

# **The Dragon King's Gate**

**By Cal Ebethan**

## **Introduction**

Hello, and welcome, traveller, to the first in the Campaign Core series by Ebethan Game Designs! The purpose of these supplements is to provide a basic framework for an adventure or campaign arc for you to incorporate into your game. As this is more of a narrative tool, these Campaign Cores are intentionally system-agnostic, and with no set difficulty. The stories and tools included within are open-ended and malleable, so that you don't feel railroaded. This first Campaign Core, The Dragon King's Gate, is exceptionally open-world, in fact, as it meant to play out over an in-game period of weeks to months. But I'm getting ahead of myself. Onward!

## **The Lore**

### **Thousands of Years Ago**

The island known as Empire's Reach was once the capital of a great, draconic kingdom, ruled by a benevolent dragon tyrant whose name is now long forgotten. The Dragon King, as scholars would one day name him, rose above his instincts to pillage, hoard, and conquer. He ruled over his kingdom of mortals and lesser dragons

with the aid of devoted counselors, disciples, and warriors. In time, the Dragon King took a mate, and both his bride and his hatchlings grew to positions of power in his court.

But there was a compulsion in the blood of his children, the very compulsions the king had suppressed in himself in order to build his kingdom: As the King's scales grew dull and his fire faded, his brood sought to pry their inheritance from the very foundations of the kingdom. They made war on their father, on their father's people, and on each other as draconic pride and will to reign supreme overtook them.

Knowing what destruction could ensue if any of his maddened children ascended as King, the King and his counselors sealed the hoard and the mantle of the Dragon King beyond a great door to a pocket dimension, and scattered the keys to the winds. And though the Kingdom fell to talon and flame as the spoiled brood of the Dragon King lamented at their loss, it did at least end and the rest of the world was spared, as the counselors predicted.

### **Today**

Empire's Reach is now a backwater, it's name no longer signifying the expanse of its parent-nation's power, instead it is

interpreted as an instance of hubris and a fruitless gamble. Its governor is equal parts lazy and corrupt, willing to let the mayors of the different cities and piratical High Captains (sometimes one and the same) call the shots, unless he is adequately bribed.

The ruins of the old draconian kingdom are scattered through the island's jungle, and even the Dragon King's Gate is well known: The giant stone door, etched with dragons wheeling through the sky, stands in a ruined keep in the center of the island. Scholars and treasure-hunters of all sorts have sought to pry ancient treasures from the ruins, or solve the riddle of the door, throughout the centuries since their discovery.

However, in all that time, the island has held too tightly to too little treasure. In time, one by one, adventurers gave up or died in the jungle. Crusades, quests, and competitions to reach the Dragon King's Hoard have ended in failure. Well, until now, anyway.

The quest to open the Dragon King's Gate has begun again, but the stakes are much higher than ever before. The competitors are no ramshackle groups of adventurers, but instead ruthless and wealthy

Pirates in search of treasure, deadly ideologies willing to die for what lies beyond the door, and world-shaking superpowers more than willing to kill.

### **Campaign Core Synopsis**

The party arrives in Empire's Reach and begins to hear the legends of the Dragon King's Gate and the treasure it is said to hold. They also witness the dynamic power-struggles at play on the island between the inept authorities, boisterous pirate crews, and one other group -- a collection of elven refugees devoted to someone called the Green Lady.

Investigating some nearby ruins, the party has an exceptional stroke of luck, surviving the dangers of the island and discovering a secret door or passageway leading to ancient artifacts worth a substantial sum. Returning to town with these artifacts earns them recognition with the island's groups, who may try to persuade them to undergo further expeditions, and perhaps even search for the Seven Keys to the Dragon King's Gate. Alternatively, based on their luck, the party may try to strike out their own for more treasure.

It becomes quickly obvious, however, that they are up against stiff

competition. Venturing into more ruins on the island, the party comes across parties of elves (devoted to the Green Lady) and undead creatures fighting over the relics within, in search of the Seven Keys. As these encounters continue, it may draw the attention of the authorities and the pirates, further muddling the situation, and perhaps forcing the party to pick a side.

Investigating the mystery of the Gate further, the party learns that one artifact it is said to hold is the Dragon King's Mantle, an item of powerful magic. The elves seek to use it to restore their lost power in the world, and the master of the undead creatures, a powerful necromancer, wishes to use it to create an unkillable army.

