

“To Stand Before the Dragon’s Wrath”

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“The hunger of a dragon is slow to wake, but hard
to sate.”

—Ursula K. LaGuin

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

—J.R.R. Tolkien



TO STAND BEFORE THE DRAGON'S WRATH

An epic battle by Lara Turner



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 about epic battles against all odds.



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 people playing this game, right now. In this game, you will be playing yourselves. Fictionalized versions of yourselves, at least. Think about your skills, your interests, your allies, your resources. Think about what matters to you.

Then imagine that a dragon has appeared, crawling out of the mists of legend and into your world: massive, powerful, and unstoppable. If a dragon appeared outside your home, what destruction would it wreak? What buildings are there to be toppled, what people nearby to be gobbled up? How much damage would a dragon do if it showed up right here, right now?

This game isn't set right here and right now, though. We are going to go on to imagine the world in about five years' time; after the dragon arrived, after it took control, after you have been beaten down under its scaled heel for long enough that you can't possibly bear it any longer.

A Long Journey

The dragon has made its lair far, far away. Far enough that many believe that they can live a normal life just ignoring the dragon. This is a lightly Tolkien-inspired setpiece. Early victory for the heroes means they encounter the dragon sooner than expected, and use their artifact successfully. If the heroes win, the Aftermath should also talk briefly about how the survivors got back home (always the most important part of a journey).

I. An Uninvited Guest: You never expected to see the dragon, let alone battle it, but you were gathered together by a mysterious guide. Who was it? Why did they pick you?

II. Mapping the Route: The dragon lives some distance away, and the journey would promise to be harrowing and weeks-long. What were the most frightful obstacles on the map?

III. The First Leg of the Journey: According to the map, a safe inn was only a few days' travel away. Who is the guide that you met on the way? What nasty surprises awaited at the inn?

IV. Getting Split Up: At the first major obstacle on the route to the dragon's lair, you are split up from your guide and companions. What happened? Did your guide survive?

V. A Mysterious Artifact: As you tried to find yourselves you found instead a magical artifact, a relic of the dragon itself—and something which could be used to kill the dragon. What was it? What strange power did it hold? Who guarded it?

VI. Back on the Path: No sooner had you gotten back on the road to the dragon's lair, than you were assaulted by servants of the dragon. Who were these servants, and what did they want?

VII. A Fortunate Rescue: As as you fled from the latest danger, you were saved by the intervention of a mysterious outsider. Who was this stranger, and what did they offer you?

VIII. Crossing the Border: Some days later, you finally reached the borderlands, and found the obvious path in blockaded. What back routes did you try? What terrible guardians did you face?

IX. The Dragon's Lair: At last, you made it to the dragon's lair, and the battle began. When all was done and dusted, who still stood?

Cosmic Horror

The dragon is a creature of immense and incalculable power, but it has not yet arrived... it sits outside time and space as we know it, watching, waiting for the stars to be right. That's right, it's a Lovecraftian setpiece and we are investigators. The dragon's presence is indirect for most of this; we deal with eldritch minions and the cultists. The first casualty was almost certainly killed in a ritual to turn the dragon's baleful eye to our world.

Whenever a human makes a sacrifice, they aren't killed—they are twisted into a corrupted servant of the dragon. If humanity wins the dragon's arrival is prevented... for now.

I. Dream-Visions of a Strange Land: The investigators shared a dream one night, a grim prophecy. What did they see? Was it a warning? A threat? Was the dragon there?

II. A Long-Forgotten Tome: The investigators learn of an ancient book with information related to their dream. Where is it? How did they acquire it? What did they give up to get it?

III. The Stars Begin to Align: In the weeks that the investigators spend poring over the tome, there are stories of otherworldly creatures skulking around town. One night, they discover one. What is it? How does it react to them?

IV. Encountering the Cult: The Cult of the Dragon bursts into the investigators' safehouse. What is destroyed?

V. Interviewing the Locals: The investigators try to discover just what the folks around here know about the latest strangeness. How well are they received? Do they learn anything of import?

VI. The Disappearances: People in town are starting to go missing; the investigators try to track them. Where are they being taken? Do the investigators get discovered?

