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# Sacramancy

## - Awareness

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# Sacramancy - Awareness

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An sacramancy journal by  
**DOUG HOPPE**

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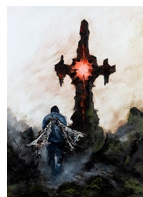
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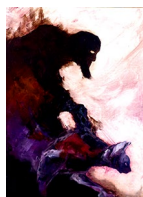
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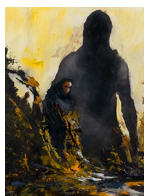
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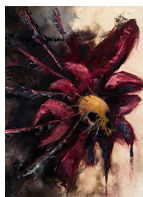
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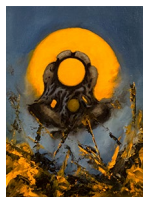
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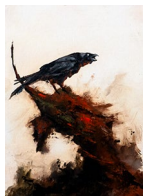
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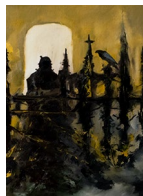
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## Awareness

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We all live in a bubble that we've built around ourselves. The bubble is formed from the media we enjoy (TV, social media, books) and the friends we bring into our lives. The media and friends eventually shape how others perceive us, as well as their initial impression of who we are.

This deck is about trying to step out of that bubble. If you consume the same media and hang out with the same friends all the time, you will have a harder time stepping out of that bubble and seeing things in a new way.

Embracing new ideas and different perspectives on the world around you helps you open yourself to a better life.

## Evolution of Sacramancy

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Like all fantasy illustrators, I wanted to create an art book. However, I didn't just want to create the traditional art book, full of pretty pictures and some text that discussed the painting or my process. You know that book. You look at it for a little while and then put it away forever.

I wanted to do something different.

On my fourth attempt at writing the book, I noticed that the prints of my paintings scattered around my desk triggered the idea of a story. That was the basis for my first book, *Selie's Road: Shadows*. As I laid down more and more prints, I saw my main character's journey and what would happen to him. After a while, I thought I was done, having written most of the story.

Uh... yeah... my wife didn't think so.

She said the book ended too quickly. According to her, and she was right, it had started well, but just wrapped up way too fast. So, back to the drawing board. I thought...and thought...and thought...and realized I had no more ideas. However, as I reread the first part of the book, it occurred to me to incorporate more of my paintings to complete the story.

I gathered all the unused prints and rearranged them at

random. Some new ideas emerged, and I knew what would happen for the rest of the story. I soon had an art book with large full-color illustrations, but it wasn't your typical art book. The overall arching story linked all the illustrations into a cohesive fantasy world that I could expand on.

Even after finishing the first book, when I tried to come up with fresh ideas, I kept rehashing everything I had just watched or read. I was relying on other people's ideas and not developing my own, and I couldn't come up with a new twist or an original concept. Yet by turning my paintings into card-sized images, I could create my stories wherever I went—and help others by making them available to everybody.

That was the moment the Sacramancy decks were created.

## Beyond A Writing Tool

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Several months later, I was scheduled to attend my first gaming convention—GenCon. I spent the first couple of hours trying to sell my decks as writing tools, but that was a disaster. People loved the art, but no one was interested in it as a writing tool. Then a casual conversation with a customer changed my entire focus.

She simply asked me, “Can I use these in my D&D game?”

Such a simple question. But they always start that way.

I had been playing Dungeons & Dragons since the late 1970s. I remember my friends and I gathered around a table, playing our favorite characters, fighting monsters, and reading *the Monster Manuals* and the premade campaigns. There were so many stories in that game, and, even better, it was within a world that fueled my imagination.

So, when this customer asked me that, I was floored! “Of course!” I said. “Think of the cards as a Deck of Many Things or props. You can also use them to develop new ideas for one-off adventures or full campaigns.”

Smiling, she showed them to her players who were with her and said, “We’re going to have so much fun with these!”

As she left with several decks, I wished her and her players fun adventures.

Several other customers approached my table at the same gaming show and asked if they would work as oracle or tarot cards. Now, I have little experience using them that way, so I asked for more information. They discussed layouts and how the meaning of the images helps one understand something going on in their life. The more I listened, the more I realized they had tapped into another use I had never considered.

You see, every painting has a story and a personal meaning. I’m just an average guy, but I understand these meanings are

the same situations everybody goes through. When I look at my paintings and remember their stories, I remember the situations and how I dealt with them.

To customers interested in oracle readings, I explained that the cards and images were designed to help individuals understand their true selves and express that understanding, which was exactly what oracle cards were meant to do.

Later, a shaman and another intuitive said that it was called shadow work reading. They talked about it in terms of understanding your dark and light sides.

When I told them I saw random shapes that told me a story (or a meaning) and that the story refined the shapes, they said I was a channeler. They were excited to hear that people teared up and cried at my shows when they read a story that connects with them.

“That is why you are a channeler,” one of them said. “You aren’t really creating the painting and story. You are responding to what the universe is telling you.”

Now, I don’t know about that, but I do know that about one to three people do cry or tear up at a show. Maybe there is something to what they are saying.

At other conventions, I found that customers also used them for creative writing classes, therapy tools, and many other projects. It was amazing. Some told me stories about how they helped a particular student or got some students



interested in writing.

I will say though that my favorite use of the cards is when therapists use them with PTSD patients or inner-city school kids. That field is called drama therapy, and they use the cards to guide the conversations with their patients.

The cards went far beyond my first simple idea as a writing aid.

## Being True to Yourself

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So, what is Sacramancy? Sacramancy is a way to help you develop new stories and ideas while being true to yourself. The images on the cards are designed to provide you with enough information about what is happening, but not enough to tell you the whole story. That way, the ideas and stories reflect who you are and how you think.

Think of it this way: If I ask you for an idea for a story or a situation, you will do the same thing you've always done or what someone else has done or liked. You are not being true to yourself. You are a result of what those around you want. Not what you like.

How do the Sacramancy decks help? As you lay the cards in a random order, as mentioned earlier, you will begin to see

the basic thread of a story or an idea emerge. That reflects you. Not your friends. Not the latest movie you saw. You. It's how you see the world.

That is Sacramancy—ideas created from you and a reflection on how you see the world. This is the first step on a journey to become who you truly are, rather than what anyone else says you should be.

## How to Use the Decks

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Now, what if you're not creative? How does that help you? Good question.

The reality is that everybody is creative. We all have our own ideas. Some are good. Some are not. However, creativity is a muscle. Just like people who have large and defined muscles, it's a matter of training and exercise to get to the level of many "creative" people.

But before we start using the decks, remember: **Do not compare your stories or ideas against others.**

Too many times, people give up because they think their story or idea isn't good enough. They compare themselves to best-selling authors or screenwriters, and that's not fair. Those people have trained for years to get where they are.

You can also get there!

It's about being true to yourself and showing the world who you are. It's a good idea to see what others are doing because they may have an interesting idea you can incorporate into your use of the decks, but don't compare yourself to them. Please don't give up because you think you can never be as good as they are.

Now, let's get started!

## Shadow Work Oracle Reading

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You've heard this term before—shadow work. Just what is it?

Shadow work is a form of oracle reading that does not focus on what will happen in the future but on what is currently affecting your life. Within each of us, there is a light side and a shadow side, the darker aspects of our inner selves that we often prefer not to acknowledge. Using traditional oracle cards, a shadow work intuitive can discern inner issues and find ways to resolve them.

