

# DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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## The Solution

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.*

One of the things that has always worked well in the Realms is the mini-campaign (lasting a set, limited number of play sessions; a baker's dozen, if I could manage it). I ran a lot of these in public libraries I worked in, back in the day. Most cast the player characters as members of chartered adventuring companies in Cormyr, purely because the conditions of their charter could steer them into a starter adventure ("you must scour out the ruined castle of the extinct noble house of Hildagger of monsters, and then you need to secure it for the Crown; after that, pursue your own fortunes").

The campaign I called "The Solution" didn't fit that mold, however, and it is highly portable. I happened to set it in Saradush ("Say-r-ah-DOOSH") in easternmost Tethyr, but it could work just as well in any sufficiently large and cosmopolitan city with a healthy merchant sector (such as Athkatla, Waterdeep, Suzail, and many more).

It goes like this . . .

The characters are hired (separately, but then cobbled together into an adventuring band; you can start roleplaying with their get-acquainted meeting) as the extra-legal enforcement arm of a merchants' collective/cabal in the city.

The adventurers will be used to frustrate or strike back at thieves and trade rivals, to spy on thieves and trade rivals and oppressive lawmakers and lawkeepers, to safeguard valuable cargo shipments, to attend meetings where goods will be bought and paid for (to "out-bodyguard" well-armed suppliers the merchants will be dealing with), and to intervene in guild wars, feuds, and situations where the merchants feel oppressed by local rulers or proposed ruling policies.

The merchants refer to this band (whom they'll pay well, and aid with shelter, equipment, disguises, and intelligence, but will disavow all knowledge of, if the characters ever get caught) as The Solution, so if someone happens to overhear them discussing deployment of the band, their talk won't sound too suspicious.

The adventurers are allowed to freelance to earn income (such as bodyguarding on the side and even adventuring for hire or to enrich themselves), but not in any way that will harm the interests of their merchant patrons—which can get tricky, since many of those patrons prefer to hide their activities and interests from everyone until situations force revelations.

My original campaign was current as of 1361 DR, so DMs using this at a later Realmsdate should feel free to rename businesses and their proprietors (as merchants come and go, sell their businesses, or their descendants take over).

Back then, Saradush was a city of around 40,000 people in winter (when outlying shepherds and crofters moved inside the city for warmth, dwelling in cellars and garrets) and 39,000 in summer, when the farmers moved back out onto the land.

A council of an elected mayor and six speakers ruled the city. The mayor had two votes on all matters and also had control of meeting agendas, and the speakers had one vote each. The speakers were the heads of the six city guilds, and thus they were elected not by the citizenry as a whole but rather by the members of each guild. These guilds were and are still The Tillage (representing crop farmers), The Drovers (ranchers, livestock handlers, tanners, and butchers), The Cheesemakers (dairy and spice producers and handlers), The Artificers (smiths and artisans), The Axe (carpenters, coopers, builders, roofers, and lumber sellers), and The

Shopkeepers (representing everyone else).

Magistrates were elected separately, and they had full control of sentencing; they tended to be popular "wise old local characters," as the locals called them. Laws were set by council vote, modified by magistrate decisions that could be overridden only by new laws enacted by council. Those laws were enforced in the city and within bowshot of the city walls by the Saradush Guard, which contained well-armed and well-disciplined warriors.

Saradush had always been the livestock market (where animals were butchered and the meat smoked, cured, and packaged for transport and sale) for hundreds of miles in all directions, as well as a center where local cotton, spice (pepper and hotleaf), pipeweed, and grain crops were processed and sold. It had also from its founding been home to flourishing cheese makers, who used the shelter of the walled city to keep brigands and marauding predators (from orcs to wolves) from wiping out their milk-giving herds.

As overland caravan trade increased in the region from the late 1200s onward, Saradush increasingly became a major trademoot where caravans broke up and new ones formed, goods and bulk cargoes changed hands, and hiring fairs (notably of mercenaries and adventurers, to serve as bodyguards or caravan escorts) were held.

