

True Names

A Distributed Live Action Roleplaying Game
by Mendel Schmiedekamp

1 Of Names

Live Action Roleplaying (LARP) is a type of game where each player acts out their characters and interacts in a theatrical sense. What makes this a game, rather than simply improvisation, is that rules are added to ensure that disputes between players and resolution of unpredictable or physically impossible events can be adjudicated. With these rules the improvisation is freed from the constraints of an audience or a director and can be built to a huge scale. This allows LARP games incorporating hundreds of people to be played and enjoyed.

A LARP is truly distributed, where each particular clustering of players has their own view of the entire game. Most approaches to adjudicating a game begin to fall apart as the game increases in size and complexity. In computer science this problem is known as scalability. To combat this trend the idea of distributed systems is applied. True Names is designed to be a distributed LARP system to combat these same problems.

Most LARP systems attempt to either strongly confine the situation to avoid the need for adjudication or use a hierarchy of gamemasters (who handle disputes and add external elements to the game). Neither of these scales well. Instead True Names takes an approach based on names. Each player of True Names has a number of cards, which determines what they control sole the right to describe and incorporate into the game. The character they play is based on these cards. During play many of these cards will change hands, be revealed, or may even be destroyed. As the cards change, so does the world, for that is the power of a name.

2 Bound and Unbound

In the world of True Names people, places, and objects of power are broken down into two types. The Bound are those who do not know their true names, and so cannot affect the greater world. The Unbound have learned their true names and can thus tap their true potential, as well as manipulate the bound by learning their true names. In True Names, the world is ruled by this distinction. The unbound are the movers and shakers, changing the world with their plots and quests. The bound often do not realize their limitations, but there is always the chance for some spark of divinity to free them from their ignorance.

2.1 Magic and Mundane

In True Names, magic cannot be separated from the mundane. Farmers whisper ancient words they do not understand to grow their crops. A lord may rule his keep, or the keep may rule him and his desires. Warfare is fought with sword, arrow, and strange spells, but the true weapon is the connection to your foe, which can bring them down, or cause your own downfall.

The cycles of the world are marked by the cycle of names. Legend proclaims the moon as guardian of freedom, and the giver of the freedom of the unbound. At the midnight of the full moon her pact with them is renewed, returning to each what is owned by them. Legend also proclaims the sun as the great enemy of the unbound, who steals their freedom for himself, causing their dissipation if they cannot fend off his constant pull. At the noon of summer solstice his power is magnified, stripping away the connections between the unbound, forcing them to reforge their names in his fire. The people of True Names live on a lunar cycle, with roughly thirteen months between summer solstices. It is this cycle which drives both the schemes of the unbound and the work of the farmers and herdsmen.

Sympathy and identity are the focii of all magic and power in True Names. To strike someone is to give them a piece of you, making you vulnerable to a counter attack. To give a gift is to weaken yourself for a time, but forges a link between giver and receiver. Thus it is that lords often give their vassals many gifts, and often receive many in turn. Each unbound has a strong desire to protect their identity, using titles or pseudonyms to place barriers around their identity. The only ones who truly know the identity of an unbound are her most precious loves and her most hated enemies.

2.2 The Spark of Divinity

Each unbound has a moment of realization, when the moon speaks to her, and gives the gift of a full true name. The unbound have much more complex names, often taken from components around her. Often, especially in times of war and strife, unbound will be dissipated, either dying or simply losing the spark and returning to their bound state. Some of their name may then appear within the names of new unbound. Some of these will even recall brief snippets of their predecessor, as though it were a past life. But they have become a new entity, and what their destiny holds has yet to be determined.

2.3 Lords and Castles

As befits the stratified culture of the unbound, the world of True Names is ruled by individual feudal lords, each in some form of fortification, generally called a castle, regardless of how great or humble. Nearly all of these castles were built in the distant past, repaired and modified by countless lords. Beyond the castles and the protected lands beneath their shadow is wilderness. These wild places are not empty of unbound, but they are populated by feral humans, unbound places of natural power, and beasts with intelligence and sorcery. Passage may be made between castles, with some hazards, but to dwell in the wild is to give oneself over to the wilderness.

