

Countdown to the Realms

Year of the Ageless One

by Rich Baker

The Realms of 1479 DR

Ninety-four years ago, Mystra perished and the world went mad.

Unchecked, ungoverned, the raw stuff of wild magic danced across the world, wreaking terrible destruction. Cities burned, kingdoms fell, luckless people were changed into monsters, and mages went berserk. This was the Spellplague, a rippling outbreak of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of magical catastrophes that left no corner of Faerûn untouched. For almost ten years new outbreaks appeared here and there, striking randomly and without warning. Wherever they struck, chaos reigned.

During the Year of Blue Fire and the terrible years that followed, heroes all over Faerûn battled to contain the magical plague. In some places they succeeded; in others, they failed and died horribly. Places guarded by powerful, persistent magical wards were largely unharmed; the Spellplague flowed around mythals and other such mighty enchantments. But even then, some mythal-guarded sites fell prey to invasions of plaguechanged monsters or the spells of maddened archmages. No place was truly safe.

In many places, the Spellplague wrought drastic changes to the very shape of the world. The vast Underdark system beneath the western Shaar suffered a calamitous collapse, leaving a miles-deep pit the size of a country where the Landrise once ran. Thay's forbidding plateaus were lifted thousands of feet higher, leaving many of its cities in ruins. The Priador and eastern Thesk are a maze of monster-haunted foothills beneath Thay's daunting ramparts now. Fencelike ridges of glass spires, drifting earthmotes covered in weird aerial forests, towering mesas of whorled stone... all over Faerûn magical landscapes are interspersed with the common rock and root of the lands that existed before. Even in countries that survived the Spellplague more or less intact, these "changelands" stand as striking new landmarks—landmarks that sometimes harbor monsters never before seen in Faerûn.

In time, the fury of the Spellplague burned itself out. New outbreaks became fewer and weaker, and finally seemed to cease altogether. Pockets of "live" Spellplague still exist in a few places known as plaguelands; one of the largest is a vast waste known as the Changing Lands, where Sespech and Chondath used to be. Few people dare to enter such places, but from time to time they disgorge horribly mutated monsters, tormenting the lands nearby. No new plaguelands have appeared in decades now, and some seem to be weakening as the years pass. But the damage has already been done.

No one will ever be able to create a comprehensive chronology of where and when each outbreak struck, or how each town and city fared through the chaos of the Plague Years. Countless thousands of people fled from each new outbreak, migrating here and there across the continent. War, rebellion, and brigandage reigned unchecked. Mad prophets walked the world, preaching that the Spellplague was the wrath of this god or that and demanding repentance, sacrifice, or holy war in atonement. Anarchy descended over most kingdoms and lasted for a generation or more before some semblance of authority was reestablished. The world that emerged from the Plague Years was not the same Faerûn.

The Sword Coast

The Spellplague left the cities of the Sword Coast almost unscathed. Perhaps it was attenuated by the lingering high magic of ancient Illefarn, perhaps it was deflected by the efforts of mighty heroes, or perhaps sheer chance steered the magical contagion away from the Sea of Swords; however it happened, the Sword Coast looks much as it did a hundred years ago.

In Waterdeep the great walking statues hidden within the city arose for a single day and wrecked several wards, only to suddenly halt where they stood when the Spellplague's influence retreated again. To this day the towering colossi remain standing where they were at that moment, while the city has been rebuilt around their stony waists. Waterdeep is still governed by its Lords, advised by the Blackstaff—the most powerful mage of Blackstaff Tower, heir to the lore of the mighty Khelben. The city remains a hub of trade and commerce; all roads lead to Waterdeep, or so it is said.

To the south, the city of Baldur's Gate became a refuge for countless thousands fleeing the ruin wrought by the Spellplague in the lands south of the Sea of Fallen Stars. Where other cities and lands turned away such refugees, Baldur's Gate tolerated them... and now, almost a century later, it is the largest city in Faerûn, sprawling for mile after mile along the banks of the Chionthar. Each group of refugees created their own neighborhood under the walls of the previous immigrants' districts, and the city is a mad patchwork of crowded neighborhoods, each dominated by a single race or human ethnicity such as dwarf, halfling, gnome, Turmic, or Shaaran.

