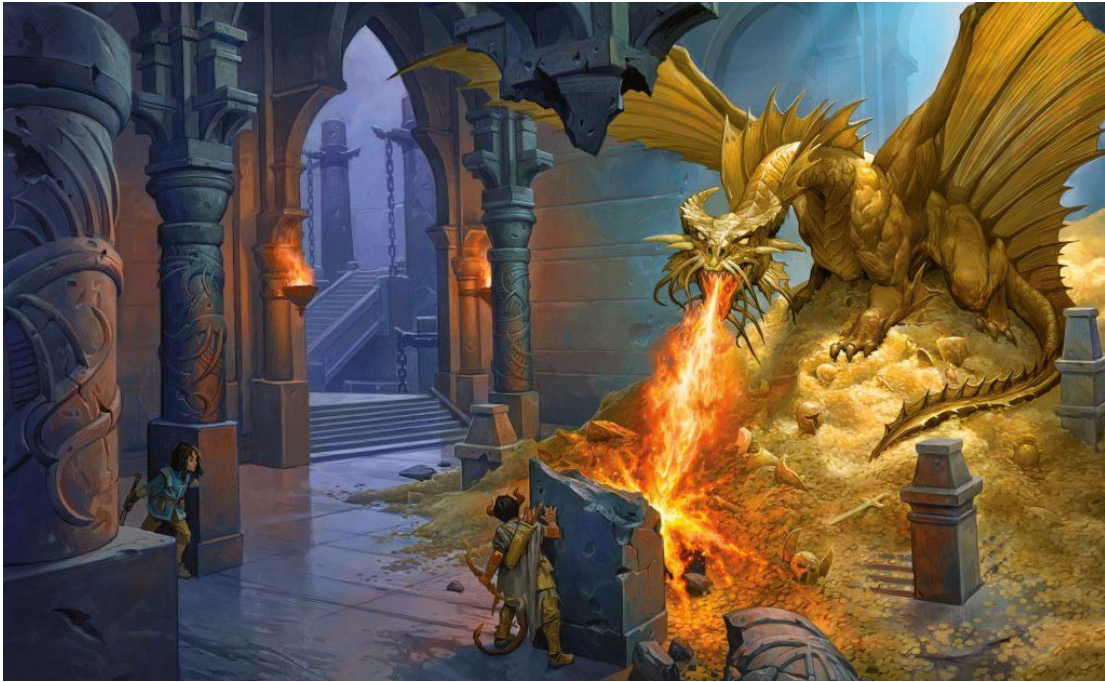


DRAGON HEIST REMIX – ADDENDUM: THE DRAGON OF DRAGON HEIST

[by Justin Alexander – February 23rd, 2020](#)



As I mentioned in [Part 6C: The Vault](#) of the Alexandrian Remix of [Dragon Heist](#), you can basically run the main vault at the end of the campaign unaltered: The PCs get the vault doors open, journey down to the lower level, find the golden dragon Aurinax hanging out down there disguised as a dwarf with the *dragonstaff of Ahghairon*, and then somehow get the gold from him.

In practice, there are a few problems with this:

- Aurinax and his relationship with Lord Neverember is not previously established in the campaign. So at the very end of your epic story, the big conclusion hinges around this dude you've never heard of before. It's very confusing and probably anticlimactic.
- If the scene ends in a fight, the low level PCs will almost certainly be brutally murdered by the CR 17 dragon.
- So the scene seems pretty heavily weighted towards social negotiation, the way it's designed makes this incredibly unlikely to succeed. (Multiple checks, with the designers actually telling the DM to ignore the rules to make failure more likely with stuff like "if even one character loses the contest, Aurinax senses that the group is lying to him.")

So what you have is a confusing encounter which likely ends with the PCs either being forced to leave without the gold or being brutally murdered.

NEVEREMBER'S DRAGON

Spoilers: This is not how I ended my *Dragon Heist* campaign.

