

Under THE Table



**Pete
Woodworth**

A WORLD OF
ADVENTURE FOR

FATE
CORE SYSTEM

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CORE SYSTEM

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UNDER THE TABLE

It should have been perfect. I mean he had me, Nicky Santoro, his best friend watching his ass. And he had Ginger, the woman he loved on his arm. But in the end, we f#@!#\$ it all up. It should have been so sweet, too. But it turned out to be the last time that street guys like us were ever given anything that f#@!#\$ valuable again.

—Nicky Santoro, *Casino*

Arthurian mythology meets Prohibition-era gangster fiction in this retelling of the Round Table set in a magic-infused alternate timeline during the days of Prohibition. The King's Men are a legendary criminal syndicate known for bootlegging *sangreal*, a magical liquor, and the player characters are poised to climb the ladder. It's an age of excess and limitless opportunities for those willing to reach out and take them...but things are tipping bad in Camelot, Illinois, and pretty soon the whole thing may just come tumbling down.

A little bit of magic, a little bit of luck, even more hard fighting, and a whole lot of blood built this mighty empire, but now the heat is coming down and betrayal, vengeance, and old grudges are boiling up. Honor and loyalty only go so far before the knives come out. Will you save the kingdom, tear it down—or take it for yourself?

INSPIRATIONAL MATERIALS

There's certainly no shortage of material when it comes to both Arthurian fiction and gangster stories. In designing *Under the Table*, the focus naturally drifted to literature for the Arthurian side and to film for the gangster elements, but there's plenty of great Arthurian films and television shows as well as excellent gangster novels and nonfiction histories. What follows is just a brief survey to get you started.

- **Le Morte d'Arthur:** A 15th-century compilation that uses both English and French sources, Sir Thomas Malory's work is still considered the foundational basis of many modern retellings, interpretations, and other variations. It also provides the basic arc of Camelot's rise and fall that so many other Arthurian works build upon.
- **Boardwalk Empire:** A sprawling fictionalized history of organized crime, political corruption, and personal drama in Atlantic City during the Prohibition era. It's an excellent study of the rise and fall of a "kingdom" in the same sense as *Under the Table* looks to evoke, and the costumes and set designs are perfect visual references. The expert blending of real and fictional elements is also a good reference point for looking at a fictionalized place like Camelot, Illinois, and its famous inhabitants.
- **The Mists of Avalon:** For those worried that they've wandered into a boy's club, Marion Zimmer Bradley's series is a retelling of the classic Arthurian legend from the perspectives of its female characters. Its depiction of pagan practices and traditions in a favorable light is an excellent gateway to viewing how supporters might contact the Fair Folk of this setting.
- **The Godfather, Parts I & II:** No survey of American gangster drama would be complete without these classics—they exert a titanic influence on every part of the genre, and remain riveting studies of both the internal politics and the human costs of a criminal organization. While the time period mostly isn't right, the themes and their exploration are dead on, and the performances and storytelling are also top-notch. Everything from *Goodfellas* and *Casino* to *The Sopranos* owes a huge debt to these films.
- **The Once & Future King:** T. H. White's coming-of-age tale about a young Arthur and his tutelage under Merlin is a bit lighter and more focused on magical fantasy than some other versions of the story, as befits its more youth-friendly approach. In addition to being a fun tale, though, it features musings on destiny, magic, and the responsibilities of leadership that might be of interest.

Sword-and-Speakeasy Fantasy

He felt in his heart cruelty and cowardice, the things which made him brave and kind.

—T. H. White, *The Once and Future King*

In *Under the Table*, players portray gangsters during the heyday of Prohibition, all in an alternate timeline where magic is real and magical alcohol is America's favorite illegal hobby. Mob bosses with swords on their hips rule neighborhoods like lords and enforce strict codes of honor among their soldiers, while devout Temperance Knights back efforts to end the immoral scourge of illicit booze and sorcery. The city of Camelot swings between hot jazz and cold-blooded murder, but can even the greatest city of the plains hold up under the pressure?

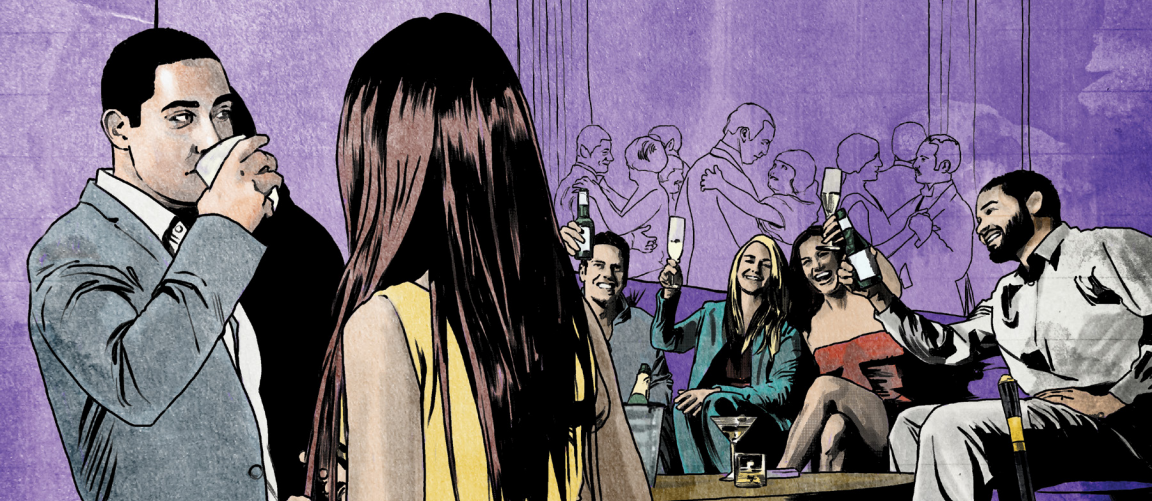
To understand what's going on in this setting, and how these seemingly disparate elements fuse together, it's important to examine the two genres that form the backbone of *Under the Table*: Arthurian fantasy and American gangster drama.

Arthurian Fantasy

One of the most widely recognized fantasy stories in the world, the story of King Arthur and the court of Camelot is nonetheless not really a single story so much as an umbrella under which many different myths, legends, stories, and interpretations have come to be recognized. There is now a whole constellation of Arthurian legends, some contradictory, not to mention the archaeological efforts to uncover the “real” King Arthur and imagine what his world would have been like. Simply put, if you're interested in digging into the Arthurian side of the equation, you can find hundreds of books and dozens of films and television shows ranging from serious and academic to campy and lightweight.

At their heart, Arthurian stories are sometimes about perfection achieved (as in the quest for the Holy Grail) but more often about falling short of perfection and either nobly attempting atonement or embracing villainy by turning away from virtue. Chivalry was an ideal that knights aspired to but rarely attained, composed as it was of virtues that easily came into conflict with each other. The Grail legends reflect this conflict, as even the great Knights of the Round Table could ultimately only produce one knight pure and perfect enough to “win” the Grail. The idea that, even in an organization of greats, there is still only one truly “good” individual is something that resonates with many modern stories as well.

The Arthurian element also acts as a gauge for how much magic the group wants in their story. As written, *Under the Table* has magical items, rituals, and places of power as key elements of its setting—not to mention the mystical alcohol known as *sangreal*—but does not feature off-the-cuff spellcasting and other forms of more active magic as many other fantasy games do. It would be possible, of course, to turn down the fantasy even more and simply tell ordinary gangster stories with strong Arthurian parallels and little to no magic at all.



American Gangster Drama

The other side of the setting coin is American gangster drama, meaning stories focused on the rise and fall of criminal empires as well as the complex and conflicted individuals swept up in those events. Americans have always had a love affair with outlaws and underdogs, and the Prohibition era saw a huge rise in the prominence of gangster mythology, with some criminals enjoying open celebrity status on par with movie stars and champion athletes. This is exactly the feel that *Under the Table* aims to evoke: while the characters are criminals, they enjoy a certain amount of public acclaim for their lavish lifestyles and their roles in undermining an unpopular law. Provided they don't get caught roughing up too many civilians or causing too much wanton destruction, they can get away with an awful lot and still be the darlings of the public eye.

On a more complex level, taking on the roles of gangsters allows players to examine exactly what it is to be a hero (or an anti-hero). Gangster dramas are full of characters who seem like good people and may indeed have some admirable traits, yet who also freely commit illegal and often downright vicious acts to get what they want. *Under the Table* is no different—if the characters are irredeemable psychopaths, there'll be no real drama or hard choices, and sessions will just become a laundry list of antisocial behaviors. Yet at the same time it's impossible to be in the life and stay pure; sooner or later a character will have to do things that are definitely villainous material. Trying to reconcile how they see themselves in that light can make for some incredibly powerful stories, as gangsters struggled to weigh the evil they did against the good it brought them, their families, and their friends.

With that in mind, it's probably a good idea to discuss with your group about how dark the gangster elements will be, because this will greatly affect the game's tone. If the violence isn't too bloody and the characters are never the ones who get asked to take baseball bats to some poor snitch, the moral dilemmas of the game are likely to make it feel a bit like a soap opera. By contrast, if the group doesn't want to shy away from all the blood, gore, and cruelty that goes into organized crime then so be it, but if the characters become too dark and remorseless, that tension is lost all the same since they never worry about making questionable choices.



Prominent Themes

On the surface, Arthurian fantasy legends and Prohibition-era gangster dramas might not seem to have much in common, but there are actually a few key threads that tie them together. Three of the biggest central themes follow, with tips on how to incorporate them in play.

Code of Honor

There's no question that King Arthur's knights and the gangsters of organized crime were violent men, but they also tried to live by a code that elevated them above mere soldiers (or criminals). Both knights and gangsters swore by a set of rules for things like claiming territories, negotiating peacefully with hated rivals, and codes for fighting "honorably" when all other efforts failed. Of course, whether those rules were always upheld is another matter, but even the worst offenders had to at least pay lip service or else risk ostracism or worse, and being known for failing to uphold such tenets typically resulted in a difficult atonement at best or just as likely a quick, ugly end. The King's Men of *Under the Table* are no different—they're asked to uphold a code to keep them from being common thugs, but they still have to get their hands dirty, and sometimes things just aren't so clear-cut.

In Play: Using this theme means putting characters in positions where their loyalties conflict and letting them try to figure out the right course of action. Sure, an enforcer is sworn to follow his boss's orders, but what if his boss tries to compel him to break a confidence he promised his lover he'd keep no matter what? Either way he's going to be in some hot water, so what does he do? At the same time, don't spring these situations constantly or arbitrarily but save them for times that force characters to choose between two values or individuals they cherish—that's when it will have the greatest impact and generate the best drama.

The Last Good Days

Both Arthurian legends and gangster stories typically begin in a period of relative peace and plenty, where the organization is running smoothly, everyone has a role and is happy to fill it, and all the group's enemies are external (and usually well-managed). There's a lot of nostalgia for the old days or the Old Country, too, where everything ran just like it should. However, the calm quickly unravels as enemies gain a foothold and members begin turning on each other, eventually bringing the old kingdom crashing down and leaving survivors in a world that's a shadow of its former glory. Tragedy is coming, no two ways about it, but that just makes the good times all the sweeter.

In Play: Incorporating this theme is a matter of contrast, showing players how things used to be and then presenting them with a diminished (or soon-to-be diminished) reality in the present. It can also involve introducing characters who are the embodiment of those “better days,” then watching them either fall to the new way of doing things or become corrupted by the modern world and its practices. Will the players fight against the inevitable slide, or will they embrace it and profit on the change?

