



*Pretty Princess*

*Death Dowry*

*The Secret War*



A One-Shot political player-conflict RPG. Intended for 4-6 players, taking about three hours.  
No GM needed.

By Vitenka



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An “[a tro challenge] my game-fu is stronger than yours” entry, by Vitenka.

Using:

Tied mechanic (conspiracies, concealment)

Creative equipment (all does the same stuff, but is declared to have a target player it is effective against)

Secret War (players fight each other, the more secretively the more effective they are)

Contested Succession (what they are fighting over, also hit-points)

And, of course, the dowry.

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David, Sarah, Douglas and Jack.  
And to Max for the Cover art and font.  
Poetry Credit: “Golden journey to Samarkand “ - James E. Flecker  
All else by Vitenka.**

## Introduction

*We are the Pilgrims, master; we shall go  
Always a little further: it may be  
Beyond that last blue mountain barred with snow,  
Across that angry or that glimmering sea,*

*In the great city of Samarkand it came to pass that the ruler had only one son.  
However, the prince was young and healthy and vigorous – and much to be desired.*

*All of the great princesses of the realm wished to be his bride.*

*Seeing in this situation an advantage, the ruler declared that his son would marry the most deserving princess whose  
family could provide a suitable dowry.*

*To his surprise, several families stepped up to announce their interest. Several princesses got a gleam in their eyes and  
came up with a plan...*

In this game, each player takes the part of a Princess, desperately seeking to vanquish her sisters and marry the Prince, assassinate him, inherit the dowry and then succeed to the throne.

They do this by using unusual items, setting up complicated plots and spending the money they intend to inherit.

## Setting up the game

*White on a throne or guarded in a cave  
There lives a prophet who can understand  
Why men were born: but surely we are brave,  
Who take the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

### **Things that you will need**

- Fake money. (Monopoly money, or glass beads)
- Index cards.
- Pens or Pencils.
- Players.
- Optionally: A Leader-board. (A clipboard, or largeish piece of cardboard that you can pin cards to)

### **Game Setup**

Set the size of the dowry, depending upon the desired length of game.

If you wish to change the duration of the game, then you can also set a target number for favours (say, ten) – and the first princess to get to that number wins.

The larger the dowry, the longer the game will be.

For a typical game, of 4-6 players to last about three hours, a dowry size of 10 piles (each of thousands of priceless gems) is about right.

Decide which optional scenario you are using, if any.

Set up the event cards, if you are using them.

## Player Setup

*This is the house of gentle learning. All the greatest young ladies of the realm are educated here. Over the course of seven years we teach the cardinal seven virtues of Gentleness, Loyalty, Intelligence, Artistry, Faith, Calmness and Honesty.*

*How could such foul rumours of our teaching the skills of poisoning have reached your ears? Certainly no young lady would be taught such things here.*

*My my. You are right. That is a large pile of gems....*

*Let us talk inside, over a glass cup of apple tea.*

If you feel lazy, or uninspired then choose one of the sample characters.

Otherwise:

Prepare a character sheet – either using the ones in the back, or by dividing an index card into four areas (one for each skill) and take a leader-board card. (A blank card which will have your name(s) and current score on it.)

First; Write down your princess name. This should be long, flowery and include some titles.

For example: Princess sylvia of the Rose Garden

or maybe: Princess julia-sam-shar, duchess of the clouds

Or maybe use [A Princess Name Generator](#)

Also write this name, and your own name in **big** letters on your leader-board card.

Next; take a moment to count your expected riches. (Take ten piles of gems as your dowry). That money isn't technically yours until long after the wedding - but that's not going to stop you from spending it to ensure your success.

Now; decide what you did for your seven years at school, and write up your character sheet.

Secretly distribute seven points amongst the four skills on your character sheet.

(You may choose to have zero in an skill, but you are taking a risk doing so.)

Note down that you have five spy networks available.

You also have three points of favour with the Prince. (It is useful to use tokens for these, if you have enough different colours available, otherwise noting it on your leader-board card will do.)

Finally; create up to three items of equipment.

This uses the same rules as creating items during play.

Although expensive, you will find it well worth purchasing at least one of these items.

The first player to finish writing their virtues and creating their items goes to the top of the leader-board, the next player goes in second place, etc.