As the Seven Keys are discovered and collected, all premise of subtlety between the groups is forfeited, and they attack each other outright, attempt to steal one another's Keys or relics, and even set up war camps spread throughout the island. Things continue in this vein until death, success, or an accord is struck, leading to a final scene at the Dragon King's Gate.

### **Replacing Assets:**

The story outlined in this Campaign Core can be repurposed if you appreciate the concepts but aren't a fan of the aesthetics. The adventure itself can easily take place in any secluded environment if you're not married to the idea of a jungle island, and the Dragon King and his Empire could easily be replaced by any other species. Here are a couple of other ideas for replacing assets in this adventure:

- Change the pirates to an influential religious order or occupying army
- Replace the elves with a sect devoted to the Dragon King
- Change the undead threat to a tribe of local monsters with an intelligent leader
- Make the undead servants of the Dragon King, the last defense against his petulant brood
- Incorporate past foes or allies into any of the opposing factions

### **Adventure Hooks**

If the adventurers are the kind to seek treasure or unique artifacts, it may be easy to persuade them to journey to Empire's

Reach. Otherwise, here are a few other options for getting them there:

1. **On the Run:** Something happened or is happening on the mainland that the party is fleeing. They hopped aboard the first available boat, only to find that it was headed for Empire's Reach.
2. **Connection in the Reach:** Perhaps a patron or ally from a previous endeavor is already in the Reach, and has summoned the party with the promise of adventure or glory.
3. **A Mysterious Reward:** A key or item gifted to the party on completion of their last quest is said to be from Empire's Reach. The mystery of the object, or the promise of more loot, draws them to the island's shores.
4. **A Friend in Need:** Their adventure could begin before even arriving in Empire's Reach. Perhaps the group comes across some elves devoted to the Green Lady, or aids a pirate crew in a battle against a leviathan, and are drawn into the quest by a chance meeting.

## **Chapter One: Arrival**

The way in which the party arrives can set the tone for the rest of the adventure. For instance, if they come with the intent to collect treasure and glory, and are high enough level to buck the authority of the local pirates, it can earn them the ire of the High Captains, and the friendship of less successful pirates looking to make a name for themselves [Author's Note: This is what happened in my home campaign]. The scenes of the party's arrival can be a fun way to introduce them to the setting for this adventure, and to get a feel for how the rest of the adventure will go.

Keep in mind that, while all the pawns may already be on the board, the struggle to gain control of the Keys has not started yet. The party may hear several iterations of the legends surrounding the Gate, and may even hear rumors of adventurers and monsters stalking the ruins scattered around the island, but there is no reason to suspect an encroaching war.

Given that this is a pretty open-world supplement, it's a good idea to give the party a sense of direction early on. Use one of the suggested adventure hooks to present them with a key or a map to a nearby ruin, a

quick adventure that introduces them to the dangers of the island and the relics of the past. Consider tying some of the items they find to the mythology of the island, giving you, the Game Master, a chance to outline the legend of the Dragon King's Gate.

## **Chapter Two: Keys to the Past**

Following the success of their first foray into the island, the party may be tempted to seek out additional ruins to dungeon-delve into. Alternatively, their contact or patron may send them to a specific ruin, either to find the treasures within, or to check on the safety of their allies who had journeyed to said ruin but not returned.

In either instance, this is an excellent time to introduce one or both of the following story elements:

- Opposing factions
- The Seven Keys

Perhaps on the second or third foray into one of the island's ruins, they discover elven agents of the Green Lady fighting undead creatures. The party may discern, either through the fighters' actions or from dialogue afterwards, that there are unique artifacts on the island, valuable enough to

kill for. Soon after this, the legend of the Seven Keys, and their connection to the Dragon King's Gate, is laid bare. If they've established a rapport with any of the factions on the island, then a scholar among that particular group may share the information. Alternatively, the party may gain the information through espionage against an opposing group, or discover the legends of the Keys through careful study of the island's lore.

## **Chapter Three: The Hunt**

This chapter can easily take up the largest part of the game, as the party searches for the Seven Keys and comes into conflict with the other groups. The simplest way to facilitate the Hunt for the Keys is to have the party work with one of the factions in pursuit of the Keys. However, it may be more fun, or better suited to your campaign, to give the party the means to strike out on their own, if they wish to.

