



Intrigues & Escapades

A FADING SUNS™ SOURCEBOOK

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The angelface vine — known on its native Ungavorox as the slargg creeper — is believed by the local vorox to have evolved within its colorful foliage its beautiful, humanlike face specifically to lure in missionaries. It then entangles them and slowly digests them with its caustic enzymes. Is this not akin to the role of the Church? The Pancreator is our lure, scripture our vines, and the practice of power our enzymes.

— *The Analects of Patriarch Hakov Li Halan* (apocryphal)

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A PRIMER ON CUTTHROAT SOCIETY

There are many dramas you can stage in **Fading Suns**: adventure, mystery, exploration, horror, and pretty much anything you can imagine. This book highlights dramas of intrigue: court conspiracies, priestly plots, and guild schemes. Conniving is the hallmark of suspense stories, spy thrillers, and even adventure yarns like *The Three Musketeers* (the intrigues of Cardinal Richelieu against the queen are the motivator for the musketeers' escapades). Betrayal and backstabbing lie at the heart of political epics like *Game of Thrones*, where the noble ideals of high fantasy are skewered by the realpolitik of red weddings. Aristocratic in-fighting is the engine that drives the messianic revolt in *Dune*.

Once you look past the codes of chivalry, Church scripture, and guild paeons to fair play, a different world comes into focus: a battlefield of betrayal, hypocrisy, and outright cheating. None of the high estates that rule society through divine and moral right come out stainless. *Intrigues & Escapades* lifts up the rock of society's pretensions and reveals the worms writhing in the moist dark soil.

This doesn't mean that such things as honor, charity, and plain dealing are naïve or a fool's game. It does mean that those who hold to those codes need to go in with open eyes, so they can defend against

and counter the cynical ploys of the corrupt. While the game may be rigged, the odds aren't so stacked against the righteous that they can't win. They can increase their odds by learning the rules of the game. But beware: the longer you play the game, the more you might get played. Sometimes the only way to win against the house is to make your own rules.

Intrigues & Escapades serves as a primer on how nobles are bred to a life of intrigue, priests are entwined in worldly affairs, and merchants are taught to always come out on top, no matter who gets the short end of the deal. Gamemasters can use this advice to get a sense for how Machiavellian NPCs might think, and players can use it to better know the enemy. Of course, players won't partake in such skullduggery themselves, right? They'll always walk the good and true path. *Right?*

The book also presents two detailed dramas that throw troupes right into the heart of dirty dealings, backdoor deals, and false identities. There are also a host of drama hooks that gamemasters can use to keep the pressure on the troupe, snaring them in conspiracy after conspiracy.

May the Pancreator protect you from calumny and conspiracy. And may He bless your own schemes with success.

Sample



THE NOBILITY:
AN INTRIGUING
LIFE

THE CHURCH:
PLOTTING
PRIESTS

MERCHANT
GUILDS:
DREAMS AND
SCHEMES

DRAMAS

HARGARD
DRAMA HOOKS

We are the puppeteers and the universe our theater. Never let them see the strings. Let them think they move on their whim until one sublime moment when they realize their mistake. But they have only themselves to blame for that, don't they? They are not clever enough to cut the strings. In fact, you could say we are doing them a favor. We are making them stronger. Teaching them the consequences for letting down their guard.

—Lady Charlotte Decados, holovid to her son, Gerard Decados



Before they are born, those fortunate (or unfortunate) enough to claim nobility are tangled in webs of obligation, power, money, schemes, and privilege. They are taught from the cradle to represent their house in the way it wants them to.

Besides the obvious goals of wealth and position, honor and reputation are the currency of nobility. Some nobles will do anything (e.g. lie, cheat, kill, blackmail, steal, etc.) to earn or cement their reputation, whatever that reputation may be. Esteem, in the world of royalty, all too often stems from executing successful plots and maintaining the upper hand.