VII. The Rush: Too late, the investigators realize where the ritual will be conducted! They must go there and stop it! Do they have time to prepare? What horrible beast stands in their way?

VIII. The Ritual: The investigators arrive to find dragon-cultists in the middle of the ritual, chanting inhuman syllables around a bonfire. How do the cultists react to the interruption?

IX. At Last, the Dragon: Despite the investigators' efforts, the ritual was completed! The dragon appears through a rip in fabric of reality. The investigators have one last chance to stop it. Do they?

The first half of this zine is the game itself; the quickest way to tell your tale is to start at the Prologue, reading each section aloud and following its instructions.

Starting at the middle of this zine are tools for tweaking the basic gameplay to suit your own needs, and face your own dragons.

Please note: this is a game about playing yourself as you encounter a dragon. That means there will be descriptions of violence occurring to yourself and those you know.

The mood is intended to be “bleak,” not “grotesque.” Keep the violence bloodless and largely off-camera. Use your preferred safety tools (lines and veils, X-card, etc.).

**You will need this zine, 3-5 players, and a deck of playing cards.
The game will take about half an hour.**

Prologue

Shuffle the cards. Everyone, **draw a card, but don't share it.** Whomever drew the highest card is going to be the *dragon player*; you don't know if that's going to be you just yet.

As a group, figure out the nature of the dragon. There are many descriptions of dragons in myth and fiction, but which, if any, are accurate? We know that it is deadly, and that it will bend the world around it to its will, but everything else is for you to decide.

What color is it? Can it fly? Can it breathe fire, or something more exotic? Can it speak, or is it a beast? What are the means by which it seizes control, and how does it make its will known?

When you have a general idea of who this dragon is, **compare your cards, looking for the highest value.** Aces are high; if the values tie, then the diamond scale is the highest suit, followed by spades, clubs, and then the lowly human heart. Jokers always lose.

Discard the cards you drew.

The First Casualty

Dragon player, you are going to describe the arrival of the dragon into our world and, afterwards, while the other players will be playing themselves, you will be playing the dragon. There's a reason you will be playing the dragon, and not yourself: you didn't survive the years that followed its arrival. Not even close; when the dragon arrived you were the very first casualty.

Describe the arrival of the dragon in the first person... what did you see? Hear? Smell? Feel? Could you sense the dragon's power ahead of time, or were you taken by surprise? And most importantly, how did you die?

... and with that, dragon player, you cease to be yourself. From now on you will be representing the dragon. Seize the deck of cards and shuffle it well. Meditate upon your greatness as the humans talk amongst themselves.



The Years That Followed

Remaining humans, you survived that first night and the years after, but not without loss. **One at a time, describe an atrocity that the dragon committed early in its reign.** This might be something it did to keep the populace compliant, or an act of malicious destruction, or an act of greed beyond human comprehension. Let the other players know just how monstrous the dragon can be.

(Dragon player, chime in, especially to make the dragon even more imposing and awful.)

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

Bold Adventurers

The dragon is mighty, but there are heroes who are mightier still. Their task is not easy, but with a little luck, it shall be done.

Here, we are questing to slay a dragon, in the grand traditions of traditional RPG heroes. Fighting begins early, and the dragon is guaranteed to take at least one good hit... although it might not be enough. This setup works well with fantasy-derived settings; for extra heroism, declare that those heroes who make a *sacrifice* are merely knocked out. If the heroes win, they'll revive and celebrate.

I. A Blood-Red Sunset: As the day crawls to an end, the heroes stand before the dragon's lair, ready to approach. How well have they equipped themselves for the battle to come?

II. The Airing of Grievances: The heroes stride boldly before the dragon: the tyrant shall know why it must be slain. How does it react to their unexpected appearance?

III. The Battle Begins: The dragon has no truck with diplomacy! Within moments, the fight is on. But which side was able to secure the initiative in this battle?

IV. First Blood is Spilled: The first few minutes of the battle were fruitless clashes of steel against claw, but finally a strike hits true. Who takes the wound, and how?

V. The Dragon is Bloodied: The heroes were able to engineer a particularly powerful strike, one which wounds the dragon painfully. How did they do so, and more importantly, is the dragon weakened or merely enraged?

