

DAVE ARNESON'S
BLACKMOOR™

**SON OF FLAME,
SON OF HAK
BY
HARLEY STROH**

PART ONE



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SON OF FLAME, SON OF HAK

PART I

The night wind cut like an arrow across the high prairie, but inside the tent the air was hot and thick with the smoke of dung fires. Fierce warriors, Peshwah raiders, sat shoulder to shoulder atop felted mats, drinking fermented grazer milk and tearing at skewers of roasted meat. Girded in armor of boiled leather and iron rings, their faces burnt from the sun and endless wind, they laughed with the abandon of wanted men. Twenty-seven winters ago invading Afridhi hordes had driven the peaceful Peshwah from their homelands. Now the herders returned as warriors, with scimitar and bow in hand, united in their thirst for vengeance.

A solemn grey-beard, Leado of the Adiel, raised his bow and brought the crowd to silence with a single phrase.

“Afridhi war bands have returned,” he declared. “Death stalks the High Hak.”

He waited for the whispers and furious oaths to pass.

“Peshwah no Trika, tell us what you’ve learned.” A wind-hardened scout stepped to the Leado’s side. “Outriders came across Afridhi supply trains this morning. I estimate five hundred reavers, if not more. They’ve built their marching camp at the foot of the Wyvern hills, not half a day’s ride from here.”

“What could they want?” one warrior demanded. “Have the invasions begun again?”

“We cannot know the answers to these questions,” the Leado said in measured tones.

“Call forth riders from the Twelve Tribes!” another man shouted. “Let us bury them beneath the Hak!”

The Leado shook his head. “My heart burns for revenge as much as any Peshwah, but our numbers are few and we cannot choose our battles so lightly.

“No,” the grey-beard concluded. “For now we must cede the day and save our strength. Trika, are all the families accounted for?”

“Only one is missing, Leado.”

“Who?” the grey-beard demanded. “Who is so high as to ignore the summons?”

“Your son,” Trika answered softly, “Peshwah no Tasi.”

“My son,” the Leado scoffed, his lips curled in anger, “is a worthless liar and a thief, but he is no Peshwah.”

The Leado spat on the hard packed floor. “Gather your herds and families. We ride before moonrise.”

Tasi dropped from the back of his horse and knelt in the tall prairie grass. His mare had scented blood early in the night, and now she tossed her head with nervous fear. Tasi scanned the darkness with eager eyes. Was it a cougar or a lion? Perhaps a war-party of goblins down from the Kerman Peaks. Soon the moon would rise and then he would find whatever it was that had spooked his horse and threatened the Hak. He’d bring back its hide as a trophy and cast it on the ground before his clansmen. Perhaps then his father would finally give Tasi the praise he awarded others so freely.

The young Peshwah tied his horse off on the stump of a fallen pine, and slid his bow from its case, hanging the fur-trimmed quiver over his shoulder. Silent as a mouse, he threaded his way through the boulders to the top of the rise.

Among his people, the ridge was called the Dragon Cairns. Years ago, before the Afridhi had chased them from the Hak, Peshwah had gathered here to hunt young drakes, making the plains safe for their herds of grazers. The herders made certain to respect the dragons, and built pyramids of rocks atop the ridge to appease the spirits of the fallen drakes.

The crest of the ridge was bare, except for the cairns and a handful of stunted oaks, bent from the constant wind. Below him, the High Hak stretched for mile after mile, rolling like an ocean of grass capped by dark, rocky ridges.

Tasi's heart nearly stopped. To the north massive campfires danced and shone in the night. Unlike the loose camps built by the Peshwah, these campfires were laid out in perfect rows, like an advancing army of flames.

The young Peshwah leaped to his feet and sprinted back down the ridge, forsaking stealth for speed. He had to get back to camp and warn the tribe that the Afridhi invaders had returned.

And then a silent shadow eclipsed the rising moon, cutting a swath of darkness through the night.