Now, this isn't the same as tarot cards. Similar but not the same. Unlike tarot, oracle cards are more fluid and free-form. Tarot cards have a defined set of cards, and each

card's meaning is static and the same across all decks. The meanings of oracle cards are defined by the card set, but they can be altered based on the intuitive feelings of the reader.

The power of shadow work oracle reading lies in helping a person understand and illuminate the darker aspects of their life. Through this understanding, they can face their issues head-on and create a path to resolve their problems. It's about transformation, not quick fixes. This leads them to self-reliance and, hopefully, a more joyful life.

Do I believe in this? Yes and no.

Let me share a concept about how I view life and my place within it.

Imagine yourself standing in the middle of a river, and the water flows around you. As you closely look around, you'll see a lot of floating branches, flotsam, leaves, and debris rushing past you. You'll be interested in some and not others.

You'll also notice that everything is floating past you at a different rate, and parts of the river will run faster than others. You'll see quiet areas, where everything is calm, and nothing changes. And you'll see a lot of foaming water, where change is happening too quickly for you to see it all.

When you wish to obtain something interesting, you must decide whether to stay where you are and hope it comes to

you or move to get it. If you venture too far out, you may get swept up in the rapid part of the river. You may also arrive too late.

Life is like standing in the middle of a large river. It is moving around you, and as you watch opportunities appear, you must decide: Do you wade through the river to grasp that opportunity, or do you stand still and watch it float by?

Every day, you face opportunities and challenges. Your current situation and how you view the world determine how you react to those situations.

Here's a real-world example:

In my late twenties, I went on vacation to Banff, Canada. I had the opportunity to go fly-fishing with a guide, and since I'd never done that before, I was pretty excited to try it. The guide took me to a small lake near a road. It was okay. Not that exciting. We got to talking, and he understood that the fishing was nothing to write home about. He suggested a favorite fishing spot he thought would be more interesting.

Well, I was game.

He asked if it was okay if we did a little bushwhacking to get to the area. Now, that sounded a lot more interesting! So, we headed off with our gear to the new location. Over rocks and fallen trees, he led me to an area with a fast-moving river. We both looked at the water and realized it was probably chest deep.

Now, I could have said, “No. I don’t think so. Let’s go back.” But I was young, healthy, and confident that I could cross the river. We both grabbed some tall, thick walking poles and made our way across.

And guess what? Nothing bad happened.

We fished for the day and then headed back across the same river. We caught no fish, but that was my fondest memory of Banff.

Besides being an actual river, how does this relate to the river analogy? Well, for many years, I’d never really done anything adventurous. I went to my day job, played sports with my friends, watched TV, and had the same vacations as most people. After that river experience, I realized a lot was missing from my life. In my thirties, I spent more time rock climbing, mountaineering, freelancing, and taking more risks.

I left my secure place in the middle of the slower part of the river because I saw an opportunity and waded out into the faster-moving part. Because I had moved out of my safe place, I could see parts of the river from new vantage points. Afterward, I became more confident in my ability to navigate faster areas and reach new goals and opportunities.

Using the Sacramancy cards as oracle cards works the same way. You can grow and expand your world by seeing where you are and understanding who you are. When you

choose those fresh opportunities, you'll see the world from a new vantage point and grow even more. Plus, you'll be confident you can navigate new situations.

You can use the information from the Sacramancy cards to expand your horizons and take chances on fresh opportunities.

### **Preparation:**

First, find yourself a quiet location and calm your thoughts. Don't worry about what is going on or what you must do.

When you are ready, close your eyes and inhale deeply through your nose. Imagine following that breath throughout your body. Feel it flow into your nostrils, down your throat, and into your chest. Will the breath travel to your arms and legs? As it settles in your fingers and toes, guide the breath to travel back to your core and slowly out through your mouth.

Do this several times until you can feel the world fading away. You'll sense a calmness.

When you're ready, focus on the deck, shuffle it, and draw the card or cards

Here are some suggested layouts to try.

## Daily Reflection Layout:



### WHAT ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE SHOULD YOU LOOK AT?

The Daily Reflection Layout deals with how to handle daily situations. You can select the card in the morning to control your reaction to what will happen during the day, or you can choose it at the end of the day to see how you could have improved yourself that day.

Shuffle the deck and draw one card from the top. As you shuffle, the important issues will work to the top.

**First Card (What aspect of your life should you look at?):** This card represents an underlying issue or strength that may affect your life. If the card is an issue, you can figure out ways to resolve it. If the card represents a strength, then you can utilize that strength to enhance your current situation.

The daily card is about understanding and seeing something you are unaware of. In terms of issues, it will not solve the



problem for you. Problem resolution can always be done faster if you understand the root cause.

Besides drawing the daily card, consider Journaling. Keeping a daily journal that records the topmost card and how it relates to you is a great way to see any emerging patterns in your life. Once you see a particular pattern, you can decide whether to continue on that path or make a change.

### **Dilemma Resolution Layout:**



**CAUSE**



**CURRENT  
SITUATION**



**RESOLUTION**

The dilemma resolution layout is an advanced version of the daily reflection layout. Rather than just identifying the source of the issue, it helps you figure out how to resolve it. You are given some ideas on approaches to take.

Remember: There is no white knight in shining armor

coming to save the day. You won't wake up the next morning and find that someone has fixed everything, and your life will be perfect. Understanding who you are and what you are capable of is the best way to resolve things.

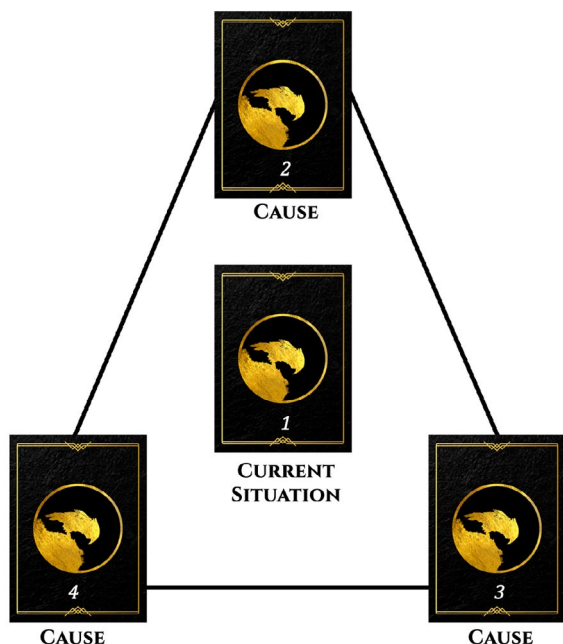
Shuffle the deck and draw three cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

**First Card (Current Situation):** This card represents the current situation that worries you. By understanding what is going on, you have a chance of resolving that issue.

**Second Card (Cause):** This card represents what, in the past, has caused the current situation. The things we struggle with often have their roots in the past. Some minor situations we ignored or thought nothing of. Over time, that unresolved initial problem causes conflict in our lives.

**Third Card (Resolution):** This card represents how the problem can be solved. The best way to resolve issues is to break the problem down into smaller pieces. Following this card's guidance will help you determine how to approach a possible solution.

## Pyramidal Energy Matrix:



The pyramidal energy matrix provides a detailed layout showing how your current situation is influenced by other events in your life. These outside influences may be something that has happened in the past or that you actively know will happen.

