

# HOUSE of BARDS



DAVE CHALKER

A WORLD OF  
ADVENTURE FOR

**FATE**  
CORE SYSTEM

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### **House of Bards**

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This is a game where people make up stories about wonderful, terrible,  
impossible, glorious things. All the characters and events portrayed  
in this work are fictional. Any resemblance to real people, politicians,  
scheming elves, acclaimed actors, muckraking dragonkin, or streaming  
television programming is purely coincidental, but kinda hilarious.

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## HOUSE OF BARDS

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*Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.*

—Winston Churchill

The City of Costracinni, after seventeen generations of expansion, contraction, upheavals, plagues, egress and ingress, is now one of the world's largest cities, playing host to millions of people. Humans, elves, dwarves, halflings, dragonkin, and more all mix together in the metropolis that is Costracinni, across all its major districts.

It sits at the heart of the Empire, a bellicose, ever-expanding nation, driven by an unbroken line of 17 generations of Emperor who have ensured that war is forever.

While the Emperor oversees wherever the war might go next, Costracinni's Benevolent Ruling Council shapes the life of all the Empire's citizens. Its elected councilmembers guide the domestic life of the Empire, passing legislation ostensibly in the best interests of its citizens, but more often, what is in the best interests of special interest groups with varying amounts of influence in the city.

Within the city, the troubadours, entertainers, reporters, editors, and spies of the famed House of Bards follows its duty to expose the truth, no matter whose path they cross: and there are no shortage of paths to cross.

Lobbyists influence the council for power and wealth, including a battle of words and spells between the Mage's Guild that wants magic to be free and the religious Inquisition that want to bring all wizards beneath their heel.

You're an overworked halfling bard on assignment that discovers a powerful senator is an agent of a Tyrant Dragon. You're an elven evangelist trying to expose a plot by rogue wizards to magically influence the next election. You're the dwarven political fixer willing to stop at nothing to make sure that your boss is re-elected. And for each of you, your ambitions cannot be stopped.

There's an Empire to command. Let's get to work.



## POLITICAL DRAMA AND FATE

*House of Bards* is a political adaptation of *Fate*, blending a massive fantasy city with a system of government that bears some similarities to ours in order to tell stories of ambition, deception, and power in an adventure game framework.

*House of Bards* takes place in a world not unlike those that have played out across millions of kitchen tables. A world of magic, monsters, humans, elves, dwarves, wizards, clerics, and so on. The distinguishing feature is The Empire of Costracinni, the focus of the campaign. Many of the exact details of exactly what fantasy staples the game embraces are left up to the devices (and machinations) of the GM and the players.

Where *House of Bards* differs from those familiar games is in a focus on *drama* and *conflict* rather than *procedure* and *challenge*. The focus of the game takes the player characters and puts them up against other characters (including each other), instead of focusing primarily on working together against external forces. This means that this is not structured like many other adventures that may be able to follow a more linear track. *House of Bards* gives you, the GM, a setting to play with, within which the players make characters who will disrupt the established order. This book contains a series of vignettes that the GM can assemble to place the PCs in a variety of situations. Since the PCs are driven by their ambitions, the games are designed to be more proactive than reactive. The end result is a short, several session campaign built from the characters, all leading up to a climactic event that changes the status quo (or brutally enforces it.)

For more discussion on dramatic versus procedural in games, check out *Hamlet's Hit Points* published by Gameplaywright Press, and for a dramatic RPG built from that foundation, check out *Hillfolk* published by Pelgrane Press, both written Robin D. Laws. The scene structure and dramatic conflict in *House of Bards* owes a lot to *Fiasco*, published by Bully Pulpit Games and written by Jason Morningstar.

## MAKING CHARACTERS

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*House of Bards* takes place in the City of Costracinni, with the players taking the role of up and coming movers and shakers among the city's elite. Player characters can come from any angle of the city, so it's OK if some characters are involved with the actual House of Bards, some are involved with the council (including members of the council, and their staff), and others are magical activists. The strength of their **ambitions** has tied them together through past events, so even two characters who seem like they have nothing in common may have crossed paths before, or collided head-on.

For more information on the different power players in Costracinni and how a player character could fit in with them, see the setting starting on page 20.

### High Concepts

The kingdom of Costracinni exists within a familiar-seeming fantasy world, but the characters themselves are overlaid with their political aspirations.

An easy way to start your High Concept for a *House of Bards* character is to pick some descriptors you'd use in other fantasy settings. On the next page are a few examples to roll up a starting point using 4dF.

You can go in reverse as well, starting with the role you want in the game and add a fantasy descriptor. *Crusading Journalist* becomes *Dragon-blooded Crusading Journalist* or *Community Organizer* becomes *Community Organizer with the Mark of the Chosen*.

### Trouble

The trouble aspect is a source of compels and trouble. In *House of Bards*, this encompasses the skeletons in the closet and personality issues of the characters, just waiting to be exposed to the world.

Some examples of personality issues are:

*Unfailingly Ruthless*  
*Prone to Gaffes*

*Unwilling to Let Go of Any Insult*  
*Decidedly Uncharismatic*

Secrets are also a good source of trouble, and are discussed in greater depth on page 35:

*Illegal Magic User*  
*Lost Bastard Child of the Emperor*

*Spy for a Rival Empire*





### BACKGROUND

-4	Extrplanar
-3	Dragonkin
-2	Gnome
-1	Dwarf
+0	Human
+1	Elf
+2	Halfling
+3	Orc
+4	Unique

### CLASS

-4	Rare/Unique Class
-3	Barbarian or Monk
-2	Rogue
-1	Fighter
+0	Non-Adventuring Profession
+1	Bard
+2	Wizard or Sorcerer
+3	Cleric or Paladin
+4	Druid or Ranger

### SETTING

-4	Imperial (Staff, Nobility, Foreign Dignitary)
-3	Political Football (War Hero, Witness, Joe the Barbarian)
-2	Other Political (Activist, Agitator, Bureaucrat, Lobbyist)
-1	Council-related (Politician, Aide, Operative, Candidate)
+0	House of Bards (Journalist, Spy, Entertainer, Editor)
+1	Mage's Guild (Licensed, Unlicensed, Supporter, Revolutionary)
+2	Inquisition (Inquisitor, High-Ranking Clergy, Local Clergy)
+3	Other Guild (Merchant, Manufacturer, Corrupt Boss)
+4	Outcast (Tyrant Dragon-Related, Unconquered Nationalist, Conquered Separatist)



## Ambitions

In *House of Bards*, the characters aren't defined by paths they've crossed: they're defined by ambition and who got in your way.

In the third stage of character creation, instead of writing your first adventure, write your character's core ambition that drives what she does. Try and pick something concrete yet grandiose, particularly starting with an "I will..." statement.

Examples:

- *I Will Become the Head of the Council*
- *I Will Arrest the Emperor for War Crimes*
- *I Will Expose the Truth of Our Endless Wars*
- *I Will Be the Voice of the Revolution*
- *I Will End the Corruption Within the Inquisition*

While your Ambition will probably get you into trouble, make sure it doesn't overlap too much with your Trouble aspect. Your Trouble aspect is where you are, and your Ambition concerns where you want to be.

## Crossing Paths

In the course of following your ambition, you've crossed paths with the other characters. Like the standard Fate Core character creation, you'll pass your character to the player on your left. Describe how that character's ambitions crossed paths with yours. Sometimes, this will be for a (temporary) alliance. Other times, your ambitions have put you in direct conflict.

Think about how your two characters could have gotten involved. It could be on a civic matter, or before the two of you obtained the positions you're in today. Then think about how your character would have reacted to the situation. From that, you'll write your Aspect about your involvement. These stages are a great chance to show just how far you'll go to achieve your ambition - or if you'll shy away from it if the cost is too high.



## Changes to Skills


Most notably, the Contacts and Resources skills are a critical part of the game, and as such, now have attack and defend actions. Most characters will want some ability in at least one, and the true power players will have both.


Magic also gets its own skill in *House of Bards*, with a number of options for customizing the feel of magic in your game, especially if you plan on dropping Costracinni into another campaign.

Finally, there are a few really quick notes on a few other skills:


- **Crafts:** The Guilds practice various forms of crafts, and magic is “industrialized” enough that you can introduce functional magic items as you need to. For example, *The Examiner* makes use of a magical image-capturing device.
- **Drive:** Horses, other pack animals, and both pulling carts. Many of the roads in Costracinni are pretty wide. High speed cart chases have been known to happen.
- **Shoot:** Bows and crossbows are a popular weapon throughout the Empire, though this same skill applies to magical and chemical advancements that blow things up.

## Contacts

 **Attack:** You know how to harm someone by knowing the right people. You can use Contacts as an attack in order to disseminate rumors, gossip, and innuendo into the right circles in order to attack someone’s credibility. Such an attack usually takes the form of Social Stress, but not always. Spreading vicious personal attacks about an individual might cause Mental Stress, and attempting to incite riots and even encourage assassination attempts might lead to Physical Stress.


 **Defend:** In addition to defending against advantages, contacts can be used to defend against a direct social attack. It can also be used in situations where a well-placed contact might be able to intervene at an appropriate time. For example, if you’re attacked via your Resources by attempting to seize your holdings, a contact roll might tell you whether you have enough advance knowledge from a well-placed government official to try and head it off before the damage is done.

## Resources

 **Attack:** Money is a means to power, but not power itself. Of course, that distinction may seem a little fine to those on the receiving end of it. Applying resources directly to a problem is a means of exercising that power.

