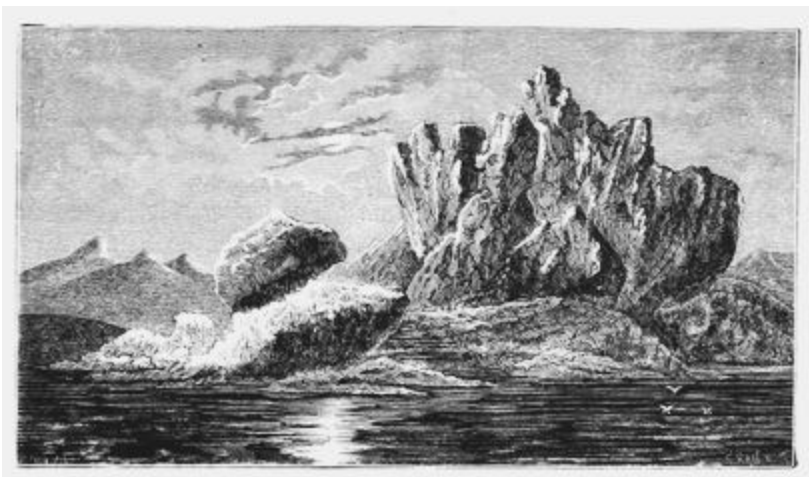




CONSPIRACY AND COWARDS

“THE WHEEL IS SPINNING
SPIT ON PALMS, A BARGAIN MADE
LICK LIPS, TRY AGAIN”



Game Setup

Conspiracy and Cowards is a short role-playing game designed to be conducted over the course of one or two sessions. One player takes on the role of the Cowards, those poor fools unwilling to seize greatness, and that player will thus run all NPC's in the game. This role is also called the MC. Everyone else plays a member of the Conspiracy, a group of people dedicated to achieve revolution.

What you'll need: You'll need a table of some sort. Snacks. Two standard decks of playing cards, including jokers. Some pens/pencils, some blank paper. Some notecards. Printed character sheets. Perhaps miniatures or tokens to represent players and prominent NPCs.



THE EMPIRE.

The game takes place in Karem, a vast Empire embodied by the Crooked Spire in its heart, from whence the Empress Jacantha rules with her consort Alyx by her side. The Empress has ruled Karem for nearly thirty years in conjunction with three groups:

- key decision-makers from the most powerful guilds: Shipwrights, Glassblowers and Mine Workers.
- maintaining her favorites amongst the courtiers, the Glittering Throng.
- keeping fierce neighbors at bay through the might of Karem's fiercest military, the Blackguard.

While the Empire is imagined here as a medieval setting, it could be adapted to an intergalactic one with minimal changes.

Much of the status quo is written for you, but both the past and the future will be defined during play. You and your conspirators will take an active hand in shaping that future, for better or ill.

Print out the map provided or draw one from scratch, but have something to use to show Karem's breadth and the placement of both your NPCs and PCs during the game. Draw on the map with pens and highlighters, or use tokens of some sort.



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karem

THE COWARDS

The MC plays all of the NPCs and is in charge of guaranteeing that they follow their goals and desires.

Their principles are:

- Be a fan of the conspiracy
- Fill the realms with intrigue
- Make there be consequences for power
- Deal equal opportunities and twists
- Make the road to revolution interesting
- Make the wagers have true stakes

NPCs in Conspiracy and Cowards are represented both fictionally and at times through playing cards. The cards of King, Queen and Jack are symbolic for three sorts of power:

- **Kings:** The official authority of their realm. They can freely dictate the laws of their domain. The king will lose their position if they are forced to follow another's dictate.
- **Queens:** A figurehead with no direct power, but a holder of great amounts of subtle influence within their realm. They lose their position if their King ever favors another above them.
- **Jacks:** A favored member of the realm that is allowed free reign within their realm without repercussions. They lose this position (and this protection) if their Queen gives their favor to another.



