

At the Monarch's Gate

by Nyessa



**A game about the weapons we carry
and the stories they hold**

Introduction

You and your companions have traveled across long distances and faced many trials to come to this point, in the hope that you will be heard by the one person who can grant you what you need. Now you stand at the gate to the Monarch's throne room, seeking entrance and an audience.

All that stands in your way is the Gate Guard, who extends their hand and demands that you leave your weapons at the door.

At the Monarch's Gate is a single-session, GM-lite storytelling game that can be played in the space of two to three hours. You will tell the histories of the weapons you carry as you surrender them, one by one, before entering the presence of a powerful ruler. Use a combination of dice and Tarot cards to build your reputation while revealing your true intentions—or keeping them hidden.

You will need:

- ❖ *2 to 6 players (3 to 5 recommended)*
- ❖ *An illustrated Tarot deck, divided into Major and Minor Arcana and shuffled separately*
- ❖ *1 six-sided die per player*
- ❖ *1 20-sided die per player (or 1 shared among the group)*
- ❖ *A screen or similar object for each player to hide dice rolls from the sight of other players*

Character Creation and Setting

First decide who will be playing the role of the Monarch, and who will be playing the Heroes. The Monarch will also play the role of the Gate Guard, and may take on the responsibility of facilitating play by reading out rules and by shuffling and dealing cards, or you can divide these responsibilities evenly.

Next, decide together what sort of setting and genre you wish to play in: fantasy, science fiction, cyberpunk, noir, et cetera. The Monarch of your story may be a traditional ruler of a kingdom, but they may also be a mob boss, a religious leader, a CEO, or any other person who holds a seat of power and authority—and who requires protection from potential threats.

Begin character creation by making sure the Major Arcana cards have been separated into their own deck. Shuffle the Major Arcana deck, and deal three cards to each player. Do not show your cards to any other player yet.

The Monarch

Create the Monarch first. Look at your cards and choose two to represent your Reputation, and one to represent your True Motivation. You do not need to have any knowledge of Tarot symbolism and may interpret the illustrations in whatever way you please.

Place your two Reputation cards *face up* on the table. Have the other players look at the cards and interpret what they think these cards say about the Monarch's public Reputation. This Reputation may or may not be an accurate reflection of who your character is; it may be true, but it may be baseless rumor or a carefully cultivated façade.

Once the other players have finished discussing the Monarch's reputation, place your True Motivation card *face down* on the table. Finish by giving the Monarch a name and pronouns and describing their appearance.

The Gate Guard

The Gate Guard's sole motivation is to protect the Monarch and enforce their law by confiscating the weapons of any who seek to enter into the Monarch's presence. You may draw one additional Major Arcana card to inspire the Gate Guard's attitude towards the heroes, or you may base their demeanor on the Reputation of the Monarch.

The Heroes

Going clockwise around the table from the Monarch, create the character of each Hero in the same way as the Monarch.

Choose two Reputation cards, place them face up, and have your fellow players (including the Monarch) interpret your Reputation. Then place your True Motivation card face down, and describe your Hero's name, pronouns, and appearance.

Once each Hero has been introduced, decide together what has brought you here as a group: what is your goal in seeking an audience with the Monarch? What do you hope to ask for or offer to them? Consider the setting, the Monarch's Reputation, and your character's personal Motivations when making suggestions and negotiating your collective goal.

If you are having trouble deciding on a purpose for the group, you can roll a six-sided die on the table below or pick an option from the list.

Roll:	You come before the Monarch to...
1	...request their aid in a conflict or catastrophe.
2	...offer them your allegiance or fealty.
3	...seek their knowledge, judgement, or counsel.
4	...beseech them to reverse an unjust law or action.
5	...present them with a gift or tribute.
6	...declare your opposition to their rule.

Once you have settled on the shared purpose of the audience with the Monarch, you may wish to discuss the circumstances that originally brought the Heroes together, or you can let those past connections develop through the stories that you tell over the course of the game.

Gameplay

Shuffle the Minor Arcana cards and place them on the table within reach of all players.