What that means is that a Resources attack roll can be used in situations where money could be used to influence negative change on a person or group. For instance, a Resources attack roll might be used to launch a negative advertising campaign against an individual, attempting to undermine that individual's standing (Social Stress). Resources also weaponize bribes: a well-placed and substantial enough "tithe" to the Inquisition might bring an illegal magic investigation down on a group, scrutinizing every decision made.

Hiring someone to discretely poison, magically curse, or otherwise "remove" another individual can lead to Physical Stress. In short, Resources are an incredibly versatile tool for inflicting damage on others through direct and indirect means. This is on purpose.

 **Defend:** Resources are likewise a very flexible means of defending oneself. Being harassed by a citizens' group? Buy the building they use. Smear campaign being launched from someone else's Contacts roll? Bribe the bards to cover something else. Long distance magical assault on your health? You've got the best counter curse money can buy.

In some cases, use of Resources as a defense might first require the use of a fate point in order to establish a fact not already covered or declare an Aspect of the situation. If you're attacked in a crowd, you might not have previously established that you hired extra security in the crowd, but a fate point plus Resources defend roll might allow it.



## New Skills

House of Bards also adds a Magic skill to the skill list.

### Magic

The default way magic is handled is purposely vague, or to put it another way, can easily fit into what everybody “knows” about how magic fits into a fantasy world. Magic requires this magic skill, an aspect that justifies possessing it, and spending a fate point for effect (in lieu of a bonus) whenever used. More than anyone else in Costracinni, mages are constantly pulled by obligations, restrictions, and secrets. In game terms, since mages need fate points to cast spells, they get them by being compelled *all the time*.

The actual effects should be flavored as wizards casting spells with ridiculously long names, priests praying for divine healing and wrath, and sorcerers channeling raw magic. Also discuss how obvious casting a spell tends to be, so if the magic is supposed to be subtle, other precautions must be made. A common cost for succeed at a major or minor cost results are making the spells bright and loud.

Just remember that in Costracinni, the Inquisition regulates use of magic, and so violating their rules (especially on dangerous and illegal spells) can lead to serious civil penalties as well as backfires from the magic itself.

While Magic is purposely vague and flexible, not all actions that involve Magic have to be the Magic skill. Magic is much more used for raw applications of magical power. Using Magic to help charm someone is more likely to be a Rapport/Deceive roll, where your magical High Concept is able to help. If there's ever a question of overlap between Magic and another applicable skill, use the lower of the two.



**Overcome:** You weave a spell that helps bypass an obstacle in your path, whether it be a divine spell of speed to quickly escape or a fire blast to take out a barrier in your way.



**Create An Advantage:** You conjure up a magical effect that assists you in the situation, from an Elemental Servant who can help you scan through tomes twice as quickly, to a magical booming voice that allows you to cut through the din.



**Attack:** Utilizing magic to attack is a common enough occurrence, as long as you're not caught damaging property (or somebody important) in the process. Dealing physical stress is common for classics such as energy missiles, though magical psychic attacks for mental stress are not uncommon as well and leave less physical evidence to find later. Social stress is rarely a direct result from attack magic.



**Defend:** A quick energy shield to defend from harm is a frequent use of magic, or utilizing charms and wards against other offensive spells.

## OTHER MAGICS

By default, *House of Bards* uses a loose magic system; encompassed by one, single flexible skill. It's powerful, but also dangerous and controlled in setting. It's designed to fit in with other fantasy kingdoms you might be familiar with already.

However, *Chapter 8: Magic in Fate System Toolkit* contains a number of variant magic systems that can drop into a *House of Bards* game just fine. As the introduction says, "Magic says incredibly important things about your game" and what you choose will flavor your game appropriately.

Some quick examples:

**Stormcallers:** Stormcallers aren't known for their subtlety, so the Inquisition doesn't worry much about mind control but does have to respond quickly to those who can't control their earthquakes, fires, or floods destroying large portions of the city. The laws heavily restrict what effects are legally manifested, and most high ranking officials will have their own defensive Stormcaller to defend against big threats. The Inquisition itself might largely be non-magical, and have no role in healing and restoration, and instead operates much more like a military.

**Storm Summoners:** The rich and powerful command elemental servants, which take care of upkeep, transportation, home heating, and all manner of mundane tasks. Wizards are sanctioned by the Inquisition in what strength of elementals they are allowed to summon based on their power: most are only certified to summon drudges, while those who are sanctioned to summon full blown attendants can fetch a mighty sum. Creating new elementals of anything above wisp requires a lot of paperwork. If you're not one of the rich and powerful, you might have had your livelihood replaced by an elemental who can do your job all day without resting or being paid. This is a source of some tension.

**The Six Viziers:** Their power might be from the constellations and come from the same source of divine providence as the Emperor, or they might have been originally taught by the six ancient Tyrant Dragons. Regardless, those marked with the power are easy enough to spot, and not easily understood. An entire wing of the bardic library is dedicated to studying all the possible manifestations of this power. And while the Inquisition's official agents are those who follow The Eye, all of the signs are present, and watched to various degrees.

**Voidcallers:** These wizards are never sanctioned by anybody, and zealously hunted by the Inquisition. If you want a more traditional "holy army hunts down wizards summoning bad things" then this is your mode.

## THE CITY OF COSTRACINNI

The Empire is massive and unwieldy. The imperial army is the largest in the world, and shows no sign of slowing down its march of expansion. While there are distant enemies that pose a challenge and keep the army at bay, the main enemy of the Empire's war is that of logistics. Because it is so spread out, supply lines and deployments make engagements last many months. Soldiers tours of duty are rearranged and extended. Each new conquest leads to new conscripts, as well as another protectorate that the Empire must cover.

The war has had pauses, ceasefires, even treaties. Yet the war has never completely ceased, not since the founding of the city of Costracinni.

The Empire is ruled by Emperor Principi Costracinni, 17th of her name, a hereditary position that dates back to the founding of the capital of Costracinni at the fork of the Oricellari river. (For more on the current Emperor, see page 29.) The original Emperor founded the city by driving out the Tyrant Dragons, claiming divine heritage as granting his abilities.

The first Emperor declared three major edicts:

- Until the people of the world were free from the Tyrant Dragons, the battle must continue, and the Pax Costracinni must be extended wherever the dragons strike.
- The Pax Constracinni shall be the main responsibility of the Emperor, the internal workings shall be decided by a Benevolent Council that come from the People.
- The Empire cannot stand without the Divine, but it cannot be ruled by the Divine.

These edicts would later be expanded upon by later Emperors, but formed the foundation of the city of Costracinni. With the city the seat of power for the Emperor, it would continue to grow in importance along with the Empire as a whole, until it became the self-declared Most Important City in the World.













## The Districts of Costracinni

The city is divided into anywhere between 40-50 districts, depending on who is in power in the council at any given time and just how gerrymandered the districts are. There are always four external districts as well, representing the northern, western, eastern, and southern holdings of the Empire as a whole.

The exact districts of Costracinni are left undefined at the start of the campaign. Instead of generating 50 districts whole cloth, you'll generate a small number of them as needed for your game such that they involve your player characters. Start by rolling two districts per player in the game, and lay those out as the foundation. Player characters—and NPCs that are described through character creation—can attach themselves to these districts as makes sense. If the character is involved with the council, one of them will be the home district for that council seat. If the character is a Bard, that district involves their beat, or is somehow otherwise important. Not every character has to be attached to a district, but the more there is, the more the characters will feel at home.

If none of the districts on the table feel right for a particular purpose, keep making new ones until you find one that fits. It's better to have more districts defined than too few. However, you shouldn't generate all 40-50: the campaign will mainly focus on the major districts and the ones "in play" in an upcoming election.

To start making a new district, get an index card, and roll its primary issues using 3 Fate Dice. Roll twice, each time moving to the right for each  and down for each . If you get the same one more than once, the issue is particularly vital and contentious in the district:

				
	Taxes	War/ The Military	Foreign Policy	Guild/ Trade-Specific
	Magic/ Religion	Jobs	Domestic Issues	
	Immigration/ Cultural	Crime & Punishment		
	Special Interest			

For each issue, write an aspect. (If, for example, you rolled Taxes twice, you'd write two different tax-related aspects.) If nothing jumps to mind, either roll 1dF or choose from the examples on the following page.

After you've figured out the two issues, write a third aspect that acts as what "everybody knows" about that district, regardless of if you feel it's the truth or not. (This aspect probably looks a little like a high concept aspect, but for a place instead of a person.)



