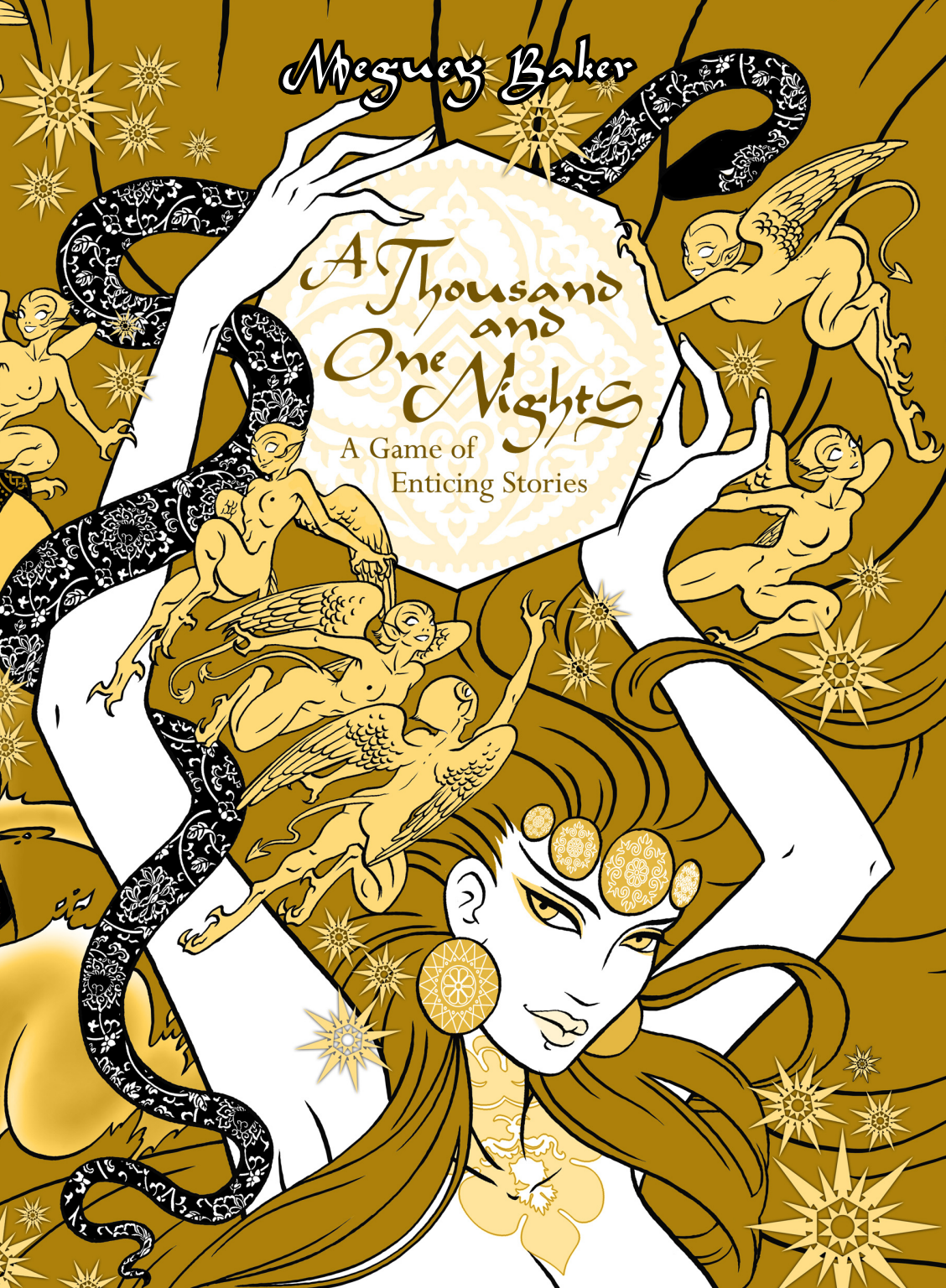


Meguey Baker

A Thousand and One Nights

A Game of
Enticing Stories



Dedicated

to my Mother, Barbara R. Threet, in gratitude for a
childhood rich in fairytales

to my sister Serena R. Torrey, in recognition of years of
shared imaginary space

and to my sons Sebastian, Elliot and Tovey in hope for and
commitment to wonder

Vincent, with you all this and more

My grandfather would have liked to see this, I think.
Albert Walter McKie 1929–2005

A Thousand and One Nights
a game of enticing stories

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Preface

This is not a game about Arab culture. I have not set this game in any real Arabic place, nor any real period of history. I have not made note of literature, music, or religion in the text, nor have I made generalizations about the peoples of the Arab world.

I do not remember a time I did not know the story of Scheherazade and the Arabian Nights. As a girl, I was aware of the subtext of a woman keeping herself alive by her cleverness, and the dangers of abused power. I related strongly to the shared desperate and dangerous plan, executed with the help of a sister. In the tales, I loved the magic and the color and the rich sensual language. In the winters of upstate New York, I loved reading about desert oases, and caravans of camels loaded with silk and jewels. Every lamp might hold a genie, if I rubbed hard enough, and quilts spread on the floor might fly if I knew the secret words. I loved saying the names – Al-Adin, Morgiana, Cassim, Dinrazade – to myself, feeling the odd syllables. And then there was the art – those beautiful drawing of women and men in layers of perfectly draped clothing, turbans, sashes, and curved slippers.

That is what this game is about.

What we make ‘other,’ we find easy to dismiss or abuse. What we try to see as ‘just the same,’ we risk making colorless and bland. We need the exotic, the fantastical, to lift us out of ourselves, out of our everyday experience. We need to delight in what is not familiar, exploring it for what it is – a strange and wonderful world not our own.

Meguey Baker 2006

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Introduction

In the palace of the Sultan are many rooms. In these rooms are many people, and the people have many stories. Most intriguingly, many of these people cannot leave these many rooms. The ornate carved walls surrounding the fragrant pools and exotic gardens are high; the lace-like doors are webs of iron; the delicately cool tones and publicly refined manners raise the significance of an arched brow to feverish degrees. This place apart holds the Sultan's peace; to disturb it would be foolish indeed. Yet, beneath the surface of any still pool are many currents, and this is no exception.

Nights especially can be long in the desert. The sun sinks, and the relief of evening washes over the palace; the inhabitants stir themselves, bathe, dress, eat, and scheme. Music of cymbals, tambours, strings and drums fills the marble halls. Smoke, perfumed and otherwise, seeps into thick color-soaked carpets. Coriander, dates, wine, cardamom, black pepper, coconut, saffron and mint mingle on the tongue. Oiled skin glows beneath fine cotton and silk, set off by leather and gold. And always, the planets dance overhead, taunting in their freedom high in the cool air. Is it a wonder that those here turn to tales of mystery and magic, beauty and bold adventure, to fly away in thought, if only for a time? And, if one's tale is well told, and brings a favor of one kind or another, so much the better, is it not so?

Gather three or more players; you may find more than six unwieldy. Consider the space in which you play: Can you burn incense or candles? Can you have tart grapes and dates and honeyed drink and sharp peppery crackers? Can you have music softly in the background?

Food and drink you might consider, evocative of the setting and appropriate to eat while you play:

coffee, raisin wine, shaved ice with fruit syrups
anise seed drink, mint tea, fruit juices
dates, figs, cashews, walnuts
olive oil with crushed garlic and sea-salt, with
vegetables to dip
saffron rice with cashews and raisins
almond coil cake
hummus and pita
tabouleh – bulgur wheat salad with onions, parsley,
lemon, cucumber, mint
grape leaves stuffed with lamb and rice
baklava – pistachios and honey pastry
roast goat or lamb with coriander, cumin and pepper
babaganoush – roast eggplant purée with spices
zalata – yogurt, cucumbers, herbs
lentil and vegetable stew
fried pudding with syrup
rabbit or fowl, marinated and roasted, with herbs and
couscous or rice.
oranges, pomegranates, peaches, grapes, apricots
sugared cubes of jellied fruit
tagine – meat or vegetable stew on couscous
grape leaves stuffed with raisins, rice and almonds
honey candy rich with sesame seeds, almonds,
cashews or pistachios

Menu



Farida paused before the crystal palace. Somewhere within, her sister Mariam was captive. The message she had received rang in her mind like a silver bell – “Parham is a monster. I have discovered his secret. Come to me in this manner...” The directions had been perfect thus far. Her heart pounding, she turned to take a last look around the courtyard before stealing through the open door.

Give each player a pencil and a character sheet or a small piece of paper. In the middle of the table, put a bowl, pleasing to look at, and fill it with dice of many colors, shapes and sizes. These are the gems of the Sultan.

Next, create your characters. There are characters at two levels in 1001 Nights: Court and Story. The Court level character is as we are generally familiar with playing; a character that we give flesh and shape and temperament. Every player chooses a Courtier from the following non-exhaustive list:

Courtiers

the Captain of the Guard	the Junior Advisor
the Food Taster	the Cook
the Chronicler	the Aged Nursemaid
the Sultan's Newest Wife	the Serving Girl
the Midwife	the Falconer
the Assistant Physician	the Perfumer
the Chief Eunuch	the Visiting Scholar
the Water Boy	the Astrologer
the Assistant Gardner	the Scholar of the Koran
the Master of the Hunt	the Chief Poet
the Seamstress	the Historian
the Favored Musician	
the Favored Dancer	

If you do not find your desired Courtier here, discuss it with your fellows, remembering that all the relevant Court members are confined to the Palace. The Headman of the Trade Caravan would not be a likely character for the Court, unless he was the Maimed Ex-Headman, perhaps. There are some, like the Master of the Hunt and the Visiting Scholar, who have greater circles of movement, but are still tethered to the Palace. Consider also social rank: there are many reasons for a Serving Girl, the Astrologer, and the Sultan's Newest Wife to be together, you'll just have to discover those reasons.