Across the Sea of Swords, the Moonshaes have fallen into a patchwork of small kingdoms. Caer Calidyr still stands as the chief kingdom of the native Moonshavians (the Ffolk), but over the last century the powerful mainland realm of Amn has set its sights on this land. Amnite merchant-lords control much of the large island of Gwynneth, while the warlike Northlanders hold Oman and Norland. The Feywild, the realm of Faerie, lies close to Faerûn here, and from its shadows a dire new threat is gathering—the terrible fomorians, who dream of sweeping away the human kingdoms and subjugating the islands beneath their mighty fists.

The Empire of Netheril

Between the North and the Moonsea Lands lies a land under the dominion of shadow. The reborn Empire of Netheril now lies in the basin that once held the desert Anauroch. The new Netheril claims all of the lands that ancient Netheril once occupied, and seeks to dominate Faerûn just as ancient Netheril did twenty centuries ago. Much of Anauroch's vast basin is still desolate wasteland, but the lords of Netheril have spent decades weaving mighty spells to summon water to the parched lands and fill the empty skies with rain. Slowly but surely, grassland grows over the dunes, and young forests cover the stony barrens.

Netheril is a magical tyranny, governed by a noble caste of shades—powerful human mages and lords who have exchanged their mortal essences for the stuff of shadow. Beneath the shade lords are the citizens of Shade, the ancient city-state that fled into the plane of Shadow when the old empire fell and survived many centuries in dark exile. They are a race of ambitious and masterful humans who strive to advance the power of their realm, hoping to earn the reward of transformation into undying shades themselves. When folk of other lands refer to “the Netherese,” they mean the people of Shade, both human and shadow-transformed.

Decades ago, the Netherese subjugated the nomads of Anauroch and many of the savage humanoid tribes inhabiting the desert. More importantly, the Netherese seized control of the wealthy nation of Sembia in the Twilight War just before the advent of the Spellplague, and they have not relinquished it since. Sembia is the crown jewel of the Empire of Netheril, and provides the Netherese with the wealth and manpower they need to bring more of Faerûn under their control. Only the fragile alliance of Myth Drannor, Cormyr, Evereska, and Luruar checks Netheril's further expansion... and Netherese diplomats and agents work constantly to break the alliance apart.

While Netheril claims all of Anauroch and the neighboring lands, the Netherese are still few in number, and great portions of this desolate land are left to ruins and monsters. The ruined cities of old Netheril and the Underdark caverns of the monstrous phaerimm (now all but extirpated from the Realms) hold many secrets the shades want to remain hidden, and ancient treasures they seek desperately to recover.

Imperial Cormyr

Cormyr is a strong, stable kingdom that has benefited from back-to-back reigns by very capable monarchs. Azoun V, born in the troubling times at the end of his grandfather's reign, went on to become a just, wise, and long-lived ruler. Under his rule Cormyr quickly recovered from the chaos of the Plague Years. Azoun V successfully resisted Netheril's efforts to bring Cormyr under its dominion, and he fought Netherese-sponsored Sembia to a stalemate in a war 40 years ago, preserving Cormyr from Sembia's fate. Late in his reign, Azoun V enacted a new code of laws that restrained the power of Cormyr's restless nobility and established rights for commoners oppressed by nobles. His son Foril is now king of Cormyr.

Foril has ruled for 30 years now, and while he is not the legendary warrior his great-grandfather was or the brilliant law-giver his father was, he is a shrewd statesman and administrator. Foril continued his father's reforms, and authored the alliance of powers that keeps Netheril at bay. Standing between Sembia and Netheril, Cormyr's best security lies in firm alliance with Myth Drannor and the Dalelands. Cormyr is wealthier and more powerful than it's been in centuries, largely due to the foresight and determination of the Obarskys.