#### CRIME & PUNISHMENT:

- We Need Less Inquisition and More Policing*
- Scrying Magic Should Be Used To Prevent Crime*
- Death Penalty For All Illegal Mages*

#### DOMESTIC ISSUES

- The Price Of Healing Is Too Damn High*
- Wagon Traffic Is Out Of Control*
- Won't Somebody Think Of The Children?*

#### FOREIGN POLICY

- Our Taxes Should Stay Here*
- As Long As Dragonkin Breathe, None of Us Are Safe*
- The Outer Powers Deserve Equal Representation*

#### GUILD/TRADE-SPECIFIC

- Import Restrictions Are Starving Us*
- We Must Protect The Sanctity Of Elven Craftsmanship*
- Deregulate Our Local Industries*

#### IMMIGRATION/CULTURAL

- This Is The Only Place Us Halflings Feel Safe*
- Those Dragonkin Must Be Kept Out Of Our Neighborhood*
- Too Many Refugees From The Outer Provinces Steal Our Jobs*

#### JOBS

- If The War Stops, Our Economy Collapses*
- There Aren't Enough Jobs To Cover Population Growth*
- Whatever Happened to Locally-Made Steel?*

#### MAGIC/RELIGION

- Sick of Magical Regulatory Red Tape*
- The Inquisition Are Bullies*
- Wizards Constantly Endanger Us All*

#### SPECIAL INTEREST

- Dwarves For The Ethical Treatment of Horses*
- Unchecked Magic Is Causing Global Warming*
- You Can Have My Wand When You Pry It From My Cold, Dead Hands*

#### TAXES

- Middle-Income Earners Cannot Survive On Their Current Salaries*
- The Wealthy Are Taking Their Gold Elsewhere*
- It's Too Expensive To Own A Home*

#### WAR/MILITARY

- Bring Our Fighting Forces Home*
- Veterans Should Be Healed At No Charge*
- Red & Yellow Ribbon Campaign to Support the Troops... Or Else!*



Two of these three aspects—the one “everyone knows” and either of the remaining aspects—are public, and are freely taggable by anyone. If the character is very familiar with that district (attached through character creation) they know all three of them, unless the GM wants to keep one part hidden for a particularly juicy secret. The others are discoverable through investigating, campaigning, etc. later. See page 34 on different ways to handle secret aspects.

You can also keep a few of these aspects blank, to fill in during play: just be sure to note what kind of aspect it is. When someone does ask what district is known for having the best stonemasons, you can grab the mostly filled in one that makes sense, and fill in that blank, after the character has done the appropriate discovery legwork.

Once you have a stack of districts on note cards, you’ll need to do two more things with them. First, arrange them in a way that shows some vague sense of geography. You should also leave some blank cards in between to indicate districts that are unimportant (at the moment), and for some landmarks like the council building (see page 15) near the center and the Emperor’s palace somewhere outside. You can also add major natural landmarks like a central river, or an ocean with port.

Second, mark which districts you’ve created are definitely “in play” for the current election: their council seats are involved in the upcoming election. Additionally mark any district that the characters are involved with.

From these steps, you’ve got a rough map. No matter what, always try and work to incorporate the characters into the setting, so keep on the lookout for interesting ways to change aspects that fit character concepts. At this point, it’s probably a good idea to take a photo of the spread; so you can reference it later.

## The Ruling Council

Formally known as The People's Benevolent Ruling Council, The Council is charged with making domestic decisions for Costracinni, while The Emperor handles foreign relations. At least, that's the theory, but when you have an ever-expanding empire engaged in never-ending conquest, the line between what is foreign and what is domestic can get a bit blurry. In the words of one notorious bard, "It's the job of the Council to clean up the Emperor's messes."

The Council is chosen by popular vote, conducted across the Empire. Candidates must first pass a primary in the district that they are representing, and must have official residence in that location. The primaries put forth a candidate from that district, but since there are fewer councilmembers than districts, not every district will get full representation, and a single councilmember may have multiple districts he represents depending on the election results. Those running for office need both the support of their home district, as well as appeal and recognition outside their district.

Elections are held every two years, with approximately one third of council seats up for vote each time. The base term is four years, and there are no explicit term limits on being a councilmember. In practice, if a councilmember outstays their welcome, they'll either find pressure among their coalition to retire, or the Council may decide to redistrict. The total number of councilmembers is supposed to be 50, but because of redistricting and other factors, the exact number of council spots fluctuates in the 40-50 range.

In addition to the councilors of the city of Costracinni itself, all the other territories of the empire are divided into the North, West, East, and South districts. Theoretically, the conquered nations largely govern themselves, and the rulers of each report to their representative councilor to express any larger concerns to the Ruling Council as a whole. In practice, it tends to work the other way around: new empire-wide taxes and other new laws come back from the Council and are delivered to the various governments by the councilmember for that region, without a lot of back and forth. Bards specializing in history often point to this as being a frequent reason for revolutions and other secessionist movements elsewhere. However, all attempts to change the system by which other territories are governed, giving them more representation, have always been shot down in Council, though it is a frequent move for political attention and good will during election season.

Among the Council, in addition to a truly staggering number of committees and subcommittees, there are a few positions elected by the council itself: a Speaker who enforces Council rules and sets agenda, a Vice Speaker who serves as support for the Speaker, and a Prime Minister who serves as primary liaison between the Council and the Emperor, as she does not attend sessions herself.

Each councilmember receives a generous stipend (not officially a salary), decided by the Council itself. They also receive public funds in order to provide them with comprehensive staff in execution of their duties. Councilmembers are publicly discouraged from acting in the interests of their own personal and financial gain, though given that the council itself enforces those rules internally, it is a rare offender that actually is punished for it, when the council needs to make an example.

## The Hall of the Council

One of the oldest buildings in Costacinni, built overtop where the Tyrant Dragons were routed by the Emperor, in the heart of the old city itself. As the city has expanded and become more massive, the buffer zone around the Hall has pushed out, taking over the oldest buildings for staff and other administrative government offices.

The actual hall where the Council does its business is massive, allowing each councilmember their own desk and assistant, around a central elevated podium where the Speaker and Vice Speaker conduct their business, and a main floor where those speaking before the Council are heard. A few ancient enchantments are weaved into the floorboards, giving an extra oomph to anyone who speaks while officially holding the floor, which can be taken away by the Speaker when needed. The Office of the Speaker denies that any such enchantments really exist, and so what other effects may be there from the hundreds of years it has existed is unknown.

An Archbishop from the Inquisition oversees matters in the Hall, ostensibly to ensure that no outside magical influence is affecting Councilmembers (a job they take very seriously.) The Bishop in charge also ends up being almost a de facto member of the Council (without being elected) by being allowed to weigh in on magical and church issues.

The “Press Box” is another elevated section that corrals all of the bards who cover Council issues and report it to the public. Tight security (and distance) keeps them from interacting with the Council directly while inside the chamber, though this has still lead to occasional protests from those who have managed to get their hands on credentials.

## District Councils

Each district has its own small, local councils, along with a number of other elected positions. This is the “accepted” path to getting elected into the People’s Council, though there are plenty with fame, fortune, and/or family that opt to skip having actual experience in government service before deciding to run for one of the most powerful positions available.

The councilmember for the district is supposed to stay in regular contact with the District Councils in order to keep a pulse on the constituents of the area. Actually following through with this is up to the complete discretion of the councilmember. Some choose to live in outer estates, and let the District Councils run the district as they see fit, while others stay intimately involved, for better or worse.

The local District Councils are also elected on the same day as the People’s Council, though only those registered in that district vote for them. There is no primary process with the District Councils, meaning that it is very common for the local elections to have a considerably longer and more complex part of the ballots than the national portions.

## Example Council Characters

Stats for these example characters are found on the following pages.

### WARREN STONEREAYER

Warren Stonereaver is a staunch Inquisition ally, whose questionable theories on magic and how it works have made him popular among his base but a dangerous opponent to anyone who knows what they're talking about. When anything can remotely be blamed on magic, Stonereaver is the first to denounce it and call for tougher reforms. It is unclear to his fellow politicians how much is an act and how much is just a surefire means of raising political capital.

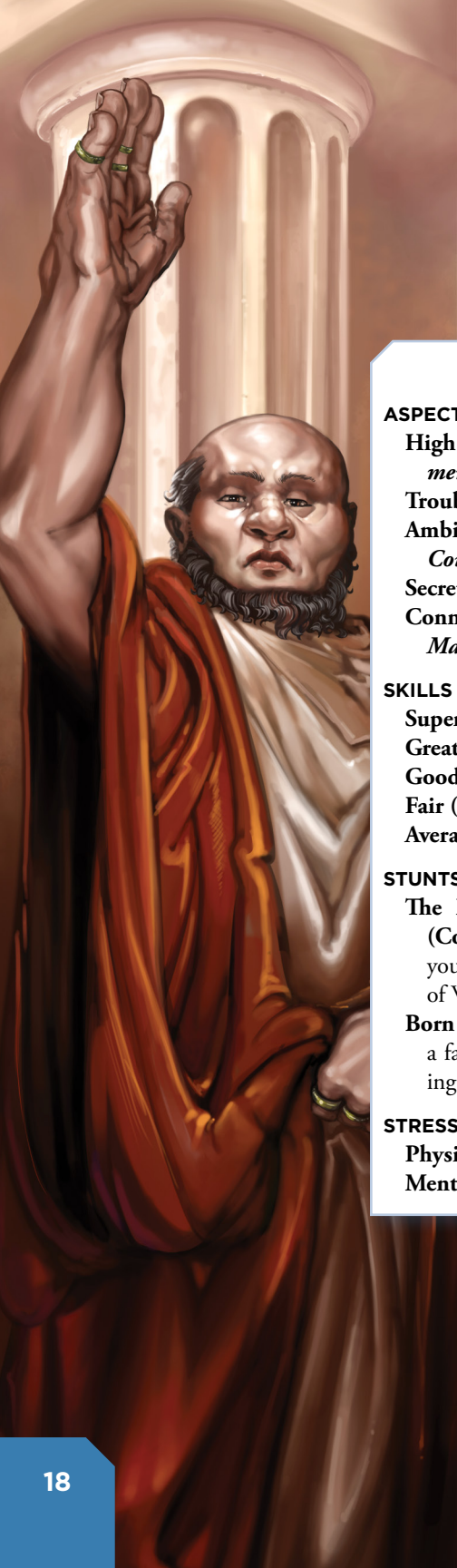
### MINNA

While Minna may seem like an unassuming woman, sitting and observing council sessions, she's actually one of the most well-connected political operatives around. She chooses who she works with carefully, and will always claim to be loyal to whomever is paying her retainer, but she has no qualms about moving to another candidate if the winds blow that way. Crossing means that all of her friends find out about it, and just how many friends she has in important places. The best way to try and retain her services is by getting an invitation to one of her extravagant parties—before it gets out of control—and catching her eye with a stunning outfit.