The Guildmasters (Realm: Industry)
King: Captain Regina Starling of the Shipwrights
Queen: First Foreman Ko Ibis of the Mine Workers
Jack: Master Jakob Crane of the Glassblowers



The Spire's Glittering Throng (Realm: Wealth)
King: Speaker Fieri Ett of House Imperial
Queen: Reverend Nevyn of the Balance
Jack: Speaker Constance of House Public



The Blackguard (Realm: Violence)
King: First General Pine of the West Wing
Queen: Second General Caruste of the East Wing
Jack: Major Poole of the Imperial Regiment



The Crooked Spire Itself (Realm: Influence)
King: Empress Jacantha
Queen: Imperata Alyx
Jack: Baronessa Jax

While these are the names and titles of those who make up the face cards, Captain Starling and Imperator Alyx may be lovers in one game and bitter enemies in the next. As such, one task of the MC is the assign goals and desires to each of the face cards. Do this while the players make their characters. Decide thoughtfully or roll a twenty-sided die.

GOALS

1. Fame/notoriety
2. Skill/expertise
3. Happiness
4. Legacy
5. Health
6. Fulfilled passion
7. Self-knowledge
8. Justice
9. Peace
10. Generosity/philanthropy
11. Revenge
12. Humility
13. Loyalty
14. Freedom
15. Balance
16. Sublimation
17. Victory
18. Oblivion
19. Reckoning
20. Revolution

DESIRES

1. To possess more
2. To experience novelty
3. To consume always more
4. To love
5. To be loved
6. To be lusted for
7. To be feared
8. To rest
9. To be kind
10. To be surprised
11. To be moved by art
12. To be believed
13. To be obeyed
14. To spread the faith
15. To conquer
16. To run
17. To forget
18. To win
19. To avoid conflict
20. To survive

When you are creating a new NPC, be sure that they too have a name, title, goal, and desire. Embrace ambivalence. A leader whose goal is “peace” but desires “to be obeyed” is very different from someone who desires “to be kind.” If you can’t find something interesting between two conflicting choices, disregard one of them and choose again.



THE CONSPIRACY.

You are workers, you are knights, you are kings. In the making, yet, but your day will come.

The players in the conspiracy each play a single character who are all working together towards a single goal. There should be no reason to betray your fellow conspirators unless it ends in immediate success, otherwise you risk exposing the conspiracy and yourself. This unified goal will not stop all infighting; there is no need to agree on methods.

The conspiracy should decide what their goal is. Their goal should be difficult, goes against the status quo and the morals of the setting, and will need to be held secret. All members must agree on the goal of the conspiracy and be 100% motivated to see that goal happen, but they do not need to agree upon appropriate methods to achieve this goal.

Decide purposefully or randomly, but be sure to fulfill this equation:

Goal = (**Institutional body or force**) must (**verb**)
or else (**tragedy of some sort**), therefore we shall (**your plan**)

INSTITUTIONAL BODY OR FORCE

1. Empire
2. Military
3. Caste system
4. Nobility
5. Bureaucracy
6. Capitalism
7. Feudalism
8. Law
9. Slavery
10. Gender

verb

1. End
2. Be replaced
3. Change
4. Surrender
5. Reinstated
6. Restored

consequences

1. Destruction
2. Death
3. Sadness
4. Boredom/Ennui
5. Starvation
6. War
7. Cataclysm
8. Poverty
9. Enslavement
10. Inquisition

PLAN

1. We fight
2. We steal
3. We escape
4. We overthrow
5. We seduce
6. We collude
7. We invite
8. We make art
9. We protest
10. We party

Some of the more glib results may seem nonsensical unless you really explore what that might mean. The plan should be ambitious, subversive, grand and, ultimately, a catalyst.

After you've established your goal, answer this question as a group:

What happened to make the tragedy imminent & immediate action necessary?



CHARACTERS

To create your character, pick a playbook and choose name, suit, rank, title, stats, moves, and your secret. If you choose a numbered rank, designate your own title. Name the three NPCs you are told to name; tell the other plays and the MC a little about them.

Take 3 in the stat representing your faction. Assign 1, 2 & 3 to the others. Add 1 to any stat. Your stat represents how many times you may draw from the deck in any given conflict. Your Diamonds stat also indicates how many resource tokens you have to spend.

Stats:

Diamonds. Wealth gives you resource tokens which you can spend.

Spades. Industry gives you skill to make things and represents feats of knowledge as well.

Clubs. Violence represents your skill with arms.

Hearts. Influence is charm and political acumen.

The playbooks all have ways in which they change the basic moves. While the secrets on the playbook are known to all players, they are not known to the other conspirators. The secrets on the playbooks are *not* the secrets that NPCs have. NPCs of the respective ranks don't have access to the playbook moves either.

