

# *Blood Royal*

*by Gordon Fay*

Once upon a time, a King ruled in a far away land. He was not a particularly good King, but he was not evil either. He had reigned for many years, and his kingdom had prospered. The peasants and merchants were content with his laws, the nobility swayed by his charisma and generalship, the priests approving of his piety – in short, the kingdom was a happy place, where almost everyone could live in comfort, if not joy.

One year, the King fell ill. It was long, decades even, after he had ascended to the throne. His children had all grown and learned, and they had gone their separate ways in the world. The best doctors and leeches were called to try their art, but the King's condition only grew worse. One by one, the healers gave up; eventually, only a few remained to take care of him.

Finally, they decided that the King was not long for this life. His courtiers remained worried and eagerly requested news of his health; but he lay dying still. The sages and physicians who attended him said "He has but one week to live." They had no hope of stopping whatever ailed him.

Worried, the King's advisors and councillors said to the King, "You must choose a successor before the week is out, or we shall be without a ruler and the kingdom will be plunged into civil war." So they brought all the King's children to the palace.

The royal abode had been a merry place, warm, lit with cheery torches and draped in colorful banners and flags; but now it was cold and dreary. The torches were extinguished, replaced by small, flickering candles; the banners had been removed in mourning, leaving only the dank stone. Heavy grey curtains shrouded the windows, obscuring almost all the sunlight. The King was dying, and it seemed all his retainers wished to follow him.

At last, calling his children to his bedside, the King explained his plan for succession. "I have not yet decided upon an heir. Upon the last day of the week, I will make my choice. Until then, all of you, show that you are worthy of my crown." He sent for a quill, ink, and a piece of parchment, and wrote a short list upon it, giving it to his herald to read to the children later.

Then he dismissed them.

This is the story of the King's children, and how they spent that week. And how, when the week was over, only one of them became the new ruler.



*Blood Royal is a game of competitive treachery and achievement in a dark fairy-tale world. Players take the roles of the children of a dying monarch, each one plotting and scheming to be chosen heir at the end of the week. There are many ways for each aspirant to the throne to either become the favored child or simply to eliminate the competition in any way possible.*

*It is a fairly simple game, though some preparation on the part of the King (gamemaster) is required. There should be at least three players; while it is perhaps playable with fewer, it will not be as entertaining. Other than the King, the players, and the King's prepared materials, only pencils, paper, and plenty of six-sided dice are needed.*

*Note for the confused – “King” is used both for the gamemaster and the most important non-player character, even though the gamemaster controls other characters as well. At option, the King may be a Queen, Emperor, Empress, or other absolute monarch.*

## Before the Game Begins

The King has the most work to do any time, but this is most true before the game itself is begun. Two maps of the palace must be drawn up, one for the players' use and one for the King's; while they need not be exacting, they should be clear and easy to understand. Any secrets of the building such as traps or hidden passageways and rooms must be noted on the King's map.

There will be several important characters who must be controlled by the King as well: courtiers, visiting aristocrats, ambassadors, servants, priests, perhaps even an enchanter, witch, or fairy may appear. Such non-player characters do not have any mechanical significance — they, unlike player characters, do not have stats — but their personalities, agendas, and appearances should be sketched out, at the very least.

Lastly, the King needs to write a small list of tasks for the players to attempt. These should not be epic quests, as characters have only a week, but they should not be insignificant. Classic fairy-tale duties include finding strange and



wonderful items such as dogs that can fit into walnut shells, teaching birds to sing, accomplishing wonders in one night with the aid of magic, and driving away menaces. Announcing three or four such tasks should suffice, though adding more is certainly possible.

Characters in Blood Royal fall into a very narrow category: conniving scions of nobility. There is little room for variance from this basic concept; all characters must be of royal descent, and, as for conniving, one who is not so would likely be the first removed from competition.

In the game, characters are represented by five statistics: Quickness, Muscle, Deviousness, Charm, and Karma. They are rated from -6 (dreadful) to 6 (nigh godlike), with zero as the average. An extremely high score (5 or 6) grants a special ability called a Talent, while similarly, a -5 or -6 confers a Drawback. Talents must be rolled for to use; drawbacks are automatic.

**Quickness** measures a character's dexterity, grace, and agility. Quicker characters are better able to catch objects, avoid physical obstacles, duck out of sight, and act surreptitiously.

