

WITNESS THE MURDER OF YOUR FATHER AND BE ASHAMED, YOUNG PRINCE.

The King has been **murdered**.

The only witnesses, his sons, gather to determine who committed the **foul deed** – and, more importantly, appoint an heir to the throne.

There is **not much time**. If a successor is not named by sundown, the agreements that the King had struck with **Crow**, the **demon-god of trickery**, will be broken and the kingdom will **perish** in a tide of **blood and fire**.

Sample file

CAN YOU SAVE YOUR FATHER'S KINGDOM?

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A Shortform Fiction Game For 3-6 Players

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Introduction

The players of this game play as Princes, the sons of the murdered King. It is an hour until dark, and if what happened to the King cannot be discovered and adjudicated in that hour, all is lost. All assembled know that **Crow**, the demon-god of tricks, darkness and ill tidings, was himself tricked into making a bargain with the murdered King, to the great benefit of the kingdom; what they do not know (except for one) is that one of the King's sons was consecrated to **Crow** in secret as part of the deal. Ultimately, this Ravensworn serves the whims of his true master.

By the end of the hour, one of these things will come to pass:

Endgame Conditions

1

There is no agreement as to what happened to the King. Thus, no heir can be declared, and the kingdom falls to **Crow**. The Ravensworn (if there is one) wins as his brothers fall to the bloody madness of the Trickster. If there is no Ravensworn, all lose.

2

There is agreement as to what has happened, and an undisputed heir is declared. The heir becomes King. If the heir is also the Ravensworn, it is his decision whether he keeps his nature secret or whether he turns the kingdom over to **Crow**; if the Ravensworn is not the heir, he flees the kingdom, unable to bear his brother's wrath.

3

There is agreement as to what happened, but the heir is disputed. One of the disputing heirs gains enough prestige with his brothers to become the new King, and those Princes who support him remain Princes; all other prospective heirs are banished, and their supporters are stripped of prince-hood. If the Ravensworn becomes King, he sacrifices those brothers who opposed him to **Crow**; if the Ravensworn is banished, **Crow's** power is diminished in the Kingdom; if the Ravensworn is neither crowned nor banished, he keeps his nature hidden and bides his time.

Preparation

Materials needed for play:

- ✂ An opaque bag.
- ✂ A number of red and black stones (or different colored poker chips, or any other kind of differentiated marker that *cannot* be distinguished by touch), about 3 of each per Prince.
- ✂ One coin, or other differentiated marker that *can* be distinguished by touch.

When you begin the game, you become a Prince and will be referred to as such.

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To Begin

The Princes sit in order of age. The youngest Prince says, *"It is now [current time]. This matter must be resolved within the hour."* It is the youngest Prince's responsibility to track the passage of time.

The youngest son places one stone per Prince in a bag, alternating between **red** and black stones. He then secretly chooses either 0, 1 or 2 stones, in any combination of black and **red**, and places them in the bag. Each Prince after him in turn secretly places 0, 1 or 2 **red** or black stones in the bag. After the eldest son places his stones, he places a coin in the bag, then hands the bag back to the youngest Prince.

The stones represent authority, and the proportion of black to **red** will color the results of the game. More **red** stones makes it more likely that there will be an heir, but less likely that he will be undisputed; more black stones make it less likely that an heir will be declared, but there will be fewer competitors for the title. Also, more **red** stones make it easier to support your brothers, and more black stones make it easier to discredit their stories.

Once all of the Princes have placed their stones in the bag, the youngest Prince draws one and says *"I, [Prince's name], am here. I am the youngest of my father's sons."* He does not reveal which stone he holds.

The next eldest Prince takes two stones from the bag and says *"I, [Prince's name], am here. I am the [superlative] of my father's sons."* The Prince can declare himself anything, from bravest to strongest to wisest. Each Prince, in turn by age, takes one more stone than the Prince before him and declares which of his fathers sons he is, until the eldest son is reached. No Prince reveals which stones he has drawn.

The eldest takes a number of stones equal to the number of Princes and says *"I, [the Princes name] am here. I am the eldest of my fathers sons."*

If any of the Princes reach into the bag and there are not enough stones, he keeps this matter to himself.

Alice, Ben and Casey begin a game. Alice, being the youngest, is the youngest Prince. Ben is next oldest, and then Casey. They sit around a table. Alice says, *"It is now eight o'clock. This matter must be resolved within the hour,"* and places a red, a black, and then a red stone in the bag.

