DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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A Dark and Stormy Knight

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.*

n my Realms campaign, "Dark and Stormy Knight" is the appellation of a particular mysterious dark-armored figure seen from time to time on horseback on a hilltop in the distance, or atop a nearby battlement, or in the high window of a mansion behind walls with locked gates, watching.

Always watching the PCs. Silently, expressionlessly, enigmatically.

Is he a fan of the characters? A foe? A spy working for a secret society, a knightly order, or a priesthood? Or something more sinister, or even more noble?

Frankly, when I first brought him on the scene, I hadn't the faintest.

I assumed the PCs would figure out for me who he or she was, eventually. And in the process, they might even invest this mystery figure with more importance and long-hidden meaning than I could possibly have dreamed up, making me look like a scheming genius (memo to self: have new business cards printed up) and making them happy and satisfied that they'd finally, finally figured out this little but longstanding mystery of the Realms.

Oh, I love this job! (DMing, I mean.)

When someone writes a novel—or, for that matter, a set of engineering specs or a legal contract—only one set of words can ultimately be used, precise details or features or outcomes explicitly decided by those choices. Even in an intensely creative design process (for, say, a fantasy or science fiction movie that requires not just "funny-looking" alien races, but their languages, garb, architecture, customs, tools, and so on), decisions must be made and end results reached that are expressed in specific words, costumes, buildings, and so on.

In contrast, roleplaying games have a built-in, accepted, embraced X-factor, the often unpredictable actions and choices of players and the characters they run. A good DM has to be willing to "run with it," to improvise and be flexible, from a beginning that is never "This will happen," but is always "If the players do X, then A will follow, but if they do Y, then B will ensue." Not to mention "The monster is aiming to do this, but if faced with that, will instead do thus-and-so." As a DM, if I want to avoid the justifiably detested style of play known as railroading, I must leave open ends . . . choices not yet made.

The more complications that are built into play, in the form of developed NPCs with whom the PCs have relationships, intrigues and other subplots running alongside the main narrative, the longer it takes to list and describe all of these waiting, hanging choices. Long lists of contingency plans—"If the PCs tell the Baron no, he will react thus, unless the Baroness is in the room or the High Priest has erupted in anger, in which case the Baron will instead . . ."—give some DMs headaches and are shunned by other DMs (not just the lists, but the circumstances that would give rise to them), yet I have grown to love such situations over the years. The interplay of PCs and NPCs who must debate or confront or warily solve mysteries or manage manipulations has become far more interesting than flailing away at a monster and just tracking hit points as a hack-and-slash encounter unfolds.

Of course, your mileage may vary. These are my preferences—and more important, my players' preferences. They need not be yours, and no set of preferences is "better" or morally higher than any others.

Yet whether a campaign is a series of purchased published adventures or a work wholly created by the DM, pure dungeon crawl or world-spanning intrigue or something in between, every ongoing **D&D** narrative is better for an element of mystery. Some players even enjoy literally "playing detective," their characters being

investigators tasked with solving in-game murder mysteries. Most adventurers, however, encounter a murder mystery by either stumbling over a body or being framed for a killing. They more often come up against mysteries akin to my Dark and Stormy Knight: Who is that guy, and what does he want from us?

(The PCs in my campaign quickly learned that the watching "Dark Knight" could vanish in a hurry, almost certainly by magical means, if they tried to chase or corner him. They also began to think that the watcher was either several humans at different times, or could look different—male, female, or even skeletal—from appearance to appearance. Either that, or maybe different PCs saw "him" differently, when they got close. . . .)

Ah, deepening mystery. Gotta love it.

Gamers who are familiar with fiction about secret societies, or scheming real-life (and sensationally fictionalized) families like the Borgias, or the royal family of Amber in Roger Zelazny's classic *Chronicles* of Amber saga, or dynastic struggles such as the Wars of the Roses (or George R.R. Martin's A Song of Ice And Fire) know the sort of ongoing, gripping entertainment that can arise from tales told in a world of secrets upon secrets, and alliances and cabals whose memberships keep changing due to murders and treachery and individuals switching sides . . . and if **D&D** players have a taste for such entertainments, why avoid them?

In my home campaign, mysteries have always unfolded—and PCs have always been chasing down new ones. That "chasing down" is important. I did not want my players to be more anxious or upset around the gaming table than they were in their real daily lives. I wanted them to feel either in control or at least able to take commanding action most of the time, rather than feeling beset on all sides, bewildered, and constantly stumbling over new bodies and problems and foes. The play experience had to stay fun for them, not become frightening or a mental burden, one more set of worries to go on top of their real-life ones. If they got frightened (or became lost or seriously overmatched, or both) during a dungeon expedition they had chosen to go on and prepared for, that was fine. "In control" means being able to freely choose to make bad decisions or willingly court danger, as well as winning out in a particular confrontation or contest.

There are big mysteries I build in, with villains I hope will become recurring foes, and there are passing "puzzles of the moment" to solve—not just the dungeon variety of "How do we solve this lock and get out of this room before it fills up with water and we drown?" but the "What happened here?" sort, when PCs arrive at a place to meet a contact and find the person missing or slain, with signs of a tussle or a robbery or something else, and must figure out what has occurred. There are also ever-present "local secrets we know are being kept from us, but haven't figured out yet," and open-ended mysteries like the aforementioned Dark and Stormy Knight, that the characters' actions and speculation and investigation will answer or modify as play unfolds.

All of these uncertainties add spice and interest, and each one has made the "home" Realms richer and have become part of its lore—which gets shared, in ways large and small, with all fans of the Realms.

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.