Mistakes Never Walk Alone

In these genres, choices are rarely one and done, especially the mistakes. A single misstep can spiral out of control, creating a bloody chain of events as characters struggle to right their wrongs—or conceal them—only to find that each new effort digs them in deeper. Sir Gawain tells a small lie, which leads to more lies to cover the first, and he winds up earning a scar that serves as a reminder of his shame for the rest of his life. By the same token, in *Goodfellas* Tommy gets into a random argument that escalates into a bar fight and culminates in the murder of a made man, which in turn leads directly to his own death years after he thought he was in the clear. Even a mistake made in the name of good deeds might come back to haunt a character; at the scene of a shootout they might decide to spare a teenage witness, only to have the kid come gunning for revenge later on.

In Play: The tricky part of using this theme is making sure that the players don't feel arbitrarily punished, as though nothing they do can ever work out right, but rather making the escalating events feel like a natural (if unfortunate) outcome. You may even wish to alert the players when they are on the verge of making a decision that could spiral out of control, saying something like “This could escalate, you know.” This warning is not meant to discourage them from acting, but to make sure they know that those actions might have consequences down the line, even if the character does not suspect it. It also avoids arguments like “Well if I'd known this could happen, I wouldn't have done that,” which can be very disruptive to play.

FROM THE OLD COUNTRY TO THE NEW WORLD

“Beware what you speak,” said the Merlin very softly, “for indeed the words we speak make shadows of what is to come, and by speaking them we bring them to pass my king.”

—The Merlin, *The Mists of Avalon*

The world of *Under the Table* is designed to look familiar to many of us from movies, novels, and even comic books—the Prohibition era, when stylish gangsters battled the cops, and ordinary citizens enjoyed forbidden beverages in back-alley speakeasies. At the same time, it is not quite the world that we know—instead of the classical influences that colored the Prohibition era in our world, there are chivalric nods and flourishes. Upstanding men and women still wear swords as part of certain formal attire, medieval details show up on fashionable clothing, businesses of all kinds fly fanciful banners rather than put up billboards, and buildings soar like castle towers.

But the single most important difference is, of course, magic.

On the Nature of Magic

While we’ll cover the interaction of magic and history later, there are three basic facts of magic itself. The first is that it is real. The second is that it is difficult, and not for everyone. The third is that it is mostly irrelevant to day-to-day life.

Well, that last one is not entirely true. Powerful magical items can surely turn the tables in certain situations, and proven mystical locations are highly sought-after real estate for the advantages they offer to practitioners. Instead, what irrelevant means is that the life of the average person isn’t touched by magic all that often. If an ordinary American was asked for her opinion on the subject, she’d probably say that she respects it, maybe fears it a little if she’s honest, but it’s a distant sort of response. Magic certainly has its place, but ultimately technology drives the world because it’s cheap, reliable, and doesn’t take complex arcane training to create or operate.

At least, this was the case until *sangreal* came along.

Opponents of this magical alcohol often overlook one of its most powerful qualities—namely, it’s magic the average person can experience, right out of a bottle. Sure, it’s a fleeting sort of contact, lasting as long as any normal intoxication, but in a world where previously only wizards, leaders, and the rare and powerful few had any firsthand contact with active magic on a regular basis, that’s enough to get people hooked. After all, who wouldn’t want literal enchantment in the palm of their hand if the price was right?

All other magic comes from the Fair Folk, who can only be contacted at mystical sites where natural energy pathways known as ley lines converge, and will only answer when the rites are properly observed and the timing is right. Aside from certain pivotal moments and conflicts that catch their attention, the Fair Folk are unconcerned with the day-to-day affairs of this world, which they consider a provincial backwater compared to the wonders of their own realm, and pick

only a small number of human apprentices each generation. Attempts by such apprentices to teach magic to other mortals has always ended swiftly and poorly, to put it mildly. This means true wizards wield great power, but are so rare that their impact on the world is not nearly as widespread as one might imagine.

Magic in *Under the Table* is a device in both the literal and figurative senses of the word. On the one hand, it is real and access to it can spark any number of stories. Ownership of a magic sword or an enchanted pistol can drive a wedge between even the closest friends, while a piece of real estate that happens to have a powerful ley line running through can spark vicious turf wars between rival gangs. Even individuals can be touched by magic, though being “blessed” with a small portion of the Fair Folk’s power can be a dangerous gift indeed.

On the other hand, magic is also a figurative device, a way of breaking limits and telling stories from perspectives not readily available in a mundane setting. Magic is by its nature transgressive, a way around the most basic rules other people must live by, and even in the outlaw community it commands a healthy level of respect...and fear. Magic enables the unexpected, as magic belts shield an underboss from what should have been a fatal ambush, or an enchanted bar brimming with mysterious secrets returns to earth for the first time in a hundred years.

We’ll give some basic guidelines for magic here, but you’re free to modify the rules of magic to suit your group’s needs and your game’s tone. Be careful with magical elements, GMs. Make sure that the rules are consistent—if a law of magic states that no one can raise the dead, for example, it’s unfair to allow NPCs to do it when the players cannot.

In addition, magic in this setting takes time and always demands a cost, often a very steep one. For this reason it is rarely used casually. Finally, magic tends to be very focused—an enchanted item may be very good at one specific thing, but that will be the only thing magical about it. All-purpose magical items or spells really do not suit the setting.

The Laws of the Fair Folk

- Power Demands, Mortals Obey
- All Magic of this World Is Fleeting
- What Is Given, Is Returned
- Wake Not the Sleepers
- Mortals Shall Not Pass the Gates

THE GOLDEN RULE

In any setting based on a real place like a Chicago and a period of history as well known as Prohibition, some groups will want to keep things closer to reality, while others won’t mind going further afield. The simplest solution is to sit the group down and ask everyone how comfortable they are with bending history. For example, if the group thinks that big band swing music “sounds right” at the table, and nobody cares that it actually came a bit later, then play it! Likewise, a Prohibition history aficionado or Chicago area native can be a valuable source of information and inspirational material, so long as they understand that certain liberties are going to be taken in the name of the game. In the end, it’s up to the table to determine what’s right for their setting; if everyone is having a good time, it’s working as intended, authenticity be damned.

The Old Country

Europe's ruling families long had ties to the Fair Folk—it's been an open secret for centuries. The whole continent is just lousy with mystic sites, and magic was strong there for a long time. Right up until the Church really got going, anyway, and pushed the idea that humanity was beholden to God alone. That made the Fair Folk a distraction at best, or at worst a foul temptation that needed to be overcome in order for mankind to be closer to its creator.

Given its unpopular rhetoric, the Church was nearly extinguished several times in the early going, but over time the message of humanity leaving the Fair Folk behind had appeal with the common people, who seldom benefited from magic and far more often suffered from it. Even some of the nobility saw the appeal as time went on, particularly the younger sons and daughters who stood to gain little from family relations with the Fair Folk and yet still owed them full deference.

Of course, none of this would have mattered if the Church had not manifested power of its own. The miracles and relics of the devout proved as potent as any glamour of the Fair Folk, allowing the faithful to hold their own during the darkest times. Miracles were rarer than magic on the whole, but as the Fair Folk's presence in the world slowly diminished, the Church eventually reached a position where its removal would be too costly for the Fair Folk and their adherents.

BUT WHAT ABOUT...?

While *Under the Table* naturally takes large liberties with some parts of history, as might be expected when things like magic and the Fair Folk are real, it otherwise assumes a history that proceeded more or less as it did in our world. As such, your group can fall back on established events when convenient, rather than feel pressured to invent an alternative version of every major historical event. At the same time, we deliberately cover the history in broad strokes, leaving plenty of room for you to invent your own twists on particular events if you prefer. If someone wants her character to be a survivor of the sinking of the *Titania*, the great cruise ship that was supposedly enchanted so as to be unsinkable, then great! If nobody takes an interest in that event, though, it can just remain the *Titanic* story everyone already knows. Whatever works for your group.

World's Caledonian Exposition, 1893

Popularly referred to as the World's Faire or simply the Exposition, this massive public event cemented Camelot's reputation as one of America's great cities and the crown jewel of the Midwest. The city battled fiercely to win the right to host the Exposition, defeating a number of larger and more prestigious cities through expert lobbying (and more than a few judicious bribes). The announcement that the city had secured the event was greeted with days of celebration and spontaneous parades, not to mention feverish preparations for the anticipated throngs of tourists and faire-goers. Its estimates figured that more than a million visitors might arrive, a staggering number that set the city's imagination alight with possibilities.

This estimate proved grossly inadequate.



Over twenty-five *million* tickets were sold during the Exposition, and even accounting for repeat visitors over the course of the five-month life of the event, the influx of people was staggering. Whole neighborhoods emerged overnight as workers struggled to build hotels, restaurants, and even housing for those tourists who were so enchanted by what they saw that they decided simply to stay in the city. It was during this time that the city acquired its nickname of “The Lady of the Lake,” as the ferries brought thousands of visitors to visit the gleaming Exposition just in off the water. The Exposition itself hosted hundreds of exhibits, performances, and displays of magical and technological wonder for the masses; one popular story claims that roughly a patent a day was filed based on advances shown at the *Faire*.

The real star of the show, however, was a previously unknown wizard named Eliot Merlin, who captured the attention of the nation—and the world—with his amazing alchemical alcohol, *sangreal*. Brewed in enchanted cauldrons, or grails, using secret techniques bestowed by the Fair Folk as well as found through his own research, this wonder concoction “activates” hidden properties of normal alcohol, allowing even ordinary people to experience mildly magical states of being for the duration of their buzz. Various forms of such drinks had existed in the past, of course, but Merlin’s method offered the first-ever chance to mass-produce the stuff and make it available to all.

Religious groups immediately protested the existence of such “devil liquor,” but their objections were largely drowned out by the clamor of both a public eager to experience a little magic in their lives and the investors anxious to get in on what they (rightly) figured would become a major new industry. Not to mention all the thieves and would-be imitators who tried to get their hands on this new process. Surprisingly, Merlin turned down some astoundingly profitable deals in order to keep the business more local, starting distilleries that could hardly cope with the demand.

As the years went by, word on how to enchant new grails leaked—some say at Merlin’s behest, as part of one of his many arcane schemes—and other outfits jumped at the chance to get into the business. Despite the difficulty involved in forging the equipment, as enchanting a grail is a difficult task even for skilled practitioners, the profit margins were just too high to pass up. After all, the only other way to obtain a new grail is bargaining with the Fair Folk, which brings its own problems. Even after the business spread to other parts of the world, Camelot remained the capital of *sangreal* production, both symbolically and in terms of raw production numbers.

Those skilled in handling *sangreal* are known colloquially as alchemixologists, usually shortened to “mixers.” Those who actually make *sangreal* are known as grail knights if they’re officially sponsored by a syndicate, or kettle witches if they’re more of an unsanctioned backwoods or back-alley operation. Given the high value of grails, they are heavily guarded, carefully hidden, moved around often, or some combination of the three, making planning heists extremely difficult.

The Holy Sangreal

As the cornerstone of Merlin's business and the signature commodity of the King's Men, *sangreal* deserves special mention. It is brewed in enchanted cauldrons known as grails, through a complex and demanding process. Finished *sangreal* is clear and nearly tasteless, and does little on its own. When just a few drops are added to any kind of alcohol, however, it unlocks latent mystic properties in the drink, granting fleeting magical senses and capabilities. Each alcohol reacts differently to *sangreal*, as do mixed drinks, in keeping with the different "character" of each type of alcohol. A light buzz might conjure the faintest of effects, but it takes at least some real intoxication to see any true result.

In game terms, *sangreal's* influence is expressed as a boost, gained when a character imbibes enough of the liquor to become at least mildly intoxicated. If you wish to refresh this benefit in the same scene, you must consume more enhanced alcohol and succeed on a Physique roll, whose difficulty escalates each time you attempt to drink more in a scene. Failure means that your character cannot obtain any more *sangreal* benefits until at least the end of the scene, and gains a related aspect like **SEEING DOUBLE**, **SICK TO MY STOMACH**, or something similar until the scene's end.