**Talent:** Sleight of Hand

An extraordinarily fast character can move briefly without even being seen. As long as an action takes less than two seconds to complete, one using this ability automatically avoids detection, even if it fails.

**Drawback:** Clumsiness

An awkward character cannot avoid certain mishaps, from tripping over his own feet to dropping delicate porcelain. A clumsy character must make a Quickness roll whenever he attempts to move quickly, gracefully, or accurately; and, if he must already roll once, he now has to roll twice in order to succeed.

**Muscle** combines the character's attributes of strength and stamina. Stronger characters can move heavy objects with ease, are not affected as much by very mild poisons and minor illnesses, and can work hard for long periods.

**Talent:** Burst of Strength

*When faced with an obstruction seemingly too heavy to lift, a character can try to move it out of the way with this ability. Burst of Strength can also be used to grant one last action before a character collapses or dies.*

**Drawback:** Sickly

*A character with very low Muscle, when attempting feats of strength or endurance, must roll successfully twice to accomplish it. If either roll fails, he is unable to act until all other players have done something.*

**Deviousness** is a character's intelligence and cunning. Should the player choose to work through conspiracy and treachery, it is certainly an important trait for him to possess.

**Talent:** Scheming

*Whenever another character makes a roll the player wishes to interfere with, the devious character may make a roll of his own, and choose which one is used to determine the actor's success.*

**Drawback:** Bewilderment

*Whenever this character's Deviousness is rolled for, all players except the one rolling may attempt to grab the dice, rendering his chances much smaller. Sweeping motions of the arm are not permitted; grab only with the hands. The Bewildered character may defend his roll, but may not strike with intent to damage other players. The others have to give his dice back after the King declares the result.*

**Charm** represents the character's innate charisma and personability. Charming characters are better able to influence others, and escape blame much more readily than those who have less magnetic personalities.

**Talent:** Hypnosis

*This character may automatically convince any non-player character besides the King to do something, so long as the action does not put the performer in direct danger or contradict his moral code.*

**Drawback:** Revulsion

A character with extremely low Charm is incapable of getting a good reaction from people without large favors. Any time his Charm is rolled for, anything less than a perfect success indicates a bad reaction; a complete success indicates neutrality on the part of the target.

**Karma** measures the character's luck and morality — his willingness to bend or break the rules. Characters with high Karma are principled (even if these principles do not necessarily agree with those held by most people) and often strict, at least with themselves. Low-Karma characters are the opposite — dissolute, contradicting themselves every minute, having no concept of morality and not wanting it, either.

**Talent:** Magic

A character with extraordinary Karma may create small, vaguely useful magical items. While the products of his skill would be considered mere toys by any self-respecting sorcerer, they can still prove worth the effort. Items that can be produced with this talent include such things as talking mirrors and dreidels which always land on Gimel (take all). Can only be done at night.

**Drawback:** Unlucky

Any time an attempt is made to harm this character, the perpetrator may roll again if it fails the first time..

In allotting a character's statistics, the player may determine them how he likes — as long as the character's eventual results total zero, balancing good and bad. Sacrifices must be made to excel.

There is nothing else to character creation; everything is determined by statistics, dice, and the King's will. The character's persona will show itself as the game progresses.



## Building a Story

*The game begins as the characters, the King's children, are read the King's proclamation by the herald. The document is a list of "suggested" tasks for the players to accomplish to aid their individual causes. After it is read, the characters may disperse, and the week begins.*

*The clock is flexible; the King will declare nightfall whenever he pleases, allowing one action per player to be taken overnight, and so another day will pass. Characters have seven days (and, to an extent, nights) to pursue their agendas; on the evening of the seventh, they are brought before the King to hear his judgement.*

*Many character actions are intended to take place without the others' knowledge. These, and all actions taken at night, should be written down and given to the King to read privately; he will decide whether to grant it automatically, refuse it, or request a roll. While suddenly being asked for a roll without apparent cause might well give rise to suspicion among the other players, remember that everyone's up to something in this game anyway.*



Rolls are made when a character tries to do anything of greater than trivial difficulty unless the King decides that it should automatically succeed or fail. The King decides upon a number of successful dice that will be required for the action as a whole to succeed.

Each player should have several six-sided dice (at any given time, only six will be needed). For each roll, he draws a number equal to his score (whether positive or negative) in the statistic being rolled to form his pool.

