

Behind the Curtain: Player Guide

Setting

Welcome to the Gilded Lily, a premier establishment for the discerning client interested in anything their heart desires! Our skilled companions are dedicated to pleasure: from lips gently brushed on the neck to fingertips pressing into the flesh of a hip to... well, just let your imagination run away with you. We promise we'll keep up.

This welcome, written in a flowing, golden script in the brothel's antechamber is the first thing a customer sees beyond the building's nondescript, windowless frontage. After reading it, they meet the Madam – and pay a hefty deposit. Only then does a companion emerge from behind a heavy, velvet curtain to take them by the hand and lead them to a private room for the fulfillment of anything they desire (and are willing to pay for).

But this is not the story of the client or of anything that happens in those private rooms. The Gilded Lily has other spaces where even more intimate stories unfold.

While waiting for their next “date”, the companions spend their time in a back room: talking, sharing, flirting, but, most of all, just passing time. After a date, they return here to complain about their tip, make jokes, wax rhapsodic, or try to forget what's just happened. Otherwise, a companion only leaves this room after their shift is over.

Each companion took a different path to end up at the Gilded Lily, yet a tight-knit community has blossomed between them – with a few exceptions. Everyone must work to survive and, whether they love it, hate it, or tolerate it, this is the only place they can truly be honest about it. In this world, this work is illegal and considered highly immoral so there's no complaining about a bad day because most companions would be disowned, cast out, or arrested if they were honest about their jobs. It is a profession built on secrets and lies.

Lies told to lovers and partners about what kind of work keeps a person out all night...

Lies told to friends about why they go from broke to splurging in a single week...

Lies told to the babysitter about why they're late and never have change...

Lies told to doctors and pharmacists about their sexual health...

Lies told at job interviews about their employment history...

Lies told to government officials about their income...

Everyone deals differently with the paranoid shame they feel when they see a gleam of recognition on the street or notice side-eyed whispers breaking out at the grocery store, but they've all felt it at one time or another. They carefully guard their work identities from their “real” lives and have small, personal ways to differentiate between them.

*I haven't worn makeup in years but **Diamond** wouldn't be seen without winged eyeliner and bold lipstick*

***Jeanette** has a pronounced French accent but **I've** never even left the country*

*I dropped out of high school when my kid was born but **Tawnee** is getting their degree and only works for fun*

The lies, the stress, the shame would all weigh much more heavily without this little community of the break room, the only place the companions can be honest about their dates, their feelings, and themselves – at least, to a point. Regardless of their reasons for being there, together they celebrate, commiserate, fight, fall in and out of love, and share this secret, scandalous life with one another.

In addition to the usual rivalries, gossip, and chitchat, today there is another topic hot on everyone's lips: the Madam recently announced her long-awaited retirement and everybody is wondering what will happen to the Gilded Lily. The Madam joked before that they might gift it to their favorite companion, but more probably they'll simply sell it. To whom? A client? A competitor? One of the companions? Or simply the highest bidder without a care for what happens to the sex workers that make it lucrative? Maybe they would even close it down or bring in cheaper workers! Everyone is on edge with their own personal theories and nobody can wait until the end of tonight's shift when they're going to find out what the Madam decides.

Although this story takes place in a brothel, this game does not focus on loving or hating, supporting or damning sex work. It is also not at all about the actual sex work, and this will not be played or depicted, but it will be fodder for inner play: the shared game plays in the private, personal, in-between spaces, although the work itself will be discussed in explicit detail in-game.

Practical

Behind the Curtain is a nontransparent Nordic larp for 5-10 players depicting companions and led by a game master (GM) playing an active NPC (the Madam). The GM keeps time, manages the conversation by removing players from the game space at their will, and provides additional information throughout the course of the game. The game lasts around five hours including workshops and preparation and plays exclusively in the shared space. When players are removed to e.g. meet with off-game clients, they wait quietly in a separate space (adjoining room or hallway).

Gameplay itself takes approximately three hours covering the Madam's last shift and culminating in them announcing what they will do with the Gilded Lily. Those three hours represent much longer in-game time: the shift seems endless and dates are typically 30-60 minutes (although they take only 5 minutes of real time). There are no predefined acts breaking up the time: instead players are pulled out of the conversation per the GM's whim.

As a player, you are in complete control of what happens behind closed doors with your clients, although some of them will reveal fetishes or behave badly once in the private room. Private rooms also have a safety measure for the companions: a button that locks the door and alerts the bodyguard, a reliable figure who will definitely tell the Madam everything. Using this measure may result in the client being blacklisted and permanently banned from the Lily, but this is at the Madam's discretion (and the Madam may not be very happy about it and decide to take out her frustration on the companions). Additionally, the use of condoms is mandatory for penetrative sex, but some companions may be tempted not to use them in exchange for a large tip. But watch out! The Madam would be very unhappy if they find out, and there may be serious consequences.

The game is explicitly about the hidden spaces around sex work, the part that nobody sees because clients and loved ones and the public are so fascinated by the parts they deem (positively or negatively) exciting. Here there are no puritan "how could you"s, no unnatural seduction, no traditional judgment. Here, your characters can be their real selves: they don't have to put on their public sex kitten or shame faces if they don't want to, they don't have to hide how they feel about the clients, only how they feel about their lives, wishes, dreams, and fears the same as anybody else. In this space, your characters will commiserate with one another on bad days and celebrate the good ones; this is a space for birthday cakes and feuds, for sharing and jealousy, for confessions and secrets in equal measure.

