

# *Court of Blades*



## QUICK-START GUIDE

A FORGED IN THE DARK GAME BY SHAWN & NAVI DRAKE

## A Couple of Drakes Quick-Start

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# Court of Blades

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# Introduction

## *This Guide*

In this quick-start guide you'll find everything needed to grasp the most essential parts of ***Court of Blades*** and play a fantastic one-shot. To make the experience easy to pick up and play we've condensed the system down to only what is needed to enjoy a single game session, and simplified many of the essential mechanics. Just read this through once, and you're all set.

## *The Game*

***Court of Blades*** is a game of politics, magic, romance and peril. It takes place in a world populated by scheming nobles, unscrupulous court magicians, and dashing duelists.

In ***Court of Blades***, you take on the roles of retainers to a newly risen House of the Esultare in the great city of Ilrien. The Esultare, composed of the six Houses Major, are considered the most powerful families in the Principalities, but amongst them they have their own pecking order. The First Prince sits atop this hierarchy, with each citizen of Ilrien aware of every House's position within that order.

You have already risen so high. But to secure your place and ensure the House you serve ascends to the highest seat of power in the world, you must learn the secrets of your rival Houses, advance your own House's agenda, and risk your lives in a renaissance world of duplicity and magic.

Can your characters play the Great Game and win it all, or will they fall prey to the machinations of their rivals?

## *Touch Stones*

Touch stones can be helpful for pitching a new game. Here, we've provided some well-known touch stones to get you started: ***The Three Musketeers***, by Alexandre Dumas. ***Romeo and Juliet***, by William Shakespeare. ***Homeland***, by R. A. Salvatore. ***A Song of Ice and Fire***, by George R. R. Martin. ***The Lies of Locke Lamora***, by Scott Lynch.

## *What You Need to Play*

- This quick-start guide.
- 2-5 players, and one game master.
- 6 six-sided dice to share.
- A printed copy of the quick-start kit.

## *The Setting Overview*

**Ilrien, the seat of power.** Our scene is laid in the Principalities; successor states which threw off the yoke of a decadent, continent-spanning imperial nation known as the Dread Empire. Quarrelsome since their inception over two-hundred years before, the Principalities have fallen into an uneasy ceasefire after decades of war. None have been more prosperous in the years of relative peace than the city-state of Ilrien.

Situated on the coast, with natural deep-water harbors and a history of technical, artistic and magical innovation, Ilrien is positioned as the greatest city of this or any other age. It is the center of learning, spirituality, art, magic and romance.

Ilrien is also a phenomenally political city. The nobles are constantly engaged in an exceedingly polite civil war. While there are always six leading families among the Esultare, each with their own Prince, there can only be one First Prince. Through careful maneuvering, bribery, manipulation, and murder, the Houses of the Esultare advance their agendas while thwarting their rivals. And so, the Great Game is played. Social sabotage and shadow warfare is waged as the Great Houses court the Houses Minor, the Houses Minor seek to improve their lot, and both manipulate the guilds, the church, and the common folk of Ilrien to rise in favor and gain power and prestige.

## *The Players*

Each player chooses one pre-generated character and works with the other players to choose a House to serve. Each player strives to bring their character to life as an interesting, talented individual with personal goals and interests. They work together with the Game Master to establish the tone and style of the game. During play the players take responsibility for the game narrative alongside the GM.

## *The Game Master*

The Game Master (or GM) establishes the dynamic world around the characters. They portray all the non-player characters (NPCs) in the world by giving each one a concrete desire and preferred method of action. The GM helps organize the conversation of the game so it points toward the interesting elements of play. They are not in charge of the story and do not have to plan events ahead of time. Instead, they present interesting opportunities to the players, then follow the chain of action and consequences wherever they lead.

## *Make It Your Own*

This is a narrative-first game. As you read through the rules you will discover many things are outlined, but otherwise left to your interpretation. This is entirely intentional! The world of Ilrien and the Principalities changes based on the interests and whims of the players, so no two games of Court of Blades are ever played the same way.

For example, in one game a player may decide the contact “Mercy, a foreigner” is a cut-throat mercenary named Jaque Mercy who works down at the docks. In another game a player may decide that it’s Sister Mercy, the headmistress of an orphanage in service to the Lady, in the Twist. Each is true, including the third option that comes up in your game.

If you do not find an answer to your question in rules, trust that you are allowed to, in fact are supposed to, make it up along the way.

# *Core Rules*

## *Safety First*

Court of Blades is a game of intrigue, scheming, and betrayal. It is easy to venture into territory some game groups may find uncomfortable. Not all topics or situations are appropriate or fun for all players, and a quick, open conversation before the game begins will help set boundaries for exploring Ilrien in a manner which prioritizes player comfort and safety.

Simply ask, “Are there any topics or situations you would like to be sure do not come up during this session?” It’s important to note this is not a time to interrogate your fellow players’ wishes. If a player doesn’t want spiders anywhere in the game world, so be it, the Principalities are now spider-free. Why a player wishes it so is unimportant to play.

Far from restricting the subjects and material your group can explore, touching base in this way will allow your group to more freely explore difficult topics during play, with everyone secure in the fact that play will not devolve into something upsetting or outright harmful.

## *Judgement Calls*

When you play, you will make several key judgment calls. Everyone contributes, but either the players or the GM gets final say in each instance.

- Which actions are reasonable as a solution to a problem? Must we get out the tools and tinker with this old rusty lock, or could it also be wrecked with the butt of a pistol? **The players have final say.**
- How dangerous and how effective is a given action in this circumstance? How risky is this? Can this person be swayed only very little or entirely? **The GM has final say.**
- Which consequences are inflicted to manifest the dangers in a given circumstance? Does this fall from the roof break your leg? Do the Corvetto merely become suspicious or do they already have damning evidence against you? **The GM has final say.**
- Does this situation call for a dice roll, and which one? Is your character in position to make an action roll or must they first make a resistance roll to gain initiative? **The GM has final say.**

## *The Game Structure*

Court of Blades has a structure to play, and for the sake of brevity and for the purpose of a one-shot, we have condensed it down to two phases. By default, the game is in free play—this is where the players get a sense of what problem or opportunity requires their expertise, and shapes the upcoming errand. Characters also talk to each other, they go places, they do things, they may gather information, and they make rolls as needed.

When the group is ready, they will choose how to approach the errand at hand. This triggers the engagement roll (which establishes the situation as the errand starts) and then the game shifts into the errand phase.

During the errand, the PCs engage the target—they make rolls, overcome obstacles, call for flashbacks, and complete the errand (successfully or not).

## *Rolling the Dice*

We do not make an Action Roll unless the PC is put to the test. If their action is something we expect them to simply accomplish, then we do not make an action roll. Each game group will have their own ideas about what “challenging” means. This is good! It’s something that establishes the tone and style of your Court of Blades session. **To make an Action Roll, we go through six steps. In play, they flow together.**

1. The player states their goal for the action.
2. The player chooses the action rating they will use. \*This also provides the base of their roll. They take 1d for each point they have in the rating they’re performing. If they have 0, they roll 2d and take the lower result.
3. The GM sets the position for the roll.
4. The GM sets the effect level for the action.
5. The player adds bonus dice as desired.

You can normally get up to two bonus dice for your action roll (some special abilities might give you additional bonus dice). For one bonus die, you can get assistance from a teammate. They take 1 stress, describe the manner in which they help you, and give you +1d. For another bonus die, you may either push yourself (take 2 stress) or you can accept a Lady’s Favor (you can’t get dice for both, only one or the other).

6. The player rolls the dice and we judge the result.

There are two types of rolls that require a dice pool. These are Action Rating rolls, taken when you’re trying to accomplish something non-mechanical. And Resistance rolls, taken when you are in immediate danger of taking some kind of harm.



When you roll your dice, you'll only keep the single highest result on any of the dice you roll, unless you roll multiple 6s, which counts as a critical success. Any time that you have 0 (or negative) dice to roll, roll 2d6 and take the lower result.