### NEW ASPECTS FOR NPCs

While the player characters are defined by how their ambitions have crossed paths with them, NPCs in *House of Bards* work slightly differently. Each of the NPCs listed have a hidden Secret aspect, which if discovered, might provide some solid leverage against them. They also have a Connection aspect, with a blank. If circumstances bring them into a story, the GM can fill in that blank with one of the PCs to immediately create history. If the NPC is being used as a social advantage (see page 31), then the PC that created that advantage will fill it in.

This also means that all the NPCs here are full-fledged main NPCs. Nameless NPCs and supporting characters can still come up (and any of the ones here can be “downgraded” in a pinch) but the ones here are designed to be complex characters, with their own agendas.



## Warren Stonereaver

### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Conservative Dwarven Councilmember*

**Trouble:** *Dangerously Ignorant of Magic*

**Ambitions:** *I Will Become the Most Influential Councilmember*

**Secret:** *Only Religious When Convenient*

**Connection:** *Frequent Opponent to \_\_\_\_ Over Magical Issues*

### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Contacts

**Great (+4):** Resources, Provoke

**Good (+3):** Rapport, Deceive, Crafts

**Fair (+2):** Empathy, Athletics, Investigate, Will

**Average (+1):** Notice, Lore, Fight, Shoot, Drive

### STUNTS

**The Distinguished Gentleman From District 7 (Contacts):** When defending against attacks to your social standing, you may use Contacts instead of Will.

**Born of Stone (Will):** One per session, at the cost of a fate point, you can reduce a consequence resulting from Magic that targets you specifically.

### STRESS

Physical

Social

Mental

## Minna

### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Halfling Political Fixer*

**Trouble:** *Sucker For A Pretty Face*

**Ambition:** *I Will Be The Most Connected Operative  
In The Council*

**Secret:** *What Happens At My Parties Should Stay  
In My Parties*

**Connection:** \_\_\_\_\_ *And I Grew Up Together*

### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Contacts

**Great (+4):** Notice, Rapport

**Good (+3):** Deceive, Provoke, Investigate

**Fair (+2):** Empathy, Magic, Resources, Will

**Average (+1):** Athletics, Physique, Stealth

### STUNTS

**Fly on The Wall (Contacts):** Once per session, at the cost of a fate point, you can automatically discover the results of a secret meeting, as long as there is any plausible way the information could have leaked out.

**A Shame If Your Wife Found Out (Investigate):** When using Investigate to Create an Advantage based on a secret, add a +2 bonus to the roll.

**Second Chance (Physique):** Once during a conflict, when using Athletics to defend against a physical attack and spending a Fate Point, reroll the dice and add a +2 bonus.

### STRESS

Mental

Social

Physical





## THE KEY PLAYERS OF COSTRACINNI

While the Emperor and the Council are the official government of Costracinni, they are both dependent upon the people. Through the years, several influential groups have developed outside of the government (and sanctioned by it to various degrees) that represent the life of the citizens of Costracinni.

### The House of Bards

Formally known as “The Imperial Academy of Bards, Criers, Minstrels, and Scribes,” the Academy and its various branch houses are known to most as the House of Bards.

Many years ago, during a particularly difficult wartime campaign, civil unrest hit an all-time high. People in the imperial capital weren't getting reports back of what was going on with their loved ones fighting the war, and a particularly zealous city watch was oppressing the population, leading to widespread protests that threatened to shut the city down.

The Emperor issued a rare proclamation, granting traveling entertainers unprecedented rights in witnessing, retelling stories, reporting, and most surprising of all, ability to speak out about the government without fear of reprisal. At first, this was intended as just a way to keep the masses happy by giving approval to the bawdy singers that frequented taverns. In order to enjoy these protections, the bards needed to attend the Imperial Academy, in the hopes of providing some measure of legitimacy (and control) over the graduates.

What the proclamation really did was kick off a journalistic revolution. As the Imperial Academy took in more recruits, eager to contribute, the ancient codes of those who carry on oral traditions was instilled. Commitment to the truth, a good story, and integrity were instilled upon the new students. The Imperial Academy was not only training musicians, but scribes, frontline war reporters, satirists, and more.

The House of Bards is the fourth estate of Costracinni, with no official influence beyond what it can find and with the power of protection. It sits in balance to many of the other powers, not because it can directly affect policy like many of the other parts of Costracinni, but it can provide pressure and public exposure. As long as the operation has the Emperor's protection behind it, the Bards are an important part of life in Costracinni.





## The Examiner

The largest (but not only) newspaper of Costracinni has its own devoted wing of the Imperial Academy, where dozens of editors coordinate hundreds of staff members to investigate, report, and publish the daily newspaper. *The Examiner* also has smaller bureau locations in each major district and in many countries abroad. Magical communication assists with filing stories remotely, and guild wizards work in concert with staff in order to mass produce the paper. The process by which the wizards are able to create the printings is a closely-held guild secret, but it involves a ritual that can be seen whereby words are “pressed” into paper, and those who work for *The Examiner* are often colloquially referred to as “the press.”

*The Examiner* is a place that pushes the boundaries of its freedoms via the Imperial Decree. It is the more likely than other bardic organizations to become an enemy of those in power, and be a source of controversy among the people, than any individual Bard or Minstrel operating on their own. It is not immune to blowback, from organized boycotts to councilmembers making the Imperial Academy’s operations difficult.

And while *The Examiner* enjoys a number of legal protections, it still must worry about market forces. *The Examiner* receives a grant from the Imperial Academy as a cut of tuition, takes advertisers in the paper, and sells the paper. Despite all that, it is an operation with quite a lot of overhead, and there’s always a chance some new magical innovation will make the newspaper obsolete. Corrupt reporters taking payola for good coverage and editors getting a kickback for killing critical stories before press time are always possible.

## The Archives

The House of Bards maintains the largest collection of historical documents and records in the known world. As part of its agreement with those that it trains, any documents that a trained bard produces (be it notes, books, music, etc.) are to be placed in the Archives. It is an incredible storehouse of information, dating back to the days of when oral tradition first started to give way to written tradition.

Like a lot of the other parts of the House of Bards, the main issue it suffers from is underfunding. As a result, more documents come in than can be quickly indexed, and lack of organization has been an issue for the better part of a century. The dedicated librarians of the archives do their best, and have their own oral tradition about what documents are where, but that knowledge only goes so far.

In short, there is a lot of power in the Archives. If you can find it.

## Example House of Bards High Concepts

- *Zealous Truthseeking Elven Bard*
- *Muckraking Dragonkin Editor of the Examiner*
- *Double Agent Dwarven Arch-Spy*
- *Traveling Entertainer to the Noble Court*

## Example House of Bards Characters

### RENA NOSK

Rena Nosk is one of the most feared editors at *The Examiner*, and not just because she can breathe fire. Rena has published more stories that have landed the newspaper in trouble by the council than any other editor, a point of pride for her. Her token punishment has been shuffling her off important beats and onto the night desk, but that has just driven her to get more work done while everyone else is sleeping.



### Rena Nosk

#### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Dragonkin Night Editor*

**Trouble:** *Won't Back Down From A Story*

**Ambition:** *I Will Ruin Those In Power*

**Secret:** *Related To A Tyrant Dragon*

**Connection:** *Published A Hit Piece Against \_\_\_\_\_*

#### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Investigate

**Great (+4):** Notice, Rapport

**Good (+3):** Contacts, Lore, Will

**Fair (+2):** Deceive, Empathy, Fight, Provoke

**Average (+1):** Crafts, Drive, Physique, Resources, Shoot

#### STUNTS

**Dragon Breath (Physique):** You can use Physique to attack by breathing fire.

**Threat? Menace? (Investigate):** You can use Investigate to attack someone's social standing as long as you can publish a story about it.

#### STRESS

**Mental**

**Social**

**Physical**

There's no explicit writing or other art skill in *Fate Core*. Instead, think about the end result of the writing or art to be created. Is it about a crime? Use Investigate. Is it an editorial trying to sway readers for a cause? Use Rapport. Is it a work of malicious slander? Try Provoke. In many cases, no roll is necessary just for a bard to do their job, unless it's specifically for some specific purpose, in which case that purpose should point to the skill used.

## IZANDI

Izandi became a journalist for the money, which was her first mistake. When the editors of *The Examiner* refused to cover her lavish expense reports, she decided to make her own fortune on the side by striking deals with the politicians she was assigned to cover in exchange for favorable press. After getting in over her head with dangerous deals, she was reassigned to the general interest beat. There, she uses her innate elven charm to get the story, make some extra coins, and not run across any more powerful enemies.



### Izandi

#### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Elven General Interest Bard*  
**Trouble:** *No Interest In Serious Journalism*  
**Ambition:** *I Will Have The Most Read Stories*  
**Secret:** *Paid Off By Various Politicians*  
**Connection:** *I Owe A Debt To \_\_\_\_\_*

#### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Rapport  
**Great (+4):** Investigate, Contacts  
**Good (+3):** Deceive, Empathy, Provoke  
**Fair (+2):** Burglary, Drive, Stealth, Notice  
**Average (+1):** Athletics, Fight, Physique, Resources, Will

#### STUNTS

**Glamour-ous (Rapport):** Twice per session, you may upgrade a boost you receive with Rapport into a full situation aspect with a free invocation.