Nobles live a lonely existence because the foundation of noble society is “trust no one.” Even if they have family and people they call friends, relationships seldom run deep. Nobles deal with this loneliness by either immersing themselves in pursuing individual goals or enjoying a plethora of hobbies. It is not unusual for an aristocrat to have skills in a variety of arts such as painting, singing, dancing, even if it is only to keep their hands busy and their mind off their isolation.

Some nobles turn away from the aristocracy to pursue a simple family life away from drama and constantly looking over their shoulder. Noble gossip circles talk about these outcasts in whispers and some with a little jealousy.

This chapter explores the life of a noble from birth to death, focusing on how the machinations and plots of nobility affect them at every stage. For nobles, education, career, marriage, and even death are moves in a game no one can ever win. But not for lack of trying.

A Noble Birth

A child! This is excellent news. I have been waiting for just the thing to put us in a good position to gain favor with Alexius. What impeccable timing. My brother will not be happy of course, but we will invite him to the presentation ceremony and promise him he can keep the estate. I'll want something bigger built anyway. That should mollify him. He always did like this place. Will your parents want to know first? I think they had that little faux pas last month and this should do nicely to erase that and they'll owe us. I should jot this down.

—Baron Luther Hawkwood, upon hearing of his daughter-in-law Luna's pregnancy

Children are a requirement for the continuation of noble bloodlines, and extremely useful pawns in achieving advancement goals. Some of these goals might be noble and benign, but some are not. Savvy nobles plan the birth down to the minute, leaving little to chance. Why? Because other nobles may use the occasion as an opportunity for their own benefit, and the parents-to-be won't necessarily like what they have in mind. Outside of noble circles it is a joyous and elaborate event, but in reality, the birth of a noble, if used carefully, can be one of the most effective power moves in politics, whether for good or ill.

Pregnancy

When noble parents find out they are producing an heir, planning for the baby's arrival begins immediately. Noble children are often seen as exploitable tools. Would it be better to betroth the child in exchange for a mutually beneficial alliance or give them an opportunity chosen to strengthen family resources? Who needs an invitation to the presentation ceremony to discuss future ventures? Who should be excluded? These are decisions to carefully consider and are among the first choices the parents make that directly

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affects the new noble's future. Not surprisingly, it isn't usually the baby's future the parents have in mind.

Of course, not all noble children are planned or used as pawns. A few outliers are the result of affairs between married nobles (not to each other, of course), unmarried (but not betrothed) nobles, or between nobles and commoners. They are the children of lust or love. In such cases there are places, usually heard of by word of mouth, where the child-carrying person can convalesce during the pregnancy away from prying eyes. Discovery could lead to blackmail and scandal. The fates of these children vary. Sometimes they are claimed by the nobility, but their true parentage is covered up. They could be given up for adoption and never know who their parents are, or learn much later in life who their parents are, which can lead to drama at family functions if the child chooses to confront their birth parents.

Birth Announcements

Time and place are extremely important when announcing an impending birth. Nobles generally don't like to have their announcements overshadowed by others, so they keep the news secret until they can deploy it at the moment it will have the most impact.

Once the baby is announced the parents become targets. Many a pregnant noble has been whisked away to a secured location until the birth. This is especially true of those in the higher echelons of power. Only those closest to the parents are allowed access, but even with intense security, there are no guarantees.

Extremely paranoid/infamous nobles hire look-alikes or stand-ins to act as decoys. They may even choose to hide the pregnancy altogether, but such juicy information doesn't stay secret very long. Decades ago, Baron Hamal al-Malik announced his wife was pregnant and sent her off to relax with her handmaidens. It was later whispered his wife was not actually pregnant and one of the "handmaids" was actually the baron's pregnant lover. The wife went along with the ruse to protect their reputation and in the end, they had an heir they claimed was theirs.