Names

Choose for your Courtier a name. Remember the setting, and choose a name that fits the Palace of the Sultan. Some names are clearly male or female, some are less distinct; make sure all players know the gender of all Courtiers, and remember that some may be eunuchs. You may choose to be precise as to age, but it is enough to say of your Courtier that they are old, young, of middle age, venerable, just past youth, or the like.

Male:

Al-Adin	Abdul-Qadir	Firouz
Ali Cogia	Mahmoud	Rashid
Baba Abdalla	Danash	Sidi
Baba	Abdalla	Zouman
Mustapha	Mustapha	Abdul-Latif
Nouronnihar	Douban	Tayyib
Schan	Gifar	Wahid
Ahmed	Haroun	
Hasad	Marzaman	
Behman	Mihrage	
Schraiaz	Damriat	
Cassim	Perviz	

Female:

Amira	Badoura	Dina
Ismalia	Malika	Cala
Balsora	Zara	Tahirah
Nisam	Nourigan	Buthaynah
Serendib	Aziza	Hadeel
Dinarzade	Morgiana	Najla
Nour	Parizade	Rihana
Imma	Maryam	
Maimoune	Serit	
Melia	Zouluka	

If you feel the need for a character with a full name, an easy way is to choose 'Name ibn Father's Name' for a man and 'Name bint Father's Name' for a woman. For a man to be known only as 'Ibn Father's Name' would be common and fine. 'Name al-Adjective' is very common for men, far less so for women. Adding 'Baba' before a name is a handy familiar honorific, as 'Uncle' would be. Women are often honored as 'Umm (mother of) Child's Name, Name': Umm Rashid Aziza. For nobility, Emir and Emira, Caliph, Vizier.

For 'al-X' last names:

Najjar – carpenter	Ghassani – line of
Husayn – beautiful	Ghassan
Rabi – spring	Suli – line of Sul
Abbas – frowner	Iskafi – Iskafiyah sect
Khalil – friend	Sufi – Sufi mystic
Azhar – shining	Uqlidsi – studier of
Basir – wise	Euclid
Fayyad – generous	Nasrani – Christian
Katib – scribe/author	Hindi – Hindu/Indian
Hakam – judge	Rawandi – Persian
Walid – newcomer	Ikmimi – Egyptian
Sagher – young	Ifriqi – North African
Awar – one-eyed	Badawi – Bedouin
Darir – blind	Rumi – Roman
Kabib – elder	Sakhawi – Egyptian
Hasib – respected	Abartai – near Baghdad
Abrash – leper	Samari – from
Mubarak – lucky	Sammarkand
Quatan – cloth worker	Jurashi – Yemen
Hadad – blacksmith	Maghribi – West
Rashidi – line of Rashid	African
Jahmi – line of Jahm	
Tahiri – line of Tahir	



With a quick twist, Hanifa released the stopper from the jeweled bottle, her bracelets chiming softly. Scents of cinnamon and sulfur swirled through the air as the mighty djinn took form out of the coppery smoke. Her lips curled briefly at the prospect of victory – the djinn did not know her secret, and best if that remained the case until her task was complete.

Now, to give your Courtier flesh. Consider the senses – Hearing, Sight, Smell, Taste, and Touch. List these on your paper, and describe each in a short sentence, so: I wear rows of tiny bells in my clothes to announce my presence, I am hard of hearing, I love music – My eyes are warm and smiling, I have a piercing gaze, I have seen death – Cinnamon and cloves scent my skin, I smell always of leather and animals, Strong smells upset me – I love almonds and honey, I can make a rich and savory meal, I smoke a pipe – My hands are delicate but stronger than they look, I can tell a good horse from a bad one by feeling it's coat, I have deep scars on my arms. Make sure to describe at least one sense as a physical attribute, but not all.

the Senses
for

Hearing:

My voice has this quality
I am nearly deaf
People confide in me
I am hard to surprise
I know the people of the Palace by their sounds
I can speak many languages
I have overheard dangerous information
I speak with authority
People believe me
These sounds are most pleasing to me
I long for this sound

Sight:

My eyes are weak
I have seen this
Little escapes my notice
I am oblivious to what does not immediately concern me
This sight is most beloved to me
I know the worth of this by sight
This one thing about me is visually striking
People overlook me easily
I can read more than one language
I know what you need by the way you look

Smell:

I smell always of this
The scent of this repulses me
I can smell a shift in the weather long before others can
My most favorite scent is this
I am highly sensitive to others' emotions
I am easily influenced
My nose has been broken
I am always interested in the lives of others
I know the scent of (birth, death, fear, war, hate)

Taste:

I love this food
I am disgusted by this food
I am addicted to this
I have a taste for forbidden women
My clothes are of the latest fashion
Simplicity pleases me
Subtlety is lost on me
I am jaded and ever searching for the new and exciting
My skin tastes of this
My manners are unrefined

Touch:

I have killed someone
My hands are skilled in this
I can tell the value of a thing by touching it
Animals are uncomfortable around me
I touch things constantly
My palms are moist
I have a diplomatic way about me
I am connected to many people
I am warm, friendly and outgoing
I am chaste

The Sultan commands great trade caravans, bringing all manner of things practical and fanciful to the Palace. Cotton, silk, linen, and wool; velvet and gauze and all weights between, in rich reds, blues, blacks, purples and oranges; bright pinks, yellows and greens. Very old cloth wears to soft pastels. Nearly every garment is embroidered – over the chest and upper back, along seams, at cuffs, and hems – in geometric and abstract organic shapes. Everyone who can afford jewelry wears it, in rings, necklaces, bracelets and earrings. Choose for your Courtier a garment that is noteworthy and particular to them.



Men's clothing:

Dishdasha – short sleeved loose v-neck gown

Sirwal – slim cotton pants, worn as an undergarment

Thobe – slim gown with a simple sleeve and short collar, usually a light color

Vest – often matching in material to the kaftan

Kaftan – long sleeved loose gown with a square neckline or a simple slit neck, often highly embroidered, and usually of wide vertical striped fabric

Mashala – elbow-length sleeved long robe of heavier fabric, highly decorated through the chest, worn as a coat over a kaftan

Aba – wide dark-colored rectangular wrap, slit to form a back and two equal front sides, generally trimmed with gold at the neck area

Taksirah – short sleeved jacket in rich dark color with much gold or silver embroidery, open in the front

Taquiya – small white pill-box type cap

Ghutra – triangular scarf worn over the cap and secured by a band

Turban – long length of fabric folded, twisted or wrapped around the cap

Hayim – length of fabric folded and tucked as a belt with pockets, including the dagger

Khanjar – a broad curved dagger

Boots – thick-soled leather boots with heels

Women's Clothing:

Sirwal – slim fitting cotton pants, narrow at the ankles, worn as an undergarment

Libas – very full pants of fine fabric, gathered at the waist and ankle

Karsh – very full skirt, usually in several gathered tiers.

Thobe – slim gown with a simple sleeve and short collar, usually a light color

Abaya – gently flaring long gown with flared long sleeves, all with embroideries

Sirish – gown with tight elbow-length sleeves and a low scooped neckline, tight to the hips then full, worn over pants

Suriya Mabdu – rectangular knee length gown with sheer sleeves, worn over pants

Vest – tight fitting stiffed vest, highly decorated, with any of several necklines, worn over suriya mabdu

Beladi – long gown with long sleeves, slit on the sides, worn over pants

Kaftan – long sleeved loose gown with a square neckline or a simple slit neck, often highly embroidered

Jillayh – gown slightly fitted through the bodice and flaring from the hips to ankles, buttoned down the front, worn as a coat

Mashala – elbow-length sleeved long robe of heavier fabric, highly decorated through the chest, worn as a coat over a kaftan

Aba – wide dark colored rectangular wrap, slit to form a back and two equal front sides, generally trimmed with gold at the neck area

Veil – various lengths of cloth used to cover the hair and/or face, can be sheer or not

Chador – full-body veiling, with a lace, net, or embroidered screen for the eyes

Slippers (also worn by men) – thin soled, embroidered or decorated leather shoes with slighting up-turned and pointed toes

Sandals (also worn by men) – leather, with moderate soles and wide straps over the foot leaving the toes bare



“See, Norin, how peacefully he sleeps and how beautiful he is! Surely my prince is more lovely than your princess! Let us devise a way to view them side by side, that you may know for yourself his superior form!” Hakim focused on breathing deep and even, his mind racing. What princess was this the djin spoke of?

Now consider all the Courtiers together. Each has a place, and skills and connections real and imagined. What must each feel towards the others? What does each wish of the other's place? Does the Cook envy the Eunuch's soft hands? Does the Scholar long for the Water Boy's simple life? Write down what your Courtier envies about each of the others and say it out loud. Note that the Scholar sees only the simplicity of the Water Boy's tasks, not the heavy, wet buckets and the constantly sore back – what your Courtier envies may not be truth entire.

Envies, for example:

Dauod his well-connected friends
 Cassim his fine clothes
 Aziza her relaxed friendship with others
 Maryam her artistic success
 Abdal his rare jewelry
 Habib his pretty face
 Serit her skill
 Rumah her knowledge of the stars
 Imma her well-favored children
 Tabita her oh-so famous lover
 Ahmed his seemingly unshakable faith
 Yamina her easy confidence
 Mador his access to forbidden things
 Shifha her membership in the Sultan's inner circle
 Nafi his many admirers
 Umar his memories of battle and glory
 Kalima her innocence and youth
 Yuseff his place by the window
 Tahir his leisure time
 Raziya her position as the Sultan's wife

A Courtier's envies drive an Ambition, some grand or small thing they wish to achieve: I envy the Gardner his fresh air – I wish for access to the garden; I envy the Chief Eunuch his access to the Sultana's ear – I want the favor of the Sultana; I envy the Scholar her travels – I wish to see her shown up by one more traveled than she; I envy the Tutor his fine clothes – I want to see them muddied and torn. An Ambition can also elaborate on one of the Courtier's senses: I long for the sound of my homeland – I want my singing of my native songs to win renown; I have a taste for men forbidden to me – I desire to lie with the Sultan's own bodyguard; I can smell when you are lying – I want to catch the Accountant in a lie, and be well rewarded for my knowledge.