#### STRESS

Mental

Physical

Social

+1 mild consequence

## The Church & The Inquisition

The faiths present in Costracinni are diverse, with various pantheons and individual deities forming a complex landscape of belief and worship. History tells of wars waged in ancient times between these individual churches, from factional infighting to traditional infidel purges of anyone judged by the Paladins as evil.

Then came the Emperor, who claimed a lineage to the divine, without referencing any specific power. As the Empire rose to prominence, various interpretations came out tying the Emperor to one church or another, though none dared to start a holy war over these differences, for fear of retribution by the Emperor.

In those early days, a group of wizards from a nearby kingdom threatened to tear the fledgling Empire apart with unchecked magic. The Emperor went to war against the kingdom, bringing in help of the “more pure” magic of the various faiths to defeat them.

While that threat was dealt with, the Emperor realized that there would be no way to keep magic in check indefinitely: the world was just too complex for that. The only ones who could be trusted with such power, he said, were those who received their gifts from the gods themselves, and the only ones with the pure authority to enforce rules about magic.

From this coalition of faiths charged with monitoring spellcasters came The Inquisition. At first, each church recognized by the Empire handled its own enforcement, but in time, the Inquisition has coalesced itself into a central enforcement body, which has integrated itself into Costracinni’s bureaucracy. The modern Inquisition wields an enormous amount of power, both civically and literally.

The individual churches still exist, and play a role in local life and in the various neighborhoods, providing life teachings and divine spellcasting, but each faith knows that the way to real influence is to get its representatives into the Inquisition.

## Licensed Wizardry

All spellcasters, regardless of the source of their abilities, must swear oaths and become licensed to practice magic. This is part of the graduation process of the Wizards Guild Trade School, but anyone coming to these talents from elsewhere (including divine casters, natural spellcasters, discovering an artifact in distant lands, practicing magic when coming from another conquered territory, etc.) must report to an Inquisition office for testing and screening. This license must be maintained every 3 years in order to continue to practice spellcasting. Failure to do so can lead to harsh punishments.

Of course, some choose to hide what they can do from the law, or claim more obscure exemptions. Unregistered spellcasters offering discrete work can fetch a tidy sum in the Empire for their services.

## Regulated Spells

The Inquisition is run by five Cardinals, advised by a larger pool of Archbishops, who among other duties meet to decide what spells are allowable on a common usage basis, what spells are restricted, and what spells are banned outright. The last category tends to pass without disagreement; it's the other two categories that shift depending on who is in power and, often, political pressure.

For instance, magic that creates materials out of thin air might become restricted depending on what manufacturing guilds have to say and what kind of influence they can exert. Restrictions on simple spells like "Create Water" may vary wildly in times of drought and flood. While many agree that scrying spells should not be available to the common citizen, not everyone agrees that the government services should have access.

Likewise, the Inquisition is made up of followers of various faiths, who have a near monopoly on curative magic, and so can determine what rates they can charge for it. Minor cure spells and most cure disease spells are common enough. However, when the Inquisition makes proclamations warning against over use of magic and creating magic-resistant diseases, matters become more complex.

The biggest conflict comes in resurrection magic. Resurrection is only allowed in specific circumstances by direct endorsement of the Emperor in circumstances that would serve the state, and often, require a hefty donation to the Cardinal performing the ritual. This often means that only the highest of the upper class are allowed to return from the dead, yet, that doesn't stop grieving petitioners of all kinds.

## Broad Discretionary Powers

The Inquisition regularly publishes reports of errant spellcasters they have captured attempting to practice dangerous, unpredictable magic. They make sure that everyone knows the threat they're up against: individuals that can alter minds, summon otherworldly creatures, and tear out the threads of reality.

In that fight, the Inquisition uses a lot of power in the enforcement of its duties, with much greater access than other kinds of law enforcement within the Empire. The Inquisition can orchestrate raids and seize property if they feel it is the best interests of rooting out dangerous spellcasting.

There are times when the Inquisition has stepped too far and suffered sanctions from the Ruling Council and even the Emperor herself, but largely, it leans on the importance of its duties and divine mandate to keep doing what it wants. While the Inquisition is supposed to be incorruptible due to its divine origins, it is anything but.

## Example Inquisition High Concepts

- *Folksy Healer Fed Up With Bureaucracy*
- *Honest Inquisitor Fighting Injustice*
- *Bishop To The Rich*

## Example Inquisitor

### BISHOP BENNET

Bishop Bennet follows the tenets of Saint Cu-Bree-Teth, an obscure saint among the officially recognized religions in Costracinni. Cu-Bree-Teth teaches justice, of the “eye for an eye” kind. Bennet spent years fighting in the Imperial army, only to grow sick of the needless bloodshed. Now, he serves as an advisor to the Inquisition branch that seeks out and punishes rebel wizards, but due to his experiences, passes along information to try and help the wizards so there is not a violent confrontation that results.



### Bishop Bennet

#### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Human Battle-Priest of Justice*

**Trouble:** *Can't Leave The Wars Behind*

**Ambition:** *I Will Ensure Justice For All Throughout The Empire*

**Secret:** *Shelters Underground Wizards*

**Connection:** *Bishop To \_\_\_\_\_'s Parents*

#### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Empathy

**Great (+4):** Fight, Magic

**Good (+3):** Lore, Physique, Rapport

**Fair (+2):** Athletics, Contacts, Deceive, Will

**Average (+1):** Crafts, Notice, Resources, Shoot

#### STUNTS

**Confess Your Sins (Empathy):** You can use Empathy in place of Provoke to attack someone emotionally.

**Inquisitor's Defense (Magic):** When defending against hostile Magic, add a +2 bonus.

**Elder Scholar (Lore):** When Creating an Advantage related to studying another's Magic, gain an additional free invocation when using it to unravel that magic.

#### STRESS

**Mental**

**Social**

**Physical**

## The Guilds

The Guilds are organizations made up of like-minded individuals who participate in similar trades. Guilds must register officially with the Costracinni government, and while it's not a requirement to join the associated guild when entering a trade, it's strongly recommended to ensure proper training, protection, and representation in government. At least, that's what the guilds say. In practice, the guilds want their dues, which is one of many reasons independent tradespeople can run into difficulties in the city.

The one exception to the "optional" nature of guilds is becoming a wizard, which is illegal in the Empire without registration through the guild.

## The Wizards Guild

Far-off lands exalt their wizards by putting them through universities, putting the masters of the arcane into positions of power. In Costracinni, wannabe wizards are organized by the Wizards Guild, through a series of trade schools. Wizard is a vocation, not a title, and after a period of training as an apprentice, they're put to work as soon as possible. All the while, the reminders are there that if they use their spells beyond the prescribed boundaries of their job, the Inquisition will be waiting.

This is not a situation the Wizards Guild particularly appreciates, and while not in the official curriculum, many of the instructors of the Wizards Guilds have been known to teach ways to practice magic subtly and best practices for avoiding the ire of the authorities.

The guild itself, in addition to training new generations of recruits and placing them with appropriate jobs, is also responsible for maintaining records and licenses, and regulating what kinds of wizards are guild-certified. Like the other guilds, this ultimately boils down to money.



The Wizards Guild not only takes money from those wishing to get into the wizarding game, they take money from those who need the services of wizards, and are responsible for determining who gets to go where. This process leads to considerable amounts of backroom dealing, favor exchanges, and outright corruption.

The public at large recognizes the value of the Wizards: they provide a number of important amenities for city life. The right to cast spells is a frequent topic of discussion in every election, as the enforcement powers of the Inquisition wax and wane, and new spells are developed that push the boundaries of what is acceptable. However, those who have been on the wrong side of either a rogue Fireball or a particularly shady guild contract have reason to be trustful that the Guild is the right side to back.

### ARCANE VS. DIVINE

If you've played D&D or anything like it, you've probably seen the distinction between Arcane and Divine spells. To put it simply, Arcane casters memorize complex spells in order to use their magic, while Divine casters receive their powers from a divine force. Each one has limits to what kind of effects they can create—healing vs. destruction being a big difference—though there are always gray areas of overlap between them. Additionally, the list of what Divine magic can do is relatively static, passed down within the tenets of faith and what divine power it is granted them, whereas sufficiently advanced magic is always discovering new effects and refining existing ones.

This distinction is most represented in the approaches of the Wizards Guild and the Inquisition. You might choose to detach this distinction in your game, or go with the idea that the magic is basically all the same, it just matters on what institution you learn it from. A supernature vs. supernature, if you will.

### Other Guilds

Most of the other guilds are common trades that, by organizing, gain a measure of collective bargaining and influence over the Council that can have dramatic effect on their fate. From the various manufacturing guilds like woodworkers and masons, to the professions like merchants and traders or sailors, each one represents a part of the infrastructure of Costracinni that is not particularly flashy but is nonetheless important. These guilds have their minor struggles with each other, and much more often, have a very contentious relationship with the Wizards Guild. The Wizards Guild has the most attention and the most power, which works to the other guilds benefit when their interests are aligned, and to their detriment when there is a general blowback against “the guild system” when something goes wrong with the wizards.



## The Emperor and the Secret History of Costracinni

Emperor Principi Costracinni the XVII is a young Emperor, having ascended to the throne just shy of her 19th birthday. As Emperor is a hereditary position given to the eldest regardless of gender, the term “Empress” has never caught on in the Empire as it has elsewhere. The Emperor has spent more time in the Imperial Palace, a secluded and fortified estate on the outskirts of the city, than many of her predecessors, but rumors are that will change soon with a new northern offensive. Though like all Emperors she is largely kept away from the public, those few who have met her and spoken to the bards about her say she is naturally charming and is expected to be much more active than her father, Emperor Nostrum Costracinni the XVI.