Shuffle the deck and draw four cards from the top. The

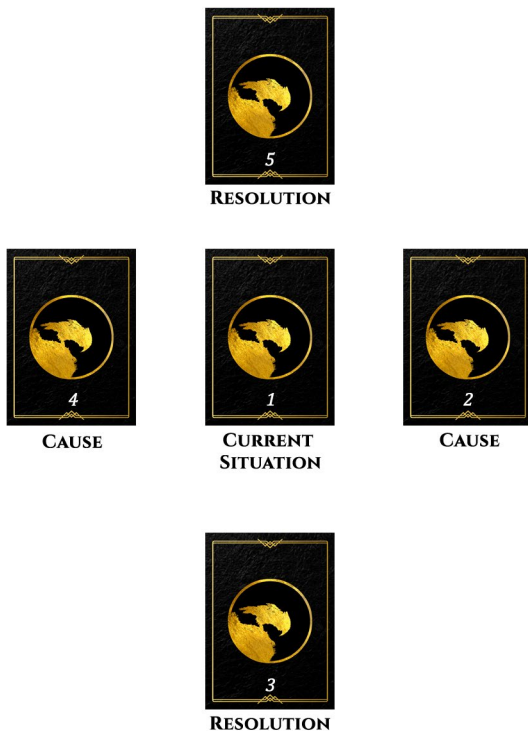
cards are laid out in the order above.

**First Card (Current Situation):** This card represents what aspect of your life you should look at. This is the most pressing issue you are facing. Think about what is going on and how the image represents that situation. The card will not give hints on how to solve the problem but will allow you to understand your issue.

**Second Card (Cause):** This card represents a significant action causing your current situation. The action is something you know is on the horizon. You can make plans to deal with that situation here and now rather than just allowing it to happen (if you don't want it to).

**Third and Fourth Card (Cause):** These cards represent significant actions in the past that caused your current situation. Many things that happen are usually not a result of a single action. They are a group of actions or inactions that combine into an overall problem.

## Cross Settlement:



The cross settlement is another detailed layout that helps you understand and resolve your current situation. Like the dilemma resolution layout, it enables you to assess your current situation and identify the cause of the issue.

Additionally, it provides various ways to help you resolve any problems.

Shuffle the deck and draw five cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

**First Card (Current Situation):** This card represents the aspect of your life that you should examine. This is the most pressing issue you are facing. Consider what is happening and how the image reflects that situation. The card will not give hints on how to solve the problem, but will allow you to understand your issue.

**Second and Fourth Card (Cause):** These cards represent significant actions in the past that caused your current situation. Many things that happen are usually not a result of a single action. They are a group of actions or inactions that combine into an overall problem.

**Third and Fifth Card (Resolution):** These cards give you an idea of how to solve the problem. Like the causes, one answer may not fix everything. If you can approach the situation from multiple areas, you have a better chance of breaking down the problem.

## Writing Prompts

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At one time or another, every writer is faced with writer's block, and the more you struggle with the problem, the more frustration builds.

Like you, I had that same problem. I just couldn't come up with interesting ideas, but then I turned to my Sacramancy decks. I have a basic technique that I use: the three-card sequence.



**PRINCIPAL  
CHARACTER**



**CHANGES FATE  
OF CHARACTER**



**RESOLUTION**

Many of us have heard of the three-act structure for storytelling. The first act is the setup, the second act is the conflict, and the final act is the resolution. I do something very similar for my short stories; for me, each act is around two thousand words. This is how I use the cards:

**First Card (First Act):** This card shows the story's inciting incident. This is where the story is set up and the main characters are introduced. In addition, for my short stories, I like to get to the point where something happens to my characters that causes them some stress.

**Second Card (Second Act):** The second card focuses on how the characters deal with the stress created by the first card. This is typically the longest part and accounts for around fifty percent of the story. In this act, I'm focusing on different ways they are trying to get out of their situation and the failures or revelations about why they are in it.

**Third Card (Third Act):** Naturally, as the final card, this is where the story concludes. I wrap up the story with a plot twist or a final conflict.

Now, if I were writing a long book, I would use the same card structure described above, but have multiple groups of three. For instance, in a long novel, the first act may consist of a total of nine cards (three groups of three cards).

Let's look at an example of how we can use the cards to come up with our own short story!





This story will be somehow related to flowers. Now, what is the purpose of the flower? Is it needed for some special medicine? Is it an opioid that is coveted by the underworld, based on the people approaching that dragon structure in the second image? Who are they, and what are they doing?

**The First Card (Left):** Cold morning mists wafted over the broken field, and all Sami could do was stare at the lone flower left by the raiders. He didn't know why they had left this particular one, but they did. They had come at night to grab every flower they could, and if they didn't have time to dig one out, they had destroyed it: all but this one. Tears welled in Sami. These were his children. He had nurtured them since they were small seedlings.

**The Second Card (Middle):** Sami knew what he had to do—to go to the local nursery that provided seeds for all farmers in the surrounding region—but didn't want to do it. He didn't trust them. They had moved in about two

months ago and overtook all the other businesses. Some farmers reported they had been threatened, but for some reason, no one believed them. The only way Sami could restore his farm was to use their seeds, though. He hoped the stories about their tainted seeds weren't true.

**The Third Card (Right):** The next morning, after Sami had planted the seeds, his special flowers returned. However, each now sported a small skull that leaked foul-smelling mist. As the mist wafted up, he tried to move away but couldn't. Stuck. He just kept staring at the plant. A voice sounded in his head, telling him to plant more. It wanted more. At the local nursery, he found many other farmers with that same dazed look, trying to buy large amounts of seeds for their farms.

This was a simple story structure, but it's about organizing your thoughts when you see the images in their unique order. If you change the order of the cards, you'll have a different story.

## Role Playing Game Ideas

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I'm an old-school gamer. I started playing Dungeons & Dragons around the late '70s and continued off and on for much of my life. If I wasn't actively playing a game, I was reading the *Monster Manual* or other gaming-related books. The big thing I always noticed about role-playing games was that they all started the same way:

1) You wake up and have no idea where you are or how you got there,

or

2) You visit a king, and he wants you to stop a cult or solve some mysterious disappearances,

or

3) You're searching for a magical item.

The games then typically turn into a hack-and-slash type, where you just fight baddies and collect gold. Really? There is an infinite world of possibilities, and these are the three principal plot lines?

The Sacramancy decks can help you come up with more interesting campaigns. You can use the decks as **a prop or a campaign idea**.

Let's look at how to use them as **a prop**.

*Your party enters the room. The room's walls are decorated with various glowing sigils, accompanied by a slight humming echo. The room itself seems to vibrate. The only furnishing is a small table with four cards lying face down.*

(The dungeon master places four Sacramancy cards before the players.)



