

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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Vraunt of the Masked Princess

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.*

In old Sword Coast parlance, a "vraunt" is a secretive cabal or informal organization dedicated to what its members see as noncriminal purposes or deeds.

The word largely fell out of use by the end of the 1200s DR because it had been so misused—by kidnappers, traitors, and even clubs of debauchers—as to invite ridicule whenever encountered. (The similar and still regularly used Common word "avraunta" is the written manifesto of a cause or grand plan, or the testimony of someone supporting such a cause or plan.)

This latter-day organization seems to have resurrected the term with pride, perhaps on the instructions of she for whom they're named. The Vraunt of the Masked Princess is a secret society that's arisen in Waterdeep, beginning circa 1476 DR. Its members originally worked toward the establishment of a Waterdhavian monarchy of ruling females, descending in the female line, to curtail the power of the nobility and the very wealthy. (Detractors claim these "Princess-Lovers" really want to get back at individual nobles for purely personal reasons.) Over time, this focus has changed.

The Vraunt is dedicated to the memory of the Princess Palatine, a self-styled ruling princess of forceful character who was actually the youngest daughter of the Bladesemmer noble family of Waterdeep when she was born, in 1277 DR. Even in youth, she tirelessly tried to tell wayward, debauched, and overtly lawless nobles what to do. Lady Galaskya Bladesemmer was short and of slender build, with an overly large nose, yet was considered strikingly beautiful. She was forceful but charismatic, and she was very popular among her own generation of nobles, though many older nobles detested her for her "effrontery" of trying to discipline nobles at all. She primarily concerned herself with the behavior of nobility in their country estates rather than in Waterdeep itself, saying they courted "the violent downfall of all nobles" if they went on seizing goods and lands that weren't theirs, casually raping and slaughtering, setting fire to the cottages of peasants that were "in the way of their plans, or that simply spoiled the view," and many other misdeeds.

The Princess Palatine gathered to herself several young minor mages and adventurers, who kept her alive through a string of assassination attempts as she became an increasing thorn in the sides of the dominant noble families of her day. In the spring of 1296 DR, she was forced to flee into the wilderlands north of Yartar when hunted by the bodyguards of Lord Bruel Hothemer, who'd ordered them to "bring her back to him in bloody pieces." When they failed to do so, Hothemer hired adventuring bands to accomplish that aim, notably the Red Scimitar brothers of Memnon, and Aldraegar's Valiant Venturers of Scornubel. The notorious Luskralus Aldraegar, a handsome rake and assassin who boasted of some six hundred successful slayings, captured the princess near Everlund, but was torn apart by a fang dragon that appeared "out of nowhere" (as the rogue Barandon Telvaer, the sole surviving Venturer, described matters) to savage Aldraegar and his fellow adventurers, then carried off the princess "high into the sky, cradling her as gently as a beloved baby."

Her life thereafter is shrouded in mystery, though if even a twentieth of the tales told about her are true, she visited most of the large cities of Faerûn north and west of the Sea of Fallen Stars, and got involved romantically with young nobles dwelling in every one, even as she admonished older nobles or even reproved them publicly through letters delivered to inns, taverns, and local organizations affected by noble misdeeds (such as guilds and trading costers). How she earned her livelihood—for she never drew upon Bladesemmer coffers nor had any converse with her kin, if their firmly stated claims are to be believed—and what skills she may have had, beyond an obvious talent for diplomacy and a shrewd grasp of the details of all walks of life in the Realms, are unknown.

The Princess Palatine was last seen publicly (in Marsember) in 1334 DR, but seems to have survived beyond what the adventurer-lich Ulesgur of Moondark (these days, a sinister kingpin of many criminal activities who lurks in various Inner Sea ports, hiring and manipulating adventurers) calls her "meat-mortal days" as an unseen spirit who murmurs warnings, advice, and admonishments to mortals of her choosing, usually young women in peril or who want adventure or who are noble and on the verge of making their first important life decisions.

