

A World of Sand and Fire

**A storytelling game
about the Dark Sun D&D setting
By Nick Wedig**

Setup:

At the beginning of play, you will do three tasks simultaneously: 1) create primary characters, 2) establish relationships between primary characters and 3) personalize the Theme Deck. You can do these three tasks in whatever order seems natural, but you should go back and forth between them so that each task can tie into the other ones.

Once those pieces of setup are done, arrange the Theme Deck in two rows, one of Seofean cards, in order, and one of Endlean cards in order. If you want to go all totally authentic Dark Sun, you should start with Priest and Defiance as the active theme cards to start, since that was the year of the original DS boxed set. But it's totally cool to just start with Ral and Fury (i.e., the first card of each cycle) as active instead. Then the Narration cards are dealt, the player with the Highest Sun begins narrating a scene, and the game begins.

Establish Primary Characters:

At the start of play, you will create two **Primary Characters (PCs)**. One of these should be more positive of a character, and one more negative. But both should be interesting characters that you want to see doing stuff in the world of Athas. The two characters may or may not be working together or opposed to one another. Ultimately, you don't really want both your PCs in the same scene, so you might want to make them as different as possible.

Think about the character in purely narrative terms, then boil them down into three aspects that are most important. These can be skills, personality quirks or whatever interests you about the character. They can be good or bad, it doesn't matter here. Just think about a character and then try to model them. You don't need to have a character fully formed before you start writing things down: maybe you write down a Blood trait, then wait on the Sand and Fire until you've seen other people's characters, themes or

relationships. Then you know better what the game will look like and can use that to make a more interesting character.

Traits do have to fit some guidelines, though. You have three traits: **Blood**, **Sand** and **Fire**. These traits each have distinct characteristics:

- **Blood:** Your blood trait represents what strength or weakness you draw from your race and family. A dwarf might be *Singleminded* or *Devoted* or *Tough* while a Thri Kreen might choose *Excellent Jumper* or *Alien Psychology* or *Innately Psionic*.
- **Sand:** Your Sand shows how your social position has made you who you are. You might be a *Worshipper of the Sorcerer-King Doubting His Faith* or a *Slave Gladiator* or *Informing to the Local Templar* or a *Penniless Wanderer in the Desert*.
- **Fire:** Your Fire is what drives your character to act, what drives them into conflicts and how they plan to change the world. You might use this to define psionic gifts, or if your character is a *Defiler* or a *Preserver*, or if they are *Skilled at Finding Water*. Are you *Rebelling Against The Sorcerer-King*? Are you *On the Run From the Templars*? *Seeking a Legendary Hidden Valley*?

In play, primary characters are 'owned' by you. You have authority over them and their behavior. You can hand off some or all control to another player temporarily, but ultimately you have the authority to say "no, he doesn't do that". This includes if another player tries to modify or kill one of your PCs: you have veto over that.

Because your veto power over PCs is pretty strong, you only can have two PCs at a time. You can, if you want, remove one of your PCs from play, by killing them or having them leave the story, or ending their story (happily or tragically, your choice). You could also decide that you're not as interested in playing that PC as you thought, and demote a PC from PC to Incidental

Character status. Then you come up with a new PC to fill the gap, or possibly promote an existing Incidental Character to full PC status.

Locations are characters, too, though their Blood trait represents the Blood of a place's builders or inhabitants. Sand still reflects the location's societal position: is it *Richly Appointed* or *Abandoned for Decades* or *Full of Beggars*? A place's Fire represents the site's purpose or how it will change the world or how it will test the mettle of those present there. The Fire shows how the place is a backdrop for action or interaction or conflict or change. Most often, locations are incidental characters, but you could have a game focused around a specific location, in which case a place could be a primary character. Magic or psionic items might also be PCs, if they are unique and important enough. Just make sure that the PC is interesting enough that you want to see them in a lot of future scenes.

Establish Relationships:

While you are creating characters, you should also create relationships between primary characters. Each PC will have one positive and one negative relationship with another PC. Don't ever make relationships between your own PCs, just between your PCs and other players' PCs. These relationships keep everyone involved in the same larger story.

Modify the Theme Deck:

Each card in the Theme Deck has a blank line for you to fill in. This is to make the Theme Deck unique and customized for your specific story. If you see a lot of thri-kreen PCs, then you might consider adding "Clutch-mentality" and "hunt-mentality" to some appropriate Theme Cards, so that the game can focus more on thri-kreen psychology. Or you might make "clutchmate" a theme, and deal with issues that arise from that. Another game might have lots of slave warriors and gladiators in the game, so you might add themes related to that, like "prolonging a fight for entertainment" or something. Or "old war injuries" or something. These themes are all things that you the player want to see happen in game, disconnected from anything your characters may want.

Each player should fill in at least one theme card, and each theme card's blank should get filled in. But other than that, you only should fill in as many as you have inspiration or ideas for: one player might only fill out one and another might fill out a lot. And that's fine, so long as all the players are okay with that.

This modified Theme Deck should only be used for this story, using this set of players and characters. If you play another game, then you should modify the set again for those players and those PCs. Each playthrough of the game needs its own set of unique themes to go with it.

