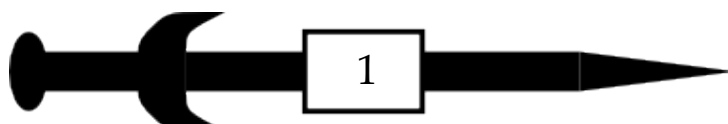


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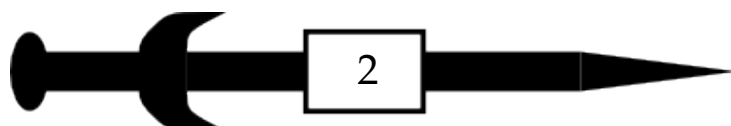
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Let this proclamation ring out throughout the world.

To celebrate the twenty-ninth anniversary of the foundation of his Empire, may it endure longer than the heavens, the Warlord is once again calling for the brave and the skilled to take his Wager. Any man or woman who can survive the journey across the Great Desert is welcome to come to him to ask a boon. All such petitioners will take part in a contest to see which among them is worthy of challenging him to single combat. Should the victor impress the Warlord enough, his or her wish will be granted if worldly power can do so. Spectators are also welcome to enjoy the hospitality of the Winter Camp for the duration of the contest.

As the Warlord has said, he will make it be.



Rise of the Warlord

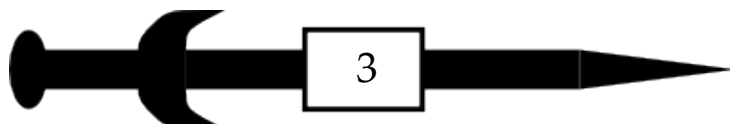
The Warlord has had many names over his long, adventuresome life. In his younger days he was known as Blavven the Tall. As his reputation for swordsmanship grew he was given the nickname 'The Wizard of Cordula'. After he led the armies of Lanniset to victory after victory, he started being referred to as the 'Golden General'. When he turned on his former masters and led a horde of raiders across their lands, they dubbed him the 'Human Maelstrom'. When he founded his own empire on its ashes and began systematically conquering the rest of the continent he was known simply as 'The Terror' or 'The Emperor of Despair'. Now that his empire has endured for nearly thirty years, stable and relatively prosperous, he needs nothing more specific than 'The Warlord'.

There were three main factors in his seemingly incredible ascent to glory. The first was his considerable martial skill. He was unquestionably the mightiest warrior in the world in his younger days, and even though age has dulled his reflexes he remains an incredible fighter. The second factor was his natural gift for strategy and logistics, which allowed the armies he commanded to crush all before him. The third key thing, which he readily admits to, was luck. He was lucky to receive the best training available, lucky to get a commission that allowed him to prove himself and develop a reputation as a leader men would follow, and lucky to rise to prominence just at the time when the Lanniset Empire's arrogance had let rebellion foment around its borders.

He rules as an absolute despot, but he is wise enough to let most regions under his control take care of their own business. He appoints governors to act as his proxies, and any governor who doesn't keep his region running smoothly is swiftly replaced. The only two things he still keeps personal control of these days are his massive army and the Winter Camp where he holds his annual Wager.

Harsh Truth

There have been many attempts to topple the Warlord's Empire but none of them have succeeded. Of course, outlying areas have squirmed out from under his control, sometimes even permanently, but usually because he does not care about the region enough to take it back. Righteous, popular uprisings fail because they're unable to beat the Warlord on his own terms. Mundane invasions by other nations fail because they lack the groundswell of popular support from the peasantry. These days, the Warlord uses his army to conquer mostly as a way of passing the time.



The Wager

Over the winter months, the Warlord spends his time at the Winter Camp, built upon a massive mesa in the middle of the Great Desert. The mesa is an oasis that supports lush vegetation quite at odds with the desert that surrounds it. It is believed that the mesa and the ecology it supports are the result a great magical maelstrom from forgotten history. The Warlord has made it his own, as a place to spend the winter when military campaigns are impractical.

Since its inception, there have usually been about two dozen or so participants in the contest. It's impossible to say how many other hopefuls were consumed by the desert before registering. New arrivals are greeted, shown to their lodgings and told to wait patiently until the first day of the contest.

On the first day, the Warlord greets all of the contenders and asks of them in turn what their prize should be if they win. After they have told him, he then says what they will lose should they fail. In general, the bigger the gift they ask for the harsher the penalty the Warlord imposes for losing. However, losing contenders are not expected to pay their forfeit until after the Wager contest has been fully concluded. So, unless they were killed during the contest, they can watch its progress.

The contest itself is a series of rounds, typically 4 or 5, and at each step a proportion of the contenders is eliminated. The first round is traditionally a battle, with the contenders each being given command of a unit of the Warlord's troops and then organised into two teams. They fight on the mesa itself, across some rather varied terrain. All contenders on the losing team are usually knocked out of the contest. Sometimes the Warlord will note that a contender fought well and had good strategy but was let down by his allies- that contender can be allowed to continue to the next round.

Harsh Truth

No-one has ever won the wager by beating the Warlord. A little under half have had their wish granted after valiantly failing to defeat him in the duel. The remainder have still paid the forfeit, even after winning the contest against their fellow competitors. Taking part in the Warlord's contest is an act of desperation that people turn to when there is no other way for them to achieve their goal.



WARLORD'S WAGER

The other rounds change from year to year. Some of them take the form of one-on-one contests, others are free-for-alls. All of them, however, are designed to test the contender's skill in battle or some aspect of military leadership. Only one round is conducted per day, giving a chance for contenders to rest and tend their wounds if necessary.

A single contender is selected after the final round to fight in a duel with the Warlord himself. The duel is not to the death. If the contender wins, which has never happened in the Wager's history, the Warlord will grant them their request. If the Warlord wins, then he is under no obligation to do so. If the Warlord feels that the contender has proven themselves worthy in strength, leadership and courage, their request will be granted. Otherwise, the Warlord will extract his price.

After the climactic fight, the Warlord's men will collect any forfeits from losing contenders. The survivors and spectators will leave over the course of the next few days.

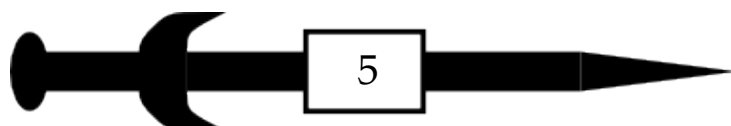
The Game

This is a role-playing game for 2 or more players, telling the events of the 29th Warlord's Wager. One player will act as the Game Master, or GM, directing events and playing the roles of neutral characters. The other players will each play the role of one of the Contenders in the contest. You will need some 6-sided dice, probably no more than 15 or so in total.

Each Contender has a secret agenda, some reason for them attending the contest that is probably at odds with why they say they're there. The game is designed so that the player Contenders stay in the contest for as long as possible, but even if a player is eliminated they can still influence the contest or work towards their goal through other means.

It should be pointed out that although the game hints at a large fantasy world with a rich history, very little is actually defined. The players and the GM should invent any details they want as and when they need them. If a player wants to play a character from a place that's an analogue to the Warring States era of Japan, they can invent one. If the GM wants part of the contest to involve fighting berserkers with axes, then clearly there must be a part of the world that resembles Viking-era Scandinavia.

Although it might seem as though the game is competitive, in actual fact it's possible for all the players to have their characters achieve their true goals. In any case, an heroic or tragic failure is just as compelling a story as a success- perhaps even more compelling.



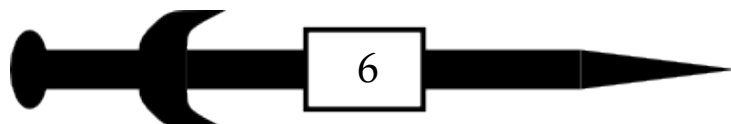
WARLORD'S WAGER

FUN FACT!

This game is a successor of sorts to one called 'Sorcerer's Symposium'. It is not necessary to be familiar with Sorcerer's Symposium to play and enjoy this game, but they have a number of rules in common. Where there's an aside in this book for players familiar with Sorcerer's Symposium, it'll be in a box like this. These asides may be rules clarifications, or additional options to let you mix elements of Sorcerer's Symposium into Warlord's Wager.

Harsh Truth

Beyond the the first round, it's not possible to predict what the contest will involve. For this reason, Contenders often find themselves ill-equipped in one or more of the rounds through no fault of their own. The most memorable example was the year the Warlord decreed that one round would be a dance marathon.



Creating a Contender

The Contenders who have gathered to take the Warlord's wager are a varied bunch. Most are respected warriors in their own right because it is well known that the challenges the Warlord sets favour the strong and brave rather than the cunning or wise. Even so, the men and women who make the perilous trek come from an astonishing number of different backgrounds. To create a Contender, follow these steps.

The Basics

The first step in creating a Contender is in defining those parts of the character that serve to introduce him or her. If you prefer, you can add these last, once you have a better idea as to the details of the character.

Name

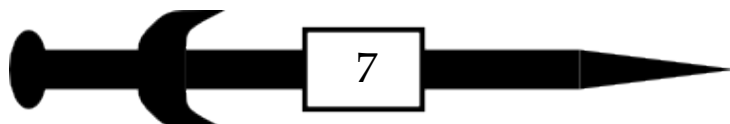
A name is not just a convenient handle for a character, it can also deliver a lot of information about their background. A list of titles implies a certain status, whether or not they were justly earned, whereas a suffix such as 'the Wicked' or 'the Betrayer' implies an altogether different character.

Gender

The world at large is regrettably sexist, but for the singular individuals that aspire to take the Warlord's wager being of the 'weaker sex' is no real obstacle. The gender you pick has no influence on your character's abilities.

Harsh Truth

A person's appearance has little bearing on their true nature, but first impressions matter with the Warlord. As many Contenders have found to their cost, the Warlord disapproves of ostentatious displays of wealth by anyone other than himself.



Appearance

In the same way that a Contender's name indicates something about their background, a character's clothes and general appearance can speak volumes about their heritage and wealth. Position in the outside world counts for little in the Warlord's winter camp, but that doesn't stop people from demonstrating it anyway. Some Contenders are sent as representatives of a kingdom or people, with a sizeable retinue to accompany them, whereas others are heading to the Warlord for their own, personal reasons. Of the latter, some arrive clothed only in rags.

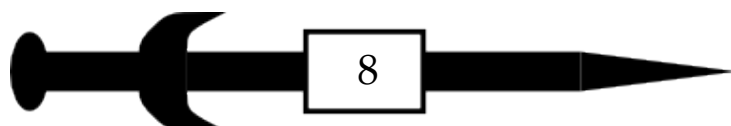
Motivation

As far as the Warlord is concerned, the purpose of the contest is to demonstrate his strength and power. For the Contenders that come to try their luck, their goal is, against the odds, to win the wager and claim their prize. The warlord has never been defeated in single combat, not once in the all the years his contest has been run.

What You Say You Want

The next item is what you want from the Warlord if you win the wager; that is, the apparent reason for you accepting the challenge in the first place. It can be as selfless or selfish as you want, but it must be something that only the Warlord, in all his power and influence, can give you. Examples are:

- ◆ A great item of treasure
- ◆ For his forces to leave your homeland
- ◆ To join his forces as a general
- ◆ The choice of a woman from his harem
- ◆ For permission to kill one of his captains who has wronged you
- ◆ For him to make you the baron of some part of his lands
- ◆ To persuade him to wage war on your behalf



Harsh Truth

Most Contenders fail, and pay the price for failure. It's important to bear in mind that a Contender doesn't come to the Winter Camp unless they are desperate enough to risk everything. It's all or nothing, and the odds are not good.

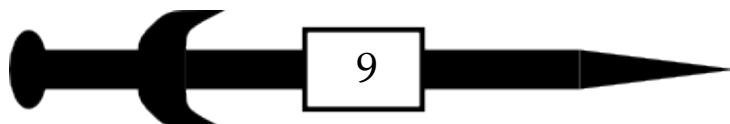
What You Really Want

That may be what you tell him you want, but your actual motive may be something else. You can keep your real agenda a secret, from both other Contenders and the GM, for as long as you wish. You may find, however, that it is easier to fulfil your mission if you can find allies in your cause. Your real goal may be a different reason for seeking the same prize, or your supposed desire may merely be a cover for your true purpose. There is a line at the bottom of the character sheet where you can write your true motivation. To keep it secret, you can fold up the very bottom of the character sheet to cover it. Examples of true motivations are:

- ◆ The same as what you say you want
- ◆ Rescuing someone taken prisoner by the Warlord
- ◆ Meeting a contact at the contest to pass on secret information
- ◆ Stealing an item from the Warlord
- ◆ Killing another Contender expected to be there
- ◆ Killing one of the Warlord's men who has wronged you
- ◆ Assassinating the Warlord himself

What You Stand to Lose

It wouldn't be a wager if you didn't stand to lose something. The Warlord sets the price you will pay for failure after you tell him what you want from him if you win. It's not negotiable. Leave this line blank for now.