This ongoing influx (and often, swift departure again) of mercenaries and other armed forces, and the new goods and customs they brought, drove local merchants to feel they needed "loyal sword-brawn," or adventurers of their own. The city merchants believed that these itinerants ignored local laws, and that those laws weren't keeping pace with the changing face of the city, in part because the newcomers often became business partners with the mayor of the time—and quite likely bribed that mayor.

The two most dominant and socially prominent members of this merchants' cabal were Imglanath Thogrul and Skelkros Thauadar. They gave the real orders and swayed weaker fellows to their views—and the cabal flourished and got things done only when they were in agreement. One of the things they agreed upon were that they were never going to deal directly with "The Solution." They bullied lesser cabal members to be the go-betweens, but chose both primary liaison and the backup contact wisely and with care. Due to their habit of verbally pouncing on those they wanted to defeat, dissuade, or persuade, these two became known as "the Hawks" behind their backs.

Thogrul was the tall, thin, swarthy, fast-moving and -thinking, energetic founder of Thogrul's Works, a business of some sixty skilled workers. He was a maker and designer of pumps, troughs, and water tanks who grew very proud of the well-irrigated city of Saradush that he brought about—and got immensely wealthy in the process. His hobby was creating fountains, and his crowning achievement was the sun-warmed household rooftop water tank (ceramic, with dark metal hatches to absorb the heat of the sun). In our modern world, he might be considered an innovative hydraulics engineer and an expert on municipal sewage systems.

Thauadar was the smart, well-spoken, superb at acting and in self-control proprietor of Thauadar's Looms, employing 120-odd folk all over Saradush. A weaver, he made all sorts of textiles, and his workers turned out finished rugs, tents, awnings, and cloaks. His gift was to see implications and future possibilities; in modern real-world terms, he might well be deemed an investment strategist—and a master of networking. He took care to befriend as many important Saradushans as possible and engage them whenever advantageous as business partners or allies. His goal was to make himself as useful and popular as possible.

The Hawks chose two other merchants to be their go-betweens and deal with The Solution adventurers directly: Elzrel Monhont and Sansanath Droond.

Elzrel Monhont was a short, rotund, soft-spoken man who scuttled when he walked, stroked his long drooping mustache constantly, and said "ahem" a lot. A nervous, mild-mannered, decent man, he was far smarter and more observant than he acted. He was a bulk baker of pastries and pigeon pies (who bred and grain-fed his own pigeons).

Sansanath Droond was a young, thin, melancholy man, going bald very young but with a thin, scraggly long black beard and a romantic nature, who made beautiful gift boxes in which lovers could enclose gifts for loved ones (and made his daily bread and cheese as a locksmith and alarm-rigger for homes and shops). He was a patient, quiet, motionless spy when he needed to be, and a tireless, determined stalker when asked to be, and he forgot nothing.

Other merchants known to be in the cabal included Banther Laskelro, Tanner (who cured and tanned hides of slaughtered draft oxen and of adventurer- and hunter-procured wild beasts from the wilderlands northeast of Saradush, for others to use in making garments—and himself made and sold saddles, harness, strapping, belts, and simple pouches and knapsacks); Melvaer Morningstone, Vintner (who made rather bad local wine, but blended cheap wines from Turmish and Chondath brilliantly to make abundant and popular emerald-green semi-sweet wines, and imported superior wines and spirits from all over Faerûn); and Yavandro Tresstel, Soundmaster (who made and repaired lutes, yartings [guitars], and other stringed instruments, as well as

composing music and producing bells for shops, house alarms, and caravan-draft-beast harnesses).

Saradushans are individualists rather than "joiners," and they like to do things as families. Their family-oriented preference is why they worship more at home shrines than at temples, why their guilds encompass so many trades and tend to be so easygoing—and why cabals and alliances are locally rare.

This cabal formed because many of the merchants passing through Saradush saw nothing wrong in exploiting local merchants by threat or duress. Often outlander merchants' well-armed bodyguard thugs would plunder a Saradushan warehouse or set a fire and be gone from the city before the Guard was even informed, as a lesson to the local merchant owners to give in to the terms offered next time, or else worse things would "accidentally" happen.