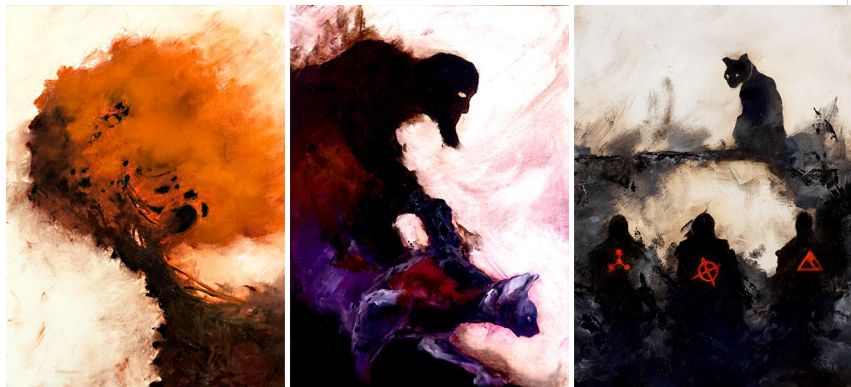
*“Chooooooooossssseeeee,” someone whispers. “Chooooooooossssseeeee.”*

One important point I want to make is that you don't always have to have the drawn card be a monster that the party fights. For instance, imagine if the drawn card summons a creature that can answer one question from the party. Or the card can allow some form of magic that the party can use to help them solve a puzzle in an unfamiliar part of the dungeon. Try to make it more interesting.

The most popular way gamers use the cards is as **campaign generators**. Using the three-card sequence talked about

in the writing prompts section, you can come up with campaign ideas. The beauty is that you don't need to use the specific creatures shown in the cards. Just replace them with representative monsters from the game.

Let's look at an example:



For this campaign, I see a bunch of souls stuck in a tree, some nefarious creature, and a lone cat being solicited by others. The creatures can be anything from the Monster Manual, your own home-brewed monsters, or a monster in the ShadowMyths Biomagy Deck.

What if the villagers are reporting a lost love missing in the night? All they know is that there are reports of a shadow man and a large cat haunting the alleyways. This campaign could be:

**The First Card (Left):** For many miles, tourists come by to hear the Screaming Tree. Some townspeople say it is a natural phenomenon caused by the gaps between the leaves. It is strange that the leaves never fall and that there seem to be faces in them.

**The Second Card (Middle):** Nalan is the tree's caretaker and seems to relish the excitement of all the visitors to his unique garden. Although a warm person, he isn't a nice one. Every night, he releases his large cat into town to see if there are new souls to feed the tree.

**The Third Card (Right):** Rumors that the authorities are "tagging" homeless people with magic symbols to attract a shadowy cat spread. Every night, the cat summons the tagged people, and they disappear. Some people have reported seeing a shadowy figure with a large cat in the same area.

Now, you've got an adventure where the players have to figure out who the shadow man is, why the authorities are tagging people, and how to release the souls, if they can.

## Teaching Tool

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In the classroom, teachers are always looking for fresh ways to engage their students and encourage class participation. This is especially true in creative writing classes. From the teachers I've spoken with, several have mentioned two methods they use for classroom study: writing prompts and vocabulary lessons.

**Writing Prompts:** Similar to the writing methods mentioned earlier, provide each student with up to three cards to help them begin their story.

You could also have each student draw a card, and they will write one paragraph about the card to start the story. Next, they will pass their paper to the next student. The next student will add to the story, using their card. At the end of the lesson, each student will have their original page back, and they will see how their story has evolved.

**Vocabulary Lesson:** Rather than just using an introductory lesson to learn extra vocabulary words, try having them come up with descriptive words based on the cards.

For example, have each student draw a single card. Once all the students have a card, ask them to write down five adjectives and five nouns that describe what they see on their card. After the students have finished writing their

words, collect all the papers. Next, show all the cards to the students, choose one of the papers, and read the adjectives and nouns listed. See if the students can guess what card is being described. Naturally, the person who described the card cannot participate.

## Therapy Tools

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Like the Rorschach inkblot test, from what I've been told, the therapists help patients discuss what they see in the cards. The primary purpose is for communication, not for revealing innermost secrets. When we tell stories, we always refer to things we know or have seen.

The standard method used is for the patient to pick five cards and lay them down in any order they wish. They then tell the story they see in the cards. You can ask them about plot situations, who the main character is, and why they are performing specific actions. The goal is to allow the patient to tell the story in their own way and become comfortable with what is being said. From there, you can explore other avenues and search for ways to help them based on what you've learned from their story.



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# Sacramancy Journal

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# Amusement

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Sometimes, we feel we aren't wanted. We are just some sideshow attraction our friends hang out with because they want something from us. It could be our appearance, intelligence, or just the fact they need a punching bag. Someone who they use to make themselves feel better. Those aren't our friends. True friends accept your failures and your successes. They make your life better by helping you improve it, not by using you for their own purposes.



# Anything

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Sometimes, we will give anything to achieve a specific goal, but we can't see beyond the moment because of our obsession with it. That desire may be the love of someone not interested in us, past pains, riches, or a sought-after job position. It doesn't matter. There is always a price we're willing to pay. It's usually not time or money that we give up but who we are. Our identity and self-image should not be a price we are willing to pay.





# Broken

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All we see is someone's outer beauty—how they wear their clothes, the cars they drive, and the house they live in. This is not always the truth. There are parts of ourselves that we keep within us—the embarrassing parts. These parts make us feel like we don't fit in and are not like others, parts we consider broken. Yet those are the parts that make us special and unique. Embrace those parts because they are the things that make you unique.





# Changes

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Change is always hard. We don't know what will happen. Will things get better or worse? Will we improve or become a lesser version of our current self? Change is a risk. If we accept the consequences, our lives will probably be better, but it depends on why we are making the change. Sometimes, we can't see the benefit until the far distant future. Change, though, is not for the weak. Once it happens, we cannot go back to the way things were, and... that's okay.



# Compulsion

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We don't want to do it, but we can't help ourselves. Something about it draws us in, and we hate ourselves every time we take a step toward it. However, the allure is too strong. It makes us happy when we give in, and we beat ourselves up when we don't. We all have what we can't let go of: food, forbidden love, and adventure. Most things, in moderation, are good for us and can make us feel alive. Learn to recognize the signs when it becomes a compulsion.



# Connection

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Ever look up at the sky, see the moon, and wonder whatever happened to a close friend or a past love? Are they looking up at the moon and thinking about us? It's a cliché. Sentimental tripe. A hope that they feel the same about us as we do about them. We all want to feel important and be thought of by others. It lets us know that we are capable of loving someone and being loved.





# Dangerous

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Keeping ourselves locked away may not be the answer. We think we are harmful to others, and it will be better if we are just left alone. That way, we can't hurt anyone, and, more importantly, we can't be hurt. But a meaningful life is about interaction. It's about being hurt and accidentally hurting others. Those we love will forgive us, and help is always there when we need it; we just need the courage to ask for it.





# Death

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We're all going to die. Sorry. No way of getting around that. However, there are two ways to view this: fear it or embrace it. If we fear dying, we'll be so focused on it that we won't enjoy everything we have. Life becomes a series of events until it happens. If we embrace it, we'll enjoy our moments because we may not experience them again. Life becomes a series of adventures until it happens. Make time to enjoy life, and Death will be held at bay.



# Deception

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Emerging from the shadows, we see shapes that don't feel right; although we can't put our finger on them, we are afraid. Part of it is our environment, and part of it is a survival mechanism. Most of it, however, is based on what we've seen in the media and what we've been taught. Either way, our minds are very good at creating the menacing from the harmless. Most shadows are just shadows... nothing more.



# Discrimination

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We can feel them staring at us from across the way. Their piercing eyes are cold. We know what they are thinking and saying about us, commenting on the way we look, the clothes we wear, and even the people around us. We create stories based on our thoughts that are often not true, projecting our insecurities onto others. And those insecurities control our behavior to the point that we are afraid to try anything new. Comfort and happiness lie in believing in ourselves and not caring about what others think about us.