* * * * *

The macabre war-banner rested atop the hard-packed mound, its red flames and gouts of black smoke visible for miles in every direction. The towering beams were carved from the trunks of a mighty redwood, the flapping banners sewn from the skins of flayed elves, and one hundred Peshwah scalps danced in the wind from the crossbeams. But most terrible of all was the open-jawed elephant skull adorning the peak of the banner; arcane flames, fed by the fat of slaves, danced fiercely within the skull, shining through the wide eye sockets and broken cranium. A fiery totem of death and despair, the banner signaled terror to all who beheld it.

Suth-Kali, high priestess of Zugzul, knelt before the mighty banner and raised her bare arms in exultation. In one hand she held an obsidian dagger, in the other a human heart wet with gore.

“Mighty Toska Rusa, Mother Destroyer, grant me your vision so that I might know the will of our Master.”

Suth-Kali plunged the dagger into the heart and the organ burst into smoldering flames. The priestess ignored the burning heat and inhaled the black smoke, savoring the pain as the fumes scalded her lungs. Through the fire she saw a vision of the Mother Destroyer, sitting in a dark throne high atop a mountain of piled skulls. Behind her rose an even greater throne, but Suth-Kali quickly turned her eyes away. Many were the fools that sought to look upon Zugzul, the Heart of Darkness and Fire, and all had had their souls seared to ash.

“Speak, child.”

“I have led my army to the Hak,” Suth-Kali declared, “and it is as you have foretold. The Horseclans return to the plains. Each day their stinking herds sprawl further onto the Hak.”

“Ours are the mightiest armies of the world.” Suth-Kali thought she detected amusement in the Mother Destroyer's voice. “Can you not defeat a band of wastrel nomads?”

“Defeating the Horseclans is easy, conquering them impossible,” Suth-Kali swore. “They fight like fleas. Swat one tribe and another dozen spring up.”

“The spirit of their fallen god fills them with false-courage.”

“Then how?” Suth-Kali asked bitterly.

“When Lord Hadeen fell from the heavens, he cast his Bow across the plains. Even now the Peshwah search for his mighty weapon. Capture the Bow of Hadeen, and you will break the spine of the Horseclans.”

“Your will shall be done, Mother Destroyer.”

“I have seen the future, Toska Rusa warned. The thread of your life is snarled and frayed. Fail to capture the Bow, and the thread shall tear, a new one woven in its place.” Behind the Mother Destroyer, the throne of Zugzul flared brightly. Suth-Kali felt a rush of heat that scorched her eyebrows and stung her skin. The priestess leaped away from the war-banner and the vision fled, replaced by a cloud of quickly dissipating smoke.

Suth-Kali rubbed the soot from her singed face, musing on the Mother Destroyer's prophecy. Slowly her pride returned, and with it the priestess' indomitable determination. Suth-Kali laughed in the dark night. She and her army had witnessed the fall of the Goblin Kush. They had smashed the armies of Ten and laid waste to the mighty Vales. Her war-banner had ridden at the head of the armies they stormed the walls of Rusagern, and its fires would rule the High Hak, even if she had to personally cut down every last nomad.

All that stood in her way were a few nomad tribes.

The Bow of Hadeen? With such an artifact she could rule the North.

Suth-Kali stood and called for her generals. Before the night was over the Peshwah would regret ever returning to the High Hak.

* * * * *

The dragon streaked through the darkness like a lance hurled from heaven. Tasi's mare didn't even have the time to start before the dragon crashed down atop it, seizing the horse with a snap of its enormous maw. The drake tossed the horse into the air, flipping it end over end. For a moment Tasi's anger overcame his terror. His hand mechanically felt for his quiver, nocking a long black arrow and drawing on the serpentine form.

The dragon tracked the horse's path through the night sky, then lashed out with a single extended claw. The horse struck the ground, splitting open from belly to throat. The long drake settled over the steaming organs, picking through the corpse like a bored fisherman gutting a salmon.

The arrow slipped from Tasi's bow, his anger replaced by awe and dread. Some unconscious knowledge, buried in his bones, rose into understanding:

To tempt a dragon was madness.