When the mayor (the corrupt Elask Lorlond, a longtime handsome ladies' man and vigorous investor gone to fat gluttony and debauchery) and the speakers and their guilds all seemed unwilling or unable to do anything about such tactics, Thogrul and Thaunadar got the cabal together and set about scouting possible adventurer candidates (covertly testing the character and possible loyalty-to-Saradush of individuals). A dozen possibles were identified, and eight were approached (the others being left in reserve as replacements for casualties). They accepted, The Solution was born, and the next set of thugs was set upon from behind, taken entirely by surprise, and killed, badly wounded, or run out of town, the wounded being literally dumped into the wagons of their outland merchant patrons.

The next few bands of thugs to come to town were treated the same way, which meant word spread that Saradush was no longer a "do as you please" caravan stop. As a result, the more unscrupulous outland merchants loaded up on poisoned crossbow bolts and those skilled in using them, and the mayor suddenly decided that seditious adventurers within his walls—by which he meant every last adventurer or ex-adventurer—had to be arrested and exiled. A suspiciously high number of adventurers were killed by the Guard while resisting arrest, and the surviving members of The Solution were swiftly given cover jobs by the cabal and ordered to assassinate the mayor while various cabal members worked within their guilds to get the speakers replaced by guild members less supportive of corrupt Lorlond.

The Solution succeeded in killing the mayor, which touched off a power struggle among the wealthiest local citizens over the vacant mayoralty. Daggers were wielded in alley skirmishes, homes were set afire by night, and the head of the Guard, Seneschal Harthrin Farandryn, made the mistake of announcing publicly that he was now in charge, and order was going to be restored at swordpoint.

This made him the target for dozens of adventurers who'd been hired by various of the ambitious would-be mayors, and he and his senior captain were assassinated within a tenday. This event occurred in a wild night of street fighting spurred by the arrival in Saradush of a caravan led by some of the worst of the lawless outland merchants, who brought along their private armies (of some forty to fifty warriors each).

Guild members harassed the visitors with tainted food and wine, furniture dropped on the visitors while they slept, visitors' horses vanished by night, and so on. Many Saradushans hired every adventurer they could find in the nearest cities to join in the mayhem, and within two days two council speakers were dead and two more had been frightened into resigning. The outland merchants had departed in a hurry after suffering heavy losses of both warriors and cargoes, and . . . things settled down into an uneasy calm.

In this time, Thogrul proclaimed himself a new acting mayor just for a month, and Thaunadar announced that he would take over as a mayor for a second month in which elections were held. The Solution and dozens of other adventurers settled into a tense nighttime existence of protecting Thogrul and Thaunadar (or their other merchant patrons) and lashing out in cat-burglar-like assaults and break-ins at other merchants, as all these various merchant patrons tried to settle old scores.

By day, Saradush was the industrious trading city and family-centered place it had always been, with citizens conversing politely and even jovially. By night, it was a shuttered, heavily guarded place of bloody street skirmishes, with the Guard retreating into their homes to defend them and leaving the streets to all the armed roamers.

Which was when, of course, some of the player characters decided to pursue their own means of enrichment, beginning with demanding protection "guard coins," and escalating to eliminating the worst Saradushan merchants and confiscating all their wealth and goods . . . and the other player characters decried this as becoming what they were being paid to fight against.

And the mini-campaign came to its preordained end right there. Yours doesn't have to, of course. If things never degenerate into pitched street battles, but remain a tense "polite by day and on the surface, but by night a game wherein the corrupt mayor attacks the player characters" situation, this could provide years of rich roleplaying.

And this very thing has happened (albeit without a mayor nonplayer character) in the Cormyrean city of Marsember—or Westgate just across the water.

Some of those players are bank managers and lawyers and corporate executives now, and they still greet me with the words "I'm still part of The Solution."

They say it proudly, too.

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### 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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