

Court of Blades



A FORGED IN THE DARK GAME BY SHAWN & NAVI DRAKE

Court of Blades

A GAME OF
POWER POLITICS
GUNPOWDER DIPLOMACY
RENAISSANCE MAGIC
&
ROMANTIC SKULLDUGGERY

BY A COUPLE OF DRAKES

Sample file

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- *A Couple of Drakes*



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CH 1. INTRODUCTION

The Game	002
The Setting	003
The Players	003
The Characters	004
The House of Service	004
The Game Master	004
Playing a Session	005
Safety Tools	006
The Core System	007
The Game Structure	008
Rolling the Dice	009
Actions & Attributes	010
Resistance Roll	014
Stress & Scandals	015
Action Roll	017
The Lady's Favor	019
Action Roll Summary	020
Progress Clocks	022
Position & Effect	025
Tier	028
Setting Position & Effect	029
Consequences & Harm	030
Healing Harm	033
Resistance & Armor	035
Special Armor	037
Death	037
Fortune Roll	038
Engagement Roll	040
Gathering Information	041
Loadout	044
Teamwork	045
Flashbacks	047
Influence & Favor	048
Romance	051
Romantic Entanglements	054
The Faction Game	055
Tier, In Depth	055
Spheres of Influence	057

House Advancement

House Advancement	058
Social Season Goals	059
Advancing in the Esultare	060
The Other House Positions	061
House Rank Bonuses	061
PC Advancement	062
Coterie Advancement	064

CH 2. CHARACTERS

Character Creation	066
The Bravo	073
The Hawk	077
The Eye	081
The Couth	085
The Knack	089
The Key	093
Standard Items	097
Coterie & House Creation	098
House Corvetto	103
House Battalia	107
House Bastien	111
House Lovell	115
House Al-Mari	119
House Elanda	123
Standard House Upgrades	127
Retinues & Colleagues	129

CH 3. DOWNTIME

Payoff..... 132
Influence 132
Favor 133
Exposure & Shame 133
Reduce Exposure & Shame 134
Downtime Activities 135
Acquire Assets 136
Uncover a Plot 137
Long-Term Projects 138
Recover 138
Train 139
Indulge & Reduce Stress 139
Intrigues 141
Rituals & Crafting 144
Arcane Magnitude 144
Rituals 146
Crafting 149
Sample Common Creations 152
Crafting Example 158

CH 4. A GUIDE TO ILRIEN

Abridged Timeline of Ilrien 160
Dueling, the Court of Blades 161
Daily Life 162
Currency 163
The Great Game 163
Cuisine 164
Law & Order 165
Magic & Superstition 166
Culture 168
Weather & Seasons 169
Major Holidays 170
Overheard in Ilrien 171
The City Districts 172
Map of Ilrien 178
Spheres of Influence Detailed 180
Factions 188
The Houses Major 188

The Houses Minor 190
The Uncouth 204
The Outsiders 214
Contacts for Indulgences 222

CH 5. PLAYING THE GAME

Actions in Play 225
Player Best Practices 250
Example of Play 252

CH 6. GAME MASTERS

Running the Game 264
GM Goals 264
GM Actions 265
GM Principles 272
GM's Best Practices 273
GM Bad Habits 275
The GM's Turn 279
Advancing Houses Major 282
Introducing the 7th House 283
Session One Checklist 285

CH 7. ROLL CHARTS

Entanglements 288
NPC House Objectives 292
Nearby Villages 295
Sprites & Spirits 296
More People (NPCs) 297
Threats to the City 300
Minor Holidays 301

CH 8. CHANGE THE GAME

Special Playbooks 306
Expanding the Scope 315
Kickstarter Backers 316

INDEX 326

Sample file

Court of Blades

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction



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. You are a retainer in a coterie. Powerful, and yet the bottom of the greater family order. Your job is to support the family until it is elected First House. Your private goal is to become a titled part of the family through service, securing your legacy—or perhaps only leaving the world better, or worse, than it was before you.

