

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Sly Blade

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.*

Once upon a time, "The Sly Blade" was a stock character in many plays (written by different bards, down the years) performed across the Heartlands. Authorities sought out this masked, debonair, handsome thief and seducer, who was a dazzling swordsman, and, beneath that mask, either noble or royal.

Recently, however, a real person has acquired this nickname—in Cormyr, at least. This individual has increasingly taken to hiring adventurers to be his agents, messengers, and sometimes, his dupes.

Welcome to the story of Rory Rowanmantle, who betrayed his family and the Crown of Cormyr.

For centuries, House Bleth, one of the eldest and haughtiest "oldblood" Cormyrean noble families, had an ongoing feud with House Rowanmantle, a rival noble family of more junior lineage who steadily rose in royal favor and influence. The Bleths were eventually exiled from the realm (for details, read *Cormyr: A Novel*, by Jeff Grubb and Ed Greenwood, TSR, Inc, 1996), but that didn't end the feud. It merely shifted the nastiness visited on various Rowanmantles (challenges to duels or arrows sent their way by night, dead animals or even people introduced into their "best inn" beds, attempts to frame them for crimes or for large orders of things they didn't need and never wanted, and so on) to occasions when they weren't on Cormyrean soil.

The Rowanmantles have tended to be polite to non-nobles, to be philanthropic, and to serve the Crown diligently, which has led to them being widely seen as "good" nobles. Yet this is as much a generalization as saying all butchers or blacksmiths are "good," and all dung carters and sailors are "bad." True in one instance, it falls down when applied to another. So it is with the Rowanmantles, who have had not merely the wayward, wild wastrel youths that many noble families enjoy (if that's the right word), but a few outright bad apples.

The worst of these is Roreld ("Rory") Rowanmantle, a handsome, debonair, agile, prank-playing young male who frequented the beds of many married women of both high and low station, who loved to ride "borrowed" horses recklessly hard and fast across country—and who in the end sacrificed the interests of both his kin and the Crown to the Bleths. Little word of this betrayal has leaked out to the ears of the wider Realms thus far, largely because the Dragon Throne has little enthusiasm for others learning the details of Rory's gambit and being inspired to try to emulate him.

Rory is the middle brother of three, and so not destined to be heir of his house unless bad and sudden fates befell his father, his elder brother Derovan, and a good handful of uncles. Rory was from youth a good rider, hunter, swordsman, and drinker, and he is bold by nature and apt to make changes and seek thrills.

Some years ago, Rory's unwed aunt Vethedris Rowanmantle (a strong-willed and well-spoken but aging "hard-riding" noblewoman) was given the task of purchasing certain choice properties in Selgaunt for the Crown (using Obarskyr family funds) but in her own name. The plan was that she would then turn the deeds over to the royal family in return for a Court office (and annual stipend). This buying-through-others habit has been employed by the Obarskyrs for well over a century for three reasons: to avoid vandalism or arson of the purchased properties by Sembians who hate Cormyr; to avoid exorbitant overcharging in the property sales by opportunistic Sembians who believe "the Obarskyrs are so rich, they'll happily pay anything to get what they want;" and to keep Crown holdings secret, in accordance with Palace policy established early in the reign of Azoun IV by Royal Magician Vangerdahast.

At a family dinner at which Vethedris was feeling poorly, Rory overheard her lamenting her state of health and how it was going to keep her from traveling for a tenday or more, and thus delay and perhaps even imperil (if

another buyer made a deal first) her royal service. He sought her out that evening for a private talk over mulled wine, learned the details, and offered to save his aunt the trouble of the trip and negotiations by doing it for her—as he was already heading for Selgaunt to see to his own investments. Delighted and relieved, she agreed to this, and Rory set out for Selgaunt. Unknown to his family, he was really headed for Selgaunt for a torrid tryst with the beautiful and spirited Joslyn Bleth (something both the Bleths and the Rowanmantles, sworn enemies for generations, would have been horrified at, and tried to prevent).

