

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Forging the Realms Archive | 5/7/2014 **New!**



The Traitors' Mill

Forgotten Realms

By Ed Greenwood

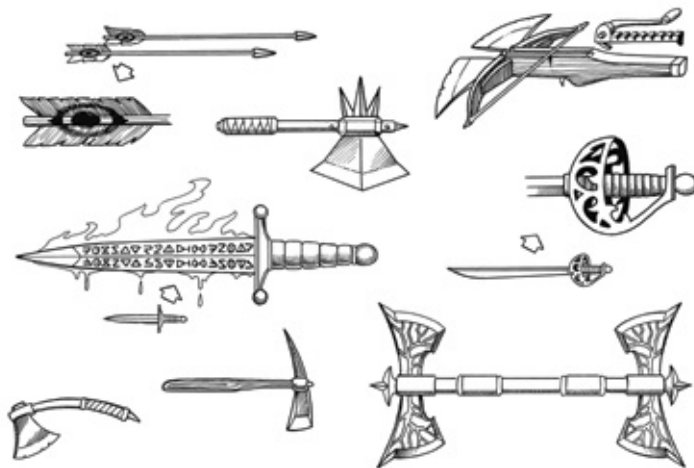
How and where and when did the Forgotten Realms start? What's at the heart of Ed Greenwood's creation, and how does the Grand Master of the Realms use his own world when he runs D&D adventures for the players in his campaign? "Forging the Forgotten Realms" is a weekly feature wherein Ed answers all those questions and more.

Although hard winters and monster raids often damage mills along the River Dessarin, at any time during the later 1300s and throughout the 1400s DR, a dozen grist mills exist along the lower reaches of that mighty river. Most of them cling to the western bank thanks to the Dessarin's habit of scouring its eastern flank (so the water there is more laden with pebbles and silt than along the far side of the river).

These mills grind grain from Goldenfields and the many small private steadings that have been established in increasing numbers east of Waterdeep down the passing years. They are hardworking, unglamorous places remarkable only as emergency shelters during winter blizzards or when brigands take one over as a base.

Except for one mill: The Traitors' Mill.

No fewer than five pitched battles raged here before the city of Waterdeep reluctantly established a standing garrison in the mill.



Aldred's Mill

The Traitors' Mill began as Aldred's Mill, though its founder Urlburt Aldred froze to death during the mill's first winter. It is a large, ramshackle, untidy timber structure that has been expanded several times since it was built in 1364 DR, and it has been partially rebuilt twice after fires damaged it. A gristmill, it uses two undershot wheels (in a row, each turning its own axle) to move grindstones that transform local grains (mainly barley) into flour.

The Hundarstone family of dwarves owned and operated the mill for some years, before selling the mill to a human who had more ambition than stamina. He soon sold the mill to another human of like character, and in this manner the mill passed through a succession of short-term human owners.

Then it fell into the hands of Melder Bardrasklo, a weatherbeaten, unscrupulous veteran traveling factor (trade agent) for certain ambitious nobles of Waterdeep. It seems he was acting in accordance with their specific direction, not just picking up useful properties for resale.

The nobles were all junior members of noble houses, not heads or heirs; specifically, they were Khamandar "Nethercoats" Massalan (a notorious prankster and "bright blade among the ladies"), Hetheko Neshar (a dabbler in the Art who has many shady contacts in Baldur's Gate), Darrask Phull (owner of several fishing boats suspected of making smuggling runs to Mintarn and Baldur's Gate), and Melthro Snome (a sadist suspected of working for a summer as an assassin among and for the wealthy of Sembia)—and it seems clear they intended to equip their own private armies outside the regard of the Open Lord of Waterdeep.

Under their ownership, with Bardrasklo installed as miller and as commander of a motley mill staff-cum-garrison of hired adventurers, the mill ground very little grain. Its grindstones instead served to sharpen newly made swords and spearheads that were forged in smithies outside Everlund and Silverymoon that had come under the covert ownership of various of the nobles, and floated down the Dessarin to the mill on timber rafts—oiled to inhibit rusting and hidden between two layers of timbers.