The Princes then secretly pick stones to add. Alice decides to add one red and one black stone. Ben secretly decides to add two black stones, as he wants to see drama. Casey hasn't played before, and so she decides not to add any stones. Casey also adds the coin to the bag, being the eldest.

The bag has been filled (with 3 red and 3 black stones, as it turns out). Alice draws one stone at random while saying, *"I, Aldwyn, am here. I am the youngest of my fathers son's."*

Ben then reaches into the bag and draws two stones at random while saying, *"I, Bruno, am here. I am the cleverest of my father's sons."*

Finally, Casey draws three stones (in this case, the last of the stones) while saying, *"I, uh....Christof, am here. I am the eldest of my father's sons."* Casey notices that the coin is not in the bag when she draws her stones, and keeps this matter to herself.

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If any of the Princes reach into the bag and feel the coin, they may choose to take it. If they take it, they are the son who was secretly consecrated to **Crow**. It is not required that the coin be taken. If a Prince chooses to be the Ravensworn, he keeps this matter to himself. If a Prince reaches into the bag and does not feel the coin, he keeps this matter to himself... for now.

The Murder

The Eldest Prince then says, “While we mourn the passage of our father, we cannot yet take the time to grieve. My brothers, what has happened here this day?”

All of the Princes may speak, telling of what they saw, think or suspect happened to their father. The Princes may speak in turn, talk over each other, interrupt each other, argue, or otherwise speak as they feel appropriate. This is each Prince’s chance to set some tone for the game. Are you mourning your father? Nervous that the kingdom will be invaded? Suspicious of someone in particular? Obviously hiding something?

Once the hubbub dies down, the eldest Prince says, “My brothers, we do not have much time! What does my youngest brother have to say?”

The youngest Prince tells all gathered what he saw. This is the Prince with the most leeway in his story – other than the tone that has been set, it is this Prince’s privilege to sketch out the scene, from the location of the murder (the throne room? while hunting? in the bath), to potential witnesses, to incriminating details about his brothers.

Once he has finished, the youngest Prince asks, “Who stands with his brother? Who supports my tale?” Each Prince extends his closed hand.

His hand may contain a **red** stone, a black stone, or nothing at all. This stone may be taken from their initial draw of stones, or, once the first tale has been told, from the stones before them on the table (as you will see below).

Once all hands have been extended, the Princes open their hands simultaneously. If a Prince wishes to support his brother’s tale, there will be a **red** stone in his hand. If a Prince wishes to challenge his brothers tale, there will be a black stone in his hand. If a Prince does not care to support or challenge, or if he is unable to do so, his palm will be empty.

Each supporter places his **red** stone in front of the youngest Prince. Each challenger then must describe what he is challenging from the tale told by the youngest. The youngest may admit that he was wrong, and accept that the challenger is right, in which case he takes the black stone from the challenger and places it in front of himself; alternately, he may restate

Ben says, “Casey, you’re the eldest Prince so you start us off.” Casey looks at the rules and reads out the ritual phrase, “While we mourn the passage of our father, we cannot yet take the time to grieve. My brothers, what has happened here this day?” Ben and Alice both start talking, Ben about the Queen, who their father married solely to cement an alliance with a rival Kingdom, and Alice about how she suspects the Captain of the Guard of poisoning his drink. Casey decides to egg both of them on, and keeps questioning them as to specifics and circumstances. After a couple of minutes, the Princes have had their say, and Casey moves on to the next ritual phrase. “My brothers, we do not have much time! What does my youngest brother have to say?”

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his case, denying the challenger his amendment. If the youngest Prince denies, he takes a **red** stone already in his possession and gives it to the challenger, who also keeps his black stone. If the youngest Prince does not have a **red** stone, he must admit the challenge.

Once the youngest Prince has finished his tale, the next eldest Prince says “That is as may be, but here is what I, the [superlative] of my father’s sons, saw.” He then tells his tale. Each story builds on those prior;

know that you if intentionally describe something counter to what has gone before, it is an invitation to be challenged. Once the tale is told, the assembled Princes again indicate their support or challenge by the choosing of stones, as described above.

The process of tale-telling, challenging/supporting, and resolving the tale continues, with each Prince from the youngest to the eldest telling what they saw when they witnessed the murder of their father.