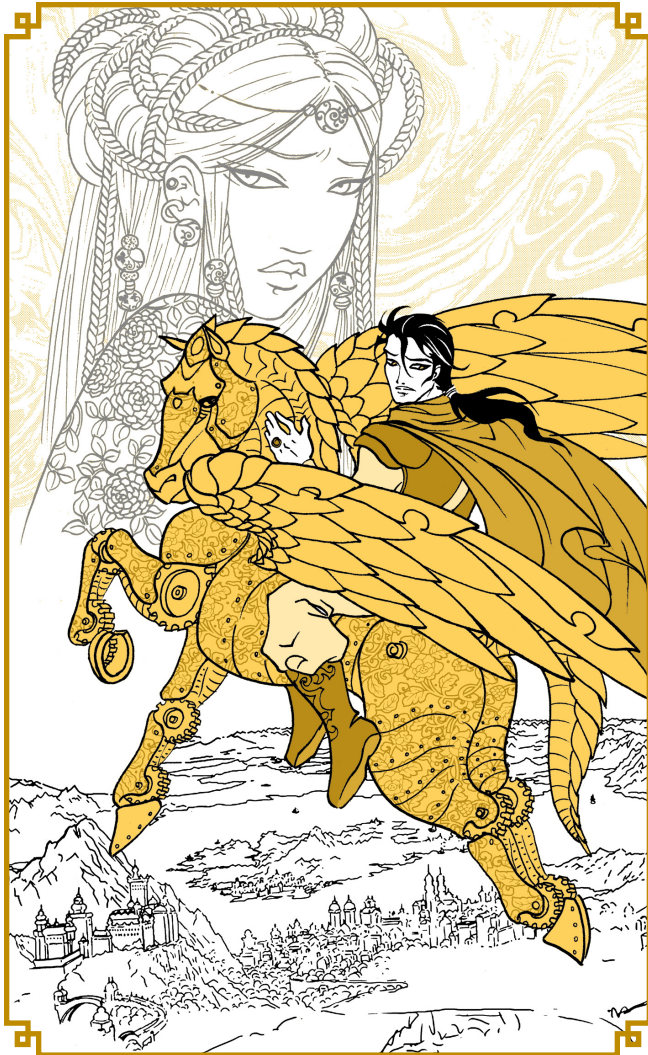
Ambition
for

Make your Courtier's Ambition something they must strive to achieve, not some triviality easily obtained. In scope, consider the next week or month or season, such that the desire is pressing and immediate. Each Courtier has one Ambition that drives them onward – write down that thing.

Courtiers in Common :

The Courtiers you play are known to each other, as are all in Court, despite differences in rank or station. They are not necessarily allies or friends; yet they are not, at the moment, hostile. If you need other members of Court for a Court scene, call for volunteers – “I need my friend the Chief Gardener in this scene; he is an old man, bent low but always laughing – who will play him?” The player who answers the call does not write up a sheet for the common Courtier, and if that Courtier is called for again, a different player may answer. The player who called for the scene gives a brief and broad outline of the action, and has authority to close the scene or provide guidance for the volunteers.

Courtiers
in
Common
for



All the long way home, Ivan could not forget the touch of sorrow in the Princess' eyes. The wonders of the clock-work horse had brought him far more than he expected, and cost him far more as well. There was much to consider and decide. Far below, the peasant boy Asad shouted "Look! There it is again! A star in noonday sky!"

To pass the time, the Courtiers tell Stories. This is the Courtiers' opportunity to advance their agendas and achieve their Ambitions. When they are not telling Stories, they are occupied with their varied tasks, and yet, there is plenty of room for a Story over the chessboard, across the bathing pool, or before a heap of onions on a chopping block. In Stories, you have the freedom to insult what you wish to insult, criticize where you wish to criticize, and make yourself look better than your rival. Here is where you may call a dangerous person foolish to their face.

*Telling
Stories*

When it is your Courtier's turn to tell a Story, that is when you are the GM.

Draw lots to determine who begins as GM – the other players will get their turns. Everyone begins with three gems, including the GM.

The task of the GM:

As GM, have your Courtier assign roles to the other Courtiers for the sake of the Story. Here you may further your Courtier's cause: assign the haughty Astrologer the role of the humble Sheep-boy, tell the quiet Guard she admires to play the role of noble Lord, and cast her rival Handmaid as the Unfaithful Wife. Thus make the roles of the Story shift and illuminate the alliances of the Courtiers. Opening the Story is your responsibility, but have no particular outcome in mind. Cast the Courtiers into the Story and set them together in the scene, and then unfurl the Story just before the feet of the players – this is the GM's role.

Remember the five senses and use them often in your play; they will make for richer gaming. When you are the GM, start each Story by giving the setting: what mood at Court, what physical space, what light, what refreshment, what season and what time of day. Every object has shape and color, weight and texture; there is always scent and sound, or else the notable absence.

7 21 2

For the start of a Story, you need go no further than the tales of childhood. Fairytales, nursery rhymes, songs and poems are all available to you as the beginnings of Story. Do not have the whole of Humpty Dumpty in mind, only that an object is broken, and needs mending beyond the ability of those present. Do not expect it to be Cinderella, just that it concerns a shoe that will fit the chosen bride. In this way, you have the opening for a Story always at hand, but you are free to allow the Story to unfold into whatever shape it naturally takes.

Naming a Story sets the tone. “The Story of the Celebration of the Fairy’s Wedding” is far different from “The Tale of Mustapha the Demon-killer” or “Three Brothers – a cautionary tale.” It can introduce the primary characters and their relationships, giving the Courtiers a moment to grasp their role. Naming a Story “The Woesome Tale of Hakim, a Barber, and his Trusty Camel” lets the players understand that one Courtier will play Hakim, one a barber, and one will most likely play the camel.

Begin with the setting of the Courtiers: “The Sultan, a stern man, has just lost an important battle, and his poor temper fills the Court. We are in a small garden in the late afternoon. The leaves overhead are thick and green, the roses nod in the heavy sunlight. A white tray holds silver cups of mint tea, and there’s a rich silk carpet on the grass, but we keep our voices low.” Each player then describes the appearance and action of their Courtier in the scene as set. Allow as many vignettes as needed to hear each Courtier speak and see each Courtier interact with at least one other Courtier. This provides richness and context for the pointed tales to come. This may pass quickly or languidly, as each Court is different. When naturally a moment of tension or a lull in conversation arises, or you are called on to do so by your fellow Courtiers, that is the time for you to step forward with the Name of the Story. Introduce the Story, and as soon as is reasonable, assign Story roles: “Now hear the Story



The silent princess Noor stood on the balcony as she did every noontime, gazing with sightless eyes across the square. Umm Sadi Binah felt the packet in her pocket and stirred up her courage. She had come this far, she would see it through, and try to gain the reward. From the shadows of the gate, Vasta the palace guard watched the old woman's slow approach.

of the Lost Slipper. Our tale begins in the morning in the Lord's household. He has lost his green jeweled slipper, and is curious where it has gone. He goes to his lovely wife, a woman easily distracted by frivolous things."

Continue your Story until there arise in your tale characters equal in number to the other Courtiers in play. Generally, seize the first opportunity to cast your fellows into the Story: "In the fields outside the palace, a humble shepherd taking his sheep to graze stumbles upon a single slipper. Guard Daud, will you play the great and noble Lord? Astrologer Kuziamah will play the Shepherd, and you, Sura the Handmaid to the Sultana, please play the forgetful Wife." If perhaps at your table there are more players, one might play the capricious Wind, or even the Slipper itself.

Now wait on the action of the others.

As GM, resolve any conflict within the Story by whim and chance. Simply pick any gem of any size, declare the possible outcomes, for example: "on a 1-3 this happens, on a 4-10 this other happens, on a 11-12, this third thing." You may find it unwieldy to have more than three outcomes.

The task of the player:

As the Story unfolds, you may, once per story, reward the GM for fine work by giving her a gem from the bowl. This can be for a particularly richly defined scene, a cleverly executed plot twist, a deftly played Common Character, or any other thing that inspires your praise. You can do this at your whim, but explain your reason.

As the Story unfolds, whenever a situation arises that interests you, take a gem from the bowl and place it before you on the table. Declare your interest: "I'm curious to know if the rabbit got away – I'll bet it was the elder brother – Well, was it the lost ring of the Princess?"

It falls upon you to know what you have declared; any gem whose declaration you have forgotten, return that

gem to the bowl unrolled. You and another player can declare interest in the same event, but only if your hands meet in the bowl.

As the Story unfolds, the events of the Story will naturally resolve. As your declared interests resolve, one by one, roll their corresponding gems. Every gem that rolls Odd, pass these to the GM; every gem that rolls Even, put these in your own bowl. You have not wagered on a certain result, merely invested in a point of interest. Whether the rabbit got away or not, whether it was the brother or not, whether it was the ring of the Princess or not – if it has been made clear, roll the gem.

A gem on the table is like a coin in the air; when the coin lands, roll the gem.

At any given moment, each player may have no more than 5 declared gems. More than this, the declared interests are too small to be of meaning to the Story. If a player cannot recall the interest on a gem they have declared, that gem returns to the Sultan's Bowl.

Again, you would do well to keep the five senses in mind, using shape and color, weight and texture, sound and scent and flavor to describe your role in the Story.

As GM, you may gain up to 8 declared gems from each Story you tell; after the eighth gem, return the Odd gems to the Sultan's Bowl.

After the GM has received the 8th gem, as a player you may declare no new gems. The GM must address all the declared gems on the table, or create an event at Court to interrupt the Story. This event must actually be able to interrupt the Courtiers from their pastime: a letter arrives, a fight breaks out, it suddenly begins to rain. The story in process is cut off – return all unresolved gems to the Sultan's bowl and go on to the Court scene.

