

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Wizards Did It

Adventurer Rescuer

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.*

hen the condemned prisoner is sent for, to be dragged in fetters before the enthroned king from the pitch-dark deepest cell of the royal dungeons—but the manacles are found dangling empty, the cell vacant of all but old moldering bones, the whispers begin: "The wizard did it!"

When some coins of the great royal fortune are needed at last, and guard after guard is passed and trap after trap circumvented, to penetrate to the innermost vault where tripwires are found undisturbed and intact spider webs stretch in thick nets—and the coffin-sized treasure chest is found locked tight yet empty of all but air, the judgment descends: "The wizard did it!"

And when the traitor is hunted the length of the kingdom, shouting riders spurring their mounts to outgallop the wind, brands blazing in their hands as they chase the miscreant into a lonely hut atop a pinnacle from which there is no escape, and surround it with wary vigilance as the battle-mightiest among them close in with warswords drawn to fling wide the door of the hut—and it is found to be empty, no matter how diligently its lone room is searched or all its boards dismantled until there is nothing left but a heap of wood, once again the cry goes up: "The wizard did it!"

Great fun, but to provide more examples would be merely to belabor the point: In fantasy worlds where magic is commonplace, hostile magic use is such an easy explanation or justification that it tends to get overused.

Randall Garrett's Lord Darcy tales stand as something of a counterpoint to that, which is one of the reasons I've always enjoyed them. They include one novel, *Too Many Magicians*, in which someone important is murdered in a locked room at a huge gathering of wizards. So "of course" it was done with magic—but if so, in a big hotel full of wizards, just how do you figure out who did it?

I'm not suggesting that all Realms campaigns should be a series of murder mysteries being solved by Holmes-like player characters. (Though that can be great fun; I did just that for one of my long-ago library mini-campaigns, in which the Four Swords adventurers became unofficial assistants of the City Watch in Waterdeep, helping solve a troubling series of murders of noble heirs. Boy, did they get to see a lot of laundry chutes and pantries and servants' intrigues.)

The idea I'm getting at is that Realms campaigns work better when DMs see and use all sorts of other explanations for the unusual, beyond "some sneaky wizard—or priest—did this, with their magic."

Perhaps this or that particular mystery is really rooted in some Faerûnians selectively breeding creatures for food stocks or mounts or other specialized uses, so a horse or ox or household cat or dog could have opened the latch at a signal, or carried off the key—or conveyed that key to a person locked in a room or cell.

It's likely that many "odd" or at-first-glance-inexplicable events or behaviors are really the results of the old, old power of greed and offered coins. The captured murderer or hostage bribed his way out of the cell, or a proffered bribe got a guard close enough that the prisoner could scratch him with a sharpened small fingernail coated in a contact poison, then gone out the window into the sea far below clutching him—so the poisoned guard drowns, and the prisoner swims away.

Perhaps the explanation involves coins, but nothing as swift or blatant as a bribe. The reason behind

bewildering deeds or events could be a desire to trim costs or make lucrative long-term trade deals.

How often do we all jump to the easiest (but erroneous) explanation? Down in the dungeon, the warily exploring PCs encounter a magical "field," wild magic area, or weird magical effect. Aha! The defenses of a powerful, lurking spellcaster, of course!

Yet are they, really? How often do such things result from long-ago collisions between spells hurled in a battle between rival bands of adventurers who got to the dungeon before the PCs? Or the meeting of an imprudently cast spell with an existing magical field?

Thanks to the expense and danger of experimenting with colliding magical effects, results remain largely unpredictable. Or to put it in DMs' terms, you can have them cause just about anything.

For example, the PCs are hunting down "bad guy" adventurers in, say, Undermountain. The bad guys hurl a *fireball* spell at the PCs down a long, narrow passage. Its effect, confined by unyielding stone walls, spreads far, reaching along the corridor toward the PCs. Not wanting to be immolated, the PC wizard counters by hurling a *fireball* spell at the onrushing flames, a counterblast to drive it back.

What happens? Well, even if the PC wizard has succeeded with this tactic before, the answer almost must be: "It depends." For one thing, the PC wizard probably hasn't practiced hurling *fireball* spells down this particular passage before. There may be old magic waiting along it, unseen, that will affect and be affected by the clashing fireballs, twisting their magical energy into awakening something or creating an unforeseen magical effect that has little to do with fire. Or there may simply be sliding panels or existing cracks in the walls of the passage that give way before either of the fireballs bursts, breaking open new "exits" from the passage into adjacent rooms—or collapsing the floor of the passage, along with some of the PCs or the "bad guys" or both, down into the next level of Undermountain, beneath.

An affected adjacent room may be where a fell and powerful spellcaster floats, caught in age-old stasis until the roiling fireball energy awakens and reinvigorates them—rousing them to furious retaliation.

Or a decaying lich who has been awaiting the arrival of sufficient magical power to capture and drain decides that this fireball collision is power enough, and its bearer is the long-awaited prize to be drained.

If magic has become too-familiar and humdrum ("Just a +1 *sword* that glows when you want it to, or when the wind blows east, or a dragon is too close? Huh, nothing special. Toss it in the wagon. We'll sell it when we get to the city."), drawing attention to its unpredictability—the fact that mortals and gods alike are playing with forces they don't fully understand and that are all too likely to go wild or at least do unpredictable (and usually "bad") things—will at least make players wary of it.

So they'll think twice before glibly sending their characters to "run and pick up the wand and see what it does." Or "I open the book and read the first spell out, and see if the idol responds." (Oh, it'll respond, all right . . .)

In other words, put a little awe and wonder back into the magic in your game.

And if you can't evoke awe and wonder in your players, a little fear and respect will do.

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.