

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Surprise Adventure

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.*

This time we look at a technique no DM should use too often, for fear of (entirely justified) player wrath: plunging player characters into an adventure without any warning, and often without their involvement being their fault in the slightest.

After all, if PCs are to be heroes, and those who play them are to have more fun at the gaming table than the pressures and crises of real life afford them, much of the time the PCs should choose where they'll go and what they'll thrust their noses into, driving their own adventures rather than having the Dungeon Master inflict on them conflicts and challenges not of their choosing. The lives of heroic adventurers are necessarily full of "fight and succeed, or die," backs-to-the-wall situations. Players will appreciate a campaign more if it's their characters' choices and decisions that usually bring about such moments, rather than a DM too often thrusting them into do-or-die corners.

Yet surprise adventures can be useful to shake up overly comfortable players and so avoid boredom, to signal when PCs have missed something important going on in the setting that would logically blow up in their faces—and sometimes, ahem, just to burn through a play session and buy a DM some preparation time when players are determined to go somewhere and explore something the DM isn't yet ready to run.

Surprise adventures can involve realm-shaking threats with widespread consequences (a suddenly opened portal disgorging invading monsters has become a personal favorite over the decades), but they seem to work better when smaller in scale and more personal. Here's the story of one such small-scale surprise adventure, drawn from my home Realms campaign.

Soon after the Knights of Myth Drannor first arrived in Shadowdale, Zhentarim agents on several occasions tried to turn the local populace against them by impersonating the Knights (with magical aid) and doing bad things.

This was annoying, to say the least, and got old fast. It also spurred my players to think about ways of taking the fight to the Zhents rather than just seeking to defend Shadowdale . . . a good tactical choice, but one that distracted them from their own plans.

Each Zhent plot or PC foray against the Zhents became one more round in the ongoing struggle of "Adventurers seek to forge the lives they want for themselves—but the world they seek to dominate keeps pushing back, and dragging them into distractions." A DM must play this sort of contest very carefully, to avoid having it descend into a DM-versus-players situation (or at least the players coming to view the DM as an active adversary).

I wanted to drive home the lesson that the Zhentarim "magelings," being more afraid of Manshoon than anyone else (and wanting desperately to impress him), would keep on hammering away at the obvious target of a defiant Shadowdale and its guardian adventurers, but lacked time and resources to be patient or very imaginative in their attacks on the Knights. Yet I did *not* want to do "Zhents impersonating the Knights" a fourth time.

As I mulled over possibilities, a twist on impersonation sprang to mind—and so was born the story of Mourngym's tattoos.

Picture a mild winter morning in the Twisted Tower. Outside, a bright morning is heralding a midwinter thaw, but Shadowdale and all nearby caravan roads are still snowbound. In recent months, local hunters have downed

more lurking Zhents than deer. Now the Zhents seem to have tired of tossing men away in pointless mischief until nearer spring, and relative peace has descended on the dale.

So the Knights awaken slowly, bathe (in stone tubs pumped full of cold water the night before, but now heated with fire-warmed stones brought up by servants), then wrap themselves in ankle-length warming robes and fur slippers, and pad to the Tower's morning room to enjoy a warm morningfeast (a largely fried warm breakfast, waiting in covered platters). All the PC Knights are present, but several of the NPC Knights—including Mourngrim, Lord of Shadowdale—fail to appear, presumably sleeping in.

The gathered Knights enjoy a leisurely meal and chat, talking over the current troubles of the dale and at last daring to entertain ideas, notions, and whimsies of what the Knights of Myth Drannor, as free-spirited adventurers rather than vigilant rulers of a small and beleaguered northern dale fending off scores of large and small daily problems and decisions, should do next. In other words, players discussing, in character, what adventures they want to pursue next. One of the great delights of any mature roleplaying campaign is enjoying the fruits of having become heroes who truly direct their own lives and affect the world around them, rather than being "acted upon" by that world.

So of course, it's high time that the world *does* act upon the heroes.

Their conversation is rudely interrupted by the precipitous arrival of a stranger: a six-foot-tall, bare- and bronze-skinned woman whom the assembled Knights can't help but notice is covered with unfamiliar tattoos. She bursts into the morning room, doors crashing open, only a stride or two ahead of two veteran tower guards who are pounding along after her with spears in hand. Spitting out curses, this woman vaults over Jhessail and her second plate of fried-eggs-on-frybread and plunges in among the Knights, snarling that she's "Mourngrim, thundering gods spit on all— And for the love of the dale and all we cherish in it, will you stop Tharth and Bregur here from *gutting* me?"

