

Affairs of State
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Answering a Few Questions...

Terrak pulled his cloak closer about him. The air was chill in the pre-dawn light. He looked up and his gaze stretched across the imposing width of the Outer Wall. Nearly stretching from one end of the horizon to the other, the intricate frescoes glorifying the Empire were just starting to emerge from the shadows. Guards patrolled the Wall, their torches like tiny sparks of fairy light moving slowly across the top. Beyond that Wall lay a city of immense riches and wonder. A hundred miserable little cons and thefts had led up to this moment. This was his one chance to parlay a lifetime of petty crime and hardscrabble existence into something so much more. Terrak took a deep breath and headed towards the Gates of Earthly Paradise.

When he finally reached the Gates, a long mechanical arm swung down. At the end of the Arm was a metallic head wearing military headgear. The head began to look him up and down, ticking, clicking and whirring as it moved. Terrak had only seen a few clockwork devices and this was by far the most complex one he'd ever seen. He had to remember to keep his cool. It wouldn't do to get flustered before he'd barely started.

"Who are you and what is your business?" came a tinny voice from the head.

Terrak nearly jumped out of his skin, but that icy calm he got whenever he ran a con slowly began to take hold. "I am Lord Dumont of the Kingdom of Arkeht," he said, shifting off his cloak and displaying his ill-gotten finery, "I have come to establish diplomatic relations between our two countries!"

* * *

Who are you?

You are a con artist who has come to the Imperial City posing as the diplomatic representative of a far off (and quite fictitious) country.

Where are you?

The Imperial City. The Empire once stretched out across a massive continent, from sea to sea. The Emperor ruled his distant provinces from behind the thick walls of the Imperial City, never venturing outside. But that was long, long ago. Now the Imperial City and a few hundred square miles surrounding it are all that's left. But though the glory of the Empire has faded, its importance has not. The Imperial City is home to a number of artisans and crafters who possess the knowledge and the skill to build the amazing clockwork devices that are common in the Imperial City but command a king's ransom in the outside world. Thus, the Imperial continues to hold itself above nations many times its size and power.

Why are you here?

The Imperial City is a place of fabulous riches and technical marvels. The standard of living here is better than anyplace else. So as long as people think you're a legitimate diplomat, you can live like a king!

What do I do?

Well, mostly you try and lead a life of decadent hedonism. Too bad you keep getting caught up in the intriguing of other diplomats and preventing your lie from being exposed.

How do I do that?

You're a con artist. Be charming, glib, fast with your wits and faster with your feet.

Character Creation

“But why do I have to be the secretary?” whined Connor.

“Because you have the manners of a goat,” replied Elana. “Plus, I’ve made an exhaustive study of Late Imperial Architecture. Which means that when I talk about the Imperial ruins of our beloved homeland, our story sounds more plausible. How much do you know about Imperial ruins?”

“No one cares about a bunch of run-down buildings, they want to see a man of action and that’s me!”

“Oh you’ll be a man of action all right. I’ll need someone to help me arrange the furniture in my apartments.”

* * *

Step 1: Name and “Home Country”

Create a name for your character and the country you’re claiming to be from. Are you just an Ambassador, or do you have other titles? The name you choose can set the tone for the kind of country you claim to be from. After all, Commander Skartz, Ambassador of Plesnosk presents a very different image than Unifier Mistwater, Ambassador of the Elysium Confederation. Thinking about who you are and the country you pretend to represent helps you establish a vivid character right from the start. And first impressions can mean a lot.

Step 2: Describe yourself

Write a short paragraph that describes what your character looks like. Doesn’t have to be more than a few sentences, but if you’re struck with inspiration write as much as you want. Pretend that your character is being introduced for the first time in a novel. This means that your physical appearance, the clothes you’re wearing, and the general feeling you exude will all be there. Aside from being a quick way to describe your character to the other players, this also gets you thinking about your character and helps to flesh them out.

Step 3: Pick your Greed

Although everyone wants to live the easy life of a diplomat, there’s some aspect of the highlife that you’re always hankering after. It could be booze, sex, fine clothes, fine art, money, food, parties, or just about anything else, so long as it doesn’t make you a better person. This is your Greed and you should write it down now. The Greed gives the GM tools to help start an adventure or pick up the pace and when you encounter it, feel free to chase it down. Roleplaying your Greed well can earn you a bonus die from the GM while blatantly ignoring your Greed may earn you a penalty die.

Step 4: Pick your Skills

You now choose three skills:

- Your Specialty skill. This is something you’re very good at and allows you to roll 6 dice on a Challenge involving that skill. The Specialty can be any skill, even one that normally requires a lot of training to learn.