As GM, if you chose to cut off your Story with an interrupting event at Court, you must return a gem from your bowl to the Sultan's.

In telling the Story, you need only a compelling situation in which the conflict between characters is clear. There are myriad places you may find these, but it is as easy as remembering the first tales you knew as a child – nursery rhymes. Trust your story. You need not create the new and most amazing thing, only show a diverting and interesting facet of something familiar and beautiful to you.

Three Blind Mice – The Woeful Tale of the Swordsman beset by Vermin, How the housemaid bested the mouse king, The three brothers and the ogre, The mouse and the cook.

Tom, Tom, the piper's son – The thief in the night, The revenge of the pig, How the greedy man was punished for his ways.

Little Bo Peep – The careless shepherdess, How the djinn stole the Sultan's flocks, The search for the spotless fleece, A lesson in patience.

Hickory, Dickory Dock – The Maiden in the Golden Tower, Twelve Brothers, The journey to the edge of Time.

The Grand Old Duke of York – The Battle of the Doomed Armies, The eight voyages of Saladin the Lucky, How the fairy saved the king of Spain.

Lucy Locket – The Lost Ribbon, The Careless Maiden and the Wise Maiden, Kindness Repaid.

Old Mother Hubbard – The Sorceress and the Greyhound, The sad tale of the princess and the terrible famine, The magic cupboard.

This little piggy – The Five brothers and the djin, How Marjian won the wealth of five counties, The foolish men and the wise pig.

Interests in Court:

As soon as the chosen storyteller begins the Story, players may begin to declare interests in the scene in Court, as well. Use these interests as connecting threads between the Story and the Court. Some of these very early interests may be among the very last to be resolved. Throughout the Story, players may occasionally declare interest in Court – “Does Behman the scholar find the tale beneath him?” Will the Sultana Aziza smile at me?” “Is Melia the musician embarrassed by the attention?” – all of these are fine. Be more eager to declare interests in the Story – for each gem regarding the Courtiers, have 2 or 3 or 4 regarding the Story. Recall that it is only in the Story that you may openly act. Remember also the Courtiers, their appearance and place in the Court. What interests do you have about their actions or reactions, their moments of spite or self-revelation?

*Layers
Upon
Layers*

Stories within stories:

On occasion a story is like a flower opening, with layers inside layers. The great and powerful jiin may agree to help the noble young prince, but only if the prince can bring him the answer to the puzzle of the little bird. And so we set aside the Story of the jiin and the prince to follow the tale of the bird. When this occasion arises, handle it as follows.

Firstly, the storyteller of the outer story may not begin the inner story. The inner story must arise naturally from the outer, through the actions of the story characters. When a player seizes the moment to being an inner story, the first role she must assign is to the first storyteller – “Hasad, scholar of the Koran, would you please play the little bird?” Then she assigns other roles as she chooses from among the story characters – “Little Kafia the water-bearer, you are playing the noble prince Daud; would you now portray the cat who hunts the

7 27 2

bird? And Ibn Shem the historian, you have shown us the haughty princess Aziza; now you will play the kind-hearted shepherd Aba who rescues the bird. Our story begins...’ Note that in casting the inner parts, the inner storyteller may counter the pointed commentary of the outer role; clearly this storyteller thinks differently about Ibn Shem than the first!

Set aside the character sheets, disturbing none of the gems declaring outstanding interests in the first story or in court. Take up a card or a small scrap of paper. Write upon it only the name of the inner Story character and some characteristic that gives this character direction – for example, Mirriam’s player might write “Aba, a simple shepherd”.

Secondly, these are smaller tales, by necessity fitting within the arc of the outer story and the time available to the players. Each player may declare up to three interests in the inner story, with gems resolving and moving to the player or the inner storyteller as usual. Further, each player may begin only one inner story during the course of the evening’s play.

The inner story teller may receive 4 gems in this way. Gems the outer storyteller receives while playing a role in the inner story do not count toward the 8 gems received for telling the outer story, but do go into that player’s bowl and are useful in avoiding the Sultan’s wrath and striving for the thing desired.

Last, a note of caution: As with any unfolding flower, what is inside may be larger than it first appears. If time is a concern, agree between the players that there will be no stories within stories for this session.



Beset by rogues in her own chambers, Nurinisa, the Queen of Marakanda, stood as tall and still as the evergreen trees in the gardens beyond her windows. Around her feet, her servants shivered, their fear-filled voices shrill as mice. The men before her were greedy-eyed, intent on their presumed prize – and utterly blind to the danger they were in.

Playing the Sultan

O great and mighty Sultan, lord of all you survey, by whose whim we breathe, through whose grace we are inspired to tales of wonder and delight, grace us with your presence and walk amongst us!

And herein lies the making of the Sultan. The Sultan is noble indeed, but still a mortal. So, the player who portrays the Sultan describes him as any other member of the Court, with the senses and the garments, the envies and the ambition. The Ambition of the Sultan may lie outside the Court, naturally, but there are no doubt things close to home that he wants to achieve that would be politically difficult to do openly – focus on these. He may travel as he wishes, as he is the Sultan, but this is not true freedom – the chains of his rule are ever on him. For Freedom, it is relief from the unwanted obligations and constant observation that he wishes, to move as merely a man, unnoted and unhindered. In the place of Safety, however, he risks an attempt on his life. In the first instance, there is an attempt on his life. In the second, he is wounded. In the third, the attack is successful. And, as he is set somewhat above other mortals, and must safe-guard his person and his realm with care, he must have two dice turn up even to ensure his Safety instead of merely one.

In the telling of the Story, the Sultan may declare interests as any member of Court, but when his interest is answered, he does not roll. Instead, he decides if the outcome pleases him, and awards the gem to the Storyteller at his whim. If it is not to his liking, he returns the gem to the bowl. The Sultan may declare interests to direct the story, as any Courtier, but he is also watching to discover things about his Courtiers, how they behave, where their secrets lie. If he so chooses, the Sultan may himself offer a Story, commanding a place out of turn to do so. He may receive up to 8 gems as usual while he is the GM, but they act as markers only, and he does not add them to his gems for the sake of divvying between Safety, Freedom, and Ambition. When the Sultan is in play, at

the close of the Story, all other players roll the dice they have. Any even dice, those that would otherwise return to the Sultan's gems, go instead to the Sultan, to divide between his Safety, Freedom, and Ambition. Naturally, his numbers are higher, as his reach is greater.

Sultan, think on your realm. Is it at peace? At war? In a time of plenty or of want? Then think on your person. Are you generous or jealous? A sharp handler of your resources, or prone to vast displays that over-reach for the sake of show? Have you many strong sons and beautiful daughters, or has fate withheld those riches from you? Are you a pious man, temperate and merciful, or are you fallen into vice and vengeance? Decide these things, and note them as needed on your character sheet. Be sure that all present know your nature; it lies with you to describe the situation at Court at the opening of play, and as needed throughout the storytelling.

A note: The Sultan is best suited to a game of 5 or 6 players; more, and his wealth tends to come easily, keeping him safe and fulfilling his desires. Fewer, and his life hangs on every turn of the tale.

It hardly needs saying that a woman may portray the Sultan as well as a man. or that the Sultana may be the one to hold this Court.



Arianna clasped the fallen Dinrael in her arms. The blood on the sand was dark and mixed with her tears. The quest for water for her people had taken an unexpected turn, and she was faced with a choice she had not foreseen. A short way off, her loyal servant Basha al-Rumi wept into his worn sleeve.

At the close of a Story, all players:

Divvy the gems in your bowl between Safety, Freedom and Ambition.

Once you have divided your gems, be forthright in your nearness to victory. “Hey, if all these come up Even, I’ll win the game.”

You may block another Courtier’s Ambition – Ambition only, not Safety or Freedom – by returning any one of your own gems to the bowl, taking with it two of the gems they have assigned to Ambition. More than one Courtier may block any Courtier, but you may not block the same Courtier twice. You must most assuredly frame a Court scene, showing how your Courtier interfered with the other’s Ambition.

Roll the gems in Safety: At least one must be Even, or the displeasure of the Sultan falls upon your Courtier. The first time there are no Evens, your Courtier loses favor with the Sultan; make one mark on your sheet. The second time, the Sultan is displeased – make a second mark. The third time, make the third mark, and the Sultan has your Courtier beheaded for their offense.

Roll the gems in Ambition: For every Even, your Courtier may advance towards their Ambition. Your Courtier needs 5 Even gems over the course of play to achieve their Ambition.

Roll the gems in Freedom: Keep track of Evens, in hope of gaining 7 Even gems. Your Courtier needs 7 Even gems over the course of play to achieve the Freedom to leave Court as you wish.

Discard your Evens back to the Sultan’s bowl; keep your Odds in your own bowl, where they stay through the next Story and into the next Court scene.

Ending
Stories

Court level:

Every player now plays their Courtier at Court, showing the effects of the rolls just cast and thus the Story just told. Your Courtier has angered the Sultan? Show how that came to pass. Your Courtier has progressed toward her Ambition? Let us see her success, or the steps she has made on that path. Your Courtier has made a small gain on his road to Freedom? Reveal the hardship he has undergone to reach even this, or the little concessions given him.