Narration and Scenes:

Narration Cards are marked *Highest Sun* (rank 1), *High Sun* (rank 2), *Sun Ascending* (rank 3), *Sun Descending* (rank 4), *Low Sun* (rank 5) and *Lowest Sun* (rank 6). Each scene, you deal out one card to every player, which determines the order of narration. If you have fewer than six players, you remove some cards from the Narration Deck, so that the deck only has as many cards as players:

- **Two Players:** *Highest Sun* (rank 1), *High Sun* (rank 2), *Sun Descending* (rank 4), and *Lowest Sun* (rank 6). This is the same setup as four players, except each player receives 2 cards per scene instead of one.
- **Three Players:** *Highest Sun* (rank 1), *Sun Descending* (rank 4), and *Lowest Sun* (rank 6)
- **Four Players:** *Highest Sun* (rank 1), *High Sun* (rank 2), *Sun Descending* (rank 4), and *Lowest Sun* (rank 6)
- **Five Players:** *Highest Sun* (rank 1), *High Sun* (rank 2), *Sun Ascending* (rank 3), *Sun Descending* (rank 4), and *Lowest Sun* (rank 6)

Narration happens in the order of card's rank, from lowest to highest. Each Narration must involve the traits on the appropriate Theme Card or a trait from an involved character. So when you describe what is happening, you need to add details to the fiction based on what cards are available at a given moment. Theme Cards give details or ideas or emotional cues, but are vague an open to interpretation, like Tarot cards.

Everything you say while narrating is true, though you should only say a little bit (like maybe a paragraph worth of text) before you should allow another players their input. Once you are done narrating, the next player gets to narrate their own additions to the scene, on down through the ranks of cards.

When Theme Cards are incorporated into narration, that Theme Card becomes *tapped*. Turn the Theme Card on its side to show it is tapped. Tapped Theme Cards can still be incorporated into later narration, but when both Theme Cards are tapped, they cycle onto the next pair of themes cards. Take the two active Theme Cards and place them in at the end of their

respective rows of cards (Endlean or Seofean). The next card in each cycle then becomes the active card.

Character traits that get used are *expended* and cannot be used until the next scene or until the Theme Cards cycle.

When everyone has had a turn to narrate, the scene ends, Narration cards are shuffled and redealt, and the new *Highest Sun* starts a new scene. Note that you can always return to a scene later on if things are unresolved, though it should change in nature in some manner: a change of venue, or introducing a new character, or a change in mode of conflict, etc.

At the end of a scene, you can modify or rewrite or change or remove one trait on each character you played in that scene.

Incidental Characters:

Incidental Characters (ICs) are minor or secondary characters, not intended to show up for more than a scene or so. Often Incidental Characters grow in importance in play and surprise you, but they are by their nature secondary relative to the Primary Characters. (If an IC becomes important enough, you might want to eliminate one of your ICs and make the important Incidental into a Primary Character.)

ICs start with only one trait defined, out of their **Fire, Blood** and **Sand** traits. When you create a new IC, you describe the character in general terms, but only fill in one of their traits. If the character is reintroduced in a later scene, the person reintroducing that character gets to define one of their blank traits, if they still have any, or rewrite one of their existing traits.

Incidental characters are not owned by any specific player. Anyone can roleplay that character, make decisions for them, and narrate what happens to them. Anyone could kill or alter the character in radical ways, if they want.

Theme Cards:

Endlean:

1. **Ral** Shadows, Muls, Mystery, the Unknown, the Freezing Night
2. **Friend** Allies, Oaths and Bonds, Humans, Romance, Majestic and Stark Beauty
3. **Desert** Insects, The Elements, Sand, Merchants, Elves, The Sun, Sandstorms, Harshness
4. **Priest** Bureaucracy, Politics, Taboos, Lies, Poverty, Tombs, Templars, Torture, Eye for an Eye,
5. **Wind** Travel, Freedom, Psychic Powers, Resource Depletion, Aarakocra
6. **Dragon** Transformation, Strength, Half-giants, Thunder and Lightning, Cruelty
7. **Mountain** Preserving, Dwarves, Resistance, Endurance, Survival
8. **King** Psionics, Sorcerer-Kings and their agents, Slavery, Gladiators, Palaces, Decadence
9. **Silt** Thirst, Starvation, Ecological Disaster, Devastation, Thri-Kreen
10. **Enemy** Villains, Hatred, Survival of the Fittest, Halflings, Defiling
11. **Guthay** The Hidden Revealed, Half-elves, Discovery, Oases, Relics of a Past Age,

Seofean:

1. **Fury** Violence, Conflict, Passion, Ferocity, Giants, Monsters, Raiders
2. **Contemplation** Introspection, Careful Planning, A Pause in Action, Villagers, Sorrow
3. **Vengeance** Reversal, Justice, Retaliation, Execution, Cruelty, City Dwellers
4. **Slumber** Lethargy, Inaction, Stealthiness, Repetition, Herdsmen
5. **Defiance** Rebellion, Triumph of the Underdog, Hunter-Gatherers, Reversal of Fortunes, Disagreement
6. **Reverence** Druids, Templars, Respect, Diplomacy, Worship, Hermits
7. **Agitation** Wanderlust, Paranoia, Routines Disrupted, Distrust, Merchants