Some sickles and scythes were kept on hand at the mill "for show," so if the metal dust produced in the sharpening was discovered, the bladed tools could be presented as the reason for it (rather than swords and spearheads). The mill ground flax, and its oil was used to coat the newly sharpened weapons to inhibit rusting, before they were wrapped in rags and scraps of cheap cloth acquired in Waterdeep and sent on their way to storage in Scornubel.

The City Watch of Waterdeep became suspicious of the purchases of these rags, followed where the cloth went—and so stumbled upon the true nature of the mill. The Watch officers who made that discovery were attacked by the mill staff, and only one escaped alive back to Waterdeep, badly wounded, to report what she'd seen.

Waterdeep promptly sent out an armed force to the mill, and the first Battle of Traitors' Mill ensued.

Battle After Battle

he mounted Waterdhavian force of twenty-six Watch veterans in full armor had a Watchful Order magist and her apprentice along as observers—but the volleys of arrows that greeted the attackers from the mill concentrated on the magist, and three shafts met in her head.

Her apprentice promptly fled the battle to report, as per instructions the magist had made her swear to follow earlier, and was shortly followed by four surviving Watch warriors—the only survivors of the city's force. Some horses had plunged into concealed pits, the archery had been withering, and the attackers hadn't even reached the mill walls. So ended the first battle.

The second battle came two days later, when a much stronger force had been assembled, this one lacking mages or clerics but having forty "heavy" warriors and a dozen archers, plus pack horses carrying large "squareshields" (rectangles fashioned to be propped upright and bolted together, overlapping, to form a defensive wall to shelter the archers. Operating under orders to not burn the mill (so a thorough investigation could be made), to capture whoever was in charge alive for questioning if at all possible, and to take minimal casualties, this second force withdrew when their foremost ranks were shredded with shrapnel from (presumably magical) exploding, filled-with-nails metal balls shot forth via arrows.

The third battle happened two days after the second, the Waterdhavian forces this time bolstered by three wizards who created strong shielding spells to repel arrows and other missiles, that cloaked the advancing force. A smaller contingent was sent north, to come down the western bank of the Dessarin and attack only after battle had been joined.

This time the defenders let loose a pack of hungry dire wolves from cages, and when the attackers had been disrupted, a small force sallied forth from the mill to attack the wizards. One was wounded before the mill's defenders retreated back inside; when the attackers charged after them, they fell into extensive concealed trenches hard by the mill walls, and assaulted with fire and oil. Similar trenches slowed and blunted the sneaky side-attack along the riverbank, and when this attack reached an outlying mill shack and entered it to use it as cover, the shack proved to be a trap—exploding into the air and destroying all of the Waterdhavians in or near it.

That sent the attackers fleeing, and ended the third battle. It was almost a tenday later when a much stronger force, including six Watchful Order magists, arrived at the mill. They were met by a waiting mercenary army hired in from Scornubel, equipped with six trebuchets set up on the east bank of the Dessarin, whose operators had evidently put in enough practice hurling rock loads across the river and over the mill at the ground immediately west of the mill that

they could accurately put boulders right where they wanted to—into the heart of the attacking force. After that devastating volley, the mounted mercenaries, who'd been waiting among the rolling hills south of the mill, charged the Waterdhavian force and routed it. Though the attackers rallied to fight off the mercenaries and avoided being harried all the way home, the fourth battle was over.

The fifth battle happened the next night. Anticipating defeat, the Waterdhavian commanders back in the city had given the force that had set out to make the fourth assault on the mill specific instructions. Accordingly, they scattered and took cover in the aftermath of their defeat, but regrouped the next day and advanced toward the mill again. As the commanders had anticipated, the mercenary army had set out sentinels, and mustered to meet them well before they reached the mill—and while that battle (or rather, a series of skirmishes, as the Waterdhavian troops split into small groups, scattered, and kept on the move among the hills west of the mill, and the mercenaries tried to chase them down) raged, a score of Watchful Order magists and seven hired and handsomely paid adventuring bands attacked the mill from north and south, along the riverbanks. The magists used magic to blast open the outer walls this time, and the adventurers stormed the exposed interior rooms of the mill building, capturing Melder Bardrasklo and a lot of weapons sharpened at the mill, not to mention food assembled for the feeding of the mercenaries. Hustling Bardrasklo and a handful of surviving mill staff away, they hid themselves and kept quiet, awaiting the return of the mercenaries—and took great delight in using their own trebuchets on them, when the hirelings appeared on weary horses, seeking their base and their evening meal. So the fifth battle of Traitors' Mill ended in victory for Waterdeep.