# Dreams

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We all have visions of how we want our lives to be. For many, the life we live and the life we want are vastly different, and we feel trapped because we believe we can't reach our dreams for one reason or another. Money. Family. Ourselves. The obstacles are endless. But perhaps the path to our visions involves making small, incremental steps rather than giant leaps and ignoring those who try to impose their own dreams on ours.





# Duality

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We're of two minds. One mind is the one we show the public, our outward persona. One is the one who talks to us in the darkness, our true thoughts. Yet neither one is true. Our minds change as our circumstances change. The world we live in and our current conditions alter those thoughts to fit in with others. Most believe it's better to alter our thoughts to fit in rather than to be alone. Choose wisely, for we can be of both minds.



# Experience

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In the back of our minds, we can hear it. We've been in this situation before. We're in it again. Was the experience pleasant or harmful the last time we were here? Did we learn from it, or did we repeat our mistakes? We all have experiences we draw from. But what do we do with those experiences—learn from them or foolishly make the same mistake?



# Followers

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Responsibility is tough because we must make decisions that could affect others. We have to live with those decisions, carry them out, and support our point of view. So many people would rather follow than lead, go through their lives just doing what everybody else tells them to, and not take any responsibility. But that's the easy way out and leads to a life where we are beholden to others. That's okay, but only if that is the life we want.





# Forgetfulness

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The memory is there. We can feel it, and it tickles our brains. We can only feel parts of it, and others are eluding us. It's like viewing a world through a frosty glass window. We have an idea of the feeling and situation but can't fully remember it. The more we focus on it, the more the memory changes to what we want it to be. Eventually, it becomes our new reality, and returning to the original memory is very, very hard. Relax, and the memories will flow more easily.





# Gateway

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“It’ll be better when we get there,” we lie to ourselves. We may even believe it. All we know is that we are unsatisfied with our current situation, and it must be better elsewhere. Life is about taking chances and hoping that everything works out. Not everyone needs to take chances, but for those who are unsatisfied, life won’t change unless it happens. The tricky part is determining if the dissatisfaction is with ourselves or where we live.



# Identity

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Are we the bright and colorful people others see? The shining star that is forever outgoing? Are we the loner who hides under the surface? The part we hold back from everyone because we are scared? Are we the demon that lives in the shadows? The darkness that no one knows about that we try to keep hidden? We are all three: the bright star, the loner, and the demon. Embrace all three parts for that makes us special.





# Invasion

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Everyone who comes into our lives is an invader. When they first see us, they come without being asked. A random encounter that, if we allow them to stay, will change us. Some people will take away everything that makes us who we are. Some will come in and heal us so that we come out as a better person. Everyone coming into our lives is a mixture of the healers and the takers. Your strength of character determines how they affect your life.



# Lies

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It's the voice inside us—the one that tells us to be afraid, the one that tells us that we're awful. If we listen to it for too long, it'll destroy us. However, if we are truly confident and understand who we are—acknowledge our weaknesses and plan to overcome them—we can defeat that beast. Embrace failure and understand that, through failure, we become stronger and more confident. Confidence is our strongest weapon to silence that dark voice.





# Magic

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Look around us. We can feel it—not the electronic devices people have, but the people themselves, the way people help one another even though there is nothing in it for them. These good people bring a power that changes the world. They care about others, not because of their wealth or status but because someone is in need. They don't just do it once in a grand gesture. They do it every day with small, loving gestures. Be one who brings magic to others.



# Memories

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Time moves on whether we want it to or not. Buildings are created and fall into ruin. People are born, live their lives, and pass on. There are many things we don't want to forget, so we try to preserve them or create monuments to remind us. But those are only temporary solutions. After a while, that memory will also fade or become altered so that it is not the same. Relish in the memories and build new ones to enhance them. Time moves on whether we want it to or not.





# Motherhood

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All we can do is watch from a distance. We want to help our children with their problems, but if we do, they won't grow and become strong enough to stand alone. It's difficult to know when we can help and when we have to let them solve their own problems. Both situations teach lessons. The best we can do is to prepare them to think on their own and make their own mistakes. With luck, they'll learn from their mistakes and become stronger.





# Poisonous

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We can sense the poison, yet we do nothing about it. Initially, we admired the beauty and elegance of our desire, wishing we could hold them forever. Over time, we believe they have changed, but they haven't; we've merely ignored the signs that others noticed. Eventually, we come to recognize their poisonous nature. We must trust our gut, not our eyes, as it will never lead us astray.



# Rebirth

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Life and death are intertwined. We can't have one without the other. The end of one thing becomes the beginning of another. When someone passes away, it's always good to look at their life and see how much of it reminds us of our own. Are we making the same mistakes? Did they do things we wished we had done? Their death can be the beginning of living our lives.



# Reflection

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We are the world around us. We are the product of what was done to us, and we are the product of what we have done to it. The world is a dangerous place, and it will swallow the weak. By focusing on our strengths, we can keep the world at bay and live the life we want. To do that, consider taking only what we need and returning the rest. If possible, that returned part will help someone else.





# Scavenger

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We've been looking at it for days. Deciding what to do. Everybody who has seen it has just walked by and ignored it. It's not good enough for them, but as we look at it, all we can see is potential. We can see what others cannot because of who we are and how we think. We aren't special because of this. It's based on our life experiences, successes, and failures. Embrace the idea that we see life differently than others and use that new vision.





# Singularity

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We all start from the same place and end up at the same place, which makes what we do with our lives the important part. Money, stature, and the number of friends don't matter. Possessions don't matter. All that matters is that we live the life we want and not what others tell us is a good life. For some, that means helping others. For others, that means that we live a pure life. Only we can judge what we consider a meaningful life.



# Spirituality

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We all have our beliefs that support us when times are tough. Whether it is the belief in a god (or many gods), nature, or some ethereal concept, that belief is our anchor to help us overcome situations. As time passes, and things go well, that belief can fall by the wayside. This belief is not a benefactor that gives us all our desires and is easily dismissed when unnecessary though. It's a reflection of who we are.





# Struggle

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Every step we take is more challenging than the last. We must wade through so much to get ahead, but we feel it'll never happen. For many, the struggle is real. Others may not see it, but we can feel it in our bones, and every waking moment, we feel we can't go on. Don't quit. Dealing with the struggle makes us stronger and stronger. We can succeed if we are on the path we are meant to be.





# Surrender

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He stares back at us from the other side. He's waiting for us to tell him what he wants to hear, but we don't know what that is. We hope he'll leave us alone if we give him what he wants. But that never happens. We give in. And he's still there. Strength at one time is hard. Strength over the years seems nearly impossible. The small moments of strength are more valuable than the explosive displays of rebellion.



# Tenacity

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The darkness surrounds us, and we feel lost. All we see is decay and death. Even the air feels dirty. Life is attacking us, and we don't know what to do. We want to give up. However, consider the large number of tiny flowers—or weeds—that grow everywhere they shouldn't. These plants found a way to grow in the harshest areas, around obstacles, and became stronger. Be like a tiny flower and be strong no matter what life throws at you.



# Troubled

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Others see us as strong and confident. We have a great job and love of our lives, and the world seems to be at our beck and call. Everybody seems to listen to us and admire us. Inside, though, are we as strong as they think we are? We all have doubts about whether we deserve the accolades. The doubt never appears when we are busy... only when we have stopped. Learn to rely on your strengths.