Startled and mightily intrigued, the Knights order the two guards out and bar the doors behind them. Then they proceed to interrogate the tattooed woman (who proceeds to eat like the starving wolves of Dales legend). Between bites, she informs them again that she's Mourngrim—and is willing to swear so before all the gods—and has no idea how his, er, her body got like this. She just . . . woke up this way, in the bed she went to sleep in the night before—except that Shaerl (Mourngrim's wife) was no longer in it, or anywhere to be found in the lord's rooms. The first person Mourngrim found was an astonished maidservant, who fled and called the guards, who in turn chased the tattooed stranger—who fled to the morning room where other Knights might be found.

So here she is, huddled in Florin's robe and eating his morningfeast as he raids the sideboard for a replacement meal for himself, and angrily pleading with the Knights: Will they *please* get to the bottom of this? Uncovering who did this, how, and, ahem, *why*?

To this, the woman immediately added her concern that this must be a diversion (why else do something so crazed?), or the work of someone needing to impersonate Mourngrim, so "we" must be alert for "mischief afoot in the dale, or involving my kin" (the Amcathra noble family of Waterdeep) or perhaps a deception being worked to affect diplomatic relations between Shadowdale and Cormyr, or Zhentil Keep, or perhaps Sembia or other dales.

This string of utterances, from their specificity, convinced the other Knights that the tattooed woman must be Mourngrim, even before she offered to answer various questions whose answers "I and no false shapeshifter would know."

And so, before they were even dressed—let alone properly into their "What adventure shall we choose to pursue?" discussion—the Knights were plunged into a . . . surprise adventure.

Jhessail could work magic to restore Mourngrim's proper shape easily enough, and did so. Yet she had to work warily, in case the tattoos were magical traps, or some other spell-mischief had been worked on Mourngrim to await an unwary spellcaster. So she called in Elminster—or rather, tried to, because (as usual) the Old Mage wasn't home. (I thought that thrusting a surprise on the PCs entitled them to call on NPC aid, but I didn't want things to be *too* easy, depriving them of a proper adventure.) Lhaeo was in residence, though, and had seen enough tattoos in Elminster's vast magical library to inform Jhessail that they probably wouldn't be directly perilous for her or Mourngrim, and were in fact spell foci.

Mourngrim's transformed body was now a storage center for spells that had been cast on other beings (probably humans), so they could enjoy magical protections or augmentations without radiating any magical auras, or bearing enchanted items or tokens, that might alert others.

His curvaceous female appearance, in Lhaeo's opinion, was copied from that of a spell-focus-tattoo caster (or a

companion), to make Mourngrym appear unlike himself—so someone else could magically use his appearance to do bad things elsewhere (perhaps where the kidnapped Shaerl could see "him"), without there being two Mourngryms at once to make the deception clear to any rumormonger.

All of which—not least Shaerl's safety—imparted a certain urgency to clearing up all of this. Lacking access to Elminster, Lhaeo called in Storm, who recognized several tattoos as glyphs associated with particular magics—and knew a Harper mage (who had just visited her, en route to Highmoon) who was capable of tracing the precise whereabouts of one of the tattoo magics: a flying spell.

Lhaeo bundled the transformed Mourngrym into a strongly warded room in Elminster's Tower that might hamper long-range use of the spell foci, and fed him a drugged mug of broth to send him to sleep and so protect his mind against magical tamperings from afar—while the other Knights made ready in haste, and took to horse. With Storm, they followed and overtook the Harper, who traced the flying spell to a country mansion in northern Sembia, and *mass teleported* herself and the Knights there, while Storm remained behind with the horses to serve as a reliable return destination.

A swift battle ensued, in which the Knights triumphed over a band of mercenaries they caught in the act of stealthily invading the fortified house, so as to lurk in attics and storage rooms until night fell. The leader of these hireswords looked exactly like . . . Mourngrym! With the house shut up for the night and most of its inhabitants abed, these assassins had planned to murder the Yarlharks, the wealthy Sembian family who owned and dwelt in the mansion.

Confused yet? The Knights certainly were—just as I wanted them to be. I wanted them to taste one more instance of flying by the seat of their pants (that is, being caught up in something they didn't understand, and thus aware that they risked setting their booted feet dangerously wrong every other moment) because it does wonders for the adrenaline of my players. I also wanted to feed the players glimpses of all sorts of intrigues and formidable NPCs next door and in the wider Realms, because every glimpse that interested them could be one more future adventure of their choosing.