### The Emperor’s Secret

It’s the greatest secret and the most vigorously-defended lie in all of the Empire. There are maybe five creatures in the entire realm who know the truth, though more suspect something is up. Expressing any thoughts publicly doubting the official story is dealt with swiftly.

#### THE TRUTH...?

If you’re planning on playing a *House of Bards* game instead of running it, this might be a good part to skip if you want to be surprised and have it come out during play.



The truth is: there has only ever been one Emperor, and she's not what she appears.

For many ages, the lands far and wide were ruled by the Tyrant Dragons and their dragonkin off-spring. A group of wizards decided they were tired of being oppressed by the dragons, and devised a powerful ritual to summon a creature into this realm to battle them. Something that was powerful enough to drive the dragons away and protect the people, and cunning enough to match wits with the dragons.

What they got was a shapeshifting creature from the infernal realms, a spirit that thrives on conflict and war itself. The creature did two things when summoned. First, the creature questioned why it was summoned. The second thing was to destroy its summoners.

The creature created the would-be Emperor guise, and appeared to the tribes ruled by the dragons, and stirred them to action. As the new Emperor rallied the tribes, she gained more strength from the conflict itself, and was eventually able to kill or drive off the dragons.

That was not enough for the Emperor, however. In order to sustain her existence in this realm, she needed to continue to be involved in war. Likewise, if anyone knew the truth, a powerful enough spellcaster could banish it back to the infernal realms. The Emperor created the Empire in order to control spellcasters and stop them from ever getting to close to revealing the Emperor's secret, while waging near continuous war to feed itself.

The creature's shapeshifting is powerful enough to pass as human, and even have children. When it's time for the old Emperor to "pass on," the creature devours its child and changes its form into the new child to take over, and it has done so through at least 17 generations to date.

The Emperor has been propagating itself for so long and is empowered by a large, ongoing war that it doesn't make many mistakes that would expose it. However, that doesn't mean it's totally safe.

The family that serves as the Emperor's personal aides are descended from the original settlers. They may have some inkling, though they are sworn to secrecy via ancient and terrible rites.

The Tyrant Dragons are just as long lived, and a few survived the initial purges when the Empire was first founded. They may be in hiding still, or biding their time, since they would be an easy target for the Emperor's wrath. Their suspicions have spread throughout the dragonkin that still walk the lands.

And there's always a chance that a transition to a "new" generation of Emperor could go wrong, especially if there were outside forces involved (in an assassination attempt, or an errant spellcaster.)

In any case, finding out this secret could mean you possessed the most important secret in the realm, and also the most dangerous.

## NEW RULES

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### Social Stress and the Effects of Stress

Just as suggested on page 50 of *Fate Core*, *House of Bards* adds a third stress track: Social Stress. Social Stress represents a character's reputation and general social standing. (For more ideas and an in-depth discussion of Social Stress, see the *Dresden Files Roleplaying Game: Your Story*.) This allows characters to absorb a bit more punishment overall before being taken out. Use Rapport as the relevant skill for extra stress boxes for social stress.

In *House of Bards*, the characters involved fuel the drama, and so stay in the picture for longer, and driving them out whether through destroying their reputation (social stress), pushing them to the brink emotionally (mental stress) or arranging for them to suffer an "accident" (physical stress) requires more work over a longer period of time.

The consequences taken inform how a character is affected by stress, and has the most long term, mechanical effect. However, looking at the stress a character has taken can also inform the GM on a character's general state. Especially for social stress, several dots marked off over the course of a scene might show themselves as rumors and whispers following the character around.

For more specifics at how direct social conflicts can be taken, revisit the *Fate System Toolkit*, page 54, for more options in social conflicts.

### Creating Social Advantages and Connecting Outside the PCs

Much of a dramatic game involves creating a large cast of characters. The Contacts skill gets a particular workout in this setup, bringing in new resources and allies. Other skills, especially social skills like Rapport, Empathy, and Provoke, all are important for direct interaction, though GMs are encouraged to be flexible in allowing skills to be applicable in other situations.

PCs are free to trade favors and make bargains, especially in the context of the Succeed at Cost tweaks listed on page 33. However, when a PC draws upon an outside party, using a Create An Advantage roll to call in someone to help, keep that resource around, even if all the free invocations are used up. That advantage is a character that can be called upon later, either by the initial creator or used against them if someone else discovers it.

A simple nameless NPC is easy enough to start with, but after the free invocations are used, make a note of who created that advantage, and create a connection between them. Were they just hired to do a job, and can now be bought by anyone? Was the contact a matter of family, shared beliefs, or a common foe? Turn that into a connection aspect, as you populate Costracinni with specialists, temporary allies, and other character resources.

Additionally, many of the NPCs listed in *House of Bards* have an empty Connection aspect. Instead of just writing down an aspect, the GM can select an appropriate NPC, fill in the name of the PC who called upon them under their Connection aspect, and have a fully formed NPC ready to go already. Such a connection has a bit more to them than a typical created advantage (though the same number of free invocations applies based on the roll, at first), but it's an easy way to draw a new character in the story to play off of later.

## Running a Dramatic Game

The traditional structure of RPGs, from its roots in D&D, is that the players usually all work together on the same side, save for the occasional disagreement about how to split the loot or doppelganger infiltration.

A game like *House of Bards*, however, follows a more dramatic structure. Instead of the action being driven by external threats, the player characters are put at various cross-purposes and thrown into conflict with one another, driving the action. When temporarily allying, or even when part of the same organization working cross-purposes, different goals and drivers push tension among each other. Characters in *House of Bards* are also more proactive than reactive: while outside factors will intrude, it is up to the characters to decide what to do with the information and put forward their own ways to use it to their advantage.

In the context of Fate, this has a few important parts to stay aware of.

### **Opposed Rolls and Player vs. Player Compels**

Inevitably, the characters are going to oppose each other, and that means dice rolls. Sometimes, this will be a one-off roll, when an investigating bard attempts to get a councilmember to slip up under questioning. Sometimes, this will be a contest between multiple rolls, such as a formal debate.

There will be plenty of times where what you know and can exploit about your opponent is what will make the difference in a conflict, and that comes down to using the aspects. As mentioned on page 71 of *Fate Core*, a player can propose a compel for another player, complicating their life based on their aspects. This is generally done in situations where the player's character who is initiated the compel is somehow involved in the turn of events.

Likewise, in an extended conflict, consequences are going to come into play, giving free invocations to their opponent when things get bad. With social stress in play, these consequences can represent various ways the court of public opinion shifts to what's happening.

## Succeeding at a Cost

When rolling against another player character, the one setting the stakes of the roll rolls first, and then the other. Whomever has the lower result has the first opportunity to invoke aspects in order to improve the roll. If the roll improves to a better result than the other player, the other player now has the chance to invoke aspects. If the roll does not beat the other player's roll, the same player has the option to continue invoking aspects. Essentially, the player on the lower side of the roll always has the option to try and improve the roll.

When both players are finished rolling, or whenever there is a tie, there is an opportunity to succeed at a cost (either minor on a tie or serious on a failure.) In the case of a minor cost, either player might propose a minor cost to the other. If the players come to an agreement on appropriate cost, then the action goes through.

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For example, a muckrucking bard may be trying to get a councilmember's aide to give up a vital bit of information. After the rolls, the two are tied. The aide says that she'll give up the information, if the bard agrees to include something in the story that the councilmember wants leaked as well. The two agree that the cost is appropriate, and go from there.

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A serious cost can be a little more tricky between two players. The player with the lower roll can propose the serious cost to the other player, but the higher rolling player can always refuse, and simply let the result of a failure stand, and the GM will narrate the results.

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Following the previous example, let's say the bard failed her roll by 2 against the aide. The aide can simply let the roll stand and refuse to give up the information. Or the bard might propose the aide gives up the information, and in the process, the bard accidentally gives up what the story is about and a way the councilmember can get ahead of it.

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When you factor in compels, these situations can turn into a rather elaborate negotiation. The important part is that every development is narrated in context of the scene, and not just the dice and fate point exchanges. In any case, the GM is the final arbiter of what counts as a minor or serious cost, even when it's between two players. Just like rolls against the GM's opposition, making failure interesting keeps the story moving, even when it's against someone else in your group.



### **Aspects: Hidden, Open, or Discoverable**

As noted on page 79 of *Fate Core*, there's room for secret or hidden aspects, especially about situations. However, that still assumes that the players will generally know each other's aspects. In a game that throws the characters into such direct contention, that may not necessarily be the case. There may also be power in dramatic revelation when a Trouble aspect or Ambition is particularly shocking. There are a few ways to handle it.

**Everybody Be Cool:** Obviously, when the aspects are written on the character sheet, and the players can read them, there's a limit to the amount of secrets. This model just assumes that while the players may know, their characters won't know what the aspects are. This is the easiest for a group of experienced roleplayers who trust each other to serve the story with their knowledge.

**Secrets and Lies:** In this version, the only aspect that starts open is the High Concept. Trouble is hidden from all other players, and only players who have directly crossed paths with a particular Ambition aspect know what it is. When it comes to light in the game, it is then revealed. Players can still invoke aspects by telling the GM "I invoke my Trouble" without stating what it is, though that may give clues and ammunition for other players to guess it.