The Presentation

Presentations of a noble child to society vary in detail, but they are almost unanimously used to spend an obscene amount of money to show off how delighted the parents are and how well-positioned they are to spoil the child. This is the time for families to partake in their own personal traditions. Traditions might include the giving of traditional names, the passing of heirlooms, a speech from the parents, the lavishing of gifts, or announcements about the child's future. Li Halans are known for having religiously themed

presentations, for instance, with lengthy blessings from the Church. Guests may have the opportunity to view the baby, offer gifts, or have a moment to speak quietly with the parents. Just like other events in a noble's life discussed below, the presentation of a baby is a fraught endeavor and taken very seriously.

Siblings also have a role to play. They are usually brought forward to declare their loyalty to the new sibling and offer their own gifts. Sometimes new siblings are relieved to share noble responsibility, while some wish to hoard all the glory for themselves. They can show their displeasure in any number of ways. They can declare they are not going to accept the new child (this can occur especially if there is a large age difference). They could give a gift mocking the child or refuse to show up at all. What is not said can speak volumes.

Once the baby finishes their primary duty of being seen, they are whisked off by caretakers so the parents can take care of their own duties. This brings us to another reason the family may choose to hold a presentation ceremony: It is evidence that the baby exists.

Nobles are not above lying about a pregnancy or even showing off another's baby claimed as their own for various reasons, such as inheritance requirements. They may need to prove they have an heir or gain leverage over a rival. The ceremony is as much for the public to see there is a child as it is to celebrate a birth.

A Noble Education

Learn all you can — and I don't refer only to the teachers; both the weaker and stronger students will teach you things. They will exploit your mistakes and force you to confront them. The classroom is all well and good, but it is outside the walls, in the corridors and empty spaces of your school, where you will learn nobility. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, and you'll come out of there at the head of the class. I expect no less from my child and remember: The family name rests on your success or failure.

— Lady Charlotte Decados, in a holovid to her son, Gerard Decados

Education is paramount for a noble. Students are taught math, history, and other foundational topics, but also strategy, psychology, and other subjects imperative for someone with high ambitions. Book learning is not the only or most valuable teaching method utilized in noble schools. Practical tests in

conjunction with subtle and not-so-subtle mental tests are standard measures of student progress at both professional academies and family-tutored fiefs.

Invictus Academy

The most common route for noble education remains private tutoring, but in the years of the Pax Alexius, noble institutions of learning have become an accepted option where children of different houses study together. The best noble education institution is Invictus Academy, located on Criticorum, with small campuses on other planets. The Academy was founded and is run by members of both House Torenson and the Pedagogues Guild. The two have partnered to expand their interests in teaching nobles and preparing them for knighthood.