We've listed some common varieties of alcohol and sample associated aspects below. However, this is an incomplete list, and it's important to remember that these sample aspects are just guidelines. Variables like the brewing processes, ingredients used, types of storage casks, the Crafts result of the alchemixologist involved, and myriad other factors can all change how a particular brand of booze reacts to *sangreal*, sometimes radically. Naturally this is part of the appeal of the stuff, as dedicated craftsmen known only half-jokingly as alchemixologists try different cocktails and combinations to see how they react. Ultimately, it is up to the GM or the group to decide how a specific alcohol or mixture responds to *sangreal*.

- **Beer:** EVERYBODY'S FRIEND, LIQUID COURAGE
- **Absinthe:** YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT I SEE, EVERYTHING'S ILLUSIONAL
- **Wine:** OF COURSE I HAVE EXQUISITE TASTE, HISTORIAN IN A BOTTLE
- **Whiskey:** PUT 'EM UP!, LIKE LIGHTNING
- **Vodka:** GOES WITH ANYTHING, I DIDN'T FEEL THAT AT ALL
- **Gin:** IT'S MEDICINAL!, THE SOUL OF WIT
- **Rum:** THE SPIRITS ARE ALL AROUND US, LIVE IT UP!
- **Scotch:** MANTLE OF AUTHORITY, TOTALLY UNFLAPPABLE



The Gate War

Although America was content to mind its own business for the most part, when war erupted in the Old Country in 1914, the United States was inevitably dragged into the mess. It began with the assassination of Archdruid Doran, the last Fair Folk ambassador to dwell primarily in the mortal world, at the hands of a disinherited young nobleman. The resulting furor escalated quickly as various nations with ties to the Fair Folk accused each other of complicity, until the entire continent was embroiled in war as countries vied to capture or close off the magical gates of their rivals. The Fair Folk, long on the wane in this world, rallied around their own obscure factions and unleashed terrible weapons and enchantments on behalf of their allies, laying waste to whole regiments.

The Gate War, usually just referred to as the War by its veterans, was a war that most Americans desperately wanted to stay out of, and was largely portrayed in the United States as a wasteful and selfish war between petty nobles on behalf of their Fair Folk ties. Unfortunately for the isolationists, the United States would get dragged in late in the war after military harassment and intercepted communications forced direct involvement. In 1917, the first American units entered the war, and were promptly thrown into the ongoing bitter, brutal fighting. Technological advances in warfare and use of forbidden magics combined to destroy on a scale the world had never seen, and any remaining notions of war as a glorious and noble endeavor were quickly replaced by scenes of butchery and horror.

Although they received parades and official welcomes wherever they returned, as a whole the veterans came home feeling cut off from the lives they'd led before they shipped out. The sheer scale of the devastation, combined with exposure to far more magic than most Americans were accustomed to, left many veterans feeling adrift, horrified by what they'd seen and done, yet also unable to easily process returning to a relatively magic-free place like America. They came to be called the Lost Generation, not just for the numbers dead but for the toll taken on those who survived.



The Temperance Crusade

Spurred on by the magical horrors American soldiers were reporting in the War, objection back home to magic in general and *sangreal* in particular was reaching a fever pitch. In particular, the Order of the Knights Temperance stepped up as a leader of the crusade to ban the sale of alcohol altogether, with the unstated but obvious goal of crushing the *sangreal* business in the process. The movement struck a chord with a public that had been bombarded with the horrific tales and images of the Gate War, and despite some high-level lobbying (and worse) the sale of all spirits and intoxicating beverages became illegal with the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, with enforcement beginning in 1920.

As the original source of *sangreal* and still (rightfully) seen as the national capital of the trade, Camelot has been a major target for the Crusaders and other advocates of the new Prohibition. Several Temperance chapterhouses operate around the city, and whenever the police prove too corrupt or ineffective to deal with the illicit liquor trade, the Knights organize “citizen crusades” of vigilantes to spur officials into action, occasionally even undertaking raids themselves. It would be a stretch to say the Crusaders are well loved in the city at present, but their zeal commands a certain amount of respect, even from those who don’t share their views. What’s more, every time gangland violence flares up—and especially when innocents are caught in the crossfire—the Knights gain a little bit more popular support.

For their part, the syndicates aren’t blind to this situation. They’ve done their best to avoid clashing openly with the Temperance Knights, knowing that coming down too hard would cost significant public support and severely limit the ability of friendly officials to turn a blind eye. Not to mention that a rare but powerful handful of the Crusaders are capable of real miracles, making them dangerous even to those carrying artifacts or blessed with gifts of the Fair Folk.



The Return of the Kings

Prohibition did not spell the end of legal sales of *sangreal* and other spirits, but it did force them into the shadowy world of bootleggers, black markets, and back-alley bars. While Camelot certainly has no shortage of gangs, syndicates, and other organized ne'er-do-wells to keep law enforcement busy in enforcing the Volstead Act, one organization quickly rose to a preeminent position in the city's criminal underworld: the notorious gang known as the King's Men.

Led by the charismatic young Arthur, a college-educated veteran and son of notorious gangster and leg-breaker Uther King, the organization has emerged as a force to be reckoned with across Camelot and beyond. Despite the open illegality of the syndicate's activities, Arthur's status as a hometown hero and the continuing popularity of *sangreal* and intoxicants in general has so far kept him and his top lieutenants out of prison, though often on the front page. Factor in the financial, political, and often literal wizardry of Arthur's backer and mentor, Merlin, and it's no wonder the organization has managed to hold on to its position as the most feared and powerful gang in town.

Although the King's Men are known for their generosity to the common people and a certain stylish flair to their activities—such as wearing swords and insisting on duels to settle formal disputes—they are still a criminal organization, and an extremely ruthless one when necessary. Officially, the King's Men hold to a strict code of honor; as a member, being found lacking is a sure way to be disciplined (or worse). Unofficially, of course, the King's Men are just as human as anyone else, and can fall victim to greed, ambition, bloodlust, envy, cowardice, and any other human frailty.

This tension in being held to a higher standard while living a criminal life is exacerbated by the fact that few of the gang's rivals bother to hold themselves to anything approaching such a formal code. The frustration of “following the rules” can cause King's Men members to chafe and even contemplate how they might run things if only they were in charge. Arthur is keenly aware of these frustrations, but feels on the whole it's worth having an organization that can be seen as fairer and more trustworthy than other criminal syndicates, especially since it affords them some extra goodwill from the locals when the police come nosing around.



Down to Business

These days, the King's Men are the preeminent criminal outfit in Camelot, responsible for all manner of criminal enterprises: running numbers, protection rackets, fencing stolen goods, muscle for hire, managing cathouses, extortion, blackmail, and of course, making and smuggling *sangreal*. They're up against the mayor's office, any number of rival gangs, and of course the Knights Temperance and their holy crusade against the spread of *sangreal*. Some of the higher-ranking members live like movie stars, beloved of the press for their sensational exploits, while others fight and die in the alleys trying to make their way to the top.

It's a time of big risks, alright, but any bookie will tell you that's when you can make the biggest score too. All you have to do is make sure you're still around to collect.

THE CODE OF THE KING'S MEN

What follows is the basic code of the King's Men. Your group may alter or add to it as suits your fiction.

- **Loyalty:** Never betray the King's Men or its members.
- **Secrecy:** Never reveal the organization's secrets to an outsider.
- **Honor:** Never break your word or stand for being called a liar.
- **Duty:** Follow orders you're given, and give orders worthy of following.
- **Mercy:** Never hurt children, or cause any harm beyond your orders.

DATELINE—CAMELOT, ILLINOIS, 1929

As far back as I can remember, I always wanted to be a gangster.

—Henry Hill, *Goodfellas*

Camelot began as a simple frontier town, a place for westward-moving settlers to rest and resupply, and where some of those same frontier souls could return to civilization to sell off the valuable furs and trophies they'd won in the wilds as well as to bring their herds to market. For a time it was best known for its saloons and slaughterhouses, and some of that rough-and-tumble attitude remains entrenched in its poorer neighborhoods. It wasn't long, though, before its prime location along a major westward route as well as its position on a natural port of the Great Lakes kicked its expansion into high gear. The coming of the railroads sealed it, and the Lady of the Lake took its position as the region's preeminent political and commercial hub. Camelot has grown by leaps and bounds, and its residents take fierce pride in the culture and sophistication the city has attracted as well. But all this money and culture also attracts such a strong criminal element to the city—a fact that is, of course, not mentioned nearly as often.

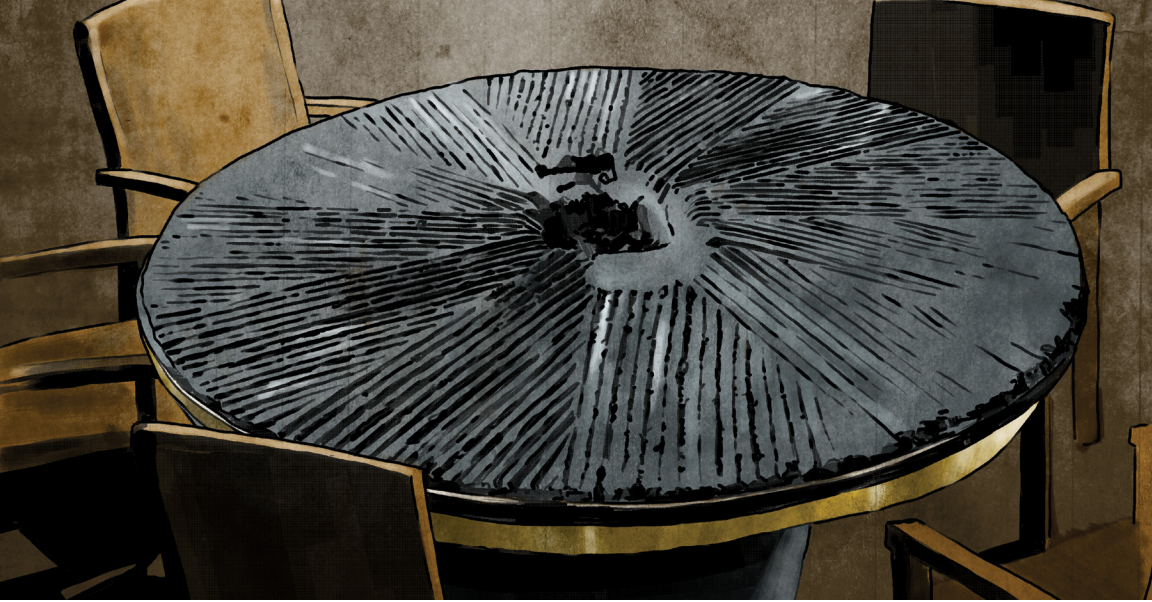
She may be better dressed now, but the Lady of the Lakes will always have blood under her nails.

The Culture of Chevalier Nouveau

Right now, the city is at forefront of a cultural movement called Chevalier Nouveau (“New Cavalier”), a design aesthetic that seeks to marry the more graceful and powerful elements of the chivalric period with modern society. This doesn't mean that people are clanking down the street in full suits of armor, of course, much less wandering drafty castles by torchlight. It simply means that artists, architects, and designers of all kinds are finding inspiration in an idealized version of the Middle Ages, creating a sort of “knight in shining armor” look for the modern age.

So, while Camelot has all the latest technologies—automobiles, telephones, motion picture shows, and so forth—there is a strong suggestion of the medieval as well. It's visible in the looming castles of the wealthy (all nicely modernized inside of course), the banners and accompanying plays on heraldic devices that seem to wave everywhere, the flourishes of medieval fashion in the clothes at the department store. Men and women still have dress swords to formal occasions—and some even know how to wield them—while staunch traditionalists wear their steels in day-to-day life.