2.4 The Known World

The map opposite depicts the known world, the default setting for True Names.

2.4.1 The Pinnacle

In the center of the known world is the great mountain simply called the Pinnacle. Legends of the mountain claim it was once the marital home of the sun and moon. They created the world as a garden, to marvel and enjoy their bliss. Then strife broke them apart, over the unbound. Now they drift together and apart still quarreling, finding no peace. It is said this makes the Pinnacle a place of power, and so many an ancient lord has built their castle on its slopes.

2.4.2 The Spine

Between the two open plains comprising much of the known world, there is a long plateau upon which the Pinnacle rests. At its top is an arid tundra, which may be coaxed into life by the use of simple magics.

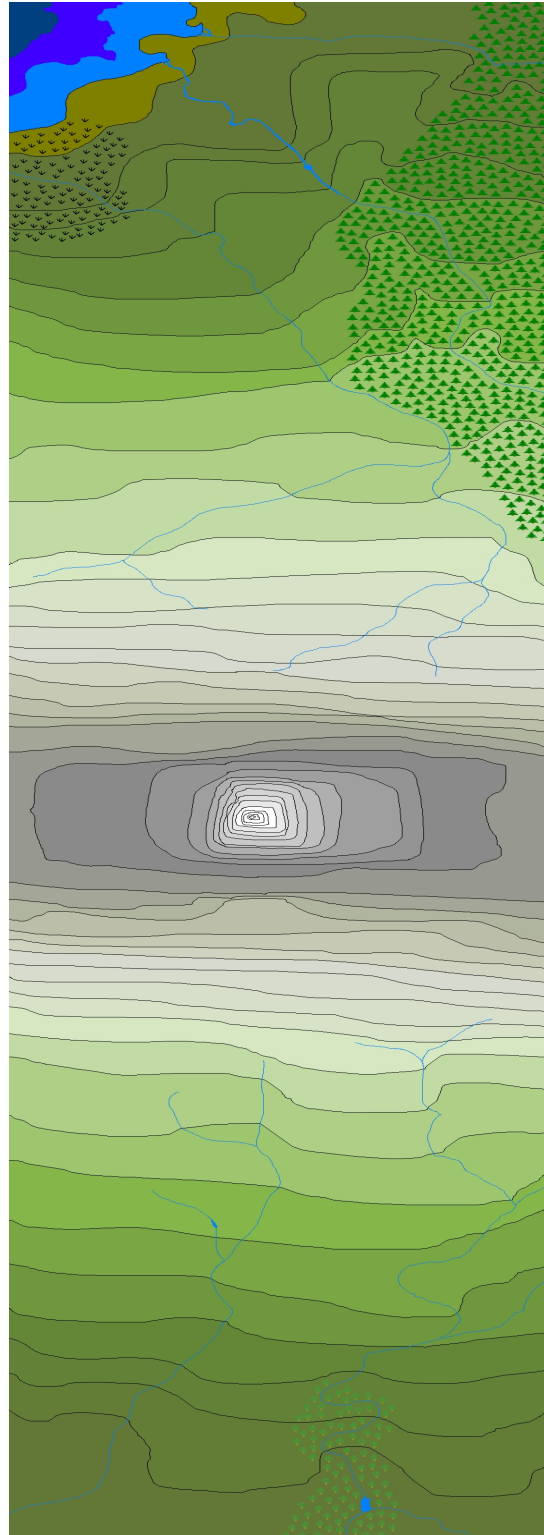
2.4.3 The Sea

To the northwest of the Pinnacle is the Sea. Often struck by storms none have charted its reaches. To its south is a saltwater marsh, rumored to be home to plants and creatures of unimagined power and knowledge, it is also well known to be a treacherous lethal place.

2.4.4 The Forests

The known world contains two forests: a large evergreen forest in the North, and a deciduous forest in the South. Neither forest has been fully charted, but the Northern forest is said to house a great number of

unbound trees, while the Southern one is rumored to contain a forgotten storehouse of powerful artifacts.