## Playing The Game

*Sweet to ride forth at evening from the wells  
When shadows pass gigantic on the sand,  
And softly through the silence beat the bells  
Along the Golden Road to Samarkand.*

It has long been said that the most secret and most focussed plans are always the most potent. A careless plan will be discovered early and thwarted easily. To succeed, ones plans must be buried deep.

## **Objective**

Your objective is to be the last princess standing, or failing that the most likely to succeed to the throne, or failing that to be teamed up with she who wins – or failing that you'd at least like to be alive.

## **Play Order**

*It is said by the wise that more plans are hatched within the walls of the harem than in any nobles court. The truly wise, however, only say such things whilst the lady is not there to hear.*

Play takes place in turns, going around the table. Start with whoever is highest in the succession. Don't bother changing order as the succession changes though - just keep going round anti-clockwise.

Whilst not taking their turn; the other players are heavily encouraged to talk and plan and conspire amongst themselves. Really. This is where the main game occurs. Plot and plan and promise mutual support against the clearly traitorous and backstabbing princess who is busy making new plots. Then say the same things to her whilst your co-conspirator is busy...

Still, occasionally you will want (and have the opportunity) to actually act.

On your turn, you may:

1. Spy: Investigate what the other princesses are doing.

You may also do **one** of the following:

2. Prepare: Create a new conspiracy, or acquire a new item.
3. Defend: Prepare a defence against a conspiracy that you know about.
4. Attack: Activate a pre-prepared plan.

After every player has had a turn, take a five minute break for all the Princesses to sip tea, eat loukoum (Turkish Delight) and discuss their business. Promises can be made, alliances formed and items traded on any terms the Princesses can agree upon.

Cards, Dowry-gems, Spy-networks and even the Prince's favour can all be traded freely, unless you're actually involved in an attack. (When you can't trade Prince's favours until the combat is over.)

## **The End**

*In all these lands, these things are true. The songs of the bird will end, and so will you.*

The game ends early, if the prince has no interest at all in any princess except one. That one, obviously, wins. Alternatively, if one princess manages to get more than ten points ahead of all the others; that one wins. Otherwise, the game ends when real-life intervenes and you run out of time. Give each princess one turn as a final chance.

- The winning princess marries the prince, murders him, and keeps whatever remains of the dowry.
- She may choose one other princess and declare her to be her most loyal friend in the entire kingdom. This princess is pardoned of all crimes.
- The other princesses are beheaded for, amongst other things, non-payment of debts to the dangerous men who have been doing their evil bidding.

## **Actions**

### **Prepare (a new Conspiracy or Item)**

*There is great beauty in an item crafted solely for the sake of love. There is greater beauty in an item crafted solely to destroy the one you hate.*

Pay out a pile of gems, from your dowry, to fund your new creation.

Take a new blank card.

On it, write a short description of your item or plan. It can be anything, and doesn't need to be obviously useful. (In fact, the less useful it looks the better – as long as you can think of a way to use it, since you want the other players to discount it.)

At the moment, your creation is going to be pretty badly hidden. You can do several things to hide it better. Keeping it a secret is key to increasing its power.

Simplest of all; the fewer people it is intended to harm the fewer spies will be interested in it and the fewer rumours will reach the ears of anyone.

Additionally; the fewer ways in which your item benefits you the less obviously suspicious it will be.

Make sure you write down the restrictions.

Make sure, also, that you leave some room on the card to note down which other players have seen it.

Then work out the concealment value:

- One, for the dowry-gems you spend on it.
- For each player that finds the card harmless, add one.
  - Obviously, you don't get a point for it being harmless to you.
  - You would get lots of points if you made it useless against everyone, but it would be useless. So don't.
- For each skill that this card cannot be used with, add one.

Note down the concealment value on the card.

This is a neutral thing to do. The cards can later be used offensively or defensively. It's just preparation. I'm not creating this object purely to attack you. Honestly.

*(Seriously; you will want to create an item or two to use defensively – perhaps covering a skill you're not so good at, as well as something to attack with...)*

### **Defend (Against something you are sure about)**

*The best offence is a good defence. No one says that, because they're all too busy killing each other.*

Defences are created against specific card. This can be a card that has been used and revealed publically, or a card which you have spied upon.

However, it can also be a card which another player has told you about. Beware! You might have been tricked!