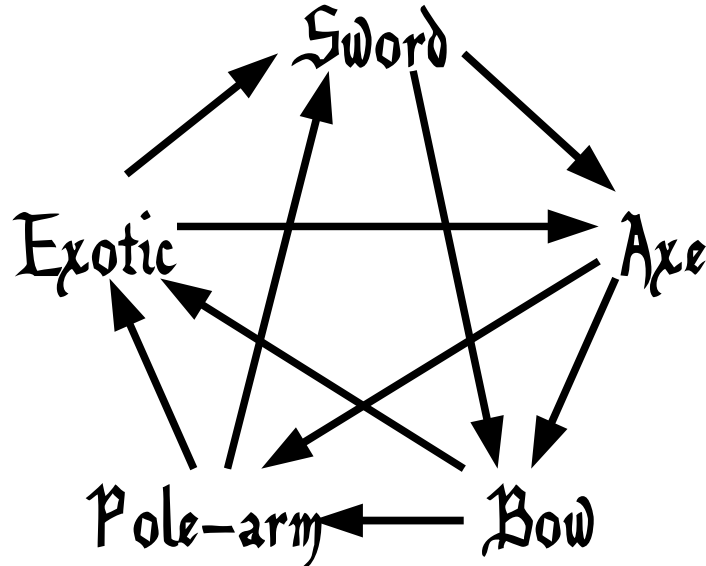
WARLORD'S WAGER

Abilities

Each Contender has 15 points to spend on character abilities. These fall into 3 categories-fighting skills, leadership skills and other abilities. It's not necessary to spend 5 points in each category; neither is it necessary to spread the points around a great deal. It's perfectly acceptable to specialise heavily in two or three skills. The Warlord enjoys setting challenges that force Contenders to use skills they don't have, so there is no way to hedge your bets and avoid being placed at a disadvantage at some point.

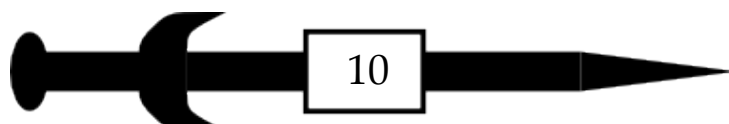
Fighting Skills

There are 5 categories of weapon, and you can be skilled in one or more of them. The maximum number of points that can be spent on a fighting skill is 5. Each weapon has an advantage over 2 other types and is at a disadvantage against another 2. When you have this advantage, your effective skill is 2 points higher (see 'weaknesses' in the rules section for more details). It will be difficult to succeed if you don't have a rating of a least 3 in a fighting skill. The respective weaknesses of the weapon types are shown in this diagram.



Sword

Generally used with a shield. The shield offers protection against bows and other ranged weapons and the sword itself is more versatile than axes.



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Axe

Also used with a shield. An axe is a no-nonsense cleaving weapon and useful against weapons with reach.

Bow

Bows and similar ranged weapons are devastating against targets without shields to offer cover.

Pole-arm

Long weapons have an advantage over swords, as the latter lack the reach to threaten the wielder. That breathing space also gives a pole-arm an advantage over exotic weapons.

Exotic

Exotic weapons include any of a number of unusual weapons which take a great deal of practice to use properly. They have an advantage over more mundane options such as swords and axes as opponents will not have had as much experience in facing them as their wielders have had facing ordinary weapons. Skill in unarmed combat against armed foes is a form of exotic combat.

Leadership Skills

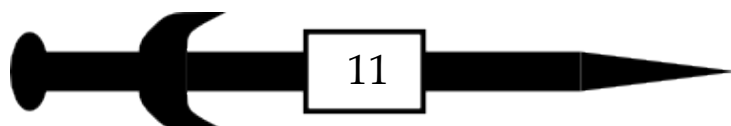
Leadership skills are those that are used by a general or other leader in the course of commanding his troops. These are mostly useful when you have the opportunity to direct troops as their commander, but they can also come in handy when dealing with people face to face. Like fighting skills, they have a maximum of 5 points in each.

Nerve

You often have to test your willingness to endure pain or stay a difficult course. Nerve is the skill used for this as well as for attempts to intimidate others. Any situation where an ability to act decisively under pressure can involve Nerve.

Presence

Presence is the ability to inspire troops or to persuade others to do your bidding. It reflects eloquence or a palpable aura of majesty. Making the impression you want to make on someone requires Presence.



Strategy

Strategy is the ability to marshal your forces to greatest effect. It can also be used to predict an enemy's behaviour based on their circumstances. It is, in many ways, the pre-eminent ability of the effective commander, but when events go against you it alone is not enough to ensure victory.

Other Abilities

The other abilities have a fixed or flexible points cost and provide some specific benefit. All of these abilities can only be bought once, but some have a variable cost that reflect different levels of the ability. Some of these abilities involves 're-rolls' or 'bonus dice'- these are described in detail in the rules section. Most of these abilities should have some additional description to give more details as to their nature.

Minor Artefact (1)

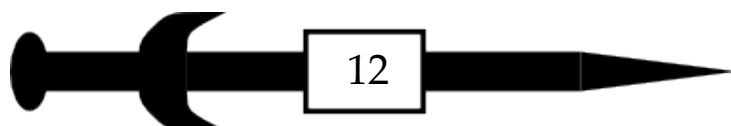
A minor artefact is a magical trinket of some description that provides good fortune. It provides a single re-roll, but only on a narrowly defined task. The name of the artefact should be decided now, but you can choose what sort of task it helps you with the first time you use it during play.

Major Artefact (2)

A major artefact is far more powerful than a minor artefact, but with similarly limited scope. It grants a full re-roll but only on tasks directly related to the purpose of the artefact. Like a minor artefact, you must name it now but it's purpose can be decided later.

Destrier (1)

A destrier is a mighty warhorse, only ridden by the richest warriors. They are renowned for their strength and versatility. It's a testament to their hardy nature that they can survive the trek across the desert to the Winter Camp. When a Contender rides a destrier, they receive a +1 die bonus to any skill they use that would benefit from a powerful warhorse. Fighting skills always qualify, and leadership skills normally do so on the field of battle. The horse itself is considered to have a Nerve skill of 2, should it ever become necessary. You should name your horse.



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Divine Blessing (1-3)

A divine blessing is a great gift. You can reduce this Divine Blessing rating permanently by 1 point in order to add 3 to your Roll Total- before, after or while rolling dice. Points spent in this way cannot be regained. You should name the deity that has blessed you in this way.

Exceptional Ability (2)

You have had a rich life of adventure that has given you a gift beyond normal abilities. Such a gift can be the ability to breathe fire, a talent for becoming invisible or being able to sense the presence of living beings around you. What all such abilities have in common is the potential to let you side-step a problem (by escaping an attacker, for example). What they don't do, however, is make you more effective with any of your skills or allow you to make a special attack against an enemy. Over-use of such an ability may incur the Displeasure of the Warlord. You should describe the exceptional ability with a few words so it's obvious what it does.

Exotic Mount (2)

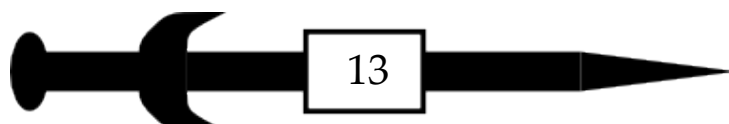
An exotic mount is some incredible creature, probably magical in nature, that has been tamed for riding. It will only suffer its owner to ride it. When using the mount, you receive a +1 die bonus under the same terms as for a destrier. The mount has a Nerve skill of 2 and an Exotic fighting skill of 3- the latter to represent teeth, claws or whatever. You should name your mount and specify its species.

General Competence (1-3)

General Competence is a skill, like fighting or leadership skills, but it applies to anything that does not fall under one of those skills. Medicine, craft and many other skills fall under this umbrella.

Great Fortitude (1-2)

For each point spent in Great Fortitude, you have an extra Wound Box.



Hedge Magic (2-3)

Many warriors pick up a smattering of crude magical skill. This hedge magic is a far cry from the powerful and pure magic wizards use, but far more fitting for a man of war. It can be turned to just about any purpose, including distracting an enemy. Hedge Magic is a skill, but the first point of the skill costs 2 points. Thus, you can have 1 or 2 dice in Hedge Magic and no more.

Legendary Weapon (1)

A legendary weapon grants a single re-roll when using it. The type of weapon (and thus the fighting skill used to wield it) should be specified, and all legendary weapons have a name.

Legendary Armour (1)

Legendary armour grants a full re-roll on the armour roll. All legendary suits of armour have a rich and vivid history- in particular their maker should be named.

Naturally Tough (1)

You roll an extra die for armour. This does not give you a die to roll if you are not wearing any armour at all, but makes any armour you wear more effective.

Reputation (1-3)

Reputation represents how well known you are throughout the world. You can fall back on your reputation instead of Presence or Nerve when dealing with other people. To a certain extent, reputation is a means of 'faking' either of those skills by relying on what people know about you. Reputation can't be used in this way when you are leading troops. Your reputation skill can also be used by other characters if they are acting on your behalf (or at least pretending to) but you are not present.

FUN FACT!

If the GM wants to, he can make some or all of the spell-casting skills from Sorcerer's Symposium available to Contenders. These get listed under 'Other Abilities'. Contenders, not being wizards by trade, can only spend at most 2 points in any given magical skill. The Warlord is known to frown upon the use of pure magic in combat, so tread carefully.



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Retinue (1-3)

Your retinue is a small group of assistants who have travelled with you. They may be bodyguards, scribes or holy men. They are not skilled enough to be given their own skills, but they are useful to use to send messages and perform other small tasks. For each point you spend in Retinue, you get 2 such followers. Your retinue can also shield you from personal injury, if they are present. Whenever you would take a wound you may choose to have one member of your retinue take the blow for you. This kills that follower but spares you any injury. You do not have to name the followers in your retinue, but you should provide some explanation as to why you have them.

Squire (1)

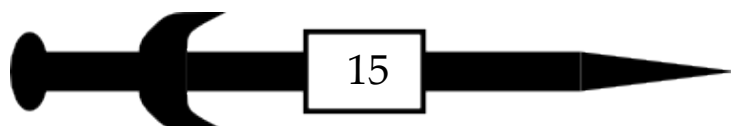
A squire is an assistant or pupil of notable ability. Your squire has 5 points available to spend on fighting skills, leadership skills and General Competence, but with some special restrictions. Your squire's best fighting skill must be lower than your best fighting skill. For other skills, the squire can only have skills that you have, and again they must be lower than yours. You can name your squire if you believe his name to be important.

Weapon Generalist (3)

You are comfortable with most weapons. you are always considered to have a fighting skill of at least 2, even if you haven't spent points in the weapon type specifically. Note that this does not grant any bonus to fighting if your skill with that kind of weapon is already 2 or higher.

Weapon Specialist (2)

You get a bonus die with one particular fighting skill. Also, the bonus your enemy receives for that type of weapon's weaknesses is halved. This bonus does not mean your skill counts as one point higher for things such as rendering assistance or the limit on a squire's skills.



WARLORD'S WAGER

Special Attributes

Contenders also have 4 other attributes, which are set at certain values at the start of the game. Some of them change during the course of play.

Favour and Displeasure

Favour represents how well the Warlord thinks of you. If you fight well and entertainingly, his favour may fall on you. Favour is very useful to have, as it grants a bonus in some circumstances and the Warlord may allow losing Contenders to stay in the competition if they have Favour- although this reduces their Favour by 1. Favour can become negative, called 'Displeasure'. Begging to stay in the contest when you have no Favour to spend will increase the Warlord's Displeasure, as will fighting in an unsporting fashion or breaking the rules of the tournament. You can never have both Favour and Displeasure- if you have one and would gain the other then you reduce your score in the first instead.

Contenders start the game with no Favour or Displeasure.

Armour

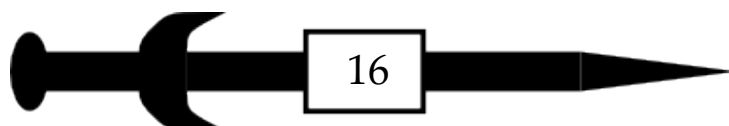
When you are wearing your armour, you roll 2 dice to resist damage. The details of how this works are given later. If you bought the 'Naturally Tough' ability, then your Armour is 3 rather than 2.