First, let's identify what's actually cool about this encounter:

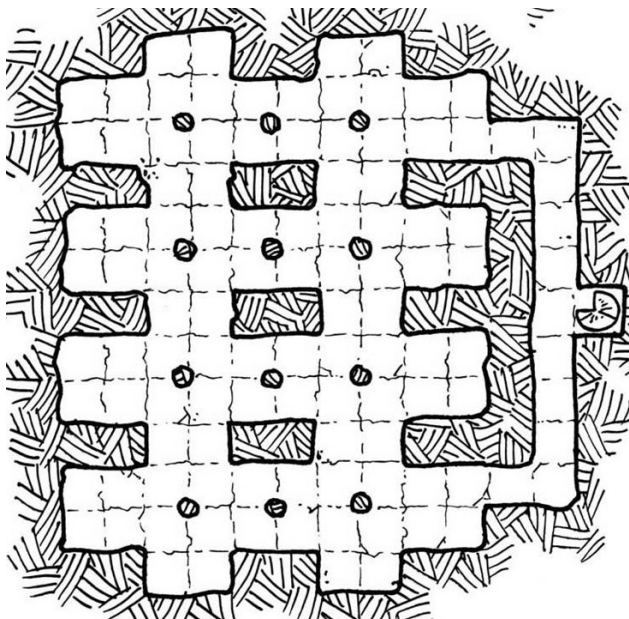
- A huge pile of gold. Not only are these inherently awesome, but this huge pile of gold has been literally the goal of the entire campaign.
- Dragon fight. Dragons on top of golden hordes? Awesome. Dragon slaying? Epic.

This is largely all you need: Epic dragon fight. If you win, you claim the dragon's horde. Perfect note to end the campaign on.

What do we need for this to happen?

First, it shouldn't be a gold dragon. Gold dragons are Lawful Good and explaining why one is down here guarding stolen gold inevitably leads to some sort of weird, convoluted continuity that the players aren't going to care about at this point. (It's the end of the adventure; it's the time to be wrapping stuff up, not adding more back story.) It's really easy to simplify this: There's a red dragon. Neverember put the dragon here to guard his gold. How? I dunno. Dragon owed him a favor. He enslaved him with an artifact. It was a young dragon who just really wanted to sleep on a big pile of gold, and Neverember's offer was irresistible.

Second, emphasize the big pile of gold. In the adventure as published, this is what the vault looks like:



Sort of a weird, complicated space with the gold tucked away in the back corner. Compare that to the epic painting of the dragon perched atop the horde above! We don't need all this distraction. Want a nice, simple dynamic here: Big pile of gold. Dragon.

So what I did was just have a large staircase leading down to the arched entrance of the lower vault. The vault itself was one big chamber with four pillars in the shape of dwarven hammers in the middle of the room (matching the architecture above). In the square space between these pillars was heaped the huge pile of gold.

When the PCs arrived, I had the dragon *behind* the pile of gold. This gives you TWO big moments:

- Players see the gold and have a moment to really focus on and process that image.
- Dragon crawls up over the top of the pile! Oh shit!

Third, it will probably be rewarding to reduce the chance of horrible death by not having the dragon pursue the PCs if they flee. If Neverember enslaved the dragon and bound it to the vault, then this takes care of itself. Smart PCs who feel overwhelmed by the dragon will now be able to retreat, regroup, and potentially call on the powerful allies they've made throughout the campaign (which would make this big finale fit thematically with the rest of the campaign).

(Tangent: If you wanted to, you could hypothesize that this is a modified *orb of dragonkind* or a similar artifact which is suspended from the roof the vault and keeps the dragon from leaving. PCs who intuit what's happening could use that to find an alternative solution to the dragon problem. But it's probably an unnecessary complication.)

REALITY CHECK - HOW BIG IS THAT PILE?! If you do the math, it turns out that 500,000 coins don't actually make for that big a pile. If you're being generous in your assumptions, it's probably about the size of a big pile of leaves. And why is it all in one big pile in the first place?! Wouldn't Neverember have his stolen horde conveniently stored in coffers or bags or something? Why would he bring it all down here and then just pour it out on the floor?