Take a card, and write down that it is a defence against the particular card. Write up how you interfere with it.

This is, obviously, a defensive thing to do.

*Note that creating a defensive card does not use up any of your dowry. It does use up your turn.*

## **Spy (To Discover the plans of your fellow princesses)**

*In the morning, my lady in waiting came to me, and as she served the tea she leaned over and whispered "They know of your plans with the mirror." And I smiled, for I had intended them to know this.*

*In the afternoon sun, a page came to me, and gave me a note which told me that they had discovered my plans for the horse. But I was not yet worried.*

*In the evening they discovered that I had talked to the Djinn; but the sun had already set.*

**Note that you can spy before you do some other action in your turn.**

Spying costs one of your spy networks.

Pick two other princesses. Each of them shows you their least well concealed card that you haven't already seen. (If they have several cards with the same concealment, pick one at random.)

Note on it that you've seen it. (So they don't show you the same card over and over.)

They only show you defence cards if they've got no normal cards that you haven't seen yet – and show you one at random.

This is mainly a defensive thing to do – although since you can share that information with the other players enemies, it can be offensive. Of course, you can also lie, to trick them.

Note: It is deliberate that it is too your advantage to create a few low concealment plots that are more or less harmless, since the other players will discover these; leaving your real plans hidden.



## Attack (Use conspiracies and Items to destroy your rivals)

*She brought me one day a fine bird in a gilded cage. A present fit for a rival. But its song was bright and to refuse would have been disgraceful. It sat in my window. Many passers-by remarked upon its song, and despite its source I was proud and accepted their praise. That night, the Sultan's guard came – for it was his bird. This morning finds me hanging in a cage. So it goes.*

This is the way conflicts occur and are resolved.

Choose one of your cards and declare a target player - and choose which skill the conflict is going to use. (The card must not disallow either the player or the skill.)

- Announce, to everyone, what you are doing – and that they'll never be able to prove that you were behind it.
  - Specifically: Announce the name of the card, the skill used and the player you are using it against.
  - Explain how your card in some way harms your chosen target. The plan can be convoluted, even Byzantine – but it shouldn't be completely impossible.
- The card is shown to everyone and remains revealed.
- Work out your total by adding the score you have in that skill to the concealment value of the card. (The later a plot is discovered, the harder it is to defend against it.)
- Your opponents value is just their skill.

The conflict then proceeds in stages.

The current loser (or the defender in the case of a tie) may:

- Use up a defence card to destroy the card it defends against (this destroys both cards).
  - Laugh at the pitiful efforts of your competitor and explain how your counter deflects their strike.
  - Deduct the amount that card was adding from their total.
- Alternatively, you may throw in any other card that applies to the conflict.
  - Explain how your cunning plan actually harms your opponent.
  - Add the concealment value of that card to your total.
  - The card is shown to everyone and remains revealed.

Cards can only be used once in any given conflict.

But (unless they get been destroyed by being cancelled out by a defence card) they can be used again in a later conflict.

Other players might want to think about creating defence cards, if you haven't already got them...

- As a last gasp defence, you can bribe any other player to intercede and throw in a card on your behalf.
  - The compensation to this player is whatever you negotiate.
  - **But:** favours from the Prince only transfer after the conflict is resolved. (So no, you can't say “Help me, and I'll give you my last favour and that way the Princess fighting me won't get it” - you have to **win** for that promise to have any meaning.)
  - Defence cards work as if you had played them.
  - Otherwise, the value of such cards is one less than the concealment value. (Your plans are less effective when used on behalf of others.)
  - The card is shown to everyone and remains revealed.

Keep going until whoever is currently losing gives up, and does not wish anyone else to throw anything else in. (Or does so wish, but is out of luck.)

**Note: The current winner isn't allowed to throw in extra cards just to increase the amount of damage they will do.**

## Resolution

*Though the speech of queens is often-times plainer than the speech of kings; still it is as the swirls in sand.*

- The winner (attacker wins ties) chooses some number equal to or less than the amount they won by.
- The loser gives that number of “Prince's Favour” points to the loser.
- The winner also gets an extra point for free. Even if the person they beat had none left. The Prince thoroughly approves of Princesses who win fights.
- Update the leader-board to reflect the new standings.

## Getting Hurt

The loser, if they do not have enough favours to pay up, crosses off one point from their skills for each point of remaining damage. (Start with the skill the conflict was in.)