### **The Roll Resolution outcomes are easy to remember.**

- 1-3: Failure with an additional setback, complication, or harm. Or, a success with multiple complications. / 1 tick on Challenge Clock with Standard Effect.
  - 4/5: Partial success, or success with a complication. / 2 ticks on a Challenge Clock with Standard Effect.
  - 6: Full success. / 3 ticks on a Challenge Clock with Standard Effect.
- MULTIPLE 6s: Critical success, or success with a bonus. / 5 ticks on a Challenge Clock with Standard Effect.

## *Action Rating & Attributes*

**There are 12 actions in the game that the PCs use to overcome obstacles.**

- |           |            |          |          |
|-----------|------------|----------|----------|
| • Channel | • Hunt     | • Skulk  | • Sway   |
| • Command | • Maneuver | • Study  | • Tinker |
| • Consort | • Skirmish | • Survey | • Wreck  |

Each action has a rating (from zero to 4) which tells you how many dice to roll when you perform that action. Action ratings do not just represent skill or training—you're free to describe how your character performs that action based on the type of person they are.

When you **Channel**, you open you draw on sorcerous might.

When you **Command**, you compel obedience.

When you **Consort**, you socialize amongst friends.

When you **Hunt**, you carefully track a target.

When you **Maneuver**, you traverse quickly and skillfully.

When you **Skirmish**, you entangle a target in combat.

When you **Skulk**, you move carefully so as to avoid notice.

When you **Study**, you scrutinize details and interpret evidence.

When you **Survey**, you observe the situation and anticipate outcomes.

When you **Sway**, you influence with guile, charm, or argument.

When you **Tinker**, you fiddle with devices and mechanisms.

When you **Wreck**, you utilize overwhelming force against a person or object.

## Double-duty Rolls

Since NPCs do not roll for their actions, an action roll does double-duty: it resolves the action of the PC as well as any NPCs that are involved. On a 6, the PC wins and has their effect. On a 4/5, it is a mix—both the PC and the NPC have their effect. On a 1-3, the NPC wins and has their effect as a consequence on the PC.

## Attribute Ratings

There are three attributes in the game system that your player characters use to resist bad consequences: Body, Mind, and Spirit. Each attribute has a rating (from 0 to 4) that tells you how many dice to roll when you use that attribute. The rating for each attribute is equal to the number of dots in the first column under that attribute.

## Resistance Roll

Each attribute resists a different type of danger. If you are embarrassed for example, you resist social harm with your Spirit rating. Resistance rolls always succeed—you diminish or deflect the bad result—but the better your roll, the less stress it costs to reduce or avoid the danger.

When the enemy has a big advantage, you'll need to make a resistance roll before you can take your own action. For example, when you duel the master swordfighter, she disarms you before you can strike. You need to make a resistance roll to keep hold of your blade if you want to attack her.

BODY	
●	SKULK
●	MANEUVER
●	SKIRMISH
●	WRECK
MIND	
●	TINKER
●	STUDY
●	SURVEY
●	HUNT
SPIRIT	
●	CHANNEL
●	COMMAND
●	CONSORT
●	SWAY

### The character here has:

- 3 dice to roll in Body
- 0 dice to roll in Mind (roll 2 dice and take the lower result.)
- 2 dice to roll in Spirit

## *Pushing Yourself*

You can use stress to push yourself for greater performance. For each effect you choose below, take 2 stress (each can be chosen once for a given action):

- Add +1d to your roll. (This may be used for an action roll or downtime roll or any other kind of roll where extra effort would help you)
- Add +1 level to your effect.
- Take action when you're incapacitated, physically or socially.

## *The Lady's Favor*

PCs in Court of Blades are professional retainers dedicated to the rise of their House—they do not always act in their own best interests. To reflect this, the GM or any other player can offer you a bonus die if you accept a Lady's Favor. The Lady's nature is duality. She is fortune, both good and bad.

### **Common Lady's Favors include:**

- Add a new complication.
- Collateral damage, unintended harm.
- Betray a friend or loved one.
- Offend or anger a faction.
- Start and/or tick a troublesome clock.
- Suffer harm.

The Lady's Favor occurs regardless of the outcome of the roll. You make the deal, pay the price, and get the bonus die.

The Lady's Favor is always a free choice. If you do not like one, just reject it (or suggest how to alter it so you might consider taking it). You can always just push yourself for that bonus die instead.

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### **Action Roll Summary**

- 1d for each Action rating dot.
- +1d if you have Assistance.
- +1d if you Push yourself -or- you accept a Lady's Favor.

## Stress

Player characters in Court of Blades have a special reserve called stress. When they suffer a consequence they do not want to accept, they can take stress instead. The result of the resistance roll determines how much stress it costs to avoid a bad outcome.

***Example:** During a duel, Mia's character, Cross, is stabbed in the chest. Mia rolls her body rating to resist, and gets a 2. It costs 6 stress, minus 2 (the result of the resistance roll) to resist the consequences. She marks off 4 stress and describes how Cross survives. The GM rules that Cross suffers level 2 harm "Chest Wound" instead of level 3 harm "Punctured Lung".*

## Scandals

When a PC marks their last stress box, they suffer a scandal. When you take a scandal, circle one of your scandal conditions like sentimental, wicked, et cetera. They are all described below. Scandal conditions are **permanent**.

### Scandal Conditions

- **Sentimental:** You are known to be soft of heart, and easily moved by misty-eyed emotion.
- **Wicked:** You are suspected of villainous appetites or inclinations, and many expect your treachery.
- **Grasping:** Your reputation is one of bold social-climbing and a lack of regard for those you hurt.
- **False:** You are known for deception and calumny; few can afford to take you at your word.
- **Gauche:** You are known to be crass, graceless, and whether by word or deed, unwilling to play the game of courtesy.
- **Jealous:** Your peers know that you covet what they have, and they guard well against it.
- **Faithless:** You are reputedly unwilling to place your trust in anyone or anything.
- **Fragile:** You are too easily cut by word or treacherous deed to live long in Ilrien.

## *Position & Effect*

### **Setting Position & Effect Before Rolling**

Anytime a roll is required, the player will state what they want to accomplish and which Action Rating they will roll. In return, the GM will state the PC's current Position and Effect. Position represents how much danger the PC is in while doing the action, while Effect represents how much power the PC has in the fiction to achieve their desired outcome.

Setting Position and Effect allows a number of different possible outcomes to spool out from a single roll. It also gives players the power to consider their actions, because the PCs are competent and have a sense of how challenging something will be for them. There is no "pass/fail", and even a bad roll will create interesting and satisfying outcomes that move the story forward.

The most common Position and Effect are **risky / standard**. When in doubt, use that.

### **Position**

**CONTROLLED** - The PC is in no immediate danger of serious repercussions. Things are calm and collected.

**RISKY** - The PC is in immediate danger of repercussions. Things are looking dangerous.

**DESPERATE** - The PC is in the worst position possible and in danger of serious repercussions. Everything is a disaster, or may be very soon.

### **Effect**

**GREATER** - The challenge is relatively easy for your PC. A 6 is treated as a crit, a 4/5 is treated as a 6, a 1-3 is treated as a 4/5. (Good news, you literally can't fail!) / +1 tick on challenge clock results.

**STANDARD** - The challenge is equal to the character's current ability to resolve. / Normal clock progress, as under Roll Resolution.

**LIMITED** - This challenge asks for more than your character's current ability to resolve. Crits are treated as a 6 instead, a 6 is treated as a 4/5, and a 4/5 is treated as a 1-3. (Good news, there's nothing lower than 1-3!) / -1 tick on challenge clock results.



## Trading Position for Effect

After factors are considered and the GM has announced the effect level, a player might want to trade position for effect, or vice versa. For instance, if they are going to make a risky roll with standard effect (the most common scenario, generally), they might instead want to push their luck and make a desperate roll but with great effect.

This kind of trade-off is not included in the effect factors because it's not an element the GM should assess when setting the effect level. Once the level is set, though, you can always offer the trade-off to the player if it makes sense in the situation.