- Your Trained skill. This is a skill that normally requires some amount of formalized training to perform. You've received that training and can roll 4 dice instead of the usual 1 in a Challenge.
- Your Sucky skill. This is a skill that an average person could perform, but you suck at it. You roll 2 dice instead of 4 on a Challenge involving that skill. Your GM is allowed to veto any Sucky skills that are too narrow or unlikely to come up in play, although truly sneaky GMs may let you get away with it and then build whole adventures around that skill.

When picking your skills, remember that we're using the word skill to cover a wide range of learned behaviors, innate talents, raw abilities and even personality traits. Thus, you could have a Specialty Skill of Strong or a Sucky Skill of Bravery and so on. Your Trained skill is probably just that but feel free to be more creative in your Strong and Sucky skills. Also, remember that pretty much any other basic skill or trait is Average and you can always roll four dice for it.

There is only one restriction on skills: magic doesn't exist so you can't pick a skill that let's you use magic. This doesn't mean there isn't magical lore, or sleight-of-hand tricks, or magical theory. It just means that if you know this stuff, then you're a charlatan as well as an imposter.

That's it. You're finished with character creation.

The System

“And why should I give you 500 Imperials, Ambassador?”

“Because these documents will prove that you have been siphoning off Imperial funds to pay for the charms of Vestasia the Courtesean.”

“That’s a lie!”

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but if you think you can survive the scandal, I’ll just pass this along. I’m sure your wife will believe you.”

“Wait...wait, you’ll get your 500 Imperials.”

“Make that 700.”

* * *

Resolving Actions

You need:

- a number of six-sided dice (at least 6 per player, probably more)
- a large number of six-sided dice for the GM. These will be used as bonus dice and should be a unique color to make them obvious.
- a large cup or bowl to cover the dice with
- a stopwatch or timer

Step 0: The Mediation

Exercise your power of persuasion. If a potential challenge comes up, talk to the group. Outline what you would like to see in the outcome. You have 30 seconds to strike a deal with all other players involved (including the GM). Note that if the GM is involved, they can simply cut you off and tell you to pick up the dice, but if you can get a reputation for coming up with clever additions to the story, you may be able to talk your way out of some impossible situations. Should you reach a deal with the other players, the GM narrates the outcome according to that deal.

Step 1: The Roll

In a challenge, players roll a number of dice equal to their skill:

- If it’s their Specialty, they roll 6 dice
- If it’s an average skill (something everyone can do) they roll 4 dice
- If it’s their Trained Skill (something they’ve been taught to do) they roll 4 dice.
- If it’s their Sucky skill (something everyone can do but them) they roll 2 dice
- If it’s an Impossible skill (they need special training to do it and don’t have it) they roll 1 die

The GM may assign a 1-die bonus or penalty for special situations and is the final judge about what skills are relevant.

The players involved announce the number of dice they are rolling. They check their rolls and then cover them up. The most important piece of information is how many matches they got. While high number beat low numbers, more matches beat fewer matches. So 3 1's beat 2 6's.

Step 2: The Declarations

Starting with the GM and moving clockwise around the table (if the GM isn't involved, start with the person closest to the GM's left), each player makes a claim about the composition of their roll. If you say "1-6", you're claiming that you've got at least one die showing a six under the bowl. If you say "4-2", you're claiming that you've got four dice showing a two. You need not be truthful. In fact, you are encouraged to lie creatively and on a bad roll, you may need to. Once you've made your claim the next person involved in the challenge must make a claim that tops the one that you've just made. So if you said, "2-3", the next person must make a claim of at least "2-4" or better.

If someone cannot or will not top the last claim, they forfeit their place in the challenge and are out of the contest. This continues until there are only two players left.

Step 3: The Showdown

When there are only two players left in the challenge (or if there were only two to begin with), both players alternate making claims until:

- One player relents. The other player is the winner of the challenge and may narrate their desired outcome.
- One player accuses the other of bluffing. In this case, the accused player may make an offer of compromise. If the accusing player rejects the offer and presses the accusation, the accused player must reveal their hand. If they cannot support the last claim they made (i.e. they were lying), they lose and the GM awards a bonus die to the winner. The winner may narrate their desired outcome.
- One player may offer to compromise. If rejected, they must make a claim, relent, or accuse. If the compromise offer is accepted, both sides have one minute to reach an agreement on how the outcome will be narrated. If they come to an agreement, the GM will narrate the outcome based on that agreement. If they fail to reach an agreement, both sides simultaneously reveal their dice. The side that has the highest-value matching set is the winner and can narrate the outcome. In the event of a tie, compare the next highest matched set (or highest value if there are no more matched sets). If there's still a tie, the GM narrates the outcome.