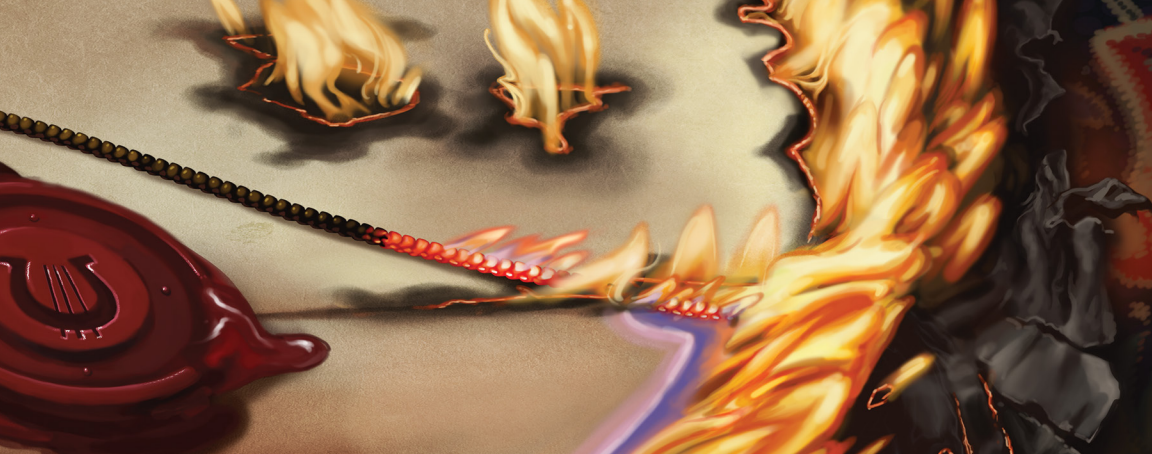
**Smokescreens:** In this version, players have a public-facing character sheet, with all the aspects they'd normally have. Those are the aspects that "everybody knows", both among the characters and the public. At any point, those aspects may be swapped for alternate ones, revealing another layer to the character, and most likely, more sinister.

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For example, the public Trouble might be *Loses His Temper When Cornered* but the truth is *Proned to Violent Mood Swings Thanks to Magic Drug Addiction*.

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Players start out being able to compel the public aspects, while the GM compels the private ones.



## Compelling Secrets

The revelation, and the tension about when a secret will be revealed is part of the critical engine of drama. If it's a piece of a character the audience never gets to see, that's not an interesting secret, that's just a missed opportunity.

When working off a secret aspect, no matter who actually knows what it is, the aspect can be compelled either by consequences of that secret, or that secret becoming revealed. If the GM tempts the player into a situation that would involve that secret coming to light, that's a compel. If the player puts the character into a situation that tempts that secret being revealed, that's a form of self-compel.

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For example, a character might have the Trouble aspect ***The Eyes of The Emperor are Upon Me***. The GM might compel that aspect to get the character involved in a clandestine meeting where an agent of the Emperor will see her. Likewise, when in danger, the player may decide to self-compel by setting up that clandestine meeting and revealing that they aren't alone.

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## Table Information, Secret Notes, and General Backstabbery

It's important to have everyone on the same page at the start of the game. A setting like *House of Bards* is supposed to throw the characters into conflict in a dramatic way, not the players themselves. Setting the expectations up front at the start of the game prevent real conflicts later.

Some important decisions to discuss about the game:

- Is all table information public, or will there be hidden elements? (see the *Aspects: Hidden, Open, or Discoverable* discussion above)
- Will there be secret notes and meetings between the GM and players, or will all action take place “on camera” for all players to know but not all characters?
- Are the players going to be totally opposed and cut-throat with each other and grudges stay permanent, or will there be times of coming together and drifting apart?

## VIGNETTES

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*House of Bards* does not follow a traditional, linear story structure. Instead, it provides collections of scenes based on a theme that can be adjusted to fit the players involved. Think of it as a toolbox of events to plug in to frame the scenes. Primarily, look at what the characters want, and what stands in their way: especially if it's another one of the players.

### Beginning: The Cold Open & The Inciting Incident

First, establish the status quo in Costracinni, and how the characters fit into it. The character sheets describe what has happened, but start establishing the now.

Take this opportunity to ask questions about each character, and introduce them each in their own scene. This is a chance to see all the characters in action in their normal environment, and start to concoct the situations that will drive the game. Ask questions like “what does your character do on a regular day?” “What is the latest project your character worked on?” “Who do you rely on a regular basis?”

These scenes frame the campaign. It's not necessary yet to roll any dice or even multiple characters in the same scene yet.

The following are a few sample starter scenes to kick the campaign off. If the characters have all roughly the same focus, one might be sufficient. Otherwise, look for opportunities to connect the dots between different inciting incidents, stretching and criss-crossing throughout the campaign to lead to some darker places.

### The Lines Are Drawn

Redistricting has always come with opportunities—and risks. One of the characters is a councilmember hoping to expand their influence or perhaps someone looking to enter the council race for the first time. Whichever the case, their allies have long promised that the time has come and all favors will be paid back, and funds are lined up for the big opportunity.

Only, the political winds have shifted, and the establishment has decided it needs to be someone other than the character. (Maybe it's even one of the other characters.) A supposedly friendly face tells them that now is not the right time. Maybe in four years?

Will the character accept this, and try to figure out another path to satisfy their ambition? Or will they run for council anyway, and anger every ally they have?



## No Holds Bard

The legendary editor of *The Examiner*, Denid Ettin, has announced he is stepping down after the current election. Different editors are vying to replace him, if only they can crack a big story. The bards are out in full force under pressure to find THE hot story that will distinguish them and let them take over when the power vacuum fills. It also means that every other organization in Costracinni is on its guard to not let anything slip out.

This starting scene involves floating a juicy, complex story in front of the characters. They might start out investigating something as simple as an affair, but beneath it should hide a much greater secret: possibly going all the way up to the Emperor herself.

## A Magical Powder Keg

While leaving his house to go to the council session, the head of the Magical Subcommittee was killed by a series of 17 fireballs from the sky.

In the wake of this high-profile magical assassination, the Wizardry Enforcement Act is quickly moving through the council chamber. The act would give the Inquisition unprecedented authority to investigate magic usage among the populace. Privacy, civil rights, and magical advocacy groups all protest. The Wizards Guild prepares for the worst, and if need be, war. The Inquisition welcomes the new law, but also struggles with internal corruption, which will only become worse without some new housecleaning.

There are those who are protesting the new law, and those who champion it, with precious few in the middle. The city prepares for riots and even a possible civil war. The characters start on their sides, but may discover there's more to this law than it first appears. And where did all the witnesses to the assassination go anyway?

## An Unexpected Opportunity

Kel Raven is a wizard on the run. She wasn't entirely licensed by the Inquisition to begin with, having had her magical abilities passed down from her Elven ancestors. She was employed by Councilmember Sturn as a magical safeguard, helping encrypt his sensitive documents and making sure his offices weren't being scryed upon.

In the performance of her duties, however, she accidentally eavesdropped on a high level confidential meeting between Sturn and the Inquisition. What she found out would shake the Empire, and Sturn knows she has the information. Now the Inquisition is out to find her under the pretense of performing "dangerous" unlicensed wizardry. She comes to one of the PCs in the hopes that she can trade what she knows for safety. But can her information be trusted?

Kel promises that the scoop could bring down Sturn, opening his seat up on the council and his committee positions. Publicly crossing the Inquisition is dangerous politically, so either they'll have to spin Kel's role somehow, or work some shadowy operations to hide her presence. The latter move might just be a trick to get you to expose your operations.

## Kel Raven

### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Elven Intelligence Wizard*

**Trouble:** *Unlicensed Fugitive*

**Ambition:** *I Will Bring Secrets To Light*

**Secret:** *Magic Has Taken Its Toll*

**Connection:** *Distantly Related to \_\_\_\_\_*

### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Magic

**Great (+4):** Lore, Stealth

**Good (+3):** Burglary, Deceive, Notice

**Fair (+2):** Athletics, Fight, Investigate, Will

**Average (+1):** Crafts, Empathy, Physique, Provoke, Rapport

### STUNTS

**Magical Codebreaker (Magic):** When using Magic to Overcome an Obstacle like encryption or surveillance, add a +2 bonus.

### STRESS

Mental

Social

Physical

## Councilmember Sturn

### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Chairman Of The Intelligence Committee*

**Trouble:** *Too Used To Getting His Way*

**Ambition:** *I Will Keep The Empire Safe From All Internal Threats*

**Secret:** *Regularly Abuses Power To Eliminate Enemies*

**Connection:** *Owes a Favor To \_\_\_\_\_*

### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Resources

**Great (+4):** Contacts, Investigate

**Good (+3):** Deceive, Notice, Provoke

**Fair (+2):** Empathy, Lore, Physique, Will

**Average (+1):** Athletics, Burglary, Fight, Rapport, Shoot

### STUNTS

**Money Talks (Resources):** You can use Resources instead of Rapport in any situation where ostentatious displays of material wealth might aid your cause.

**Spy Network (Contacts):** You can use Contacts instead of Lore in any situation where you have received intelligence reports about the topic.

### STRESS

Mental

Social

Physical

## Heating Up: Power Plays

“When in doubt, have a man enter with a gun in his hand” is the advice to keep a plot lively. These are the political equivalents of the man with a gun. Whether it’s the players coming up with the idea or a trusted aide floating a vague notion, here’s some major scenes that the characters can proactively initiate that will cause major waves.

Alternatively, the power plays listed below can be used against the PCs, but that puts them into a more reactive mode, and should be used sparingly.