Map of the Known World

3 Etching the Name

When playing True Names, there are two basic roles each person can take. The most typical is that of a player, who plays the part of a single character and the associated cards. The other type is the custodian, who takes one or more accessory unbound and keeps track of their actions and cards. A single person can be both custodian and player, for example, playing both a character and managing a location. In any case, what describes characters is the cards which make them up, pieces of their true names.

3.1 Cards

The core of the mechanics in True Names is sets of cards. These cards are signs, representing control of a particular thing in the game of the game. Each character is built of a small number of cards (typically around 8). This also applies to accessory characters, objects, and locations of importance, all of whom can also be unbound.

Each card has four major parts:

1. Meaning - each card represents some quality, aspect, or bound person, place, or thing.
2. Owner - the unbound the card belongs to, not necessarily the one who holds it.
3. Element - one of the five elements (earth, fire, wood, metal, water) associated with this aspect or quality.
4. Signatures - a list of unbound which have come in contact with this card. The owner is always assumed to have their signature on a card.

Every card used in a game should share the same format, for ease of use. One suggestion is to use index cards, with the first line being the meaning, the second being the owner's name and the card's element, and the signatures starting on the fourth line and continuing.

3.2 Elements

The five elements of cards describes the spiritual alignment of the card. Multiple cards of the same element have heightened effect, while balance of elements ensures survival and flexibility.

- **Earth** - The element of solidity and form. Cards of this element pertain to experience, reliability, and persistence.

- **Fire** - The element of energy and illumination. Cards of this element pertain to youth, vision, and awareness.
- **Wood** - The element of growth and nature. Cards of this element pertain to the natural world, maturation, and empathy.
- **Metal** - The element of artifice and order. Cards of this element pertain to artifacts, scholarship, and reason.
- **Water** - The element of change and force. Cards of this element pertain to force, spontaneity, and emotion.

3.3 Ownership

Ownership of a card gives several advantages, most of which ensure that the card will return to you in time. Thus a gift will return with the signature of the recipient given time. While any card with your signature may be used against you, a card you own can be retrieved when used in this manner, using the Rite of Ownership. Also during the night of the full moon, all unburned cards will return to their owners, as well as one burned card, which is recreated without signatures. Thus it is traditional to give gifts immediately after that night, as it reaffirms to bonds made between allies. It also makes the night ideal for betrayals.

3.4 Signatures

Whenever an unbound affects another unbound or gains possession of a card, they must sign that card, unless it has already received their signature. This represents the sympathetic link they have to that card. Using signatures it is possible to greatly hinder or aid another unbound, as each signature gives that card power over the signing unbound. Signatures last until the card is burned, using a Rite of Destruction, or until the day of the summer solstice. That day is treated as the beginning of a new year, when all things may begin anew.

4 The Work of Ages

In True Names, magic flows through everything and to have a name is to grant power. The use of names, whether in overt sorcery or apparently mundane actions is performed by rites and ceremonies. These can then be placed together to create protocols, which can be customized for each game.

4.1 Rites

Rites are the basic way of performing any action in True Names. These allow one or two players to manipulate cards, perform actions, and travel between locations.

- **Rite of Destruction** - burn a card you possess (a burned card is X-ed out on both sides and cannot be given, taken, or otherwise used, it is treated as blank).
- **Rite of Revelation** - show an acting card whose meaning must be appropriate for what action you are taking. You may then show as many cards as you wish provided they have the same element as the acting card or share a signature of the target. The number shown determines the severity of the effect:
 1. - minor effect: communication or cosmetic effect.
 2. - significant effect: cause a mental, emotional, or physical change (up to a single card bonus or penalty).
 3. - major effect: force a gift (as rite of gifting) or force a burning (as rite of destruction).
 4. and above - split into above effects.
- **Rite of Refusal** - can only be used to respond to a rite of revelation. Show a refusing card with a meaning which can oppose the action. Then show any number of cards with the signature of the actor or matching the refusing card's element. The actor's shown cards are reduced by the number of refusing cards shown. If the action remains successful, then the actor must sign one of the refusing cards (which may already have the signature). Alternatively, the refuser may simply choose to reveal any number of cards which have the actor's signature.
- **Rite of Ownership** - After a rite of revelation or a rite of refusal where you were shown a card you own, you may take that card back.
- **Rite of Passage** - This rite allows passage between specific locations in the game. First any location token you possess must be surrendered to the custodian of that location. Then the player should travel to the custodian of the new location and request a token of that location. It is possible for a location to perform a rite of revelation either when the token is surrendered or when it is requested. This reflects

the difficulty which may exist in escaping some locations and entering others.

