
THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE DIE

~ ~ ~

COUNCIL

A Player's Handbook

- BY SIR LANDIS FISHMAN -

◆ PRINTED EDITION · ONE VOYAGE, ONE VOLUME ◆

*strive and pay, or be given —
but keep hope, whatever the weather*

- COUNCIL · THE HANDBOOK -

- CONTENTS -

where to find things

- How to Play FIVE MINUTES · READ THIS FIRST

I · FOUNDATIONS

- §0.1 The Thesis · §0.2 Who Sails Under It
- §0.3 The Core Loop · §0.4 The Eight Timbers
- §0.5 Keel & Rigging

III · WORKS & THE TIDE

- §3.1 Declaring a Work · §3.2 The Tide
- §3.3 The Ledger · §3.4 Squalls · §3.5 Forcing a Work
- §3.6 Completion & Work Orders · §3.7 The Divine Work

V · TEACH & SHIP

- §5.1 Session Zero · §5.2 Writing Seals · §5.3 Giving Grace · §5.4 The Signed Squall · §5.5 Hope & Harm · §5.6 What to Print

II · THE RESOLUTION CORE

- §2.1 The Two Answers · §2.2 Grace · §2.3 Price
- §2.4 The Seals · §2.5 The Roads
- §2.6 The Reward of Cleverness

IV · GOVERNANCE

- §4.1 The Council · §4.2 Who Sits · §4.3 Deputies
- §4.4 Interrupts · §4.5 The Override
- §4.6 Absence Beyond Reach

Before You Sit Down

There are no dice here, and no character sheets. There is only the story we tell together – and a handful of promises about how it answers back.

1 *You live a scene.* You speak and act as your character, and the keeper plays the world around you. Most of the time, that is all there is – and it is enough.

2 *A need arises the table can't just wish away.* A locked door. A hidden truth. A thing that must be built or found. Under dice you'd roll. Here, you don't guess the magic question – you simply reach for the answer, and the world provides it by one of the two ways below.

3 *What comes back changes the next scene.* And the tale sails on. That wheel – scene, answer, scene – is the whole of the game.

- BY PRICE

What you pay for. You may seize an answer by spending something of your own – a truth confessed, a new trouble taken on, a little time lost. Price is yours to demand. It always costs the self, and it is always true.

- BY GRACE

What you are given. The keeper may hand you an answer freely – unearned, unasked, because you are stuck and the story loves you. Grace cannot be bought or demanded. It falls where it falls, and it falls most on those who keep trying and keep hoping.

strive and pay, or be given – most tales are told in the weather between the two

- YOU CANNOT BE TRULY STUCK

Behind every real obstacle the keeper has already written three clues – a gentle nudge, a plain bearing, and, at the last, the answer itself. They are never improvised and never withheld forever. However you reach for help – by cleverness, by price, by grace – one of these comes. No riddle in Council is a locked room with no key. That is a promise.

- THE ONE THING WORTH KEEPING

Council is built to reward hope. The world bends kinder to a crew that believes it can be made better, and grace runs toward them like water downhill. The game can wound you – it can cost you dearly, and grieve you truly – but it only truly breaks the one who has stopped hoping. Keep hope, and you are never past saving.

Despair is the only door that locks from the inside.

- ONE STRANGER YOU SHOULD KNOW

There is a madman named Landis, who is real only in water. Find still water in any world – a sea, a cistern, a cup – look in, and ask him with grace, and he will sell you a true answer at a steep and personal price. He is not the main road, and you will not need him often. But he is always there, in every water, and every answer he gives is true. More of him waits in the pages that follow.

FOUNDATIONS

BOOK THE FIRST

*being the whole of the game, set down plain,
that any hand aboard may read it*

~ § 0.1 THE THESIS

Council is for tables who left the dice behind — and found they had left something else behind with them.

When a crew stops rolling and starts telling, the story runs warmer and the arithmetic goes quiet — and then, one night, a locked door appears that no one at the table happens to be clever enough to open. Under dice, a character rolled to know things their player did not. Take the dice away and that quiet gift goes with them: now a player can learn only what they personally thought to ask, and the keeper is left dangling hints, praying someone guesses the shape of the answer.