If the roll is for a positive or zero stat, the player retains control of his dice; if it is negative, he must give the pool to another player selected at random or by other means, if desired.

All dice in the pool are thrown. A successful die is one which rolls **under** the positive or negative stat; a failed die matches the target or rolls over, making it still possible to fail with a score of 6. Total the number of successful dice; if it meets or exceeds the King's minimum, the action is successful.

The principal goal of all actions taken by the characters is to advance

Eric, a character with a Quickness of 6, has heard that one of his father's councillors carries a scroll useful for one of the tasks that has been assigned him, and wishes to "liberate" it without anyone else knowing.

In the morning, the councillors plan to gather to discuss a recent lapse in trade. Eric waits carefully by the route he knows his target will take.

Some minutes after he arrives, the councillor appears. Eric walks quickly out, seemingly preoccupied, and runs into the man.

Eric's player takes six dice and announces that he will use Sleight of Hand to grab the document. The King declares the target number to be 3 successes — it's an important piece of paper, and the councillor is suspicious when run into..

Throwing the dice, Eric rolls 6, 5, 6, 6, 2, 6. Two successes. He fails to snatch the parchment, but since he is using Sleight of Hand, does not risk detection. If he were trying to grab it without his special ability, he would have had to make a Charm roll against a different target.

Later on the councillor's route, another character, Tamar, also lies in wait. She, unlike Eric, is not dextrous at all, having a Quickness of -2. Still, for her, the document is worth the risk.

Tamar, not as daring as Eric, does not use the same technique. Instead, she waits for the councillor to pass, and then tries to snatch the parchment. Since her Quickness is negative, another player rolls for her, in this case Eric.

Eric rolls two dice; both must succeed for Tamar to get the document. The throw comes up snake eyes — double ones. She succeeds!

*themselves, optionally at others' cost. There are many, many ways for the nefarious to accomplish this, whether by murder, framing, blackmail, or even presenting legitimate evidence of wrongdoing or completing the King's tasks. A successful roll cannot be directly contested; however, the victim may retaliate later, should he still be alive.*

*Most characters will have plenty of ideas on how to either put themselves far ahead of the rest, or simply to get rid of the others. As royalty, the resources of the palace are at their disposal; however, should they be caught, consequences are severe.*

*Simply moving around the palace may be done at any time, as long as the player declaring movement is not interrupting another. When declaring actions, if two or more players try to act at the same time, they proceed in order of Quickness – highest first.*

## Happily Ever After

At the end of the week, all surviving characters are brought before the dying King. He will choose a successor from their ranks based on how much they have accomplished in the past seven days.

The characters' individual favor with the King is established by points. A certain number of points is given for completing a task on the list read to the characters in the beginning; more points are granted for removing other characters from play, temporarily or permanently. And, should characters attempt to curry favor with palace officials, they may gain points that way as well.

At long last, Eric and Tamar, along with their only surviving sibling Ian, are brought into the dying King's chambers. The players and King total their positive points.

Eric has completed two of the King's four tasks for 14 points. This appears to be all, until he brings out the chamberlain, who admits that he lost one of his crucial reports after passing Tamar in a hallway. Tamar is searched, and they discover the report. Eric gains another 2 points, and when the chamberlain voices his confidence, another point. Eric's total is now 17.

Tamar has only completed one of the King's tasks, but it was worth 9 points. She managed to drive her sister Carmilla off, giving her another 6 points, and she has written commendations from two officials, giving her a total of 17 as well.

Ian did not complete any tasks. He managed to get the oldest sibling, Oliver, thrown into prison on false charges which were never questioned, for 5 points. He presents concrete evidence of wrongdoing on the parts of Tamar and Carmilla both, for 6 points; and he has the approval of one official, giving him a total of 12 points.

The players now total their negative points. Eric was caught trying to get Ian locked up, taking away 4 points; he is left with 13.

Tamar has serious evidence of corruption against her, and was seen trying to poison Eric's food. 18 points are subtracted from her score, leaving her with -1.

Ian managed to cover his tracks well enough for the most part, but he was caught as he tried to slip an enchanted doll into Tamar's room. 2 points are subtracted, leaving him with 10.

Eric is chosen to succeed his father.

