

# HEXBONES

---

## INTRODUCTION

Mankind has always looked for tools with which to divine the future and make sense of the present. To this end, we often turn to fortune-tellers and their tools – the tarot, the I ching, tea leaves, goat entrails and so on. The human mind excels at extracting patterns of meaning from seemingly random data, and some point to that tendency as proof that these oracles are frauds or delusional. Those who have made use of these tools of divination know that understanding these things can be improved with practice and talent. Just as all of us can run but only some can run marathons, all of us can see these patterns, but only some can truly derive their meaning.

Such was the thesis of Phineas T. Frobisher in 1871. A small inheritance had allowed him a life of moderate leisure, and an overly-enthusiastic crusade to debunk psychic's, mystics and mediums had rendered him unwelcome in many of Europe's capitals, and he found himself in Dublin with time on his hands and many collected tools of the fortune-teller's trade. It is said that he created the hexbones in this period<sup>1</sup> as a means of illustrating that the *methods* of fortune telling were easily reproducible. It had been his hope that in making it something easily taught and used, he could show the fortune tellers to be frauds.

He succeeded, but not in the way he expected. As he experimented with the hexbones, his predictions and assessments became more and more accurate with time. Drawing in a small circle of trusted friends, he discovered that he was not alone in this, leading him to posit that that the fortune-teller's only fraud was the assertion that fortune tellers were needed at all! He made it his goal to attempt to spread this knowledge and methodology far and wide, to free mankind from these shackles of deceit.

Obviously, the fact that I am now writing this, pulling together this knowledge from scraps and secondhand accounts indicates that he failed.

Frobisher's obituary is a matter of public record – it is concise, mentioning his crusade of debunking and making oblique reference to his 'unfortunate accident' and nothing more. Diligent study of the papers of the time will note a story, a few days before, of lightning striking among a number of cattle en route to the slaughterhouse, producing a stampede which produced 'numerous injuries and one fatality.' This is no certainty that this was Frobisher, but as there have been only three deaths by stampede in Dublin's history, and the time and place correlate, it is not much of a stretch to make that assumption.

Whatever the reality of the matter, Frobisher's confederates clearly thought there was more to it, as several of them disappeared shortly thereafter, and those that remained in

---

<sup>1</sup> *In his writings, Frobisher states that he discovered an ancient form of the hexbones in forbidden Egyptian texts, but this is generally considered to be hyperbole created to give his studies an air of legitimacy.*

public disavowed any knowledge of hexbones and were dismissive of Frobisher's works. Of those who disappeared, one was a young woman, Nigella Hathrow, who was said to have been Frobisher's fiancée. It is from her journals, secreted away in a private collection in Paris, that much of what we know of hexbones has been recovered. An American soldier (whose name we fear we must not reveal, out of consideration for his family) found the remnants of her papers during the last days of World War II, and transcribed what he could. It is from this young man that hexbones found their way to the United States, and he passed the secret on to his granddaughter many years later. What you read now is a result of her efforts to see this knowledge distributed.

Dismiss this as claptrap if you wish, but do so with respect. Many more than Frobisher have paid the price for trying to put this in your hands, and their memory deserves more than your mockery.

## ON THE MATTER OF CASTING THE HEXBONES

Casting the hexbones is a simple matter, not unlike throwing sticks, coins or actual bones. It requires anywhere between one and four hexbones and a surface on which to roll them.

The hexbones themselves are small pieces of worked material with six surfaces, each denoting one of the 'faces' of the reading. While there is some debate among practitioners as to the ideal material to construct hexbones from - metal, wood, plastic or even actual bones - there is no evidence that it has an impact, and any assertion to the contrary is best viewed as base superstition.<sup>2</sup>

Each face displays a number of figures, in a pattern that suggests a relationship. The details of that relationship are determined by something called "facing" - the figures are said to be facing inward or outward.

*For example, the twins shows two figures. If they are facing in, towards each other, it suggests a relationship between the two figures, and that configuration is called "The Lovers". If they are facing away from each other, it suggests that they are in opposition, and that configuration is called "The Duellists".*

Since it is impossible to tell facing simply by looking at the bones, it is necessary to cast them on a surface with two distinct colors. The precise colors do not matter much, but one is associated with facing inward, one with facing outward. Traditionally, white is internal and black is external, but that is far from binding.

If it is unclear which color a bone has settled on, it is considered to be "cocked". A cocked die usually suggests a more complex relationship. Many novice seers consider this to be a bad sign, but with experience, they come to recognize these results as a valuable tool.