Real-World Inspiration: Art Nouveau, the paintings of Waterhouse



The Round Table

A battered but proud old restaurant whose cuisine is best described as true Americana with a touch of the Old Country and a heavy emphasis on great steaks, the Round Table was the first headquarters Arthur chose when he was rising through the ranks of the King's Men. Despite his great wealth and position, he still prefers this place to any other when he's doing business. He has a back room all to himself when he shows up, and makes all of his important decisions while holding court seated at the famous Round Table—a massive wooden thing brought over from the Old Country, said to be enchanted with protective magics—which gives the restaurant its name. Earning a seat at the table for one of these meetings is a sign of real prestige. Although there are no official barriers to any customer coming in, one can be certain that strangers get examined very carefully if they come in on a night when the boss is there and working.

White City

Originally constructed as part of the World's Caledonian Exposition, the White City was an amusement park dominated by a singularly striking feature: a tower of electric lights that could be seen for miles. Even after the Exposition ended, the park remained a popular destination for years, but gradually business fell off as the novelty of its innovations wore thin and people sought entertainment elsewhere. Shortly after the War, the park was beginning to fall into disrepair when Merlin swooped and purchased it, installing his personal office at the top of the redesigned tower, dubbed the Ivory Tower by the locals. Cutting admission cost to nearly nothing as well as renovating the park and its attractions earned Merlin a lot of goodwill with the working class of Camelot. Rumor has it that Merlin conducts all sorts of experiments in his tower, perhaps even concocting new formulations of *sangreal* in hidden laboratories. It seems too brazen to be true, but the tower is tightly guarded. You never know.

Real-World Inspiration: White City Park

Saint George Hotel

Although Arthur keeps his original “office” at the Round Table open as a matter of pride, a humble restaurant doesn’t cut it when it’s time to really put on a show. When the occasion calls for hosting dozens or dazzling his guests with extravagance, the Saint George Hotel is the only choice. A majestic building nestled in one of the waterfront’s most exclusive neighborhoods, its accommodations are luxurious to the point of opulence, from its rooms to its dining to its world-class (and utterly discreet) concierge services. Not only that, but between the friendly criminals, reclusive business magnates, and vacationing celebrities looking to dodge the press all coming to stay, the Saint George has gradually added a network of secret passages, hidden staircases, private elevators, and no less than three underground tunnel exits. Throw in their top-of-the-line warding enchantments and tight-lipped security, and it’s easy to see why the Saint George remains the gathering place of choice for high rollers and important figures in town.

Real-World Inspiration: The Drake Hotel

Camelot Water Tower

Not far from the water’s edge sits the one of the city’s main water towers and water treatment facilities, an imposing stone structure that looks more like the tower of a fantastic castle than a functioning civic structure. And yet it is exactly that, taking in water from the lake for firefighting and municipal use as well as regulating floodwaters during periods of extreme weather. Of course, the King’s Men have co-opted it for their own purposes, working right under the city’s nose with bribed contractors to add a complex network of secret pipes that carry water straight to their illegal grails around the city. Best of all, the building’s status as a public structure means that all it takes is a few well-paid engineers and security guards to keep the whole thing running.

Real-World Inspiration: The Chicago Water Tower

Cavalier Field

One of Camelot’s crown jewels, the brand-new Cavalier Field is an arena like few others in the country, and a source of great pride for locals. The massive castle-like structure seats more than a hundred thousand people when packed to capacity, and has seen everything from collegiate football games to campaign rallies to musical performances. Most famously, Arthur rented it out for a massive public party to celebrate his wedding, inviting the population of Camelot to celebrate with music and a tremendous feast. There was even a great deal of free-flowing alcohol and *sangreal*, though the host later claimed to not know how someone managed to sneak it into his party—against his strict orders, of course.

Real-World Inspiration: Soldier Field

The Lady of the Lake

A beloved Camelot institution, the venerable ferry known as the *Lady of the Lake* was originally christened the *Queen Vivian*, but during the Exposition the ferry acquired the city's nickname and it stuck. A sturdy ship that's been overhauled numerous times over the years, the Lady of the Lake is also a lynchpin of the *sangreal* smuggling operation, so much so that Merlin has been heard saying that without her "the King's Men would have no crown." After purchasing her through a carefully removed holding company and using a combination of clever engineering and a bit of magic, Merlin transformed the Lady of the Lake into a major smuggling vessel responsible for bringing in raw materials and then sending *sangreal* back to Canada, where it is routed to other ports across the lakes. Although several boats now make the run, the Lady is the first and greatest of them all, and it would be a blow to Merlin's pride if anything were to happen to her.

Shallot's Department Store

A huge department store that made its fortune on swanky fashions and high-end home goods, Shallot's is nevertheless best known locally for its gorgeous counter girls. Management's insistence on hiring only the most beautiful and vivacious young ladies is such that the local papers run a regular photo feature on the "Ladies of Shallot's" around the holiday season every year. Landing a date with one of these beauties is a mark of no small distinction, and the store is also a hotbed of gossip. Everyone who's anyone in Camelot passes through its doors sooner or later, after all, and so the girls pick up all sorts of scandalous information ranging from extramarital affairs to money troubles to drug habits, making the store a prime target for all kinds of crooks looking for angles to work.

Real-World Inspiration: Marshall Field & Company department store

Green Chapel Cocktail Lounge

So named because it's run out of the basement of an abandoned church in the heart of Camelot's biggest Irish neighborhood, the Green Chapel is one of the city's most notorious nightspots. The sound of music and laughter echoes out of the doors every night of the week, and while the existence of the club is one of the worst-kept secrets in the city, the raids are rare and lackluster, and never seem to shut it down for more than a week or two at most. If the neighbors are bothered by the blasphemy of turning an old church into a rollicking speakeasy, the money the King's Men spread around goes a long way toward keeping any troubled consciences quiet. As one might imagine, the Knights Temperance seethe at the notion of a holy site profaned in this way, but so far their efforts to crush the speakeasy and reclaim the site have been repeatedly frustrated. It's becoming something of an embarrassment, so the likelihood that they'll take drastic action to shut down the club is rising by the day.

Real-World Inspiration: The Green Mill Tavern

Memoir Theater

A stylish place to take in the latest newsreels and picture shows, the Memoir is a lavish theater that celebrates the new cinematic art form while carrying over many of the most luxurious indulgences of classic theaters. On the weekends, the lines can stretch around the block if a popular feature is playing, though of course the King's Men and their dates don't wait in line, and the ushers know better than to throw them out even if they talk or throw popcorn during the feature. While it is known that the Memoir sits atop a powerful ley line, recently rumors have swirled that the place is cursed, and that part of that curse says one day a notorious outlaw is destined to die at that very site. This has kept some of the more superstitious underworld crowd away, though of course it just encourages others to show up as a show of bravado.

Real-World Inspiration: The Biograph Theater

Gringo Layla's Garage

It's unclear exactly how Layla came by her nickname—while her accent definitely places her somewhere down south, she seems to tell a different life story every time she's asked—but there's no question she knows her way around engines like nobody else in Camelot. Most of the King's Men get their rides through Layla, who seems to be able to dig up battered jalopies and pristine limousines with equal ease. While she is not an official member of the outfit, she and her bulldog Shotgun are welcome guests at all but the gang's most private functions, and she has proven to be discreet and capable when it comes to repairing suspicious problems like fixing bullet holes or cleaning up bloody upholstery. Plenty of smitten gangsters have asked her out, but so far nobody has managed more than one day.

THE SOCIETY PAGES

When you love someone, you've gotta trust 'em. There's no other way. You've gotta give them the keys to everything that's yours. Otherwise, what's the point? And for a while, I believed that's the kind of love I had.

—Ace Rothstein, *Casino*

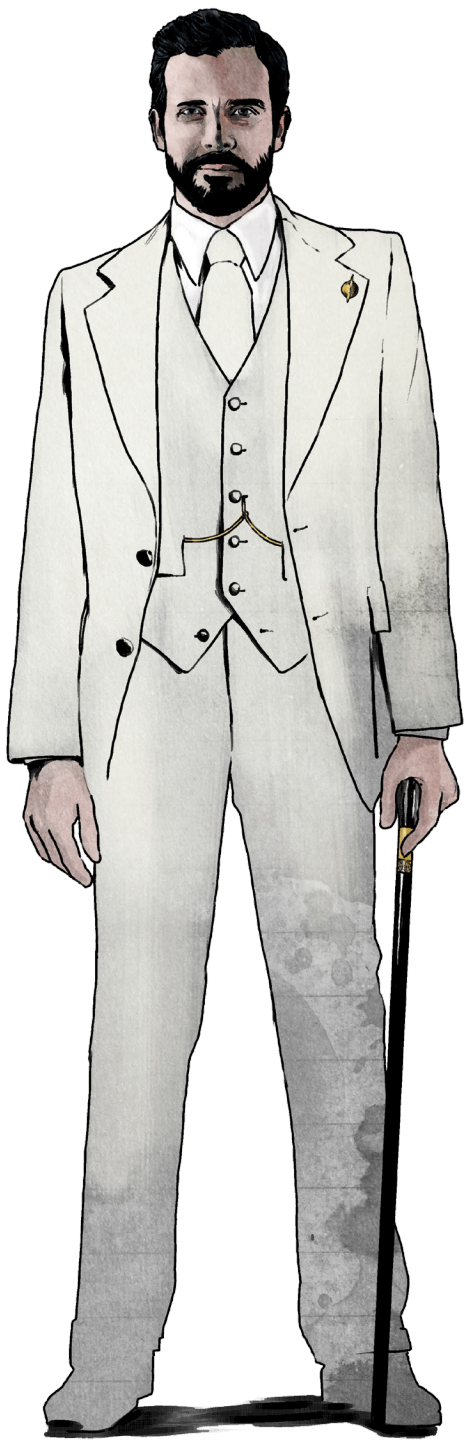
Here are a few prominent local figures that have shaped present-day Camelot and the King's Men. They've got high concepts and troubles to give you an idea of who they are and how they might interact with fiction, along with some relevant skills. GMs, if the players interact with these individuals, feel free to give them stunts and more skill ratings as needed. They are all powerful allies and dangerous opponents in their own ways, but it's important to remember that they are also fallible and flawed, and should never make the players feel their characters are superfluous.

Arthur King

This wasn't supposed to be Arthur's life. His father, Uther, was a hard-bitten gangster who arrived from the Old Country in his youth and built up a brutal criminal empire in Camelot. More than anything, though, he wanted to keep his son out of the violent and paranoid life of organized crime, with the dream of handing over a totally legal business to his son by the time the boy came of age. However, as is so often the case, fate had other plans for the charismatic young man.

When America at last threw its forces into the Gate War, Arthur left college and enlisted over his father's strenuous objections, becoming a decorated junior officer who fought in several famous battles. Along the way he picked up his best friend, a young lance corporal named Thomas Mallory or "Lance" for short, who would follow him back to Camelot after the war and become his strong right hand in the years to come. Arthur finished his degree—history—and went to work in the family business. He and his father quarreled bitterly over this decision, often with Merlin acting as something between an impartial arbiter and a referee in the ring depending on the day, but Arthur felt at home and refused to take the legitimate path his father wanted for him.

When Uther died in a raid organized by the Temperance Knights, Prohibition was already heading toward becoming reality, and Arthur took control of the King's Men during a tumultuous time. Even with his considerable charisma, he might not have been able to keep the gang alive in those early years if it weren't for Merlin's sage advice and Lance's strong right hand. Fortunately, Arthur is a natural leader, and knows when to listen to advice, when to delegate, and when to take command directly, and under his direction the King's Men not only held on but gradually became one of the fiercest outfits in the city.



No small part of this success is due to the legendary code of the King's Men, which might seem like a handicap in a criminal organization but has proven to bind the gang tightly together. Arthur's policy of meeting with his lieutenants and even ordinary members at the Round Table to discuss business directly, acting almost as equals and taking time to consider their input, has also been a boon, even though Merlin has cautioned him repeatedly that it makes him vulnerable. Arthur adamantly insists on the Round Table policy, however, in a rare case of serious public disagreement with his mentor.