First: Honestly, this is probably a place where you just need to care a little less. If the players do the math later and hit a fridge logic moment where they're like, "Hey! That pile of gold shouldn't have been that big!" it's fine. It's not going to detract from this big, awesome moment you had or the dragon fight that ensued.

Second: They're in a big pile because dragons like sleeping on big piles of treasure. Stop kink-shaming. (If you want to add a bunch of leather satchels or coin coffers that have been ripped open by dragon claws and tossed in the back corner of the vault, that could be a cool touch, though.)

Third: Okay, you still care. Maybe the players have already done the math because they've been trying to figure out how they're going to get all those gold coins out of the vault, so they're already expecting a leaf pile of gold. Fair enough. Two things you can do:

- Who said the whole horde was made up strictly of gold coins? Add a bunch of silver and even more copper to bulk things up. The gold is a thin layer on top, because dragons like the feel of gold on their scales.
- Look at that picture again. Notice the stone plinths sticking out from the corner of the horde pile? Yup. Middle of the vault is actually a big stone pyramid and the dragon has piled all the gold and silver and copper on top of it, greatly increasing the perceived size of the pile. (Why? Dragons like big horde piles. Again: Stop kink-shaming!)

Oh! Better yet, it's actually a stone replica of Mt. Waterdeep. (If the PCs have been paying attention to the Dumathoin imagery throughout the rest of the vault, they might realize the Melairkyn dwarves have

placed a huge sapphire worth 25,000 gold pieces in the center of this replica to echo the Heart of the Mountain. Up to them whether they desecrate the ancient holy place to dig it out. This can be a nice reward for groups that have ethically agreed to return the money to the city, however, because the sapphire wasn't stolen from Waterdeep and the city has no claim to it.)

(Damn. That's really cool. Wish I'd thought of this last night when I ran that final encounter.)

DESIGNING THE DRAGON

A brief digression on encounter design in 5th Edition.

With the remix of *Dragon Heist* I was worried, coming to 5th Edition for basically the first time, that the heists built around the villains' lairs would be too fragile/difficult. This concern was primarily based on the number of times the book says any of the PCs going to these lairs will almost certainly die.

Not only was I taking stuff that was supposed to be too hard, I was still also writing them up with [adversary rosters](#) so that the NPCs would dynamically respond to the PCs if the PCs were detected. Using this technique with encounters that are already extremely difficult can easily lead to TPKs, as I discussed long ago in [Revisiting Encounter Design](#). (You can also read an example of this happening in actual play in my [Playtest Report on Gamma World](#).) In actual practice, though, there was nothing to worry about for *Dragon Heist*: The NPCs rarely get a chance to respond dynamically because they're generally dead before they can raise any sort of alarm.

For example, the books says that, "Lord and Lady Cassalanter are formidable spellcasters and devoted to one another. If one is assailed (...) the other arrives as quickly as possible. A direct confrontation with the Cassalanters will likely result in defeat for the characters..." But in practice the PCs can dish out so much damage that the "formidable" spellcasters will be dead before they can cast more than one spell.

In my game, for example, the PCs snuck up on Victoro, got a surprise round, and then all beat his initiative check. Two full rounds of unleashing damage on him and he was dead before he was able to take a single action.

This was not an isolated incident.

My experience with 5th Edition is still mostly limited to this single group, so it's possible that my players are just really good. But the fact that I'm routinely seeing "Deadly" encounters (or stuff that's even more difficult) getting curb-stomped by the PCs does leave me scratching my head on what effective encounter design actually looks like in this game. Because the point where the curb-stompings by PCs become mechanically unlikely seems to ALSO be the point where the bad guys have such outsized offensive capability that if the PC's DON'T successfully curb-stomp them, they're going to one-shot kill the PCs.

So right now it seems to have a real "choose your glass cannon" problem going on.

With that being said, my experience is still limited to a very specific campaign and I can already see that there are a number of other play dynamics that I need to actually run at the table. This notably includes:

1. Really huge mobs of bad guys. (These are comparatively rare in urban adventures like *Dragon Heist*.)

2. Long dungeon crawls or similar scenarios where long-term strategic play has a potential impact. (Also not really part of the *Dragon Heist* experience.)
3. Higher level adventuring. (With the remix, *Dragon Heist* tops out at 7th level.)