Step 4: The Narration

The winner (or the GM in cases of compromises) narrates the outcome of their choosing. Any reasonably logical outcome of the winner's choosing is possible and may be narrated. The only restriction is that the winner may never narrate the death of any

character other than their own and that if they choose to narrate the defeat of an NPC, they can immediately initiate a follow-up challenge for the right to narrate that NPC's death (note that the GM may agree to their request, negating the need for a challenge).

Alternatively, the winner may choose to allow the GM to narrate a failure. If the winner chooses this option and the winner is a single player (i.e. it's not the result of a compromise), then the GM will give the winner a bonus die. If the player narrates a failed outcome or loses to the GM, that won't earn a bonus die. The winner must have sole narrative control, but pass it over to the GM in exchange for the bonus die.

The GM reserves the right to change or modify a winner's narration or the outcome reached via compromise. But if the GM changes the outcome desired by the winner, they must give the winner a bonus die. If the outcome was the result of a compromise, everyone involved in the compromise receives a bonus die.

Alliances:

At the start of a challenge, before any dice are rolled, you may declare that you are allying yourself with another player. If you do so, you forfeit any right to participate in the challenge, but you loan one of your dice to your ally. Your ally must then use that die as a bonus in the challenge. After the challenge, the die is returned to you. If the situation involves your Specialty, you may loan 2 dice to your ally. The GM has the final word as to whether or not you can offer two dice to an ally.

Bonus Dice:

Awarded for successfully calling a bluff, letting the GM narrate your failure, or having your outcome changed, bonus dice may be used at any time to supplement your roll. Once used in a roll, they must be given back to the GM. However, you may also choose to give your bonus dice to someone else who may then use them at their discretion. Thus, they can become useful tools in negotiations or compromises. Leftover bonus dice at the end of a gaming session carry over into the next one.

Participation:

Everyone can participate in a challenge. Even players whose characters aren't there and couldn't possibly be affected by the outcome can still get involved if they choose. Note that the more people involved, the longer the process will take and the longer the game will be. It's often in the interests of play to simply ally with someone more directly involved and give them a boost, but if you feel the need to get fully involved, go right ahead.

The GM only participates when the Challenge involves NPCs or the players are attempting something that has a reasonable chance of failure and it could seriously impact the story. However, over time, the players themselves should be getting more involved in these events and if things go well, your job will consist mostly of passing out the bonus dice and keeping the story from straying too far afield. When the players are actively setting the dynamic tempo of the game, they're probably fully engaged and you've probably done a fantastic job.

An Example of Play

Andy, Beth, Carl are in the middle of a session and Jen is acting as the GM. Andy's character is at an Imperial Ball and he's trying to impress Serrene, Duchess of the Silver Shores (never mind that the Silver Shores were lost to the Empire thousands of years ago, the title is what's important). Serrene is quite attractive and Andy's Greed is Women so this is a totally appropriate response. Andy says he's going to try and sweep the Duchess off her feet with some fancy dance moves. Jen says this is a good time for a challenge.

Andy tries to head off the challenge with a little negotiation, but Jen won't hear of it. So Andy is involved in the Challenge. Jen is involved as she's running the Duchess. Carl realizes he'd like to win the attentions of the Duchess so he gets involved. Beth doesn't care much one way or the other, but she's a little tired of the way Andy's character is always womanizing so she decides to ally with Carl.

Andy has no special skill so he'll be rolling 4 dice and gets a bonus die from playing up to his Greed. Jen is rolling 4 dice for the Duchess. Dancing is Carl's Sucky Skill so he only rolls 2 dice, but since Beth has Imperial Customs as a Specialty Skill, Jen agrees that she can loan Carl two of her dice for this Challenge.

So the three players roll their dice and get the following rolls:

Andy: 6, 4, 2, 1, 1,
Carl: 4, 4, 2, 2
Jen: 6, 3, 3, 2

Now we start the Declarations...