# Trust

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Trust. It's such a small word for an important part of our lives. We trust our loved ones to protect us, to make us feel wanted, and not to hurt us. We trust our friends will bring joy into our lives and make it more interesting. Trust. Yet when that trust is broken, we see those who broke it in a different light, and it's hard to regain it back because we will always wonder if it'll happen again. Relationships can work again as long as both sides learn to trust again.



# Unexpected

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We do something because we expect something positive in return and know we will succeed. This reward cycle causes us to repeat it, the now-established comfort zone. However, this comfort zone prevents us from trying something that may negatively affect us. There is no growth. Only when we take chances may we see the impossible. Life is a balance of the familiar and the unexpected. The unexpected is not always bad.



# Value

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Value is arbitrary. What is important to someone may be useless to another. These don't have to be expensive items—like cell phones, cars, or houses. It can be intangibles—like a smile, small talk, or a kind word. Even complimenting someone's hair can go a long way. The power of a smile or a kind word can change someone's world. The value of a kind word or smile lets others know that someone cared enough to step out of their own life for the sake of others.

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# Gallery of Nightmares

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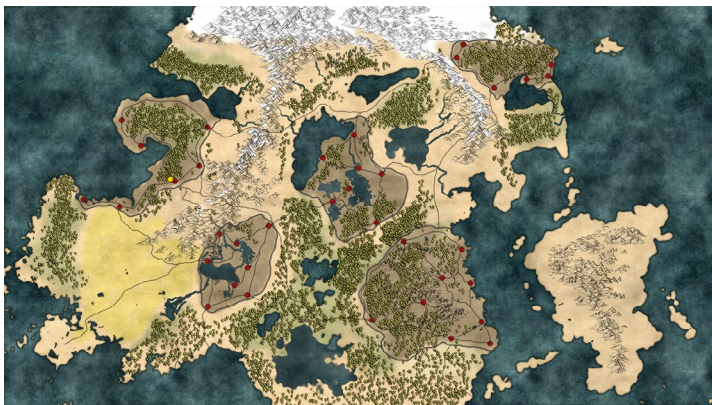
## How I Used the Decks

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Now that we've gone through a lot of different ways to use the decks, the big question I've always been asked is, "What are the books you've written when you used the cards?"

The books tell the tale of Jonathan and the Gallery of Nightmares. The gallery serves as a bridge between two distinct worlds: our own and the world of Caelith.

Jonathan inherited the gallery from his mother, and it flooded his sense of reality with mysterious shadow people and dark voices emanating from the paintings. He thought he could handle it until he stepped into a room called the Shadow Nook. Through a painting in that room, he was transported to Caelith, a magical world of nightmares, and realized his problems had just begun.



In that plane of existence, Death created the universe from the ever-present darkness. He brought elemental gods into reality, and they made the species that live there. Over the centuries, skin elementals, and weaker species were abused by the stronger elementals because they had no natural ability to protect themselves. Death had to balance the world before the weaker species were eliminated, so he created the Sacramancy decks and gave those weaker elementals the means to access the world's magic.

Now that we have the basics, let's talk to Jonathan, the owner of the Gallery of Nightmares.

## Sythra and Death (Third Age: Year 3126)

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Hey. My name is Jonathan Stromberg, and I've been asked to fill in what I know about this world, Caelith, and the Gallery of Nightmares. At the time of this writing, I was 74 years old in your world when I decided to leave it behind to live in Caelith. The gallery made me an offer to live here, and in doing so, I was returned to the age when I renovated and managed the gallery, at the ripe old age of 17. It's been 15 years since I left your world, and I can honestly say that life is much better, although difficult at times, here. Nowadays, I have a wife and daughter and live comfortably in Medini, the first town I encountered when I entered the

Shadow Nook.

This world isn't perfect, but I'm happy, which is more than I could say when I lived in your world.

As mentioned earlier, everything began when I was 17 years old, and my father passed away. At that time, I inherited the Gallery of Nightmares from my mother, and honestly, I was pretty scared. Up until then, I was going through the motions of life. My father and I didn't have a great relationship ever since my mother passed away when I was seven. I had some friends, but not a lot, and all I could think of was getting out of the town I was living in.

The first time I walked into the gallery, it felt like home, and I knew it would be a new start for me. I have to be honest, though... it was pretty weird. It was full of shadowy figures walking around, a strange room called the Shadow Nook, and mysterious, dark paintings that spoke to the visitors.

I eventually discovered that the shadow people were like me: previous gallery owners who had been offered the option to become young once again and live in Caelith. Once we gave up responsibility for managing the gallery, we could travel back and forth between both realms, but never interact with the old world—our name for your world. Some of us couldn't leave the old world behind, so we kept going back. I did the same thing at first, but seeing the world only as a shadow left me feeling empty, and I realized that I had lost all interest in the old world.

My life was here in Caelith.

Now, the weirdest part is that I didn't realize the gallery was an actual person. Well, not a person per se. More like the assistant to Death. In the past, whenever I entered the gallery, I felt that something was watching me. At first, I had assumed that it was my mother or shadow people, but I was wrong. It was the building that revealed itself as a female shadow resembling my mother, and I later found out that the gallery appeared differently to the other owners, even when we were all in the same room.

The gallery's real name is Sythra. Throughout the books scattered around the building and personal discussions with her, we learned about the entire history of Caelith. She also offered each of us a special coin, allowing us to change into any elemental we wanted. The only rule we had to follow was that no previous owner could make the gallery their home, and we were not allowed to take any of the manuscripts out. Instead, most of us have small cottages near the gallery. Initially, I was fascinated by everything I learned, but eventually I became tired of it and decided that the real world was more interesting.

Now, Sythra is amazing. Death created her long ago to help foster understanding between all the species of this world and other planes of existence. In particular, after the War of Corruption, it became Sythra's job to help heal the wounds between the skin elementals, in particular the human species, and the rest of the elementals. After all,

it was my species, humans, that started it. I'm not saying we were right to start the war, but I'm not saying we were wrong, either.

One night, Sythra, assuming the form of my mother, and I sat in the reading room and watched the fire burn in the ancient stone fireplace, discussing who Death was. Long ago, there was nothing but Death. It's not that he was an entity floating in the void. He was the void itself. A sentient consciousness that had no form. After a period, he knew it was time for the Beginning and the End. He had rested enough, and the Great Cycle must begin again. So, he fractured his essence into multiple parts. Some parts created the moons, planets, and suns. Other parts were sent to oversee the created worlds and had dominion over what was created. They were all part of Death, but separate from him. Their job was to create life, learn from it, and, after a period, destroy it ... bringing back that knowledge so that Death can rest and the cycle begins again.

On Caelith, my world, Death created the major elemental gods representing earth, air, water, fire, and skin. Their job was to create all the species on the planet so that Death may learn from them. When working with the elemental gods, he was cautious to let them know that all the species had to learn to work together and understand one another. This understanding and empathy between the races would lead to more knowledge for Death to absorb. However, Death knew in his heart, though, that there would always be a conflict between the races since they, ultimately, are a

creation of him and he is a creature of chaos.

## War of Corruption (Second Age: Year 2368)

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As time went on, the creations fought and ostracized one another. Prejudices and jealousies erupted, and the elementals kept to their own. Skin elementals, especially humans like me, became targets because we lacked special abilities to protect ourselves. This was known as the Time of Chaos.