No shield could check its mighty blows; no armor could annul its wicked fangs. Taut muscles rippled the length of its shimmering, serpentine form, and the drake's bulk alone could crush two-score men. To watch it move through the night was like witnessing a force of nature, absolutely indifferent to the finite concerns of man.

Tasi's arrow clattered softly to the bare rock and the dragon's head snapped to attention. Without waiting Tasi sprang away into the darkness, spilling and stumbling down the rocky slope. The dragon was already in motion, leathery wings beating with the force of a gale. Before Tasi had covered a dozen steps, the wyrm rounded the ridge, scouring him with sand and rocks. Tasi lost his footing, spilling to the ground and sliding helplessly towards a cliff edge. A single massive talon struck the rock before him, arresting his slide.

The pitted nail was encrusted with blood and the black tar of time. As long as a spear, as thick as a stallion's neck, and sharper than any blade honed by dwarf or elf, the claw glistened wetly in the moonlight.

"Jump, manling," the dragon hissed softly. "Leap to your death – if you have the courage."

The dragon fixed a single bottomless orb on Tasi. "Thought you to run? To hide? To call up your armies and smite me from the evening skies? Have your people dismissed the legends of Deumat? I have leveled cities for my pleasure. I hear every whisper uttered on the plains, I witness all that transpires in my domain." The dragon cocked its massive head. "You, who once called me Scourge of the Plains, have you so quickly forgotten?"

Tasi lay perfectly still. "Forgive me, great wyrm, but my people tell no such tales. Even I," he swallowed hard, "greatest of all the northern skalds, and speaker for the Barons of Blackmoor, have never trembled at your name. We are a short-lived race, and legends have a certain way of fading—"

Deumat lifted its head to the skies and roared, causing the very rocks beneath them to tremble. The sharp talon tore free from the cliff's edge and caught up Tasi by the tunic.

"Run, little mouse. Tell your people that Deumat has awoken from his torpor of a hundred years, and that they will answer for their neglectful ways. Tell them I will brand the memory of my might into the heart of every child. Tell them that for every legend lost, for every myth forgotten, I will tutor them tenfold."

The dragon reared up, blotting out the moon, and cast the Peshwah down the steep ridge.

Tasi bounced and rolled down the slope, finally sliding to a stop. It took him a moment to realize the truth: he was free!

Tasi leaped to his feet like a rabbit freed from the jaws of a wolf, sprinting toward freedom. He ran across the rolling hillsides, his lungs burning with exhaustion, until he collapsed in the tall grass, his sides splitting with laughter.

He had lied. He had lied to a dragon and lived! Tasi thought back to his father and all the ceaseless tales of Peshwah honesty – how wrong they were! Tasi rolled back into the soft grass, reveling in the light of the moon and the brush of the cool night air on his skin.

In the distance, mournful Peshwah horns called across the hills. Tasi climbed to his feet. The clan was on the move. With luck he would be with them in an hour, and then he could leave this nightmare behind.

Tasi started off again, then tumbled forward as a dozen tiny barbs snared his leg. He pitched forward and a net closed in around him. Tasi gave a cry and tried to roll over but only succeeded in snaring himself deeper in the folds of hooks and braided twine.

A war net! Tasi swore aloud in frustration. In his terror of the dragon he had forgotten about the Afridhi war camp! Their warriors must be somewhere nearby, and it might be only moments before they returned.

Tasi drove his hand toward his dagger, tearing jagged lines across the flesh of his forearm and wrist. Swallowing back the tears, he eased the long blade from its sheath and began to saw through the oily threads. As he worked, his eyes searched the darkness, wary of the hunters that had set the trap.

Hands slick with blood, Tasi worked one arm free and then the other. With every move, the barbs bored deeper and deeper into his flesh. Exhausted from his flight from the dragon, bleeding from dozens of wounds cut by the shallow barbs, Tasi wanted nothing more than to surrender, to collapse in the darkness.

But still he worked on, cutting himself free at an agonizingly slow pace. He was nearly free when he heard the combat whistles calling back and forth.