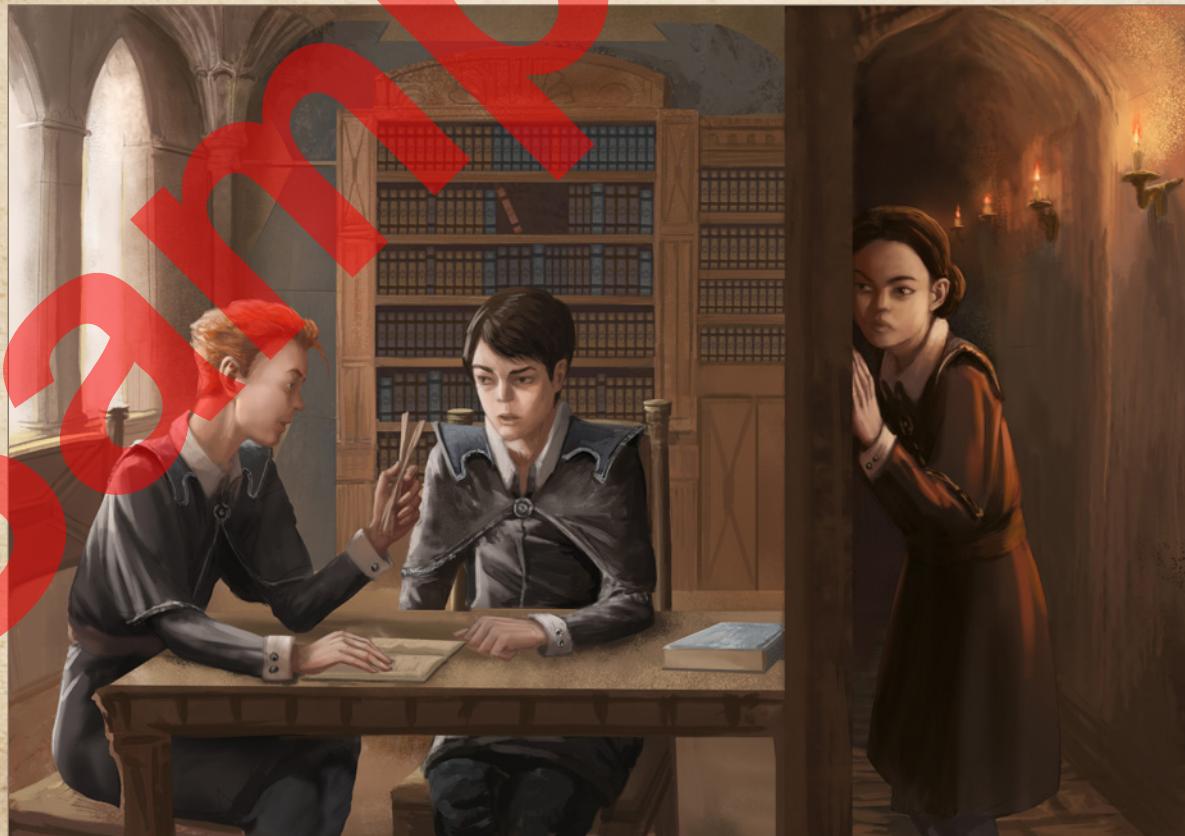
The main campus' infamous maze is perfect for holding private conversations, while a myriad of paths and secret passages provide students with spying opportunities (if they are lucky enough to discover these nooks and crannies). It is tradition that the students are never told all the architectural secrets of the school but must find them on their own. Some students may be fortunate and have an alumnus relative or ally who can fill them in on at least some of the best places to study or converse secretly.

Those who are the brunt of too many prank stunts or fail their classes are sent home to their families. This is a great dishonor. The only worse disgrace is when a student chooses to leave, which does happen. Perhaps they're bored and seek adventure outside the Academy walls, or they just don't fit in and find it an agony to keep trying, or they heed an inner calling to the priesthood. Worse: they join a guild. Often the parents will try to brush these incidents off as a decision they have made and disparage the Academy for not meeting the needs of their child, to preserve their honor.

Though the Academy is opulent and bright on the outside, underneath the carefully manicured exterior are a plethora of secrets.

STRATEGIC LEARNING

Lessons at the Academy cover a range of subjects intended to enrich basic knowledge, with an extra focus on strategy. The curriculum is filled with classes unknown in common schools. They study great schemes of the past, battle tactics, politics, diplomacy, acting, psychology, strengthening logic, consequence analysis, problem solving, critical thinking, and debate, to name a few. These are often competitive classes with limited enrollment and so even getting into them



requires strategy and planning or the student will miss out. These classes are not uncoincidentally relevant to everyday interactions between students, and it is expected that the students can and should put their principles into practice immediately.

Sports and other extracurricular activities offered at noble schools teach long-term planning and strategy focus. These activities encourage thinking five moves ahead and preparing for counter attacks, all vital skills for young nobles. Analysis of texts and art is also considered a desired skill, because it teaches the students how to see beyond the surface and base conclusions on sound interpretation.

This differs from home-schooling in two distinct ways. For one, the young nobles preparing for their squireships get an early start on social interactions. Second, experiencing more than one tutor's style can be greatly beneficial for understanding others. On the other hand, home-schooled students tend come out with more of their self-esteem intact and might be less anxious than their Academy counterparts.