Edge

Any soldier will tell you that preparation is the key. During the evenings, you will have an opportunity to try to gain an edge in the next day's contest. Should you succeed in doing so, by finding out ahead of time what the contest will be or agreeing to ally with another Contender the next day, you gain a point of Edge. This point only lasts for the next stage of the contest but represents a significant advantage. Note that some ways of gaining an Edge may also result in the Warlord's Displeasure if you are found out. Thus you either have an Edge available or you do not. Contenders do not start the game with an Edge.

Wound Boxes

You normally have 3 Wound Boxes to track damage. If you spent any points on 'Great Fortitude', you may have 4 or 5 boxes.



WARLORD'S WAGER

EXAMPLE: SIR DEYER OF PALLAN

Name: Sir Deyer of Pallan, chosen of Larket.

Gender: Male

Appearance: Full chainmail armour with the emblem of Pallan on an over-tunic. A cruciform sword and a shield bearing the coat of arms of his family. A long scar runs down his face from his left ear, pinching the corner of his mouth.

What You Say You Want: The return of the Cup of Pallan, a religious artefact.

What You Stand To Lose: As yet unknown.

Fighting Skills: Sword 4.

Leadership Skills: Nerve 2, Presence 4, Strategy 1.

Destrier (1) – Lighthoof.

Divine Blessing (1) – Shown favour by Larket.

Legendary Sword (1) – the Light of Larket.

Squire (1) – Master Brown: Pole-arm 2, Nerve 1, Presence 2.

What You Really Want: To discover the true fate of Lady Yrrick, his lover rumoured slain by the Warlord's men.



The Contest

The GM will already have an idea as to what the different rounds of the contest will entail, but may tailor them to suit the Contenders the players have created. The basic unit of the game is the 'scene', and each scene is one period of time during the story. The game begins with two special scenes that introduce the player Contenders. Each round has a scene dedicated to it, and each evening's rest also has a scene dedicated to it. At the end of the game, there's a final scene to provide an epilogue for each of the main Contenders.

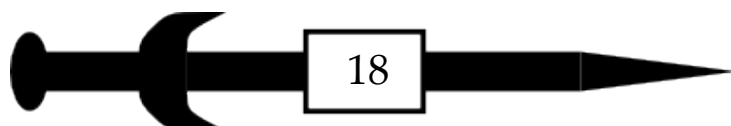
'Scene', in this sense, doesn't mean a single encounter or a single conversation. A scene includes every significant event in a particular time frame. It is generally broken up into smaller parts by flicking between different player Contenders so everybody gets a fair amount of time in the spotlight. Contenders that have been eliminated don't get to participate in the rounds themselves, but can still engage in skulduggery behind the scenes while the rounds are taking place.

The GM is encouraged to concentrate on the most exciting and interesting parts of the scenes and avoid spending time on the routine. Ordinary preparation for the contest rounds should also be avoided- the best advantage is to be had by attempting to earn an Edge during the previous evening. If a player has a plan they want to unfold during a round of the contest (for example by deliberately churning up mud in one part of the field in the early stages so they can trick an opponent into getting bogged down in it later), then they can present it as a *fait accompli* when it becomes relevant. The GM is, of course, free to say that although the Contender tried to set up the situation they wanted, it didn't work out. Or, the GM can ask the player to describe the preparation in flashback in order to give a cunning idea more 'screen time'.

Introductory Scenes

The first scene gives a chance for the players to introduce their Contenders. They take turns to describe an event that occurred to their Contender during their journey to the Winter Camp. The event can be one that took place in the Great Desert, or earlier on in the journey. This introduction can be used to set up a little mystery about their background or motives, but mostly acts as a better way of introducing the character than just describing their appearance and giving their name.

The type of scene can be entirely up to the player and can reflect what the player thinks is most important about the character. It could involve fighting off some bandits on a



WARLORD'S WAGER

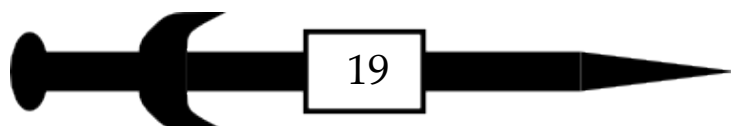
mountain pass, a heart-warming talk with an unhappy child in a small tavern or a cryptic exchange with a masked figure in the shadows. There does not necessarily have to be any danger in the scene, and nothing has to be resolved- in fact it is better if the initial scene sets up questions that are answered later on in the game.

EXAMPLE: INTRODUCING SIR DEYER

"It's a small village centred around a natural spring on the edge of the Great Desert. Sir Deyer and his squire have just finished negotiating with a local merchant over what it will cost to water Lighthoof. Sir Deyer sends the squire to hire a desert guide while he sits on a low wall and rests. He sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the locals, who eye him suspiciously and give him a wide berth. Nearby, a man is arguing with a couple walking past. Sir Deyer can only follow some of the words, but it becomes obvious that the man is complaining that the couple should not be together as they are from different social classes. Deyer says nothing, but rises slowly and approaches the three of them with his hand resting gently on the hilt of his sword. The man who was shouting falters under Sir Deyer's piercing gaze, then leaves in a hurry. Sir Deyer nods politely to the couple and returns to where he was sitting."

Meeting the Warlord

Some time after all the Contenders have arrived at the Winter Camp, the Warlord will be introduced to all of them. This may be the only time the Warlord is face-to-face with any of the Contenders before the final duel. The player characters, and any non-player characters the GM wishes to introduce at this stage, each tell the Warlord what they wish to ask of him. After listening to each Contender's request, the Warlord will tell them what they will forfeit if they lose. At that point, the Contender can refuse the wager and have nothing to do but watch the action as it unfolds. This happens rarely- the Contenders are usually already desperate if they try their luck at the contest, so have little to lose.



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EXAMPLE: MALARYA MEETS THE WARLORD

The Warlord: "And what do you desire, pretty young thing from the jungles of the west?"

Malarya: "Your Empire butts up against your lands, and your captains raid our towns for valuables and take women from them for slaves. I ask you to order that they stop the raids and return the kidnapped to us."

The Warlord: "If you win the Wager, I will see that happens. But if you lose, you will be escorted to your home village by my troops. You must select four other women of the village who will share your fate of joining my harem."

Malarya, quietly, "I... accept."

Rounds

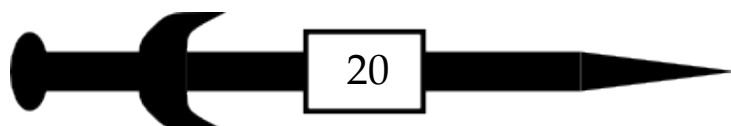
Each round of the contest will be its own scene. The competition will unfold, some Contenders will be knocked out, and the remainder will go on to the next stage. More details about the rounds can be found in a later chapter, but the nature of the rounds come as a surprise to the Contenders.

Evenings

After each round, the Contenders have their evening free. They can use this time to seek out allies, make plans for the next day or merely patch themselves up. There is a limited amount of time available in the evenings for any such actions, so players are encouraged to concentrate on the important things. More details about different parts of the camp are given in a later chapter.

Final Duel

The winner of the competition duels the Warlord himself. The duel may not be the only event of consequence at the time- Contenders may use the cover of the duel to escape, murder, steal or even make an attempt on the Warlord's life. Thus, the action of the duel may be paused while other players put their plans into motion.



Aftermath

Assuming the Warlord lived, the Wager is called in that night. Losing Contenders must offer up their forfeits, and if there is a winner this year then the Warlord will present him with his prize. If the Warlord has been slain, this scene instead depicts the Contenders leaving in a hurry to escape the chaos unleashed by his death.

During this scene each player gets a chance to deliver a short narrative about their character- if the character died then the narrative describes their last moments. If the character lived, then a brief epilogue says what they went on to do after the night of the Wager's finale. These narratives are a chance to give a proper end to the Contenders' stories.

EXAMPLE: THE WARLORD IS DEAD

"Sir Deyer stumbles into the stables. A footman wearing the Warlord's colours is in the process of trying to steal Lighthoof, but the loyal horse is fighting him. When the man sees Sir Deyer, he flees without his prize. Sir Deyer calms the horse down with some soothing words, then climbs onto its back and trots it out of the camp and down the side of the mesa.

With the Warlord dead and his army in chaos, it looks like he will never find out what happened to Lady Yrrick, but he has learned an important lesson- people who dwell too much on the past become consumed by it. Sir Deyer has resolved to put as much of the past behind him as he can.

In any case, he took the Cup of Pallan from the treasure house shortly after the Warlord fell, so at least he still has his reputation with the people of his country, something he may have lost if he had abandoned the cup in favour of the information he really sought."

EXAMPLE: THE WARLORD'S PRICE

"A week later, Malarya is dressed not in her armour but fine silks paid for with the Warlord's wealth. She is travelling in a covered wagon back to her home country, as a chattel of the Warlord.

She takes up a knife she had hidden during lunch, and holds the point to her neck. She knows that the Warlord will enact terrible vengeance on her land and its people if she breaks the bargain, but she cannot bring herself to accept this fate."



The Rules

These are the rules for the meat of the game- Contenders getting into fights and doing other difficult things. The rules for specific rounds of the Warlord's contest have their own section later on- although they are all based around the material here.

The Basics

When a Contender or other character performs an action where the outcome is uncertain due to luck, skill or a mixture of both, dice are rolled to work out what happens. The GM decides which skill is most appropriate to the situation. Where a character is in competition with another important character, even indirectly, they are engaged in a 'contest'. Otherwise, when a character is acting against the bleak, uncaring world, they are attempting a task. The dice are rolled in the same way for either. After the dice are rolled, characters that are currently failing have an opportunity to try to improve their score, but at the risk of failing far more spectacularly. This risk element is an important part of the game.

The Initial Roll

The number of six-sided dice you roll are equal to the points you have in the skill you are using, plus any bonus dice. If no skill seems appropriate, roll 2 dice. If the GM thinks that the circumstances favour you, he may grant you 1 or 2 additional dice. Roll the dice and remove duplicates until at most a single die is showing each number. The sum of the remaining dice is your Roll Total.

EXAMPLE: INITIAL ROLL

Sir Deyer is trying to persuade one of the Warlord's guards to let him into somewhere that is supposed to be off-limits. The relevant skill is Presence- Sir Deyer has a Presence of 4. His players rolls 4 dice, getting 6, 2, 4 and 6. One of the sixes is removed, and so the Roll Total is 12.



Unskilled Rolls

If a skill is applicable, but you do not have it, roll 2 dice but discard the higher of the two. The remaining die is your Roll Total.

Initial Re-Roll

Some character abilities give you an 'Initial Re-Roll' on a particular skill. When this is the case, you can select any of the dice to roll again to try to get a better Roll Total. You have to accept how they fall after the re-roll, even if it's worse. Duplicate removal happens after the re-roll.

EXAMPLE: INITIAL RE-ROLL

Malarya is being hunted across the tournament field like an animal. One of her pursuers is attempting to ride her down with a lance. She's unarmed, but she has an Exotic Fighting skill of 5, and a Major Artefact. The artefact hasn't been defined yet, so her player decides to define it as a totem that gives her the ability to jump with the skill of a panther. The GM agrees that the artefact will help her in the attack if she turns and fights. The roll is 4, 5, 4, 1 and 3. Malarya's player chooses to re-roll one of the 4s and the 1. The re-rolls are a 2 and another 4. The Roll Total is therefore 14.

Pushing Your Luck

After the initial roll, a character can attempt to improve their Roll Total by taking a risk. A single die is rolled. If the number it falls as is different from any of the other dice in that character's roll, it is added to it. If it matches one of the previous dice, then the character has made a serious mistake. Their Roll Total is set to 0 and they cannot push their luck again to try to improve it.

The only time you are compelled to push your luck is during a joust, due to the ritual, all-or-nothing nature of its combat.

EXAMPLE: PUSHING YOUR LUCK

Sir Deyer has been ambushed while looking for a contact one evening. He is struggling to defend himself with 1, 3 and 4 (Roll Total 8). This is not enough to defend himself, so he pushes his luck. He rolls a 5, bringing his Roll Total to 13. That is still not enough,



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so he pushes his luck again. He rolls another 5- matching a die he has already. This reduces his Roll Total to 0, and he can't try to improve it any more.