Alice says, “Brothers, it was horrible. I returned from hunting with my men-at-arms, and after bathing came to see our father, for as you know he had been feeling unwell all day, sweating and had not yet left his chambers. I entered, and he was still in bed. I opened the window, which awakened him from his daze, and he croaked for water. Of course, being an obedient son I brought him his chalice, which I assumed to contain that which he asked for ... but upon drinking, he began coughing and in fact, even spat up blood! I ran for the physicker, but it was too late! Murder, my brothers, and by poison! How foul!” With her story, Alice has implied much about the world containing the story.

She then says, “Who stands with his brother? Who supports my tale?” Ben and Casey each select from their stones and extend their hands. Upon opening them, Ben is holding a red stone, and Casey a black one. Ben supports the tale of the youngest Prince, and sets the red stone on the table before Alice. Casey, however, challenges Alice’s story. Casey says, “My brother, I simply cannot believe your tale, or at least that you are telling all of it. I myself saw you enter our father’s chamber before you went hunting, and holding his chalice. At the time, I thought you were simply bringing it to him, but now I see that you had more nefarious purposes.”

Alice says, “My brother, perhaps you thought it was me, but I assure you, you must have been mistaken. Ask any of my men-at-arms, I was with them all morning! Perhaps someone stole my clothes in order to fool you. I would never imply that you are lying in this matter, of course.” Because Alice is denying the challenge, she takes the red stone from in front of her (which she had received from Ben) and places it in front of Casey. If Alice did not have a red stone, she would have had to give in to the challenge and confirm Casey’s accusation, though she would take Casey’s black stone in return.

As of the end of the first tale, Casey has one red and one black stone, and neither Alice nor Ben have any stones.

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Princely Authority

A Prince may invoke his status as [youngest/eldest/superlative] in order to describe how he was present in the tale of one of his brothers. If the Prince describes his presence in a manner that supports the account of his brother, he takes one of his red stones and places it in front of his brother. If the Prince describes his presence in a manner which casts doubt or aspersions upon the tale of his brother, he takes one black stone from in front of his brother and places it in front of himself.

If a Prince involves one of his brothers in the story, and his brother disagrees with how he is represented, he may interrupt the tale-teller by saying “But, I am the [youngest/eldest/superlative]! That is not how it happened!” and describing his actions in his brother’s tale and how they really were, before letting his brother resume his tale. If the tale-teller wishes to impose his version of events over his brother’s objection, he must give his brother one red and one black stone and say, “Though it wounds me, I must tell the truth of what I saw.”

Continuing the Tales

After each round of tales, the brothers decide whether to continue the discussion, or whether to come to a decision. If there is not a unanimous decision, each Prince takes a stone (either from those in front of him, or those which he still has not revealed) and holds it in his hand: red to continue with the tales, black to go to a decision. All open their hands simultaneously. If there is a tie, the color of the stone held by the eldest of the tied brothers wins. It is recommended, though by no means necessary, that games with 3 or 4 Princes go at least two rounds of tales.

Ben tells his tale, concerning seeing the Queen, their step-mother, preparing the King’s chalice that morning, and detailing how he rushed to their father’s side in time to hear his dying words. Alice supports him and Casey remains neutral, and Ben now has one red stone.

Now it’s Casey’s turn, and she describes how Christof, suspecting foul play to come, concealed himself in the King’s bedchamber and watched Bruno sneak in, while the King was asleep, and slip something into the chalice.

Ben says, “But, I am the cleverest! That is not how it happened! Yes, I did enter our father’s chamber, and I did add something to his chalice ... but it was an antidote to the poison which the Queen had placed in it! I consulted with the Royal Librarian, deduced the most likely venom she would use, and made a counter to it. Tragically, she must have used much more than the usual dose.”

Casey looks at the stones on the table – she has one red and one black stone, and so could impose her version over Ben’s, but that would leave her entirely at the mercy of the other players as to gaining any more. Also, if the game were to end now Ben would win, as he has one red stone and no black stones. Casey decides to save her stones to push for another round of tales, and says “Of course brother, you are correct. Forgive my error.”

The Decision

Once each Prince has presented his tale, all look at the stones before them. Only the stones on the table before each Prince are counted when making the decision; if a Prince still has unused stones from his initial draw, they are kept concealed until the game is over.

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Making The Decision

- ✂ If only one Prince has only **red** stones, then he is the undisputed heir to the Kingdom.
- ✂ Failing that, if multiple Princes have only **red** stones, there is a final dispute between those Princes.
- ✂ Failing that, if multiple Princes have black and **red** stones, there is a final dispute between those Princes.
- ✂ Failing that, if no Princes have **red** stones, there is such distrust between the brothers that a heir cannot be declared.

