

Countdown to the Realms

Magic in the Forgotten Realms

by Bruce Cordell

Magical power and fantastic features abound in the **Forgotten Realms**. Arcane secrets whisper to those with the ears to hear in the eons-long movement of the continents, in rushing river rapids, in every inhalation of beasts great and small, and in the sighing cries of the wind. Raw magic is the wild stuff of creation itself, the mute and mindless will of being, suffusing every bit of matter and coursing within every manifestation of energy throughout the world.

Wizards, warlocks, clerics, sorcerers, bards, paladins, and even rogues, fighters, rangers, and other adventurers call upon personally derived threads of magic to cast mighty spells, enforce pacts with enigmatic entities, heal injury, ward against evil, or accomplish physical feats that transcend purely mortal means.

Dangerous monsters, too, call up frightful magic to accomplish their deceitful ends. Aberrations spawned by ancient magic seethe below the earth and above it, hungry for flesh and knowledge alike, waiting for the chance to feed. Dragons whose blood runs with magic wield abilities so potent that gods and primordials alike fear to face the most ancient of these mighty beings. Undead fuel their mind and protect their corpses from dissolution by powerful necromantic rituals, especially lichs, whose never-ending acquisition of arcane knowledge has propelled more than a few into contention with divine designs.

Indeed, magic is so bountiful in Abeir-Toril that even the land bristles with fantastic landscapes. Great motes of free-hanging earth balance on nothing but air, amazing all those who chance upon these mighty demonstrations of nature's glory.

If fact, the **Realms** are so awash with magic that the world proved particularly vulnerable to a plague that fed on magic itself.

The Year of Blue Fire

"Learn ye well the lesson of the pebble that begets a landslide. Likewise a single betrayal unleashed the Spellplague, whose consequences yet dance and stagger across Toril, and beyond."

--Elminster of Shadowdale, 1479 DR, Year of the Ageless One

An appalling magical event called the Spellplague afflicted (and still afflicts) the world in 1385 DR.

Despite its name, the Spellplague was much more than a disease. For one, it did not restrict itself to mere flesh. All things were meat to the Spellplague's insatiable hunger—flesh, stone, magic, space, and perhaps even the flow of time was suborned. The world of Toril, its lost sibling Abeir, and even the planes themselves were infected with a plague of change.

Most suppose the Spellplague was the direct result of the goddess of magic's murder at the hands of the god Cyric. Some whisper that Mystra's death was achieved through the machinations of the goddess Shar, with Cyric her unwitting stooge.

This theory holds that the world's magic was held so long in Mystra's Weave that when the Weave lost its weaver, magic spontaneously and ruinously burst its bonds. Areas of wild magic, already outside the constraints of the Weave, touched off first when their boundaries misted suddenly away. But eventually, few parts of Toril and the planes beyond were unaffected.

The plague raged on and on in ever-widening spirals, leaving some places completely untouched (such as many northern lands of Faerûn, including Cormyr and the Swordcoast), and radically altering others (such as Muhorand, Unther, and points south). The plague passed into the realms of demons, gods, and lost souls—dividing some realms, joining others, and generally seeding chaos.

Near-mythical realms that had passed beyond easy reach were pulled back, such as the Feywild (called Faerie in ancient days). The home of demons fell through the cosmology, unleashing swarming evil before the Abyss found its new home beneath the Elemental Chaos.

Even the long forgotten world of Abeir burned in the plague of spells, despite having been unreachable and cut off from Faerûn for tens of millennia. Portions of Abeir's landscape were transposed with areas of Toril in the disaster. Such landscapes included their living populations, and thus places such as Akanûl and Tymrather lie as if new-birthered on Faerûn's face. Across the Trackless Sea, and entire continent of the lost realm reappeared (called Returned Abeir) subsuming the continent of Maztica.

The Spellplague was a potent direct agent of change, but it also set off a string of secondary catastrophes.

Effects on the Weave

For eons, the use of magic in Faerûn was focused through a god of magic, most recently Mystra. Except for certain Netherese wizards of ancient days who learned the truth, most believed that no magic would be possible without such a deity. However, with the death of Mystra and jealous Shar suppressing the ascension of a new deity of magic, it became common knowledge that magic is accessible without a god to control and codify it. Now when a spellcaster speaks of the Weave, she is just using another term for magic.

Effects on the Shadow Weave

Just as Mystra controlled the Weave, the goddess Shar controlled the Shadow Weave. Not satisfied with her portion, Shar plotted to seize control of both. She miscalculated. When Cyric murdered Mystra, the Weave collapsed so completely that Shar not only failed to gather up the fraying threads, she also lost control over the Shadow Weave.

Just as magic persists without Mystra, so does the dusky power of shadow endure without Shar acting as an intermediary. Powerful necromancers have developed their own unique methods for accessing the dim energies of the Shadowfell.

Effect on Spellcasters

Many creatures that learned to cast spells and channel magic with Mystra's Weave found themselves powerless in the Spellplague's wake. Some never regained their power. Others worked to attune themselves to the new magical environment. Many required years to regain this facility, while others never regained the knack. Others took shortcuts to reacquire the power they'd lost, swearing questionable pacts to enigmatic beings in return for the ability to utilize arcane powers.

Today, spellcasters access magic through a dizzying array of methods. Some murmur spells and incant rituals, some forge arcane bargains, and others pray for intervention. In truth, it seems that magic can be accessed in more ways than ever before, fueled by newfound knowledge of arcane, shadow, primal, and other sources of power.