Can your characters play the Great Game and win it all, or will they fall prey to the machinations of their rivals? Or worse yet, their own human failings.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

- One copy of this book for reference.
- 2-5 players, and one game master.
- 6 six-sided dice to share.
- Blank paper or notecards and a pencil.
- Printed copies of the character playbooks, and House sheet. (*Reference sheets, and maps can be helpful.*)

THE SETTING

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 creates a character, referred to as a PC (or *player character*), and works with the other players to create the coterie to which their characters belong, shaping the House they choose to serve. Each player strives to bring their character to life as an interesting, talented individual with personal goals and interests. Players are rewarded for good roleplaying practices with experience (xp), making it in everyone's best interest to develop their characters a bit over every session.

The players 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. They will make judgement calls about the mechanics, dice, and consequences of actions, working with the GM to craft a compelling setting and narrative.

THE CHARACTERS

The characters attempt to develop themselves and their coterie by performing errands and contending with threats to the House they serve, as well as threats from their own enemies, over distinct social seasons. They begin their adventure as dedicated servants of little renown, and must carefully guard their reputations from scandal and shame. With every advancement they become more integral to the machinations of the family they serve and better known to the other citizens of Ilrien.

THE HOUSE OF SERVICE

In addition to creating the characters who will form your coterie, you will also choose the House your coterie serves. Each House has its own set of strengths to explore, and its own unique flavor to inspire the sort of stories your group wants to tell. While any House can be played in whichever way the group wishes, you will find that each House lends itself well to a specific playstyle, without any modifications. House Corvetto lends itself well to skullduggery and magic, Lovell to high politics and manipulation, Bastien to charity and good will, and so on.

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. This is the basis of the “conversation,” the narrative push and pull which develops the fiction and the course of play. Everyone, players and GM alike, has a hand in creating the story.

PLAYING A SESSION

A session of *Court of Blades* is like an episode of a TV show filled with taut intrigue and romance. There are one or two main events, plus some possible side-story elements, which all fit into an ongoing series. A session of play can last anywhere from two to six hours, depending on the preferences of the group. During a session, the coterie of retainers works together to choose an errand to accomplish based on their goals for the social season. They spend time gathering information, then they make a few dice rolls to jump into the action of the errand in progress.

The PCs take actions, suffer consequences, and finish the errand (succeeding or failing). Then the coterie has downtime, during which they recover, pursue side-projects, and feed their indulgences to relieve stress. After downtime the players once again assess their goals, and we play to find out what happens next.

BEFORE YOU START

It is recommended that at least one person in your group has read this book all the way through before you begin. If you are familiar with other *Forged in the Dark* games, many of the core mechanics will be familiar to you. If this is your first time trying out a *Forged in the Dark* game, first of all, **AWESOME**, we're excited to bring you into the fold—but just as importantly, this game may not make complete sense to you until you play it. **When in doubt, just start playing!**

TOUCH STONES

Touch stones can be helpful for pitching a new game to friends. Below we've provided some of the most well-known touch stones for the game that we could think of to get you started.

Books: *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.

Film & TV: *Medici*, by Nicholas Meyer and Frank Spotnitz. *Rome*, by Bruno Heller, John Millius, and William MacDonald. *Harlots*, by Moira Buffini and Alison Newman. *The Godfather*, Francis Ford Coppola.

Video Game: *Dragon Age Inquisition: Wicked Eyes and Wicked Hearts*, Bioware.

SAFETY TOOLS

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 are appropriate for all players, and the use of safety tools helps set boundaries for exploring Ilrien in a manner which prioritizes player comfort and safety.

The most basic safety tool is open communication amongst yourselves regarding what you do and do not want to see in your game world. This discussion fits best in a “session zero”, wherein you discuss this and other aspects of your world. It’s important to note this is not a time to interrogate each other’s 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, and while there are many safety tools your group can use, we recommend two in particular.

Lines and Veils are used to set clear boundaries for what content can appear in a game. Lines are hard limits which by no means are to be crossed. These are subjects and things the GM or the players have no interest in engaging with under any circumstances. Veils, on the other hand, are softer limits; things acceptable to the GM or players so long as they are veiled, glossed over, or mentioned only in brief passing. Veiled content may still appear in the game, but never be highlighted, described in detail, or serve as the focus of a scene. It is recommended Lines and Veils be tracked in your game notes, where they can be updated or amended throughout play.