The main phase of play takes place in the vestibule to the Monarch's audience chamber. Have each Hero describe an aspect of how they imagine the appearance of this space based on the agreed-upon setting and the Reputation of the Monarch.

You have been granted an audience with the Monarch to address your goal, but the Gate Guard demands that you disarm yourselves and hand over all of your weapons for safekeeping before you will be allowed to approach the Monarch.

A Storied Weapon

Take turns handing your weapons over to the Gate Guard one at a time. Each Hero starts with at least three weapons (a larger group of Heroes may want to begin with two weapons each).

When you surrender a weapon, roll a twenty-sided die. Consult the *Story Prompts* table on the following page to determine what kind of story you will tell about the weapon based on the number you rolled. Then draw one card from the Minor Arcana and place it face up on the table.

Describe your weapon, including what type of weapon it is and what it looks like. Then tell a brief story about it based on the prompt from the table and the imagery of the card you just drew as well as your Reputation cards. Use the story you tell to build on or refute your Reputation. At the same time, try to drop hints about your True Motivation without directly revealing what it is yet.

Story Prompts

Roll: ...and tell a brief story about:

- 1 ...what falsehood people spread about this weapon.
- 2 ...what gives this weapon sentimental value.
- 3 ...how you used this weapon to save someone.
- 4 ...how you almost lost this weapon.
- 5 ...how this weapon once saved your life.
- 6 ...who gave you this weapon.
- 7 ...an opponent that you faced with this weapon.
- 8 ...how you earned this weapon.
- 9 ...how you used this weapon in service to the Monarch.
- 10 ...how you got this weapon back after losing it.
- 11 ...the most frivolous thing you used this weapon for.
- 12 ...how this weapon connects you to a fellow hero.
- 13 ...how you used this weapon to defeat an enemy.
- 14 ...how you once hurt yourself using this weapon.
- 15 ...how this weapon is different from others of a similar kind.
- 16 ...how you used this weapon to defend your honor.
- 17 ...a time you wish you used this weapon but didn't.
- 18 ...how this weapon once failed you.
- 19 ...how you once refused to use this weapon.
- 20 ...how you found this weapon or how it found you.

Chiming In

As you tell the story of your weapon, other players can chime in to contribute details or suggest twists in the tale.

Fellow Heroes, who may have been present for the events you describe, may say something like, "I remember that! That was the time when..."

The Gate Guard, who may have heard rumors of your deeds, may say something like, "I think I've heard that tale. Was that when...?"

You have the choice to confirm or deny the truth of their contribution. If you confirm that it's true, elaborate on what it adds to your story. If you deny it as false, explain why it is untrue and tell what *really* happened.

Excessive Weaponry

After each Hero has surrendered three weapons (or whatever number of weapons you decided to start with), continue taking turns. But now you will roll on each turn to determine whether you have given all of your weapons up or have any left to hand over.

At the beginning of each turn from this point forward, roll a six-sided die. Roll behind a screen or other object to keep the result hidden from the other players. On a 2 through 6, you are still armed with at least one more weapon. On a 1, you have already given up all your weapons and have none left to surrender.

Keep the result of your roll hidden, and either declare that you still have a weapon, or claim that you have no weapons left. You may choose to lie or tell the truth.

If you declare that you still have a weapon, continue your turn as normal by rolling on the Story Prompts table, drawing a card from the Minor Arcana for inspiration, and telling the story of your weapon as you give it to the Gate Guard.

If you claim that you no longer have any weapons, sit out further rounds until all of your fellow Heroes have finished surrendering their weapons. You can continue to contribute details to their stories by chiming in.

Holdout Weapons

You may wish to sneak a hidden weapon into the Monarch's audience chamber to fulfill your True Motivation, whether your intentions are noble or nefarious. In order to keep a holdout weapon, you must convince the Gate Guard that you have been fully disarmed regardless of the result of your d6 roll.

Bluffing

As the Gate Guard, if you suspect that one of the Heroes is lying, you may accuse them of having a holdout weapon. Making an accusation requires a *bluff contest*.