Arthur is every inch the image of a handsome leader, with a strong build and square-jawed good looks that convey power as naturally as he breathes. He is exceptionally well spoken and makes friends easily, but also knows when a leader needs to distance himself. He genuinely cares for the men and women of the King's Men, a weakness that has been exploited more than once but which he cannot seem to rid himself of—and is not interested in trying. Though privately he sometimes wonders if he will ever be able to retire, head to Jersey, and live year-round in that quiet little shore place in Avalon where he vacations every summer...or if this life will claim his, like it did his father's.

Arthur also has a blind spot when it comes to those he trusts most—Merlin, Gwen, and Lance—which has kept him from reading them and their faults as naturally as he reads others. He sincerely believes they would never hurt him, which is why they are destined to do exactly that—and when they do, all of Camelot may burn in the aftermath.

High Concept:
THE ONE TRUE KING

Trouble:
A HEART THAT CANNOT SEE BETRAYAL

Notable Skills:
Rapport (Superb), Will, Fight, Empathy

Guinevere “Gwen” King (née Bradley)

If Arthur enjoys a certain amount of outlaw celebrity, it's due in large part to the efforts of his wife. A consummate socialite and skilled politician from an old-money family, Gwen is almost single-handedly responsible for the goodwill of the ordinary people of Camelot that makes it so hard for the authorities to effectively crack down on the King's Men. She attends all the right parties and makes a splash whenever she shows up, setting fashion trends and making (or breaking) reputations with a carefully worded quote for the press. She gives generously—and sincerely—to charity, though she's savvy enough to make sure her generosity is well covered in the local press too.

Gwen is, in a word, glamorous. She balances an ethereal sort of beauty with a quick wit and a love for a well-placed scandalous phrase, and possesses a nearly unflappable sense of poise. She is also an expert at taking rough-edged guys and dolls who have come up through the streets and giving them a crash course in fashion, etiquette, basic finance, and the finer points of public relations, making them into respectable (seeming) citizenws and sometimes even media darlings. Gwen likes to joke that her husband was her first such success story, though the truth is they met in college, and by the time she knew his family's business she was too much in love to care.

Only one thing has broken Gwen's sure sense of self, and that's the growing feelings she has for Lance. She loves her husband, but something about the quiet killer with the tortured eyes just tugs at her, and quite against her will and better judgment she's fallen hard for his second-in-command. She keeps it bottled up as best she can, believing it's unrequited, but it only gets deeper over time. Should she learn the truth about his feelings, there's no telling what will happen next...but it won't be good.

High Concept:

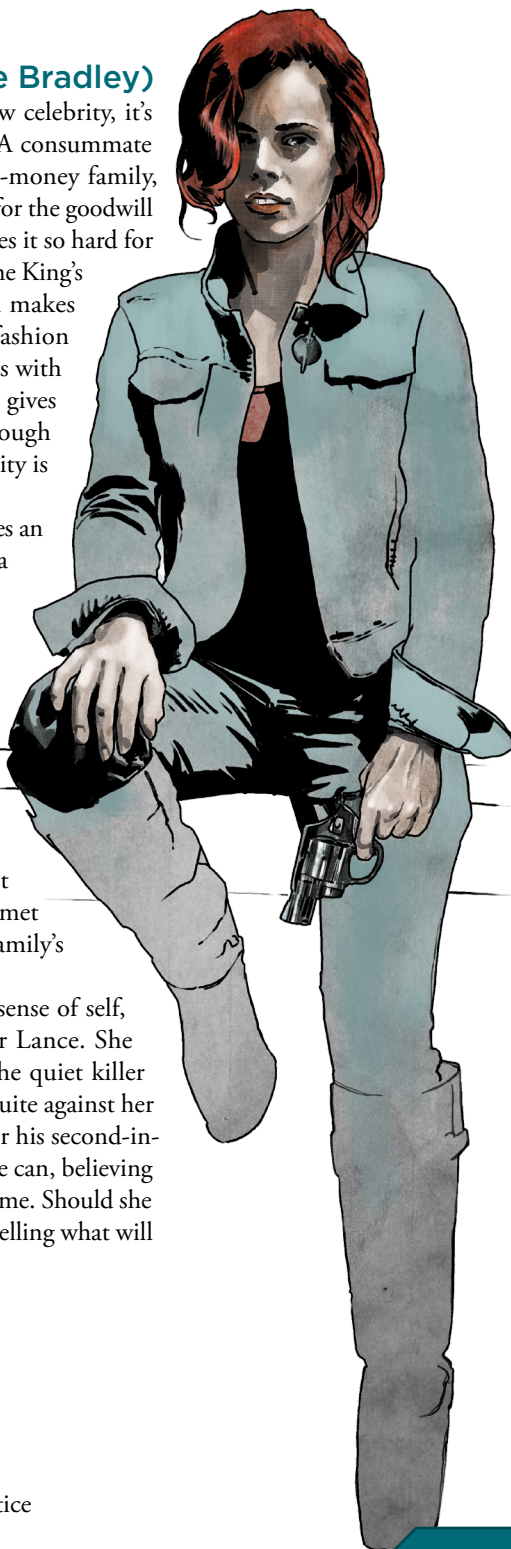
GANGLAND QUEEN OF HIGH SOCIETY

Trouble:

MY HEART CAN'T BE DENIED

Notable Skills:

Contacts (Superb), Resources, Deceive, Notice





Eliot Merlin

Camelot's most mysterious man, Eliot Merlin has been many things in the course of his long lifetime: a businessman, a scholar, a gangster, an inventor, and a mentor. Of course, as far as the public is concerned, all those pale in comparison to his fame as the great wizard of his age, the man who somehow won the secret of enchanting grails to craft *sangreal*. He is widely regarded as one of the most powerful wizards in America, if not the current era altogether, a distinction he acknowledges with a laugh and a shy smile of non-denial.

Merlin tends to cultivate a professorial appearance, complete with a pipe, glasses, long white beard, and tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, but is not shy to abandon this pretense to don formal business attire as necessary. He dislikes the showy affectations of some practitioner—robes, wands, other such things—though he will occasionally dress the part of a fearsome wizard if it gives the impression he needs. The most striking thing about him are his eyes, which are flat gray like chips of flint but always bright with interest, coupled with the unnerving quality of seeming to stare right through the person he's scrutinizing.

For a man who is constantly juggling a variety of business, criminal, and magical concerns, Merlin nevertheless has the eerie habit of appearing where he's needed most, whether or not those involved understand exactly why. He is fond of testing junior members of the King's Men, presenting them with problems whose solution also determines their long-term potential in the outfit, and while his tests can be rigorous and are seldom quite what they appear to be at first, passing them is a sure way to rise rapidly in Merlin's estimation—and thus Arthur's as well. Merlin also sees competing with Mayor Lafayette as something between a chess match and a blood sport, and loves ferreting out her latest schemes and finding inventive ways to thwart them.

High Concept:
GREATEST WIZARD ALIVE

Trouble:
UNDONE BY MY OWN DESIGNS

Notable Skills:
Lore (Superb), Notice, Investigate, Will

Thomas “Lance” Mallory

Lance served under Arthur in his platoon during the Gate War, which is where he also picked up his nickname, with the joke being that he'd never make it past corporal due to his penchant for running into danger. Despite the wide gap between their backgrounds—Lance grew up in a blue collar family in Philadelphia—the two became inseparable, with Lance's calm demeanor and skill at arms complementing Arthur's fiery charisma and tendency to plunge into the thick of the fighting to rally his men. When the war ended, Arthur offered Lance a place in the outfit, and the young man went from loyal soldier to bodyguard and lethal enforcer without batting an eye.

A quiet young man with old eyes and hands that never waver, Lance keeps his hair shaved low in the style of many returning veterans. He doesn't tend to talk much but is a keen listener, and when he does speak it's clear he's been carefully analyzing all he's heard. Though he wasn't raised in a fencing tradition, Lance is sudden death with any kind of blade in hand, a true prodigy with steel. Although his enemies suspect he must be blessed by the Fair Folk, the truth is that Lance is simply a natural warrior; magic has nothing to do with it.

Lance has been known to pick up a girl from Shallot's now and then, but never goes with any dame for long. He says it's because dating saps his focus, but the truth is he's hopelessly in love with Gwen. What's more, the guilt he feels over loving his best friend's wife is eating him alive, especially since he's increasingly convinced that these feelings aren't unrequited. If and when he and Gwen finally level with one another, the balance of power in the King's Men is going to change forever, a moment that Lance is dreading and dreaming of in equal measure.

High Concept:

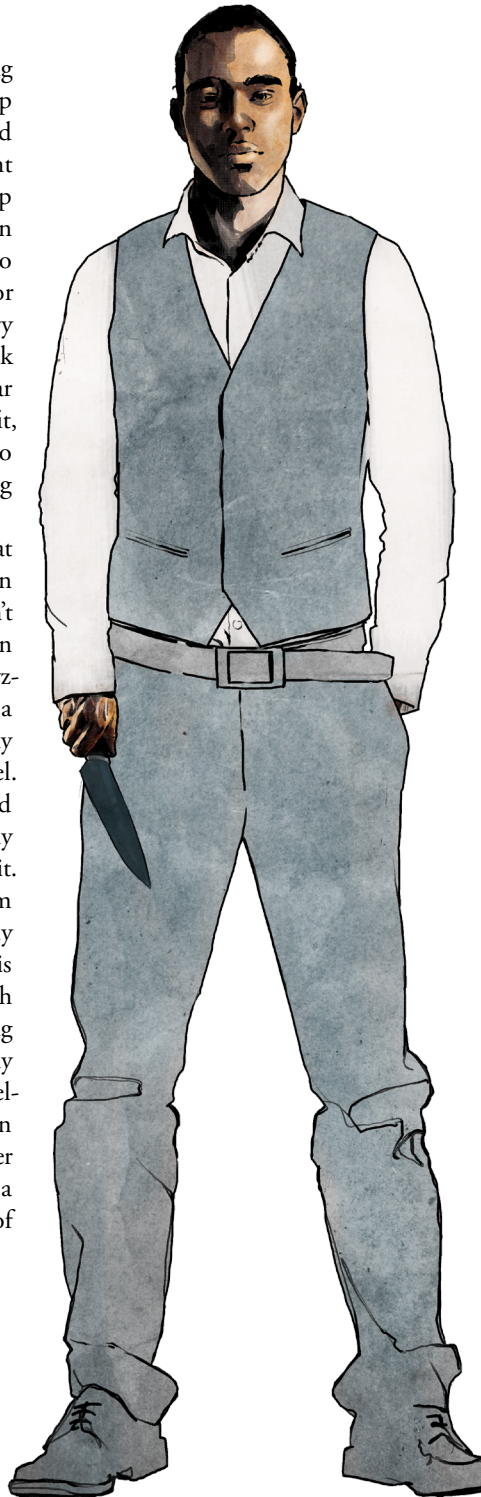
THE KING'S BLOODY RIGHT HAND

Trouble:

MY HEART CAN'T BE DENIED

Notable Skills:

Fight (Superb), Notice, Physique, Provoke





Mayor Morgan Lafayette

While no one disputes Merlin's brilliance, the man is not infallible, and the powerful sorceress turned political dynamo Morgan Lafayette is perhaps the old wizard's worst mistake. A brilliant practitioner in her own right, Morgan's combination of magical skill and old family money made her irresistible to Merlin, who took her under his wing (and into his bed) while Arthur was away during the Gate War. There she learned much of Merlin's magic and the making of *sangreal*, knowledge she still puts to good use today. When Arthur returned, however, Merlin increasingly ignored Morgan in favor of his favorite pupil, a situation the proud Morgan found intolerable.