First, let's list the main **objectives** for this portion of the Campaign Core:

- Find the locations of the Seven Keys
- Collect the Seven Keys
- Assess the enemy
- Keep the Keys out of enemy hands

Now that that's settled, we should probably determine **what the Keys are**. According to legend, the Keys were fashioned for and entrusted to the King's most trusted counselors and family members. In addition to being keys, they are also powerful magical items. I've listed some below:

- **The Key of the Commandant:** A menacing glaive with a crystalline blade and black haft. Given to the mortal general of the Dragon King's forces.
- **The Key of the Seer:** A length of bone wrapped in old cloth and odd charms, said to be a rod or wand of magic power. Given to the court soothsayer and chronicler.
- **The Key of the Child:** An enchanted flute that affects the minds of those that hear it. Given to the Dragon King's ward; a strange girl.
- **The Key of the Spymaster:** A simple-looking rusted key, said to be able to open more than just doors. Given to the King's Eye.
- **The Key of the Priestess:** A ring that protects the wearer from harm while giving insight into the world

around them. Given the leader of the Dragon King's clergy.

- **The Key of the Bride:** A circlet for his mate to wear when in human form, that gives the wearer the ability to send messages mentally over great distances.
- **The Key of the Soldier:** Given to a loyal, rank-and-file warrior of the King's army: a sword capable of slaying a dragon, even the King.

Like any of the resources in this Campaign Core, nothing is set and stone, and you may alter the Seven keys to your heart's content.

Now that we have an idea of what the party is looking for, let's figure out **how they find the keys**. Above, I mentioned how working in tandem with a faction, and having that faction give the party the locations of the keys, is the most straightforward way of doing things. If you'd like a little variety, however, here are some other suggestions for adventure hooks:

- An island local comes to town, and says their village was attacked by undead (or any of the other factions).
- Another adventuring party found one of the Keys, and one of their

members is running amuck with the dangerous artifact.

- The party learns the location of one of the Keys, only to find the place has been ransacked by an opposing group.
- A mysterious journal (perhaps from a long-ago expedition) outlines the locations of the ruins, though its writer never uncovered all the treasure.
- One of the Keys has been found recently and is currently for sale by a local shop as a curiosity.
- One of the Keys was found long ago, and is kept in a temple on the mainland as a holy relic.

Like I said, the hunt for the keys will probably take up most of the length of this campaign or adventure arc. Now that we've covered the main aspects of chapter three, let's talk about: **Additional Conflicts.**

**Additional Conflicts** are complications, encounters, or subplots that serve as stumbling blocks in the party's quest for the keys. These are largely optional, though I suggest using one or two make the story more interesting:

- **Elven Militarism:** As the elves come closer to (or farther from) their goal of having all Seven Keys, they become increasingly militant. This may put them at odds with the authorities and pirates, and may even lead to bloodshed, destruction of the elves, or an elven occupation of one of the port cities.
- **Attacks by Opposing Faction:** This is one of the most straightforward complications. As the party becomes more meddlesome, the elves or the necromancer may decide to rough up the characters. And, if any one group possesses multiple keys, it makes them the target of theft and assassination. This encounter could play out on- or off-screen, as the party arrives at their ally's headquarters to find the place ransacked, the keys stolen.
- **Hostages:** An alternative to the situation above. Instead of taking the heavily guarded Keys, the opposing group takes someone precious to the party and coerces the characters to give up the Keys they have, or even pursue additional ones.

- **The Newcomer:** As the quest for the Seven Keys plays out, it may draw the attention of other groups, especially if it spills into the street. This new group could make or break alliances, or may force previous enemies to unite against this mutually hated group.

By now you have the majority of what you need for Chapter Three of your campaign. I just want to talk briefly about **Locations and Challenges**.