If you've got no more skills and still more damage to soak up, then you're knocked out of the competition.

## The Reading of the Will

*In a speech, which to this day kills any bard that tries to learn it, the king said...*

*Well, only the queen understood what he said. But she explained that what he meant was that they had one more chance.*

*For the speech of the court is not like that of normal people - it can say one thing and mean quite another.*

Dead characters can still have one final impact on the game. Their will.

As is the nature of such things, a Princess's will is long and complex and will take many years to be fully understood. However, at any time the player chooses, their lawyers can finish interpreting a sub-clause and work out who some of their property belongs to.

Take some time to explain exactly why you feel she deserves it, and give one of your erstwhile (and surviving) competitors some of your property – cards or dowry or some or all of both.

You can also still be spied upon.

## Characters

### The Virtues

*We travel not for trafficking alone;  
By hotter winds our fiery hearts are fanned:  
For lust of knowing what should not be known  
We make the Golden Journey to Samarkand.*

The seven virtues, taught to all young princesses are:

Gentleness, Loyalty, Intelligence, Artistry, Faith, Calmness and Honesty.

The school to which all young Princesses are sent is supposed to teach these, one in every year.

However, your family has instead asked for different skills to be taught...

You know that these skills are shared with your competitors. What you don't know is which they have excelled in.

## **The Skills**

Passion.	The ability to romance the Prince.
Prattle.	The ability to spread malicious rumours and hurt people socially.
Politics.	The ability to undercut a rivals support in the nobility.
Poison.	Somewhat more direct action.

## **Passion**

Passion covers all ways and means of impressing the prince that you are the most worthy bride.

A conflict on Passion might be attempting to impress him, or his family – or alternately trying to prove that your rival is unfit.

Items of Passion are works of art, music and jewellery.

Sample passion items:

- “Love potion number nine” (to imply that a rival is less than untouched) – passion only.
- “Fireworks display” (Just for you, my love.) - passion, but also poison (point at rival and light blue touch paper...)

## **Prattle**

Prattle covers all forms of gossip, rumour-mongering and reputation demolishing.

A conflict on Prattle might be shoring up your own reputation – or more likely demolishing someone else's.

Items of Prattle are usually innocuous – what is important is the tale spun around them. Also items such as pens, letters and such.

Sample prattle items:

- “A delightful Laugh” (to support you) – prattle only
- “A hideous dress” (to harm an opponent) – prattle and passion.

## **Politics**

Politics covers all forms of complex manoeuvring that involves innocent third parties.

A conflict of Politics might be as direct as getting someone's family banished, or as obscure as suggesting that they supported an unpopular policy.

Items of Politics include all the symbols of rulership, but also those innocent third parties.

Sample politics items:

- “Alliance with the Griffons” - Politics to impress, or Poison (get them to attack)
- “A one way mirror” (to spy on the noble's conferences, or to imply that an opponent did...) - Politics or Prattle.

## **Poison**

Poison covers all forms of direct action and assassination.

A conflict of Poison could, obviously, be attempting to poison someone – but it might also be hiring thugs to beat them up, burning out their house or just slapping them in the face.

Items of poison include all weapons, but especially the most subtle and secretive.

Sample poison items:

- “Poisoned apples” (just to be traditional) – Poison or Prattle (did you see what her stepmother gave me!)
- “Private army” (all forms of violence, but this one is purely to defend me. Honest.) - Poison or Politics.

## Optional Rules

The basic rules above should provide a fun experience. However, regular gamers might like to expand the game with the following extra options.

### **Events**

Events can be added into the game in order to add spice. One of the best ways to do this is to write 'EVENT' on a few of the blank item cards and shuffle them in. Then, when a player draws a card to create a new item and an event card is revealed, take a gossip break and run one of the events.