Single Re-Roll

Some character abilities give you a 'Single Re-Roll' on a particular skill. This re-roll can only be used when pushing your luck. It allows you to roll the new die again, but you have to accept the new result if you do so. You can have more than one single re-roll from different abilities, and apply more than one to a single attempt to push your luck, but each re-roll ability can only be used once per task or contest.

EXAMPLE: SINGLE RE-ROLL

Malarya has a Minor Artefact that lets her hear unusually well. She's trying to placate a group of soldiers that caught her sneaking around near the stables. Her roll is currently 1, 5 and 3 (Roll Total 9), which the GM says is not enough. She pushes her luck, getting a 3, which threatens to reduce her Total to 0. She asks if her improved hearing can pick up some mutterings at the back, to give her more insight into what the soldiers think and help her plead her case. The GM says yes, so she re-rolls the 3. This time she gets a 6, bringing her Roll Total to 15. If she decided to push her luck again for this roll, she would not be able to use that same minor artefact for a re-roll.

Task Checks

A Task Check occurs when you are attempting an action that involves no-one else, or are trying to get the better of a minor GM-controlled character. When you are attempting a task, you compare your Roll Total to a fixed number, depending on the difficulty given below:

| Difficulty | Description | Chance of success after Initial Roll | | |
|------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|--------|--------|
| | | 3 dice | 5 dice | 7 dice |
| 5 | Moderate | 87% | 98% | <100% |
| 10 | Difficult | 31% | 72% | 90% |
| 15 | Very Difficult | 0% | 20% | 47% |
| 20 | Almost Impossible | 0% | 0% | 5% |



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There is no category for 'easy'- if the task is easy then it does not require a dice roll to perform. If you beat the difficulty number, then you succeed at the task. If you do not beat it, then you fail at the task. If your Roll Total is 0, after pushing your luck and failing, you not only fail but fail particularly badly- perhaps making the situation worse somehow. You cannot make repeated attempts at a task in the hope of succeeding eventually- persevering in such a manner would be simulated by pushing your luck as described above.

Where a character controlled by the GM is attempting a task, the GM should not roll dice. Instead he should simply decide what he wants the outcome to be.

EXAMPLE: A TASK CHECK

The GM decided that when Malarya was trying to persuade the guards at the stables to let her go, it was a 'Difficult' task- needing a Roll Total of more than 10. Her final Roll Total was 15, enough to succeed.

Hidden Difficulty

Sometimes the GM may decide to keep the difficulty a secret. This might be because the GM wants to keep whether or not the player Contender succeeded at the task a secret until a later time. The player knows what the Roll Total is, and thus what degree of difficulty the task would have to have been in order to have failed at it, but no more.

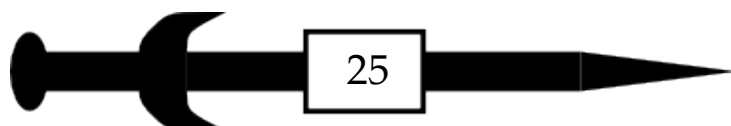
Contests

A contest is a situation where two characters are involved in a task with opposing goals- and both are significant characters to the story. This does not need to be a face-to-face confrontation. For example, if one character hides an important document in a room and another searches for it after they've left, that is a contest based on Subterfuge. The GM may decide that the two characters involved use the same skill or different skills. In a contest, both parties make their Initial Roll separately.

If you are currently losing, you may push your luck until you either nudge ahead of your opponent or suffer a match and lose.

If you are winning, and your opponent has chosen to not push their luck, you can push your luck if you wish to make your Roll Total higher.

Once both participants have either chosen to stop pushing their luck or have had their Roll Total reduced to 0 by a match, the contest is resolved. The Margin is the difference between the two Roll Totals, and is a measure of how convincing the victory was. This



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Margin is used for damage (see later), or for the GM to adjudicate the outcome of the contest.

If two characters controlled by the GM become involved in a contest, do not roll any dice. The GM simply decides the outcome of the contest as he sees fit.

EXAMPLE: A CONTEST

When Sir Deyer was fighting, he got a Roll Total of 0 to his attacker's 16. This means he loses, and the Margin was 16. A large margin like that means that Sir Deyer was caught by surprise and couldn't defend himself adequately.

Other Important Rules

Weaknesses

The Fighting skills have a system where some are strong against others. If you are using a skill in a contest and your opponent is using a skill against which yours is strong, you get 2 extra dice for your Initial Roll. If the opponent is a Weapon Specialist for that skill, you only get 1 extra die.

EXAMPLE: WEAKNESSES

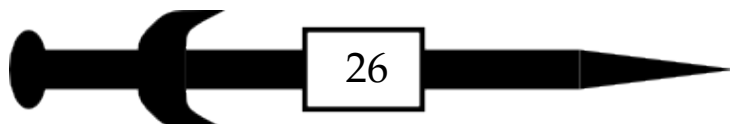
Malarya is using her Exotic fighting skill against a Contender using an Axe. Her Exotic fighting skill is 5, and his Axe skill is 4. Exotic fighting is strong against Axes, which would give her 2 extra dice, but the axeman is also a Weapon Specialist. This means that she roll 6 dice, and he rolls 5 (as Weapon Specialist also gives him a bonus die).

Joint Failure

If both you and your opponent had a Roll Total of 0, which can only happen if you both pushed your luck too far, then the contest ends in joint failure- neither of you wins and the outcome will probably be embarrassing for both of you.

FUN FACT!

Hedge Magic is weak against all forms of true magic.



Ties

If the Roll Totals in a contest become equal in a situation other than Joint Failure, a special circumstance triggers. The result of the first contest hinges on a new contest based only on Nerve. In essence, a tie means that skill takes a back seat to grit and determination. The Margin of this Nerve contest is used for the Margin of the original contest. If the contest was already based on Nerve for at least one participant, then do not start a new contest. Instead, both characters have the option to push their luck if they wish.

If a contest ends in a draw, because neither character wished to push their luck after a tie in Nerve, then the contest ends in a dead draw- neither character wins but neither character loses.

Assistance

If another character tries to help you, in either a task check or a contest, then they can only do so if they have at least one point in the relevant skill and they are no more than 2 points worse than you at it. You gain an extra die to roll for your initial roll. If two characters try to help you, then both must meet the previous criterion and at least one of them must be at least as good as you at the skill. In this case, you roll two extra dice in the initial roll. There is no benefit to having more than two people assist you.

EXAMPLES: ASSISTANCE

Sir Deyer is attempting to climb a wall. This is a General Competence Task Check, but as he has no points in General Competence things don't look good. His squire doesn't have General Competence either, so can't help. Malarya, however, has a General Competence of 2. This means she can assist Sir Deyer. This gives him a single die to roll.

Once Sir Deyer is on the wall, Malarya tries to join him. He can't assist her as he has no points in General Competence.

Later on, Malarya is trying to sneak past a sentry. This is another General Competence Task Check. She has two allies with General Competence 1. One of them can assist her, but as neither can match her skill of 2 being helped by both gets her no additional advantage. She will roll a total of 3 dice.



Combat

Combat is a special kind of contest. Losing combat usually means that your opponent has got the better of you- knocking you down, disarming you or otherwise beating you. This is a defeat, and often enough to put you out of the current round of the Warlord's contest. That, by itself, may not be sufficient to eliminate you from the contest altogether- much depends on the Warlord's capricious nature.

If you don't want to accept defeat, you must push your luck. If you lost the contest by pushing your luck too far, you are not defeated; merely badly wounded. You can immediately start a fresh combat contest to carry on the fight. If you don't want to concede defeat, you have to risk being badly injured. If you do concede defeat, there is a chance that a dishonourable enemy will strike at you anyway, inflicting great injury.

EXAMPLE: COMBAT

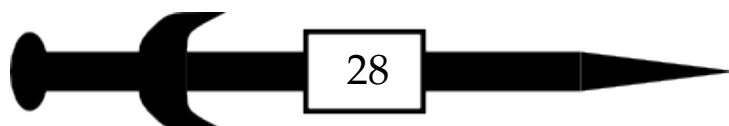
Sir Deyer is fighting against another Contender in one of the rounds of the contest. His Roll Total is 12, and his enemy's is 14. He can accept a losing Margin of 2, and trust that his enemy will let him live after defeating him, or push his luck in the hope of turning the tables on his opponent.

If he pushes his luck and fails, the losing Margin will be 14, but he will be able to fight on with his wounds.

Wounds

The after a combat contest, the loser fills in a blank Wound box with the Margin they lost by. This value represents how serious the wound is. Wounds, no matter how serious, have no effect on a character's skills or abilities. If you were wearing armour, it can reduce the damage you suffer. Make a roll with your Armour ability (fixed at 2, usually). You cannot push your luck with this roll. Subtract this Roll Total from the damage you receive. If this reduces the damage to 0, then you do not fill in a Wound Box, but you have still lost the contest.

If all of your Wound Boxes are filled in with a number, then you are sufficiently badly injured that death is a possibility. Make a task check with your highest Leadership or Fighting skill. The difficulty is the lowest number in any of your Wound Boxes, but you cannot push your luck or use any re-rolls. If you succeed, then erase that lowest number. If you fail, then your character has died. Sorry.



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Very small values in the Wound Boxes are not much of a problem. Unless you are very unlucky, you will be able to shrug them off if you ever receive enough wounds to need one of these checks.

EXAMPLE: WOUNDS

Sir Deyer lost a fight with a Margin of 14. He makes his armour roll with 2 dice, getting 2 and 4 (Roll Total 6). This means his player puts 8 in a Wound Box. If he had Legendary Armour, he could re-roll the dice for his armour roll. If he had Naturally Tough, he would have rolled 3 dice for the armour roll.

As it happens, this is the third wound he has received. The other two had values of 2 and 13. His highest skill is 4, so he makes a roll with 4 dice and gets a Roll Total of 12- way more than he needs to shrug off the least serious wound.

Defenceless Opponents

If you strike at a defenceless opponent (someone who has no combat skills, or who has surrendered) you make a roll as if you were in combat, but your target does not get a roll to defend with. Thus, the damage you inflict (before armour) is your final Roll Total after you have finished pushing your luck. After you have made such a dishonourable strike, then your victim may either being the fight anew or flee. Striking a surrendered opponent during a round of the contest is a sure-fire way to incur the Warlord's Displeasure.

Healing

To treat a wound, a you must make a General Competence task check with the difficulty set to the value of the wound to be treated. If the check is successful, the wound is erased. Otherwise, the wound remains. Treating a wound takes a few hours, so it's unlikely that a Contender will have a chance to treat more than one wound between each round of the Warlord's contest. You can treat your own wounds or those of others equally well.

The Winter Camp has a well-stocked apothecary's tent and a talented surgeon on stand-by that Contenders that are still in the contest are free to make use of. Using the apothecary's tent allows you to roll 3 dice for the check- in this case even if the GM-controlled surgeon performs the treatment the player still rolls the dice for the check, as it directly concerns them.



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EXAMPLE: HEALING

Sir Deyer is worried that the nasty wound (value 13) on his arm is starting to smell of almonds. He visits the apothecary's tent to get the wound cleaned and sewn up. The apothecary's tent lets him roll 3 dice to attempt to heal it. He rolls a 5, 1 and 4 for a Roll Total of 10. That is not higher than the value of the wound, so it remains.

Edges

You receive an Edge for a particular round through preparation on the previous evening. You have to take special measures to receive an Edge for a round, such as by sneaking a look at the Warlord's men getting something ready for the next day or pumping someone for information. It is not easy to receive Edges, but they are very powerful.

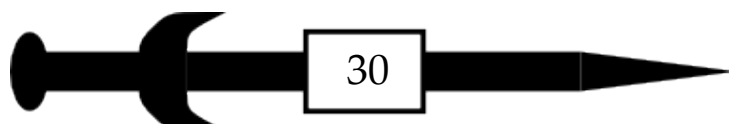
If you have an Edge for a round, you roll a bonus die in the Initial Roll for every task check or contest during it, as long as the action you are taking is part of the contest. This applies even if it's not clear how the knowledge you got would help in that particular circumstance- consider it a general 'I knew what was coming' bonus.

You can spend an Edge when pushing your luck to say what number you roll instead of actually rolling the die. When you spend an Edge in this way, you no longer receive any benefit from it for the rest of the round. Thus, it's best used during the final stages of a round for a decisive advantage.

You can never have more than one Edge for a particular round.