The **Location and Challenge** of acquiring any of the seven keys is important. One of the unique qualities of this Campaign Core is the opposing factions, and so physical conflict is an obvious **challenge** the party may need to overcome on the hunt for the Keys. When I first started writing this campaign, I was inspired by films such as *Indiana Jones*, and so a lot of the **challenges** in navigating the island's ruins were puzzle and trap related. However, fighting zombies and elves through very similar ruins may become tiresome. Many of the suggestions I've made above are to give you opportunities to avoid excessive dungeon-crawling. To better meet that end, I have decided to list some **locations** below,

which may be used as stages for the main quest, or for side quests, to avoid any sense of monotony:

- **The Sunken Colony:** This once-great city was built centuries ago (but still long after the time of the Dragon King), but due either to some great cataclysm or poor engineering, it has sunk below the shore of the island. The partially submerged streets and buildings are now the home to pelagic monstrosities. It is reasonable to assume that the original inhabitants left some valuables behind, or even that the adventurous among them had collected treasures from the island's ruins.
- **The Old Fort:** Much like the sunken colony, this place is a recent addition to the ruins of Empire's Reach. This secluded keep, in poor repair, may serve as one of the necromancer's hideouts or a pirate lair.
- **The Island-Turtle:** The gargantuan turtle with an island on its back is possibly the best thing I've put in this Campaign Core. Perhaps this living island was part of the Dragon



King's empire, and one of the Keys is hidden on its back in the tomb (or home) of one of the King's Counselors [Author's Note: In my game, the King's Eye (spymaster) resided in a temple at the center of the living island, and could communicate with the party, though he had turned to stone]. The island may even be inhabited by people descended from the Dragon King's populace, or be a moving prison for enemies of the Dragon King's court. Regardless of what lies on the island, its sudden arrival is sure to draw the interest of all the people of Empire's Reach, and may lead to battles upon the living island or on the sea surrounding it.

- **The Sea:** This is perhaps the most open-ended option at your disposal. As animosity between the opposing factions grow, the party may target, or be targeted, upon the waters surrounding Empire's Reach. They may fall victim to pirates or sea creatures while sailing around the island to reach a destination, or perhaps they link legends of the

Seven Keys to urban tales of a ghost ship that haunts nearby waters.

## **Chapter Four: The End Game**

Much of what happens here is written by what transpires in Chapter Three: Does the party ally themselves with one of the factions in search of the keys? How successful are they in recovering the keys? Does one group hold all Seven, or are they split between groups? What state are their enemies in, or did they manage to defeat them outright while searching for the Seven Keys? Have some of the opposing forces formed alliances against others?

The final scene, at the Dragon King's Gate, may be a moment of victory and celebration; or a moment of betrayal as the faction the party has been working with stabs them in the back (or vice versa!). More likely, however, are the chances of a final showdown. Let's look at some of our options systematically, though. For this end scene, what you have to consider is:

- **Who Is In It?** If Chapter Three is an unprecedented success, it may only be the party and their allies in attendants. [Author's Note: In my game, it became a final showdown

between the elves and the necromancer. Although the pirates became involved during the story, they did not succeed in collecting any of the Keys, nor did they form any alliances, forcing them to sit out the final scene],

- **What Happens?** If the Keys are split between opposing factions, one may try to force the other's hand by camping at the base of the Dragon King's Gate and awaiting their enemy's arrival. They may even form alliances with the less successful groups, promising to split the Dragon King's Hoard once the gate is open. Alternatively, the groups may reach some kind of accord, and agree to open the gate together (this would be most difficult with the elves and necromancer, as both covet the Dragon King's Mantle). Perhaps an ambush is sprung upon the group with all of the Seven Keys.
- **What Lies Beyond the Gate?** Once all Seven Keys are brought together at the foot of the gate, what happens? What lies beyond? Is it the Dragon

King's throne room, filled with riches? Is the Dragon King's Mantle there? What does it look like? Is there really any treasure? Is it guarded by one last obstacle, set by the King and his counselors? Perhaps it is merely a gate to another world, a dangerous one, as one last trap for the Dragon King's spiteful offspring. [Author's Note: In my game, each key corresponded to one of seven wheeling dragons carved upon the door's surface, each pair (key and dragon) glowed one by one and faded from existence, unlocking the Gate. Beyond it was the Dragon King's Hoard, and his Mantle: an ephemeral pair of golden, draconic wings, which attached themselves to those it deemed worthy of their power (and by that, I mean whoever you deem worthy of their power).]

From here, I leave you at your own devices, although there are certainly many directions to go. A new elven kingdom may be on the rise, one based on draconic magics. An unkillable army of the undead may soon threaten all nations of the world. And our party of adventurers, with their share of

treasure from the Dragon King's Hoard,  
must now decide their next step as well.

This is where the Campaign Core:  
The Dragon King's Gate comes to an end. I  
hope you've enjoyed the ride, and that  
you've taken some inspiration for future  
endeavors. Be on the lookout for more  
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