Regardless, upsetting content may appear suddenly in the course of the game. **The X-card** is a safety tool for use in those instances. Ideally it is a simple card with an “X” on it, which players or the GM can tap or hold up during play to indicate something they wish to avoid. Other tools might be a digital marker which can be pinged on the virtual tabletop of your choice. When the X-card is tapped, pinged, or held up, play will pause, backtrack to before the offending bit, and resume, avoiding the X-carded material entirely. If something is X-carded during play it is recommended that another tool, such as Lines & Veils, be updated to reflect the new subject so it does not appear again.

Far from restricting the subjects and material your group can explore, safety tools 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. Nothing which happens in an imaginary world, even one as exciting as *Court of Blades*, is more important than the safety and well-being of the very real people around your table.

THE CORE SYSTEM

THE CONVERSATION

Court of Blades is an exchange between the player characters (PCs) and the game master (GM). No one is entirely in charge. It is a back-and-forth between all involved until that conversation develops enough uncertainty for you to reach for dice to decide the outcome.

Improvisation is a must. As you read through this book 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 of the players, so no two games of *Court of Blades* are played the same way. If you do not find an answer to your question in the book, trust that you are allowed to, in fact are *supposed to*, make it up along the way.

For example, in your first 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 the Twist. Each is true, including the third option that comes up in your campaign.

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? Can this person be swayed? 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.
- Which events in the story match the experience triggers for character and coterie advancement? Did you express your character’s beliefs, drives, heritage, or background? You tell us. The players have final say.



THE GAME STRUCTURE

Court of Blades has a structure to play, with three parts. By default, the game is in **free play**—characters 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 choose an objective for their next **errand**. They may decide to gather additional information to aid them later, or they may simply choose a type of plan to employ. 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). When the errand is finished, the game shifts into the **downtime phase**.

During the downtime phase, the GM engages the systems for **influence**, **favor**, **exposure**, **shame** and **entanglements**, to determine all the fallout from the errand. Then the PCs each get their **downtime activities**, such as **indulging** themselves to remove **stress** or working on a **long-term project**, or **intrigue**.

When all the downtime activities are complete, the game returns to free play and the cycle starts over again.

The structure is **only a conceptual model** to help you organize the game. You can phase in and out of **free play** and the errand. Likewise, you may finish downtime and then jump straight into the next errand. There is no rigid structure in *Court of Blades*.



ROLLING THE DICE

Court of Blades uses six-sided dice. You will always roll between 1 and 6 dice, and typically you will read the highest number.

- If the highest die is a 6, it's a full success—things go well. If you roll more than one 6, it's a critical success—you gain some additional advantage.
- If the highest die is a 4 or 5, that's a **partial success**—you do what you were trying to do, but there are consequences: trouble, harm, reduced effect, et cetera.
- If the highest die is 1-3, it's a **bad outcome**. Things go poorly. You probably do not achieve your goal and you suffer complications, too.
- If you ever need to roll but you have zero (or negative) dice, roll two dice and take the single lowest result. You cannot roll a **critical** success when you have zero dice.

All the dice systems in the game are expressions of this basic format. When you are first learning the game, you can always return to a simple roll to judge how things go. Look up the exact rule later, when you have time.

To create a dice pool for a roll, you'll use a **trait** (like your **Body** or your **Mind**, or your coterie's **tier**) and take dice equal to its **rating**. You'll usually end up with 1 to 4 dice. Even 1 die is good—a 50% chance of success. The most common traits you will use are the **action ratings** of the player characters. A player might roll dice for their **Hunt** action rating when they track a rival, for example.

There are four types of rolls that you'll use most often in the game:

- **Action roll.** When a PC attempts an action that may prove dangerous or troublesome, you make an action roll to find out how it goes. Action rolls and their effects and consequences drive most of the game.
- **Downtime roll.** When the PCs are at their leisure after an errand, they can perform **downtime activities** in relative safety. You make downtime rolls to see how much they get done.
- **Fortune roll.** The GM can make a fortune roll to disclaim decision making and leave something up to chance. How loyal is an NPC? How much does the plague spread? How much evidence is burned before the First Court's investigators knock at the door?
- **Resistance roll.** A player can make a resistance roll when their character suffers a consequence they do not like. The roll tells us how much **stress** their character suffers to reduce the severity of a consequence. When you resist that "Publicly Snubbed" **harm**, you take some stress, and now it's only "Bruised Ego" instead.

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. Maybe your character is good at **Command** because they have a scary stillness to them, while another character barks orders and intimidates people with their military bearing.