Council exists to hand that gift back without handing the dice back. It is a game of insight, consequence, and shared command that runs entirely on words. One question steers every rule in this handbook: how does a soul come to know a thing without guessing the exact right way to ask? All that follows is an answer.

~ You will not roll to see if you succeed. You will decide what you are willing to pay to find out. — the first principle

~ § 0.2 WHO SAILS UNDER IT

Crews who have already drifted. Long campaigns that quietly abandoned sheets and initiative and now live on narration and trust. Council names what

Keepers weary of dangling hints. Game masters who love the shared story but keep striking the reef where a puzzle stalls because no one has yet said

they are already doing and gives it teeth.

the magic thing.

~ §0.3 THE TURN OF THE TIDE – THE CORE LOOP _____

Play turns through three stations. A *Scene* raises a need the table cannot simply declare true. The world answers by one of two roads – the *Water* (buy insight now, at a price) or the *Tide* (commit the work, let time carry it) – and whatever comes back walks into the next Scene, changed. That is the entire machine. All else is rigging hung upon it.

STATION ONE	ROAD A	ROAD B
<i>The Scene</i>	<i>The Water</i>	<i>The Tide</i>
A need arises the table cannot just wish true.	A truth, a trouble, a scene, for a real answer.	Commit a Work; the world moves it a watch at a time.

U and whatever the world returns walks back into the next Scene, changed U

~ §0.4 THE EIGHT TIMBERS _____

The fixed vocabulary of the game – the timbers of the hull. These words mean the same at every Council table; a keeper may re-rig the world above, but not rename the timbers below.

No	TIMBER	WHAT IT NAMES
I	<i>The Water</i>	Landis, real only in water, who sells true answers at a price.
II	<i>The Council</i>	Shared command with a final say; every vote and dissent minuted.
III	<i>Works</i>	What a crew sets in motion between scenes: an aim, the hands, the stakes.
IV	<i>The Tide</i>	Time itself. The keeper turns the watch; a session may pass one, or several.
V	<i>The Ledger</i>	What a Work spends: Hands, Power, Standing. Nothing pinned twice.
VI	<i>Squalls</i>	Sealed complications carried by the larger Works, breaking when the weave turns against you.
VII	<i>The Seals</i>	Pre-written clues – Nudge, Bearing, Answer – sealed and shown, in order.
VIII	<i>Price & Grace</i>	The two ways an answer comes: seized with a piece of self, or given freely.

- §0.5 THE KEEL & THE RIGGING

Council is a keel, not a world. A table brings its own fiction – a drowned empire, a generation ship, a haunted county – and rigs it to the timbers below. But one timber is not the table’s to swap. *Landis is fixed.* The madman on the sea, real only in water, who sells true answers at a price, stands in every Council game that has been or will be run.

<p>THE KEEL – FIXED</p> <p>Landis & the Water. The eight timbers and their names. The turn of the tide. Price and grace. The Seals. Mercy.</p>	<p>THE RIGGING – YOURS</p> <p>The world, its peoples, what Power and Standing are made of, what the riddles guard.</p>
---	---

Change everything you like. Leave me the water. – L.F.

THE RESOLUTION CORE

BOOK THE SECOND

how the game answers, when there is no die to throw

A die answered a question the table could not: what is true, and what do you learn? Council keeps the question and throws away the die. In its place stand two hands – one that takes, and one that gives. Learn these two and you have learned the game.

§ 2.1 THE TWO ANSWERS

When a scene raises a need the table cannot simply declare true, the world answers in one of two ways, and only two. An answer is either *seized* – bought with something of your own – or it is *given*, freely, by the hand that made this world. The first is price. The second is grace.

<p><i>Price</i></p> <p>You pay, and you may demand. It costs the self and is always true.</p>	<p><i>Grace</i></p> <p>You are given, and may not demand. It costs you nothing and cannot be earned.</p>
---	--

§ 2.2 GRACE – THE GIVEN ANSWER

The keeper is the god of this small creation – not a tyrant, but a maker, who set its laws and largely lets them run. Grace is the maker's one free hand: the single thing in the game not bound by the world's own rules. An answer given as grace is unearned and unpriced.

