventurers live in the now, and this particular "now" bids fair to be bright, energetic, and interesting.

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.