After a bitter falling-out that saw Merlin flee the country for a time and Morgan locked out of all her mentor's laboratories and businesses, she resolved to destroy everything the old man had worked to build. Prohibition was a godsend, delivering her the perfect weapon for her vengeance, and when she saw it coming down the line she used her family's connections and considerable war chest to push into politics. Being a known practitioner of magic is normally a considerable hurdle in American politics, but Morgan realized that Camelot's position as a major *sangreal* city could be played to her advantage. She ran a campaign based on "responsible magic" and, despite a great deal of interference by Merlin and Arthur, won handily in the both her first mayoral race and a subsequent re-election campaign.

Safe in her office at City Hall, Mayor Lafayette wages a slow war of attrition against the King's Men as well as Merlin's many shell companies and straw politicians. A masterful chess player, she takes losses and reverses in stride, using her magic in powerful but subtle ways to help achieve her goals, and is willing to sacrifice in the short term in order to see her opponents' strategies in action. She is supremely patient, taking her time to make her victory as painful and thorough as possible for her enemies.

High Concept:

AMBITIOUS WIZARD MAYOR

Trouble:

TOO CLEVER BY HALF

Notable Skills:

Resources (Superb), Lore, Deceive, Contacts

Morton Rudd

Although Arthur prefers to gloss over the more sordid details of his father's life, even he acknowledges that his father broke his marriage vows on more than one occasion. What Arthur doesn't know, however, is that one of those lovers—Margarite Gusman, a chorus girl—bore a son. When Uther refused to acknowledge the child, Margarite gave the boy up for adoption, but not before placing a curse on the hapless child and his father for ruining her life.

Cursed or not, Mort made his pious adoptive parents proud by growing up zealous and intolerant of all things magical. A legal archivist by day, he joined the Order of the Knights Temperance after college and rose through the ranks not by passionate ambition but by cold calculation, showing real fire only on raids, where Mort shocked his comrades by shedding his calm demeanor and fighting like a man possessed. Now the youngest chapter president in North America, he runs the Camelot lodges like a private army, seeking greater and more direct conflict with the criminals and magicians he despises. He loathes the mayor's magical background but grudgingly concedes the need to work with her; were it not for this disgust and distrust, the criminals of Camelot might be in even greater danger.

Morton Rudd gives the appearance of being a methodical and dispassionate man, but it hides a terrible temper and a heart constantly simmering with hate. An expert swordsman, Mort loves toying with enemies to take their measure before dispatching them as painfully as possible. However, all of this is prelude to Mort's one driving ambition—killing his half-brother Arthur. Although he was always a hateful and vindictive man, learning of his true parentage and his relation by blood to the city's most notorious criminals drove him quite over the edge. He has and will kill to keep this secret, and will consider himself pure only when Arthur lies bleeding at his feet.

High Concept:

SPURNED CRUSADING ZEALOT

Trouble:

FIRST BLOOD TO ME, ALWAYS

Notable Skills:

Provoke (Superb), Fight, Persuade, Resources





Min Wei

If Merlin is considered the most mysterious man in Camelot, no small part of that reputation comes from the presence of Min Wei, his constant companion of the past decade. (In Chinese fashion, Wei is her given name, and Min her surname.) Although at a glance it would seem that the lovely and graceful Wei is simply a personal secretary, only a fool would assume that such is the limit of her capabilities. Judging by the meetings she attends with Merlin, she is at the very least a trusted confidant, and various other accounts place her as his bodyguard, magical assistant, and possibly even lover.

There is no question that Wei is a talented practitioner of magic, and judging by the fact that she has personally repaired some of the outfit's grails it's clear that she is well versed in Merlin's techniques. All that anyone knows for sure is that shortly before Prohibition began Merlin vanished for a few months, and when he returned he brought Wei with him. When asked about their relationship, for his part Merlin simply smiles and replies: "She's my penance." Efforts to pry further are met with increasingly stony silence.

In person, Wei is polite but unfailingly deflects questions about her personal life or her life before coming to Camelot. She adores opera and attends regularly, and those few who have heard it claim she has an impressive singing voice herself. She also treasures flowers of all kinds, especially roses, and despite her status as a foreigner she has managed to join several of the city's prominent horticultural societies. When not at Merlin's side or overseeing one of his projects, she can usually be found collecting records in his office, or pursuing one of her other passions in the city.

High Concept:

USURPING WIZARD APPRENTICE

Trouble:

GREATNESS AT ALL COSTS

Notable Skills:

Lore (Superb), Deceive, Stealth, Will

MAKING YOUR BONES

You can't be half a gangster, Nucky. Not anymore.

—Jimmy Darmody, *Boardwalk Empire*

Under the Table uses the *Fate Core* rules for creating characters, with a few notable tweaks to better represent the technology and culture of the time period as well as the setting's fantasy elements.

Modus Operandi

By default, characters in *Under the Table* are made members of the King's Men, who most likely joined as part of the same crew, gang members who work together and probably came up in the ranks together. You may adjust this starting position as you wish, though. Perhaps your group wants to play brand-new recruits, still eager to prove themselves, or maybe you're interested in playing part of Arthur's inner circle who've earned their seats at the Round Table ten times over. Ultimately, whatever makes for the best story is what's right.

However, this doesn't answer the question of what it is the PCs do. The King's Men are involved in a lot of activities, so you'll want to work out what each character's area of expertise is within the syndicate. These aren't strict classifications, but most members do tend to get noticed for one or two outstanding skills, becoming specialized in those pursuits as they work more jobs. Here are some common areas of expertise that characters might explore:

- **Muscle:** If a member needs protection or some poor bastard needs to get hurt, it's the muscle that gets the call. From old-school sword fights to tommy-gun ambushes and sometimes even arson or dynamite jobs, their work usually isn't subtle, but it's always memorable.
- **Grift:** Fast-talkers, con men, masters of seduction, and charmers of all stripes. Grifters befriend, bewilder, and betray as needed, breaking hearts on demand. If it requires a silver tongue and a fearless heart, these boys and girls get it done.
- **Brains:** Members with a talent for leadership, logistics, and all-around tactical thinking are typically groomed to act as the brains of a crew, making sure everything goes according to plan. A crew with real brains is a dangerous force indeed, highly adaptable and hard to pin down.
- **Heist:** Whether it's picking pockets, cracking safes, or just some good old-fashioned B & E, these thieves are the best of the best at boosting other people's property. Of course, the first lesson is learning who you can steal from in the first place.
- **Bootlegging:** The signature criminal enterprise of the King's Men, smuggling *sangreal* components and ordinary alcohol into the city and the finished products back out of it demands resourceful, quick-thinking members willing to take huge risks.
- **Magic:** Rare and highly prized, any member with a blessing from the Fair Folk or in possession of a useful artifact will inevitably find their services called upon to upkeep grails, supervise *sangreal* production, and ward off mystical attacks and surveillance from other gangs.



The crew's composition is important. You'll want to carefully discuss this as a group to make sure that all the character concepts fit. If most of the group wants to play straight-up sword-wielding muscle, for example, but one player wants to play a charming but cowardly grifter, talk it out and make sure everyone will have a chance to shine.

A crew that is centered almost entirely on one purpose—such as an all-muscle crew, or a group of smugglers led by some capable brains—is called a pike crew, or just pikes. (*Never* pikers, though, unless someone wants to start a fight.) By contrast, a crew of very mixed different talents is referred to as an axe crew, or woodsmen. As one might imagine, pike crews are valued for their great ability with their chosen focus, while woodsmen earn respect for being able to handle a wide variety of tasks.

Of course, if your group isn't interested in playing King's Men, you could always play members of a rival crew, or Prohibition agents trying to enforce the law, or even members of the Temperance Knights, wielding divine power against the scourge of *sangreal*. There's certainly nothing stopping you from doing so, but in the interest of focus we won't really cover such concepts here.

Aspects

Characters choose aspects normally, with a major exception: magic. If you want your character to have a Fair Folk blessing and thus possess a supernatural stunt, or a signature artifact that is part of their legend, write the blessing or artifact into their high concept. Note however that such folks are rare to begin with, and any in the syndicate are certainly being watched carefully by Merlin if not working with him outright. In fact, it's a fairly safe bet that the sly old dog is cataloging everyone in Camelot with interesting blessings or useful artifacts, whether they're in the syndicate or not. This in turn gives GMs a ready-made compel for characters with magical high concepts; a character with a gift for invisibility might find Merlin calls on that special talent to help him with a "little favor" involving getting in and out of a high security location unseen.

Also, the group as a whole has a **crew aspect**, which reflects their reputation, for better or worse. It could be something straightforward, like **THE BEST HEIST CREW IN TOWN**, or it could be more colorful, like **THE 39TH STREET KILLERS**. You don't have to pick a crew aspect immediately, though. If your characters are just starting out, or no immediate reputation presents itself, you may wait a session or two to gauge your group's chemistry and see if a suitable aspect presents itself.

For more on how magic stunts and artifacts work, read on to "Stunts" (page 35) and "New Mechanic: Artifacts" (page 37).

SA SAOL

While many gangster stories and Arthurian legends focus almost entirely on male characters, that's not a limitation *Under the Table* recognizes. In this setting, female politicians, entrepreneurs, and police officers might raise some eyebrows in socially conservative circles, sure, but they're still accepted parts of society. As for the criminal underworld, women who take up active roles in the syndicate are referred to as being *sa saol* ("in the life" in the tongue of the Old Country), which has since been corrupted to "sassy" in American street parlance. These so-called sassy women can rise to any rank in the syndicate and are known for being as ruthless as their male counterparts, if not more so, though naturally they are also no longer subject to the protection typically granted to wives and girlfriends against violence and kidnapping during gang warfare. Such are the breaks.

Skills

Most of the skills in *Under the Table* work the same as in *Fate Core*, though naturally we've made some adjustments here and there to account for different technologies when it comes to things like Drive and Shoot.

Crafts (Alchemixology)

As one might imagine for the “science” behind the creation and application of *sangreal*, alchemixology is a colorful discipline: part chemistry, part alchemy, and part old-fashioned mixology. Anyone can try to mix liquor and *sangreal* with a decent chance to get a fairly simple result, but someone versed in the intricacies of “the Devil’s chemistry” can craft exquisitely nuanced and focused effects, leaving patrons delighted and eager for more magical intoxication.

To mix a drink with *sangreal*, roll Crafts. Mixing a drink whose effect is a basic aspect of one or two words (**GHOST WHISPERS**) faces Mediocre (+0) difficulty, while a simple sentence (**I CAN HEAR THE SPIRITS**) is Fair (+2) difficulty, and a nuanced or highly specific aspect (**THERE ARE SPIRITS ALL AROUND US, AND I AM THEIR CONDUIT**) demands Great (+4) difficulty. Adjust the difficulty depending on whether the nature of the booze is in line with the intended effect and the time available for experimentation.

Creating *sangreal* from scratch requires the Grail Knight stunt, listed later in this section. Making even a small amount of the brew also requires an enchanted grail, numerous rare and expensive ingredients, and a significant investment of time, meaning that far more people know how to make the stuff than actually have the resources to do it. This is especially true when one considers that both syndicates and law enforcement are constantly on the lookout for new *sangreal* distillers to recruit or incarcerate. Still, the potential rewards are impressive indeed, so there’s never a shortage of folks willing to take the risk when it presents itself.

EXAMPLE ALCHEMIXOLOGY STUNTS

Grail Knight: You know how to brew true *sangreal*, and can operate a grail. You may spend a fate point to “flavor” a batch with a basic aspect, which naturally applies to any liquor mixed with it. A bartender using flavored *sangreal* does not have to roll unless they want to elaborate on the aspect. You must possess this stunt to create *sangreal*; with narrative justification and the GM’s permission, you may begin play with a working grail already set up.

Hey, Bartender: You have a flair for alchemixology. You receive a +2 on all Crafts rolls to produce a desired aspect when mixing drinks, and each shift generated when mixing grants a +1 bonus for those drinking on their first Physique rolls to resist ill effects from imbibing.