Effect on Items

Most magic items that permanently store magic, such as magic swords, cloaks, and boots, survived the Spellplague and continue to operate normally. Permanent access to magic was "installed" in these devices when they were created, so even though the Weave was used in their making, the Weave no longer played any part in their continuing operation. That said, some items that temporarily stored "charges" of magic, such as wands and staves created prior to the Spellplague, no longer work. If such items do work, they no longer work in the same way.

The secret of making magic items in a post-Weave world was relearned decades ago. Magic items are as plentiful as ever, as desperately sought by doughty adventurers, and as mysterious as they ever were.

Effects on the Landscape

Where magic was completely loosed, the Spellplague ate through stone and earth as readily as bone and spell. Broad portions of Faerûn's surface collapsed into the Underdark, partially draining the Sea of Fallen Stars into the Glimmer Sea far below (and leaving behind a continent-sized pit called the Underchasm). The event splintered several of the Old Empires south of the drained sea into a wildscape of towering mesas, bottomless ravines, and cloud-scraping spires (further erasing evidence of the lands and kingdoms once situated there). Historical lands most changed by the Spellplague include Mulhorand, Unther, Chondath, and portions of Aglarond, the Sea of Fallen Stars, and the Shaar. What was once called Halruaa detonated and was destroyed when every inscribed and prepared spell in the nation went off simultaneously. This explosion was partly to blame for destroying the land bridge between Chult and the Shining South—only a scattered archipelago remains.

Tendrils of the Change Plague reached many other corners of Faerûn, sometimes directly across the landscape, othertimes bypassing great swathes of land by infecting both sides of the many two-way portals that once dotted the world.

Pockets of active Spellplague still exist today, most famously in the Changing Land. Referred to as plaguelands, each one is strange and dangerous. No two possess the exact same landscape or features, save for the fact that entering could lead one to be infected by the Spellplague. Luckily, remnant plaguelands possess only a fraction of the vigor demonstrated in the Spellplague's initial appearance. These lingering Spellplague pockets are secreted away in hard-to-reach locales, often surrounded by twisted no-man's land. Most of Faerûn and Returned Abeir are entirely free of such pockets, though the plaguechanged and spellscarred may appear in any land.

Effects on Creatures

When the initial wave of Spellplague infected a creature, object, or spell, the target usually dissolved into so much glowing, dissipating ash. However, sometimes living creatures survived the plague's touch but were altered, twisted, or fused to another creature or even a portion of the landscape. The initial Change Plague wave had no regard for boundaries or species, or the ability of a changed entity to survive with its new form, powers, and limitations. The most unlucky of these mewling, hideously changed survivors perished within a few days.

Luckily, the initial wave directly touched relatively few parts of Toril and Abeir. Moreover, not all creatures, objects, or spells touched by the original Spellplague were doomed, to have survived meant having to accept

change. Living creatures so affected are differentiated into two broad groups: plaguechanged and spellscarred.

Plaguechanged

A massive change in body and mind marks a creature that has survived contact with the original wave of the Spellplague during the Year of Blue Fire. Such survivors are called the Plaguechanged. Extreme alterations forge potent monstrosities in even the meekest flesh. Plaguechanged creatures are monsters, driven slightly insane by the viciousness of their metamorphosis. Few of this generation survive today, because the initial plague was so virulent, and the changes wrought were so extreme. What's more, many decades have passed since the Spellplague's end, so most plaguechanged creatures simply died in the interim. A few of the horrifying monstrosities remain, though, hidden away in various corners of the world.

Spellscarred

Spellscars are a phenomena of the present, gained when someone moves too close to a plagueland (where active Spellplague yet lingers), though sometimes spellscars afflict people who've never had any contact with rampant magic. Some individuals—heroes and villains alike—can gain spellscars and learn to master the powers inherent in them.

On rare occasions, a spellscar appears as a physical abnormality, but more often it is an intangible mark that only appears when its owner calls upon it. When this happens, a spellscar might appear as jagged cracks of blue fire racing out across a spellscarred's forearms or hands, a corona of blue flame igniting the creature's hair, a flaming blue glyph on the creature's forehead, or perhaps even wings of cobalt flame. In many instances, an individual's sudden manifestation of blue fire is a reliable indicator of a spellscar.

Magic in the Year of The Ageless One

The ancient wonder of old magic yet lingers among the ruins of thousand-year-old empires, in crumbling towers of mad wizards, and in buried vaults of elder races. The modern marvels of living wizards, sorcerers, warlocks, clerics, druids, and other spellcasters stride the land as purposefully as they ever did, altering the world in small or large ways with each spell they cast. Indeed, without the divine restrictions of previous ages, magic is more abundant than ever, manifesting not only as inexplicable changes to the landscape, items, and creatures, but even in some of the most fantastic exploits of fighters, rogues, rangers, and other heroes. Magic truly does permeate all things. For all the changes wrought by the Mystra's death, magic remains the lifeblood of Toril.

About the Author

Bruce Cordell is a D&D designer, but during his twelve years in the game industry, he has dabbled in miniatures, board games, collectible card games, d20 games, and more. Bruce has over a sixty listed credits to his name, including the *Expanded Psionics Handbook*, *Libris Mortis*, and *Expedition to Castle Ravenloft*. His body of work also includes three published *Forgotten Realms* novels (*Lady of Poison*, *Darkvision*, and *Stardeep*), with more on the way.