Name	
FACTION	
RANK	
Resource Tokens <i>(= wealth)</i>	
Favors	
BLACKMAIL	



wealth



INDUSTRY



VIOLENCE



INFLUENCE



Name	
FACTION	
RANK	
Resource Tokens <i>(= wealth)</i>	
Favors	
BLACKMAIL	



wealth



INDUSTRY



VIOLENCE



INFLUENCE



BASIC MOVES

When you are in conflict with a Coward or the world, state your position.

1. Narrate the suit of conflict.
2. Firm up the stakes.
3. Decide if you will accept assistance.
 - a. If you do, you will owe a *favor* to those who assist you. (Unless of course they are repaying you for a *favor* you provided to them)
4. Decide if you will use a resource token. If you do, remove it from your character sheet and place it in the center of the table. For this conflict, any diamonds you draw will be considered to be within the suit of conflict.
5. For each point you have in a relevant stat, draw one card.
 - a. If there is a relevant haiku on the table (see below), draw an additional card.
6. If you have a card within the suit of conflict, you succeed. An ace or a numbered card is a success with complications. A face card is an outstanding success. If you do not have a card within the suit of conflict, you fail. You must still play a card.
 - a. If you have assistance from a Conspirator, you may add their stat to a numbered card you drew; if this would make the value higher than 10, you achieve an outstanding success.
 - b. If you have assistance from a Coward, you may add 1 to the numbered card you drew. There is no limit on the number of Cowards who may assist you.
7. Play your card face up as you narrate your action. Narration must flow from the suit of the card.
8. The MC will detail your failure or complications.

When you fail a conflict, write a haiku of your lesson (5/7/5) on an index card and place it in the middle of the table; then add 1 to the stat of the card that you played.

When you are in conflict with a Conspirator, get your act together. This is no time for strife. Settle disagreements by offering a favor or wealth. If you can't agree, you fail.

When you may ask any character for support on an upcoming conflict, they pick one:

- they promise it to you; if they later back out, they owe you a *favor*.
- they promise it to you in exchange for a *favor*.
- they deny you assistance

When you coerce a character in your suit of lower rank, they promise you their support. Pick one, unless you have *blackmail* on them, in which case pick two:

- You don't owe them a *favor*
- They won't seek to betray you
- No one notices that you've coerced them

When you learn someone's secret, you gain blackmail on that character. Write it on your character sheet.

PLAYBOOKS

The King

Choose two of these:

- Dictate: When you dictate a rule within your realm, choose one.
-No one in your suit dares speak out against the rule
-Name an NPC who will support and follow through with the rule no matter what
- Sovereignty: When you participate in a conflict in your own suit, you may count numbered cards as outstanding successes.
- Paragon: Get an additional stat point in your suit.

Name a trusted servant, an intelligent but difficult advisor and your headquarters.

Choose one of these:

- Puppet: If the king is forced to follow the whims of a lesser in their suit, they are usurped by that character.
- Power of the People: You may not engage in conflicts of your own suit with anyone but those of your own faction.

Pick a secret:

- My primacy is a sham, forged through deceit or trickery. I was aided by two others, one still a friend and the other a foe.
- If the public knew _____, I would be denounced. An enemy knows, but has not yet revealed it.



The Queen

Pick two:

- Influence: When you coerce someone in your suit, you get an extra choice.
- Power Behind The Throne: When you have the aid of your King, you may choose to automatically have partial success in conflicts within your own suit.
- Negotiator: When you have the aid of a Jack, Queen or King in a conflict, a card from the suit of that leader can be counted as the suit of conflict.

Name a guard you've identified as a spy, a clever relative you've added to your revenue and a ward that you are trying to protect from the world.

Pick one:

- Second from the top: If you are opposed in a conflict within your own suit, your King may simply force you to fail.
- Fragile Alliances: Without the direct assistance from a relevant Jack, Queen or King in a conflict outside your suit, you can only have partial successes in that suit.

Pick a secret:

- I have a vice (addicted to _____) that I keep from the King and the Jack. One of my advisors knows.
- I have trusted with _____, a dire enemy.

The Jack

Pick two:

- Loose Cannon: No one in your suit may have blackmail on you.
- Eye of the Storm: The complications created by partial successes in conflicts of your own suit will affect other people, not yourself.
- Spoiled: When you use resources, both your own suit and Diamonds are considered to be the suit of conflict.

Name a lover, a childhood friend who resents you and a teacher you've disappointed.