Stunts

Stunts are handled as in *Fate Core* with one significant addition: Characters that received a Fair Folk blessing when they were young, survived a harrowing experience in a mystical location, or otherwise were exposed to significant magical energies may select one stunt that represents some kind of minor magical power or capability. Bear in mind that potent stunts—ones that exceed the normal scope of stunts, are clearly magical, or both—always require spending a fate point to use. GMs, you have final say on what stunts require spending a fate point.

While potent, these magical stunts do have some drawbacks. For one, even more-subtle magic always manifests some sort of signature “tell” that may be recognized by alert observers. For example, a character whose stunt allows him to get others to believe even obvious, outrageous lies might find his gift accompanied by the sound of small silver bells. These tells also allow those familiar with an individual to recognize the unique signature of their magic, sometimes even long after the user has departed.

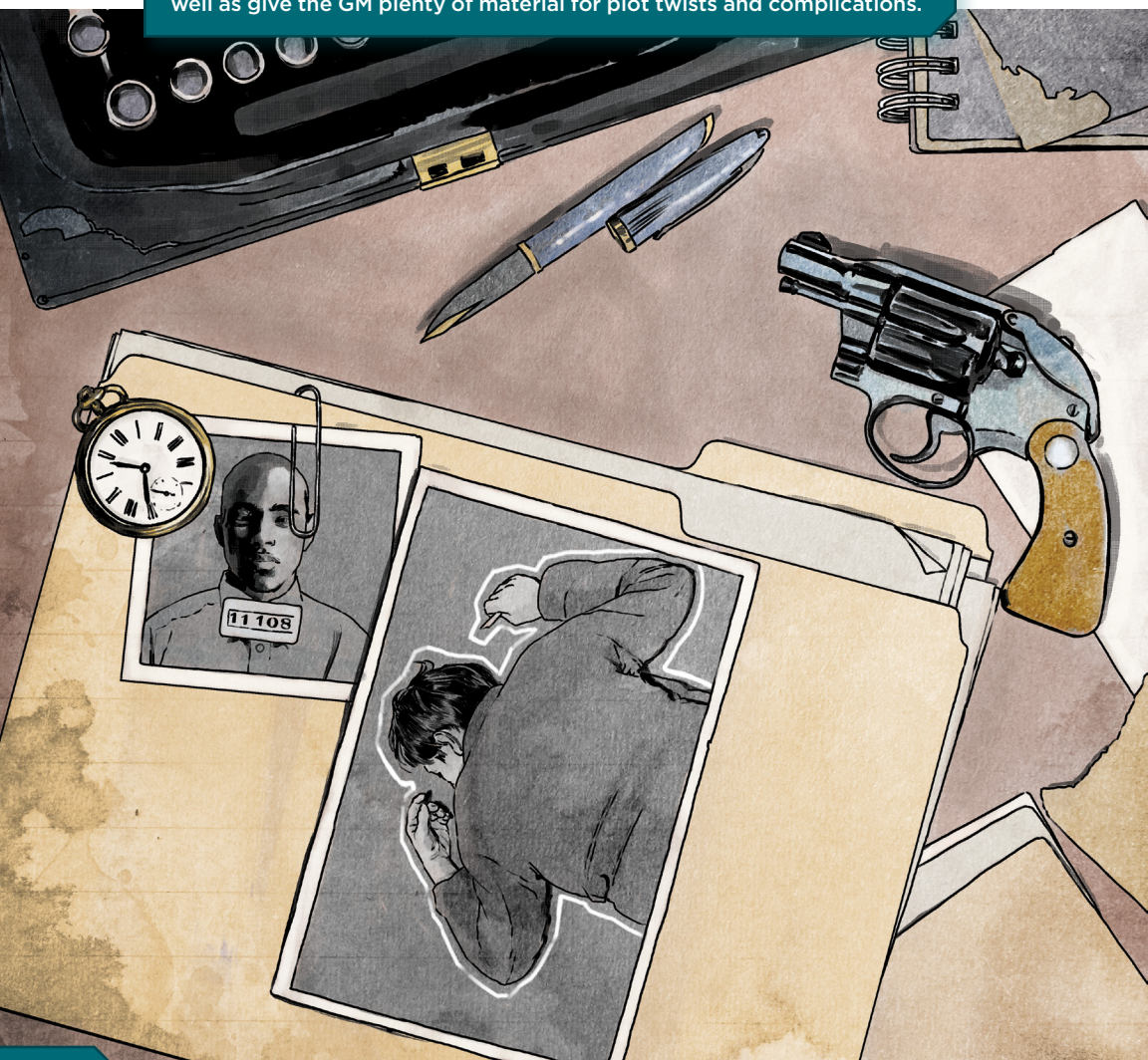
Interestingly enough, particularly devout individuals such as paladins of the Knights Temperance may also manifest supernatural stunts, though theirs tend to reflect their austere devotion and crusading zeal rather than the wondrous items and glittering glammers of the Fair Folk. Also, the Knights Temperance would certainly take great exception to the notion that they were in any way similar to the tainted gifts of the Fair Folk.

No matter how they came by it, your character may only possess one supernatural stunt, and it must be tied to their high concept.

Megan wants her character, Igraine “Iggy” Hart, to have a supernatural stunt. Her parents were from the Old Country, and took her to a remote part of the woods on her first birthday, where the Fair Folk blessed her as a reward for her family’s devotion. Her high concept is The Girl You Don’t See Coming, so she asks Ben, the GM, if Iggy can have a stunt that lets her use Stealth in broad daylight, representing a limited invisibility glamour she received from the Fair Folk. Ben thinks about it and decides that it seems appropriate to the setting, but says that the scent of the pine forest where her parents bargained with the Fair Folk will follow her every time she uses her gift. It’s not a huge thing, but anyone who knows it will be able to tell when she’s been using her gift.

THE RAP SHEET

On your character sheet, leave room for a rap sheet: a list of things your character has done that might come back to haunt them later on. Although its name refers to a slang term for a criminal record, this section does not have to only cover actual crimes. (Though it's definitely worth noting those too.) Promises, favors, affairs, and debts are great material for this section, for example, as they can certainly complicate your character's life down the road. Relationships are good fodder as well—spouses, children, relatives, close friends, even rivals. Characters in *Under the Table* can never completely shake their secrets and their sins, and the rap sheet allows the players to watch them accumulate as well as give the GM plenty of material for plot twists and complications.



New Mechanic: Artifacts

Although *sangreal* has put a little bit of magic in the reach of the common man, genuine, permanent magical items, commonly known as artifacts, are still rare and only getting scarcer in the years after the Gate War.

Artifacts offer great power to their owners, but—like all the gifts from the realms of the Fair Folk—that power comes with a price. Using an artifact can confer great advantage, but it always takes a toll on the wielder's body, mind, or both. Likewise, keeping too many artifacts interferes with the body's natural processes: Each artifact beyond the first that a character carries reduces their refresh by one. Should this reduce them to zero refresh, they cannot activate any artifacts until they raise their refresh to at least one.

Permanent Artifacts

Permanent artifacts have both a high concept and a trouble, which respectively describe the item and a notable drawback to its use: for example, a **RUBY PENDANT OF FORESIGHT** might bestow **SPLITTING HEADACHES**. In addition to its aspects, each permanent artifact also has one to three magical stunts.

Temporary Artifacts

There are also such things as temporary artifacts, which lose their power after a certain amount of time, a particular number of uses, or upon meeting some other condition. One might be a perfume bottle that can make the user utterly desirable three times.

These artifacts don't have high concepts or trouble aspects, and depending on how powerful they are, their benefits might manifest as boosts instead of stunts. Such artifacts are slightly more common one the whole, but still quite difficult to create—just less so than permanent ones—so they aren't as common as one might imagine.

Using Artifacts

Whenever you use an artifact's stunt, check off your lowest available box on the appropriate stress track. If an artifact's stunt is persistent or relatively diffuse—such as shoes that allow walking on water or a ring that produces a subtle emotion that colors an area—activating it once in a scene will usually suffice, unless circumstances change so much that activating it again seems like a fair price for retaining its benefits. Using an artifact in a nonmagical fashion has no cost—for example, wielding an artifact sword as a regular weapon.

If you're playing with multiple types of stress, GMs, you'll determine which type of stress each stunt causes. Depending on the power of the artifact, some of its stunts might also cost fate points or even additional refresh if they are particularly potent.

Activating a temporary artifact's stunt costs the same stress—there is no such thing as “cheap” magic!



Making Artifacts

As making artifacts requires mastery of true magic, their construction is by default beyond the province of PCs in *Under the Table*. That doesn't mean the characters might not be involved in making an artifact, though—when the urge to craft strikes him, Merlin is not shy about sending some favored King's Men to round up the rare, valuable, and often downright dangerous materials required.

HOT GOODS

Contrary to many fantasy settings where magic items are popular loot, artifacts in *Under the Table* are relatively rare and difficult or even dangerous to use, with power that comes at sharp cost. Each artifact was crafted for a specific purpose—and whether it was formed from the primal power of the Fair Folk or the blood and sweat of a mortal artisan, it was never casually done. Even minor artifacts have fascinating origins, and the most legendary of them have histories that rival nations. GMs and players, you'll want to work together to make sure that artifacts are compelling parts of the fiction as much as they are cool items with neat powers.



New Mechanic: Mystic Places

Areas of mystical power are highly sought-after real estate—they help in creating *sangreal* and other magical materials, and might serve as points of contact with the Fair Folk, if you're bold enough. In addition, the ambient magic such sites are soaked in sometimes makes it possible even for ordinary people to experience a bit of the supernatural if they know how to tap into it.

Each mystic locale has a rating from 1 to 3, unknown to the characters. In addition to any mundane aspects it might possess, the site has situation aspects equal in number to its rating that represent the site's supernatural nature. Really strange or powerful sites might even have special zones accessible only to those that know their secrets, such as a library with a hidden extra floor or a cellar where those in the know can step into the shadows themselves.

These supernatural situation aspects are treated like any other situation aspects, but notably they can only be invoked by those who know how to awaken the site's mystical energies. This might mean anything from calling out a particular magic word to spilling a drop of one's blood on the floor to conducting an elaborate hour-long ritual chant.

Mystic locations also have more long-term benefits. Anyone who performs deep magic, attempts to contact the Fair Folk, or creates magical materials on site—from *sangreal* all the way up to true artifacts—can spend a fate point to add the site's rating in shifts to any successful action. This does not add a bonus to a roll; it only enhances a successful result. Thus, even minor sites are highly prized, as they can do a great deal to facilitate the smooth creation of magical products, and they act as conducive places for beings like Merlin to do arcane research.

It is said that more-powerful sites exist, but such locations are almost certainly remote, carefully hidden, and likely well guarded. Among the King's Men, the most well-known of these supposed paradise spots is Avalon, a legendary shore retreat supposedly located off the coast of New Jersey that Arthur sometimes talks about retiring to, in those rare moments when he discusses such matters.

New Mechanic: Doom

Both gangster stories and Arthurian legends trade heavily in the concept of doom, not just in the general sense of a kingdom falling but also in the notion of the fate that awaits each individual who rises to power. To reflect this, each character in *Under the Table* has a set of **doom consequences** known collectively as their Doom. When a character uses up all of these consequences, their Doom will find them, and if they are not removed from the story altogether, they will certainly be forever changed by the experience.

As the story progresses, you must design the particular Doom you have in mind for your character. This can be something grand—your character might abandoning the last of their principles in their thirst for power—or something as “simple” as being betrayed by someone they trusts. Your character might be destined to leave “the life” behind, perhaps getting a new life after serving as a state’s witness or simply on the run after losing their nerve.

The Doom Aspect

When you first take a doom consequence, you also get a **doom aspect**. Its wording should suggest the way you see your character’s ultimate fate. Despite its name, the doom aspect does not need to be literally fatal, but it should definitely signal the end of the character as they once were. It’s never a happy outcome; at best it’s bittersweet, and most of the time it’s downright terrible. If there is a lighter side to this outcome, it’s still paid for in blood and pain. The phrasing may change over time, too, as your character’s fate comes more fully into focus.