---

<sup>2</sup> Curiously, while the name "hexbones" seems to reek of witchcraft, it is actually far more mundane in its origins. The 'hex' is a reference to the six faces rather to any sort of curse, and 'bones' grew informally out of the fact that Frobisher's own set were ivory.

Because of this, some seers prefer complex surfaces, such as chessboards, because they are more likely to produce a cocked result.

*For example, if the twins are cocked, it suggests an asymmetrical relationship, such as master and servant. This configuration is called "The Mismatch."*

## **READING THE BONES**

What follows are the six faces of the hexbones, and their more detailed interpretation based on whether the figures face inward, outward, or if the bone is cocked.

### **THE FIRST FACE: THE STRANGER**



The Stranger is a lone figure in an empty plain. His strength, motivation and importance come from within, but his weakness come in his lack of ties to those around him. The Stranger is never a welcome figure.

#### ***THE STRANGER FACES IN: THE MYSTERY***

The Mystery is a question to be answered, usually one of great importance. It may be a secret to be revealed, a crime to be solved or something lost to be found, but there is a great unknown that must become known to allow further progress.

#### ***THE STRANGER FACES OUT: THE MENACE***

The Menace is a threat to all – it has no allies or enemies it is simply a danger that cannot be allowed to go unchecked. It may be malicious to all – a killer or mad beast – or it may be vastly indifferent – a storm or natural disaster – but it is unquestionably a threat which demands response, and the only responses that are really viable are to face it, flee it or succumb to it.

#### ***THE STRANGER COCKED: HIDDEN DANGERS***

A cocked stranger is very inauspicious, as it combines the worst elements of both facings. The Menace may have some Mystery about it which needs to be solved to be able to deal with it, or the Mystery may contain some Menace that keeps it from being solved or which be released is the Mystery is not solved.

### **THE SECOND FACE: THE TWINS**



The twins are two figures, opposite one another. Who they are is far less important than how they relate to one another, for each is defined by this relationship. When the twins appear, the relationship will be pushed to the forefront, to be strengthened or broken.

### ***THE TWINS FACE IN: THE LOVERS***

The lovers may actually be lovers, but they may just as easily be family members, partners or friends. Whatever the relationship, acknowledged or not, it defines both of them in ways they may not admit, and if one is pricked, the other will be sure to bleed. This is strength and weakness – the partner is a source of strength, but also of vulnerability.

### ***THE TWINS FACE OUT: THE DUELISTS***

Hatred ties one man to another as easily as love. The Duelists are in opposition to one another, competing directly with each other. The Duelists may compete over prizes and things, but those are just distractions – the goal is to overcome the other person. While this facing covers physical confrontations, it is equally apt for contests of words, or even long-standing rivalries, as between an investigator and his quarry.

### ***THE TWINS COCKED: MISMATCH***

The Twins usually assume a degree of equity, but the mismatched twins discard that in one of two ways – there may be a mismatch of sentiment, or a mismatch of means. Regard the cocked hexbone carefully – if the figures are on opposite sides of the color line, there is a mismatch in sentiment –one may view the other as a friend or rival, but the other does not share that view. They may be in opposition in their viewpoints (one loving, one hating) but more often, it merely means the sentiment is strongly held by only one.

If the figures are on the same side of the color line, and it is only the background that crosses it, the mismatch is in means. One party is more capable than the other in this arena of conflict, and this issue will be deeply lopsided if it comes to the forefront. This may mean a wife who dominates her husband or perhaps the relationship of the hunter to the prey.

## **THE THIRD FACE: THE SCALES**



The Scales are identical to the Twins, except that a third figure has been placed between them. This third figure serves as the crux of matters – the fulcrum point of the scale. Where the twins relationship is with each other, the Scales are defined by their relationship to the crux. The crux itself is usually torn between these forces, though whether she is the subject or object of the choice it creates depends upon the facing.

#### ***THE SCALES FACE IN: THE PRIZE***

In crux is desired by both of the figures at the poles, and they will contest each other to gain it. This has some apparent similarities with the Duelists, but the conflict is entirely about the crux, not about each other, but at the same time they may not value the crux itself so much as they value *winning* it. This does not always work out for the crux, since the scales represent rival suitors as easily as they do two huntsmen after the same quarry.

#### ***THE SCALES FACE OUT: THE CHOICE***

Power shifts to the hands of the crux now, who faces a choice between the two polar figures. Each may make his case, offer bribes or sweet promises, but the decision is ultimately in the hands of the crux. Again, it is not always good to be the crux – the choices may not be desirable, but there is *always* a choice.