Joslyn's older brother Hammaer was already suspicious of his sister's doings, and went to Selgaunt for some roistering of his own but also to spy on her. He burst in on Rory and Joslyn with drawn sword—and Rory thought and talked fast enough to save Joslyn's life and his own by insisting he was really there to betray his own family and the Crown of Cormyr, working with Joslyn.

He and Joslyn, Rory claimed, would use the Crown funds to buy the choice properties, but then switch the deeds with rundown Bleth-owned dockside warehouses, so House Bleth would end up owning superb Selgauntan rental properties, and Rory would get his "revenge" on both his own kin and the Obarskys. Hammaer may or may not have believed him, but was willing to go along with the tale for what House Bleth stood to gain.

So the properties were purchased, the exchange of deeds done—and the burly, ruthless Hammaer dragged his sister Joslyn firmly away from Rory Rowanmantle.

Unknown to all the young nobles, an undercover Highknight and a disguised War Wizard operating in Sembia had been ordered to watch over the transactions. They did so, and both thought something was amiss, but weren't sure just what. Rory happened to recognize one of them from earlier dealings with the Palace (thanks to some of his pranks), and went into hiding in Selgaunt. So the Highknight and the War Wizard sought out Joslyn, caught her alone a night or so later, and learned the truth.

Frantic to warn Rory, she managed—ironically, via Hammaer, who saw the usefulness of cultivating a relationship with a Rowanmantle to be a sometime ally or dupe, in his own private schemes (some perhaps against fellow Bleths)—to tell him agents of the Crown were after him and knew all about what he'd done. Rory decided on the spot never to return to Cormyr, in favor of a wandering life across all remote Faerûn, in pursuit of his own fortune.

Romantic notions are often easier embraced than accomplished, and Rory discovered that with most of his family shunning him, some of the Bleths after him, and various Highknights and War Wizards operating under "slay on sight" orders (presumably from the Crown), his choices were a violent death soon, or changing his appearance sooner.

He paid a stiff amount of coin to a back-alley sorceress in Westgate going by the name of "Blackstars" to magically change the appearance (but not the fleshly reality) of his face.

Yet a year or two later, lonely and lacking the backing of his family, Rory sought to reestablish contact with his younger brother Nalryn and several of his uncles (who were of the same pranksome, dashing mold as Rory, and had always been friends). He dared not try to meet with them directly, for fear of being betrayed (and captured by agents of the Crown), because his changed face might lead some of them to regard him as an impostor trying to defraud the Rowanmantles, and because he didn't want anyone of Cormyr to connect the face he now wore with Rory Rowanmantle.

So he hit upon the notion of hiring adventurers to act as his go-betweens when dealing with various family members (and with Joslyn Bleth, whom he still has feelings for), and his agents (when dealing with everyone else).

Thanks to Rory's continued attempts to swing shady business deals in Sembia, Westgate, and even in southern Cormyr, and his ever-increasing difficulties with Cormyrean agents and Bleth-hired slayers hunting for him, serving Rory Rowanmantle has taken a tough toll on adventurers.

Some of these adventurers have been betrayed by Rory himself, when he thinks they've learned too much about him and are best eliminated and replaced by new adventurers.

Recently some of Rory's swindles and attempts to seduce rich Sembian wives and widows have borne financial fruit, and he's become quite wealthy. This means he finally has coin to match his ambitions—and needs ever-more adventurers to achieve them.

Not that most of them know what they're getting into. As far as the wider world is concerned, the Sly Blade of Cormyr is dead or gone into hiding for some years now. A patron with another name (often several other names at once, but that's hardly unusual among shadowy patrons of adventurers) is hiring them to do this or that

involving shady activities or making contact with certain Rowanmantles or Bleths, and paying well—and that's often all they learn before it's too late.

On the other hand, in the words of Rory Rowanmantle: "It's never too late for a betrayal."

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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