### Assassination

The most direct of all ways to eliminate a rival is also the most dangerous. Besides the particulars of arranging an assassination in the first place, but the suspicious death of any high-ranking or powerful individual is likely to draw scrutiny from across Costracinni.

Hiring a professional assassin involves working your Contacts in order to find someone for the job. Costs associated with this roll could involve needing to trust an unreliable source to put you in touch, or not being able to find a professional in time and instead needing to rely on someone less experienced, or that the professional hired is planning on using the job for blackmail later.

Then, a Resources roll is required to make the appropriate payment to arrange the assassination. A higher profile target, increases the difficulty. A fair difficulty for a minor unguarded functionary, up through stupendous for the rich, powerful, and well-protected. Costs for the roll might involve extra favors for the professional in addition to a monetary payment, or that there’s an inconvenient paper trail that could lead back to you for the payment.

If the target is an NPC, let the hiring player take over the NPC for a scene of how it plays out (using the same pool of fate points as their primary character.) If the target is another PC, let them defend against the assassination attempt. Remember that conceding instead of being taken out can lead to more plots further down the road: perhaps the assassination becomes a kidnapping instead, with all the complication that entails.

### MOHAWK

The Dwarf known only as “Mohawk” has shaved all her hair except one red patch on top of her head. She takes jobs only via dead drop known to a select few in the criminal underworld. While she seems to mostly concentrate on eliminating criminal targets for other criminals, she’ll kill anyone if the price is right: the higher ranking the target, the higher the price. Those few who have met her and lived say she will only kill those who she judges Wicked, and nobody has even been judged otherwise. She prefers to kill close up, but will use whatever means are necessary to get the job done herself, and slip away once the deed is done.

## Mohawk

### ASPECTS

**High Concept:** *Unrelenting Dwarven Assassin*

**Trouble:** *Costracinni's Most Wanted*

**Ambition:** *I Will Eliminate The Wicked*

**Secret:** *Favored By Death*

**Connection:** *Killed a Member of \_\_\_\_\_'s Family*

### SKILLS

**Superb (+5):** Fight

**Great (+4):** Shoot, Stealth

**Good (+3):** Athletics, Deceive, Will

**Fair (+2):** Investigate, Notice, Physique, Provoke

**Average (+1):** Burglary, Crafts, Drive, Lore, Resources

### STUNTS

**I'll Be Back (Will):** When conceding a conflict involving physical violence, you can forego the Fate Point to slink away, to return at a later time.

**Killing Stroke (Fight):** Once per scene, when you force an opponent to take a consequence, you can spend a fate point to increase the consequence's severity (so mild becomes moderate, moderate becomes severe). If your opponent was already going to take a severe consequence, he must either take a severe consequence and a second consequence or be taken out.

### STRESS

Mental

Social

Physical





## Staging a Scandal

Bards have a wide latitude in criticizing those in power thanks to ancient imperial decree. This leads some to believe that they are immune to prosecution, and they look for other lucrative opportunities, like slander for pay.

Staging a scandal requires creating the scandalous moment, and then publicizing it far and wide. Sometimes it's enough to create the illusion that something improper is going on through some orchestrated public scenes, and other times, putting someone in a position to do something improper means their baser instincts will take over.

First, getting to know the target of the scandal is important. Knowing their aspects in advance means being able to manipulate (compel) them in appropriate circumstances. Then getting them into the scene requires another pretense: a party, a meeting, or other diversion. Rolling Deceive opposed by Empathy can at least hide your true intentions, but ultimately, it must be something that makes sense.

Then it's a matter of getting the target into a compromising situation. The most common method is trying to manipulate someone into a libidinous situation, particularly for a married or especially religious target, then make that situation public.

Once that happens, either making sure that the setup involves the Press "accidentally" finding it, or a bard on the payroll of whoever's arranging it ready to find the compromising situation. Such a discovery is a major story and sells newspapers, but it's certainly going to raise questions about how they were in the right place to get the story.

The end result for the target is likely Social Stress, especially those that turn into longer-term consequences. The Bard covering the story might roll Provoke to gauge how effective the story is at swaying the public. If the results are bad enough, the target might drop out of public life completely.

## Vote-Fixing

For a campaign that involves an election, election day (see below) might be the big moment of the campaign. However, if campaigning isn't enough, it might be time to take matters into your own hands with some good old-fashioned voter fraud.

The Inquisition guards zealously against magical influence in voting. However, that doesn't mean that tampering with it in other, non-magical ways can't still work, though that's certainly also not without safeguards.

Working ahead of the election, enterprising character might try to influence the voter rolls, contained in the Inquisition Hall of Records. Divine spells are used to sanctify and keep the Hall protected from magical influence, but due to the size of bureaucracy involved, some infiltration and inside sources might allow some changes in paperwork. And given the Imperial demands of who is allowed to vote and who is not, disenfranchising certain districts might be a direct way to cut out a rival's power base. The more influential and known that district is known, however, the more likely it is to call unwanted attention to the tampering later.

With access to the Hall, the fixers could also try adding voters, and then use a variety of agents to vote as directed under these new identities. Identity paperwork is a common forger's target, it just requires a large operation to make this work. A base of operations nearby the voting centers is a must, like a trusted tavern or inn.



## Campaigning

From the creation of the city earlier, you have your districts, and what you know and can find out about those districts. Now it's time to turn those districts into votes.

As a candidate campaigns, each district is effectively running a separate Contest (as described on page 150 of *Fate Core*.) The skill rolls involved are based on the method of campaigning. In fact, some may be contests within the larger contest: a debate against an opponent may involve multiple rolls to resolve, using a variety of social skills, and then winning the debate counts as a win towards the larger contest.

The amount of opposition might not be always clear, either. An overcome roll against the district's population (a set difficulty) might not show its results until later. The GM can compare the results to the difficulty, and make a note, then spring the result weeks later. For example, running campaign ads in the newspaper for the district might start with a Resources roll to pay someone to make the ad and run it. However, the actual effect on the population won't play itself out until later, perhaps when the candidate makes a personal appearance in the district. Then the GM can show the results of being a success or success with style based on how the appearance is attended, or offer a mild or severe consequence (like needing to partner up to a particular unsavory local politician to get the word out.)

In any case, while each contest is its own issue, the overall issue is opportunity cost. Time and staff are not infinite. While moving the spotlight around to each different player and what they're doing, keep track of how long each step is taking. While a contest might be spread out over many months, only getting to three successes fully guarantees a district will vote for the candidate. Others might be more up in the air. And in a setting without telephones, polling constituents is much more unreliable and time-consuming (not to mention tension-building.)

Remember that it's not just the candidate herself that can contribute to these rolls. Campaign staff will also be making these kinds of rolls to influence districts. This is especially where alliances and special interests come in to play: they can work on the candidate's behalf while the candidate is doing other tasks. Of course, there's no guarantee that support is going to work either.

## End Game: Election Day

Election day makes a natural climax to a game. For politicians, it's the biggest deal, trying to secure a more powerful position or seek re-election against a tough challenger. It's where favors fly fast, hoping that the end result pays off. For the House of Bards, there's everything from election news, to candidate profiles, to speculation on what the effect the elections could bring to Costracinni. Wizards, Inquisitors, and guild members all want to get their candidates elected, and have to decide where to throw their muscle to achieve their outcomes.

Under Campaigning, there's a method for determining how the players influence the individual districts. There may be some districts that have been completely won over by a specific candidate, while others have a mixture of successes, failures, and incomplete activities. Those can be used as a rough checklist of how a candidate is performing overall. If enough districts are won over, they're likely going to be elected. If it hasn't been going well, then that might be apparent too, in which case it can be interesting to see what the candidate decides to do to try and hold on to some influence.

In many other cases, the outcomes won't be so cut and dry. While the GM has perfect knowledge of where everything stands, the players will have less information, between rolls that may be murky in their effectiveness and other players making secret moves. This is a chance for the GM to float out which districts are still in contention, and really push the players into action. A review of the stakes helps here: if this candidate gets in, it will likely have these changes, if this candidate fails, it means this, etc. This helps draw in all player types, to influence for their desired outcome, or just to expose the truth.

It's also a chance to suggest some last minute desperate power plays, as listed above, to those who might not be doing so great, or even those candidates who are doing well but might have a lot of favors hanging over them as they get ready for office.

Regardless, on election night, the GM can read off the election results based on the successes thus far, and may even read that some areas are too close to call. To inject some extra uncertainty into districts that haven't been locked up, candidates can roll, and instead of using a skill, with a bonus equal to the number of successes scored in that district previously. High roll takes the district, with ties going to a truly random roll.

The GM should set an electable margin for number of districts carried, based on the number created in play. If most or all of the players are candidates or campaign staff, a larger number of districts is appropriate. If there's only one or two players that care about the election, keep the number of districts available small to zoom in on those more. If a player-controlled candidate can take a plurality of those districts, they're elected to a vacant seat (and remember, there are multiple candidates who gain council seats every year in Costracinni, so if the numbers are close enough, the GM should choose multiple candidates to take seats: just as long as there are losers as well.)

## The Aftermath

Election night is only one possible end point. After the results have been established, there are campaign promises to follow (or ignore), favors to return, and secrets to be uncovered. While election night might be a natural stopping point depending on the results, if the characters still have stories to tell and activities to follow up on, the game can go until there's a natural stopping point. When enough characters have succeeded in their ambitions, or failed spectacularly, it can be time to leave the Empire. Either that or they can come up with a whole new, even grander ambition to follow...