The Afridhi warriors came at him through the darkness, three dark-skinned warriors with flaming red beards. Each was shorter than Tasi by a head, but with powerful limbs born from a life of violence. Their eyes burned beneath leather cowls as their lips curled in savage joy. They were scouts and hunters, wearing shirts of black chainmail, and wielding hook-beaked spears. These warriors, or men like them, had ravaged the plains of the Hak, chasing the peaceful Peshwah their homeland to die by the thousands.

Tasi sprang at the Afridhi with the desperate ferocity of a cornered lion. He swung the net around the head of the first warrior and pulled hard, delighting in the cry of pain as the barbs and hooks tore free, taking patches of flesh with them.

He continued in his charge, ducking past the ungainly spear and slamming into the surprised Afridhi warrior. The two tumbled to the ground, the Afridhi crushing Tasi in a bear hug as the Peshwah plunged the long hunting knife into the Afridhi's legs and groin. Anywhere the chain shirt was not, he drove the knife home, until Tasi felt the iron grip slack and finally break.

Tasi struggled to sit up, dimly aware of the last warrior, when the butt of the spear crashed down on the back of his head, shooting stars through his vision. The second blow caught him in the ribs, knocking Tasi prone. He looked up just in time to see the roaring warrior raise the butt of the spear for a final blow.

Tasi drew back his knife and threw.

The knife spun blade over hilt, burying itself squarely in the Afridhi's throat. Gurgling in agony, helpless to stem the pulsing gouts of blood, the Afridhi dropped to its knees, then fell to the side, dead. Tasi stumbled over to the corpse and eased his knife from the Afridhi's throat. Somewhere in the darkness the last Afridhi thrashed about blindly, but Tasi didn't have the heart to kill him. He was utterly exhausted, every last reserve spent. Even the act of breathing brought shudders of pain.

Why did the Afridhi want to capture him? They seldom took prisoners, and yet, if they had wanted to, the three warriors could have killed him easily. Instead they tried to bring him back alive. Tasi cringed at the thought. For the few prisoners taken during the Afridhi invasions, death was a release.

The gentle keening of a flute drifted through the night air. For a moment Tasi thought he imagined the sweet, soft tones, but they slowly grew stronger. Tasi took up a spear and faced the newcomer.

A slim youth walked towards him through the darkness. What Tasi had mistaken for a flute was the child's voice, clear as any woodwind. The youth was dark skinned and dressed as an Afridhi warrior, but its bare chin and soft face gave no indication to its gender.

“Stand down,” Tasi warned, threatening with the long spear. “I’ve slain three of your kinsmen tonight, and won’t hesitate to make it four.”

The youth smiled, and all illusions of delicacy fled, erased by the leering maw of sharpened teeth set beneath coal-black eyes. Tasi cried out in fear and hurled the spear with all his dying strength. The youth stepped aside as lightly as a cat, drawing inexorably closer. Tasi warded the child off with his knife, fumbling backwards through the night. “I’m warning you—”

The child continued to draw closer. Its calm, dark eyes fixed on Tasi and the child began to sing again, this time in praise of Zugzul. Tasi turned to run, then felt a sharp blow strike his back. His limbs went rigid and the Peshwah tumbled to the ground, stunned. Unable to scream or turn, he felt rather than saw the youth roll him onto his back.

The sweet-faced child stood over Tasi, its head cocked to one side. The child raised a fist to strike again, and the night finally faded to a merciful darkness.

To be Continued in Part Two of Son of Flame, Son of Hak

GAMING SPECIFIC INFORMATION

The following sections give more insight and detail into the people, places and items found in this installment of the serial.

The Dragon Cairns

On the rolling plain of the High Hak there are a series of sharp ridges rising from the sea of grass. Atop these ridges are small pyramids of rock, maintained by Peshwah herders. If queried, the herders will answer that the cairns are sacred, and the Peshwah will do everything in their power to keep them from being disturbed.