TESTS

Besides standard tests like essays, short answers, or multiple choice, students are also given psychological tests, not only face-to-face with teachers, but also in scenarios that put them into situations where they have to make tough choices.

For example, a student "discovers" the answers to a test beforehand (this is set up by the teacher). What do they do with the information? Do they keep it for themselves, sell it to the other students, or turn it in? The results are very telling.

GRADUATION

An Invictus graduation ceremony is about awards, ribbons, medals, and other paraphernalia showing off student accomplishments. The students look like heavily decorated war heroes, and with some of the tactics used by teachers it is not an inapt metaphor. The first student to cross the stage is always the most decorated, and this achievement allows the student and their family the greatest leverage for a better squireship. The closer to the front of the line, the better the opportunities and bragging rights.

Teachers encourage this behavior, and families put money aside for this purpose. It hasn't even been unheard of for students to exchange graduation position among themselves in exchange for favors later or other bribes. The teachers see it as one last test for their students. It is not unheard of for parents to bribe their child's way to a spot closer to the front. Some unfortunate students have been tricked into leaving the line

to deal with an "emergency," only to find they lost their place at the last minute. It is that important.

The graduation party is filled with students chatting up parents and teachers alike to land a good squireship after they graduate. Those who are lucky receive one right away, but the longer a student languishes without a post the louder the whispers about their competence. When that happens, those in a position to offer squireships are less likely to give the young noble a chance. This becomes a self-feeding loop that takes some skillful maneuvering to get out of.

A Noble Squire

You have to worry about yourself, Your Grace. If you don't... well we've just seen the results, haven't we? You trusted her and she betrayed you. You were too blinded by her beauty; she knew, and she used you. You could learn from this. Learn how she manipulated you and never let it happen again. Find a similar power in yourself and have no compunction about deploying it.

— Lord Maximus Justinian's advice to Duke Oscar Hawkwood following his sultry affair

After graduation a noble is squared to another noble of their own house. After their squireship, they are knighted. Nobles with influential parents might square within their own close family, but those with less-connected parents often prefer to square with someone of higher rank outside the immediate family, but still within the same house of course. The squire doesn't want to be thought to have no prospects and to be taking charity.

The rank of the squire's noble is a point of pride. Squiring to a knight is good, but squiring to a countess or duke is even better. Other important considerations for the squire when choosing with whom they square are connections and perhaps an influence on the squire's desired calling. If a noble is interested in courtly matters rather than military affairs, it would be wise to square with someone known for such things.

Harsh Realities

While they were in school, the nobles had teachers watching them and lived in a controlled environment. Now, while they do have a noble they serve, their squireship represents a new level of independence and learning.

They are learning to rule, from war lore to fief management, but are also expected to know enough to protect themselves. A young noble learns quickly the first time another squire seriously betrays them, or they watch their lord maneuver through the machinations of daily life. It is hands-on study with larger consequences than anything in their home school or at the Academy.

In school, these matters are games and framed as friendly competition, not to be taken seriously. Here they learn the final lessons to becoming a knight and hopefully have some idea what they are doing, either through schooling, inheritance, or less likely, through their own deeds.

Opportunism

Nobility means watching for and snatching opportunities, and the squireship is where the ability to recognize opportunity is honed. As a squire, they learn to interact with the Merchant League guilds and Church sects: How to work with them, not make them angry, but also not be snowed by them. They are expected to build alliances among the younger set of priests and guilders who will later be in positions to help when the squire becomes a ruler. They will be looking for ways to eventually build their own entourages with people who will help their rule, but also help them in their own calling.