### A few examples of a character facing off alone against a small rival coterie:

1. She fights the coterie straight up, rushing into their midst, hacking away in a wild skirmish. In this case, being threatened by the larger force lowers her position to indicate greater risk, and the scale of the coterie reduces her effect (**desperate / limited**).
2. She fights the coterie from a choke-point, like a narrow alleyway where their numbers can't overwhelm her at once. She's not threatened by several at once, so her risk is similar to a one-on-one fight, but there are still a lot of combatants to deal with, so her effect is reduced (**risky / limited**).
3. She doesn't fight the coterie, instead trying to maneuver her way past them and escape. She's still under threat from many attacks, so her position is worse, but if the ground is open and the coterie can't easily corral her, then her effect for escaping isn't reduced (desperate / standard). If she had some immediate means of escape (like leaping onto a speeding carriage), then her effect might even be increased (**desperate / great**).
4. The coterie isn't aware of her yet—she's set up in a sniper position on a nearby roof. She takes a shot against one of them. Their greater numbers aren't a factor, so her effect isn't reduced, and she's not immediately in any danger (**controlled / great**).

## *Consequences & Harm*

Enemy actions, circumstances, or a roll outcome can inflict consequences on a PC. The GM determines the consequences, flowing from the fiction, style and tone established by the game group. There are five types (below).

**Reduced Effect:** This consequence represents diminished performance. The PC's action is not as effective as they had anticipated. She accepts the forged invitation, but she will keep her eye on you throughout the night.

**Complication:** This consequence represents trouble, mounting danger, or a new threat. The GM might introduce an immediate problem that results from the action right now: the room catches fire, you are disarmed, the target evades you and now the chase is on, et cetera.

Or the GM might tick a clock for the complication, instead. Or create a new clock and tick it.

A serious complication is more severe: your dueling foil is broken, your target slips out of sight, et cetera. Fill three ticks on a clock working against the coterie for a serious complication.

Don't inflict a complication that negates a successful roll. If a PC tries to corner someone and gets a 4/5, do not say that the person escapes. The player's roll succeeded, so the person is cornered... but perhaps the person is not who they first appeared.

**Lost Opportunity:** This consequence represents a shifting circumstance. You had an opportunity to achieve your goal with this action, but it slips away. To try again, you need a new approach—usually a new form of action or a change in circumstances.

**Worse Position:** This consequence represents losing control of the situation—the action carries you into a more dangerous position. Perhaps you make the leap across to the next rooftop, only to end up dangling by your fingertips. This is a good consequence to choose to show escalating action. A situation might go from controlled, to risky, to desperate as the action plays out and the PC gets deeper and deeper in trouble.

**Harm**

This consequence represents a long-lasting debility (or death). It can be physical or social in nature. When you suffer harm, record the specific injury on your character’s playbook sheet equal to the level of harm you suffer. If you suffer lesser harm, record it in the bottom row. If you suffer moderate harm, write it in the middle row. If you suffer severe harm, record it in the top row. See examples of harm and the harm tracker on the following page.

Your character suffers the penalty indicated at the end of the row if any or all harm recorded in that row applies to the situation at hand. So, if you have “Embarrassed” and “Battered” harm in the bottom row, you will suffer reduced effect when you try to talk your way out of a risky situation with the Al-Mari diplomat. When you are impaired by harm in the top row (severe harm, level 3), your character is incapacitated and can’t do anything unless you have help from someone else or push yourself to perform the action. If you need to mark a harm level, but the row is already filled, the harm moves up to the next row above. If you run out of spaces on the top row and need to mark harm there, your character suffers a catastrophic, permanent consequence.

HARM		
3	Relieved from duty!	NEED HELP
2		-1D
1	EmbarrassedBattered	LESS EFFECT

This character has three harm: a “relieved from duty” (level 3, severe) plus “embarrassed” and “battered” (both level 1, lesser). If they suffer another level 1 harm, it will move up to level 2. If they suffer another level 3 harm, it will move up to level 4: Potentially Fatal.

## Harm Examples

- **Potentially Fatal (4):** *Physical*; Electrocuted, Drowned, Stabbed in the Heart, Lost Limb. — *Social*; Excommunicated, Fugitive, Enemy of the State.
- **Severe (3):** *Physical*; Impaled, Broken Leg, Shot in Chest, Badly Burned, Terrified. — *Social*; Relieved from Duty, Disgraced, Shunned.
- **Moderate (2):** *Physical*; Exhausted, Deep Cut to Arm, Concussion, Panicked, Seduced. — *Social*; Atoning, Out of Favor with House X, Openly Mocked by House X.
- **Lesser (1):** *Physical*; Battered, Drained, Distracted, Scared, Confused — *Social*; Embarrassed, Chastised, Whispers Behind your Back.

Harm like “embarrassed” or “exhausted” can be a good fallback consequence if there’s nothing else threatening a PC.

## Resistance & Armor

When your PC suffers a consequence that you would rather not, you can choose to resist it. Just tell the GM, “No, I don’t think so. I’m resisting that.” Resistance is always automatically effective—the GM will tell you if the consequence is reduced in severity or if you avoid it entirely. Then, you will make a resistance roll to see how much stress your character suffers as a result of their resistance.

You make the roll using one of your character’s attributes (Mind, Body, or Spirit). The GM chooses the attribute, based on the nature of consequences:

- **Mind:** Consequences from deception or understanding.
- **Body:** Consequences from physical strain or injury.
- **Spirit:** Consequences from mental strain or willpower.

Your character suffers 6 stress when they resist, minus the highest die result from the resistance roll. So, if you rolled a 4, you would suffer 2 stress. If you rolled a 6, you would suffer zero stress. If you get a critical result, you also clear 1 stress.

Usually, a resistance roll reduces the severity of a consequence. If it looks as though you are going to suffer fatal harm, for example, a resistance roll would reduce the harm to severe, instead. Or if you got a complication when you

were sneaking into the manor house, and the GM was about to mark three ticks on the “Alert” clock, she would only mark two (or maybe one) if you resisted the complication.

You may only roll against a given consequence once.

By adjusting which consequences are reduced vs. which are avoided, the GM establishes the overall tone of your game. For a more daring game, most consequences can be avoided.

The GM may also threaten several consequences at once, allowing the player to choose which ones to resist (and make rolls for each).

“She stabs you and then leaps off the balcony. Level 2 harm and you lose the opportunity to catch her with fighting.”

“I’ll resist losing the opportunity by grappling her as she attacks. She can stab me, but I don’t want to let her escape.”

Once you decide to resist a consequence and roll, you suffer the stress indicated. You cannot roll first and see how much stress you’ll take, then decide whether or not to resist.

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### **Resistance Roll Summary**

- 1d for each Attribute rating.
- You reduce or avoid the effects of the consequence (GM chooses).
- Suffer 6 stress minus the highest die result.
- Critical: Clear 1 stress.

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## *A armor*

If you have a type of armor that applies to the situation, you can mark an armor box to reduce or avoid a consequence, instead of rolling to resist. When an armor box is marked, it cannot be used again until it is restored. It has already saved your life and gotten damaged in the process.



## *Special Armor*

Every playbook is granted a special armor feature. This feature is a special ability which allows the playbook to resist a single consequence or complication per errand related to a specific area of expertise. In many ways it is like the armor which any playbook can acquire with load. When a consequence that might be resisted by the special armor is mentioned, the player marks off the armor and describes how their armor saves them.

## *Death*

There are two main ways for a PC to die:

- If they suffer level 4 fatal harm and they do not resist it, they die. Sometimes this is a choice a player wants to make, because they feel like it would not make sense for the character to survive, or it seems right for their character to die here.
- If they need to record harm at level 3 and it is already filled, the character suffers a catastrophic consequence, which might mean sudden death (depending on the circumstances).

## *Fortune Roll*

The fortune roll is a tool the GM can use to aid in decision making. You use a fortune roll in two different ways:

When you need to make a determination about a situation the PCs aren't directly involved in and don't want to simply decide the outcome.