The origin of the cairns date back to before the Afridhi invasions, when the Peshwah were so numerous they were called “the people of the thousand tribes.” Every year the tribes would gather in celebration of Camberi, and eager young warriors would form hunting parties, intent on clearing dragons from their ancestral lands. When a young dragon was found and brought down, it was a cause for great celebration and feasting, an omen of prosperity for the year to come.

But Peshwah never take their hunts lightly. After every kill a cairn was built atop the ridge to appease the spirit of the fallen dragon, and to mark the passing of its reign. Peshwah legend tells of terrible curses that fall upon those that upset the dragon spirits. Whether there is truth to these claims—or if they are only the superstitions of savage nomads—remains to be seen. Cabalist wizards have detected intense auras of magic in and around the cairns, but to date no mage has succeeded in staying near the Dragon Cairns long enough to determine their source. Presently sixty-six cairns stand atop the ridges of the High Hak, and woe to any outsider that is caught disturbing or investigating the cairns.

The Dragon Cairns are home to more than just one mystery. By killing off generations of younger dragons, the Peshwah made it easy for the older, more sophisticated dragons to make their homes on the high plains. With no competition, the elder wyrms grew in majesty and wisdom, and to this day an unusual number of very powerful wyrms make their home on the Hak and High Hak. It is whispered that a handful of good dragons were responsible for imparting the ways of the Dragon Knight to riders of the Leron Peshwah tribes, and that these venerable wyrms hailed from the Hak.

Recent Afridhi invasions have disturbed the dragons, and it remains to be seen if the wyrms favor one side of the conflict, or if they simply lay waste to all. And with the absence of Peshwah hunters during the last thirty years, a generation of drakes are nearing young adulthood, ferociously determined not to die like those before them.

One of the most powerful of the wyrms is Deumat, an ancient black that makes his home in dank caverns beneath the Dragon Cairns. Arrogant and prideful in the extreme, Deumat regards the entire Hak as his personal hunting ground. Thankfully the ancient wyrm is prone to long periods of rest, during which he sleeps away entire centuries. When he is angered, however, armies, cities, and entire nations fall before his wrath.

Deumat (Ancient Black Dragon):

CR 19; Huge Dragon (Water); HD 31d12+186; hp 431; Init +4; Spd 60 ft., fly 150 ft. (poor), swim 60 ft.; Space/Reach 15 ft./10 ft. (15 ft. with bite); AC 38, touch 8, flat-footed 38; Base Atk +31; Grp +50; Atk Bite +40 melee (2d8+11) or Claw +40 melee (2d6+5) or Wing +40 melee (1d8+5) or Tail Slap +40 melee (2d6+16) or Crush +40 melee (2d8+16); Full Atk +40/+35/+30/+25 melee (-5 secondary, -2 Multiattack); SA Breath Weapon (20d4/DC 31), Corrupt Water, Crush, Darkness, Insect Plague, Plant Growth, Spells (Caster level 11th); SQ Blindsight, Damage Resistance 15/magic, Frightful Presence (DC 28), Immunities (Acid/Paralysis/Sleep), Keen Senses, Spell Resistance (25), Water Breathing; AL Chaotic Evil; SV Fort +23, Ref +17, Will +20; Str 33, Dex 10, Con 23, Int 16, Wis 17, Cha 16.

Skills and Feats: Appraise +19, Bluff +29, Concentration +27, Hide +30, Intimidate +23, Knowledge (geography) +37, Knowledge (history) +34, Listen +38, Move Silently +27, Search +33, Spot +38; Alertness, Blind Fight, Cleave, Flyby Attack, Improved Initiative, Infamy (Afridhi), Infamy (Peshwah), Power Attack, Snatch, Weapon Focus (bite), Weapon Focus (claw).

Spell-Like Abilities: 3/day-darkness (radius 100 ft.), insect plague; 1/day-plant growth.