Grace cannot be bought, banked, or demanded. A good-faith struggle invites it, and hope draws it near – but nothing compels it. It may fall on the crew who tried hardest; it may fall, just as well, on the one who tried least and needed it most. It falls where it will. Yet even grace bends only so far as a thing’s nature: the maker’s free hand may nudge a people, but cannot make them other than what they are.

Grace is not counted. There is no pool, no token, no tally at the table’s edge. It has exactly one law that binds it: *mercy*. If a crew is truly aground, grace comes, because the maker will not let the story drown.

And grace comes quietly. It is a nudge slid across the table, unremarked. The keeper need not announce it, and mostly should not. The crew will feel they were lucky. Let them.

- *Grace is not the keeper being kind against the rules. It is the one rule that kindness was allowed to keep.*

- § 2.3 PRICE – THE SEIZED ANSWER _____

Where grace is given, price is taken – by you, from you. When you must know a thing *now* and are willing to bleed for it, you may seize the answer and pay in the only coin the game accepts: something of your own self.

The dearest altar of price is the Water – Landis, real only in water, who trades true answers for pieces of the one who asks. But mark this well: *the Water is a rare road, not a daily one*. When you do go down to the water, the price climbs with each answer of a single visit:

ASKING	THE PRICE
--------	-----------

FIRST	<i>A truth.</i> Confess a secret, or commit a new fact about yourself, aloud. Canon the moment it is spoken.
-------	--

SECOND	<i>A trouble.</i> The answer is true, and arrives lashed to a fresh complication.
--------	---

THIRD	<i>The madness bleeds.</i> You glimpse a thing the keeper knows and you should not, and cannot say why.
-------	---

ALWAYS	<i>A scene.</i> To sit with Landis costs time; the weave moves on while you do.
--------	---

- § 2.4 THE SEALS – WHAT BOTH HANDS REACH FOR _____

Price and grace do not invent their answers on the spot. Behind any obstacle worth being stuck on lie three clues, set face-down on the table, in order.

<p>THE FIRST</p> <p><i>The Nudge</i></p> <p>A single honest word or image.</p>	<p>THE SECOND</p> <p><i>The Bearing</i></p> <p>What to do next – never why.</p>	<p>THE THIRD</p> <p><i>The Answer</i></p> <p>Plain as porridge.</p>
--	---	---

They open in order, one at a time. Price opens the next by paying for it. Grace opens the next by giving it – most often the Nudge, for nothing.

- §2.5 THE ROADS TO A CLUE

A crew that means to pay has more than one road to the next seal – the Water, being dearest, is the one they should walk least:

HONEST SEARCH Dig, read, question, pry. Paid in effort and a scene’s time – call it wit by another name.

A WORK Let the Tide carry it (Book III). Slow, priced only in watches.

A LETTER Ask one who is absent but would know. Slow as the post – and those who carry it may read what it says, unless it is sealed.

THE WATER Landis, and his climbing price. Walk it least.

The rule that binds every road: it opens the next Seal in order – never a later one, never two at once.

- §2.6 THE REWARD OF CLEVERNESS

Sometimes a crew closes out a whole labour – a Work, a mission, an obstacle worth being stuck on – with its Seals never broken: no price paid, no grace needed. Each Seal left closed is banked as *Slack*: a due at the Water. The next time the crew comes to Landis, that much of his usual price is simply waived – one price forgiven for every Seal they earned – and he throws in something past the ordinary menu besides, a thing he judges cool enough for the doing, never named in advance. Slack is spent only there, only with him, and does not linger forever unspent.

- *Solve it yourself, and the madman remembers you the next time you’re wet.*

WORKS & THE TIDE

BOOK THE THIRD

how the world keeps moving even while the table sleeps

A scene is what the crew does with their hands. A Work is what they set in motion and must then wait upon. Everything in this book is bought with the one coin the game keeps honest for everyone at once — time.

§ 3.1 DECLARING A WORK

A Work is any labour too large for a single scene — a bomb built, a treaty struck, a ruin excavated, a wound healed. It is written on a card the whole table can see, and it carries three lines and no more:

- **THE AIM** — the plain thing wanted, stated so plainly that its finishing cannot be argued.
- **THE HANDS** — who does it: a person, a department, a people.
- **THE STAKES** — what is pledged from the Ledger to make it possible.