Completing one of the King's tasks — 5-15 points, depending on difficulty

Driving a rival to suicide or self-exile — 6 points

Imprisoning or banishing a rival with a legitimate reason — 5 points

Killing a rival in secret — 3 points

Presenting evidence of the corruption or wrongdoing of a rival — 2 points

Written approval of palace official — 1 point per official

Points may also be taken away. If a character is incautious, he may wreck his chances of achieving the crown forever.

Caught tormenting a rival by a third party -- -2 points

Imprisoning or banishing a rival without excuse — -4 points

Caught killing a rival by a third party — -8 points

Evidence of corruption or wrongdoing — -10 points

It is possible for a character to win by default — if he kills, imprisons, or exiles all of the other potential heirs. However, if the character is careless, he may find that the King considers him unworthy anyway, and, if his crimes become known, could be imprisoned himself. If a character is about to win by default but has fewer than five points, he is unable to succeed.

In case of a tie, the kingdom passes to the character with higher Karma. If the decision is still tied, the succession is decided by lot. Tied players roll one six-sided die each until one comes out higher. The victor is crowned King, and the others must be content with their lots.

The player chosen King at the end of the game becomes King for the next one. If no character was chosen, the old King gets another week.



## In Other Lands

House rules can be used to change practically anything about Blood Royal. They're not for every gaming group, but depending on the players they may make the game more fun.

### 1 – Machinations of the King

Instead of being bedridden for his final week alive, the King is well enough to move around. He has a very specific idea of how he wants the kingdom to end up, and acts surreptitiously to advance his goal. As he wields much more power than any other character, and is above the law he establishes, this makes him a very dangerous opponent should he choose to sponsor another...

### 2 – Athens Rule

Instead of a monarchy, the land is ruled democratically. Points are not given for anything other than written approval, which can be granted by anyone literate (a commoner is literate if the character asking him succeeds in a Karma check). The King is replaced by an appropriate authority figure.

### 3 – Fortinbras' Rule

In the event that all characters end up killing each other, the King dies without an heir. A distant relative is called in to be King, and the now-deceased former ruler chastises his wayward children for eternity.

### 4 – Road to Faerie – Bob and Bing Rule

Only for use with groups who enjoy this sort of thing, have time to prepare, and are mature enough not to take advantage of knowing full well what everyone else is up to. Before moving against another, a character must stand up (or sprawl across the table, as desired) and sing a brief musical number. The King doesn't get away, either – he has the option of singing at the beginning or the end, but he must sing. Also, Dorothy Lamour must make an appearance.

5 – Munchkin Rule

*Every character, regardless of Karma, can create magical items.*

6 – No Rest for the Wicked Rule

*No actions may be taken at night, as the characters are all shaking with fear and self-loathing until dawn. Magical items can be made in the daytime, but take the full day.*

7 – Riddigore Rule

*The palace contains a gallery of ancestors' portraits, which critique the actions of any character present. They are generally dissatisfied with anything a still-living descendant does, and aren't afraid to let him know it. Unless he is adding to their number, in which case they may be better disposed.*