EXAMPLE: AN EDGE

Malarya has an Edge in the current round of the contest. She's using her Exotic fighting skill, and the bonus die from the Edge means she gets to roll 6 dice. She rolls 5, 1, 2, 5, 2 and 6 for a Roll Total of 14. She wants to push her luck, and chooses to spend the Edge in doing so. She gets to add a die showing whatever she wants to her Roll Total- and the best option would be to add a 4, the highest number she doesn't already have. Her Roll Total is then 18.



Field Battles

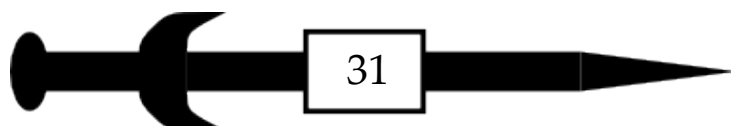
The first round of the Warlord's contest involves a field battle, and the Contenders are each given a unit of soldiers to command. In battles between them, only the Leadership skills of their commanders are used. When you lose a combat contest involving your unit, the Margin is the number of soldiers in your unit that are lost. They may not be killed, but they are unable to fight on. Naturally, the size of your unit cannot go below 0. If you lose all the members of your unit, you do not have to surrender- but you may be attacked in order to force your surrender.

If you have lost your unit, and you wish to fight against a Contender who still has theirs, then you are at a disadvantage. Your attacker will add the number of men in their unit to their Roll Total in any combat contests fought. It is only a small problem if their unit has been worn down, but if a significant number remain then it will be almost impossible for you to win. Surrender is always an option.

Favour and Displeasure

The attitude of the Warlord to a Contender does not affect the dice rolling. Rather, the Warlord can express his power as he sees fit in ways that circumvent the usual mechanics or force a change in what a character does. For example, if a character with Favour loses in one round, the Warlord may decree that he is allowed to progress to the next (at the cost of a point of Favour, naturally). Equally, if a character has incurred the Warlord's Displeasure, then the Warlord may make unfair rulings against him. Favour is gained for impressing the Warlord, awarded at the GM's discretion. When the Warlord interferes on behalf of a character with Favour, one point of Favour is lost. Displeasure is gained for annoying the Warlord, or remaining in the contest when, by the rules, you should be eliminated. Displeasure is not reduced if it causes the Warlord to interfere.

When the winner of the contest duels the Warlord, each point of Favour they have counts as a point of Edge, as described above. This reflects the Warlord not wanting to hurt a worthy opponent he admires.



FUN FACT!

If you're familiar with Sorcerer's Symposium, here is a summary of the differences in the rules between that game and this one:

- No true spell-casting means no forced pushing of your luck outside of jousts (unless the GM allows true spell-casting).
- Ties now trigger a contest of Nerve.
- The rules for assistance have changed slightly.
- When you fill all your Wound Boxes, you use a Fighting or Leadership skill in the attempt to remove the least serious Wound.
- There is now Armour that can reduce the severity of Wounds.
- Weaknesses now give 2 dice to your opponent instead of 1.
- Favour, Displeasure and Edges are new rules.

The Rounds

The Warlord's contest is the driving force behind action in the game. The rounds should not only provide tension in their own right but present opportunities for Contenders to cross swords or demonstrate their character. Although each round eliminates some of the Contenders, making a round a miniature elimination game in its own right is a poor choice, as it player Contenders may be knocked out early on and be left with nothing to do for the rest of the round. Ending a round with the Warlord's decision as to who is allowed to continue is a major source of tension, and having rounds that, by design, make that decision for him dissipates that tension.

The first round, the Grand Tourney, is described in detail here. The other rounds can be created by the GM in as much or as little detail as he wishes.

An important factor for the GM is how long the game is intended to last. For a single-session game, the tournament is probably best deal with in one or two decisive clashes, with the minimum of the extra rules incorporated. For a multi-session game, more details can be played out in all of the rounds.

The Grand Tourney

The grand tourney is a spectacular field battle. Each Contender is put in command of a unit of 20 of the Warlord's troops. They are sorted into two teams. One Contender on each side is made the 'king' (the Warlord usually chooses based on the highest Reputation ability). The king is given a large banner to carry. The goal of the tournament is to capture the opposing force's banner. Only on rare occasions is the king killed, and then usually because he refused to submit to his captors and kept on fighting. Being on the winning side pretty much guarantees that you will proceed to the next round; but even if you lost if you fought well and led your troops sensibly the Warlord can still allow you to proceed.

The troops are taken from the Warlord's army and are handsomely rewarded for taking part- this makes them eager to fight well. By agreement, soldiers that are wounded are allowed to leave the field unmolested. A team of stretcher-bearers are also given the run of the battlefield to take more seriously wounded soldiers to a place of safety. Despite those precautions, the tournament is still a battle. Weapons are not dulled.

The king of each side generally formulates an overall strategy, but the other commanders on his side are under no obligation to obey if they believe they have a better idea.



Harsh Truth

One year, one of the kings in the tournament was profoundly incompetent as a field commander. The other Contenders on his side realised this early on, and then spent their time limiting the damage he could do to their chances in the overall contest by killing the men in his unit and keeping him captive themselves. They went on to win the tournament by a narrow margin. The Warlord allowed the other Contenders on his side to proceed to the next round, but gave a resounding thumbs down to the incompetent king. He paid his forfeit with his life at the end of the wager.

Each unit is made up of one type of soldier, falling into one of five categories. These categories have weaknesses and strengths, in the same way as fighting skills. Each type of soldier also gets an extra die in certain circumstances. These weaknesses and bonuses are an abstraction included to introduce an element of strategy rather than an attempt at realistic battle simulation.

Footmen

Footmen carry swords and shield, and are slow-moving but dependable troops. If they engage troops armed primarily with ranged weapons, they are devastating. Footmen provide an extra die if they have the high ground.

Skirmishers

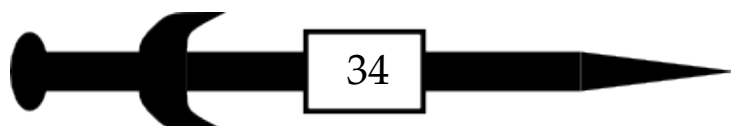
Skirmishers are armed with throwing spears, buckler shields and short swords. They are useful for breaking enemy formations or ambushing from cover. Skirmishers provide an extra die if they are fighting on wooded terrain.

Archers

Archers are primarily useful for their ranged attack, which can defeat an enemy unit before they close to mêlée range. Archers provide a bonus die if they are firing from behind a defensive feature, such as a river or wall.

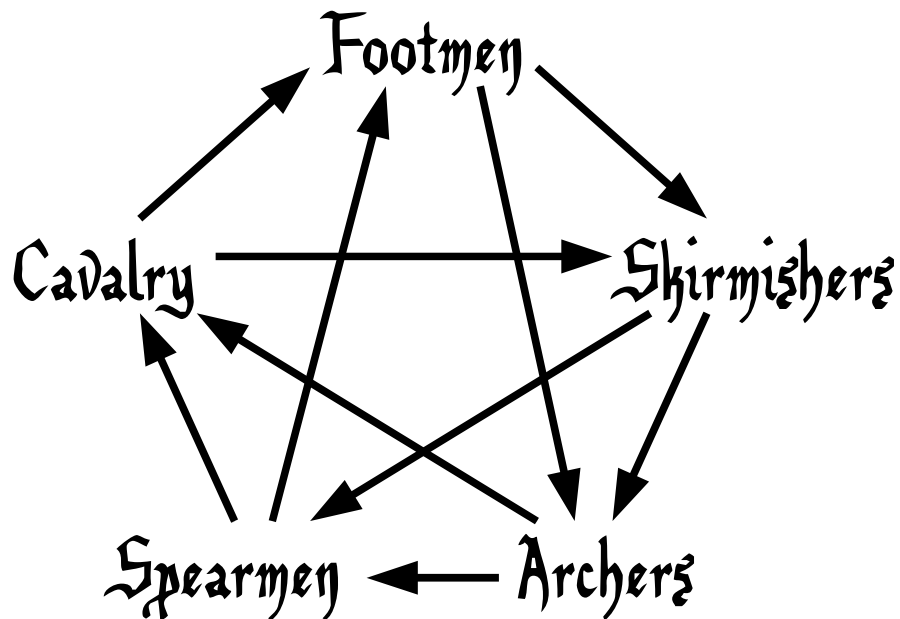
Spearmen

Spearmen fight using long weapons, and are particularly devastating against mounted enemies. Their reach also makes them effective against footmen. Spearmen provide a bonus die if they are attacked from the front.

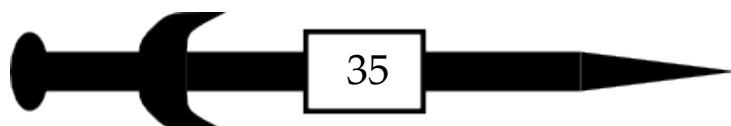


Riders

Mounted troops are very useful for getting around the battlefield quickly and running down easy targets, but they lose much of their strength on broken ground. Riders provide a bonus die if they have the clear space to mount a charge.



Individual soldiers don't offer much resistance to Contenders, but if you ever need stats for regular soldiers use the ones in the GM advice section, later, and swap out the Sword fighting skill for something else if it doesn't make sense.



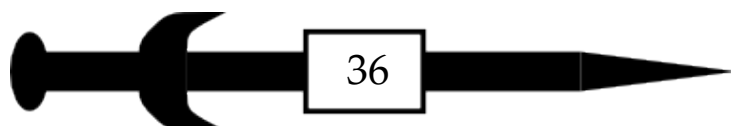
Running the Battle

The GM may well put all the player Contenders in the same group, with a specific goal given to them by their side's king. It is important that the rules of the battle are fully explained, and the terrain of the battlefield made plain. This means all the players take part in the same part of the overall battle, with the rest played out 'off camera'. The action will likely be a small number of combat engagements with enemy forces, with opportunities to change the overall plan between them based on how the battle is going. Leadership skills are used to command units, in the following way-

- ◆ **Strategy** is used to predict an enemy's plan before it is put into motion, and used for combat when the battle is first joined.
- ◆ **Presence** is used for combat after the first rush in an engagement, and used to prevent your unit from breaking if the battle goes against you.
- ◆ **Nerve** is used in combat when the roll is tied, and also used to stand your ground in the face of great danger.

Morale and Courage

When two units fight, the one that suffered the most casualties is in danger of breaking and running. Its commander must make a Presence task check, with the difficulty set to the number of casualties it suffered. If this is failed, the unit disengages. The check can also be prompted by an attack by an overwhelming force. Nerve is used similarly, when a commander who has lost most or all of their troops is attacked- but this reflects the commander's courage. The difficulty is set by the GM based on the circumstances. On the battlefield, it is not unknown for a commander's mount to spook- Destriers and Exotic Mounts have a Nerve of 2 to withstand this- regular warhorses only have a Nerve of 1 for this purpose.



EXAMPLE: AN ENGAGEMENT

Sir Deyer is leading his unit of riders past a wooded area. He is concerned that it may harbour enemy troops, but doesn't have the time to spare to send a scout or two.

Instead, he scans the area to see if he can make out any tell-tale signs of an enemy lying in wait. This is a Strategy Task Check (The GM wouldn't want to give the game away by saying it's a Contest if there are enemies there).

Sir Deyer has no Strategy skill, so rolls 2 dice and takes the lower. His Roll Total is 3. He pushes his luck until he gets 7, which is enough for an easy check. He doesn't want to push any farther.

"I can't see any sign of the enemy," he says, "And we have to press on. Keep your wits about you, men."

As it turns out, there is a unit of skirmishers lying in wait. They've already taken casualties and are down to 14 men. The GM rules that the successful ambush grants them an extra 2 dice on their roll. Their commander has a Strategy skill of 2, so the skirmishers roll 4 dice. Sir Deyer's riders are strong against skirmishers, so add 2 dice to his Strategy of 1. He gets another die for his warhorse. The skirmishers get a Roll Total of 16, to Sir Deyer's 7. Sir Deyer's player decides to push his luck until he gets 12. Thus, he loses 4 of his riders.

"A volley of javelins erupts from the trees," the GM says, "killing 4 of your men and unhorsing another 3. The riders left without horses hurry to mount the steeds of their fallen comrades."

The GM decides that with so few casualties, there is little point in forcing Sir Deyer to make a Presence check to fortify his troops' morale.

Instead, another round of the battle is fought. At this point, the ambush no longer provides a bonus and the contest is fought with Presence rather than Strategy. Sir Deyer rolls 4+2+1 dice and gets a Roll Total of 18. The skirmisher's commander has a Presence of 2, and gets a Roll Total of 8. The GM decides he pushes his luck and he fails, getting a Roll Total of 0.