- **Rite of Wandering** - This rite allows you to remain in non-specific locations. Again this requires surrendering any location tokens, as with the rite of passage, but no new tokens are gained. Instead the location of the character is assumed to be unspecified. A wandering character can enact rites of revelation only if they show at least one card with the target's signature, and a rite of revelation targeting a wandering character requires that character's signature to be shown. Wandering characters may not participate in ceremonies or rites of gifting or exchange. Players of characters in a specific location can require a wandering character to leave their physical vicinity at any time, if they are not presently involved in a rite.
- **Rite of Gifting** - show a card and give that card to another entity unless that entity shows a card with your signature. If accepted the gifted card is signed by the receiver.
- **Rite of Exchange** - if both entities agree exchange cards, without showing them. Note, it is bad form to exchange cards between two entities controlled by one player. These cards are signed by the receivers.

4.2 Ceremonies

Ceremonies in True Names are performed by more than two people. Ceremonies require one player or custodian to act as celebrant while the remaining are participants.

- **Ceremony of Creation** - this ceremony creates a new entity, using contributed cards of the participants. This changes the ownership of these cards if those cards are donated by the owners, or do not have a current owner. The celebrant is the custodian for this new entity.
- **Ceremony of Loss** - this ceremony breaks apart an entity, distributing its cards among the participants. The entity must either be willing or be reduced to dissipation. The celebrant is the custodian or player of the entity. The celebrant determines who gains which cards. These cards are treated as having no owner.
- **Ceremony of Chaos** - Each participant adds one card to a common pool. The celebrant then randomly distributes the cards to each participant.

4.3 Protocols

Lastly, each game of True Names will have some Protocols, which are predetermined ways to combine rites and ceremonies. These can be designed to fit the needs of the game, here are a few examples:

- **Protocol of the Duel** - Each player takes turns as actor in a series of bouts. Each bout involves the actor performing a rite of revelation and the defender performing a rite of refusal. Revealing three or more cards forces the defender to perform a rite of destruction. A duel to the first touch lasts until a successful rite of revelation occurs, a duel to first blood lasts until a card is burned, and a duel to the death lasts until one side is dissipated.
- **Protocol of Fealty** - This protocol involves the liege performing a rite of gifting followed by a rite of exchange between the liege and the pledger.
- **Protocol of Houses Joined** - This protocol consists of two ceremonies of loss for each of the noble houses involved, and a ceremony of creation for generating the new house. between the first two ceremonies and the last one, any number of rites of gifting or rites of exchange may be performed between members of each house.

4.4 Dissipation and Rebirth

Dissipation is a constant threat to all unbound. At best it causes the forgetting of their true name, at worse complete destruction. Dissipation occurs whenever either of the following conditions is not met:

- the unbound possesses at least two cards it owns.
- the unbound possesses at least two different elements.

The first condition ensures the unbound retains its identity. The second ensure it is not subsumed by the elemental forces of the world. Thus survival requires both identity and balance. Burned cards do not count for either of these conditions, and the burning of cards is often how one unbound can force another to dissipate.

Once an unbound is dissipated, the player may choose to take one of the remaining cards of that unbound to use in making a new unbound. This represents a connection between former and new unbound, analogous to a past life. These cards change ownership, but otherwise stay the same. Any cards owned

by a dissipated unbound will stay in circulation until the next full moon, when they also dissipate.

4.5 Questing for the Name

Starting characters will usually begin with 8 cards, at least one of each element. This can vary due to the needs of the game, and accessory unbound can have more or less cards as needed by their custodians and the game. Each player character is also able acquire cards, as well as regain additional burned cards over time.

