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Dragon Kings

by Timothy B. Brown

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DRAGON KINGS



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Foreword

As I put the finishing touches to this volume, it occurs to me that it has been more than two years since design on the DARK SUN™ campaign began in earnest. For two years, pretty much every day saw a new idea pop up, another fall by the wayside, and a dozen questions get answered. In this book, I'm committing to paper the last of the original concepts we envisioned so long ago. For Athas, it is the end of the beginning.

But where is the DARK SUN setting going, and how does this book fit into that scheme?

The overriding design philosophy for support products is simple: concentrated campaign development. If you're waiting for maps of the entire world of Athas, or campaign supplements that take us to the far side of the Sea of Silt and beyond, don't hold your breath, 'cause they're not coming. Not for a while. We're concentrating on what's in the boxed set: the Tyr Region and its seven city-states. We've barely touched that plot of sand, game development-wise, and it will take quite a while to fill it up with slave tribes, merchant houses, elven raiders, and more. The DARK SUN campaign's future is bright, but for now it's strictly bounded within the existing campaign map.

Then why a hardbound rules book devoted to higher-level characters? *Dragon Kings* serves two purposes—one obvious, one not.

First, *Dragon Kings* lets characters advance as high as 30th level in all classes. They get wondrous new abilities, possibly even new bodies, when they reach such heights of experience. We originated all these concepts early on in the design of the DARK SUN universe, but we kept them out of the original rules for two reasons. First, they wouldn't all fit. Second, we didn't want to give away the secrets revealed in the first DARK SUN novel, *The Verdant Passage*. (If you haven't read the novel yet, be warned that this book spoils its surprises!)

The second, less obvious reason to present rules for the highest-level characters is rooted in overall campaign development. I'm a firm believer that the

macro-forces of a campaign world should set the tone for even the lowliest adventures—sort of a “trickle-down” theory, if you will. In a science-fiction world, the ambitions of powerful corporations, star-spanning empires, and malevolent alien races set the stage for adventure. In the DARK SUN world, the sorcerer-kings, advanced beings, and other powerful characters set the tone. Characters beyond 20th level are the movers and shakers of Athas—their every move leaves a wake of adventure possibilities. To present a plausible DARK SUN campaign, a DM must understand that world's most influential NPCs and their incredible powers.

Why more powerful magic? Well, why not! Massive spells can help drive a campaign just as easily as powerful characters. I think of fantasy novels I've read that are centered on the casting of a single, incredible magical spell, one that takes years to prepare and wipes out entire cities or nations. Whole adventures can revolve around casting such magic or preventing its casting.

The existing 9th-level AD&D® game wizard spells do the same old stuff, just bigger and better: They protect the wizard from being killed by a bigger monster. To me, it's just not epic. Casting a spell that erases a mountain range—now that's magic!

Do I expect lots of DARK SUN campaigns to become high-level campaigns? Do I want player characters unleashing 10th-level spells at one another as soon as they open this book?

No. But I do expect players to have something more to strive for, and I expect DMs to have everything they need to evolve a complete array of powerful NPCs for their little corner of Athas.

Obviously, use of player characters who have advanced beyond 20th level dictates a somewhat different role-playing style. These characters are usually people of great reputation who have many fantastic accomplishments to their credit and can challenge any foe or situation. More mundane adventures, such as searching for small treasures or taking jobs as mercenaries, become less important to the mega-characters.



Their attentions should instead turn to more city- or region-sweeping epics, such as the search for lost ancient civilizations, struggles between large armies or nations, or quests for lost magical knowledge that can win a throne! Encourage high-level characters to use their talents toward lofty ends—what's the point of advancing to 25th level if all you're going to do is pen scrolls all day?

Note, though, that in the DARK SUN™ world, no one gains fantastic levels anonymously. In the FORGOTTEN REALMS® campaign setting, a wizard might go from 20th to 30th level and hardly be noticed by the general populace, but I wanted something different for Athas.

No DARK SUN world character can escape the consequences of superior experience. With the exception of the rogues, high-level characters become victims of their own success. Fighters find themselves heading huge armies, like it or not. Fledgling dragons and avangions have nothing but enemies, and psionics must either join an exclusive organization or be hunted by it. In terms of game balance, is this fair? Given that each class has unique advantages, it all evens out in the end. And if not, well, nothing on Athas is particularly fair!

It has been a massive undertaking. I thank Zeb Cook, William W. Connors, and J. Robert King for their valuable input, and Troy Denning and James Lowder for literary advice. Thanks also to Jim Ward for his assistance and to Allen Varney for his editorial expertise.

Let the games begin!