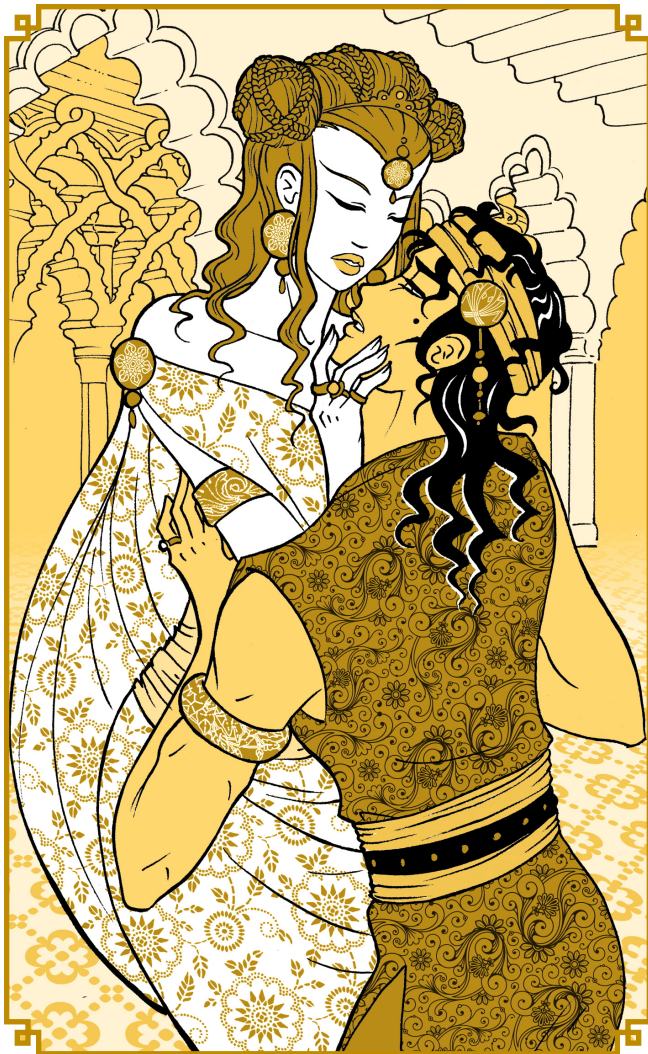
Begin the next story. Consider first the players who have not yet had a turn as GM. Of them, the player with the least gems becomes the next GM. Should there be a tie, choose the player to the left of the last GM. Turn to that player and have your Courtier invite their Courtier to tell a story. If you like, challenge them to make their story follow from the one before – “but of course that reminds me of the story of Asim and the wild boar, does it not you?” This is also the place for the subtle barbed politeness and carefully veiled comments that Courtiers can say, whereas in the Story, they may speak more freely.

The new GM then takes over, and sets the scene in Court for the next Story. The mood may have shifted since the last tale, especially if the Sultan’s peace was disturbed, and someone was reprimanded for it. The new GM may move the whole Court forward in time, eclipsing days or years between the first Story and the next.

The end:

Once the Sultan Beheads a Courtier, or a Courtier achieves their Ambition, or a Courtier wins their Freedom to come and go, the game is over. Each of you now narrate an Epilogue for your Courtier – where do we leave them in their envies, their ambitions, and their quest for freedom?

If you would like to continue playing with the same Courtiers, you may, except the Courtier who is now gone from Court. When you are the player of the Courtier who is Free or Beheaded, choose another character, and devise new Envy and Ambitions between the new and existing Courtiers. All continuing Courtiers may change the Envy they feel towards one another, and Ambitions if they feel so inclined, but all must define what they Envy about the new Courtier. The next GM then sets anew the scene at Court, reflecting the shifting list of Courtiers and the tone at Court.



“Beloved! You have returned at last! Where were you this long month gone?” “Catching rats at the command of the Sultana.” “And was your mission a success?” “Yes my love – the vermin are disposed of, and I am richly rewarded.”

To portray the Court more fully, bringing it to life, follow the steps below. Someone will play the Sultan, and it may be necessary to have some other players portray Viziers to the Sultan – more will be revealed about them soon. Your guests will benefit from a familiarity with the rules beforehand, if possible. If not, tell them to recall the stories of childhood, the rhymes and songs and make-believe, and to think on the Tales of the Arabian Nights, and they will be served well enough. At the back of the book there is a list of supplies you will need as host.

*Live
Action
Support*

Gather this information prior to the day, so that you may best consider the feeling at Court: your guests choice of Courtier, the name, and the descriptive phrases for the five senses. If you have some favored dancers, a poet, some foreign princes, and the cook, that reflects perhaps a different Court than one that contains war veterans, hawk-masters, and the sultan's daughter. Direct them to come attired for the Court of the Sultan, and to perhaps bring a dish appropriate to the theme. Prepare the space in which you are to play in the best ways you are able, to evoke the Palace of the Sultan. You may choose to play the Sultan, but you are not obligated to do so – only be sure that someone with a full understanding of the game does. For a group of up to ten. the Sultan appoints one Courtier a Vizier. For each additional five players, The Sultan appointes one additional Vizier.

When all of your guests have arrived, and as needed for the group, tell to them the rules around the gems of the Sultan, the role of the Storyteller, and the three objectives of each Courtier – Safety, Freedom and Ambition. Allow each player a minute or two to introduce the Courtier they are portraying for the evening, that each will know the other members of the Court. Proceed with the rest of the character creation, what is envied and what is the desired ambition of each Courtier. Have each player write these things on a character sheet, copied from the

back of this text, that they can keep secret about their person.

If you have ample time, have the members of Court introduce themselves, and then simply enact their lives together for half an hour or so, all the envies and ambitions might naturally emerge. Have some chime or bell ring when the time is up, and at that time write out the envies and ambitions.

If you are more pressed for time, write out each envy directly after hearing each introduction, and the ambition once all the Courtiers have introduced themselves. Also, if there are a large number of people, perhaps over ten, have each Courtier write out only the four most pressing envies, assuming others to be less urgent.

After everyone has written down their envies and ambition, reveal them in the following manner: the Sultan gives one of the Viziers a small hand-mirror and requests the Vizier to use this magic mirror to peer within the hearts and minds of his Courtiers, so that all things are known to the great Sultan. The Vizier then accepts the mirror, and passes it to one of the Court, selected at random by the Vizier. The chosen Courtier then discloses the envies and the ambition written on their sheet clearly for all to hear before passing the mirror on to the next person. This repeats until all present have revealed their envies and ambitions, including the Vizier tasked with this undertaking, who goes last but not for the Sultan. For groups of more than ten, consider splitting into two smaller groups for this step. In this case, the Viziers must report all ambitions publicly to the Sultan before play begins.

When the mirror returns to the hand of the Sultan, he tells his own envies and ambition, and sets aside the mirror, now full of secrets, for safe-keeping. All players now know the hidden side of the Court, but the Courtiers must not assume they know these things told into the Sultan's mirror. In the stories soon to be told, few or many may be made clear.

Then, the next phase begins. If there are fewer people, perhaps up to six, consider staying in one room and telling the Stories as in the regular game. If there are many people, split into smaller groups, to better use the time available and to give each tale its chance. Each group must include the Sultan or at least one Vizier. Have bowls of gems in various rooms or locations so that each group may tell a tale complete to the apportioning of gems and noting the Courtier's safety and progress toward freedom and ambition.

As each Story ends, all players in that story return to the main room and continue play as their Courtier. Once everyone has returned from the first round of Stories, the Court scenes take place, following the outcome of the gems. The Sultan's will is made known in regard to each Courtier; the Viziers report to the Sultan the actions of the Courtiers in the location that Vizier observed, that the Sultan may pass judgement upon the Courtiers as he sees fit.

An idea of how it might look:

Habib, Amia, and Daud have finished their story, watched by Vizier Asan. It turns out Habib has done something deserving rebuke, Amia is closer to attaining her ambition, and Daud is closer to winning his freedom. In another room, The Sultan has taken part in the story told by Sulima, who has incurred his wrath for a second time, along with Nizam, who is closer to her freedom. The Sultan receives gems only for Stories in which he takes part. When everyone comes back, Vizier Asan presents to the Sultan the error of Habib, the praiseworthy actions of Amia, and the hard work of Daud. The Sultan then makes judgments accordingly on all Courtiers.

After passing judgment, and seeing the Court scenes that play out accordingly, the Sultan directs which people go in which groups for the next round of stories. This is a power of the Sultan, to move his Courtiers at whim.

on Violence and Viziers bur

When a member of Court has won her freedom, or achieved his ambition, or lost their head, this scene must play out. Following that scene, the game naturally ends.

Players may decide to continue the game if there is a dominant desire to do so, and the Sultan wills it. If the Courtier can devise another ambition, all carries on as before. If the Courtier is dead or has left Court, this player becomes a Kapuji, able to declare interests and report to the Sultan, but unable to receive gems, and all else continues as above. This is a dangerous Courtier, for he or she has nothing to lose – be wary of the Kapuji! Further, do not actually commit violence to each other, but let words alone carry the tale, and the Sultan alone decree the death of a player's Courtier, in keeping with the Story. Note: If a Storyteller chooses to interrupt a story with an event in Court, that event must be conveyed immediately to the Sultan, who then may choose to interrupt the other Stories or not, at his whim.

Playing a Vizier:

In a larger group, have one player in five play a Vizier. The Viziers are no different from any other member of Court, they merely have more work to do and more power with which to do it. They are characters as any other, with ambitions and envies. They declare interests and take part in the stories as any Courtier, and they are also the eyes and ears of the Sultan, and the people know it. Be wary, Viziers, that this does not lead you to corruption, for you may find yourselves under the displeasure of the Sultan or the contrivance of your fellows!

After the Courtiers are introduced publicly, the Sultan decides which characters are the Viziers. The little handmaiden may turn out to be the most trusted Vizier of the Sultan, while the grand philosopher may not be accorded this honor.



“What have you to offer us, o man?” Maboud gazed at the Serpent Queen in fear and wonder. The snakes of her court swayed, their jewel-like scales flickering in the strange light. He swallowed, tasting blood.

Subtle Gestures

There are times when the Storyteller or the players listening wish a greater degree of description, or to provide other direction. Without disrupting the flow to the tale, these gestures can encourage the speaker to include more of what is wanted. Incorporating this technique provides another way to enrich the experience for all. Teach the gestures first, then use them, reminding each other as needed.

These are particular to the characters, their physical expression and their state of mind. This applies to both the Courtiers, the story roles they portray, and any common characters that appear in the scene.