8 – Mundane Rule

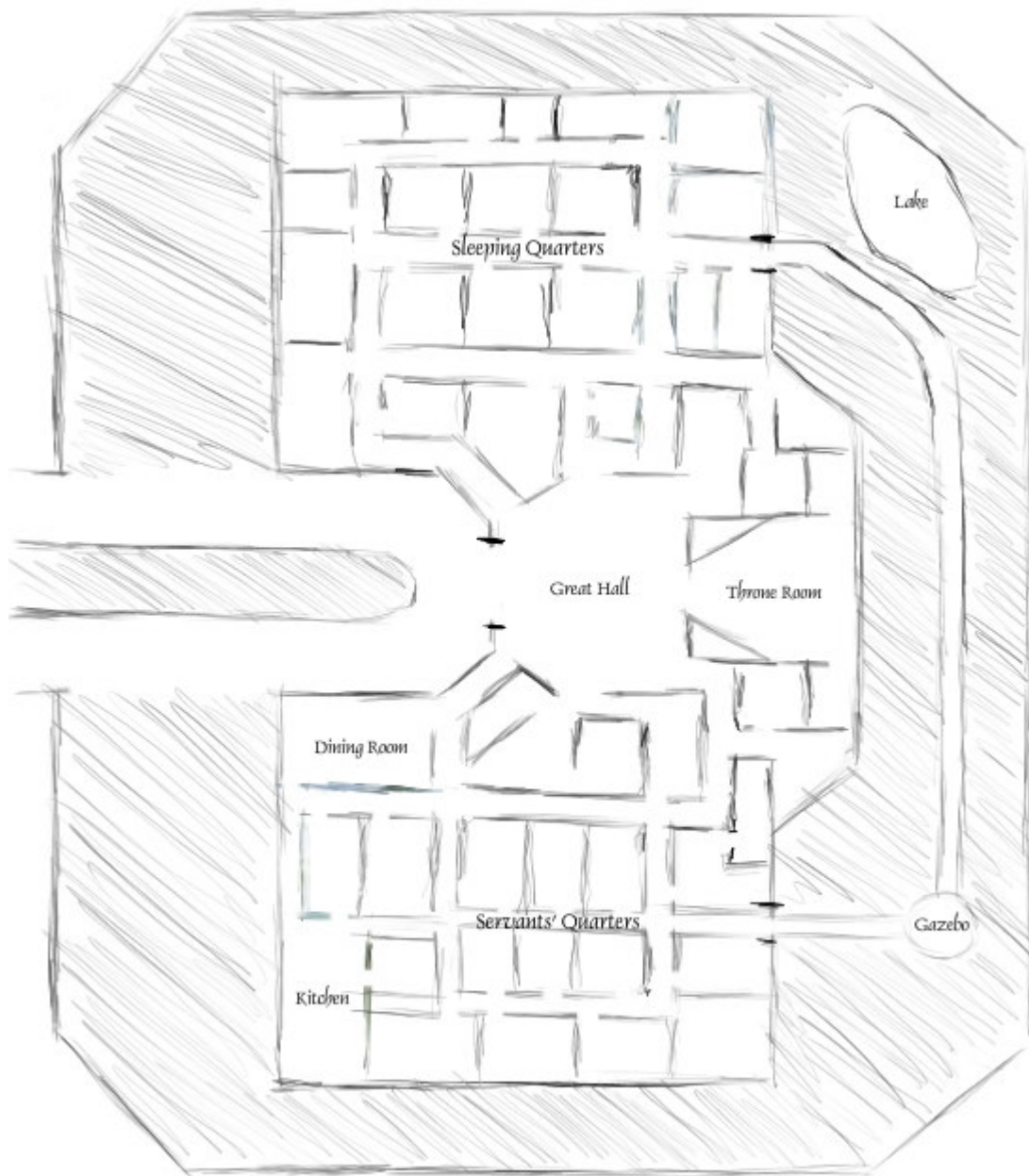
*Instead of magic, characters with high Karma may reroll one failure per day.*

## *There Lived a King*

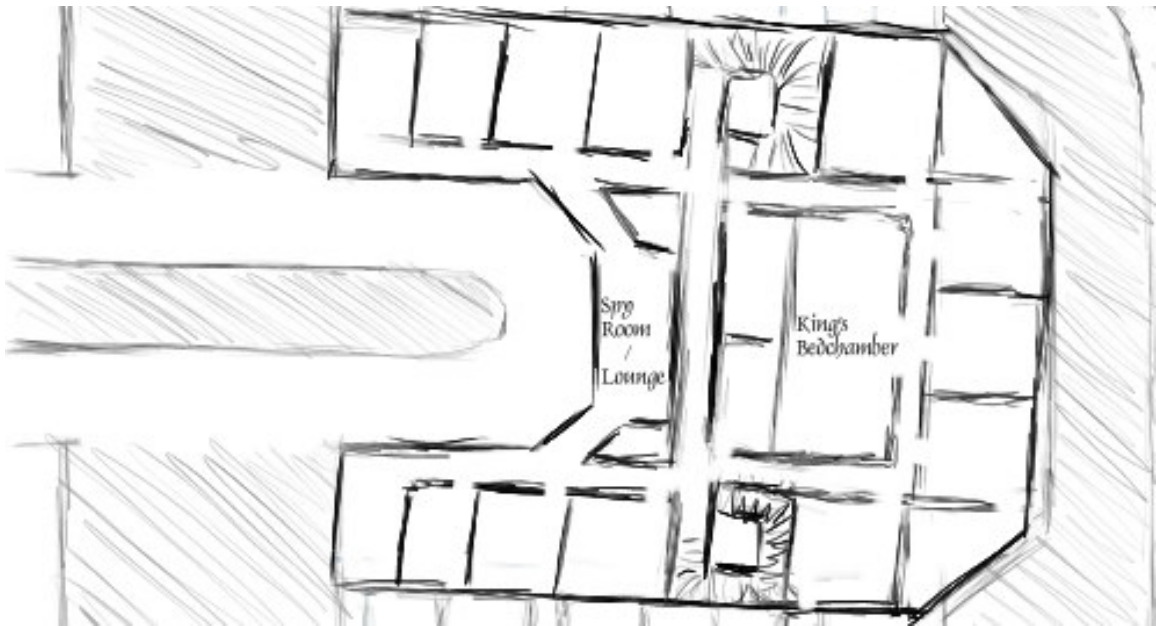
*This chapter is intended as a resource for quick games, or if the King simply does not want to prepare his own setting. A complete map of a palace and grounds (without secrets such as traps or hidden passages) is provided; while it has no basement, one can be added easily. Several important non-player characters are also detailed.*