Now, I know what you are thinking. If everybody is an elemental, why can't we, skin elementals, protect ourselves? Well, it's simple. We can't alter our appearance. All the other elementals are primarily composed of their base element and can change their shape or density. For example, water elementals can shift parts of their bodies into fins, allowing them to swim faster, or become transparent and hide in the ocean. Skin elementals can't do that. We're stuck in our single form. It's not like we also have other special gifts, like being better at accessing magic or being faster. Nope. None of that. So, we're definitely at a disadvantage, at the bottom of the power scale.

In the year 2280, to help the weaker species deal with this imbalance of power, Death created the ShadowMyths decks. The decks provided access to the world's magic to



help lesser species defend themselves. This access came in two forms: sacramancy and biomagy. The sacramancy deck altered reality, allowing the holders of the cards to draw energy from The Path, and the biomagy deck was used to establish a common language and foster understanding between the species. As with many powerful items, this worked for a while, but soon became abused. In particular, humans, I'm ashamed to say, used the cards and waged a war against the other elementals, even skin elementals, to get revenge for how they had been treated over the years.

In 2368, Malochi, the destroyer and corrupter, was ready. He had gathered as many of the cards as he could, and with both decks and help from a group of talented sacramancers, he altered the cards' magic to capture and control all elementals. He felt that all elementals were at fault and sought to control everything.

So, the War of Corruption began, and no one could defeat him.

Eventually, he suffered the same fate as all creatures. He died of old age in the year 2432.

## The Separation (Second Age: Year 2433)

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Without a word, Sythra extended her left forefinger at my forehead, and thin wisps of black smoke covered my eyes. The room shifted, and I was a small obelisk sitting in the middle of a table. On one side of the table, a dark man-like shape full of stars flowed in and out of my vision. Surrounding the rest of the table were various forms of flames, clouds, water, and, distinctly different from the others, a man with a dark green cloak.

“No,” Death said flatly as the elemental lords looked upon the dark shape at the head of the table. “And that’s my final word. I will not end the existence of the human species in this world. Not to satisfy your bloodlust. Many of them had nothing to do with this war, and they were just as victimized as you. Plus, let’s not forget that each of you elemental lords—not you, Lord Mazram—is partly responsible for the actions of humans. Also, what should I do about those elemental species that voluntarily participated in the war? Not just the victims enthralled by Malochi. If you had treated them with proper respect and had controlled your species, the war would have never started in the first place.”

Lord Mazram, the skin elemental god, nodded at Death and smiled inwardly.

“I agree, though, that peace must be restored,” Death

continued. "The human species shall be quarantined to certain regions for their protection and yours. It is forbidden for any other species, including other skin elementals, to enter without an invitation from one of the humans inside. This is their land, and they should live there in peace. Over time, they will learn to live harmoniously with everyone else, but right now, wounds need to heal. You will work out the details among yourselves, and Lord Mazram, you shall oversee this, so your children are treated fairly."

Death then faded away, and the room became brighter. In seconds, the elemental lords of water, air, earth, and fire started loudly complaining about his proclamations.

"How dare he order us around!" Faemir, the fire elemental lord, yelled. "We're not children! This is our world, and our children were controlled and destroyed by those filthy humans! To allow those humans to go out and threaten us again is unacceptable!"

The earth elemental god, Magnus, opened his mouth to join the conversation but stopped. Studying Mazram quietly sitting in the corner and observing everybody, he understood this was not the time or place to discuss any problems they had with Death's proclamations. Quietly, he said, "Hold, my fellow lords. Let us rest a bit and mull over what Death has proclaimed. It may be for the best right now. Nothing says this has to be forever. I suggest we meet again after we have thought about this."

## Quarantine Zone (Second Age: Year 2436)

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As Lord Mazram surveyed the world, he created five regions for humans. Each region was thousands of miles in size and had full access to natural resources to build their towns. To separate the human species from other elementals, he created barriers, canyons with death mists on the earth side, and formidable waves managed by the kai on the waterside.



Mazram enhanced both barriers by creating a magic field that allowed certain kai and death mists to become far more intelligent and stronger than other members of their species. Over time, a religious organization further enhanced the specialness of those members who agreed to patrol the border. Those unique individuals became known as maulers.

The final part of the agreement between Death and the elemental lords was that humans had to have the opportunity to learn and associate with other elementals. Several bridges were created, and mages (sacramancers or biomagists) were the only humans who could cross those bridges, since they were supposedly taught to understand other species through the use of sacramancy and biomagy cards. If a human who was not a mage attempted to cross, a mauler would rise and eliminate them.

When Mazram presented the new plan to the other elemental lords, they were strangely quiet. “So,” he asked, “will this satisfy? Humans are no longer a threat to anyone else. If, by some chance, they understand other elementals, they should be worthy enough to rejoin the rest of the world. Death wants this, and I think I have delivered a suitable solution.”

The other lords just looked at him. No responses. No smiles. Nothing.

Finally, Lord Faemir, the fire elemental god, spoke. “It

looks all nice and pretty. How are we supposed to get the humans in there? Do we ask them politely? Please go in. You'll love it there!"

"No," Mazram said. "They will be herded in by the death mists, thanks to Lord Graylar. Some humans will, of course, die, but I don't believe that will bother too many of you."

As the other elementals studied the map, they all agreed the plan would work...for now. There really was no other option.

## Elementals (Third Age: Year 3126)

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"My job," Sythra said, "is to help elementals, in particular members of the human species, better understand the world and teach everyone about empathy. I've performed my duty for thousands of years and will continue to do so for thousands more. You, Jonathan, are the next human who will help me with this task.

"That is the purpose of the gallery," she continued. "The gallery brings other humans from different planes of existence into this world so that new ideas may be introduced to everyone. Death must learn. The gallery management is a test that shows me how you handle power and whether you can deal with future issues. Those who



pass the test are allowed to reside in Caelith as very special sacramancers with access to the world's history. My desire is that you spread the knowledge and the wisdom of your old world to those who live here."

As I sat back, I asked, "What happened to those who didn't pass?"

For a long time, she looked at me and didn't say a word.

"Okay... got it. I'm curious, though. How did some get in this quarantine zone if Lord Mazram didn't allow other elementals in? Are they the ones that I should be talking to first? There's the statue at the end of town, which, I'm sure, is a captured elemental. Where did it come from?" I asked.

She extended her finger towards my forehead, and the room disappeared again. All I saw was some of the elemental lords surrounded by clouds.

After Lord Mazram left the room, Lord Faemir asked, "Is everything ready? Your people know what to do?"

"Yes," responded the air and water elemental gods. "We have instructed our priests that certain elementals will visit them. Some priests are loyal to our cause and will provide a way to bring elementals out of sight of the maulers. No one will know what is happening. We must be careful not to let too many in, though, or Death and Mazram will notice."

“Great! This will be a perfect opportunity to eliminate the troublemakers and criminals in our lands. Since Death and Lord Mazram love those humans so much, they can have them. They have also provided us with a perfect opportunity to cleanse our lands.”

As the image faded, Sythra spoke again. “That,” Johathan, “is why you have elementals here. At first, they were not the best examples of the other species, but most were good people. Nowadays, many of them have come to view the quarantine areas as a sanctuary and a protection from others of their species. They have a right to live safely and freely, just like you humans. That is the true meaning of the quarantine zones. That is the idea Death had in mind.”