Each player may take one quest per game session. This should be selected before the session begins, and is usually given by one of the setup staff, who hand out cards, and allot custodial tasks. A quest is for a particular burned card or a particular new card for the character. This must be decided before the quest is given.

If by the end of the session the character has succeeded on the quest then they are that much closer to gaining the card being quested. If the card was owned by the character but was burned, then one quest is always sufficient to return it. If the card is new then one quest is needed for every three cards the character already owns (burned or otherwise), rounding up. Often quests relate to the card at hand, such as a military victory to regain the trust of a company of guards or winning a debate to reacquire your glibness.

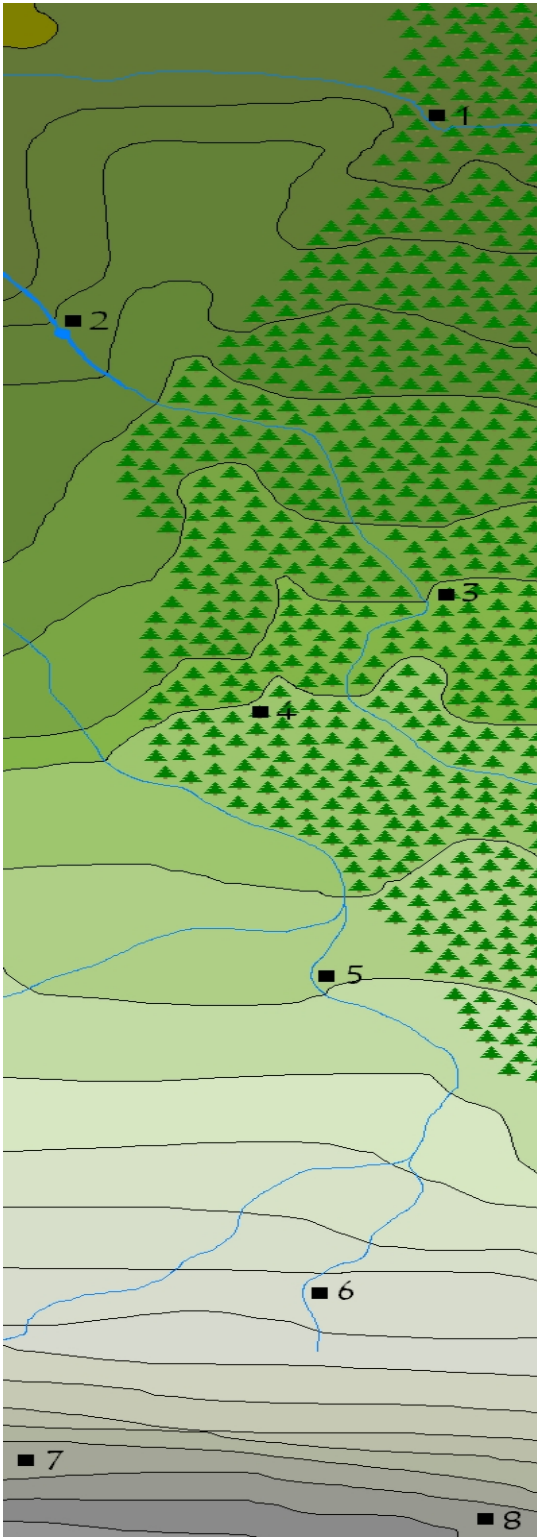
5 Castles on the Hill

Much of the action of a game of True Names will occur in or around a castle. While each has its peculiarities, there are many features which are common.

5.1 Living in Castles

Each castle has two parallel strata. One one side are the unbound, who invariably rule and vie for power and prestige. On the other side those bound to rulers and their subordinates lie within a similar strata, for the servant of a lord ranks higher than the servant of a merchant. At the top is the lord or lords of the castle. Beneath them are the ministers who administrate and command the resources of the castle. Typically they hold this position by periodic demonstrations of loyalty to their lord or lords. Beneath them are courtiers, who have no responsibilities and are not trusted, but are known to the lord and permitted to remain. Lastly are the outsiders, who stay away from the court, either from disgrace or personal choice. In practice if a lord falls it is to an outsider as often as to a minister, though very rarely to a courtier.