Pick one:

- Brat: For the purpose of converting a partial success into an outstanding success, all numbered cards are considered to be a 2.
- Hung out to Dry: If you come into conflict with the Queen in your suit, your suit stat drops to 1.

Pick a secret:

- I am not the true scion of my faction; I am illegitimate or otherwise a fraud.
- I am in discussions with another faction's leadership to leave my suit.



The Rank & File

Pick two:

- Trusted: No one in your suit can decline assistance from you.
- Fast-Learner: When you fail, add two points to the stat you improve instead of one.
- Unnoticed: You can unexpectedly insert yourself into a scene by narrating how you were always there in the background.

Name a trusted comrade, a dead colleague that haunts you and the love of your life who doesn't even know you exist.

Pick one:

- Inconsequential: You can only support others in conflicts of your suit.
- Low-ranking: You cannot begin a conflict with a Jack, Queen or King directly.

Pick a secret:

- You have been leaking information to someone in another faction. Your immediate supervisor knows.
- You were secretly privileged by the Jack in your suit.

The Ace

Choose two:

- Supporters: Double the value of support that you receive *and* provide in a conflict.
- Self-Knowledge: In conflict, you may use an Ace of any suit as a face card of the suit in conflict. If you do, remove it from the deck for the remainder of the game.
- Messiah: When you speak the truth to the Rank & File in your suit, you free them from any coercion they currently face.

Name a person whom you will never truly meet their expectations, a highly-ranked official that wishes you dead and a recent convert to your ways.

Choose one:

- Moving on Up: Any character may offer you an empty position lower than them from their realm. If you don't want that position then it is a conflict. If they win or you accept you gain the rank that was offered and are no longer the ace.
- Humility: If there is an ace available to you in a conflict, you must choose it.

Pick a secret:

- I have accepted a bribe from _____. One of my comrades knows.
- I am a fraud; I have never believed in the cause that I promote.



The Joker

Pick two:

- Fool: You can spend a resource token to play the top card of the discard pile in a conflict.
- Strong-Willed: If anyone attempts to coerce you, reduce the number of choices they make by one.
- Chameleon: You are considered to be part of every suit so long as you make a token gesture to act the part.

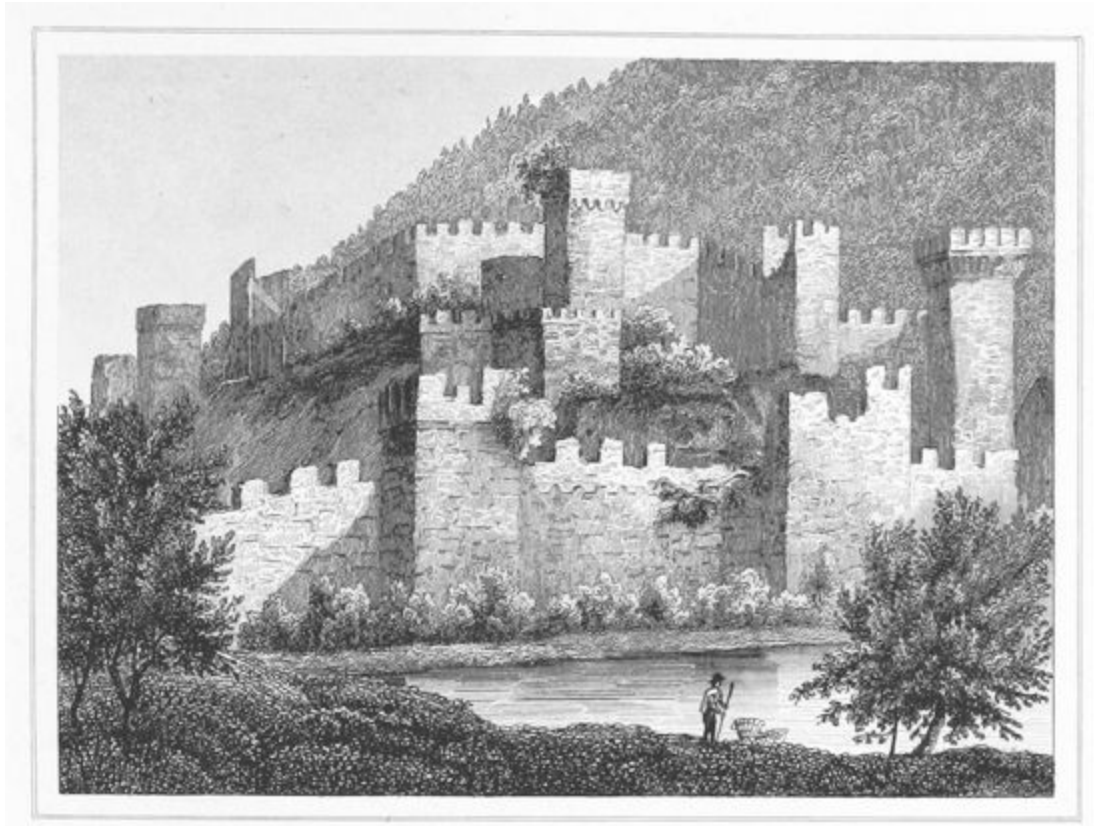
Name someone you love who you should never see again, a highly-ranked person you have grievously offended and someone you made laugh in a very dark time.