Safety and Triggers

This game includes themes which may be triggering for some players, specifically sex work, frank discussions about sexual activity and fetishes, and dishonesty; some characters will have histories of sexual or other abuse, homelessness, addiction, and abortion. Characters will talk openly about the bodies of their clients. Some dates involve kinks and fetishes, drug (ab)use, sexual assault, and transphobia. It will be possible to opt out of any conversation or date at any time. If there are any particular topics listed or not listed here that you wish to avoid, discuss these with your GM before the game begins so they can ensure a safe and satisfying experience for everyone.

During the game, players can communicate with the GM at any time by asking them to step into the off-game space. Escalation of play should be slow, using bullet-time consent, and opting out is always possible with the Rule of Feet (walking away from that conversation or stepping into the off-game space) or with double-tap. Double-tap is used by tapping one's hand twice somewhere obvious on their own body or by saying "double-tap". When double-tap is used, the situation should be immediately de-escalated.

The GM also serves as the safety person if you need someone to talk to and they can help you align with other players if you need to calibrate with them before or during the game. If you however feel the need to leave the game for whatever reason, that is completely fine – you, the player, come first!

Expressing your boundaries and escalating mindfully makes play better and safer for you and everyone else, so please use safewords!

Costume (optional)

Each character has their own style and that is partly represented by their costume. When deciding what to wear, you can be as creative as you want to be: does your character wear a lot of latex, leather, and interesting straps, or frilly, feminine lingerie? Are they campy or vampy? Do they keep their look simple or do they have a full face of dramatic drag-style makeup? While you should not simply strut around completely naked, you can design your look to fit your character.

Keep in mind that you will play your characters in the relaxed back room spaces of the Lily, and this can also be represented in your outfit: bathrobes or kimonos tied over skimpy lingerie, loose cardigans and jackets pulled over corsets, and the like are also excellent options, especially if you don't feel comfortable appearing in something more risqué.

Characters

All players will be depicting a companion and each character has been intentionally based on a sex worker stereotype. While players receive more details before the game, they are encouraged to make the character their own. Before coming to the game, please read through this list and choose two characters you'd most like to play.

The term "companion" is a polite one: depending on who refers to your character, you could just as easily be referred to as hooker, prostitute, sex worker, whore, escort, or streetwalker, no matter how inaccurate some of those terms may be for what you do. Your character may have very strong opinions about what they're called, but you, the player, will decide what those opinions are.

All characters may be depicted by players of any gender and players freely choose the name, gender and pronouns, and sexuality of their character. You'll receive your full character sheet shortly before the game.

The Happy Hooker

They love their job and couldn't imagine ever doing anything else! The most experienced, they love giving advice and support, but this attitude definitely rubs some of the others the wrong way – especially those struggling with the work. They're not making as much money as they did when they were younger and have started wondering: should they go more niche, which they do not enjoy, or get out of the business and... do what?

The Brown-noser

They want nothing more than to take over the Lily and suck up to the Madam at every opportunity, immediately reporting any hint of insubordination, resulting in the offender being

stuck giving freebies or with the least desirable clients. Will their colleagues finally decide to hold them accountable for their toxicity?

The Miserable Wretch

They couldn't say which is worse, their home life or their work life, but either way, something's gotta give. They need to put on a brave face, though, because the Madam has threatened to fire them if there is one more customer complaint. If that happens, how would they manage?

The Practical

Although a well-paying one, prostitution is a job just like any other for them and they don't seem to need the social support craved by the other companions. After having resisted the community feeling for a long time, they're faced with a new crisis and find themselves in need of a friend. Who will they open up to? What will they do about the new major hurdle in their life?

The Responsible

The eldest of four, their parents were imprisoned a few years ago and left them in charge of their siblings with no end in sight... at least not for another eight years. They gave up their dreams in order to keep their family together and out of foster care. They rarely let it show, but the stress of parentification and the fear of being shamed for their work is really getting to them.

The Apple Doesn't Fall Far

Raised by someone who was also a sex worker, it was their only real option once they needed to support themselves. They've gone through the wringer and have been trying to get out for a while, but have no other work experience and can't tell a prospective employer what they've been doing for the past five years. Will they find a way out or give up hoping?

The "Girlfriend"

Famous for their "girlfriend experience", a service more about comfort and empathy than sex, they enjoy their job considerably. Recently, they found themselves a new partner – who doesn't want them working at the Lily anymore and has offered to financially support them instead. Will they convince themselves to be financially dependent on someone else or decide to break up?

The Sweetheart

They're madly in love with their fiancé/e, The Flamboyant, and can't wait to get married; it's all they talk about! After a short honeymoon, they plan to come back to the Lily and keep working as before. The pair specialize in duo dates (two-on-one) and The Sweetheart sometimes even offers discounts to get to work with their fiancé/e.

The Flamboyant

They're engaged to be married to The Sweetheart, but recently heard something from a client that has thrown them into doubt. They're no longer sure they want to get married, at least not with things as they are. They'll have to decide soon, though, because the wedding is next week. In the meantime, they're trying to get to the bottom of the rumor without making it too obvious.

The Investor

They've been working for a long time and have built up quite a nest egg. They enjoy their job and status quo and so are undecided what to do with it. Several investment opportunities have presented themselves, but do they even want to transition to something new?

The Madam (GM)

After many years working as a companion, they saved up enough to buy the Gilded Lily and have run it for almost twenty years. Now it's time they retired to enjoy their hard-gotten gains. The title "Madam" is an honorific used by all brothel managers and the GM will decide what kind of Madam they wish to portray.

Credits

Especially inspired by *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* edited by Frédérique Delacoste and Priscilla Alexander and *The Valley of Amazement* by Amy Tan.

Conceived and developed by Johanna Morgan for SIF Games. You can reach her at info@sifgames.com

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