VI. Out of the Lair: As the battle rages through the night, the fighters move out of the dragon's lair. Now, beneath dim starlight, who is getting the upper hand?

VII. The Dragon's Wrath: In desperation, the dragon unleashes its most powerful attack... a maneuver as taxing as it is deadly. What is this attack? How does it affect the dragon? How does it affect its targets? Are they able to fend it off?

VIII. A New Dawn: As the sun crests over the horizon, one side of this battle finally collapses, too weary to continue the fight. Who falls, and who lives to see a new day?

Battle Setpieces

The battle sequence is built around nine events, or stages, that create the narrative. Collectively, these stages are a “setpiece.”

The core setpiece, “Against All Odds,” is meant to make the human players feel as if they are taking on a mighty foe: there’s several scenes of slow preparation and a fight structures around a few dramatic turning points rather than direct clashes. Changing a setpiece will dramatically alter the tone of the battle and, consequently, the game. Even though the mechanics of the battle are the same, the narrative that the setpiece creates will be changed, making the heroes feel more powerful, or more desperate.

Creating New Setpieces

To create your own setpiece, arrange nine phases that support the story you want to tell, and give each phase an evocative name and short description that has questions for the players to answer.

Every stage must be able to benefit either side; with the first four stages, neither side will be defeated, so those benefits can be subtle. Starting at five, however, both the heroes and dragon should be in a position to triumph, somehow.

A stage can cover a few seconds of activity, or years of quiet planning, or anything in between. Mix up the lengths of stages; even in the height of battle, a series of short clashes can be tiresome. Pull back from the action, force a change of location, or even have a flashback to keep things varied.

Usually, events are worded to favor the dragon, but maybe you want the heroes to feel powerful. Experiment with pacing and wording to get the emotional impact you want.

Free-flowing Battles

For an unpredictable battle, ignore pre-built setpieces altogether and craft the fight as you go: a red card indicates something goes well for the dragon, and a black card indicates something goes well for the humans, but everything else is freeform, based on the context of the moment. This is a good choice for especially strange settings and dragons (or playing a game in a car or somewhere you can easily see cards but can’t readily read small text). Just be sure to change what each victory means; what you don’t want is two sides beating the hit points out of each other.

The Servants and Betrayers

Dragon player, **deal one card, face down to each human.**

Most humans are below the dragon’s notice, but it deals with them when it must, and humans quickly learned that they could evade the dragon’s wrath by serving it.

Other humans, benighted fools who don’t recognize their place in the grand order of things, stood up to the dragon. Most of them were eaten or otherwise disposed of, but some extremely annoying examples of the species were able to evade the dragon’s grasp.

One at a time, choose a human and flip over their card.

If the card is red, they have *served* the dragon in the past. Together, the two of you will narrate a scene in which they either took upon a task for the dragon, or gave the dragon something especially valuable. What did they do? What was their reward?

Afterwards add the red card directly to your hand.

If the card is black, then that human has *defied* the dragon somehow; together, the two of you will narrate a scene in which they caused the dragon some minor harm but somehow escaped unpunished. What was their act of defiance? **Afterwards, discard the black card and add a card from the deck to your hand.**

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



Human players, **snatch the deck of cards from the dragon player, shuffle it once more, and deal nine cards, face down.**

The time has finally come. After five years of oppression, you have decided to fight back. As you’re dealing out the cards, talk about what it was that led you here. Was there a final straw? A last indignity that couldn’t be tolerated? Or did you just see your opening and decide to take it?

The Last Battle

There are distinct stages of the battle, below. You will play through them in order. **At the beginning of each stage, the dragon player reads its description, then selects one card from the table and flip it over,** to determine which side won that stage.

I. 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 home, so where might it want to stay?

II. Marshaling Resources: What weapons have the humans managed to acquire? Do they have a military envoy, or a couple rusty swords? Consider the local businesses, museums, or allies with access to interesting weaponry.

III. 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?

IV. Embarking on the Journey: The trip to this battle was not without its dangers; what did the humans face as they went to the lair? Did the dragons have allies or spawn, or did the humans encounter reinforcements on their way?