Pick one:

- Cassandra: No one in power believes you but the common folk lift you up; in conflicts, numbered cards count as outstanding successes, but face cards count as failures.
- Pariah: No one ever owes you a favor.

Pick a secret:

- I was once a member of rank within _____ faction. If it got out, I would be forced to return to my duties.
- I am the illegitimate child of _____.



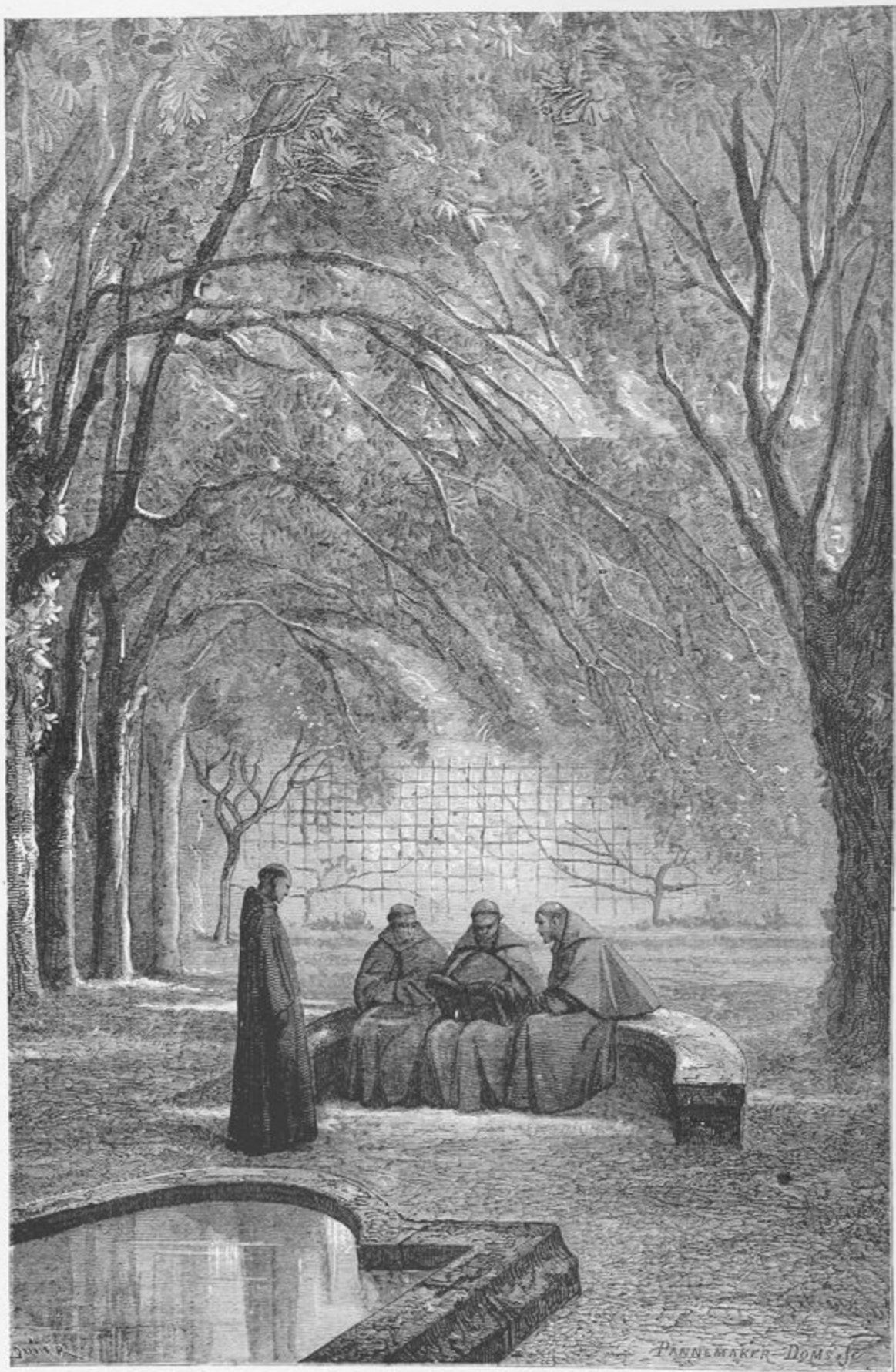
PLAY

The game takes place over five stages:

- I. First Wager: Planting the Seed**
- II. Fallout**
 - A. If wager was successful: Baiting the Trap**
 - B. If wager was unsuccessful: Scrambling for Position**
- III. Second Wager: Conspiracy Ripens**
- IV. Climax**
 - A. If wager was successful: Seizing the Prize**
 - B. If wager was unsuccessful: Devil's Wager**
- V. Epilogue: Paying the Price**

Go around the table for each scene, each player gets a turn to set up a scene, focused on any of the PCs they're interested in (including their own, as players). If anyone is stuck, the MC can present options.

Include in your wager: What resource is at stake, what danger there will be, and something about the scene that you wonder about. The MC will then narrate who else is present, and hint at the mystery that you wondered at.



Stage I. First Wager: Planting the Seed

The MC should follow the conspirators' lead here -- they are setting the tone for their conspiracy, giving the MC clues on what they value and the sort of game that they want to be playing. Be honest about making sure that the resource at stake is valuable. Follow your NPCs goals and desires. Make up secrets on the fly as necessary. Make the ensconced rulers seem unstoppable without leverage.

It should be clear from the conflicts that are initiated by the players if they are successful or not. Make the danger of failure real and visceral. Regardless of whether they are successful or not, they will be framing the next scene.

Stage II. Fallout

- A. If wager was successful: **Baiting the Trap**
- B. If wager was unsuccessful: **Scrambling for Position**

If they were not successful, you should double the amount of opposition they will find. If they *were* successful, give them an opportunity to expand upon their success. Let the NPCs in positions of power fall if they are knocked down. This is the beginning of the end.