1. Chinese prisoners are being paraded through the streets. Each princess is asked whether she would pardon them or have them executed. The majority decision stands. If the prisoners are pardoned then each Princess who chose to pardon them gains a spy network. If they are executed then each executing princess gains a gem.
2. The nobles hold a great meeting. They declare that only the purest and most noble shall succeed to be the Princes' bride. The Princesses must vote for the most stately and noble amongst them. That princess is rewarded with a pile of gems.
3. It is market day. The bazaar is bustling with merchants selling to each other, drinking tea and sherbet. Each player may sell a card for a pile of gems.
4. A great whirlwind approaches, and for a time the city is enveloped in sand; hiding many things. Each player can take one revealed card back into their hands, and hope that the other players forget what it was.
5. The silk caravan arrives. They bring wondrous fabrics and clothes. The Princesses must vote amongst themselves as to who has acted in the most queenly manner. She is rewarded with a great dress, and a pile of gems.
6. The night of the restless dead comes around. The Princesses take part in a seance to talk the dead. If any players have been knocked out of the game, then they can come back to life.

### **Playing With A GM**

If you play with a GM, then the various cards can stay much more secret for much longer.

One important change is that the GM can keep track of the cards so that players are not immediately informed when they have been spied upon.

Also you can choose to have the actual statistics of cards only revealed to those actually involved in the attack; or even to keep everything except that a card was usable in that attack hidden.

Equally, although an attack will reveal the number of points a player has in a skill it will no longer reveal all of their skills.

This keeps the game more secretive and makes spying more important.

In addition to this; the GM can help bring the city of Samarkan to life by adding information about where the conflicts occur and running the short events as traditional roleplaying segments, playing up minor characters and such.

1. The prisoners have been accused of spying, are terrified of being executed, and will promise to spy for the players if they spare them.
3. The merchants are sleazy and will promise the moon. Disparage the player's cards loudly and demand better ones, but do accept the offers in the end.

## ***Sudden Death***

You can use this rule if you are short of time, or if all of the players prefer to spend forever preparing their positions and never actually attack.

Continue playing as above until the day of the wedding (make sure you have about half an hour of real time remaining) at which point all options other than 'Attack' vanish - carnage is then pretty much assured.

Once everyone is done playing their cards, the game is over.

## ***Other Settings***

The default setting is that of calm unruffled princesses who carefully lay their secret plans, and then stab each other ruthlessly, to a backdrop of arches and sand.

But other genres are equally possible.

## **Magical Princess Pretty Death**

In this setting, the princesses destroy each other in a frenzy of cartoon frenzy; giving each other big bombs (spherical, with fizzing fuse, and 'Bomb' written on the side) as presents, dropping anvils on each other and so forth.

All it takes is changing the skills to be "Magical sparkles" "Slapstick Violence" "Sappiness" and "Explosives". And encouraging people to be **silly** with their items.

The Prince alternates between a social useless klutz (whenever he actually talks to one of the Princesses) and the fine and noble dream figure that the Princesses imagine him to be.

## **Princess Dowry Race 3000**

In this setting, the princesses race spaceships for a living and must win the cup in order to win the hand of the prince of the cosmos (whose collection of almost-spherical balls of junk are a prize beyond price...)

Think 'Whacky races' meets 'Wipeout'.

The skills are "Driving fast" "Dirty Tricks" "High Technology" and "Love Conquers All"

# Quick Reference Rules

## Setup

10 Dowry gems.  
7 points amongst four skills.  
5 spy networks.  
3 Points of favour.

## Card value:

1 + number of blocked skills + number of players immune to it.  
(One less when used in support of another player)

## Turn:

You may spy once (two players each show you their least concealed card that you've not seen)

And choose one of:

You can make a new attack card. (Costs one gem.)

You can make a defence card. (No cost.)

You can attack one princess. (No cost.)

## Combat:

Choose a skill. The **whole** combat uses this skill. All cards used must not have that skill blocked.

All cards used must not have the opponent listed as immune.

Attacker **must** use at least one card.

Current loser chooses whether, and what, card to throw in.

Defence cards destroy the card they target, and themselves.

Otherwise cards add in their value.

Continue until the current loser gives up.

Do damage up to the difference in values – attacker may choose to do less.

Attacker gains a point of princes favour.

Defender pays damage in princes favour first (which is given to the attacker) and then in skill points (which is not)

Dead players may choose to give away their possessions – both money and cards – to any of the other players, as the rest of the game continues.

## Winner:

The game ends early, if the prince has no interest at all in any princess except one. That one, obviously, wins.

Alternatively, if one princess manages to get more than ten points ahead of all the others; that one wins.

If you're about to run out of time, announce the game end – and then everyone gets one final turn.



# Character Sheets






**Item Cards**