In any case, this influenced my design of the final encounter: I knew the dragon would be alone down there. But I wanted the encounter to be meaningful and challenging. It was, after all, the big finale of the campaign.

TARGET LEVEL: One other thing to discuss here is the expected level of the PCs for this finale. This is discussed elsewhere in my notes for my remix, but basically I have the PCs level up:

- After Chapter 1 (when they rescue Floom).
- After the Gralhund raid.
- After each of the heists.

There are four available heists, although the PCs may only need to do three of them. So the PCs will either by 6th or 7th level going into the Vault. (In the case of my campaign, the PCs did all four heists, but we were on a race to the end and I forgot to have them level up. So they were 6th level heading into the Vault.)

THE DRAGON: The first thing I did was to just pull up the list of available dragons. I'd decided a classic, fire-breathing red was the way to go, so:

- Ancient Red Dragon (CR 24)
- Adult Red Dragon (CR 17)
- Young Red Dragon (CR 10)
- Red Dragon Wyrmling (CR 4)

The Ancient and Adult Red Dragons are obviously too deadly. If you want to build an encounter strictly by the book, then I might suggest throwing a pair of Red Dragon Wyrmlings in there. A double dragon fight sounds cool. (You might even bump it up to a triad of wyrmlings for larger 7th level parties.)

But what I really wanted was that really iconic dragon-on-its-horde encounter. So I decided to grab the Young Red Dragon at CR 10.

However, I'd already seen my PCs mop the floor with "deadly" CR 10 encounters. (Victoro Cassalanter, for example, is a CR 10 opponent and they'd rolled right over the top of him.) Have the dragon go, "ROAR!" and then do nothing while they turned it into a thin, red paste felt like an anti-climactic way to wrap things up.

(If it happens, that's fine. Awesome even. The players will probably love telling the story of how they blew a dragon away. I'm just not going to deliberately design it that way, since that would be the opposite of awesome.)

What I concluded was that the plausible solution to this problem was to give the dragon some legendary actions. Generally only much more powerful monsters are given legendary actions, but they almost instantly solve the problem of the bad guy not getting to do very much before being wiped out.

Long story short, this is the dragon I designed. Feel free to plug it into your *Dragon Heist* finales:

YOUNG RED DRAGON

Large dragon, chaotic evil

Armor Class 18 (natural armor)

Hit Points 178 (17d10+85)

Speed 40 ft., climb 40 ft., fly 80 ft.

STR 23 (+6), **DEX** 10 (+0), **CON** 21 (+5), **INT** 14 (+2), **WIS** 11 (+0), **CHA** 19 (+4)

Saving Throws Dex +4, Con +9, Wis +4, Cha +8

Skills Perception +8, Stealth +4

Damage Immunities fire

Senses blindsight 30 ft., darkvision 120 ft., passive Perception 18

Languages Common, Draconic

Challenge 10 (5,900 XP)

Multiattack. The dragon makes three attacks: one with its bite and two with its claws.

Bite. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 10 ft., one target. *Hit:* 17 (2d10+6) piercing damage plus 3 (1d6) fire damage.

Claw. *Melee Weapon Attack:* +10 to hit, reach 5 ft., one target. *Hit:* 13 (2d6+6) slashing damage.

Fire Breath (Recharge 5-6). The dragon exhales fire in a 30-foot cone. Each creature in that area must make a DC 17 Dexterity saving throw, taking 56 (16d6) fire damage on a failed save, or half as much damage on a successful one.

LEGENDARY ACTIONS

The dragon gets 3 legendary actions. These actions can only be taken at the end of an opponent's turn. They refresh at the end of the dragon's turn.

Detect. Make a Wisdom (Perception) test.

Bite Attack. Make a bite attack.

Wing Attack (2 actions). Creatures within 10 ft. make DC 18 Dexterity saving throw or take 2d6+8 bludgeoning damage and are knocked prone. The dragon can then fly up to half its flying speed.