Two fingers of one hand, tapped twice on the relevant body part to request a focus on that sense:
beside the eye – the colors and shapes of a thing
beside the nose – the smells in the scene
beside the mouth – flavors if obviously relevant; the tone and manner of the speech if not clearly about food
beside the ear – the sounds in the scene not related to a person
on the fingertips of the opposite hand – the texture of a thing, or what the character physically feels

Two fingers traced vertically down a few inches from the base throat – please describe further the clothing and appearance of the character.

Two fingers tapped to the heart – please show the emotions of the character.

Two fingers across the corner of the brow – please share the thoughts of the character.

These assist with the overall description of the stories and the actions, being useful to all players :

Outline the hills – in the air before you, make a series of small arcs with two fingers – please describe the scenery, including such things as the immediate place, the time of day, the season, or anything particular to this setting.

A knock at the door – knock twice on the table – please move to the action. This is not to be used to rush a scene, but to gently remind a player that each scene has a reason, and to come to the reason.

Come to stillness – on the table or in the air, make a zigzag that moves towards you and comes to a stop, diminishing as it does – please draw to a close and bring this bit to its conclusion

Step up – extend the hand palm up, and raise it slightly toward another player, as if resting on the next stair above the original place – invite another player who has been quiet for some time to take the floor and contribute.

Step back – extend the hand palm up and turn it toward your body palm down, as if closing a book – recognize that you have been speaking, and convey your readiness to hear from other players



The three sisters arrived at the garden of their mother, weary from their long flight. "Wait!" cried the youngest. "I hear something!" "Ah, Kalima," said the eldest, "Do not fuss so! I want to bathe! Come on!" Poor Duban, dirty and bedraggled, hid behind a tree in the garden as the great birds descended. He watched astonished as each bird, on lighting at the edge of the pool, lay aside its dusty feathers as if laying aside a cloak, and stepped into the water a beautiful maiden!

Chris, Robin, Greg and I are starting a game of 1001 Nights. We meet at Chris and Robin's at 6 p.m.. I bring carrots, hummus and pita, Greg brings grapes and peppery crackers, Chris and Robin have almond cake, tea, juice and coffee. The living room has comfortable chairs and a small table, and there's a faint scent of incense in the air.

Example of Play

I start by reading the first few paragraphs of this book aloud. "We need a big bowl for the Sultan's Gems, and a small bowl for each of us." Chris gets a silver metal bowl and four small glass bowls. "Each person takes three gems, the rest go into the big bowl." Dice rattle and sparkle as they tumble into the Sultan's Bowl. "Now we choose our Courtiers."

Robin: I want to be the Favored Dancer.

Chris: I'm going to be an Old Advisor to the Sultan.

Me: Like an accountant or something?

Chris: Sure, an Accountant to the Sultan!

Me: I think I'm going to be a Eunuch, trusted with the Sultan's womenfolk.

Greg looks over the list: Hm. I'll be the Assistant Cook in charge of pastry.

"Ok, we all need names, and then we write a short descriptive sentence about ourselves for each sense, and describe our most notable item of clothing."

The players write and think for a while.

Chris: Ok, I'm Baba Mubarek. Hearing: My voice is gruff and measured. Sight: I'm slowly going blind due to cataracts. Smell: I smell like old coins. Taste: I have a weakness for candied apricots. Touch: I can tell the number of the coins by the weight of the bag. My aba is dark blue and edged with silver.

Robin: Nour bint Ahmed ibn Haroun is the current favorite dancer at Court. She has long lustrous black hair and when she dances she seems to shine from

Decide in public who is playing which Courtier. While it is reasonable to have two undercooks, there can be only one favored dancer. There can easily be the Favored Dancer and the Former Favored Dancer, however. Also give a little thought to the circumstances that bring these Courtiers together – brainstorm this together until everyone is clear.

within. She loves to walk in the rose gardens... I'm stuck on the hearing bit... She loves the new paisley cottons. She doesn't like to be touched. She often wears saffron colored libas.

Greg: How about something to do with music for her hearing?

Do all character creation in public, so all players have all the information.

Chris: Yeah, like she's always hearing drums or something.

Robin: Ok. She often looks like she's listening to something you can't hear.

Take time here to help each other if needed, and make suggestions if asked. Some people will have an easier time than others, and everyone must complete their Courtiers before play can begin.

Me: I am Hasad al-Azhar, a most trusted eunuch of the Sultan's harem. I have seen a thousand secret things. The scent of raw meat disgusts me. I know the voice of everyone in the Palace. I prefer lovers from outside – travelers, tradesfolk, or visitors. My skin is nearly black and highly polished, accented by brass jewelry. My favorite kaftan is emerald and gold striped silk. And I favor a small checked turban to match.

Chris: Cool!

Greg: I'm Umm Sidi Balsora...

Robin: You're female?

Greg: Yes. I'm the assistant cook in charge of pastry. I've seen great cities in my childhood. My son's clean hair is my favorite smell. I sing while I work. Whoever tastes my cooking is content. My arms are strong and my hands are sure. I wear a dark karsh skirt and a loose patchwork shirt in the manner of my homeland.

Me: Excellent! Now, what do we all envy about each other?

Robin: Well, Nour envies Umm Sidi Balsora her freedom to eat as much as she likes.

Greg: Umm Sidi Balsora envies Nour her easy physicality, and imagines her talking with people from all over.

Robin: I also envy Hasad's connections; he seems to know everything. And Baba Mubarek's secure place in the Sultans' eyes.

Chris: Baba Mubarek envies Nour's youth and beauty,
Umm Sidi's family, and Hasad's access to the
harem.

What the Courtiers envy can
be big or little things, and
may not even be true. Envy is
in the eye of the beholder.

Me: Well, obviously I envy Baba Mubarek's intact
state.

Chris: Obviously.

Me: I also envy Umm Sidi Balsora's security below the
Sultan's gaze, and Nour's innocence. What else does
Umm Sidi Balsora envy, Greg?

Greg: I envy Baba Mubarek's leisure time and
Hasad's rich clothes.

Recall that what one envies,
they wish for themselves. How
might Nour gain Hasad's
seeming connections,
or Baba Mubarek usurp
Umm Ali's family? Envy is
something that builds up
over time, and is expressed
in a thousand and one small
ways; slights, jibes, pointed
jests, subtle movements and
countermoves.

Me: All right. Now, out of these things we envy,
figure out what your Courtier's Ambition is,
big or small. My Ambition is to get the dirt on
Baba Mubarek.

Robin: Nour wants power and security; she's all
about Ambition, because she knows this is her
moment. She wants her place in Court made
sure, so that she doesn't fall out of favor and
get forgotten. Oh, I've got it – she wants to be made
dancing master.

Chris: Hmm. Baba Mubarek wants to sleep with Nour.

Robin: Oh really!

Greg: My Ambition is to see my son return to my
homeland.

Me: Greg, that seems kinda long-term. What does Umm
Sidi Balsora want in the next week?

Greg: Ok. I want to be paid for my work – right now I
get room and board, but I want to save up money to
send my son back home. So I want recognition and a
stipend...No! I want the Sultan to legitimize *our* son,
and raise him accordingly!

Chris: Cool!

Greg: Yeah, as soon as I said 'recognition' it was clear.

I say, "as the first GM, I get to set the scene. You can add
to it when it's your turn to GM.

When setting Ambitions, be specific. “To be happy” is not specific enough. Also, short term Ambitions work better in play than long-term ones. Hasad and Baba Mubarek’s Ambitions will lead directly to character action, whereas Umm Sidi’s is less direct. Very simple things make fine Ambitions – break this person’s nose, be served first at a feast, have nicer shoes than that person. If you are uncertain, think about the next week or month of the Courtier’s life, and what they want in that timeframe.

Be thorough in the first description of the Court setting – the mood, physical health and general outlook of the Sultan, the political scene, and the Palace itself. This gives a good framework for the rest of the game. You do not need to detail every rug and wall, only whether the rugs are new and fine, old and worn, old and rare, new and flashy, muted, soft, uncomfortable on the eyes – that sort of thing. This leaves room for the next GM to add to the Court setting while giving all players a sense of the place. Be sure to include some clear indication of the season and time of day – in the example, it is during the rainy season, just after dinner.

“The Sultan is happy and at peace just now. There have been good rains lately, which means good grazing for the Sultan’s herds, ample food for the people, and lush gardens in the Palace. The rains also have kept any raiders or rebels at bay. It’s been a good time for politics, and there has been a visiting dignitary here for the past week, leaving within a few days. This Sultan is well-established and fairly competent; his Court runs smoothly and he deals quickly with any upset in his Palace or his lands.

“The Palace reflects that in the décor, which is quiet and strong, showing wealth in excellent wood and stonework more than in bright tassels and flashy ornaments. The colors of the cushions and soft furnishings are deep jewel tones – dark sapphire blues, purples, emeralds, and garnet reds, accented with pearls and small bits of gold. The Sultan has an interest in art, especially hunting scenes, and has a gallery for his collection, which include works from far beyond his own lands. He is also fond of clean scents, so cedar and pine and vanilla and citrus dominate, rather than heavier things like amber and rose and musk.”

Chris: “So basically it’s too good to last.”

I laugh. “Ripe fruit ready to go rotten. Ok, we are relaxing towards the end of a feast. Nour danced, Umm Sidi Balsora’s pastries were a hit, and Baba Mubarek got to say something advisory a few hours back. I’m here to look out for anything inappropriate. The Sultan is deep in a game of chess in the adjoining room, watched by half the Court. There’s still food around, and other people talking in groups. There’s a musician playing at the far end of the room. I stretch and settle where I can watch everyone. Where are you all?”

Nour (Robin): I'm sitting near Baba Mubarek, as far from Umm Sidi as I politely can. Gotta align myself with the upper folk.

Baba (Chris): I'm totally checking you out, but only out the sides of my eyes. I don't want Hasad coming down on me.

Umm Sidi (Greg): I'm sitting on the floor on a little cushion, by a bowl of fruit and figs. "So, a story! Let's have a story!"