Method of the Game

The goals of a noble are usually inherited. Young squires aiming to be knights are expected to follow in their families' footsteps. This is especially true of the firstborn children. Children born later down the line might gain some leeway, but they are still expected to aid house ambition. Their method of rule depends largely on the house to which they belong and the person to whom they are squired. Decados are the most openly cruel and aggressive, while the Li Halan are focused on manners and more religious pursuits. The final piece of squireship is not only learning the practicalities of how to rule, but also style of rule: cruel, duplicitous, pious? Nobles who find that their methods and goals go against those of their families will have difficulty managing their house's expectations and their own desires.

A Noble Knighting

I have been planning this for 10 years. All you have to do is slip the note to Theresa. I know there is no reason why I should trust you, but I am willing to bet you will find it more beneficial to help me than to betray me. You know my ambition and you know I will probably succeed. Wouldn't you rather bask in that light than be lost in the shadows like the others? Start tonight. Stand by my side when I take the stage and we will take the worlds by storm.

— Duke Blaire Decados to his younger brother Lucas, just before his knighting

A noble's knighting is their first significant opportunity to present themselves to society as a true adult. The knighting also allows the opportunity for society to measure up the newly adult knight. It is the official end of squiredom, as they are finally knighted by the noble for whom they squired. Even when a squire has already received a battlefield knighting, a ceremony is still held later to make it official.

The knighting ceremony includes an oath of fealty to a lord of higher rank. This could be the noble for whom the knight squired, one of their parents, another family member, or another noble of the house. If nothing else, it will be to the Prince of the house.

Planning

Planning is crucial. When the time comes for their debut, the young noble is brought before their parents and given their blessing. They get total power over the event, though some parents will still try and control their child even then.

A long time ago, a feud sparked between the Keddah and the Justinians because two young nobles, one from each family, wanted to use the same venue for their knighting. Months after the discovery of the venue conflict they were still trying to out-buy or out-bribe the other for it. In the end, the Keddah triumphantly walked down the stairs to greet their guests at the venue and the Justinians had to embarrassingly find another locale.

For those invited to the party, this became a decision of which one to attend, because neither of the nobles were willing to change the date of their party so they could both use the venue. That would be surrendering power.

The vendors made out like bandits. While the two families fought, the best vendors on the planet got outrageous bids for their services. No matter who they chose as a client, they made money hand over fist.

The Ball

The atmosphere, the glamour, the riches, the dancing, the whispered deals — including deals on who to take as a companion to the debut. There is a message in the choice of companion that speaks to the alliances the noble wishes to make or who they have already chosen to ally with. Requests from would-be companions are received and considered. These often include what amounts to a resume of what the companion or their family can do for the noble, should they agree.

The League and the Church are not to be forgotten in this. If a noble chooses a guilder or priest as a companion this could be looked upon with scandal or approval. Many al-Malik would be delighted to see a guilder companion, but the Li Halan would much prefer a priest.

If the young noble knight wants to shock, they might choose an alien or even a commoner to really send a message. When the Emperor married Freya

Eldridsdottir, Vuldrok were all the rage for knighting companions for the next few seasons.

Some nobles dress in disguise or create a place where they can watch the proceedings before they make their appearance, to absorb the atmosphere of the room and essentially become a fly on the wall. It's also a great information-gathering tactic. Lady Amita Sung Li Halan of Kish discovered that her cousin, a boon companion during her youth, was trying to lure the Mitchau weaponsmith family to build their new factory on his lands — something Lady Amita had long desired for her family, which her cousin well knew. So began a decade-long feud over the contract, ending when the weaponsmiths, tired of waiting, ended the deal after they realized they were losing money and business due to the drama.

At another knighting, Sir Emilio Hazat de Sutek planned a masquerade party and spread a rumor that he was wearing a red costume with a black mask. He wore a white outfit and spent all of the ball watching from afar as guests interacted with his decoy in the red-and-black mask. He then had the freedom to follow them afterwards to read their true feelings and intentions.