You choose which action to perform to overcome an obstacle, by describing what your character does. Actions which are poorly suited to the situation may be less effective and may put the character in more danger, but may still be attempted. Usually, when you perform an action, you'll make an **action roll** to see how it turns out.

When you **Channel**, you open your mind to arcane power and draw on sorcerous might.

You might navigate the tricky syllables of an ancient spell of binding. You might quickly summon a magical ward to stave off harm. You might identify a recently uncovered artifact, but Study might be better.

Channel, as an action, typically draws upon arcane energy in some form or another. Knacks have an internal power, whereas for others Channeling might be drawing it from an artifact, a trinket, a device, or an arcane creature or spirit. "Blunts" can interact with the arcane, but Knacks create it.

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

You might glare down a handful of thugs in an alleyway. You might get a fop to retract an insult with a cutting remark. You might demand information from mercenaries in league with your House, but Consort might be better.

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

You might chat up the friendly tavern owner in hopes of learning when the diplomat was last seen alive. You might draw out a secret from a confidant. You might use a disguise and forged papers to bluff past a House guard, but Skulk might be better.

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

You might follow a carriage as it crosses the city. You might navigate the press of the crowd to find a sight-line on the hangman at the execution. You might unobtrusively tail a corrupt priest, but Skulk might be better.

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

You might leap from roof-top to roof-top with a running start. You might navigate the tricky steps of a fashionable new dance. You might carefully lie by omission, but Consort might be better.

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

You might slip a knife into the ribs of the street-tough hired to kill you. You might fight an elaborate duel with an affronted rival. You might spring from the shadows to neutralize the agent on your tail, but Wreck might be better.

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

You might keep to the shadows to avoid the attention of an attentive guard. You might cobble together a disguise to pass as a rival House's courier. You might soundlessly pry open a window to secure entrance to a villa, though Tinker might be better.

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

You might decode an enciphered message or occult ritual. You might follow the money to draw connections between hired bravos and your rival. You might assume an enemy's current intentions based on the number of warships they have docked in the harbor, but Survey might be better.



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

You might scan a rooftop for hidden assassins. You might recognize the mark that separates gang territories in the Twist. You might recognize the embroidery on a jacket as distinctive of a rival House's favorite tailor, but Study might be better.

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

You might make a good impression upon the chamberlain to the Prince with a honeyed word. You might provide convenient evidence to the captain of the Watch to implicate a rival. You might engage in a debate at a dinner party and try to win on the basis of being the better orator, but Maneuver might be better.

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

You might soundlessly pick a lock and slip inside a room your rivals thought secure. You might quickly navigate a puzzle box. You might set a cunning clockwork trap for a foe, but Hunt might be better.

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

You might use acid to melt a tricky lock on a strongbox. You might decide that the only sort of diplomacy the gang boss understands is a chair across the teeth. You might twist the weave of magic to incinerate a foe, but Channel might be better.

As you can see, many actions overlap with others. This is by design. As a player, you get to choose which action you roll, by saying what your character does. Can you try to Wreck someone during a duel? Sure! The GM tells you the position and effect level of your action in this circumstance. As it says, Skirmish might be better (less risky or more effective), depending on the situation at hand (sometimes it won't be better).

*To see detailed explanations of each Action Rating see: **Actions in Play** (page 225).*

ACTION ROLL OVERVIEW

You make an action roll when your character does something potentially dangerous or troublesome. The possible results of the action roll depend on your character's position. There are three positions: controlled, risky, and desperate.

If you are in a controlled position, the possible consequences are less serious. If you are in a desperate position, the consequences can be severe. If you are somewhere in between, it's risky—usually considered the “default” position for most actions.

If there is no danger or trouble at hand, you don't make an action roll. You might make a fortune roll, or use a downtime action and roll as appropriate. Otherwise, the GM will simply say yes—and you accomplish your goal.

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. (*See the example on the following page.*) The better-rounded your character is with a particular set of actions, the better their **attribute rating**.

ATTRIBUTES & ACTIONS THEY GOVERN

BODY

- SKULK
- SKIRMISH
- MANEUVER
- WRECK

MIND

- TINKER
- STUDY
- SURVEY
- HUNT

SPIRIT

- CHANNEL
- COMMAND
- CONSORT
- SWAY

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 sword-fighter, 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.