Two rival factions in the Groan are fighting. How does that turn out? The GM makes a fortune roll for each of them. One gets a good result but the other gets limited effect. The GM decides that the first faction takes over some of their rivals' territory but suffer some injuries during the skirmish.

When an outcome is uncertain, but no other roll applies to the situation at hand.

While the riot breaks out in the Twist, Bertrand and his coterie are caught between The Unburnt, The Motley, and House Bastien pikemen. As the fires rage and the three sides close in on the crossroads where the coterie try to make their escape, the GM makes a fortune roll. Will the Unburnt honor

their contract? Will they hold back the Motley? Are they in league with the Bastien Pikemen? Do they even know the PCs are here?

Roll 1d6 for sheer luck or create a dice pool (from 1 to 4) based on the situation at hand. If two parties are directly opposed, make a fortune roll for each side to see how they do, then assess the outcome of the situation by comparing their performance levels.

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### Fortune Roll Summary

- 1d for each Trait rating.
- +1d for each Major Advantage
- -1d for each Major Disadvantage

**1-3:** Bad result / Poor, little effect.

**4/5:** Mixed result / Limited, partial effect.

**6:** Good result / Standard, full effect

**Critical:** Exceptional result / Great, extreme effect.

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## *Engagement Roll*

The engagement roll is a special type of fortune roll which comes into play when the Coterie has the necessary plan and detail to begin an errand. First, they decide what type of plan they are undertaking. The plans are outlined on every Playbook for reference and are as follows: Assault, Deception, Stealth, Arcane, Social, or Transport.

There are two reasons for choosing a general plan before beginning an errand. First, it keeps the Coterie on the same page. If half of the Coterie wants to use Stealth to bypass the Elanda House Guard and steal their ledgers while the other half of the Coterie wants to run a Social errand and earn formal access to Elanda's ledgers, it is best to iron out this wrinkle before the engagement roll is made. The second reason involves taking advantage of bonuses awarded by some abilities or Spheres of Influence.

Example: The Grand Gate has the following Perks: +1d to Gather Information regarding comings and goings within Ilrien. Take +1 to your engagement roll when acting on that information.

When the Players are ready to make the engagement roll, they begin with 1d for sheer audacity on the part of the Coterie, with the total number of dice rolled modified by any major advantages or disadvantages affecting them.

### Major Advantages and Disadvantages

- Is this errand particularly bold and daring? Take +1d. Is it overly complex or contingent on luck or outside factors? Take -1d.
- Does the plan leverage a House strength? Take +1d. Is the target strong against this approach or prepared for this eventuality? Take -1d.
- Can any of your friends or contacts provide aid or insight into this errand? Take +1d. Are your enemies or rivals interfering in this errand? Take -1d.
- Will this errand in some way endanger or reflect poorly upon one of your paramours? Take +1d and lose 1 heat with them. Will you allow your paramour or their reputation to complicate this errand? Take -1d and gain 1 heat with them.
- Are there other elements you wish to consider? Maybe a lower-tier target might afford you +1d. Maybe a higher-tier target gives you -1d. Maybe there's a situation in the district which makes the errand more or less troublesome.

**1-3:** You're in a desperate position when the action starts.

**4/5:** You are in a risky position when the action starts.

**6:** You're in a controlled position when the action starts.

**Critical:** Exceptional result. You've already overcome the first obstacle, and are in a controlled position for whatever is next.

The engagement roll assumes the PCs approach the object of the errand with as much care, attention, and intelligence as they can, given the nature of the plan and detail they have provided. We do not need to play out tentative maneuvers or special preparations. The engagement roll covers that. The PCs are already in action, shadowing the courier, maneuvering across the ballroom at the Corvetto masquerade, cornering the double agent, etc. Cut directly to the action resulting from of the approach.

## *Progress Clocks*

Not every situation and obstacle requires a progress clock. Use clocks when a situation is complex or layered and you need to track something over time—otherwise, resolve the result of an action with a single roll.

A progress clock is a circle divided into segments. Draw one when you need to track ongoing effort against an obstacle or the approach of impending trouble. Sneaking into a Prince's garden? Make a clock to track the alert level of the patrolling house guard. When the PCs suffer consequences from partial successes or missed rolls, fill in segments on the clock until the alarm is raised.

Generally, the more complex the problem, the more segments in the progress clock. A complex obstacle is a 4-segment clock. A more complicated obstacle is a 6-clock. A daunting obstacle is an 8-segment clock.

When you create a clock, make it about the obstacle, not the method. The clocks for an infiltration should be “Interior Patrol” and “The Tower,” not “Sneak Past the House Guards” or “Climb the Tower.” The patrols and the tower are the obstacles—the PCs can attempt to overcome them in a variety of ways.

Remember that a clock tracks progress. It reflects the fictional situation, so the group can gauge how they're doing. A clock is like a speedometer in a car. It shows the speed of the vehicle—but the throttle controls the speed. Actions are your throttle.

## *Danger Clocks*

The GM can use a clock to represent a progressive danger, like suspicion growing during a seduction, the proximity of pursuers in a chase, or the alert level of the bravo accompanying your target. In this case, when a complication occurs, the GM ticks one, two, or three segments on the clock, depending on the consequence level. When the clock is full, the danger comes to fruition—the house guard hunts down the spies, sounds an alarm, releases the hounds, et cetera.

## *Racing Clocks*

Create two opposed clocks to represent a race. The PCs might have a progress clock called “Escape” while a rival coterie has a clock called “Cornered.” If the PCs finish their clock before their rivals fill theirs, they get away. Otherwise, they are cornered and cannot flee. If both complete at the same time, the PCs escape, but the hunting coterie is on their heels!

You can also use racing clocks for an environmental hazard. Maybe the PCs are trying to complete the “Search” clock to find the lockbox on the Prince’s sinking ship before the GM fills the “Sunk” clock and the vessel goes down to the bottom of the harbor.

## *Linked Clocks*

You can make a clock that unlocks another clock once it is filled. For example, the GM might make a linked clock called “Trapped” after an “Alert” clock fills up. When you challenge a veteran council-member, she might have a clock for her “Defense” and then a linked clock for “Vulnerable.” Once you overcome the “Defense” clock, then you can attempt to overcome the “Vulnerable” clock and defeat her argument. You might affect the “Defense” clock with cunning in a debate, or you lower her defense with deception if you have the opportunity. As always, the method of action is up to the players and the details of the fiction at hand.

## *Gathering Information*

The flow of information from the GM to the players about the fictional world is very important in a roleplaying game. By default, the GM tells the players what their characters perceive, suspect, and intuit. But there’s just too much going on to say everything—it would take forever and be boring, too. The players have a tool at their disposal to more fully investigate the fictional world.

When you want to know something specific about the fictional world, your character can gather information. The GM will ask you how your character gathers the info. Alternately, if it is information your character might already know, the GM may ask how they learned it in the past.



If it's common knowledge, the GM will simply answer your questions. If there's an obstacle to the discovery of the answer, an action roll is called for. If it's not common knowledge but there's no obstacle, a simple fortune roll determines the quality of the information you gather.

Each attempt to gather information takes time. If the situation allows, you can try again if you don't initially get all the details that you want. But often, the opportunity is fleeting, and you'll only get one chance to roll for that particular question.

### **The Gather Information Roll**

Ask a question and make an action roll or a fortune roll. The GM answers you honestly, with a level of detail depending on the effect level.

Great: You get exceptional details. The information is complete and follow-up questions may expand into related areas or reveal more than you hoped for.  
Standard: You get good details. Clarifying and follow-up questions are possible.

Limited: You get incomplete or partial information. More information gathering will be needed to get all the answers.

### *Loadout*

Before you begin an errand, you will be expected to declare how much gear your character is carrying, based on what you think you will need to accomplish the goal. This is your character's "load".

You will have access to all of the items and gear on your character's Playbook sheet during each errand. The idea here is that your character is skilled and talented, and knows what they need to bring on an errand (even when you, the player, do not). As you and your coterie go about completing your errand, you will tick off the load boxes next to each item you use, but only after you've used it.