§ 3.2 THE TIDE — WATCHES

Time in Council comes in like a tide, on its own, needing no one's permission. A *watch* is a unit of fictional time, not a unit of table time. When the keeper turns the watch, every open Work advances one — whether the crew touched it or not. A session may pass one watch, or several; a night's sleep passes a watch, and a long journey may pass more. Spend a whole scene labouring at a Work, and it takes one watch more. The counts are public.

SMALL WORK <i>1 watch</i>	A WORK <i>3 watches</i>	GREAT WORK <i>5 watches</i>
-------------------------------------	-----------------------------------	---------------------------------------

- §3.3 THE LEDGER – STAKES _____

A Work spends more than time; it spends the crew’s finite holdings, pledged under three headings:

HANDS <i>people & their labour</i>	POWER <i>resources, the means</i>	STANDING <i>goodwill with peoples</i>
--	---	---

A stake cannot be pledged twice – and to wound a pledged stake is to stall everything pledged to it. This is how a single blow lands everywhere.

- §3.4 SQUALLS _____

Every Great Work – and, at the keeper’s discretion, some lesser Works – is declared with one sealed complication – its *squall* – set face-down beside the card. It breaks at the halfway watch, or sooner if the weave calls for it.

- §3.5 FORCING A WORK _____

Once per session, a crew may drive a single Work one extra watch by paying one of two coins:

A TRUTH – confessed aloud, canon the instant it is spoken – a truth made true of the Council – a new law passed.

A FAVOR OWED – the keeper names its price now, seals it, and gives it into the crew’s keeping; they hold it unread until the keeper calls it due, and only then is it opened.

Note the mark of haste: a forced Work still delivers its squall.

- §3.6 COMPLETION & WORK ORDERS _____

A finished Work stops being a card and becomes a plain fact of the world. Between sessions the crew may send *Work Orders* – written instructions to the hands who do the labour – and the keeper answers in those hands’ own voices next the table sits. Such orders turn no extra watch of their own; they come due as of

the next watch the tide brings, so the world moves between sittings without the calendar running wild.

- §3.7 THE DIVINE WORK – THE GREAT TIER _____

Above the Great Work stands one tier more, reserved for labours that span a whole telling, or a season. A Divine Work is not a card the crew declares; it is a weather the keeper sets moving beneath everything:

- *No fixed count.* No watch-total set at declaring, no countdown shown – even if one is quietly kept.
- *Many squalls, not one.* Several sealed beats, opened one at a time.
- *A beat may rewrite the card.* A beat can recast the aim, add a stake, release another.
- *Stakes bind and loose over time.* Hands and Standing attach and detach across its length.

A Divine Work ends not on a watch but on a *turning*. Even here the one law holds: mercy. A Divine Work cannot be seized head-on; it throws off ordinary Works the crew can grasp – its *Footholds*, each marked on its card with a small cursive *ℓ* to name the greater tide it serves. Such a work moves by turns the keeper alone counts; now and then the fiction lends the crew a *weatherglass* – a warning read early – that a turning draws near.

- HOW A STORM SPEAKS – A STANDING HOUSE STYLE

Every squall, every beat, every hard turn is delivered as an in-fiction report on the letterhead of whoever bore it. Never an omniscient voice from the clouds. In Council, the bad news always arrives signed – witnessed, not narrated. *Testimony is king.*

GOVERNANCE

BOOK THE FOURTH

who may command a thing to happen – and what it costs to choose

The game is named for this book. A Council is not a throne – it is a table, where authority is shared, choices are witnessed, and the cost of command is that everyone remembers what you decided.

~ §4.1 THE COUNCIL

A Council is a body of shared command with a single seat that holds the final say. Its virtue is not efficiency – it is *the record*. Every vote and every dissent is entered and remembered; a voice overruled is not silenced but minuted.

A king may be wrong in private. A chair may only be wrong in front of the table. Whether that seat stays with one hand or passes among many – its holder then said to hold the *Fasces* – is the table's to settle at the first sitting.

~ §4.2 WHO SITS – A DIAL SET AT SETUP

Council does not decree who holds a seat; the table sets that dial when it seats its own Council:

<p>THE WIDE TABLE</p> <p>Every standing head holds a seat and a vote. Loud, slow, truly divided. Choose this for intrigue.</p>	<p>THE NARROW TABLE · DEFAULT</p> <p>Only the few at the heart of the story sit and vote; the heads report and advise. Choose this for pace – and by default, this is where a Council begins.</p>
---	--

Council seats a narrow table by default, and widens only when a table decides the intrigue of a true vote is worth the pace it costs.