"Your Riders recover from the ambush quickly, and chase the enemies into the woods. The skirmishers are cut down wholesale before they can retreat, and their commander is last seen disappearing into forest at a dead run," the GM says.

"Let him go," Sir Deyer says, "We still need to stick to the plan."



Potential Strategies

There are several common strategies that one of the armies can follow in the tournament listed here for inspiration.

- ◆ **The Rush-** attempt to strike early before the enemy is organised, risking all on a desperate first push.
- ◆ **The Flank-** attempt to draw the enemy forces towards you, and send a crack team to attack the enemy king from the side.
- ◆ **Positional Play-** seize the strong points early on and use the advantage they give you to whittle the enemy down to a point where you can finish them off.
- ◆ **The Waiting Game-** fortify on favourable terrain and wait for the enemy to strike.
- ◆ **Misdirection-** Hide your king away from your main force while still maintaining the pretence that he is with it.
- ◆ **Guerilla Tactics-** Use the woods and the gorge to harry the enemy, wearing them down slowly while taking minimal losses.

Tournament Terrain

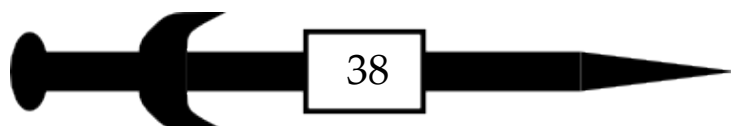
There lay of the land on the tournament field is as follows.

Forts

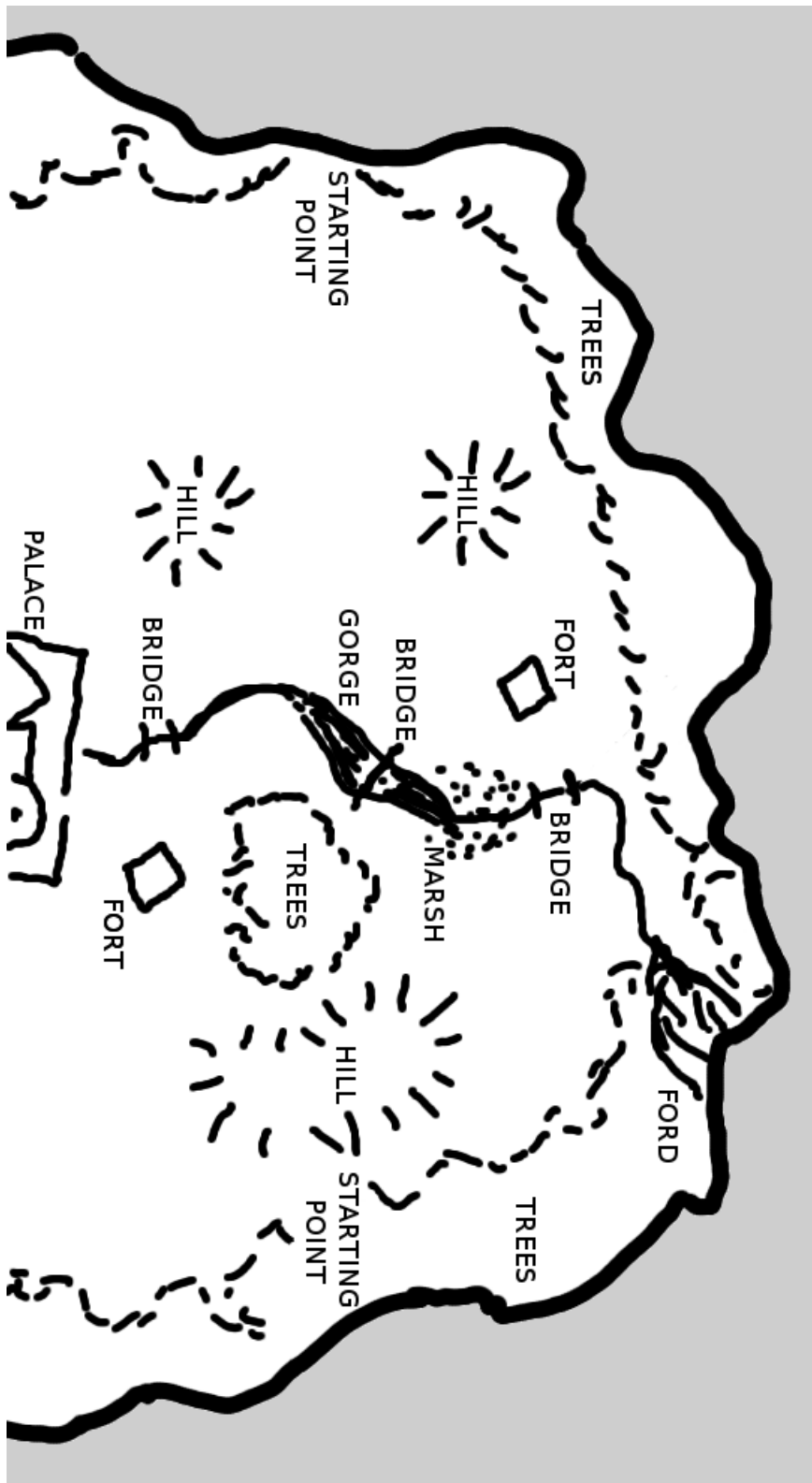
There are two forts, both equidistant from where each army starts. The forts have stone walls, battlements and a wooden gate to hold the enemy at bay. They each have a central roofed building surrounded by a small courtyard. They are, in some ways, miniature castles. They begin the tournament unoccupied and with the gate open. The forts are so small that it is struggle to fit more than about 50 men in each of them.

River

The river runs all the ways across the battlefield. For most of its length it is easy to wade, but it will slow down any attacking force.



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Bridges

There are three bridges across the river. Two are large, stone-built bridges that horsemen can ride across easily. The third spans the gorge and is a rather more dangerous rope bridge. Soldiers cannot cross the rope bridge in a timely and safe manner, but individuals can cross on foot or with a reliable destrier.

Ford

At the edge of the mesa, the river widens like a delta and becomes very shallow. Although well away from the main battlefield, the ford doesn't slow down any troops significantly.

Forests

The edges of the battlefield consist of light forest. It is possible to make your way around the edge of the field in secret by sticking to them, but it is a circuitous route to take. There is one large stand of trees on the southern half of the battlefield, which frequently sees units of skirmishers take advantage of its cover.

Gorge

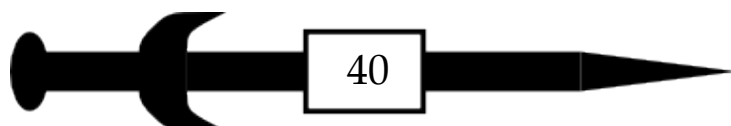
Near the centre of the battlefield the river runs through a gorge. It is steep-sided, narrow and more-or-less impassable. However, a long man could slip down its length unnoticed to get behind enemy lines.

Hills

There are three low hills on the battlefield which are good vantage points to follow the battle from.

Marsh

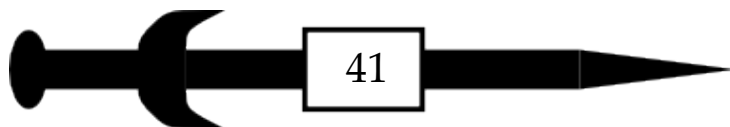
As the river leaves the gorge, the area becomes sodden and marshy. Units can get bogged down in the muck rather easily, and the marsh's position means that units retreating from a battle for one of the bridges are often driven back into it.



Other Rounds

The other rounds change year to year, but here are some specific rounds the Warlord had used before and enjoyed. The GM is free to create specific rules for any round he includes, but the tournament is generally most complicated round of the contest.

- ◆ **Chariot Racing** - exactly as it sounds. Controlling chariots at high speed took plenty of Nerve, and attacking other charioteers was encouraged.
- ◆ **Jousting** - horses were provided for Contenders who did not have their own. When jousting, a Contender must always push their luck if they are currently losing. This led to some horrific wounds.
- ◆ **Gladiators** - Contenders were stripped of their weapons and released into the arena four at a time. Weapons were scattered about on the ground. Each group had to fight until only 1 was standing or a fixed amount of time had passed.
- ◆ **Maze** - a large wooden maze was constructed, and the Contenders set loose in it fully armed. The exit from was hidden and only opened after 3 Contenders had been killed in the maze.
- ◆ **Slayer** - All the Contenders were put in the arena and had to fight a dragon as a team.
- ◆ **Stick in the Mud** - two Contenders were armed with staves and fought on a narrow log over a mud pit. Each Contender played in a fixed number of bouts, and the Warlord took into consideration the strength of their opposition when deciding who went through to the next round.
- ◆ **Wild Hunt** - two Contenders (possibly ones who had incurred the Warlord's Displeasure) had their wrists bound and were released onto the tournament field on foot. After ten minutes, the remaining Contenders took to the hunt after them.



Between the Rounds

This section lays out the locations in the camp that the Contenders can visit in their downtime in the evenings. The GM is free to include any other features or incidents, of course, but this is a basic list of places that might be of interest. It's not essential for the player to read this section, particularly if they intend their Contenders to be ignorant of the layout of the Winter Camp.

What goes on in the evening is largely up to the players. Each player can request that their part of the scene takes place at a particular location. You may want to further your secret goal or develop your character's story a little more. You can ask another player if they're happy for their character to share a scene with you, and negotiate on what's going on and where. Once everybody is happy with what their character will do in the evening scene, the GM can run each part-scene in whatever order he wishes. Collaboration between all the players and the GM is important as it keeps each scene to the point and interesting. If a player struggles to come up with a suggestion for what their character will do, the GM or other players can make suggestions until one is taken up.

Camp Layout

The Winter Camp is a large place and, as its name implies, much of it is temporary. In the centre of the mesa is a large, stone-built palace where the camp's permanent staff live all year round and where the Warlord stays when he is in residence. The bulk of his army set up a small city of tents on the drier side of the mesa. Fully a quarter of the total area is given over to rolling grassland rimmed with light forest, the heart of which is the tournament field. There's a small area set aside some distance from the palace where the Contenders, spectators and their followers can camp. Fresh water comes from a natural spring that rises near the palace and a well in the army encampment. The Contender area also has a few common spaces, such as the mess tent, where Contenders can mingle. Other specifics vary from year to year, and often hinge on exactly what the Warlord has planned for the contest. If a future round requires specific set-up, that part of the mesa will be screened off by wooden walls of canvas sheeting, but a determined Contender can sneak a peek if they try hard enough. Some features of the mesa are consistent year to year, and a character who has done their research before coming to the Wager will be aware of them.



Apothecary

The Contender area has one small tent that acts as an infirmary. An old gentleman of obscure origin can prepare and dispense a large number of medical draughts, and pallets are available for people to rest on while they recover. The magical healing available at the apothecary is better than is generally available, but the apothecary is also the first place a ruthless enemy will look if he intends to finish what he started. Three heavy-set guards are stationed in the tent, but they are there primarily to protect the apothecary himself rather than break up fights between Contenders. They may, however, report unsporting conduct to the Warlord himself.

Arena

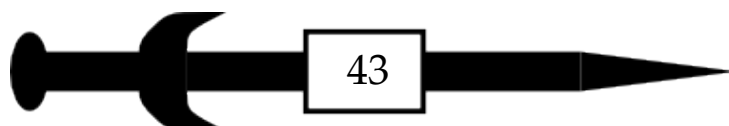
On the opposite side of the palace from the hippodrome, there is the arena. It is only used for the Wager rounds that require a fixed combat area, so does not see as much use. The spectators do not enjoy tiered seating, and must jostle for a good place to watch from. There is an underground tunnel linking one end of the arena to the stables, so 'surprise' animals can be brought to the fight.

Army Encampment

The Warlord's army has a large, well organised camp in a circle about a well. The majority of the army spends its time at the camp, training and passing the time. A small proportion of the soldiers are allowed to watch the rounds of the contest, usually as a reward for excellent performance during the previous fighting year. There is no wall or ditch around the camp, but it is sufficiently full of soldiers that sneaking into it will be difficult. The army is well-disciplined and the soldiers know to challenge anyone they don't recognise if they see them.

Hippodrome

There is a dirt racing track near the palace, which is used for a number of side entertainments during the contest. It is made of stone, with a series of tiers for the crowd to watch the action from. The track itself consists of soft, sandy earth around a central wall. Like traditional hippodromes, the course is wide with semi-circular turning areas at the ends.