Jen: "I've got 1-1"
Andy: "I've got 1-6"
Carl: "I've got 2-2"
Jen: "2-3"
Andy: "3-1"
Jen: "I'm out"

Now there are two players left in the Challenge so we're into the Showdown. Carl asks for a Compromise and Andy accepts. Jen starts the timer and the two haggle over potential outcomes. Unfortunately, neither is willing to let the other one get away with the Duchess and after a minute, time is up. The two compare their die rolls and with a 2-4, Carl easily beats the 2-1 that Andy has. So Carl narrates an outcome in which he gets the Duchess, Andy looks like an idiot and gets tossed out of the Imperial City. Jen thinks that last bit is a little harsh, so she gives Carl a bonus die and says that Carl gets the Duchess, Andy looks like an idiot but that Duke Hallor, who was also looking to impress the Duchess is now more than a bit upset with Carl's character. Which sets the stage for another round of Challenges....

Artifacts

“Emperor, I am pleased to present you with this small token of esteem from my homeland.”

“Is that it?”

“Yes, Emperor.”

“It appears to be a large boulder with a large blue square painted on it attached to a chain.”

“Correct, Emperor. This comes directly from our Grand Temple. It is a powerful talisman, blessed by the gods to provide long life and good health to the wearer.”

“The...wearer?”

“Oh yes, Emperor...”

* * *

The Emperor is always eager to learn more about the distant lands from which you hail. Your rivals are eager to learn more about this country they've never heard of. You are eager to make sure there's lots of evidence supporting the existence of your homeland. To that end, the game supports the creation of artifacts.

At the beginning of each game session, the GM will go around the table and have each player present some sort of artifact from their home country. An artifact is simply a physical prop of some kind. You display the item, talk about it for a minute or two, answer any questions from the peanut gallery and then the next person takes a turn. It's essentially an in-character show and tell.

The artifact can be just about anything. “Official” documents are easy to create and can be a lot of fun, but tools, drawings, clothing, songs, foods, rock samples, plants, jewelry, or anything else could show up at the table. There is only one restriction:

You may not bring a definitive map of your country!

It's perfectly all right to bring a map of a city or a small sub-section of your country, but you must never bring a map that shows a border, even a border with another player's country. The reason for this is simple: if such a map exists, someone may try very hard to match it up to other maps and discover that it just doesn't quite fit.

Besides building up a neat little collection and physical record of your game, the artifacts serve as another way to earn bonus dice. You get 1 bonus die for bringing an artifact. All players then vote on who has the most impressive artifact and who had the best explanation for their artifact. The winner of each vote (and it may be the same person) receives a bonus die.

GM Section

“So what do you think of our new diplomatic mission from...where was it again?”

“Some Confederation of something or other. All I can say is that every time I visit the Diplomatic Quarters, I am reminded of why I we never leave this glorious city.”

* * *

NPCs

NPCs basically come in three flavors minor, major, and badass. An NPC is built in exactly the same way as a character, but they have different dice pools based on how important they are:

Minor characters:

- Roll 4 dice for their Specialty Skill
- Roll 2 dice for their Trained/Average Skill
- Roll 1 die for their Untrained and Sucky Skills

Major Characters:

- Roll 6 dice for their Specialty Skill
- Roll 4 dice for their Trained/Average Skill
- Roll 2 dice for their Sucky Skill
- Roll 1 die for any Untrained Skills

Badass Characters:

- Roll 8 for their Specialty Skill
- Roll 6 dice for their Trained/Average Skill
- Roll 4 dice for their Sucky Skill
- Roll 2 dice for any Untrained Skills.

Simple, no?

Adventure Ideas:

Welcome to the Imperial City – The PCs have arrived at the Imperial City, can they convince the Minister of Foreign Relations that they are legitimate diplomats and should be shown the proper deference? Or will they meet with Corlon, Imperial Executioner?

The Orange Orgy – The orange trees in the Imperial City have finally ripened and it's time for the annual Orange Orgy. Tired of their mooching, the diplomatic elite of the Imperial City are expecting the PCs to throw an Orange Orgy celebration or face social ostracism. The PCs, of course, don't have the funds for this, but they'd better come up with a fabulous party or their social standing will suffer.

The Iceberg Incident – A foreign nobleman has a large clockwork device that creates beautiful ice sculptures. After a botched attempt to secure it, one or more of the PCs winds up in hot water. The winds of war are blowing; can the PCs stop the flames?

A Pox on Both Your Houses – Two Imperial Noble families hope to end years of feuding by a marriage between their families. But the two kids have their own ideas, as do other family members who still have scores to settle. The PCs have been asked to make sure that love runs true and get the pair of them down to the altar in good time.

Don't Derail the Gravy Train – A PC's cover is blown, but rather than being kicked out, they're being blackmailed to aid in a plot to assassinate the Emperor. Can the PCs rally together to save their friend and thwart the plot? Or maybe it is time for a new Emperor.