Nour (Robin): I look pointedly from the food to Umm Sidi. "Not enough to distract you here tonight, Umm Sidi Balsora?" There's the slightest hint of disdain in my tone.

Umm Sidi (Greg): I pop a fig in my mouth and lick my fingers, seeming to enjoy it more than maybe I actually do.

Baba (Chris): I pat Nour on the knee. "Don't worry my dear, there are plenty of juicy figs to go around."

Umm Sidi (Greg): Oh ho!

Nour (Robin): Pat me on the knee, is it? I look acid.

Hasad (me): I clear my throat and look coolly at Baba Mubarek. "I'll tell a tale. This is the tale of the Sage, the Student, and the Stubborn Camel. Once upon a time, a young student raised an orphan camel. The student, call him Abib, doted on this camel – fed him from a flask, washed him in rosewater, and gave the camel his own robe as a cover against the chill of night. Now, the time came when the student Abib had reason to call on his old teacher. He took the camel with him, as ever he did, and traveled to the cave of the Sage. On arriving, Abib called out 'O master! I have returned! Please, hear me!' The Sage bid him enter, and so he did, the half-grown camel following as ever he did. Well! A camel, in the cave of a wise man? It was too much! 'Out with that beast, Abib! What have you brought me?' said the sage, his brows knit tight. But the camel sat down, and would not be budged. Baba Mubarek,

After you have set the scene, allow your players to place their characters. This is the first time we officially see the characters in play, which can be revealing. The length of this initial Court scene can vary; give everyone a chance to speak and act before the very first Story. Sometimes that's enough, sometimes you'll want more interaction to establish the characters.

With subsequent Stories, though, the GM can launch directly into a Story after describing the setting. Use any of the traditional story opening phrases: Once upon a time, Our story begins, Here is a tale, The story of, I once knew a man who, etc.

please play the camel. Nour, you are the young Abib, and Umm Sidi Balsora the sage.”

Set the stage for the Story as thoroughly as you did the Court. Again, pay attention to the senses, the season, and the time of day.

Baba (Chris): The camel! Hmph. All right.

Nour (Robin): I make some reassuring gesture. “That’s all right, I’m sure you’re a most dignified camel. And sweet-smelling, too.”

Umm Sidi (Greg): Here, boy, take this camel out at once!

Nour (Robin): But teacher, it is a poor orphan camel that I have raised from a babe. Surely I am right in treating such an unfortunate beast with tenderness.

Baba (Chris): I break wind.

Hasad (me): The stench is mighty in the small space, ruffling the curtain at the cave’s mouth.

When you choose a Story and assign Story roles, keep in mind what you envy of the other Courtiers and what your Ambition is – the Story is where you can be more pointed, where you can make your attacks on those you wish to bring down or flatter those you wish to use.

Nour (Robin): Ha! I wonder if the sage leaves before the camel! (Robin takes a white gem from the Sultan’s bowl and places it before her.)

Umm Sidi (Greg): “Ack! Smell what your camel has done!” I wave my hands before my face and back towards the door. “I think you had best leave. You have not the wisdom to let a camel return to it’s own kind; I think you have not the wisdom to continue as my student!” I bet Abib and the sage don’t part well. (Greg takes a yellow gem from the Sultan’s bowl and places it before him.)

Nour (Robin): I pull on the camel’s lead. “Come, Petal, you must get up.”

Baba (Chris): I’m tired from the journey here. I pull back, shaking my head and pulling you closer to me. Sand flies everywhere. Does Abib drop the rope? (Chris takes a black gem from the Sultan’s bowl and places it before him.)

Hasad (me): The sand flies, stinging your eyes, Abib. The rope is rough in your hands and behind you your teacher is growing more angry by the moment.

Nour (Robin): I drop the rope and turn to prostrate myself at my teacher’s feet “Forgive me! I am at a loss without your guidance!”

A Story can be any nursery rhyme, fairytale, song, or poem you know well. In the example, the story is based on Mary Had a Little Lamb. There is a student, a teacher, and a devoted but unruly pet – the three Story characters needed for the three Courtiers.

Baba (Chris): Ha! (Chris rolls the black gem, for “does Abib drop the rope?” Even goes to his bowl, Odd goes to my bowl. He rolls Even.)

Umm Sidi (Greg): I’m flattered, but still I’m waving my hand by my face. “What were you thinking, that a camel is like a man? A camel is a camel, and should be treated like a camel!” I swat the camel on the rump.

Baba (Chris): I snort in surprise and ordinance, and bolt from the cave, tearing the curtain in the process.

Nour (Robin): Drat! (Robin rolls the white gem, for “I wonder if the sage leaves before the camel!” Even goes to her bowl, Odd goes to mine. She rolls Even.)

Umm Sidi (Greg): Well, the camel is out, but now my curtain is torn. And there goes your spoiled camel, running in the brush.

Nour (Robin): I run after the camel calling “Petal! Come back Petal!” Do I catch him? (Robin puts forward a brown gem.)

Hasad (me): Petal, bits of plants get caught in your coat, making you uncomfortable. Abib, your shoes fill with sand as you run. Overhead, clouds begin to gather.

Baba (Chris): And how soon does it rain? I think Abib gets soaked. (Chris puts forward a sparkly gem)

Hasad (me): Well, let’s see. (I take a gem from the Sultan’s bowl.) 1 or 2, right now; 4-8, in a bit; 9 or 10, it holds off until you get home. (I roll a 3.) Ah, you are in luck. The rain holds until you catch up with Petal, at the bottom of the hill. You come back to your teacher only mostly soaked. (I return the gem to the Sultan’s bowl.)

Robin rolls the brown gem, for “do I catch him?” Even goes to her bowl, Odd goes to mine. She rolls Odd. It is my 1st gem gained.

Once the Story roles are cast, give the Story characters a moment to adjust, then follow their lead. Trust your Story, and don’t worry too much – you know this Story well enough to tell it backward.

When a gem is declared, that’s a cue to what the player finds interesting. You can use those cues to help drive the Story. Let the Story play out, and most of them should resolve naturally. If your players declare wildly incongruous things, or dull things, or overly simple things (“Is the water wet?”), Remember that you can spend a gem from your bowl to have the Sultan interrupt your Story.

Chris rolls the sparkly gem, for “I think Abib gets soaked.”
Even goes to his bowl, Odd goes to mine. He rolls
Odd. It is my 2nd gem gained.

Umm Sidi (Greg): I throw up my hands “What am I to
do with such a student as you? You are soft-hearted
to a fault. Fix my curtain, and we shall see about your
next lesson.”

Nour (Robin): I stake Petal’s rope securely outside, and
start on the curtain.

Baba (Chris): I start eating the flowers.

Umm Sidi (Greg): No! Not my prize apricots! Are you
blind, you stupid camel?! Don’t you know too many
will make you sick? (Greg takes a blue gem from the
Sultan’s bowl and sets it before him.)

Nour (Robin): I run out holding the curtain. “Petal, what
are you doing now?”

Umm Sidi (Greg): Eating my prize apricots, that’s what!

Baba (Chris): I keep eating. Do I get sick?

Hasad (me): You feel a little uncomfortable. The lilies
look torn and chewed on, what’s left of them. There
are muddy brown puddles around from the rain, and
it’s still sprinkling slightly.

Baba (Chris): When Abib comes over to check on me,
I’m going to lean on him. (Chris says to Robin,
“Baba’s leaning all over you, brushing your shoulder
with his cheek.”)

Keep in mind other
Courtiers’ quirks and bring
them into the Story. Greg
introduced the apricots here
to get at Baba Mubarek;
Chris is playing right along.
Make broad and pointed
references, pointing out the
flaws or virtues you see in
your fellow Courtiers

Umm Sidi (Greg): Lean on him right into the mud,
I bet! (Greg takes a red gem from the Sultan’s
bowl.)

Nour (Robin): I dodge your head, waving my arms
wildly to avoid falling. I drop the curtain, though.
(Robin says, “I dodge Baba too.” Robin pantomimes

Nour leaning away, her nose wrinkling ever so
slightly.)

Greg rolls the red gem, for “lean on him right into the
mud, I bet!” Even goes to his bowl, Odd goes to mine.
He rolls Odd. It is my 3rd gem gained.

Umm Sidi (Greg): I shake my fists. “You foolish young
man! Now look at my curtain!”

Hasad (me): The curtain settles gently into a puddle, the water soaking through the colors.

Nour (Robin): I throw myself in the mud “Oh great teacher! How can I make it up to you? I am not worthy to be your student!”

Remember your Courtier.
Speak and act for them, as well as for their Story Role.

Umm Sidi (Greg): I wait a long time before answering. At last I say. “I got that curtain from a certain jinn that lives in the tree by the river of gold, far to the east. If you replace my curtain, you are fit to remain my student. If you do not, I forbid you, and your camel, from setting foot within 500 paces of my home for the rest of your days. Understood?”

Nour (Robin): I scramble up covered with mud but smiling broadly. “O, you will not be sorry, my teacher! I will return with a new curtain, I swear it! Come, Petal!” I take your lead rope.

Baba (Chris): No. I look pouty. I’m not feeling well.

Greg rolls the blue gem, for “don’t you know they will make you sick?” He rolls Odd and gives it to me. It’s my 4th gem gained. He also rolls the yellow gem, for “I bet Abib and the sage don’t part well.” It is Even, and he puts it in his bowl.

For the sake of brevity, we will skip to the end. Let us assume Abib and Petal made it to the jinn and secured a new curtain for the Sage. Let us further assume that Hasad’s (my) description of the river of gold inspired Robin to reward me with one die.

Feel free to add new characters to the Story as needed, played by you or assigned to the Courtiers as you wish. Don’t overload your players, though – they’re already playing a Courtier playing a Story role; more than one or two bit parts might be burdensome.

Hasad (me): And so the camel learned to stay outside, and Abib managed to learn to treat animals as animals and men as men.

Me: Now we divvy up our gems between Safety, Ambition and Freedom. I’m putting three in safety, four in Ambition, and five in Freedom.