Sorcerer Spells Known: (6/7/7/7/6/4; base DC = 13 + spell level): 0-breeze, detect magic, detect poison, elemental globe, flare, ray of dust, read magic, resistance, shrapnel; 1st-charm person, hypnotism, mage armor, obscuring mist, true strike, ; 2nd-blur, coyote's dirge, mustang's speed, protection from arrows, summon swarm; 3rd-clairaudience, elemental ball, haste, nondetection, ; 4th-scrying, spell turning (lesser), stonewall ; 5th-cloud kill, teleport.

The Sons of Flame

The success of the Afridhi invasions cemented Toska Rusa's control of the Afridhi nation. To reward her successful generals, the Mother Destroyer selects the finest specimens of young, Afridhi males to serve as servants to her loyal Handmaidens. In dark ceremonies hidden beneath the craggy mountains of the Goblin Kush, the boys' young minds are indoctrinated in the ways of Zugzul, while their bodies are mutilated, seared and scarred.

The eunuchs that emerge from the caverns of the Goblin Kush are deadly in the arts of combat and loyal to the death. Each is assigned to a Handmaiden that he serves for the remainder of his life. Their loyalty resembles nothing so much as a dark love, perverted to violent ends.



The Sons of Flame are always slender, young Afridhi men. Each bears the mark of flame on his chest, above the unique brand of his Handmaiden mistress. Often the Sons file their teeth or engage in ritual scarring, in a ceaseless effort to prove their loyalty. Each Son reflects the unique madness of his assigned Handmaiden but one trait is universal among their dark brotherhood: unquestioning loyalty and unrivaled martial skill.

Using Sons of Flame in your game:

Despite their youth, Sons of Flame often possess unexpected skills that can catch PCs off guard. Sons of Flame are brutal and direct in combat, and attempts to parlay with them always fail. A Son's single guiding star is his mistress: he will obey every order to the death, and if his mistress is ever slain the Son will go to any length to avenge her.

Sons of Flame emerge from the caverns of the Goblin Kush with one to three levels in Monk. Levels, skills and feats learned after a Son's initial training depend entirely upon the mistress he is assigned to. Those sent to the front lines of battle quickly acquire levels in Fighter and Cleric, while those serving Handmaidens immersed labyrinthine Afridhi politics often learn the skills of the Rogue and Assassin.

Zanjin, Son of Flame

Zanjin has served Suth-Kali for five years and three military campaigns. Devoted bodyguard, messenger, and assassin to the Handmaiden, there are no secrets between Suth-Kali and Zanjin, save one: Zanjin's ardent love for the Handmaiden.

Love between a Handmaiden and a Son of Flame is not unusual, but Zanjin refuses to acknowledge the emotion, fearing that it might compromise his ability to defend Suth-Kali from every danger, and so it remains undeclared. For Suth-Kali's part, the Handmaiden loves only power and her own advancement.

Zanjin's love does not make him any less of a merciless killer. The Afridhi has devoted himself to the study of the human as prey, and used this learning to great effect during the Afridhi-Blackmoor Wars, spreading death and terror behind enemy lines.

Like all Sons of Flame, Zanjin is deceptively slender and lithe. His small frame disguises a deadly foe willing to exploit his foes' every weakness. Zanjin's teeth are sharpened into disconcerting fangs; his smile is usually opponents' first and last warning the childlike Afridhi is more than he appears. The eunuch is prone to keening when he hunts, an unearthly mix of singing and whistling through his sharpened fangs.

Zanjin fights with a pair of magical Afridhi halfblades, cleaver-like weapons that were a gift from his mistress. He also bears a black spidersilk cloak that he looted from the corpse of a fallen Peshwah Leado. Zanjin delights in taking the scalps of his foes, and in camp he wears a belt of trophies woven from Peshwah hair.

Zanjin, male Afridhi Mnk3/Ran2: CR 5; Medium Human (5 ft. 2 in.); HD 3d8+2d8; hp 31; Init +7; Spd 40ft.; AC 16, touch 16, flat-footed 13; Atk +7 melee (1D4+4/x2, afridhi halfblade +1); Full Attack +5/+5 melee (1D4+4/x2, afridhi halfblade +1); SA Flurry of Blows; SQ wis mod to ac, stunning blow, flurry of blows, unarmed strike, deflect arrows, evasion, still mind, favored enemy(humans), track, wild empathy, combat style (two-weapon fighting); AL LE; SV Fort +6, Ref +9, Will +6; Str 14, Dex 16, Con 11, Int 12, Wis 16, Cha 9.