#### ***THE SCALES COCKED: THE STACKED DECK***

When the scales are cocked, the outcome seems certain. The conflict is nearly won, the choice seems obvious and if matters are left as they are, things will play out predictable. The figure on the losing end may still have some chance to turn things around, but the odds aren't good.

### **THE FOURTH FACE: THE TOWERS**



One figure stands at each cardinal point, standing watch. The Towers are figures of power, each potent in their own way, but they exist in the context of their peers. Each Tower may have a vision of supremacy, but the reality is that the board will never be cleared. The Towers may relate to one another, but more importantly do they relate to the world around them, each playing their part in the larger game.

#### ***THE TOWERS FACE IN: THE GAME***

The game is played between the towers and places them in opposition, each seeking to claim some prize. Like the Duelists, the prize itself is less important than the struggle and overcoming the influence of the other towers is the true goal. It is unlikely that this struggle will truly strike at the foundation of any tower – instead its final outcome is merely a shift in the ongoing contest.

#### ***THE TOWERS FACE OUT: THE CASTLE***

The Towers stand in alliance, at least loosely, and rather than turn their eye upon each other, they cast it outward to the world at larger. This may mean an agreed

upon division of spheres, or simply that there is a wide enough venue that conflict is not an issue. Whatever the arrangement, each tower benefits from the presence of the other tower, and when an external threat manifests, they can count on each other for support.

### ***THE TOWERS COCKED: A FRAGILE ALLIANCE***

The Towers may oppose one another, but do not do so openly (if it can be avoided). Nominal peace and cooperation exists between them, but conflict roils beneath that surface, and the danger that the conflict may boil to the surface is a constant companion.

## **THE FIFTH FACE: THE CROSS**



The Cross appears very like the Towers, but like the Scales, an additional figure has been placed in the center. As with the scales, this new figure is the crux, and the relationship of the figures at the cardinal points are now defined by that Crux. The Cross is a powerful face, as it can reveal relationships which were in-obvious, for the Crux is hidden from view by a figure in each direction, and usually remains hidden. Even when the identity of the crux is unknown, knowledge that she exists can be powerful.

### ***THE CROSS FACES IN: THE WEAVER***

The crux is the weaver, in the middle of a web of allies and servants who pursue her agenda. They hide her from prying eyes, and act as her hands, allowing her to act without incriminating herself. The crux's agenda is her own, but her means are as direct or indirect as her servants.

### ***THE CROSS FACES OUT: THE PALADINS***

The cardinal figures protect the crux. They are not subservient to it, rather, each does so for his own reasons of duty, morals or necessity. The Paladins may not necessarily even be associated with one another, but their role is the same – protect the crux figure from whatever is currently threatening it.

### ***THE CROSS COCKED: THE TANGLED WEB***

This may be the hardest facing to read, since it suggests such a network of alliances, obedience, duty, command and secrecy that it can be difficult to unravel. The crux remains critical to matters at hand, but her ultimate role is unknown, even to those who surround her. It may be that she is strong and has earned both servants and paladins, but it may also be that she is weak, and needs these things to survive.

## **THE SIXTH FACE: THE DIVIDE**



Three figures stand in a neat line, mirrored by another three opposite across an open plain. Each trio is unified, but clearly separate from the opposing group. There is an instinct to focus on these groups, but it is the gap between them

which truly defines this face for better or ill.

### ***THE DIVIDE FACES IN: THE WAR***

The two sides are coming together in conflict, each looking to defeat the other. It may be deferred or delayed, but this underlying conflict is so important to both sides that unless something essential is changed, the best that can be hoped for is armistice for a time.

### ***THE DIVIDE FACES OUT: THE SCHISM***

The two sides were once one, but are separating. Such a separation is painful, but all involved will call it necessary. There may be comes conflict or contention in this division, but all in service of the goal of establishing firm lines of separation.

### ***THE DIVIDE COCKED: RAGGED LINES***

The lines of separation are no longer clear. Allies in war are undependable, and opinion on division is far from unified. It may be time for purges or opportunistic conflict, but whatever the specifics, they will be broad and unpleasant.

## **YOUR FIRST READING**

The first time you sit down to cast the bones, take a moment to gather all of the things you will need:

1. Some number of Bones. Two or three is the ideal number, though the ambitious may consider using four.
2. A divided surface to roll on. This may be divided by color, but even something as simple as a piece of paper divided by a line will suffice.
3. A handful of names of people you expect to come up. This list need not be comprehensive, but it is absolutely necessary to have at least a few names to start with. These will be the touchstones of your reading, and allow you to start filling in the identities of some of the figures. Those you can fill in will suggest the fate of those names, and those you cannot suggest the roles new figures may play.
4. A sheet of paper and something to write with, to allow you to capture the reading.