Harsh Truth

It is a little-known secret that the Warlord sleeps on a small wooden pallet in an otherwise opulent room. To the few privileged enough to know, he says that having spent his entire life as a soldier he can't get comfortable on anything else.

Palace

The Palace is strictly off-bounds for Contenders. The Warlord, his closest advisors and the senior officers of his army stay there during the contest. The palace has a large staff of servants and other lackeys. The palace is guarded by the Warlord's Elite Guard, battle-hardened and fanatically loyal, but it is still possible to get inside if you are willing to take the risk. The palace not only houses the Warlord's treasure-room, but it will also be possible to find the reports of his spy-masters and letters concerning the contest itself. This makes it a very tempting target. If you get caught, however, you might be given a thorough working over by the guards as well as receiving the Warlord's Displeasure. The innermost palace areas, which include the treasure-room, the harem and the Warlord's personal quarters, are too heavily guarded to infiltrate at any time except during the final duel.

Mess Tent

Food for the Contenders and their companions is laid on by the Warlord. The food tends to the simple, with an emphasis on roast meats and boiled vegetables. Contenders with refined palettes are allowed to prepare and cook their own meals using the mess tent's fire pit and utensils. On warm nights few people gather inside the tent, and instead sit on split logs just outside. It is by far the best place to mingle with other Contenders, as long as you don't mind your conversation being overheard.



Stables

There are stables in the Contender area, mostly reserved for Contender mounts and pack animals that came with them as part of their train. Because of the desert surrounding the Winter Camp, most such animals are camels.

The main stables are much larger, and only open to the Warlord's forces. The horses, elephants and camels of his main army are quartered here while he is in residence, in large numbers. If the contest involves any exotic or particularly large creatures, part of the stables will be given over to them. In previous years griffins, lions and pit fiends have featured in the contest, and the stables are built to be able to contain just about anything.

Tournament Field

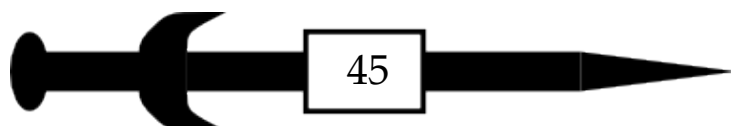
Not much goes on here after the first day's battle. It can, however, serve as an out of the way place to meet someone away from prying eyes. If you find out that the field will be used for a later round, it is easy to sneak a useful item onto it with the intention of recovering it later.

Incidents

The player Contenders are not the only people who could get into trouble in the evening. Players may encounter 'situations in progress' involving other Contenders and can find some way to take advantage of the situation. This kind of encounter is a good way to put one Contender in debt to another or otherwise provoke interaction of some kind. Alternatively, a Contender bearing a grudge may seek out a player Contender to make their life difficult.

It's more interesting if the GM can find some way of tying the incident into something that has already gone on in, such as a grudge, or reflects something already known about a player Contender. For example, if it appears that a player character is strongly inclined to help innocents, they may encounter a spectator at the contest being hassled by one of the Warlord's men.

These kinds of incidents can even crop up while a Contender is exploring the camp, as a sideshow to their main task or an interruption that threatens it. With these incidents, as with most parts of the game, the idea is to make the 'game-in' time as interesting as possible.



Advice for Players

This section provides some guidance for players on how to get the most out of the game. It's also useful for the GM to read to see what the players might come up with in play.

Making the Most of Your Scenes

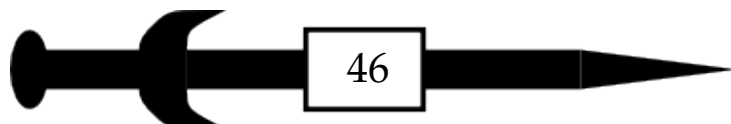
Ordinary actions make for boring scenes. For this reason, the GM and the players are encouraged to elide the boring parts and get straight to the interesting bits. Don't start a scene at the start of a round- start it just when it's getting interesting. The GM should let the players score some minor victories 'off-camera', in order to keep the parts of the story that are played out tense.

Don't concentrate only on winning the contest rounds. Although that may be necessary for your character to achieve their goal, it's more interesting to try to find ways of furthering that goal during the round- by talking to other Contenders or manipulating the contest to your advantage. If you can also find a way of developing your character's history and personality at the same time, that's even better. Try to think of the round as something that stirs up trouble and conflict rather than just an interim goal.

Keeping the Secret

There's a temptation for you to be extremely protective of your true goal, shielding it from other players until the very end. This is a bad move. The only reason the true goal is secret to begin with is to add an element of mystery to the player characters. At some point during the game, probably before the final duel, there will be a good opportunity to reveal the secret goal to the other players. Maybe your character takes a risk and lets another Contender in on his plan, looking for help. Maybe, in the heat of the moment, they let it slip to an enemy who was taunting them. Maybe they just open up to a Contender they respect during one of the evening meals. Or you could simply make the goal clear through your character's actions without letting anyone know them in character.

It is an advantage if the players at the table know your character's true goal because they can then introduce elements into the story that play up to the goal. The GM, in particular, can make the game interesting by referencing what he knows about character goals. There's a tendency to frown on this slight blurring of player and character knowledge, but done subtly it is a positive thing. Heroic stories often give characters a high degree of



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intuition about the people they meet, and letting player knowledge impinge onto character behaviour in small ways is a means of recreating that intuition within the game.

For example, say your character wants to steal a valuable item from the Warlord. During one evening, your character spends time observing the Palace, taking note of where the guards are and what their patrol patterns are like. This lets the other players know what your character is up to. During the round the next day, a Contender controlled by the GM says something was stolen from him. He loudly accuses your character, pointing out that you can't account for your whereabouts the previous evening. Another player Contender then vouches for you unexpectedly- you suspect it will lead to blackmail later, but for the time being your character has no choice but to go along with it. That evening, another player suggests that his character and your meet by accident because they are both practising using a hook and grapple to sneak into the Palace. You like the idea, and the GM runs with it- during the scene your character will probably find an ally that will make your eventual burglary much easier to pull off. By revealing your goal, three interesting things have been added to the story- your intent to enter the Palace, a potential blackmailer and an ally who may help or betray you later.

Using Other Characters

The other Contenders in the Wager are possibly your most valuable asset. You may find allies that will help you achieve your goal in exchange for helping them achieve theirs. Sometimes, your goal will be automatically be achieved if theirs is- if you discover that one Contender intends to kill the Warlord, if he does so then in the chaos you may find your homeland liberated. Other Contenders, even the ones controlled by the GM, won't usually offer their help for nothing. You may have to help them as much as you want them to help you- and if that runs contrary to your character's moral code they will have to make a significant decision.

Don't underestimate the usefulness of simply talking to other characters. If you have thought of some rich history for your character, making references to it when talking to other characters makes a scene more interesting and gives hints to other players about what kind of thing might engage your character's interest or attract their ire.



Laying Plans

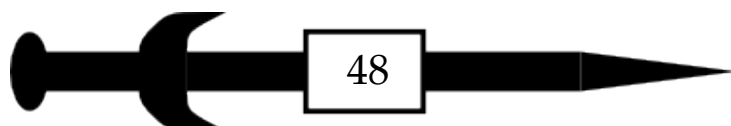
Wherever possible, make it clear what your character is planning. Don't just say what they are doing, say why. That's important because it lets the GM work with your plans and not accidentally crush them. If you intend for the planning to come to fruition within the same scene as it is set, you don't even have to go to the trouble of setting it up explicitly. Suggest that you planned something when the activation of the plan comes up, and unless the GM has a good reason to say it failed you will still get the benefit.

Changing Direction

You may decide during the course of the game to change your Contender's secret goal. This should not be done lightly. The task is very important to them. It should only be done in a way that raises the dramatic stakes. A suggested progression from low drama to high drama is:

- ◆ Selfish personal goal
- ◆ Noble personal goal
- ◆ A noble goal for the good of others
- ◆ Killing the Warlord

It's entirely possible that the new goal for your character will achieve the old goal as a side-effect. That might represent your character being persuaded to collaborate on a larger group effort. If the old goal is abandoned entirely, this represents some kind of epiphany on the part of your character- choosing a nobler path even at great personal cost. If a character with a noble goal decides to kill the Warlord instead, this could be because they have lost control of their anger at the Warlord to the detriment of their cause. In all these examples, the change in goal increases the dramatic tension. From the perspective of a player, this may help redeem your character if you find it difficult to pursue their original goal in an interesting way.



Advice for the GM

This section contains suggestions for the GM on how to make the game run well. There's no information that might spoil the game for the players or ruin any surprises, but it's only really useful for the GM.

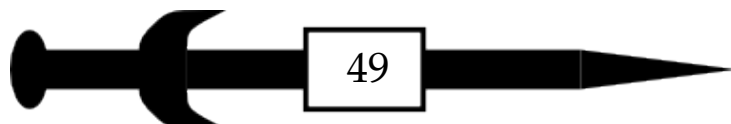
The Big Picture

It is important to remember that the integrity of the competition is not as important as the story the game tells, or the personal drama for the player characters. Although the contest is established as a series of elimination rounds, as the GM you should do your best to keep all of the player characters in the contest for as long as possible. Use Favour or Displeasure to keep them in the running wherever you can. Of course, if a player seems to be making a tactical decision to drop out, the better to advance their own plans, then don't force them to continue.

Unlike many games, when the overall course of the game is plotted out (at least in part) beforehand, this is a game where you have to improvise. The key thing to remember is to provide opportunities for the players, and to respond to ideas they have. So, if a player decides to invent a personal history with one of the NPCs, run with it and make up any you need details on the fly. Because the hidden agendas of the players are unknown to you, at least at the start, you don't know exactly what they're up to. Of course, if a player makes it clear what their agenda is during the course of the game, then you can start making plans that play to their goals.

The structure of the competition is such that Contenders will be forced to co-operate one day but fight against one another the next- play this aspect to the hilt, particularly when a player character develops a strong like or dislike to another character. The Warlord runs his contest primarily for entertainment, and he will make decision about the contest based on what he will find interesting.

The length of the game is also an important factor to consider. If you plan to run *Warlord's Wager* in a single session, you need to have a small number of rounds and keep the evening scenes brief and to the point. If you plan to run the game over 3 or 4 sessions, you can either let the scenes last longer by having more happen in a given round or evening or increase the number of rounds in the contest. If you plan to run the game over even more sessions, then you can do both. If there's a possibility that you may run short on time, remember- it is better to end early than have to cut off the ending.



Favour and Displeasure

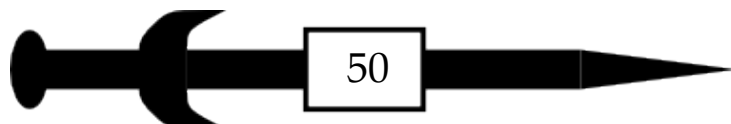
Favour is awarded in one of two ways. The overall 'winner' of a round receives a point of Favour- or at least the Contender that the Warlord felt performed the best. The Warlord will also show Favour towards a Contender who demonstrates particular cunning, determination or courage during a round of the contest. Favour should be awarded sparingly, seldom more than 2 points of it in a round. The award is only made at the end of the round, when the Warlord reviews the outcome. For the first round, the 'winner' is the leader of the side that won the contest.

A Contender receives Displeasure in one of two scenarios- the first is by pleading to remain in the contest after failing in a round. The second is by displaying 'dishonourable conduct'. The Warlord, being a practical man who appreciates the use of low cunning, will generally turn a blind eye to small acts of treachery and malice. However, he will frown upon open use of high magic or any act which reduces the overall entertainment value of his spectacle.

Other Characters

Because many Contenders controlled by the GM will drop out during the course of the game, you should not spend too much time describing most of them. In fact, it is probably better to leave most of them entirely unspecified until the moment when you need an opponent for a player character. You can give them skills on the fly, as and when the skill is needed, but as a general rule you should avoid making them as strong as the main Contenders- perhaps limiting them to 10 points to spend on skills and abilities. Because each of these shallow characters will probably only appear in a single round, those 10 points can go a long way if you spend all of them on relevant skills. Such characters exist to exercise the player characters, but not to challenge them greatly. You don't even need to introduce them during the second scene. If their motivations become relevant, they can be revealed later on in play.