The Gate Guard and the Hero each draw one card from the Minor Arcana deck. Whoever draws the card with the higher value wins the contest (note: in a Tarot deck, the Ace is considered a One). If both players draw cards of equal value, use the suits of the cards to determine the winner. For this game, the suits are ranked in the following order:

- ❖ *Swords*
- ❖ *Wands*
- ❖ *Pentacles*
- ❖ *Cups*

If the Hero draws the card with the higher value, the Gate Guard believes that you are telling the truth and are fully disarmed, while you keep your hidden weapon.

If the Gate Guard draws the card with the higher value, they search the Hero. A Hero who is accused of hiding a weapon may also consent to being searched without a bluff contest. When you are searched, reveal your true roll and whether or not you have a weapon.

Getting Caught

When a Hero gets caught with a holdout weapon for the first time, apologize for the "misunderstanding" and continue your turn as normal: roll on the Story Prompts table, draw a card from the Minor Arcana for inspiration, and tell the story of your weapon as you give it to the Gate Guard. On your next turn, roll again to see if you have any weapons left. You may choose to play it safe and declare your result truthfully, or you may press your luck and attempt to bluff again.

If you get caught concealing a weapon more than once, you will be refused entrance to the audience chamber and removed from play.

Whenever a Hero is caught with a holdout weapon, the Gate Guard draws two cards on their next bluff contest and uses the card with the higher value.

False Accusations

When the Gate Guard searches a Hero but finds no weapons, apologize for the mistake and move on to the next Hero's turn.

If you make a false accusation more than once, your judgement is no longer seen as trustworthy, and you may not make further accusations against any Hero.

Whenever the Gate Guard finds no weapons after searching a Hero, the next Hero to engage in a bluff contest against the Gate Guard draws two cards and uses the one with the higher value.

Disarmed

Continue playing through rounds until all Heroes have finished surrendering their weapons. If the game is running long, or if one or more players have been sitting out of the turn rotation for a while, you may decide as a group to have a final round where each Hero who is still armed rolls for one last weapon.

Once all Heroes have been disarmed to the Gate Guard's satisfaction, they will be ushered into the Monarch's audience chamber.

Resolution

When the Heroes enter the Monarch's presence, have each player describe an aspect of how they imagine the audience chamber. The Monarch should describe their throne and how they present themselves within the space.

An Audience with the Monarch

As a group, address the Monarch and present the reason why you have come before them. Explain your purpose and what you hope to offer or gain from your meeting.

After discussing your purpose and the situation at hand, the Monarch gives their formal response. As the Monarch, respond to the Heroes according to your True Motivation card, and then flip the card face up on the table for everyone to see.

At this point, any Hero may take action to fulfill their own True Motivation. When you do something or something happens that reveals or fulfills your Motivation, flip your True Motivation card face up to show it to the table.

Depending on the True Motivations of the Monarch and each Hero, the meeting may conclude peacefully here.

However, if your True Motivation brings you into violent conflict with another character, each person directly involved in the conflict draws a card from the Minor Arcana deck. If you succeeded in bringing a holdout weapon into the audience chamber, reveal your true d6 roll that you have kept hidden, and then draw two cards and use the one with the higher value. Whoever draws the highest card wins the conflict. Describe how you defeat your opponent and what action, if any, you take next.

When all True Motivations have been revealed and any conflicts have been resolved, the Monarch draws one final card from the Major Arcana deck. Use this card as inspiration to describe together how the scene draws to a close.

Credits

Thank you for playing *At the Monarch's Gate*. Design, writing, and layout are by Nyessa ([@NyessaGaming](#)) for the 2019 Tropes Jam. It was inspired by the [Extended Disarming](#) trope.

Playtesters: Spiritscribe ([@StoriesByAmsen](#)) and Sarafina D. ([@swanofmischief](#)). Many thanks to both for their time, patience, and creative problem solving.

Cover image is by [Alexander Tsang on Unsplash](#).