Stage III. Second Wager: Conspiracy Ripens

When the second wager comes, reverse the tone. Give struggling conspirators another chance, remind successful ones that they are still up against the glory of Empire. If there were fluctuations in the status quo from the previous stage, show the effects of that unrest. Hint at the potential for change that comes with the conspiracy. Again, though, be real with them if they fail. The success of the conspiracy is not without great risk.

Stage IV. Climax

- C. If wager was successful: **Seizing the Prize**
- D. If wager was unsuccessful: **Devil's Wager**

If they succeeded in the second wager, the revolution will be coming to pass. However, there is still time for the Cowards to take the Conspiracy down with them. Do not let them go softly into the night. If the second wager is *unsuccessful*, however, you should give the Conspiracy an all-or-nothing opportunity. The all isn't true success -- it is merely living. If they fail the devil's wager, their lives are forfeit.

For the first time, a wager that can divide the conspiracy. The Devil's Wager is individual; Death meets each of us alone.

Stage V. Epilogue: Paying the Price

When the game finishes, every player should collect their haikus gained from losing conflict. If a conspirator has less than five, they live or die with some dignity; perhaps even acclaim. If they have five to ten, a truly checkered past. More than ten, and they will go down in history as a failure or a villain.

The MC should compose a haiku for each player to reflect their legacy. Each player should take turns reading all their haikus out loud.

SPOTLIGHT SCENES

In between stages, the MC should stage short spotlight scenes. Conspirators should decide which one between each stage, bearing in mind that you can only have one of each kind of spotlight scene per game. To benefit from a spotlight scene, each participating conspirator should compose a short haiku (5/7/5) that describes the mood of their scene.

Spotlight scenes take place between Stage I & Stage II, Stage II and Stage III, and between Stage III and IV. There is no spotlight scene between Stage IV and V. That means you will not have every spotlight scene in every game.