Fell Traitors!

Following the return of the Waterdhavian force to the City of Splendors, and swift (almost undoubtedly coerced) confessions from Bardrasklo and his fellow mill staffers, the news raced across the city—leaked by whom, no one knows—as to the four nobles involved with the mill.

Almost as swiftly came spirited public denials of any involvement in what was going on at the mill by the heads of the noble houses of Massalan, Neshor, Phull, and Snome. All of them initially blamed Melder Bardrasklo for “misuse” of the property he was being paid to oversee.

That cut no ice with the Lords of Waterdeep, who had learned rather more during those confessions than had reached the ears of the citizenry. The four noble patriarchs got their wayward kin out of the city, fast, and adopted a fallback position. Even if their younglings were dabbling in weapons sales, it had nothing at all to do with Waterdeep; these were merely the honest efforts of ambitious young men seeking to found successful businesses of their own, rather than living as idle wastrels and draining the coffers of their families. The noble houses proclaimed as much in broadsheets they had published and distributed around the city, not just in letters delivered to the palace.

That very palace was in an uproar of its own due to just-revealed corruption: Bardrasklo had called in some favors and been helped to “escape” from custody. He had then promptly vanished.

Although the four young nobles were publicly dubbed “traitors” by the Open Lord of Waterdeep, no clear evidence indicated that they intended any sort of coup or armed operations within the city. What little they said of their intentions before fleeing the city (if the broadsheets published by their families can be believed) was that they intended to involve themselves in disputes and conflicts “far from our fair City of Splendors” for their own “amusement, and perhaps some plunder.”

Subsequent investigations by agents of Waterdeep revealed that all four had begun to recruit and hire warriors in Baldur's Gate and Scornubel. It seems the nobles had realized they'd hit upon a sideline business that could greatly swell their coffers. They contracted with Dereld “Cutter the Cutler” Kutkutlarbur, the notorious arms dealer of Scornubel, to sell most of the weapons they'd warehoused in that city—slowly, in small amounts, at “good high prices” rather than to any purchaser who could demand a discount for a bulk purchase.

Darker Dealings

Waterdeep promptly installed a garrison at the mill, because it was suspected that someone else might use the blade-sharpening setup, and it was deemed too useful and too well-built to destroy out of hand—when, after all, the city could make use of it, or allow others to use it under Waterdhavian supervision.

The garrison had barely settled in when among the first wagons of supplies sent to them from the city, a grisly cargo was found: the severed head of Melder Bardrasklo. His murderers have never been found, but are widely suspected to be agents hired by one of the heads of the noble houses involved.

Khalamdar “Nethercoats” Massalan, Hetheko Neshor, Darrask Phull, and Melthro Snome have all disappeared, but a

certain “Arrmurth” of Baldur’s Gate placed an advertisement in a Waterdhavian broadsheet not a tenday after the discovery of Bardrasklo’s head that offered “a change of face and name for anyone desiring a new life/escape unwanted entanglements/new beginnings for those with coin enough.”

Waterdhavian agents and private citizens of the City of Splendors alike have discovered, upon trying to follow up on the advertisement, that Arrmurth is a fictitious name, that someone in Baldur’s Gate seems to know individual Waterdhavians very well and to be wary indeed of anyone learning too much about Arrmurth—but that the offered “change” is very expensive, involves magical disguises and ready-made careers (some involving captaining merchant ships sailing out of Baldur’s Gate), and caters to noble clients.

Arrmurth can apparently be contacted, if the one contacting him doesn’t arouse Arrmurth’s suspicions, in the small, little-known Old Anchor tavern and dancing hall in the Lower City district of Baldur’s Gate.

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.