5.2 Castles of the Known World



Northeast Quadrant

1. **Baderwatch Keep** - Once the home of a bandit king, this castle is filled with hidden passages and storerooms. Secrets, both of the keep

and its residents are the stock and trade of this castle.

2. **Graylake Castle** - On the banks of the richest lake in the known world this castle is renowned for its fish. Many of the exotic species that can be found here have mystical properties. The lord of the castle spends much time alone near the lake, perhaps communicating with the unbound who dwell within.

3. **Etyr Castle** - In the depths of the forest, along the bank of the Gray River, is the strangest castle in the northeast. This fortress was not built from stone or wood, but was tunneled out of a huge tree that was once lord of the entire forest. While most inhabitants assume the tree has dissipated, none can say for certain the Etyr has truly passed.

4. **Deepreach Castle** - One of the few success stories against the wilderness, until the past century Deepreach was considered a doomed attempt by a family of lords to found a new castle. Almost overnight, Deepreach seemed to have found peace with the wild. But of what sacrifice or treaty this is from, the lords refuse to answer.

5. **The Glinting Fortress** - Within the bend of the Hadoris River, this esoteric castle is visible for many miles. Constructed entirely of quartz, the fortress is split into several disconnected sections, each ruled by a different lord.

6. **Therin's Gate** - This castle is a huge stone wall, surrounding a vast holding of fertile fields and prosperous towns. The lord of the castle travels around the wall over the course of a year, holding court in the giant gatehouses each month, returning to the largest for summer solstice.

7. **Shadow's Look** - Carved out of an outcropping of stone, this castle contains numerous caverns and passages, many of which seem to resist lighting of any sort. At the peak is the lord's manor house, carved entirely from a single boulder.

8. **Redstone Castle** - Named for its impressive red granite walls, this castle has passed through numerous hands. It is rumored that it has never done so peacefully.

6 Words at Midnight

The following is a few short example of play, occuring during the night of the full moon and the cards each unbound owns are returned.

6.1 The Setting

The castle of Therin's Gate under the reign of Lord Malucint. An evening of court, at the fourth watch tower, when the moon lies full.

6.2 The Unbound

The scenes focus on four unbound:

Gaden Malucint, heir to the Lordship

Cards:

- Regal Bearing: Fire - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Indomitable Will: Earth - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Seal of Princedom: Metal - owned by Lord Malucint, signed by Gaden Malucint and Hera Ourten.
- Sturdy: Earth - owned by Gaden Malucint, unsigned.
- Keen Hearing: Fire - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Hera Ourten.

Hera Ourten, keeper of the fourth tower

Cards:

- Skyward Gardens: Wood - owned by Hera Ourten, unsigned.
- Fourth Tower Guard: Water - owned by Hera Ourten, signed by Baldein.
- Political Cunning: Fire - owned by Hera Ourten, signed by Thex Ludor and Gaden Malucint.
- Fourth Tower Servants: Wood - owned by Hera Ourten, signed by Gaden Malucint.
- Persistence: Earth - owned by Baldein, signed by Thex Ludor and Hera Ourten.
- Trained Mind: Metal - owned by Hera Ourten, unsigned.

Baldein, warrior for hire

Cards:

- Strength of Arm: Water - owned by Baldein, unsigned.
- Sword of Zirkana: Metal - owned by Thex Ludor, signed by Baldein.
- Baldein's First Company: Water - owned by Baldein, unsigned.
- Baldein's Third Company: Water - owned by Baldein, signed by Gaden Malucint.
- Cunning Eye: Fire - owned by Baldein, signed by Gaden Malucint.
- Honor: Earth - owned by Hera Ourten, signed by Baldein.

Thex Ludor, mystic and adviser to Lord Malucint

Cards:

- Baldein's Second Company: Water - owned by Baldein, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Phoenix Elemental: Fire - owned by Thex Ludor, unsigned.
- Seeing Bowl: Fire - owned by Thex Ludor, unsigned.
- Quiet Empathy: Wood - owned by Thex Ludor, signed by Gaden Malucint and Baldein.
- Crow Familiar: Wood - owned by Thex Ludor, signed by Baldein.
- Wisdom: Earth - owned by Thex Ludor, signed by Hera Ourten

6.3 The Scenes

Before the Midnight Ball, Hera Ourten's Chambers.