Doom Consequences

Each character has four doom consequence slots: **the omen**, and the mild, moderate, and severe slots. Any time your character suffers a consequence, you may choose to fill a doom consequence slot. Fate intervenes and prevents the short-term harm the character was facing, but at a cost of moving one step closer to the character’s ultimate fate. GMs, work with the player to come up with a way the immediate consequence was avoided in the fiction, while also setting up a character’s shift toward her fate.

If there is no logical way to move the Doom forward immediately, events can take place shortly thereafter, or simultaneously but outside of the character’s knowledge. Perhaps they miraculously survive the shootout that should have killed them, but afterward they’re spotted disposing of crucial evidence, which moves them toward the fate of **RAT THEM OUT** as law enforcement gets leverage they will use later. Or maybe while the character’s lying low after the shooting, a petty thief breaks into their apartment and makes off with a trophy they took on the sly, which is going to end up in the wrong hands somewhere down the road.

Unlike regular consequences, **doom consequences do not recover over time or with rest and healing**. Once a character has a doom consequence, anyone who knows of it can use it against them in the same way as any other consequence. Of course, this often leads characters to become paranoid and ruthless as they try to contain the knowledge of their failings and misdeeds, which in turn leads to

more lies and more violence and more mistakes, but that's the way these things go. As they say in the business, one body tends to make others.

Given all this, you might wonder why you would ever take a doom consequence, since it lingers indefinitely and brings your character closer to their ultimate fate. There are a few reasons to make this decision. The first is that the Doom is part of the tragic nature of both Arthurian fantasy and gangster drama, and makes for the kind of flawed characters that inhabit those stories. Second, you can take a doom consequence in place of a regular consequence, which means your character can last longer before bowing out of the scene due to stress. In fact, coming closer to one's doom can be oddly liberating: **a character taking a doom consequence may clear the stress track that prompted the consequence.**

THE OMEN

The omen serves as a warning of the character's impending fate—the proverbial chill of someone walking over your grave. GMs, if a player has asked you to decide the nature of the Doom, this is the time to reveal it. It's a moment that reinforces a character's special status in the eyes of destiny. The omen is not a consequence, a character taking the omen may immediately clear a stress track or refresh her fate points. An omen may only be taken once.

MILD DOOM CONSEQUENCE

Typically, taking this means the character has made a seemingly minor but fateful mistake, or betrays a moment of weakness that will eventually be their undoing. Perhaps he makes a promise that will come back to haunt him, or she spares the life of an enemy who will one day look her in the eye and pull the trigger. Perhaps she starts losing money at the gambling tables that will be her undoing. It can even be something like an allergy or illness, like an old war wound starting to bother him, provided that ties into his ultimate fate.

MODERATE DOOM CONSEQUENCE

Taking this is a major step toward the character's ultimate fate. In some significant way she crosses a point of no return, even if no one else knows it at the time. She might not even realize the full significance of what she's done, though it's a serious enough moment that it's unlikely she'll dismiss it entirely. The gambler loses big, really big, and is forced to steal from his boss—he sets someone else up to take the fall, but the house still knows who did it. The old war wound flares up while his nemesis watches, giving her the fatal flaw in the character's defenses she's been waiting for.

SEVERE DOOM CONSEQUENCE

Taking this means something tremendous has occurred. If the character's ultimate fate hasn't already been clearly delineated, it will be soon. The gambler, now hopelessly indebted and blackmailed, is handed a clean gun and a dirty name “to wipe it all away.” The old war wound cripples a character at a critical moment, leaving him exposed for a fatal attack. The character will meet their Doom and leave play as soon as the fiction allows.

THIS THING OF OURS

Alas, that ever I bare crown upon my head! For now have I lost the fairest fellowship of noble knights that ever held Christian king together.

—King Arthur, *Le Morte d'Arthur*

Devising stories in *Under the Table* might seem intimidating at first, especially for those who are unfamiliar with Arthurian fantasy or American gangster drama, but it's not too tricky if you think about the setting's themes discussed earlier and begin with a basic formula.

The Setup

The opening of the story, the setup usually begins with the characters getting a job from their underboss or, if they run their own territory, being alerted to a matter that their underlings can't handle alone. Most of the time, the setup should be something that can be expressed in a simple sentence: "A witness needs to change his story, fast" or "A truckload of *sangreal* needs to make it to the docks by midnight." The setup should be fairly simple so that the underlying purpose of the task is something the players can remember easily if they get off track.

Here are some ideas for setups, but they are far from the only possibilities. It's important to make the setup active whenever possible—passive roles like guard duty tend to make for sluggish stories, unless the action kicks off right away as trouble starts!

Map Gig: The crew needs to take something (or someone) from one place to another.

Muscle Job: The crew has to intimidate or rough up a target, maybe do some damage.

The Heist: Something valuable needs a new home, and the crew is tasked to procure it.

Heat Run: The crew has to make a big distraction to cover another job in progress.



The Trouble

Of course, what seems like a simple operation really never goes so smoothly, so it's time to add some trouble to the situation. Maybe it's something the characters know up front, or perhaps they only discover it later. (Trouble that comes up later is also called a twist.) For a short session, a single trouble is usually enough to keep things interesting, but for longer sessions or groups with a high tolerance for setbacks you can add two or three such elements and watch things get really complicated.

Some sample troubles are listed below, but as before these are just suggestions—trouble comes in all shapes and sizes!

High Profile: This job threatens to bring a lot of unwelcome attention on the crew.

Outgunned: The opposition is a whole lot tougher or more entrenched than expected.

Nemesis: A big-league enemy is involved and gunning for the crew.

Countdown: There's very limited time to do the job, and it's running out fast!

Double-Cross: The job's a disaster and the crew has clearly been sold out—but who's the rat?

The Code

Here's the real meat of *Under the Table* stories. Both Arthurian fantasy and gangster drama derive their greatest drama from putting in play the tenets of the characters' codes, forcing them to make hard decisions to avoid breaking their code—or sometimes, breaking one rule to avoid upholding one they feel is wrong. Take a look at the code of the King's Men on page 17, then see how the setup might present a problem for one or more of those tenets. The key is to put the characters in tough spots in balancing their code with their conscience, avoiding obvious correct answers in favor of situations where there are lots of options but no one right way.

Remember that the drama comes from making a decision, however difficult; if there is no choice, the characters will feel helpless at best and railroaded at worst. Someone who faces a wrenching choice between doing their duty and following their orders, or showing mercy to the helpless witness they've been ordered to kill, is in a dramatic bind. Someone who is never offered any choice except for blowing that witness away regardless of their feelings has no dramatic agency, so the choice has far less impact.

Using compels related to the characters' histories is a great way to bring conflicts of code into play, especially if they build on past choices like promises or obligations. Here are some ideas for code conflicts to look at:

Loyalty: A friend or relative outside the organization needs a favor that puts the job in jeopardy.

Secrecy: An innocent witness sees the crew in action, a compel causes a slip of the tongue.

Honor: The job conflicts with a past promise—to a spouse, a kid, an old Army buddy.

Duty: A boss gives foolish but specific orders that would place the crew in needless danger.

Mercy: Doing the job would be easier by allowing some more collateral damage.

The Hammer

Once the characters have tackled the setup and its associated troubles, not to mention made choices pitting their codes against their consciences, it's time to bring the hammer down. The hammer is simply making sure the events of the story have consequences, for better or worse. After all, if the characters agonize over a decision that turns out to be no big deal, the players understandably will feel cheated. Sometimes things work out, sometimes they don't, but regardless of the outcome, it should always *matter*.

The hammer is not about punishing the *players* for the choices they made, though, but about the consequences hitting home for the *characters*. It's a subtle but critical distinction, because if the players constantly feel they are being punished for not making the "right" call, then the complex moral and ethical choices that drive the setting will become a dreaded chore instead of an anticipated feature.

Another crucial part of the hammer is that the choices have permanent consequences—even if the characters make apologies or amends, it doesn't undo what happened. What they do might be forgiven, but it won't be forgotten. After all, if they can just go back and completely undo the bad parts of one of their choices, it cheapens the choice itself. Again, it's not about punishing players, but about giving the choices lasting impacts on the game world and its fiction.

OPTIONAL RULE: HARD TIME

Members of the King's Men get arrested all the time, but the charges never seem to stick. Assuming a character hasn't met her Doom and the GM isn't setting up a prison story arc, a character who gets arrested can take a consequence roughly equivalent to the severity of the crime to have the syndicate arrange her release. If she does, she'll be back on the street in a day or two, or by the next session at the latest if it was particularly tricky or severe. Particularly brazen acts might bump up the perceived severity, as might requiring regular bailouts of this nature—the syndicate knows everyone gets pinched now and then, but being stupid or careless about is going to dry up their patience quickly.

Mental consequences tend to represent the debts she now owes the syndicate in return for getting bailed out, whether money or personal favors or both. Physical consequences indicate getting knocked around in custody before the charges are mysteriously dropped, or perhaps being similarly punished by the outfit on release.

This rule allows the story to continue without the need for characters to disappear for long trials and prison terms, while still making sure that being arrested has consequences.

Three Strikes

These three scenario starters have the basic ingredients for a session or two each, and can easily be tailored to fit individual crews and their skills.

Green Chapel Knights

A night out at the Green Chapel nightclub is interrupted by a big Knights Temperance raid, and the crew has to hustle a truck full of *sangreal* to safety before the Knights—or the cops—catch them.

- **The Lineup:** Morton Rudd (Knights Temperance), Bertie Hosier (bartender of the Green Chapel)
- **The Setup:** Muscle Job (brawling with the Knights Temperance)
- **The Trouble:** Countdown (racing to hide the *sangreal* with both cops and Knights hot on their tail)
- **The Code:** Secrecy versus Duty (hiding the *sangreal* might require bringing a family member into the job or stashing it hastily someplace where the crew gets spotted by an upstanding citizen)
- **The Hammer:** Landing on Morton Rudd's personal hit list (losing the *sangreal* or being spotted and figuring out what to do about the resulting witnesses—and telling the bosses about it)

Between the Sword and the Stone

The crew is put in the unenviable position of orchestrating a jailbreak of a kettle witch from the Butcher Block Boys, a rival gang, who just happens to know everything about the gang's upstart grail network.

- **The Lineup:** Donny "The Doorman" O'Malley (kettle witch), Sgt. Myra Hammerhan (in charge of his escort)
- **The Setup:** Jailbreak (busting Donny out of city lockup, by guile or by force)
- **The Trouble:** Outgunned (the Butcher Block Boys show up to take Donny out, afraid he'll snitch)
- **The Code:** Mercy (violence threatens to spill out of control between the cops and the Butchers)
- **The Hammer:** Sgt. Hammerhan takes a personal interest in the crew, the Butcher Block Boys have it out for them, and there's still the matter of what to do with all that loot Donny talked about...

Mistress of Avalon

Arthur asks the crew to pick up a beautiful, mysterious woman in white from Jersey at the airport and bring her to his private suite at the St. George Hotel, while swearing them to utter secrecy.

- **The Lineup:** Marion/The Woman in White, Gwen King (Arthur's wife)
- **The Setup:** Map Gig (picking up the woman and bringing her to the hotel)
- **The Trouble:** Detour (the Woman in White wants to go out and enjoy the nightlife, and threatens to report them to Arthur if they don't), High Profile (Gwen runs into them either while they're out or after they drop off the Woman in White and wants to know who she is)
- **The Code:** Honor (honor the oath to Arthur and trust his reasons, or tell Gwen what's going on)
- **The Hammer:** Lose Arthur's trust or lose Gwen's trust, plus the mystery of who this woman is and why Arthur wants to meet her so badly.