Refresh Scene

During a refresh scene, each conspirator recovers one resource token.

Flashback Scene

During this flashback scene, each conspirator can resolve a favor they owe to an ally by describing how they once helped them in the past.

Leverage Scene

Each conspirator can spend a resource token to get a secret from a co-conspirator or from an NPC.

Reconnaissance Scene

Conspirators may arm themselves for impending conflict by asking the MC of an NPC's impending plans; the knowledge provided earns an additional card when it is acted upon.



EXAMPLE OF PLAY

The Baronessa Jax, Jack of Hearts, is played by Dave. Her lover, the Duchess Keffrey of House Imperial, 10 of Diamonds, is played by Jen. They are young and in love and believe that the Empire's wanton displays of wealth are unconscionable, therefore they have a plan to win the military and remove Jax's parents from the throne (Goal = *The Empire must End, because Poverty, therefore we overthrow.*)

The Empress recently told the Baronessa that she'd betrothed Jax to Captain Regina Starling of the Shipwright Guild. When Jax said no, the Empress told her that she was actually *not* her true heir, and that if Jax crossed the Empress again, she would disinherit her. Keffrey has just been confronted by Speaker Constance of House Public -- Constance knows that Keffrey has been feeding information to the Baronessa. She'll keep quiet, for now, but who knows what Constance will do when the extent of Keffrey's treachery comes to light?

For the initial wager, Jen suggests trying to get leverage on Major Poole of the Imperial Regiment. Dave suggests that the Baronessa has likely met the Major before at a formal function. Perhaps that would be a good environment for Jax to get leverage on the Major. The stakes are leverage on the Major, but if it failed, the Major could then blackmail the Baronessa. Perhaps the function is a costume ball, and Dave wonders who might throw such a thing?

The MC narrates the state of the ball, the various costumes of the attendees and grandiosity of the room, the excesses of food and performance (*Ed. notes: Playing up the opulence to reflect the conspirators purpose back to them*). Jen suggests that the Duchess starts working the room, figuring out who is behind the masks and looking for the Major. She wears a lynx mask, symbol of the Empire's commoners, and casts wanton looks at Jax from across the room. The MC describes a man in a black coat with ram horns -- the Duchess identifies him as Count Perro of House Public, 4 of Diamonds. The Duchess decides to coerce him into helping work the room -- she won't tell him why exactly, but she'll get his help. Jen chooses "No one notices that you've coerced them" because the Duchess isn't ready for anyone to know anything yet and she's not worried about a measly 4.

Across the room, Jax chats with one of the guards -- Alyce, Ace of Clubs. The MC says that it is well-known that Alyce was once the Major's squire and still has strong connections with her. Dave decides that Jax would challenge Alyce to a duel in order to demonstrate her skill and have Alyce see her as worthy. Of course, if she fails, Alyce will likely mar Jax's reputation with the Major. Because the conflict is a dual, the suit of conflict is Clubs. Jax has a 2 in Clubs, but she spends a resource token to reflect her expensive training. Jax is *Spoiled*, so both hearts and diamonds will count as clubs for this conflict. Jax does not accept aid -- this is one on one combat, and while it might help her, it would likely lead to ill-will. Dave draws a Queen of Spades and a 4 of Hearts. The Queen is useless, but the 4 of Hearts will give the Baronessa a partial success. Dave plays the 4 and narrates how a little trick from Jax's personal dueling tutor gives her an edge on Alyce to let her score first blood. The partial success means that the MC must narrate complications arising from the duel. The MC might have said that Alyce lost the duel and grew angry, dropped her sword and broke Jax's nose before she recovered her composure. However, Jax also chose *Eye of the Storm*. While this conflict was in Clubs, not Hearts, the MC invokes the spirit of *Eye of the Storm* and describes how Jax and Alyce managed to knock over a servant, Bertrand, (2 of Spades) weighed down by rich food. Due to Jax's rank, the servant takes the blame and stares at the Baronessa hatefully.

Will they win over the Major and overthrow the Empire? They'll play to find out.

OH YEAH AND...

Reshuffle when the deck runs out. Leave out any cards that were removed from the game.

LAST WORDS

Thanks to Paul Czege and my unknown collaborators, this has been a great experience.

“THE DEVIL’S HANDS PAUSE
KNIFE FALLS TO HER SIDE SLOWLY
THIS ONE COMES WILLING”