- § 4.3 **THE SECOND CHAIR – DEPUTIES** _____

A deputy may *hold* a Work at its present watch, but may not advance it. To move a Work forward wants a Work Order or a Directive from the seat of command. A Work left unheld does not merely wait: it slips back one watch for each watch it goes without its hand. A deputy’s hold stays the slip; a Directive keeps the hand at the task, so it neither slips nor pauses.

- § 4.4 **INTERRUPTS** _____

An emergency that names a head pulls them off their Work automatically. The card freezes until released, or a deputy steps in to hold it – keeping it from slipping back.

- § 4.5 **THE OVERRIDE** _____

Only the seat of final say may keep a pulled head at their task regardless, by issuing a *Directive* – a truth committed aloud, on the record.

- § 4.6 **ABSENCE BEYOND REACH** _____

When a head is beyond all word – away, lost, or silent – the table cannot wait on their insight; the need is met by whoever stands present. The answer still comes, but rough: concrete and specific, shaped by the wrong hands, never the clean sealed clue the absent expert would have drawn. Mark such Works – when the head returns, they may find the labour done crooked, and worth the doing again.

TEACH & SHIP

BOOK THE FIFTH

for the keeper – how to raise a Council game from nothing, and run it well

The first four books are the game. This one is the craft of it – how to stand a table up in an evening, and the three small arts that make a keeper of you: writing Seals, giving grace, and wounding without cruelty.

§5.1 SESSION ZERO – RAISING A GAME IN ONE SITTING

Council boots in a single evening. Five moves, in order:

1

Rig the world. Agree the fiction – the setting, its peoples, what Power and Standing are made of here.

2

Seat the Council. Decide who holds the final say, and set the dial of §4.2 – narrow by default, or wide for intrigue.

3

Lay the first Ledger. Write two or three opening Works.

4

Teach the Water. Tell the crew, plainly, of Landis.

5

Promise hope. Say aloud the one creed – if it is truly yours; none is bound to a creed they do not hold. Then begin.

THE CREED – OPTIONAL, TAKEN AT ONE’S OWN GOOD GRACE

*I believe in the power of words.
No thing is created without them,
Nor no thing that is not created can be described with them.*

*I believe there is Grace in words,
For the cutting syllable is duller than the sword.*

Hold Fast!

Hipp Hipp Hurrah!

And don’t forget to: Tally Hoe!

Hurumph! Hurumph! Hurumph!

– L.F.

- §5.2 THE FIRST ART – WRITING SEALS _____

For any obstacle worth being stuck on, write three clues before play and seal them: the Nudge, the Bearing, the Answer. Write them *before* – never under the pressure of a stuck table, when your judgment is worst.

- §5.3 THE SECOND ART – GIVING GRACE _____

Give it quietly. Give it toward the stuck and the hopeful. Do not tally it, do not let it be demanded. Its one hard law is that a truly aground crew always receives it.

- §5.4 THE THIRD ART – THE SIGNED SQUALL _____

Deliver bad news as a report on the letterhead of whoever bore it. In Council, bad news always arrives *signed*.

- §5.5 ON HOPE & HARM – THE TONE OF THE GAME _____

Council is built to reward hope. The game may wound – it may cost dearly, and grieve truly. But it breaks only the one who has stopped hoping.

- *Despair is the only door that locks from the inside.*

- §5.6 WHAT TO PRINT, WHAT TO KEEP _____

Two bundles make a Council game ready for a table:

<p><i>The Crew's Packet</i></p> <p>This handbook, and Landis's two handouts. All a player needs. (For the Council of Un: the crew's Standing Orders for the expedition ride here too.)</p>	<p><i>The Keeper's Papers</i></p> <p>Sealed Seals, hidden stakes, Divine Work beats. Shown to no one until its watch turns.</p>
--	---

- *The Living Ledger* – a place to run Works between sessions: on paper, or (better) online at the Council website, FUCKINPHILOSOPHERS.COM.

Print the first. Keep the second. Run the third.

- ♦ -