Members of the Vraunt have long met in secret to seek advice from, and obey the guidance of, a floating, murmuring mask that claims to be the princess. (The handful of noblewomen who've had contact with both the murmuring spirit and the mask are all convinced they are one and the same entity. These nobles include Radralla Assumbar, Asmreene Kormallis, the sometime-adventuress Yathla Lathkule, and the mages Haloronda Majarra and Jaklyn Nandar.) This mask looks solid and real, but on many occasions has proved insubstantial when various persons have sought to seize, capture, or attack it. Even spells cannot touch the mask, and it can fly and hover with great precision, and see as if there were real eyeballs behind it (on all sides; it appears to have no blind spot).

The Masked Princess no longer seems driven to discipline nobles or establish a monarchy. These seem to have become long-term goals to be achieved "gradually and peacefully, through inevitable steps" (as Radralla Assumbar reports the mask as telling her). Rather, it is now most interested in exposing corruption among nobles and among the lawkeepers and officials of the city of Waterdeep. It also seeks to make sure all connections between these authorities and Waterdhavian nobility—and all attempts of nobles at exercising influence over justice or the decisions of the Palace—are known to the wider public. They do this through spying done by the Vraunt, with their results regularly recounted at Waterdhavian inns and taverns, and shared with widely traveling caravan merchants.

For instance, in 1479 DR, the Vraunt uncovered that the Phull family was getting favorable decisions and contracts from the Palace because no less than eight officials there owed various Phulls a lot of coin. A year later, the Vraunt revealed that Lady Dereira Massalan had seduced no fewer than four city treasurers, who were extending her "off the books" loans to purchase property after property in Sea Ward—buildings she later resold for handsome profits.

The Vraunt meets in various clubs and tavern backrooms in Waterdeep, and their ranks are known to include the finesmith Helto Ammurch of Vondil Street, the flower-seller Daranthra Tethleir of Tarnath Street, the alchemist Guluskrar Tanthloe of Tarsar's Street, the horse-breeder Dezrin Bloodhunter of Red Larch, the shipwright's carpenter Jethen Wuld of Fish Street, and the weaver Velnra Tolsarth of the Street of Silver. At least six Vraunt members are known to have been killed (almost certainly by the paid agents of various nobles), and two have fled the Sword Coast, seemingly for good, after being arrested and questioned by city authorities (with the magical aid of the Watchful Order of Magists and Protectors). Rumor has it that both were warned that their return to the City of Splendors might prove swiftly fatal. These two are the fighter Thamaskos Wintershadow, now an adventurer based in Teziir, and the rogue Shansra Deltereth, who now runs a very successful importation business (some say a front for smuggling) in Marsember.

As too many Vraunt members are becoming well-known for their eavesdropping to be successful, they have recently taken to casually hiring outlanders newly arrived in the city to do their spying for them for an evening or two. As these short-term stints mean a continual turnover of faces that are unlikely to be recognized by watchful guards, alert nobles, and vigilant city authorities, this technique has been highly successful, resulting in revelations about the secretive transfer of certain city-owned buildings to the Neshar family, the appointment of a "slow-witted" member of House Manthar to a highly paid position as "Inspector of Cobbles" in Sea Ward and North Ward (apparently the only wards of the city whose cobbles require inspection), and what might or might not be the outright purchase of some Masked Lord masks (from the Palace, in return for undisclosed but reportedly "stupendous" sums) by House Snome.

Lord Gulgoryn Tarm (not the head of his house, but a rip-roaring elder wastrel uncle of the clan) recently announced a bounty of four thousand gold pieces per head on the heads of any Vraunt members delivered still alive to him. Or rather, someone distributed printed proclamations purporting to be from him in profusion throughout the city, that he then denied having anything at all to do with—a denial that was accompanied by a "big wink and much laughter," according to the broadsheet writer Murth Demmeth, of the broadsheet *Whispers of Waterdeep*. It's not known if anyone has tried to collect on this offer, true or not. (There have been six "brigand" raids and one mixed-monster attack, of beasts strange to see working together, on the Bloodhunter lands northeast of Red Larch, but no one has publicly proclaimed these as attempts to kill or capture Vraunt member Dezrin Bloodhunter.)

For their part, the Vraunt show no signs at all of disbanding or fading away, though they say little of a monarchy these days (other than toasting each other with their traditional "To a queen!"), and concentrate on—in the words of Vraunt spokesperson Dezrin Bloodhunter—"uncovering noble corruption, of which there is regrettably

never any shortage."

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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