

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 9/19/2013



The Slaying Fever

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.*

On thankfully very rare occasions, small areas of the Realms—typically half of a village, part of a city street, or a few adjacent houses in a widely-scattered rural hamlet—host intense but short-lived outbreaks of the Slaying Fever, a condition that makes some people run amok, seeking things they can throw or stab or cut with to go and hunt down particular types of targets, and murder them. An outbreak will occur one morning, then again in the same spot the next morning, and then seemingly never again in the same place (at least, some sages caution, so far; in truth, no one knows if the exact same spot may host an outbreak centuries later).

Some beings afflicted with the Slaying Fever hum or howl constantly (and tunelessly), but others are glassy-eyed and silent, detectable only by the intensity of their stares and their attempts to kill.

Someone afflicted with the Slaying Fever never tries to kill a particular person or creature, but rather a "sort" of creature—such as tall, brown-haired human males, or short, blonde halfling females. (What someone is wearing, holding, or doing seems never to be part of what determines a sort of target, for those afflicted by the Slaying Fever.) These targets are usually intelligent beings, and the Fever-driven would-be slayers are perhaps (estimates vary widely, but sages have averaged the numbers given in credible reports) one in every eight people in the small area in which an outbreak occurs—out of everyone present at the time, not just habitual residents of the locale.

The "Fever-driven" usually travel energetically in search of weapons and targets, for the relatively short time in which the fever has them in thrall (half a day or less). There may be no limit to their bloodshed if they aren't restrained or distracted. They'll fight to disable or slay anyone menacing or hampering them, but otherwise utterly ignore creatures not of the type they seek, even when obvious traps, attacks, or confinements are being prepared for them. Their running amok almost always ends suddenly, either through their own death by misadventure, or their disabling by others (they will try to continue to carry out murder, even if they can barely crawl or twitch), or by their fever breaking—which occurs very rapidly and without warning, in a reeling moment in which they are drenched with their own sweat, and then collapse into unconsciousness.



All Fever-driven seem in a hurry, and their powers of reasoning and elaborate planning vary widely; some seem single-minded, so they'll spend hours trying to scale a wall or force a bolted and barred door, to get to targets they know are on the other side of it, whereas others encountering an obstacle will work out ways to get around it—even if these ways require using boards, ropes, or other handy items in non-obvious ways.

These murderous outbreaks are known in ancient Realmslore, but they have always been rare and infrequent—perhaps one every three years or so, somewhere in Faerûn. No one knows what causes them, though many

theories have been advanced, and various priests and sages continue to study the condition.

Thus far—and very slowly, over many years—many claim that the Slaying Fever is caused by imbibing or consuming this or that fruit or fungi or other drink or substance that has “gone off” or in combination with another edible have been eliminated.

A favorite cause or blame is to term the Slaying Fever “the Madness of the Gods” and proclaim it not a sickness, but a “mind goad” (or something else) sent by this or that deity. More than a few priesthoods have fiercely denied this down the years, and sages who have paid high coin to receive the word of this or that god from the altar have been told—on some occasions by, they believe, the deities themselves and not a mortal intermediary—that the deity had nothing at all to do with the Slaying Fever.

The god Tyr once went so far as to say that no deity had anything to do with the Slaying Fever, “not even Cyric the Mad, Moander of the Rot, and Shar, Mistress of the Night.” The Blind God was firm about who was not to blame for the Slaying Fever—but said nothing at all about who or what was to blame.

Those stricken by the fever who survive their “enthralment” typically have no memory of what they did, where they went, or what else happened during their marauding, but may retain a single image of something small and insignificant—such as a fallen button, an odd-shaped stone underfoot, or the latch of a door—they observed while in the grip of the fever. They never remember slaying, fighting, or blood, and they are often astonished to find they’re holding a weapon or are covered with gore, and are at a loss to explain where it came from.

It’s known that some rulers have sought to try to learn what causes the Slaying Fever both to safeguard against it afflicting those they hold dear, and in hopes of harnessing it as a weapon—but so far, no one has learned even how to predict its coming or targets, let alone control or influence it in any way.

Several priests and wizards have written that the Slaying Fever never seems to manifest within temples, groves, or other consecrated areas, or in the presence of strong, persistent magic (such as inside a magical ward or mythal, or within a castle or other structure that has long-lasting spells cast on its walls, or an encampment surrounded with perimeter spells, however temporary), but Elminster warns that this never really just means “not reliably recorded yet,” and should not be taken as any sort of firm rule. (The Sage of Shadowdale adds that he himself honestly has no idea what causes the Slaying Fever, but notes that his fellow Chosen of Mystra, Khelben “Blackstaff” Arunsun, entertained the notion that the Slaying Fever might be the result of spells cast by individual Phaerimm or illithids—but perished before he could follow up on this “unsupported” notion.)

Some of the sages hired by such rulers to carefully study the Slaying Fever have noted that a few Fever-driven both survive the condition and do no harm at all to anyone, because they spend the entirety of their time under its influence searching for relevant targets, sometimes walking miles overland in the rural areas. The sage Rethmyr of Crimmor has pointed out that all such “fever-influenced far travelers” do seem to be heading for a settlement known to them, where the sort of target they seek is most likely to be found, rather than wandering at random.

Although the “Scaly Infection” theory suggested by the sage Mertrym of Athkatla is widely considered to be utterly fanciful and even crazed, Elminster (who sides with the critics of Ildro Mertrym) says it cannot yet be ruled out. Mertrym believes Fever-driven persons have been infected with “emissions” from the scales of dragons who, lacking a mate, need trace amounts of particular sorts of blood from other creatures (the sorts of targets sought by the Fever-driven) to fertilize their eggs—or influenced by area-effect spells cast by dragons for the same purposes. The dragons remain hidden, but send servitor creatures (usually spell-controlled humans) to gather the necessary trace amounts of gore after the murderous rampages are over, or stealthily follow the rampaging Fever-driven, and collect the needed blood unobserved by others in the tumult.

Another theory is that as-yet-unidentified fungi or flowering plants in an area release spores or pollen (that in the case of urban outbreaks is carried to the city and released in the droppings of birds) that cause the short-term madness that turns folk into reckless murderers.

Some sages have suggested that caravan merchants or adventurers cause (or at least unwittingly carry and spread the true cause of) the Slaying Fever, advancing as proof the many instances of caravans or traveling adventurers being present at the murderous outbreaks. Others scoff at such claims, saying the merchants or adventurers are merely known to be present at so many instances of the Fever because they report the outbreaks where local residents, fearing that trade will dry up as all travelers avoid the cursed area in the future, cover up news of local rampages.

At least one adventuring band, the Bellbuckle Blades of Elturel, believed that a Red Wizard they made an enemy of stalked them from time to time, and cast spells that caused outbreaks of the Slaying Fever in inns and taverns they were frequenting, in hopes the Blades would be slain by Fever-driven. A few Red Wizards have greeted these claims with sneering public derision, at least one of them pointing out that some reports of the Fever predate the founding of the Red Wizards. Several sages have pointed out that although the notion that the Slaying Fever is caused by a Red Wizard spell is far-fetched and unlikely, spells are handed down from wizard to wizard or even gained from tomb scrolls or the spellbooks of the dead, so the idea can't be ruled out.

Elminster reminds us all that although vast reams of lore have been written about the Realms, what is unknown and mysterious about it still dwarfs what is known and recorded—and probably always will.



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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