In a final dispute, each disputing Prince reiterates his tale of the murder of his father, with whatever embellishments, changes or revelations of facts he deems necessary to sway his brothers to his side. Then, each Prince who is not disputing chooses whom he wishes to throw his weight behind; he then hands over all of his **red** stones to his favored brother.

Whoever of the disputing Princes has more **red** stones at the end of the final dispute is declared heir. If there is still a tie in **red** stones, then an heir cannot be decided, and the kingdom falls to **Crow**.

Time is of the Essence

If the hour runs out before an heir is decided, the youngest Prince says, "I am sad to see this day, when the sons of our father could not serve his wishes. The bargain is broken, and **Crow** comes to take our lands."

The Ravensworn

Chances are that the Ravensworn, if there is one, will be revealed once an heir is declared; if the Ravensworn is not discovered at this time, he is not required to come forth (though it is sporting). The bag may be checked, however, to see if the coin was taken at all.

Designer Notes

This game was written for the Murderland competition, which was held in October of 2008 by Jonathan Walton. The contest guidelines were:

Design a game that can be played in 60 minutes or less, including all prep & reading the rules;

Here's your theme: ravens (also known as crows, which come in 'murders', hence the name);

Here's your requirement: play can't involve drawing or writing anything down, including marking off boxes, circling stuff, etc. No pens or pencils at the table;

I'm not going to disqualify people for breaking the rules or not reading my mind; you're just less likely to win;

Your game must contain the word 'Murderland', somewhere in the title, such as "Murderland: Last Exits," "Driving Through Murderland," or "Chronicle of Extraordinary Locations: Murderland." [Later edited to say:] So, on second thought, I've decided the titling

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requirement is a bit strict. As long as your game has ‘murder,’ ‘raven,’ or ‘crow’ in the title, I think you’re solid. So go ahead and write that game about the Raven Queen or whatever.

The feedback from Jonathan on the original entry:

The premise reminds me of the beginning of Gaiman’s Stardust -- itself a reflection of Nine Princes in Amber -- mixed with Shadows Over Camelot (“Mordred!”), while the mechanics are a bit like [Shreyas Sampat’s] Mist-Robed Gate. While I’m a little intimidated by reading through the list of tile mechanics, since there are quite a number of different things you can do with them, I have no doubt that their uses would be much clearer in play, once they start moving around and you see what the emergent strategies are. I also very much like that there isn’t a sole winner in the game. If the brother you want to be king wins, you win too, basically, unless he happens to be secretly consecrated to Crow. That makes for a much more interesting and cooperative set of tactics than simply trying to win yourself. Also, it allows the traitor Prince to “bide his time” by joining the winning side, not having to reveal himself but probably dooming the kingdom in the long run. Of all the various endgame mechanics I’ve seen in the contest then, this is probably my favorite, just because of the diversity of interesting outcomes and how none of them necessarily railroad the narrative (aside from the doom one, I guess), but allow the players to negotiate a bit after the final result is reached.

I had independently arrived at the conclusion that the original stone-giving/taking/moving mechanics were too procedurally complex for what should be a quick-playing, fairly casual game, and the text here is actually simplified from the original contest entry. That aside, I was aiming for a non-zero-sum endgame, in which there wasn’t a direct correlation between having more stones and winning the game. I tend to

use secret knowledge in a lot of my designs, and the secret Ravensworn mechanic is certainly an expression of that! Thankfully it also makes this game more interesting to play.

When I first read the contest outline, I was excited to enter something, but I didn’t know what. I was trying to do some brainstorming, and came up with this title, and it was just off to the races after that. I think I wrote the original entry in three or four hours over two days. Generally, I need some kind of Color* touchpoint to design, and the title gave me all the color inspiration necessary: a Prince, aghast, staring at his murdered father, but is he more worried about his father’s death, or about being

Mechanically, I had been absorbing a lot of Jonathan Walton’s structured freeform work (not any one game in particular, mostly from reading his blog and personal conversations), and I was very much trying to work in that tradition. Finally, I wanted to make a game that could be played casually, but had some strategic depth if a player wanted to delve into it. I’m always wary of “parlor narration” games, in which the mechanics mostly serve to assign who says what and when. I think that the tactical choices along with the loose guidelines for talking work together to make a real game, and I’m happy with the way the whole package ended up.

Enjoy!

**Color being one of the five aspects of Exploration, that is, one of the five necessary things that make up actual play of an RPG. The other four are Character, System, Situation and Setting.*



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