Timothy B. Brown
January, 1992

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Legends of Athas

Athas has no gods, but despite this—or perhaps because of it—it has legends and myths aplenty. Every village, oasis, and city-state neighborhood spawns its collection of tales. Most carry valuable lessons for survival, such as ways to survive with little water or avoid predators. Some, propagated by the templars, give instruction in polite conduct. Many more, whispered in secret, tell how a hero gained revenge against a templar or sorcerer-king.

A few legends are even funny, for when not struggling to survive, every Athasian enjoys laughter. The humor, though, is almost always cruel, a jest at the expense of some detested rival race or class.

Some typical legends follow.

The Drunken Half-Giant

In a village south of Raam lived a half-giant named Junnai, a youth of great size whose sole love was ale. His fellows knew him as a drunkard. But the pleasant half-giant pulled his weight in a fight, so no one bothered him about his constant inebriation—no one but his brother, Trundai.

“Stop your drunken ways, brother,” Trundai said.

But Junnai replied, “I drink two tankards of ale at the inn every evening, brother. And I shall do so until the inn runs dry!”

“Then at least cut down, dear brother, and drink but one this evening,” Trundai suggested. Out of love for his brother, Junnai agreed. That evening he drank just one tankard of his beloved ale before heading home.

But when an elven runner found Junnai sitting, sobbing along the road back to his village, he stopped briefly to enquire. “Normally I can find my way by taking the middle road of the three blurry roads I see,” Junnai said. “But this evening I drank but one tankard of ale, so I see only two fuzzy roads before me.”

“I see,” said the elf. “I can help you see the third road, friend. Here, drink this.” The elf handed

Junnai a bottle of brew. The half-giant quickly and gratefully downed the elf’s gift, squinted along his path, and continued home.

The next morning, Trundai searched for the missing Junnai. He found him face down on the road, poisoned, his possessions stolen, the tracks of an elf all around.

Drake and Maiden

Outside Makla village stands a temple ruin, burned during one of many elven attacks. All that remains is the charred statue of the small sect’s founder. Worshippers abandoned the temple, all save one, an old man of great wisdom. When he died, his daughter continued to visit the temple daily out of respect for her father.

One day, as she visited the temple, a great sandstorm blew up. Hating to see the statue damaged further, she wrapped her own shawl around it while waiting out the storm. A drake happened by, and (as this was back in the days when drakes were quite intelligent and polite) he stopped to observe.

When the storm let up, he inquired of the daughter, “Damsel, why do you give your own robes to the image, an image of simple stone, that cannot feel the sting of airborne sands?”

The daughter was startled but composed herself before replying. “If it were but stone, mighty drake, then how could it answer my prayers and those of my father?”

Never had the drake heard such wisdom, not even from the spirits that counseled it. The drake returned often to visit the daughter on her daily trips, and in time came to love her. So taken was he that he sought out a wizard to alter his form. Then he went to visit the daughter as a human.

The daughter shared his love, and the two founded a village of their own beyond the mountains. Their offspring, it is said, share the wisdom of their mother and the ferocious strength of their father. To this day, any child who displays both attributes is



often termed a “drake’s child.”

Arkhold’s Devastation

The dwarves of Balic say the ruins of Arkhold were once a farming village. Its troubles started in a Year of Priest’s Vengeance, when Thorlin, a ruler of uncommon power and cruelty, claimed to hear “the high voices from the moons.” He said the two moons, Rul and Guthay, commanded him to visit them and receive their wisdom.

Thorlin flew into the sky with a magical device of some kind—variously, a jozhal-drawn chariot, a net carried by air elementals, or (one of the most bizarre touches in Athasian mythology) a spoon. He returned a year later with “a wild and burning eye.”

Thorlin urged the villagers to burn their crops in great bonfires, then sacrifice all livestock. This, he said, would bring prosperity to the village. So it was done.

After the devastating famine that followed, survi-

vors left for all parts of Athas. Nothing remains of the village of Arkhold except ruins. So say the dwarves.

Uncle Tontor: A Wyrm’s Tale

Elf merchants around the Lost Oasis believe (or claim to believe) that no one has ever seen young or small silk wyrms. No one, they say, has ever seen them breed or reproduce, despite repeated (usually fatal) attempts. The mystery has prompted many tales. One concerns Old Uncle Tontor, a mythical old human known for nosiness about other people’s affairs. As the elves tell it, Tontor grew curious to learn how silk wyrms reproduce. None too bright, he tried to disguise himself as one, dyeing his skin green and wearing limp cloth wings. Then he crept out to “a fearsome deep cavern” where wyrms roosted.

Uncle Tontor entered the cavern, trying as far as possible to look and sound like a wyrm. His bum-