Cormyr now controls Daerlun and Urmlaspyr, two formerly Sembian cities that managed to break away from that realm before the Netherese yoke settled completely over them. During the chaos of the Spellplague and the years that followed, the small cities on the southern shore of the Dragonmere turned to Cormyr for protection. Only ten years ago, the thief-ruled city of Proskur proved so obnoxious to the Forest Kingdom's growing trade and prosperity that King Foril brought it under Cormyr's authority as well. Not all of these territories are content under Cormyrean rule.

Adventurers in the service of the Crown find plenty of excitement in the Stonelands, the Tunlands, and the Stormhorns, where various monsters and savage tribes (some secretly sponsored by Netheril) cause no small amount of trouble.

Tymanther, Land of the Dragon Warriors

Along the shore of the Alamber Sea, old Unther was swept away by a catastrophic outbreak of the Spellplague. Where once ancient Unther stood now stands an arid mesa-land inhabited by draconic humanoids calling themselves dragonborn. This is the realm of Tymanther. The dragonborn have proven to be a proud, martial

race, and in the decades since the Year of Blue Fire they have slowly tamed the ruined changeland from the Riders to the Sky all the way to the Black Ash Plain.

Some say that the dragonborn are creations of Tiamat, hatched from vast incubators hidden beneath temples of the dragon-goddess in the cities of Unther. Others believe that the dragonborn are descended from the human population of the old empire, changed by the touch of the Spellplague into something no longer human. But the truth of the matter is even stranger: As it did in many other places in Faerûn, the Spellplague opened the door to some other realm entirely, wrenching the aeries and castles of the dragonborn from their native land—wherever that once was—and depositing them amid the chaos of devastated Unther.

The dragonborn of Tymanther are highly militarized, and the “lords” of the land are those dragonborn who have proven themselves capable of leading their fellows. It is a harsh and unforgiving meritocracy, and each of the kingdom’s great clans is organized more like an army than a noble house. In the world from which they came, the dragonborn fought many terrible wars against true dragons, and they still harbor an ancestral hate for the winged wyrms.

Tymanther lies atop the rubble of ancient Unther, and Untheric ruins are common throughout the land. Even in its decline, Unther was a rich and populous land, and many palaces and treasure vaults of the God-King’s favorites still wait to be discovered. In other places, broken cities carried into Faerûn from Tymanther’s appearance are likewise storehouses of gold, gems, and magical artifacts. Unfortunately, many powerful monsters settled into these Untheric and Tymantheran ruins during the Plague Years, and still pose a deadly threat to those who delve too deeply.

The Changed World

This brief discussion touches on only a few of Faerûn’s myriad kingdoms and peoples. It’s a quick sketch of how a century has changed several familiar lands, and a look at one new land that has arisen during that time. Many of Faerûn’s most iconic locales are still what they were a century ago; wood elves still roam the High Forest, and pirates still sail the Sea of Fallen Stars. Other places such as Unther have changed drastically, as described above. But above all Faerûn remains a land of high magic, terrifying monsters, ancient ruins, and hidden wonders—the essential fantasy world for your players to explore.

In upcoming previews, we’ll take a more thorough look at other aspects of the new Faerûn—the fate of the Chosen, the nature of the pantheon, how magic has changed in the world, and an introduction to some of the new threats that now menace Faerûn. Good fortune and good adventuring until next time!

About the Author

A former officer in the US Navy, **Rich Baker** has been a game designer since 1991. He has written or contributed to more than 70 game products, including 3rd Edition **Dungeons & Dragons** and **Axis & Allies Miniatures**. He is also the author of eight *Forgotten Realms* novels, including the New York Times bestseller *Condemnation*.

Rich married his college sweetheart, Kim, in 1991; they have two daughters, Alex and Hannah. Rich’s interests include Golden Age SF, military history, hiking in the Cascades, wargaming, and the Philadelphia Phillies.