The GM judges the threat level of the enemies and uses these “preemptive” resistance rolls as needed to reflect the capabilities of especially dangerous foes.

*Find out more about Resistance Rolls under **Resistance & Armor** (page 35).*

EXAMPLE

BODY	
<input type="radio"/>	SKULK
<input type="radio"/>	MANEUVER
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	SKIRMISH
<input type="radio"/>	WRECK
MIND	
<input type="radio"/>	TINKER
<input type="radio"/>	STUDY
<input type="radio"/>	SURVEY
<input type="radio"/>	HUNT
SPIRIT	
<input type="radio"/>	CHANNEL
<input type="radio"/>	COMMAND
<input checked="" type="radio"/>	CONSORT
<input type="radio"/>	SWAY

This character has:

3 dice to roll in **Body**

0 dice to roll in **Mind**
(roll 2d6 and take the lower result.)

2 dice to roll in **Spirit**

STRESS & SCANDALS

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.

*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 the **harm** is reduced by the resistance roll, but not avoided entirely. Cross suffers level 2 harm "Chest Wound" instead of level 3 harm "Punctured Lung".

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.

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*, *grasping*, et cetera. They are all described on the following page.

When you suffer a scandal, you are taken out of the current errand. You flee, are incapacitated, or otherwise drop out of the situation. You will return later, with a new personal reputation looming over you. When you do, you have zero **stress** and your **indulgence** has been satisfied for the next **downtime**.

Scandal conditions are permanent. Your character acquires the new personality quirk indicated by the condition, and can earn xp by using it to cause trouble. When you mark your fourth scandal condition, your character cannot continue as a retainer. You must retire them to a different life or send them to the guillotine to take the fall for the coterie's **shame** level.

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.

ACTION ROLL

When a player character does something challenging, we make an **action roll** to see how it turns out. An action is challenging if there is an obstacle to the PC's goal that is dangerous or troublesome in some way. We do not make an action roll unless the PC is put to the test. If their action is something that 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* series.

To make an action roll, we go through six steps. In play, they flow together, but let us break each one down here for clarity.

1. The player states their **goal** for the action.
2. The player chooses the **action rating**.
3. The GM sets the **position** for the roll.
4. The GM sets the **effect level** for the action.
5. Add **bonus dice** as needed.
6. The player rolls the dice and we judge the result.

1. The Player States Their Goal

Your goal is the **concrete** outcome your character will achieve when they overcome the **obstacle** at hand. Usually, the character's goal is obvious in context, but it is the GM's job to ask and clarify the goal when necessary.

“You're punching your paramour's suitor in the face, right? Okay... what do you want to get out of this? Do you want to take him out, or just rough him up so he'll do what you want?”

2. The Player Chooses the Action Rating

The player chooses which **action rating** to roll, flowing from what their character is doing on-screen. If you want to roll your **Skirmish** action, then get in a fight. If you want to roll your **Command** action, then raise your voice and throw your weight around. You cannot roll a given action rating unless your character is presently performing that action in the fiction.



3. The GM Sets the Position

Once the player chooses their action, the GM sets the **position** for the roll. The position represents how dangerous or troublesome the action might be. There are three positions: **controlled**, **risky**, and **desperate**. To choose a position, the GM looks at the profiles for the positions below and picks one that most closely matches the situation at hand.

By default, an action roll is risky. You rarely roll when there is no risk involved. If the situation seems more dangerous, if the PCs would have more to lose if they fail here, make it desperate. If the PCs have the advantage, or do not stand to lose much with a failure, make it controlled.

4. The GM Sets the Effect Level

The GM assesses the likely **effect level** of this action, given the factors of the situation. What do the PCs stand to gain if they succeed here? Essentially, the effect level tells us “how much” this action can accomplish: will it have **limited**, **standard**, or **great** effect?

The GM’s choices for effect level and position can be strongly influenced by the player’s choice of action rating. If a player wants to try to make a new friend by **Wrecking** something—well... maybe that is possible, but the GM would not be out of line to say it is a desperate roll and probably limited effect. Seems like **Consorting** would be a lot better for that. The players are always free to choose the action they perform, but that does not mean all actions should be equally risky or potent.

5. Add Bonus Dice

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).

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.
- Sacrifice influence, or favor, or an item.
- Betray a friend or loved one.
- Offend or anger a faction.
- Start and/or tick a troublesome clock.
- Add exposure to the coterie from evidence or witnesses.
- 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.