There are as many types of knighting as are there are nobles. For example, a noble might not have an elaborate knighting affair and choose instead mysterious intrigue as their theme. They lean into the idea of an enigma and want to do everything they can to get everyone curious. One day invitations start arriving, elegant and expensive but vague on details. The rumors begin: Who is the knighting for? Where is it going to be? Who else is going to be there? This throws the community that thrives on having the upper hand for a loop because there are so few details to plan with. Details arrive as needed. The guests are transported to mystery spot where the knight will take “meetings” with guests. This is a great tactic to use to invite people whom the new knight knows would never take a forthright invitation, or to keep undesirables away.

Image is everything. First impressions as a noble count, which makes the knighting an important milestone in a noble's life.



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**THE CHURCH:
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DRAMAS

**HARGARD
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A Noble Marriage

Darling, I know how you feel, but my marriage means nothing. It's convenience. There is no reason you can't stay with me. Our relationship doesn't have to change. I know you don't completely agree, but isn't being together in a limited capacity better than nothing? You won't want for anything and you will be treated like a princess without all the nasty duties my partner will have. All of the perks and none of the drab, boring politics.

— Baroness Haylynn al-Malik

A noble marriage is the most heavily negotiated event in a noble's life and, not coincidentally, the biggest decision they make. A marriage ties people legally and socially. It is the most far-reaching event in terms of influence and power.

Arranging a Marriage

It was once the case that marriages were often arranged pre-birth, but the Emperor Wars caused havoc with this tradition, as prearranged grooms and brides would die in the war, or lose their lands and wealth, or become invalids, etc. It was disastrous for some families, stuck with a now-impoorer noble prospect. Hence, it became the custom to wait until the marriage was on firmer ground. Now that peace has returned, many houses seek a return to the old ways, but many resist this, fearing they'll be stuck in an unfruitful alliance. Some nobles enjoy the fact they don't have to make the decision and acquiesce. Some feel their parents' choice is poor and want a better match. Some hate all their options and rebel by having an affair, refusing to marry, or possibly running away.

PRENUPTIAL AGREEMENTS

A prenuptial contract is a behemoth, frequently as large as books. They cover all aspects of merging a family and any potential assets the merger might include, such as finances, property, children, and where they are going to live after the ceremony. Also covered are the parameters of divorce, infidelity, death, or the names of future children.

These negotiations, usually mediated by House Torenson, can take weeks, if not months, to complete. They are tedious and require a lot of stamina, especially if there are disagreements about details. If an agreement cannot be reached, the document will not

be signed, and weeks of work are wasted. Wars are started over less than the issues included in a noble prenuptial agreement.

The Marriage

The wedding day, much like the knighting, is filled with positioning and jockeying for power by the guests and the married couple. The ceremony itself, is designed for showing off money and influence. There are vows, a reception, and dance. Talking with the married couple is a status symbol, and everyone expects to be judged by their wedding gift.

After the wedding, the honeymoon may be the first time the couple gets to know each other, which can lead to surprise, if they decide to spend time together at all. The details of the arrangement are set, but how to interact with each other is another matter entirely, and it isn't always pleasant. A standard practice in such a case is setting up a lover or two in secret second homes. Some nobles maintain numerous homes for this purpose.

This isn't always true. Some couples are true business partners. Some hold no animosity but still choose to see as little of each other as possible, each allowing the other to follow their own interests. There are, of course, the noble couples who are actually in love. It is rare, but it can happen. Love is the last consideration for a noble marriage, if it is considered at all, but occasionally the stars align just right.

Alas, the more common scenario is for the couple to actively work against each other. More than one noble couple has gotten married just out of spite and a need to keep an eye on each other. Such marriages are quite the entertaining topic of discussion in the clubs. Their parties are always well attended just to watch the sparks, which often includes property damage.

Affection

Emotions and true affection are best avoided when it comes to noble relationships. Sentiments are nothing but weapons, and even though tales of nobles who gave in to their feelings are some of the most popular stories around the fireplace, most nobles avoid any kind of sentiment. If they absolutely cannot help themselves, then showing affection is kept secret and hidden in the corners of the noble's heart.