Your load also determines your movement speed and your conspicuousness.



- 1-3 Load: Discrete, you're faster, less conspicuous, and you blend in with the citizenry.
- 4-6 Load: Loaded, you look like a specialist out on an errand. You look like trouble.
- 7+ Load: Encumbered, without special skills or abilities added from Playbooks or House Sheets, you are encumbered at this point and only capable of moving very slowly.

**Example:** *The coterie is asked to escort an important diplomat from the city gates to their patron's house. Anna, their Knack, is expecting this errand to be a milk run. All the coterie has to do is keep their heads down, and blend in, so she declares she'll be taking a discrete load.*

*When they run into trouble along the way, Anna is forced to use her armor to avoid being seriously harmed in an ambush, costing her two of the three load she declared when she decided to go discrete. When she produces her Fine Arcane Focus to make her diversion more potent so that the coterie can escape, she marks off her last load box. She has now spent all three of her declared load and must rely only on her skills and quick thinking for the rest of the errand.*

## Teamwork

When the PCs work together, they gain access to four special teamwork actions. They are listed on all of the character Playbooks to remind players of their options. Players are always welcome to act on their own and without aid. These actions are optional, and provide various bonuses to players to represent the coordinated action of a coterie working together.

## Assist

When you assist another player who is rolling, describe what your character does to help them. Take 1 stress and give them +1d to their roll. You may also suffer consequences occurring due to the roll, depending on the circumstances. Only one character may assist any given roll. If you want to help someone who is already being assisted, consider using a set up action instead.

Note: A character can assist a group action, provided they are not taking part in the group action themselves. Decide which character in the group action gets the +1d, and mark 1 stress.

## *Group Action*

When you lead a group action you coordinate with your coterie members to accomplish a goal. Describe how your character helps the action as an individual. For example, do you give commands, signals, or motivation?

Every PC involved in a group action makes a roll using the same action rating, and the coterie counts the best roll as the overall effort for everyone who participated. However, the PC who leads the group action takes 1 stress for each PC whose best result was a 1-3. A PC does not have to be skilled in an action to help, the group action leader essentially absorbs the fallout from poor rolls.

Mira decides to lead a group action for the coterie to sneak into the tower at the Grand Gate. Everyone who wants to sneak in rolls their Skulk action at the same time, and the best result counts for the whole team. Jin rolled a 6, so the coterie succeeds without complication. However, Mist and Bran both rolled in the 1-3 range. Mira takes 2 stress for the coterie members who rolled poorly. It is no frolic covering for the stragglers.

The group action result covers everyone who rolled. You can also lead your coterie's retainues and colleagues (NPCs hired by your coterie) with a group action. Roll Command if you direct their efforts, or the appropriate action rating if you participate with them. The retainue or colleague rolls its quality level.

## *Set Up*

When you perform a set up action you have an indirect effect on an obstacle. If your action has its intended result, any coterie member who follows through on your set up gets +1 effect level or improved position for their roll. You choose the benefit based on the nature of your set up action.

This is a great way to contribute to an operation when you do not have a good rating for the action at hand. A clever set up allows you to help your coterie indirectly. Multiple follow up actions can take advantage of your set up action, including someone else leading a group action, so long as it makes sense in the narrative.

Set up actions are especially helpful in situations where the coterie is facing a challenge or opposition that has advantages in quality, scale, and/or potency. Even if PCs are reduced to zero effect due to disadvantages in a situation, a set up action provides a bonus that allows for limited effect.

## *Protect*

You step in to face a consequence on behalf of a coterie member. You suffer the consequence instead of them. You may roll to resist the consequence as normal. Describe how you intervene.

## *Flashbacks*

The rules do not distinguish between actions done in the present and those carried out in the past. When an errand is underway and your retainer is on the job, you may invoke a flashback to roll for an action in the past that impacts your current situation. Maybe you convinced the district watch sergeant to look the other way while you broke into the Al-Mari warehouse, so you make a Sway roll to see how that went.

**The GM sets a stress cost when you activate a flashback action.**

**0 Stress:** An ordinary action for which you had an easy opportunity.

**1 Stress:** A complex action or unlikely opportunity.

**2 (or more!) Stress:** An elaborate action that involved special opportunities or contingencies.

After the stress cost is paid, a flashback action is handled just like any other action. Sometimes it entails an action roll because there is some degree of danger or trouble involved. Sometimes a flashback will require a fortune roll because we just need to find out how well it went (or how long it took, or how much it accomplished, et cetera). Sometimes a flashback will not call for a roll at all, per the GM's approval, because you can just pay the stress cost and consider it accomplished.

If a flashback involves a downtime activity, pay influence for it instead of stress. One of the best uses for a flashback is when the engagement roll goes badly. After the GM describes what sort of complications have ensued or what kind of trouble you have gotten yourself into, you can call for a flashback to a special preparation you made, "just for such an occasion."

## Limits of Flashbacks

A flashback is not time travel. It cannot undo something that has just occurred in the present moment. For instance, if the Corvetto bravo saw you walking across the Plaza carrying the marked courier's bag containing the bribe money, you cannot simply call a flashback to have already dueled and killed him the night prior. The narrative has established the bravo is there and looking at you.

You could, however, flashback to tipping off a couple of Blue Devils who have it out for this particular, luckless bravo, affording yourself an armed and dangerous obstacle between you and your Corvetto rival.

## Romance

Ilrien is a city of romance, danger, and dangerous romance. That said, if romance and the mechanization of romance does not feel appropriate or right in your game, feel free to ignore the following mechanics and the paramour system entirely.

Typically, a PC would acquire a Paramour through play, but for the purpose of a one-shot it makes sense to simply allow anyone who wishes to have one, to begin with one, and award them one point of "Heat" to spend in one of the following ways during play:

- The paramour will intercede with a related faction to prevent a shift in faction status (-2 to -3, for instance).
- If your paramour is of a higher status, you may make use of the paramour's status (typically the tier or reputation of the organization to which they belong) for the course of an errand.
- If your Paramour is of a lower status, you take 2 less exposure for an errand if they can help you by covering for your actions.
- Acquire asset rolls which in some way leverage your relationship to secure an asset related to your paramour cannot roll below a 4/5.
- Heat may be spent on a 1 for 1 basis to gain favor with the faction group (Houses Major, Minor, Outsiders, Citizenry, or Uncouth) to which they belong.

When you choose to have a Paramour, give them a name, and assign them one or two Edges, and an equal number of Flaws.

### Edges

- **Connected:** Your paramour is well thought of in their circles and has no trouble in getting exactly what they (and you) need.
- **Protective:** Your paramour will sacrifice their safety for yours.
- **Doting:** Your paramour will offer their assistance without reservation or strings attached.
- **Well-Protected:** Your paramour is insulated from the dangers of your world.

### Flaws

- **Jealous:** Your paramour will not suffer anything else being the center of your world lightly.
- **Meddling:** Your paramour is quick to get involved in your business concerns.
- **Flighty:** Your paramour is often distracted by other matters requiring their attention.
- **Star-crossed:** Your paramour is caught between love and duty; your love will always be a forbidden one.

Relationships between PCs do not require a heat clock and are instead adjudicated as a deepening of the bonds between characters. PCs can assist their PC paramour once per errand without paying stress. Protecting your paramour in a manner which requires a resistance roll costs reduced stress, as detailed here:

- 1-3:** 2 Stress  
**4/5:** 1 Stress  
**6:** No Stress Cost  
**Critical:** Recover 2 Stress



# Character Creation

## *Choose a Playbook*

When you choose a Playbook (Such as the pregenerated Playbooks included with this Quickstart), you are choosing a set of special abilities, which your character can use to break the rules governing everyone else. Every Playbook begins with some action rating dots, and its own special armor which gives them a unique ability to mitigate certain circumstances falling under their skillset.

Each Playbook also has its own unique, specialized gear items to accompany their standard gear. These provide special permissions and interesting abilities to each Playbook. Gear items like the Knack's Vulgar Display of Power, are open to interpretation. Players may use them to affect scenes and overcome challenges, manipulating the balance of position and effect. If you don't have an idea for an item on your list, simply ignore it.