Not wanting to make too many blunders because of their own ignorance, the PCs returned to Storm with the mercenaries who had survived the fray as captives (the false Mourngrym among them), so she—an expert at magically aided interrogation—could unravel matters. (The Knights' actions left everyone in the mansion alerted and fearfully ready for other intruders, and added to the Sembian rumors about—and growing reputation of—the Knights of Myth Drannor.) We then roleplayed through Storm's interrogation, because the PCs wanted to sit in on it and learn how to question and manipulate future belligerent captives.

Right away, the interrogation revealed that the leader of the mercenaries had been magically given Mourngrym's likeness and ordered to proclaim himself (loudly and repeatedly) to be Mourngrym Amcathra, Lord of Shadowdale, as the Yarlharks were murdered. The hireswords were also under orders to let two servants escape, to spread word of the outrage and who did it. Their patron had hired them to eliminate the Yarlhark family, but they had then devised their own way of going about it, to win themselves the opportunity to loot the household of coinage and portable valuables, as sideline remuneration. The human male stranger who hired these slayers had prepared them for a bold frontal onslaught on wealthy targets that could be expected to have bodyguards and trained "war dogs," plus possibly a few minor, defensive magic items. Hence the spells cast on Mourngrym, into tattoo spell foci that allowed non-spellcasters to silently call on spell effects, over great distances if need be, without having to cast (and probably botch) the spells.

Yet the array of spell effects (the flying and silence magics, in particular) made Storm suspicious that the tattoos weren't there just to benefit the mercenaries. It seemed to her that their patron had prepared to spy on the attack on the Yarlharks. So she left off questioning the captives in Shadowdale to magically look in on the Sembian mansion from afar—in time to see two of the Yarlharks sneak away on horses from the mansion stables, and become, as they rode away and magical disguises were allowed to fade, two quite different people: the missing Shaerl, and a Zhentarim mage who was coercing her. The mercenaries, when shown the mage's image, confirmed he was the man who hired them.

Leaving Lhaeo to put the captive mercenaries to sleep and securely confine them, Storm led the Knights on another *mass teleport* jaunt, to safely rescue Shaerl and capture the mage. Which they successfully did.

More interrogation followed. The players were made fully aware of the Zhents' use of spell foci to provide third parties who couldn't wield the Art with formidable magic (allowing dupes, coerced non-Zhents, and hired agents to carry out dangerous and difficult missions, while Zhentarim wizards watched more safely from afar). They also learned Mourngrym had been chosen to bear the spell foci (from a roster of various targets the Zhents wanted to darken the reputations of, or make trouble for), because the mage had a few days earlier (while posing as the factor of a trading company from Hillsfar, and signing a contract with the Lord of Shadowdale) managed to put a pin through Mourngrym's sleeve. The Zhent could then accurately *teleport* himself (and others) to the pin's location, which happened to be one of the robing rooms opening off Mourngrym's

bedchamber. He had done so, and then cast spells on the sleeping Shaerl and Mourngrym, before departing with Shaerl as a magically controlled hostage to protect himself if the Knights came storming after him immediately.

The Zhent mage had intended to let the mercenaries do all the work of finding and carrying off the Yarlhark wealth, then kill them after they encamped, gaining the loot without much work. He would thus eliminate the agents who could implicate him (and to whom he still owed the balance of their hiring fees), enrich himself with the Yarlhark valuables, and cause Sembians seeking to avenge the loss of their investments in Yarlhark business endeavors to attack Shadowdale—either destroying it, or weakening it enough that Zhentil Keep could easily conquer it. The mage would thereby earn Manshoon's gratitude and good regard, and a possible promotion. Which would no doubt come with orders concerning *another* little surprise adventure to visit on the Knights of Myth Drannor. . . . Layer upon layer. To the Knights, wheels within bewildering wheels. Not only driving home to my players the point that when it comes to ambitious Zhentarim and ambitious Sembians, there's *always* a lot going on behind the scenes—but showing them how their characters could engage in intrigues or at least learn to look for and unravel them.

My players were positively gleeful a few play sessions later, when the next Zhentarim moves against Shadowdale turned out to be attacks they had anticipated and prepared for (forewarned that non-wizards could use spell foci somewhere else to call on magic to perform Zhent missions, they were now looking not for Zhentarim wizards, but for anyone doing anything suspicious in and around Shadowdale), not to mention a deception (one person being magically given the appearance of another) that they saw through from several miles away—having just experienced the case of a murderous mercenary using Mourngrym's likeness. So a startling little surprise attack increased their savvy and gave them one of those all-too-rare-in-life moments of "We foresaw, and prepared, and by our own wits and efforts *have triumphed!*" satisfaction.

And aren't such imaginary but rich satisfactions what **D&D** is all about?

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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