Lovers are one thing; they provide physical pleasure, but to allow vulnerability is inviting disaster and nothing good can come of it. It is the wiser course for nobles to avoid affection, but most nobles fail in this endeavor. They keep diaries or pour their feelings into their hobbies or art. Anything to channel it out of themselves and somewhere else where it can't be used against them.

Ballads and novels are written about impulsive nobles who have no control over their desires and although they may exhibit self-control publicly, they seldom remain so in private. In fact, many nobles are envious of those who are free to love who they want.

A Noble Game

“Cards are very interesting. They have the same faces and the same backs, but each game is different and exciting. What makes it truly thrilling, in my estimation, is the people around the table. Learning cards is a study in people’s personalities. Watch someone play cards and you can tell if they are aggressive, conservative, or nervous. Reading nobles is difficult, but with practice it becomes easier. Study hard and even lose a few hands to see what happens. I guarantee it is the best education money can buy.”

— Lady Adeline Keddah, in a holovid to her daughter, Serafina, while she was attending *Invictus Academy*

Each stage of a noble’s life has its unique pitfalls, but how do nobles use their skills in everyday life and how exactly do they get one over on each other? This section explores the tactics nobles use to navigate the halls of power without getting themselves manipulated or killed while demonstrating their cleverness. It is walking a razor, and each noble has specialties and methods they employ regularly to walk it.

SOCIAL RANK

Rank is quite important to a noble, and moving up in the hierarchy just as important. A noble must prove themselves worthy of increased duties and responsibility. They can also gain rank by lying, cheating, and getting in good with anyone who can give them a leg up.

Titles are often conferred after the death of a predecessor. In the case of nobles without a clear heir, lesser-ranked nobles often wedge their way into their good graces, hoping they will be rewarded with inheritances.

COMPETITION

Competition is another chance for nobles to gain standing and prove their superiority. There are all kinds of competition: Who can make the most

wealth in a month? Sports. Races. Who will get married first? Who will get drunk and pass out at their cousin’s wedding? Anything that can be turned into a competition will be.

Wily nobles participate to show off skills. There is just as much bragging going on between allies behind the scenes as there is from those in the competition. Everyone wants to see their allies win because that makes them look good by proxy. Choosing winners is an important life skill.

Don’t have the skills yourself? Just hire someone.

When a noble boasts about their accomplishments, it is beholden on all the nobles present to one-up them. If one can relay their accomplishment with exaggerated casualness, all the better. A night of pleasant diversion can turn into a very passionate game of one-upping each other at the slightest provocation. Hours are lost discussing which is the bigger accomplishment: getting a child into the best school or marrying into a high-ranking family.

Nobles will use their entourages to win competitions; at least, those who want to win do. A troupe-member with guild connections might be able to find out information about the contest field to give advantage. Another might be able to chat up the judge and bias them toward the noble. There are all sorts of ways an entourage can help the noble win and this helps the whole entourage in the process.

CONTRACTS

Contracts are binding agreements between nobles. A verbal agreement is well and good, but getting it in writing seals it. Why? A verbal agreement is easily broken. One of the biggest coups is forcing a noble to write down the parameters of an agreement. There are two types of contracts: the public contracts (marriage agreements) and private contracts signed in secret and used as insurance. Nobles use astounding techniques and protections to ensure contracts cannot be fraudulently signed. They practice hard-to-create, hard-to-forged signatures and contract with the Engineers Guild to create unique think-machine verifications. Contracts can be anything from promising to attend a particular event to leaving certain property alone.

Learning how to negotiate a contract and wield one appropriately when it is threatened is a survival skill. Employing a good Reeve, who can be trusted, is an intelligent move, but they are in demand and expensive. A lucky or extremely prudent noble might have a Reeve in their entourage who can not only make the contract ironclad, but also see any holes in the contract.