- The **Bravo** is a dashing sworn-sword, quick of wit and unmatched in combat.
- The **Hawk** is a dangerous bounty hunter, menacing and unflappable in the face of danger.
- The **Eye** is a master agent and infiltrator, cannier than a skulk of foxes and just as hard to catch.
- The **Couth** is a street-wise wildcard, lucky or dangerous enough to rise from the gutter.
- The **Knack** is a magical expert, gifted with arcane power and knowledge of the hidden world.
- The **Key** is a social mastermind, crafting arguments and devices with ease.
- The **Kiss** is a fae-touched charmer and magical manipulator.
- The **Curse** is a haunted revenant bearing ancient knowledge, weaponry, and a grudge.

*The player kit that came with your quick start guide contains premade characters and House sheets for use with your one-shot, allowing you to skip character generation and House set-up.*



# House Creation

## *Choose a House to Serve*

The House you serve determines your coterie's modus operandi. What one house would consider a smart move; another house may consider ill-advised. The house you serve is not intended to be restrictive, rather another way to flavor your gameplay. Sometimes it will be worth angering your patrons to get a job done.

Decide as a group which House you are the most interested in serving. There are six distinct Houses to choose from, and each one has its own way of doing things most of the time. Choose the House that best reflects your preferred shared playstyle, or just whichever the group is most excited about.

- **House Corvetto** - The oldest known house in Ilrien, House Corvetto is mysterious, tyrannical, and feared.
- **House Battalia** - The watchtower of Ilrien, House Battalia won the freedom of Ilrien in The Last War. They are noble, vigilant, and honorable.
- **House Bastien** - Champion of the people, House Bastien is loved by the common folk and only tolerated by the other Houses of the Esultare at best.
- **House Lovell** - The socialites of the Esultare, House Lovell makes it their business to know everything about everyone. After all, knowledge is power.
- **House Al-Mari** - Fearsome mercenary princes from across the sea, they've staked their claim by sheer power and force of will.
- **House Elanda** - The most powerful merchant family in the greatest city the world has ever known, House Elanda deals in goods and fiore, carefully guarding its reputation.

Like a Playbook, your House shapes how you are known in Ilrien. You will be treated by the citizenry as an extension of your greater House, and anyone who is anyone will most likely know who you serve. The House Playbook is a shared sheet that helps the coterie keep track of the bigger picture.







Dead Man

CORONET

GILT MARKET

WHITE ROAD

After

Grand Gate

WILDERNESS

SPINDLE

ROSE

CRICKET

Firefly

# *An Abridged Guide to Ilrien*

## *The Great Game & Polite Warfare*

- Every House of the Esultare has its own agenda. Most Houses have at least one rival House, whether secretly, or publicly known. Open warfare is frowned upon, as it might make the Houses Major look petulant in front of the citizens of Ilrien. If a House of the Esultare commits a crime so egregious it must be met with violence, it is preceded by lengthy court hearings. Because of this, warfare happens in the shadows.

## *Culture*

- Peacekeepers of the city, the City Watch deal with the everyday law and order of Ilrien, outside of the Houses Major. Patrolling in breastplates and brown oilskin cloaks, they keep a watchful eye out for trouble. Should they find it, it is their duty to ascertain the truth of the matter. They determine who is pushed before the First Court and who just gets sent crying back home to their mothers with a good ear twisting.
- The fiore is the currency of the city, named for the crocus stamped onto its silver surface. The flower itself was a symbol of the true first Prince's House. Much of the city still runs on trade and barter. The well-to-do carry bank-notarized letters of credit from the Bank of Brass and Bone
- Legal disputes in Ilrien, matters of personal and familial honor, and redress for grievous wrongs both public and personal oft as not result in dueling. The customs and courtesies attached to such duels are as changeable as the fashions of the city, but at minimum the law requires witnesses, an impartial judge, and the permission of local magistrates before any blood is shed.
- In Ilrien, Prince in a gender-neutral term. Regardless of who sits at the head of any House of the Esultare, they are a Prince, out of tradition. Whomever a Prince of Ilrien marries is referred to by the honorific Prince Consort.
- The masks of the old nobility is a notable social convention particular to the city of Ilrien. When the Dread Empire claimed dominion over the entirety of the Principalities, Ilrien was the first nation to rise against their masters. They did this with the natural circumspection which they demonstrate to this day,





and so, they donned masks when they moved against the Empire.

The Lady's irony is such that those who took masks to hide their face now reveal themselves through their mask. There is an elaborate code of markings, embellishments, and decorations through which any individual's history might be read.

- The Lady is the primary deity worshipped in Ilrien, though travelers and foreigners bring their beliefs with them without rebuke. She trusts the souls in Ilrien to take care of themselves, always exacting a price when asked for aid.
- Spirits are everywhere, but generally keep to themselves and out of sight, except on Spirit's Eve, and only with the help of the city's Graces. Hauntings are rare but not entirely unheard of, and typically terrifying for any living persons involved. If a spirit presents itself, it is folk wisdom to figure out what it wants from you and see the matter resolved quickly.
- Magicians or those with the knack, are forbidden to practice their talents in or around The Necropolitan Hill for fear of waking the Deathless in its cold tomb. Even as far as the Groan, displays of legerdemain that might delight a crowd in any other part of the city will draw ire, crowds throwing insults and bottles rather than fire. Common folk wisdom holds that the Deathless was an Imperial warweaver, a sorcerer-general, and magic calls to magic.

When thunder rolls too close for comfort, you'll often hear soft singing between the crashing; denizens of the Groan trying to lull the Deathless back to sleep.

- The Lady's hours are the hours of Tryst and Whist. And dealings between these hours, midnight and four 'o'clock in the morning, are considered to have her attention. This is not always a good thing. Sailors departing on early tides make an offering to the Lady, begging her forgiveness for leaving so soon.
- It is considered bad luck to cut into bread. All bread is broken by hand in Ilrien, even at the finest events hosted by the Houses Major. There is a sense of sacrality about bread that is honored more fervidly the further down the rungs of social status you go. The poorest houses will not throw out even burnt or stale bread, giving rise to interesting dishes relying on those very features. "Burnt bread makes you sing like the canary," is a common colloquialism.



# *Player's Best Practices*

## *Embrace the Danger*

Your retainer did not make it this far in life without a deep understanding of the dangers inherent in serving a noble house, or the loyalty required to hold such a prestigious position. They know that they are as likely to die in service to the house as they are to climb to the very top, if not more so. The odds are stacked against them.

Systems in the game are designed to punish even a deed well done, so no matter how effectively you complete an errand, the exposure and the entanglements will begin to pile on. It will require wit, fast thinking, and finding ways to make amends to cope with these mechanics if you want to make it to the finish line. Embrace the fallout as part of the adventure, not as a detractor. You are here because you have the unique ability to get the job done, no matter the cost. You did not get here because you are unwilling to take risks or push yourself. Fall in love with the satisfaction of getting an impossible errand done.

## *Play to Tell a Great Story*

As a player you have the ability to choose which action to roll for any given task. This does not mean that you should only stick to the actions you are the best at. Doing so would make for a terribly boring story. If you have no people skills, but you need to sway someone, lean into that, or push yourself if your character feels like it is important. Do not try to devise a way in which you can roll Tinker to move someone with your words simply because you have more dice there. That's "weaseling" and not in keeping with the spirit of the game.

## *Shape the Game*

Everyone at the table has a shared responsibility to make Court of Blades into the kind of game they want to play. If you want the game to be more dangerous, play more dangerously. Each person at the table is responsible for the tone, style, and themes of the game. Not just the GM.

## *Build Your Character Through Play*

In Court of Blades, your character begins as a thumbnail sketch, just a few spare details. You do not need to know who you really are at the start, and certainly no one else needs to know. Your character will develop in interesting ways you may have never anticipated as you play, and you should not be constrained by some detailed history that you imagined before the world got its hands on you. Show, don't tell. You are what you become over the course of play.