V. The First Strike: The humans led off with a surprise attack, catching the dragon unaware! Where did they strike from? What happened when the dragon realized it was in danger?

VI. The Long Struggle: The battle raged well into the night, with the humans too fast to hit and the dragon too large to hurt! In this battle of attrition, who started to weaken first?

VII. A Fighting Retreat: After a sudden turn in the battle, the humans tried to escape! What happened? Where did they run to, and how far did they get?

VIII. 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?

IX. 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?

Pick a Genre, Any Genre

Interested in a different genre, but not sure where to go with it? Draw a card at random, and let its suit guide you.

◆ **Historical:** The dragon has been languishing in shadows since before recorded history, so there's no telling when it will emerge: from Greek antiquity to the Wild West to the trenches of World War I.

♠ **Fantasy:** Even in worlds that allow for dragons, the dragon is *the* dragon: the biggest, baddest, and cruelest, whether in a low-magic Conan-style epic, an old school dungeon crawl, or the outskirts of a school of wizardry.

♣ **Sci-Fi:** Science suggests that the dragon couldn't exist... but that won't stop it. You may find it slinking in the ruined cities of a cyberpunk dystopia, awaiting colonists on terraformed worlds, or even commandeering a spaceship deep in uncharted space.

♥ **Contemporary:** A world much like our own, but not quite. Perhaps there are monsters lurking in shadows, or perhaps there are superheroes defending the citizens from danger, or superspies fighting an invisible war in boardrooms and back alleys. What there definitely aren't is dragons. Until now.

(Astute readers may note that you can use this, plus the thirteen dragon types on the previous page, as an instant setting generator. The suit gives you a genre, and the value gives you the dragon who doesn't belong in that world but shows up anyway.)

Once you've got your characters and setting put together, decide if you want to use the standard battle setpiece, or turn to the next page to see alternatives.

Then, when you're ready, go to the Prologue.

Alternate Settings and Characters

The core game asks players to portray themselves, in their own town. It means it's quick to get started. You know who you are and what the world is like. But, maybe you want to have an epic battle where you don't have to describe yourself and your friends dying horribly. That can create uncomfortable levels of emotional bleed for some players.

To Stand Before the Dragon's Wrath can be adapted to valiant knights, to space adventurers, to superheroes, or even just to different people in a different place. There's just two additional steps, which take place before the Prologue: creating a setting and introducing characters.

Creating a Setting

As a group, determine the big-picture view of when and where the dragon will appear: in Prohibition-era Chicago, on a moon-colony, or in a wuxia-themed empire, for instance.

The palette is how the players will refine their broad setting. **In any order, each player can declare one thing that exists in the setting (which other players might not expect), and then one thing that does not exist in the setting (even though it could logically be assumed);** a player might, for example, declare that a fantasy setting has firearms, but wizards don't exist, or that a contemporary world has vampires, but not the Internet. Discuss and negotiate as needed; the players should all be happy with the palette. Continue until every player has made one set of declarations or passed on their turn.

(The dragon is not beholden to the palette; it can be a unique exception to anything declared nonexistent in the setting.)

Introducing Characters:

One at a time, each player introduces a character, and places them in the setting: give the character a name and brief description, then make up an organization within the setting that the character is related to. This might be a profession, club, or big family—anything which ties the character into a larger world.

Once all the characters have been introduced, each player should determine the relationship their character has with the character of the player to their left. It need not be close, but they should know each other.

When the card you flip over is red, it means that the dragon had the advantage. The dragon player will narrate the outcome of that stage in a way that benefits their own interests.

If the card is black, humans get the advantage. The human players will collectively narrate the outcome, dividing their duties as they see fit.

After the narration, the battle moves on: **the dragon player reads the next stage, flips another card, and the side who won the advantage narrates the outcome.** This continues until one side has won their *fifth* stage. This might take you all the way to the final stage on the list, but then again it might not... sometimes battles are quicker than you might suspect.

Whoever wins their fifth stage wins the entire battle. They narrate their victory during this stage, being sure to include the destruction of their opposition. Either the dragon is slain or, more likely, the human's efforts are 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 discard it and replace it with a card from your hand.