Skills and Feats: Balance +5, Climb +4, Disguise +3, Escape Artist +5, Hide +10, Knowledge (religion) +4, Listen +7, Move Silently +10, Perform +2, Search +5, Sense Motive +5, Spot +7, Survival +7; Improved Initiative, Track, Weapon Finesse (halfblade).

Possessions: a pair of matched afridhi halfblades +1, black spidersilk cloak (+4 to hide and move silently checks).

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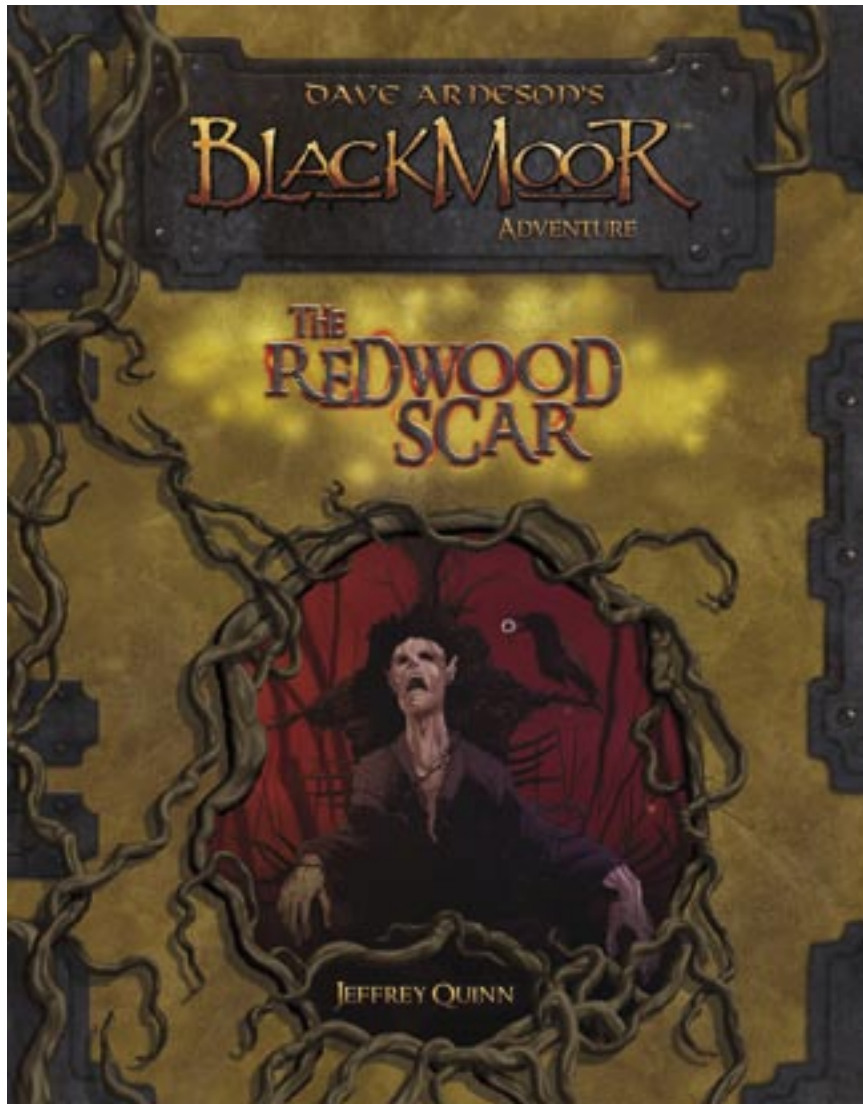
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THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES



A BROODING TERROR LIES IN WAIT

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