## *Act Now, Plan Later*

In Court of Blades, we smash to the action. Some planning is fine, but in-depth planning will only stand between you and the fun part of the game. We strongly advise against it. A couple of gather information rolls, reaching out to a contact, and you are more than ready to be on your way.

Instead, when things go wrong, plan with a flashback. Trust that your character knew what they would be encountering well before you did.

**GM:** There is a guard dog on duty.

**You:** Of course, there is. Let me flashback to stopping by the butcher's shop for a great stonking soup bone before we headed out.

**GM:** That's pretty easy. No stress cost for that one. Enjoy your pig's femur.

And we're back to the action.







# Game Masters

## *Running the Game*

### **GM Goals**

When you run the game, you should try and accomplish the following three goals:

- **Play to find out what happens.** Do not steer the game toward certain events or outcomes. Be curious and allow yourself to be surprised by the directions that the narrative takes.
- **Convey the fictional world honestly.** When it is time to say what happens in the world around the PCs, “look around” the vision of Ilrien that is developing in your head and say what you see. Do not play favorites. Make the world of this shining, decadent, and dangerous city and all of the maneuvering within it seem real, not contrived.
- **Bring Ilrien to life.** Give each location a specific aspect (crowded, sun-drenched, salty, fetid, opulent) to make it vivid in your players’ minds. Give each important NPC a name, detail, and a preferred method of problem-solving. Give them agendas, needs and desires. Give each action context--the moonlit duel in the Prince’s Gardens; a double-agent passing intelligence pauses as a Watch patrol strides by; the Brizolatto gambling den smells of foreign liquor and dreamleaf smoke.

To achieve these goals, use GM Actions guided by your GM Principles.

## *GM Actions*

The player characters have twelve actions that they get to use in order to achieve their goals in Ilrien. You have actions, too. When it’s your turn to contribute, and you are not quite sure what to do, look at the following list of actions and pick one.

### **Ask Questions**

First and foremost, ask questions. You can get along very well as a GM in this game by simply asking questions, building on the answers, and then asking more questions. When there is an interesting point of friction or there is a measure of uncertainty, pick up the dice and find out. Asking questions is the heart and soul of running this and every other roleplaying game.

- Ask establishing questions to set the stage for the action. Who's leading the group? Is everyone rushing into this scuffle, or is someone hanging back to do something else? Are you trying to convince the Marquis and win him over, or are you trying to just score points with the other nobles listening?
- Ask provocative questions to make your players think and express their characters. What kind of person does she think you are now? Are you just going to let that matter lie? Do you think you could bring yourself to kill them?
- Ask leading questions to show the player what you're thinking. Do you think they're the type of people who respond well to threats? Does anyone want to Survey the room or Study your host? When you do that, there's a good chance that it'll explode, right?
- Ask trivial questions when the mood strikes you and you're curious. Where do you typically shop for clothes? When did you learn to do that?
- Ask the players for help when you are uncertain or stuck. You do not have to do this alone. I'm not sure...does this feel more Desperate or Risky? Can anyone think of the Lady's Favor here? Sounds like fatal harm, doesn't it? What do you think?

## *Provide Opportunities, Follow Their Lead*

### **An opportunity consists of:**

- A target. The Dockers
- A location. An impounded ship in the Shores district
- A situation. A ship carrying valuable, but technically contraband, alchemical reagents needed to finish a House project has been impounded by order of the Harbormaster.
- One obvious vector for the plan. De' Rossi can pilot a gondola near enough without attracting suspicion--for a favor later.  
Better information from contacts or investigation (or other means) might also include:
- A not-so-obvious vector for a plan. The Harbormaster might see reason if we call in a favor with the Watch.
- Interesting secrets, a link to an alternate opportunity. The Bank of Brass and Bone are likely behind the impoundment and have doubtless hired a team to search for hidden contraband that they may claim as rightful salvage. If we get it first, we'll have leverage over them.

## *Cut to the Action*

When they say, “We should break into Ambassador Dashiell’s house,” that’s your cue. Say, “That sounds like a stealth plan, don’t you think? What’s the entry point?” Then, when they give you that detail, you say, “All right, so you’re on the second-floor balcony of a rooming house overlooking the Plaza. Dashiell keeps his apartments in the adjoining building. The bell has just struck tryst and the ambassador’s house appears dark and silent. Ready with a grappling hook, you prepare to do a bit of breaking and entering. Let’s make an engagement roll.” Just like that you are on an errand.

That might feel fast and breezy, especially if you are used to other roleplaying games. You do not always have to get there that fast! But it is good to aim for. Anything prosecuted via conversation is going to take longer than you think it will--if you hold this “cut to the action” idea at the forefront of your mind, you can trim some of the fruitless planning and unnecessary hesitation from the game and get to the part where we all get to be romantic duelists and powerful sorcerers doing what they do best.

The same can be said of any kind of “Scene Change” that happens in play. Like when a player decides to go and Consort with a friend, you can just cut to the action in progress. “You find Lucky in the usual place, under one of the arching bridges on the Street of Silks. He’s pressed into an alcove, trying to keep the sun off and walking a fiore over his knuckles. ‘You know what I like about you? You know the first rule of 20 questions is coin up front,’ he says.”

Rather than starting back at the house, or wherever the retainers keep their apartments, and playing out the “Where do you go? Where would Lucky hang out? How can you set up the meeting?” you can just cut to the action of the meeting in progress and move the game along. This keeps the momentum high, and a story in motion remains in motion until acted upon by a sudden, dramatic cliff-hanger.

## *Telegraph Trouble Before It Strikes*

When the action is underway, show them a threat that is about to hit, then ask them what they do. Then it is easy to know what the consequences that they are up against might be.

*Your spy is right where you expected him, right in the middle of the Plaza. There's something not right about the way he's carrying himself, though. His eyes plead with you across the red paving stones, flicking toward a shifting bunch of toughs milling to one side. What do you do?*

Contrast with this vague version: *The spy isn't alone at the meet. What are you going to do?*

Without telegraphing the trouble and giving context to the action, the outcomes can seem murky. You might feel like you have to “invent” a consequence out of the blue when they roll a 1-3 or a 4-5. If you imply the consequences before the roll, though then it's obvious what will happen. You're ambushed at the meeting—it follows from the fiction.

## *Follow Through*

You have telegraphed the threat, so go ahead and follow through when it hits. Players have tools at their disposal to deal with setbacks like these. If they react in time, they can make an action roll. If they are hit with a consequence, they can resist. Fight the urge to pull your punches.

There are a lot more toughs in the Plaza than you were expecting. They're moving to cut off all avenues of escape. “I'm sorry,” your spy says, “They have Cassandra.” The toughs, you now see, are armed and you feel the noose beginning to tighten. I'm starting the “Captured” clock.

The players will interrupt, scramble, flashback, and deal with it.

## *Initiate Action with an NPC*

This is very similar to the previous GM action, but it's worth highlighting. You don't always have to wait for the PCs to do something. You NPCs can initiate action, too! The more dangerous the NPC, the more they should seize the initiative.

“Cypriana is incredibly smooth. She tells you exactly why she could have nothing to do with the Prince's poisoning and it seems completely legit.”  
“Oh no way. We know that she was the last one to see him alive. She's lying.”

“Okay, resist with Mind if you want to. Otherwise, she’s just a little too slick for you.”

This is a very effective technique, but it can be overused and it wears thin quickly. Save it for NPCs who are particularly masterful or the direst of situations.

### *Say Consequences and Ask*

“You could Channel all of the arcane energy from the Masque of the Deathless into a single violent explosion, but that’s more power than even one of the Imperial Warweavers could handle safely. Do you want to roll for it, or do you want to try something else?”

“He’s a skilled duelist with a bad temper. You can try to spend the evening bringing him over to your way of thinking, but you might inadvertently prick at his honor enough to invite a challenge. Do you risk it?”

### *Tick a Clock*

Keep a stack of index cards and a marker handy. Draw a clock whenever it feels right. Put them out where everyone can see, to help track progress in the fiction. Ticking a clock is a great way to follow through on a threat without bringing an end to the conflict yet.