If it is ever a point of contention, the GM has final say over which Lady's Favors are valid.

6. Roll the Dice and Judge the Result

Once the **goal**, **action rating**, **position**, and **effect** have been established, add any bonus dice and roll the dice pool to determine the outcome. (See the sets of possible outcomes, by position, on the following pages.)

The **action roll** does a lot of work for you. It tells you how well the character performs, as well as how serious the consequences are for them. They might succeed at their action without any consequences (on a **6**), or they might succeed but suffer consequences (on a **4/5**), or it might just all go wrong (on a **1-3**).

On a 1-3, it is up to the GM to decide if the PC's action has any effect or not, or if it even happens at all. Usually, the action just fails completely, but in some circumstances, it might make sense or be more interesting for the action to have effect even on a 1-3 result.

Each 4/5 and 1-3 outcome lists suggested **consequences** for the character. The worse your position, the worse the consequences are. The GM can inflict one or more of these consequences, depending on the circumstances of the action roll. PCs have the ability to avoid or reduce the severity of consequences that they suffer by **resisting** them.

When you narrate the action after the roll, the GM and player collaborate to describe what happens on-screen. Tell us how you woo the courtesan. Tell us what you say to the Sister to convince her. The GM will tell us how she reacts. When you face the Blue Devil bravo, what is your dueling style like? Et cetera.

ACTION ROLL SUMMARY

- A player or GM calls for a roll. Make an **action roll** when the character performs a risky, dangerous or otherwise **troublesome** action.
- The player chooses the **action rating** to roll. Choose the action that matches what the character is doing in the fiction.
- The GM establishes the **position and effect level** of the action. The choice of position and effect is influenced strongly by the player's choice of action.
- Add up to two bonus dice. 1) **Assistance** from a teammate.
- 2) **Push yourself** (take 2 stress) *or* accept a **Lady's Favor**.
- Roll the dice pool and judge the **outcome**. The players and GM narrate the action together. The GM has final say over what happens and inflicts consequences as called for by the position and the result of the roll.

ACTION ROLL

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

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. The single roll tells us how those actions interact and which consequences result. 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.

Controlled—

You act on your terms. You exploit a dominant advantage.

- **Critical:** You do it with **increased effect**.
- **6:** You do it.
- **4/5:** You hesitate. Withdraw and try a different approach, or else do it with a minor consequence: a minor **complication** occurs, you have **reduced effect**, you suffer **lesser harm**, you end up in a **risky** position.
- **1-3:** You falter. Press on by seizing a **risky** opportunity, or withdraw and try a different approach.

Risky—

You go head-to-head. You act under fire. You take a chance.

- **Critical:** You do it with **increased effect**.
- **6:** You do it.
- **4/5:** You do it, but with a consequence: a **complication** occurs, you suffer **harm**, you have **reduced effect**, you end up in a **desperate** position.
- **1-3:** Things go badly. You suffer **harm**, a **complication** occurs, you end up in a **desperate** position, you **lose this opportunity**.

Desperate—

You overreach your capabilities. You are in serious trouble.

- **Critical:** You do it with **increased effect**.
- **6:** You do it.
- **4/5:** You do it, but there is a consequence: you suffer **severe harm**, a **serious complication** occurs, you have **reduced effect**.
- **1-3:** It is the worst outcome. You suffer **severe harm**, a **serious complication** occurs, you **lose this opportunity** for action.

PROGRESS CLOCKS

A progress clock is a circle divided into segments. Draw a progress clock 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, more complex problems have more segments in their 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.

Complex threats can be broken into several "layers," each with its own progress clock. For example, the First Prince's palace might have a "Perimeter Security" clock, a "House Guard" clock, and a "Vigilant Help" clock. The coterie would have to make their way through all three layers to reach the ideal hiding place to eavesdrop on the Prince's clandestine meeting this evening.

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.

SIMPLE OBSTACLES

Not every situation and obstacle requires a 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.

Examples of **progress clocks** follow.

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.

MISSION CLOCKS

The GM can make a clock for a time-sensitive errand, to represent the window of opportunity you have to complete it. If the countdown runs out, the errand is scrubbed or changes—the target evades you, the household wakes up for the day, et cetera.