Once all the pieces are in place, take a moment to think about the situation, about what you know and what you expect, and then cast the bones onto the surface. If any roll off or away, discount them, but take them as a bad omen for the remaining bones.

Capture each pattern on your notes, and review them against your list of names. This is the most subjective part of the process, and the part which improves with practice. The patterns should resonate with at least some of the names, allowing you to fill in at least part of the pattern with the names you have. Those figures you cannot immediately name should suggest to you new names and ideas. If the bones show the towers, and some of your names are leaders, you should ask "What other leaders might they be in contention with?" and fill in the answers.

One point that is important to remember is this: While a name should only appear once on a particular face, the same name can appear on other faces. It is this truth which binds the bones together, and produces the clearest image. Without this, the bones may offer small insights, but it is only as the faces form a network that deeper truths are revealed.

## HEXBONES IN YOUR GAME

So what's the purpose of this little piece of fiction for what is an oddly glorified means of rolling standard dice on a chessboard? It may seem like a lot of unnecessary color for an unclear purposes, but bear with us for a moment.

Most methods of divination depend upon a certain amount of color to get the mind working. They use sets of symbols that have a lot of information that may not be very meaningful in the abstract, but when we look at them, our minds want to see patterns, and we use the color to help us do exactly that.

Even so, this might just be one more oddball way to read futures, except its purpose is actually a little different. The specifics of the hexbone method are designed to help a GM come up adventure ideas. Start with the list of names of PCs and interesting NPCs in your game, and see how they fill in. This maybe easier said than done, but it is probably easiest of all to show.

## A SAMPLE READING

For the record, I'm really doing this. I'll be using characters and setting elements from Fred Hicks' . Faith, Faces and Fingerprints, which can be more thoroughly referenced here: <http://drivingblind.livejournal.com/326248.html>

I have my bones and my surface prepared, and I need only my list of characters to begin with. For our purposes, I look to the citizens of the city of Rotterdam, and some of its prominent citizens, including:

**The Face** – Elected head of the council, and voice of the people

**Anders** – High class, Well connected companion.

**Theah** – Dedicated monk of a minor order, getting by on courier, but with big dreams.

**Brynna** – A noble's daughter, sent off to a school for reprobates and fighting graduation.

**Joc** – A courier with a bad attitude and a worse hat.

**Aldar** – A Gondolier, and an honest lawman with a gambling problem.

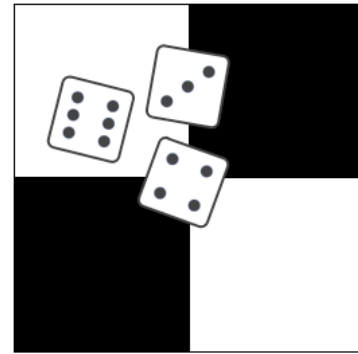
I could bring in many more names, but this is a good starting set, and since Anders, Brynna and Theah are PCs, they'll be my lens of focus. The other names are NPCs that I have an interest in seeing for one reason or another. I may not use them all – only the bones will tell.



I've chosen to cast 3 bones, and with due deliberation, I do so, and get:

That's a *Stacked Deck*, *War* and *The Fragile Alliance*.

The Face is so easy to place in this that the challenge comes from narrowing down the options. As a political figure, he likely is on one side or the other of any war, and as the fourth faction of the council, it seems that the Fragile Alliance is too perfect not to use.



In fact, the Alliance is so apt that I begin with it, making it the centerpiece of this reading. With The Face in one corner, the other three corners would most obviously be the church, the nobility and the merchants. However, I've hit upon an important point – these are figures, not mere ideas. The other three towers must have names, and for guidance on that, we want members of the faction who relate to our names in some way.

First, for the church, a tie to Theah seems apt, but her particular order is a small one, of another faith entirely. It would not make sense for her church to be directly represented, so we selected a ranking churchman, Bishop Robey, for the slot. Still, with Theah fresh in mind, I ask myself what he thinks of Theah's sect, because he should have a strong opinion one way or another. He looks down on them with disdain, I think, and I file that away.

For the merchant's, we have no obvious candidates, but we know that Companion's have a guild, and since Anders is a member, the Guildmaster of the Companion's Guild seems like a good plan. He hasn't been named yet, so I just make something up, and so Guildmaster Ryan is on the grid.