*The King should copy the map pages and mark his secrets on a private copy for himself, leaving a second for the players. The King's map should be kept away from the others at all costs. A third backup can't hurt, either — the players' map is likely to be folded, crumpled, torn, stained with drinks, and otherwise abused.*





*Any unlabeled room that is not part of a larger section (Servant's Quarters in the south wing, others' Sleeping Quarters in the north) is left to the King to imagine.*



*The second storey houses the royal family's bedchambers. Each player character is given a room here by the King.*

Non-player characters:

King Grigory — tall, stocky, and white-haired with age, the King has controlled his realm for some seventy years. Respected and sometimes feared by his subjects, he became king by overthrowing the corrupt government of his predecessor, King Torvin. Grigory's just laws, and draconian enforcement, have made him many friends as well as enemies. Now he lies dying, and soon he too will be part of history, though undoubtedly a more appreciated part than Torvin.

Queen Esmeraelda — Esmeraelda has been married to Grigory for forty years, and is now old and gray-haired. Her wits are still at her command, though — it is rumored that she, and not Grigory, actually did most of the governing during his reign. Sadly, her hearing has not kept up with her sharp mind and tongue, and she must often ask people to speak louder in her presence.

Labhra — Not much is known about this man in white. Coming from a far-away land, he quickly rose to fame in Grigory's kingdom as a physician and sage. He is one of the few healers who remains to take care of the dying Grigory. Strong but kind and wise, he also advises the King and Queen on matters of state. However, he may have his own reasons for being inside the castle...

Ocres — In company with Labhra, Ocres is the other doctor who remains to care for Grigory. In contrast to his coworker, Ocres is small and dark, and acquired his considerable reputation through careful perseverance over decades of work. He and Darius are often seen together, and as far as anyone can tell, are from the same land.

Bartholomew — King Grigory's chief advisor, Bartholomew is a small, wiry man in his middle years. He is almost never seen without a pile of papers almost as big as he is. His glasses are constantly trying to fall down his nose, often resulting in pandemonium when he unthinkingly reaches up to push them back with a hand that was just holding stacks of reports.

*Syrah* – The second of the King's advisors, *Syrah* is Grigory's spymaster and chief ambassador. She is friendly and almost brutally candid in casual conversation, making her seem a peculiar choice for her office. However, she never seems to be around when wanted by anyone except Grigory and Esmeralda, and has a way of dropping out of nowhere when so much as mentioned.

*Ingos* – Grigory's third advisor and captain of the palace guard, the square-faced *Ingos* is a stolid but intelligent man. Untidy himself, but strict with his men, he seems not to notice the double standard – or simply not to care. An amateur musician, he has become quite skilled with several instruments.

*Simon* – As a herald, *Simon* is charged with several duties: making any announcements requested by Grigory or Esmeralda, preceding the royals on official occasions, and occasionally venturing out alone to collect people. *Simon* is still young, though he has been in this position for some time.

*Dorian* – The chamberlain, *Dorian* is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the palace, ordering goods, directing servants, and ensuring the comfort of its inhabitants. His work has made him a bit fussy, but he is good-natured even so.

*Micha* – The palace's head cook, *Micha* is extraordinarily talented. A little vain, perhaps, but then he has a right to be proud of himself, and routinely astonishes guests with the quality of his food. It is rumored that he was once in Grigory's military, or even the army of another king, but he does not choose to answer.