### *Offer the Lady’s Favor*

Think of a fun complication or a reckless decision. Offer them a bonus die in exchange. Ask what would raise the stakes, and then offer a bonus die. If you don’t have a good idea, ask the other players--or you can offer the Lady’s die in exchange for exposure. There are always unseen and unnoticed eyes lurking about in Ilrien.

### *Think Off-Screen*

What is going on elsewhere, and will it have an impact on what is on-screen right now? Are there characters who might have reason to arrive here and get involved with what’s going on? Where is the Watch right now? Is there anything arcane going on that might affect what’s happening here?

## *GM Principles*

**When you pursue your goals and choose actions, use your principles to guide your decision making.**

- Be a fan of the PCs. Present the world honestly--things are never quite as simple as they seem, and the deck is loaded--but do not make yourself the enemy of the PCs. They have enemies enough. Be interested in the characters and excited about their victories.
- Let everything flow from the fiction. The game's starting situations and your opening scene will put everything in motion. Ask how the characters react and see what happens next. NPCs react according to their goals and methods. Events snowball. You do not need to "manage" the game. Action, reaction, and consequence will drive everything.
- Paint the world with a romantic brush. Ilrien is a city that prizes beauty and passion. Life is fleeting, change is constant, and nothing is as it seems. Throw caution to the wind and live loudly. Aspire to greater things.
- Surround them with treachery. Ilrien, on the whole, is a city of spies and assassins all playing at politics. Every party hides a poisoner. Every smile hides a dagger. The House is the only thing that they can trust, and only so long as they are useful.
- Address the characters. "Satice, where do you find the Mercy that is hunting the wereleopard?" Not "Sara, where does Satice find the Mercy?" This puts Satice front and center--her preferences, her desires, her style. This lets Satice come to life as a character.
- Address the players. "Sara, how should we do this? Do you want to do a whole scene talking to the Mercy or do you just want to make a roll real quick to see if she knows anything?" This puts Sara front and center--her preferences, desire, and style. Sara can consider what she wants rather than what the character wants.
- Consider the risk. Think about the dangers inherent in what retainers do. A risky roll is the default. When they're building on successes, they might be making controlled rolls. When they have to improvise, work off the cuff, or when they are getting in over their head, they're probably making desperate rolls. Go with your gut. Call the positions as you see them, but be open to revision.
- Hold on lightly. Always feel free to rewind, revise, or reconsider events as necessary. This is not a "no take-backs" kind of game. You can always say, "No, wait...let's say that there were only two guards watching the

chambers of the First Grace. I don't see why they'd need any more than that." This can be a hard one to internalize. It can be tempting to put your foot down--often without good reason-- or to treat elements of the game as sacred. Resist that impulse.

- Turn it into fiction. Much of the game is mechanical in nature. The players select action ratings related to what they are doing, roll for results, apply consequences. Do not let these things be mechanical. Ground actions and consequences in the fiction. When they Channel, what does it look like? When they botch a Skulk, what goes wrong? How does a faction's actions during downtime change the story for the players?
- Write it down. The machinations of Ilrien and her various factions are far too much for a single human to hold within their head. Whether you use index cards, a notebook, or a system yet more advanced, write down details and notes. If there are a bunch of House goals on a bunch of index cards, your Coterie will have a clearer picture of how the city is moving around them. If you need to remember a detail about a contact, what better way than to look at your list of NPCs?
- When in doubt, treachery. Assassins crash the party. Your benefactor has been playing both sides toward the middle. The artifact is a forgery. They lied. Ilrien is a place of complexity and scheming. If you find a natural lull, reveal some new twist and catapult yourself on to the next bout of treachery.

## *GM Bad Habits*

### **Don't Call for a Specific Action Roll**

This is a bad habit that usually comes if you've GM'd other games where this is your job. You might say, "Give me a Maneuver roll," or "That's a Consort check." Try to get out of that habit. Get used to saying this instead: "How do you do that?" Ask the player which action they use. Then tell them the position and effect level that you see in this situation, using that action--as well as why you think that.

### **Don't Make the PCs Look Incompetent**

When a PC rolls a 1-3, things go badly. This is an established fact in the narrative. However, it is because circumstances are dangerous, there is a problematic wrinkle that they did not previously identify, or something troublesome has occurred. They do not go badly because the character is a buffoon. Even

a character with zero rating in an action is not an abject moron. Here's a trick for this: start your description of the failure with a cool move by the PC, followed by a but. Then, introduce the element of the situation that made things go awry.

"You aim a fierce right hook at his chin, but he's quicker than he looks! He ducks under the blow and wrestles you up against the wall."

On a failure, talk about what went wrong. "Ah, maybe you missed something while you're climbing through the Moneylender's window?" "Yeah, they probably have a guard-dog or something, huh?" "Yep. You hear the dog beneath the window snuffling awake. Sounds like he's a big one, too." You can also lean on features that the player has already portrayed about the character. How are their indulgences and scandals a problem? What is it about their heritage or background that gives them trouble or gets in the way?

### **Don't Overcomplicate Things**

The consequence(s) you inflict on a 1-3 or a 4/5 roll will usually be obvious, since the action has already been established. But sometimes, you'll draw a blank. It's okay to keep it simple. A complication can just be a tick on a clock that represents a related problem not present in the current scene. Or you can inflict simple harm like "Exhausted" or "Unsure." Every single consequence doesn't have to be an interesting new problem or a brutal reversal of fortune. Go with what's obvious to you. Ask the players for ideas if you feel stuck!

### **Don't Let Planning Get Out of Hand**

Some players will plan an operation forever if no one steps in to stop them--even if they hate doing it. They think that it is worth the trouble if they can cover every eventuality or possible issue in order to avoid a bad outcome.

This is not how Court of Blades is meant to work. Everything is resolved by engagement and action rolls, so get to it! If someone has a cool maneuver or idea, that's great, but it's probably still a controlled action roll. They can't plan and discuss their way out of making rolls. An idea is not execution.

### **Give Them What They Earn**

If they get into position, make the roll, and have their effect, they get what they earned. They are not allowed to weasel. Neither are you. Do not weasel. Things are already hard enough in Ilrien. Don't be a miser with victory; defeat



will come even without your thumb on the scales. The retainers are swimming in dangerous waters and their targets out-mass and outclass them. This doesn't make them ineffective--we wouldn't have a game if that were true. Instead, it means that they need lots of victories to make it.

### **Don't Say No**

There's usually a better answer than a flat "no," or "you can't do that." Offer the Lady's Favor. "You want to seduce the Prince? Uh huh. Okay, then. That's desperate with limited effect, but let me offer the Lady's Favor: regardless of how this goes, you are going to fall madly in love with them. That's the problem with star-crossed lovers, see?"

### **Don't Roll Twice for the Same Thing**

When a PC faces danger, they make an action roll. Also, they can roll resistance to avoid a bad outcome. However, you should not roll twice for the same thing.

In other words, the action roll determines whether a consequence manifests or not. A resistance roll changes how much of that danger manifests or how bad it is. It does not negate the fictional outcome of the previous roll.

### **Don't Get Bogged Down**

Whenever possible, elide time and edit the action to move ahead to the next exciting moment. When the players say, "Let's go talk to Tate and see about our next errand," you can say, "Okay, you head down to the Shores and find Tate staying at the Tradewind. His first mate ushers you into the finest room in the inn where Tate is considering a nautical chart as though it owes him something." That's potentially 30 minutes of tedium that you've cut out.

## *Quickstart Errands*

In *Court of Blades*, you guide the PCs through social seasons where they must contend with more challenges than they have time for, keeping the political tension high and managing relations with countless factions. For the purpose of a one-shot, we've provided sample Errands for each of the Great Houses, allowing you to jump right into the middle of an existing political tension, opportunity, or threat to the players' House. You may safely mix and match them. To use an Errand sheet, read it over and choose one *Angle*, a *Bind*, and a *Coup*, to generate a plot and your session is prepped.