For the nobility the choice is obvious: Brynna's father, Lord Banqmere.

So, right off the bat I've set up some council intrigue at the center of things, and I've already hooked in the PCs, but I've only just started. So I move on to The Stacked Deck next because I'm torn between options. Because it suggests a mismatched conflict over some third party, I could easily set it up to be between Brynna and her father (with her father at an advantage) or Theah and Bishop Robey (with the Bishop at an advantage). Of those two, I don't immediately see the crux between Brynna and her Father, since their conflict is so much with one another. Brynna's mother might do, I suppose, but I'm not feeling it. On the other hand, since I've already decided on Bishop Robey's opinions on Theah's order, I can see putting the leader of that order between her and Robey and on the verge of being driven out of his position in favor of someone more pliable. That's seems to create some investment, so I check the notes, get Patriarch Helmut's name, and we're set.

Now, the war is tough. I mean, it's easy in that I could just pick two factions and say go, but I don't want to do it arbitrarily. Not only do I not want to end up splitting the PCs over this (at least not now) I want to make sure the conflict ties into everything else in a meaningful fashion.

Now, I could take the folks I've got on the board already and engineer a conflict that way. The council factions are easily split, and any two of them could be at each other's throats. But with the Fragile Alliance in play, I want this to be more about balance of power and intrigue and less about open struggle, so I move the war a little bit away from center, and make it the *reason* for the intriguing.

I pick a representative of a foreign power, say, Ambassador Rialdo of Glassindo, and I put him on one side. The setting makes it hard for this to be a shooting war, so I could make it a trade war or the like, but I like gun smuggling and knives in the dark, so I decide it might be best to make it a literal war between two powers on the continent, so I pick another ambassador (Fharn of Dhala) and I place him on the opposite side. I've been watching old episodes of Babylon 5 recently, so I'm totally digging a Centauri/Narn vibe, and this provides it.

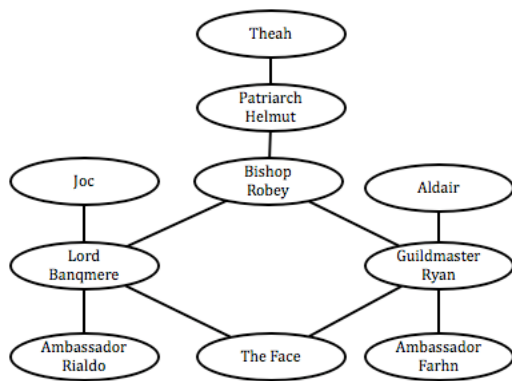
But it's still got no teeth. Who cares about a foreign war? Well, I've got a few more figures to plug in, so let's figure that out. I want this to be a dividing issue on the council, so I probably want a councilor on each side. Say, Banqmere supporting Glassindo because, I don't know, they have shared blood. Actually that works great, since it touches on Brynna. On the other side, Guildmaster Ryan supports Dhala. He's a merchant, so there could be money in it, but since Anders isn't tied too much yet, I think it's more likely he's being blackmailed, by the ambassador or one of the other undetermined figure. That's a problem Anders can address well.

That gives us some nice context back to the Fragile Alliance. The Council is balanced – Guild and nobles on opposite sides, the Face and Church undecided. Odds are good that Theah's order has a presence in one of the warring nations if only to give her some skin in the Bishop's ultimate decision.

We still need two more figures. Joc and Aldair don't look like good matches for this, but to just discard them would be the easy way out. Part of what makes this work is forcing yourself to *make* it work within limitations, so it's time to see if I can push these into place.

Ok, so Aldair. He's local, he's a good guy, and he's capable to stopping or aiding smuggling. As a good guy, maybe he's looking the other way for something like refugees. It's the sort of thing he's *capable* of doing, morally and practically. I decide Glassindo is winning, and producing refugees, and I think Aldair is sneaking them into the city. This is sort of a loose end plot, but I'm ok with that, this joint is already jumping. That leaves Joc, and y'know what, I need some straight up badguy action here. He's a Glassindo spy, and he's using his role as a courier to intercept messages and tip things in Glassindo's favor. Odds are good, he may well be the entry point into the adventure, since it gets us a rooftop chase, and who doesn't love that?

And with that, I'm set. The Final configuration looks something like this:



Note that the PC's only barely show up in this, even though I've gone out of my way to tie them in. This is a weakness in actually doing this like I would for a game - the example doesn't look as tidy. However, a lot of the figures are one step removed from the PCs, so there are plenty of implicit connections.