By contrast, it can be useful to have a small number (two or three, say) of Contenders created in more detail. A player may want a specific kind of character for theirs to interact with, in order to further their secret agenda or demonstrate their characteristics. If none of other players have made a Contender that's suitable, having well-defined non-player characters around is an advantage- they can invent a history for them without risking cutting across what another player has intended. These fully-fleshed-out Contenders should be made with 15 points, as player characters, and you should make a point of



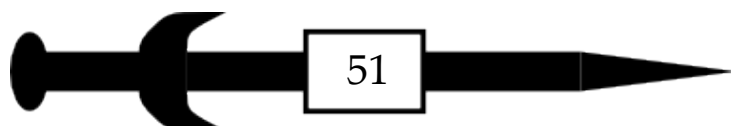
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having them introduce themselves to the Warlord and state their wish to him in the same way as player Contenders. You should attempt to keep them in the contest as you do for player Contenders. Remember though that they can still be present, and available for player characters to bargain with, after they've been eliminated. These non-player characters may even become part of a player character's plan of action during the Warlord's duel.

Three useful archetypes to use for these characters are:

- ◆ **The Good** - A generally honest and trustworthy Contender, competing for some goal which is admirable, if not noble. She could be a chosen champion sent by a desperate people or a lone individual pursuing some higher cause.
- ◆ **The Bad** - Rather than violent, this Contender is either deeply selfish or committed to a cause or group that could happily be described as evil. He won't betray someone simply out of contrariness, but he does not care if anyone is hurt by the way he tries to achieve his goals.
- ◆ **The Crazy** - This Contender is unpredictable, possibly prone to outbursts of violence. It is very difficult to get any answers from her about her past or intentions. She may be psychotic, or an otherwise ordinary person gripped by a kind of madness.

You also have to play the role of the Warlord's soldiers, should any of the players cross paths with them. A typical regular soldier's stats are given later, but feel free to make up any attributes for such characters you portray- bearing in mind that a skill of 5 is truly exceptional, and that the Contenders should be among the strongest warriors in the world.



Choosing Forfeits

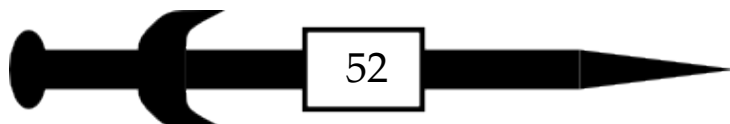
The Forfeits are not just a good way to stamp the Warlord's authority on proceedings early on; they are also a way of raising the stakes for the player characters. If the request of the Contender is small (at least as far as the Warlord is concerned) then the forfeit will be also. If the Contender makes a large demand, the Warlord will impose an equally significant penalty for losing. Mostly though, the Warlord will pick forfeits that reflect the nature of the request. Take the example requests earlier:

- ◆ A great item of treasure - To give up something of value you possess.
- ◆ For his forces to leave your land - For the people of your land to be pressed into slavery.
- ◆ To join his forces as a general - To join his forces as a common foot soldier.
- ◆ The choice of a woman from his harem - To become a eunuch caring for his harem.
- ◆ For permission to kill one of his captains who has wronged you - Death.
- ◆ For him to make you the baron of some part of his lands - For him to have you chained to a rock in an isolated place.
- ◆ To persuade him to wage war on your behalf - For him to wage war against your forces.

Picking Rounds

The most natural way to think about the rounds are as elimination contests in their own right; but this is not necessarily the best way to go about running them. Everything that happens should involve one or more of the players, to make sure it stays interesting. Not only should you not bother rolling dice for anything that happens between non-player characters, you should also avoid even describing it unless it's of immediate interest to at least one player.

For rounds that revolve around a series of one-on-one duels, set them up as a Swiss tournament (where all competitors play a fixed number of matches) rather than a knock-out tournament. For team-based rounds, make the player characters either team-mates or put them on opposing teams. In particular, if two characters worked well on a team in one round, have them as opponents in a later round. The first round, the tourney, has the additional complication of units of soldiers. It is certainly a simplifying matter if all of the players happen to be put on the same team.



Equally important is that a round should have a well-defined end point- impose an arbitrary time limit (in game or in real life) if necessary.

Elimination

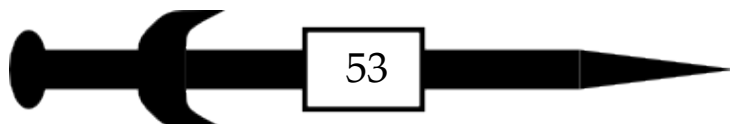
The exact number of eliminated Contenders in each round is not terribly important. The first round eliminates approximately half of the Contenders right off the bat, but the other rounds need not eliminate a fixed number, or indeed any. They can be more of an endurance challenge, where the survivors from previous rounds prove it wasn't a fluke that they got through. The final round, where the victor is selected, must have a single winner. That winner could be picked by Warlord (and thus GM) fiat rather than by having a round that selects a single winner by design.

Mixing Things Up

Sometimes the round you want to use, as stated, doesn't seem interesting enough. Or it becomes clear that one player character has exactly the right skills and will be very difficult for them to lose.

The Warlord is known to sometimes impose arbitrary restrictions on a round of the contest just to make things more interesting. Many of the rounds are such that it would be unsuitable for the Contenders to be mounted, so the benefits of personal mounts are lost for those. Other possibilities include:

- ◆ **No allies:** A solo challenge where squires and followers aren't allowed to assist.
- ◆ **No weapons:** A challenge where the Contenders must fight bare-handed.
- ◆ **Specified weapon:** A challenge where the Contenders must fight with a particular weapon, even if they are unskilled at using it.
- ◆ **Dulled weapons:** Weapons are kept sheathed or otherwise padded or blunted (including padded gloves for unarmed combat specialists), meaning that all damage received is halved before armour is considered. Legendary weapons, while blunted in this way, provide no benefit.
- ◆ **No armour:** No armour can be worn, making serious wounds a greater possibility.
- ◆ **Tied in pairs:** Contenders are shackled in twos, and compete together either both winning or both losing.



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If as the GM you notice that one player Contender is dominating proceedings, feel free to impose one of these restrictions as a means of levelling the playing field.

Between Rounds

In contrast to the tightly-structured nature of the contest rounds, the evenings are a lot more nebulous. You should encourage the players to have their characters interact with each other or NPCs, and have a specific short-term goal in mind for each action. So, rather than saying:

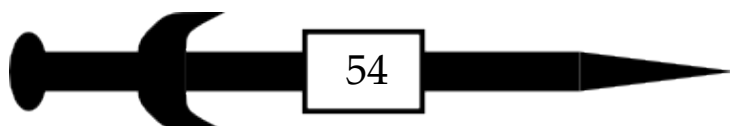
"I'll spend the evening feasting around the camp-fire."

Get them to say something like:

"I'll join the feast, but spend my time trying to get the measure of the other Contenders, looking for one I can make an ally later."

The intention to do something related to either the contest or their personal goal creates potential for conflicts or task checks in an otherwise humdrum scene. Fights can break out, characters can be caught trying to get into places they shouldn't be, and juicy hints can be dropped as to secret agendas. There are only a finite number of evenings in which to act, so remind the players that they are acting against the clock and have to be proactive if they want to get anything done. In particular, a player can't simply say 'I go and find out what the next round is'- they have to explore the camp and perhaps get little lucky with where they choose to go. If they opt to follow a Contender or one of the contest officials, then they stand a better chance of finding something interesting. A Contender may find something interesting, but not related to the next round- such as a clue as to the nature of one of the later rounds. For example, if a player discovers that the stables are being prepared to receive a large creature, that is a hint that it will be worthwhile sneaking off to them another day to see what the monster is and thus gain an Edge.

It's up to you to make sure that the player do neither too little nor too much in their evenings, in particular an attempt to explore the entire camp in an evening will only take in a small part of it. You should always strive to have something interesting, though, even if it's only an encounter with another Contender up to no good. You can introduce hitherto unseen Contenders in these scenes who then act as foils in the next round of the contest. This keeps the current cast of characters only as large as it needs to be, and makes every encounter meaningful in a short time frame.



The Warlord

For most of the game, the Warlord will be a distant figure, carried on a sedan chair inside a ring of elite guards. His utterances will be few and far between, generally restricted to deciding who won a particular round or who impressed him during it. Even when the Warlord is hearing the Contenders' requests, he is remote and aloof. The only time the Warlord is directly face to face with any character is during the final duel- the time when he is most vulnerable.

How you play the character of the Warlord is up to you. He is skilled in many areas of war and politics, and has probably changed a great deal over the years of his rule. How you choose to play the Warlord depends on how you want the players to think of him- make him sympathetic if you suspect one or more players of secretly wishing to kill him, make him arrogant and uncompassionate if the players mostly appear prepared to play his game on his terms.

The Warlord generally has a number of Elite guards surrounding him, and of course most of his army is camped with him. Trying to attack him at any except during the climax of the contest would be pure folly.

The Climax

The climax of the contest, where the winner of the competition duels with the Warlord, should be the highlight of the game. You should hammer home to the players that the best time to put their secret plan into motion, whatever it may be, is during the duel. The Warlord is distracted, and most of the guards and soldiers around the camp will be jostling for a good vantage point to watch the fight from. Your goal, as the GM, is to make sure that critical moment for each player character happens during this duel.

Naturally, this will involve a great deal of cutting from one location to another, unless the player characters have arranged to all work together on one specific goal. You should ask each of them in turn what they will do during the duel. They only have time to do one important task- it is too late for any more preparations. All they can do is plunge right into the last stage of their plan. Don't let any of them keep their secret goal secret any longer- you need to know exactly what they are up to so you can ensure that they get a chance to fulfil it.

Once you know what each player intends to do, you can work out what order to handle their scenes in. Some plans may interact with others, or hinge on an ally being successful, so put them in the correct order. If possible, make the duel itself the final part of the scene.



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As this is the last chance each Contender has to achieve their goal, it is an all-or-nothing situation. Contenders can be caught by guards and killed quite easily at this stage.

As for the duel itself, it does not have to be to the death. As with normal combat, though, declining to push your luck when you are losing is choosing to concede the duel. The Warlord himself will continue to fight until 4 of his Wound Boxes are filled, then surrender the next time he is losing the roll. If the victor decides to try to kill him instead of accepting his surrender, the fight will continue. Remember that even the uncontested blow the Warlord receives won't kill him if he can clear one of his wound boxes. If other Contenders wish to get involved in the duel, as part of a plot to kill the Warlord when he is vulnerable, then some of his Elite Guards will certainly try to stop them. General pandemonium will be the order of the day, which may be all the distraction other Contenders need.

Killing the Warlord

One likely goal will be killing the Warlord. The Contender duelling him may try to finish him off rather than accepting his surrender, or other Contenders may surge out of the crowd to overwhelm the Warlord before the guards can stop them. If the Warlord dies, the camp descends into uproar. Discipline falls apart and the guards and soldiers will have

The Warlord

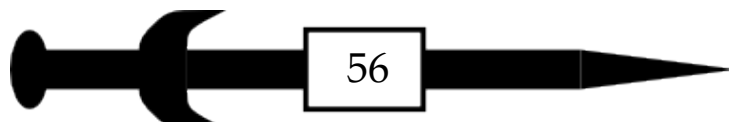
| | |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Sword | 5 (+1, single re-roll) |
| Nerve | 5 |
| Presence | 5 |
| Strategy | 5 |
| General Competence | 5 |
| Great Fortitude (2) | |
| Legendary Armour | |
| Legendary Weapon | |
| Naturally Tough | |
| Reputation (5) | |
| Weapon Specialist (sword) | |
| Armour: | 3 (+full re-roll) |
| Wound Boxes: | 5 |

Elite Guard

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Pole-arm | 5 |
| Nerve | 5 |
| General Competence | 2 |
| Armour: | 2 |
| Wound Boxes: | 3 |

Regular Soldier

| | |
|--------------------|---|
| Sword | 3 |
| Nerve | 2 |
| General Competence | 1 |
| Armour: | 2 |
| Wound Boxes: | 3 |



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little idea as to what to do. If other player characters have tried and failed to achieve their goals during this scene, the death of the Warlord may leave them with an opportunity to succeed unopposed, depending on what their goal was.

Sneaking Away

A Contender may decide that he wants to avoid paying the forfeit the Warlord demanded after losing the competition. You should point out to any player trying this that by far the best time to attempt an escape is during the final duel, when the Warlord is preoccupied and the guards are more interested in watching the fight than discharging their duties. This keeps the player in the game right up until the final scene.

Ending the Game

It's important that the game should end on a high note. For that reason, once the final outcome has been decided- the Warlord is dead or the Wager completed, bring that duel scene to a swift end. Run through the player Contender epilogues fairly quickly, before the sense of drama from the climax has a chance to dissipate.