HERA: It is time for us to teach that insolent whelp a lesson.

BALDEIN: How so?

HERA: Tonight, at the ball he will be at his weakest, you must intercept him before his father can provide him support. I will provoke him, and then you can challenge him.

BALDEIN: I have no love for Gaden, but tell me, where is the profit for me in this?

HERA: The profit? Are you not honor bound by my gift? ... I see your point. Then how about this, if you do this for me, I will return Honor to you once more.

BALDEIN: Fair enough, but you will also owe me a favor.

At the start of the midnight ball, due to the influence of the Moon, all cards return to their owners. Moments later the ball begins, and music

Baldein and Hera complete rites of passage to the ballroom, receiving tokens of the main hall from the custodian.

HERA: Gaden, I see you're looking well.

GADEN: Lady Hera.

Hera uses a rite of revelation to provoke Gaden into an insult. She reveals her trained mind using pointing out the prince's ignorance, supported by her political cunning and servants (using their connection to Gaden). Gaden responds by a rite of refusal using his indomitable will, supported by his keen hearing's connection to Hera. Since Hera revealed one more card than Gaden, he is provoked into a minor insult. Hera elects to sign keen hearing, giving Gaden no later advantage over her, since it already bears her signature. Hera then calls upon Baldein to champion her cause.

BALDEIN: I'll teach you to insult a lady in her own home!

Shortly before the duel, Gaden seeks out Thex Ludor for assistance, Thex agrees to gift the heir the sword of Zirkana, which was recently lent to Baldein, and still bears his signature. After the rite of gifting, the protocol of the duel begins, to be fought to first blood.

GADEN: We shall see who gains satisfaction.

BALDEIN: Indeed.

As challenger, BALDEIN initiates the first bout. Currently their cards are the following:

Gaden:

- Regal Bearing: Fire - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Indomitable Will: Earth - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Sturdy: Earth - owned by Gaden Malucint, unsigned.
- Keen Hearing: Fire - owned by Gaden Malucint, signed by Hera Ourten.

- Sword of Zirkana: Metal - owned by Thex Ludor, signed by Baldein and Gaden Malucint.

Baldein:

- Strength of Arm: Water - owned by Baldein, unsigned.
- Baldein's First Company: Water - owned by Baldein, unsigned.
- Baldein's Second Company: Water - owned by Baldein, signed by Thex Ludor.
- Baldein's Third Company: Water - owned by Baldein, signed by Gaden Malucint.
- Cunning Eye: Fire - owned by Baldein, signed by Gaden Malucint.
- Persistence: Earth - owned by Baldein, signed by Thex Ludor and Hera Ourten.

Baldein reveals Strength of Arm, supported by Baldein's First, Second and Third Companies, as well as Cunning Eye (due to its signature). Gaden refuses with Sturdy, supported by Indomitable Will (by matching element) and Sword of Zirkana (due to its signature). Because Baldein revealed two more cards, Gaden is knocked to the ground by the attack, but is not yet wounded. After this bout Gaden is in a tough situation, he is on the floor, unless someone can help him up, he will suffer a one card penalty in the combat.

Gaden then retaliates by revealing Regal Bearing, using his status to intimidate Baldein, supported by Keen Hearing and Sword of Zirkana. Baldein refuses using only Persistence. While Gaden has revealed two more cards than Baldein, Gaden is under a one card penalty. Rather than attempt to affect Baldein, Gaden elects to stand, removing his penalty. However he is forced to sign Baldein's Persistence card.

When Baldein attacks once more he reveals Strength of Arm, supported by all of his cards, either from signature or element. Against six cards Gaden elects to refuse using only Sturdy and Indomitable Will, the later of which is signed by Baldein. Being four cards up, Baldein then describes Gaden's sudden lapse leading to his being wounded. Gaden elects to burn his Keen Hearing and the duel ends.