Robin: I’ll do four in Safety, six in Ambition, and two in Freedom.

Greg: Two in Safety, five in Ambition, two in Freedom.

Chris: Boy, I don't know – three in Freedom, three in Ambition, four in Freedom.

Robin: Hey Chris, I'm going to spend a gem to return two of your Ambition gems to the bowl; I think Umm Sidi made Nour look foolish in that Story.

Remember that first everyone divvies and says whether they might win, then anyone can block Ambitions, then everyone rolls.

Me: Ok, now we all roll. I got one in Safety – whew! So, I keep the two odd gems, and the even goes back in the Sultan's bowl. I got three in Ambition, and...two in Freedom.

Robin: Oh! I have none in Safety! Three in Ambition, though. And two in Freedom.

Greg: Two in Safety, three in Ambition, and none in Freedom.

Chris: Two in Safety, one in Ambition thanks to Robin, one in Freedom.

Me: So, Nour, what happens? How does the Sultan show his displeasure with you?

Robin: Well. I think someone ratted me out for flirting with Baba Mubarek. I think it might have been Hasad, but I'm not sure. Anyway, I get confined to the harem for the next month. The scene should be between Hasad and a messenger from the Sultan. Who wants to play the messenger?

Chris: I'll do it. I'm Cassim the messenger. Hasad knows me because I often bring the Sultan's wishes to the harem. "Hasad, I have news."

Hasad (me): What is it?

Cassim (Chris): That dancing girl, Nour? The Sultan is displeased with her outrageous behavior at the feast, being so...intimate...with Baba Mubarek.

Hasad (me): "And what does His Splendid Majesty wish?" I stroke my chin, suggesting that I know already.

Cassim (Chris): Hm, that flusters me a bit "She'd better be more careful. And she's to stay within the harem for a full cycle of the moon."

Hasad (me): I nod my head courteously "I will be sure it is so."

Robin: Sure, that's good.

Me: And how does Nour interfere with Umm Sidi Balsora's Ambition?

Chris: Well, I would have maybe been halfway to getting my son acknowledged, but nooooo.

Robin: Hm. Oh, I know. I exorbitantly praise one of the other children as a gifted dancer, and request that praise be sent to the Sultan on behalf of this child of his Court, with the subtext being that it's his child, and that's why it is skilled.

Me: Do you want to play that out?

Robin: No, I'm good.

Me: Cool. Ok, who's our next GM?



Sharifa held the gem aloft, taunting the guards on the palace wall. She had the gem the wizard Absalam had requested, indeed, but more – she had the Sultan’s cat beside her. “I do not suggest we stop” the cat said calmly as the first of the arrows began to fly.

Initial Setup (refer to page 6)

Set the table (refer to pages 6-9):

Put a bowl full of gems (dice) in the center of the table; this is the Sultan's bowl.

Put a bowl in front of each player.

Summary

Create a Courtier (refer to page 9):

Describe your Courtier with a short sentence for each of the five senses.

Decide and declare what your Courtier Envy about each other player's Courtier.

Decide and declare your Courtier's Ambition.

Take three gems from the Sultan's bowl and put them in your own.

Choose a starting GM (refer to page 21):

By lots, or by who best knows the game.

In Each Story

GM, start the Story (refer to page 21):

Set the scene in Court.

Name your Story.

Assign a role in your Story to each of the other players' Courtiers.

Set the opening scene.

Do not have a whole story in mind! Launch the scene and then give it its head.

Do all with your Courtier's envies and ambition foremost in your mind.

Players, play your Courtiers in their Story roles (refer to page 24):

Speak in both your Courtier's voice and in the voice of the character they're playing.

Say both what your Courtier does and what they have the character they're playing do.

Try to use your Courtier's Story role to advance your Courtier's ambition and express their Envy.

In Stories, your Courtiers can be confrontational, rude, aggressive, and blunt, which they cannot be in Court. Do not try to adhere to whatever Story you suppose the GM to be telling! Follow your Courtier's and your Courtier's Story role's lead.

Players, declare gems (refer to page 25):

Whenever you're interested in the resolution of some question or circumstance in the story, declare a gem.

Take a gem from the Sultan's bowl, say your interest, and place the gem on the table in front of you.

If another player declares a gem on a point of interest, you may not declare one on the same point of interest, unless your hands met in the bowl.

When you've declared a gem and then that point of gets resolved, roll the gem.

If it's odd, put it into the GM's bowl. If it's even, put it into your own.

Once the GM has received eight gems, you may not declare any new gems, but all the gems you've already declared remain on the table, in play.

GM, resolve events in the Story (refer to page 25):

Resolve them through the story, or by simple whim, or by simple chance.

GM, end the Story (refer to page 25):

In any single Story, you can add only eight gems to your bowl.

Once you've received that eighth gem, you have reason to bring your Story to an end.

You must resolve the points of interest associated with every gem remaining on the table before you can end your Story.

When there are no more gems on the table, you can end your Story however you like.

Or else, if you prefer not to resolve all the remaining gems, you can declare that the Sultan interrupts the Story. Put all the gems on the table, unresolved and unrolled, into the Sultan's bowl.

You must also take one gem from your bowl and put it into the Sultan's; this is the price you pay for the interruption.

Between Stories (refer to page 33)

Divvy your gems:

Take all the gems from your bowl and arrange them in three piles: Safety, Freedom, Ambition.

Announce to your fellow players whether you might win on this roll.

If you'd like to set another Courtier back from achieving their Ambition, discard any one of your gems to the Sultan's bowl. Your chosen player must discard two of the gems they've assigned to Ambition. Describe how your Courtier interferes with theirs.

Roll your gems:

For Safety, you need at least one gem to come up even, or your Courtier displeases the Sultan. The third time your Courtier displeases the Sultan, the Sultan beheads them and the game ends. You've lost!

For Ambition and Freedom, keep a running total of how many evens you've rolled, over the course of the whole game.

For Ambition, once you total five or more evens, your Courtier achieves their Ambition and the game ends. You've won!

For Freedom, once you total seven or more evens, your Courtier wins their freedom to come and go, and the game ends. You've won!

Ties are allowed.

If nobody's won or lost, discard all the evens you've rolled to the Sultan's bowl. All the odds you've rolled, return to your own bowl.

If the Sultan is in play, he has more to win or lose, so his numbers are higher for each of Safety, Ambition and Freedom.

Play out Court scenes (refer to page 33):

Whatever status changes your gems indicate, play out scenes between your Courtiers to reveal them.

Call upon your fellow players to play the roles of any incidental characters you need.

Remember the strict bounds of manners and decorum the Sultan imposes.

For the next story (refer to page 34):

Consider all of the players who have not yet been the GM.

Of them, consider the player with the fewest dice in their bowl. That player becomes the GM for the next Story.

In case of ties, choose the player nearest to the previous GM's left hand.

At the End of the Game (refer to page 34):

Three things can end the game: a Courtier is beheaded by the Sultan; a Courtier wins their freedom; a Courtier achieves their Ambition.

Go around the circle, giving an epilogue to each Courtier. Everyone can contribute to each epilogue, but the Courtier's player has the last word.

There are many I could acknowledge and thank, but these in particular:

Joshua A C Newman for encouraging me to publish in the first place.

Ben Lehman for an hour-long international playtest report which was invaluable.

Emily Care Boss and Vincent Baker, without whom this game would not exist.

Julia Ellingboe for being such an enthusiastic playtester, friend and hair guru.

Rachel and Steven Cronen-Townsend for initial playtesting.

Ralph Mazza for writing Universalis and inspiring the first spark of this game.

Paul Czege for his comments on the first text, over 10 years ago.

Moyra Turkington for early encouragement and Matt Wilson for being a steady voice of support.

The folks at Story Games and the Forge for being generally great people.

Specific thanks for the 2nd Edition:

Fabio Michele Russo and Cristina Recupero played in my game at Lucca 2011. Fabio made a choice in-character that was the key to realizing my vision for nested stories, and the two of them deserve credit and my great thanks.

The folks who played in my game at InterNosCon 2012 inspired me to sit down and finish the 2nd edition. They will recognise their characters within the text.

And finally, great thanks to Claudia Cangini for her amazing artwork!

Gratitude
for

Courtier

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch -

Clothing -

Safety

Q The Sultan Rebukes me in private.

Q The Sultan Rebukes me publicly in court.

Q The Sultan has me beheaded.

Ambition

Q Q Q Q I achieve my Ambition, which is...

Freedom

Q Q Q Q Q I win my Freedom from Court.

بار

بار

the Sultan

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch -

Clothing -

Safety

Q. Q. There is an attempt on your life.

Q. Q. You are wounded in an attempt on your life.

Q. Q. The assassin is successful.

Ambition

Q. Q. Q. Q. Q. Q. I achieve my ambition, which is...

Freedom

Q. Q. Q. Q. Q. Q. Q. I gain my freedom to travel unknown

for

for

Give Action
Courtier

1 Envy

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch

000 Safety

00000 Ambition

0000000 Freedom

Give Action
Courtier

1 Envy

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch

000 Safety

00000 Ambition

0000000 Freedom

Live Action
the Sultan

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch -

1 Envy

○○○ Safety

○○○○○○○○ Ambition

○○○○○○○○○ Freedom

Live Action
Courtier

the Senses

Hearing -

Sight -

Smell -

Taste -

Touch

1 Envy

○○○ Safety

○○○○○○ Ambition

○○○○○○○○ Freedom

Supplies

For a table-top game

Beautiful dice to represent the Sultan's Gems

A container for those dice - a dish or tray or cloth that suits the setting

Pencils and copies of the character sheets

Tasty things to eat and drink

For a live-action game

Beautiful dice to represent the Sultan's Gems

One container for each group of five players

A bell to signal the close of the initial Court scene

A couple of hand mirrors for the disclosure of the Envyies and Ambitions

Pencils and copies of the character sheets

Tasty things to eat and drink