

It's time. The sun is just about to set and the beast will be settling down any minute now, weary after its day's rampage.

For five years, the dragon has ruled your home. For five years you've lived in terror and struggled to survive. But tonight you've armed yourself. You've planned your attack. You've accepted that some of you aren't coming back.

You're ready. It's time.

To Stand Before the Dragon's Wrath

(A story game for 3-5 players)

This is a game about people engaged in a battle to free their land from a tyrannical dragon. But it's not a game about knights in a fantasy realm, or epic heroes on a glorious quest. It's a game about you, the players seated around the table right now.

Tomorrow, a dragon will appear, crawling out of the mists of legend and into your town: massive, powerful, and unstoppable. It will topple the buildings you live and work in, tear up the streets you ride on, and kill thousands on that first night: your neighbors, co-workers, or loved ones.

But this game isn't set tomorrow; it's set five years after that. For five years, you will suffer under the dragon's reign, until you finally work up the nerve to take the beast on. You are not a group of trained adventurers, but yourselves: scarred, scared, and five years older.

The Prologue:

You will need three to five players, and a deck of playing cards.

All players except one will be playing themselves, five years from now, on a quest to slay the dragon. The final player will portray the dragon itself. Decide fairly who among you will be the **dragon player**. If necessary, draw cards to decide. Everyone else is a **hero player**.

Dragon player: There's a reason you're playing the dragon, and not one of the party on a quest to slay it: you didn't survive the five years. Not even close; when the dragon arrived you were the very first casualty.

Describe the arrival of the dragon and how you were killed. Go into as much detail as you can; there are many descriptions of dragons in myth and fiction, but which, if any, are accurate? We know that it is huge, cunning, and deadly, but everything beyond that is up to you.

What color is it? Can it fly? Can it breathe fire, or something more exotic? Can it speak, or is it simply a beast of indescribable power? But don't forget the most important detail: you were the dragon's first casualty, so **how did you die?**

Hero players: You survived that first night, and the five years following it, but not without loss. Your quest is certainly brave, yet there is an undercurrent of cowardice: tonight, you are likely to die, and be freed of the horrors the dragon has forced upon you.

One at a time, describe an atrocity that the dragon committed over the five years of its reign. This might be something it did to keep the populace compliant, or an act of mindless destruction, or an act of greed beyond human comprehension. Let the other players know just how monstrous the dragon can be.

You lost something because of this atrocity, something important: a spouse or child, a limb, your freedom, something. **What did you lose?**

Dragon player: You are responsible for the deck of cards. Shuffle it well, and deal one card, face down, in front of each hero.

Most humans are below the dragon's notice, but it has dealt with each of these heroes before. Select any hero, and reveal their card.

If the card is **black**, then that hero has defied the dragon somehow; together, the two of you will narrate a scene in which that hero caused the dragon some minor harm but somehow escaped unpunished. **How did they defy the dragon?** Afterwards, discard the black card and draw a card from the deck into your hand.

If the card is **red**, then that hero has served the dragon in the past. Together, the two of you will narrate a scene in which that hero either took upon a task for the dragon, or gave the dragon something especially valuable. **How did they serve the dragon?** Afterwards add the red card directly to your hand.

Repeat this for each hero. You should wind up with a hand of cards equal to the number of hero players.

The Stages of the Battle:

The quest to slay the dragon will play out in the form of one pitched battle between the heroes and their target.

Hero players: Seize the deck of cards from the dragon player, shuffle it once more, and deal nine cards, face down, in a line.

These nine cards represent nine distinct stages of the heroes' quest to slay the dragon: four stages of preparation, and five of fighting.

Dragon player: At the beginning of each stage, read its description. Then, select one card from the table, and flip it over, to determine which side won that stage.

The nine stages of the battle:

- **Staking out The Dragon's Lair:** Where does the dragon make its home? How well fortified is it? Are there weak points? Consider where you are: the dragon took over your town, so where might it want to stay?
- **Marshaling Our Resources:** What weapons have the heroes managed to acquire? Do they have a military envoy, or a couple rusty swords? Consider the local businesses, museums, or mutual acquaintances with access to interesting weaponry.
- **Monitoring the Dragon:** What was the dragon doing today? When it returned to its lair, was it energized by its rampage, or exhausted by the effort of maintaining its dominion?
- **Embarking on the Journey:** The trip to this battle was not without its dangers; what did the heroes face as they went to the lair? Did the dragons have allies or spawn, or did the heroes encounter reinforcements on their way?
- **The First Strike:** The heroes led off with a surprise attack, catching the dragon unaware! Where did they strike from? What happened?
- **The Long Struggle:** The battle raged well into the night, with the heroes too fast to hit and the dragon too large to hurt! In this battle of attrition, who started to weaken first?
- **A Fighting Retreat:** After a sudden turn in the battle, the heroes tried to escape! What happened? Where did they run to, and how far did they get?
- **Unexpected Reinforcements:** Suddenly, another party came on the scene, ready to turn the battle! But who was it, and who were they here to save?
- **The Last, Killing Blow:** Finally, one side triumphed in a desperate, last-minute maneuver! But which side was it, and how did they eke out their victory?

Red cards mean that the dragon had the advantage. The dragon player will narrate the outcome of that stage in a way that benefits the dragon.

Black cards mean that the heroes had the advantage. The hero players will collectively narrate the outcome, dividing their duties as they see fit.

When the winning side finishes their narration, move to the next stage.

The battle continues until one side has won their fifth stage; this will be the final stage of the battle. The winning side narrates their victory during this stage, being sure to include the destruction of their opposition: either the dragon is slain, or the heroes' quest proves futile.

Dragon player: You have the power of *cunning*. At the beginning of any stage, instead of turning over a card on the table, you may place a red card from your hand on top of it, guaranteeing your success. Once a card has been revealed, you *cannot* play a card from your hand on it.

You also have the power of *rage*. When a **black card** is revealed during a stage, discard any card in your hand, then draw a replacement from the deck. You *do not* use rage when a hero's *sacrifice* reveals a black card.

Hero players: You have the power of *sacrifice*. During any stage, when a red card has been revealed, a hero may sacrifice themselves: draw a new card from the deck and lay it over the revealed card. Whoever wins this stage must include that hero's death in their narration.

If all heroes are sacrificed, the battle ends. Heroes *can* win the battle, if this sacrifice generates the fifth **black** card. Otherwise, the dragon is victorious. If the sacrifice created a **red** card, the dragon player narrates their victory normally, and on a **black** card, the hero players narrate a scene in which *the dragon is victorious, but injured*.

Heroes *can* sacrifice themselves over cards the dragon player laid down using *cunning*, but *not* over cards drawn by another hero's *sacrifice*.

The Aftermath:

Hero players: Whether you were successful or not, you will narrate a short coda: five years after the quest, ten years after the dragon first arrived, what are things like? Are things going back to normal following the dragon's defeat, or has the dragon grown more tyrannical in the wake of the heroes' failed quest? **How have things changed?**

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"So comes snow after fire, and even dragons have their endings."

J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*