*Lady Hecht* – Small and usually placid, *Lady Hecht* has been visiting her cousin, the Queen Esmeralda, for the past month, and shows no signs of departing anytime soon. Only rarely does her temper get the better of her, and then even *Ingos* avoids being in the same room.

Lady Thale – A noblewoman whose attitude can only be described as predatory, Lady Thale is, perhaps, a few years past her prime. However, she does not let that discourage her, but continues hunting anyway.

Lord Calvin – A nobleman visiting the palace, just as Grigory's impending death was announced, Lord Calvin is foppish and constantly nervous. Dressing always in flamboyant clothing, he sweats and staggers his gaudy way through every day, hoping always to come out ahead.

Lord Grav – Tall and severely dressed, Lord Grav has never stopped mourning for his wife, dead ten years ago. Gloomy and stubborn, he has taken up semi-permanent residence at the palace in return for his long-ago service to Grigory in the wars of succession.

The Curate – nobody knows what his actual name is; people have always referred to him as "The Curate", even in direct conversation. Tall and quiet, The Curate walks softly, reverently, wherever he goes. He sometimes advises Grigory, but prefers to keep to his chapel, where he spends hours standing or kneeling before the altar.

Ambassador Darius – The emissary of a kingdom some distance from Grigory's, Darius is a swarthy man in loose-draped garments. Quick-witted and silver-tongued, he is well-liked by the residents of the palace.

Koshchei – An enchanter from a land to the east, Koshchei appeared out of nowhere to request an audience with Grigory. What happened in that audience remains untold, but the sorcerer seems to have moved into a small tower just to the north of the palace. Flashes of light and noise are often reported coming from the tower. Koshchei is sometimes sought for advice, but gives it only grudgingly. He has his own agenda, most of which does not involve anyone else, and prefers to be left alone.

Mogrin — When Koshchei arrived, the witch Mogrin fled to parts unknown. Previously, she had been tolerated, though not liked for her unpleasant demeanor; it is theorized that the wizard drove her out. Town gossips maintain that she is still in the area, though there are at least twenty accounts of where exactly she is to be found.

Asen — Few people know if Asen even exists, or is just a rumor. In any case, she is supposed to be Mogrin's adopted child and apprentice, and to have a fair amount of skill with magic herself. Occasionally, on very stormy nights, two voices would be heard arguing in Mogrin's hovel; but now that the witch has gone into hiding, there is no sign of Asen either.

Gretchen — A girl living in a town near the palace. Plain but good-natured. Is rumored to be able to spin gold thread from straw.

Tomas — A commoner youth. In love with Gretchen, and plans to marry her before the end of the month. Tomas works as a journeyman blacksmith, but moonlights as a boxer.

## The King's List

Any of the following items can be dropped into a list of tasks for Kings who are short on preparation time. Some of them are mutually exclusive. The number before each is the point score for accomplishing the task.

- 5            Go to Koshchei's tower and request his presence at the palace on the fourth night. Swear that he will be safely conducted. Do not take "no" for an answer.
  
- 7            Find the crystal goblet my father lost, forty years ago, in the dining room.
  
- 7            A girl in the village is said to be able to spin straw into gold. Bring her here, find her a shuttle, spindle, wheel, and straw, and set her to work.
  
- 8            Return this relic to The Curate, and do whatever he asks concerning it.
  
- 9            Find Mogrin, and ask her if she knows of a cure for me. (The answer is always no)
  
- 9            Teach my pet parrot a new language.
  
- 9            Determine whether or not Lord Calvin is plotting against the throne. Follow him at the ball on the second evening, and watch every movement. Report to Syrah.
  
- 10           I was given this hound as a gift recently, but it has not yet been trained. Do so, and take him on a hunt. Bring me the results so I can see for myself what kind of gift it is.
  
- 10           Find Mogrin, and destroy her or drive her out.
  
- 10           Bring The Curate to the sealed room on the first floor and help him cleanse it.

- I1            A merchant has arrived, selling fine silks Ingo swears are stolen and smuggled through my port. "Convince" this thief to leave his wares here.
- I1            Find or make a piece of cloth which measures twenty yards by one yard, but can fit in my hand.
- I2            Discover whether or not Mogrin's apprentice Asen exists.
- I2            Build a device which will capture sound out of the air, and release it later.
- I3            Follow Darius on the second night. Watch everyone he talks to, and try to listen to their conversation. Report to Syrah.
- I5            Ask Koshchei to leave the kingdom. If he refuses, destroy him.