Human players: You each have the power of *sacrifice*. During any stage, when a red card has been revealed, a human may sacrifice themselves: draw a new card from the deck and lay it over the revealed card. Whoever wins this stage must include that human's death in their narration. If all the humans sacrifice themselves, the battle ends; if the sacrifice created the fifth black card, the humans defeat the dragon but are killed in the process. Otherwise, the dragon was victorious.



The Aftermath

Human players, whether you were successful or not, you will **narrate a short coda:** jump forward in time another five years or so, now a decade after the dragon's arrival and takeover. 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 humans' failed quest? How have things changed?

And with that, the battle is truly over.

VARIATIONS & ALTERNATIVES

To Stand Before the Dragon's Wrath is a fairly simple framework for a fight; this section discusses ways to customize it.

Changing the Dragon

What is the dragon anyway? It's the thing that made the world wrong. It could be a literal dragon, or a similar massive monster. But while wings and scales and fiery breath make for an easy toehold into imagining a villain, they're not necessary, because the dragon is just a way to put a face on a world gone wrong.

The problem is that you are afraid and alone and forced to serve an entity that can thoughtlessly destroy you with a whim. What that entity *is* can change; a vampire lord emerging from the darkness. A necromancer atop a tower of bones. A regular old human, heartless and driven by power.

You're striking a blow against greed, anger, the thoughtless destruction the powerful deal to the weak, and the cruelty of oppressors who need to maintain their status as oppressors. These are abstract concepts, so it's easier if you give them a face to punch. The dragon is whatever you need it to be.

Getting Rid of the Dragon Player

Maybe you don't want to be the dragon. Maybe nobody wants to be the dragon, because it's hard to be an absolute jerk to your friends and loved ones. Maybe you all want to take on the dragon together. For the most part, that's an easy change. Describe the arrival together; it disrupts you life but doesn't kill any of you. From then on, wherever the dragon player narrates, everyone else takes turns to fill in those details.

However, because the dragon will not have the ability to use its *cunning* to its own advantage, it will get another benefit:

If there is no dragon player, the dragon wins if it gets four red cards before the humans do.

If the humans get their fourth black card, the dragon will need five red cards to defeat them. Otherwise, it will win with just four cards. The advantage lies with the dragon.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dragon

Need a dragon in a hurry? Draw a card for a random prompt.

A: The Bestial Dragon – A blood-red flying beast which feeds on humans. It cannot be reasoned with; you are merely prey.

2: The Moon Dragon – The moon cracks open, revealing a building-sized creature made of transparent crystal, which descends to Earth and declares itself to be humanity's new deity.

3: The Time Dragon – A two-headed dragon with white scales. One head's breath accelerates time, making things crumble to dust. The other reverses time and un-makes people.

4: The Fae Dragon – A dragon which can transform into a beautiful woman with emerald eyes. She's slowly pulling our world into her magic realm, and forbids technology of all kinds.

5: The Dapper Dragon – A dragon-headed man in a spotless black suit; he is seemingly invulnerable to bullets. He's a thuggish mafioso, and has declared that this is his town now.

6: The Psychic Dragon – This terrifying silver-scaled dragon is just an illusion, created by a paranoid child with psychic powers and a deep resentment for being told what to do.

7: The Dead Dragon – A skeleton belching thick gray smoke, which turns those who breathe it into mindless zombie servants.

8: The Clockwork Dragon – This wood and brass construct was found deep underground and, unwisely, wound up. It demands humans lead clockwork lives on rigid schedules.

9: The Winter Dragon – Endless winter storms follow this pale blue dragon; it merely wishes to sleep, unconcerned by the damage that surrounds it.

10: The Elder Dragon – Though this ancient gray creature is physically frail, it has mastered every form of magic imaginable, and mocks humanity for not equaling its skill.

J: The Aquatic Dragon – This serpentine blue-green beast arrives with a flood that leaves much of the area under water.

Q: The Greedy Dragon – This golden-scaled dragon is rather charming, but demands jewels and precious metals for its mighty hoard, and burns those who cannot supply any.

K: The Void Dragon – A dragon-shaped patch of nothing, as black as space. Its speech is incomprehensible, so what it actually wants is unknown and unknowable.