DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

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The Mushroom Man
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.*

The Mushroom Man Crashed through the Window

here the heroes were, tensely hiding behind tapestries and in the shadowy corners of the darkened library, trying not to breathe loudly.

They'd crept into the castle in the proverbial dead of night, using magic to reach the battlements and painstaking stealth to venture from those windswept heights to here, where they were supposed to meet the spy who would pass them the documents.

Except that something had obviously gone wrong. Instead of a lone figure slipping in to meet them, there were two people in the library—a young noblewoman and a courtier eloquently trying to persuade her to accept his love.

Which one was the spy? Or was the spy neither of them, but someone else in the castle who hadn't dared enter the library with all the flirtatious murmurings going on?

The PCs could only wait, and hope for a chance to either meet the spy or withdraw undetected.

The players around the gaming table had grimly decided as much, obviously feeling the tension I was trying my darnedest to engender, as the slow, deliberate footfalls of patrolling guards sounded in the passage outside, a courtier with a dog hastened purposefully through this wing of the castle, and—

With a terrific crash, a myconid guard burst through the window!

As leaded glass panes flew everywhere in shards, guards rushed in to hack apart the unexpected arrival, and lights were kindled all around. The PCs had to try to hide their faces as they fought their way hastily out, while the castle was roused around them, and . . .

Well, the characters got away, but without having contacted the spy, and they were glum in the knowledge that arranging any later meeting was going to be much harder. Rallying after our usual break for chips and dip and green tea, they demanded of each other: Why had what the noblewoman screamingly called "a mushroom man" smashed through the window? What was a myconid doing in the windy night sky outside a high window in a castle that fell away in a sheer drop for hundreds of feet, down into a noisome (and reputedly monster-haunted) moat? How was it able to move violently in a horizontal direction, when it can't fly and there was nowhere to jump off from within three miles?

I sipped tea and tried to look interested but noncommittal, with nothing remotely like a smile finding its way anywhere near my face.

Oh, this was an instance of the DM toying with the players, all right. But not to be nasty, or anything of the sort. There was a sensible explanation for the violent arrival of the myconid, all worked out in advance (the invisible, high-in-midair mouth of a long-forgotten gate/portal, as it happens) . . . but it was more than likely that the PCs would never learn it. My players know me well, so they weren't accusing me of doing something erratic and unbelievable just for the fun of it, or to derail their careful plans just because I could—but to someone else it might certainly seem that way, because it wasn't the first "unsolved mystery" of the Realms that just happened,

without anyone knowing why.

I love mysteries. I think no roleplaying campaign can have too many of them, as long as the players never feel bewildered, or get the feeling that the DM is a deliberate and malicious opponent rather than merely the director of the unfolding entertainment who has sent some challenges their way. I like intrigues and old, unsolved family mysteries and "never seen agains" and hauntings—and I like low and high criminals at work around the PCs and often using the characters as protective camouflage (or dupes to be framed) for the crimes.

Here's a lovely example of such misdirection. In an old Edgar Wallace "Mister J. G. Reeder" short story, a thug whom Reeder helped to put in jail gets out when his sentence is done and threatens to take bloody revenge. The mild-mannered but brilliant Reeder turns the tables by meeting repeatedly with the thug—and having the police arrest other criminals shortly after every meeting, so eventually the other criminals start to think the thug is informing on them, and they take care of him themselves. (Short stories and novels can provide scores of plots, elements, and notions a DM can use in play—as long as the players don't peruse the same library the DM does!)

But let's return to the unexplained mushroom man. I knew how and why that unfortunate myconid guard had come through that window just then, but it was up to the PCs, if they cared to, to find out for themselves.

And here's the important thing: If they come up with a richer, more interesting, and more useful explanation than my original one, I would be perfectly happy to toss mine aside and adopt theirs. Arriving at that explanation gives them the gratification of having puzzled it out or forced the truth out of someone or otherwise done it themselves. That's what matters to players—outwitting the dragon or the king (or the situation) in some clever manner, or duping the local master of thieves and living to boast about it, not slaying their three-thousand-and-sixth goblin.

Boy, did my players cudgel their wits (figuratively speaking) trying to figure out where that mushroom man had come from, and why. It was a measure of how much the episode bothered them that the next time they faced spells from a known wizard foe, they wondered aloud if he might magically hurl mushroom men at them. Which in turn was my cue to start having lone mushroom men show up where the PCs would notice the myconid but not be able to reach it (for instance, walking along a busy city street past a building's window while the PCs were inside being lectured by local Watch officers, or praying at a temple, or the like). Not all the time, of course; just often enough to make my players stare at me and then at each other and ask aloud, "What is it with the mushroom men?"

Maybe someday I'll tell them . . . if they don't tell me first.

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.