“You will start with them,” Sythra said as she faded from the room.

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# Gallery of Nightmares

-Short Story

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## A Wish Fulfilled

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I tried screaming, but no sound came out. How long had I been here? Hours? Days? Years? No way to tell, but there was a good chance that, eventually, I'd go mad and secretly pray that I hadn't already done so.

The darkness that surrounded me made me feel like I was floating in an ocean of black water, except I couldn't feel the water. As I moved my hands down to feel my body, there was no sensation of movement or even touch. Only a coldness permeated my soul.

With a bright flash, the darkness became lighter. Shades of gray replaced the inky darkness, and muffled sounds lingered in the distance. They were faint but present. Actual light and sound! Soft blankets curled beneath my hands! I could feel my body again!

I slowly opened my eyes—I could feel them opening!—and looked around. The room was blurry and dark, but it wasn't like the darkness where I had been floating. In the corner of the room, a dark-skinned female glared at me with her arms crossed. Her skin was slightly dark green with patches of blackness and broken wings. Tattered skin hung from the stubs of her wings and disappeared into the darkness. Scars covered her face and body, and she was *not* happy to see me. Yet, as I focused more on her face, she

disappeared.

I wonder who she was.

“You’re awake! You’re awake!” the healer cried as she entered the room. “Don’t worry. The confusion is to be expected. You’ve been in a Death State for five months! We were hoping, but never thought you would wake this soon!”

She called into the next room near my bed, and two other healers rushed in.

I tried to look around, but my body didn’t respond. “Where... am..... I?” I croaked out.

“Shh... Don’t talk. You’re at the Medini Infirmary in Edlowe. You were brought here after your fall. Just rest now, and we’ll get you in better shape.”

I looked into the healers’ faces and saw their teeth rot and fall out. *No! Not again!* Their hair became brittle and straggly, and large clumps dropped onto the floor. The longer I looked, the more their soft skin turned into grey ash and dust.

The visions had returned, but I couldn’t stop them. I closed my eyes abruptly and slowly opened them. Everything returned to normal.

“Are you okay?” The nearest healer asked while checking



my vitals.

“Yeah,” I said. “Just thought I saw something. I’m fine. Just tired.”

She laid a glowing ShadowMyths card on my chest, recited a couple of inaudible words, and the card melted into my body. I’d seen street performers using similar cards, but it never occurred to me that healers would also use them. Made sense. I could feel my body getting warmer as the card began to melt.

“Just relax. This will help you sleep more easily. We’ll be back in a little bit to check up on you.”

As everything faded once more, the green-skinned woman appeared again. Nobody else seemed to notice her, though.

Probably my imagination.

For the next month, the scarred woman reappeared in the corner of my room every night, and she always stood there, glaring at me as black ooze dripped out of the scars on her body and face. I had grown accustomed to her appearance, but not to her persistent presence. Whenever I asked an attendant about her, they never saw the scarred woman. They kept repeating that it must be just a side effect of the medication—nothing to worry about.

Eventually, they released me and sent me home with an in-home caregiver. I was hopeful that the scarred woman

would only be in the hospital and would now leave me alone.

I was wrong.

At night, she appeared at the foot of my bed, and every time I screamed, my caregiver would burst into the room, look around, and tell me nothing was there. Eventually, my calls for help were ignored. I guess I had cried wolf too many times.

On the nights when my caregiver didn't show up, the woman at the foot of my bed spread her broken wings, and an inky shadow washed over me. The same nothingness I had felt before I woke up in the hospital. It was cold and made me feel more alone than anything I'd ever known.

One night, she was at the edge of my bed, like usual, but this time, I didn't scream. Just waited for the darkness to take over. I don't know how many times my screams had been ignored, and the cold nothingness had taken over, but it barely registered anymore. Instead of the shadows covering me, her claws scraped against the bed frame as she climbed onto it.





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She perched on the edge of the bed frame as if she were a bird deciding whether to eat a helpless worm. Her thick, tattered wings unfolded, and razor-sharp feathers glinted in the light. Occasionally, a feather scraped against the bed frame's wood, and I could easily imagine how she could tear me apart.

I tried to move away towards the bed's headboard, but fear froze my body. All I saw was her scarred face, the edges of her wings, and the ooze that dripped onto the bed.

After tilting her head from side to side several times, she crawled onto the bed towards me. Her mouth opened impossibly wide, and insects of every form flowed out! Caterpillars. Ants. Roaches. Centipedes! The insects mixed in with the ooze that still dripped from her wings and scars.

Large taloned hands formed out of the sides of my bed. Hands! Where did they come from? They held my arms and legs down. Even more hands appeared from the edges of my pillow and held my head down. Some clamped over my mouth, and others forced my eyes open. I fought against their holds and tried to scream, but it was too late. There was nothing I could do other than watch her crawl toward me, vomiting insects and dripping black ooze.

When she finally got close enough, she spoke in a hoarse voice that smelled of decayed earth and rot. “Why have you summoned me every night? What do you want?”

With a flick of her finger, the hands around my mouth dissolved into thick oily smoke and flowed off the sides of my pillow.

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my voice shaky. “I have no idea who you are! I didn’t summon you!”

Sniffing the air around her, she glared at me. “I’m the Angel of Mercy. In the middle of the night, *you* always summon *me*. Why? What do you want?”

“Angel of Mercy? You’re not her! She is supposed to be beautiful and kind-looking! Bathing the room in her glorious light! You’re a demon!”

“I am who I am.” Her voice stayed calm. “Answer my question, or I will rip the answer out of you. Slowly. So very slowly.”

“A friend told me about you,” I muttered, slowly putting what I knew about her together. “All my life, I’ve seen things decay. Not a lot. Just enough. But ever since I came out of the Death State, it’s been getting worse. *Everything* is decaying. When I see babies, I see them grow, age, and die. Same with every person I look at. Their eyes fall out. Their skin grows sallow and cracks. Open sores erupt from their bodies. Flowers. Plants. Buildings. Everything. All I see



is death and decay. You've got to help me!"

The hands around my eyes dissolved as tears fell from my eyes.

"Please! You have to help me. I don't want to see that anymore."

She stared at me for a long time. "I can help you," she muttered after a while. "However, there is a price for my services. Are you willing to pay?"

"Absolutely! I'd do anything!"

With a smile, she gently leaned over and kissed my forehead. The kiss burned like nothing I'd ever felt, and the smell of charred flesh filled the room. The insects, ooze, and hands all dissolved in an instant.

She returned to the edge of the bed. "Shall we begin? Remember. You agreed to this."



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She looked up to the ceiling and began to chant.

*Naloth Neek Sect Shibach*

*Naloth Neek Sect Shibala*

*Tok Seth Noch*

The words repeated over and over again

*From the heart of darkness, Shibach, show yourself.*

*Payment shall be made. Payment shall be given.*

*This for me. Next for you.*

*Naloth Neek Sect Shibach*

*Naloth Neek Sect Shibala*

*Tok Seth Noch*

Black ooze erupted from her eyes, body, and wings, and the thick ichor flowed toward the ceiling and clung to every inch of it. Once complete, the ceiling looked like a lake of darkness.

As her chanting continued, the room grew dimmer and dimmer. Ice formed at the ceiling's edges and worked its

way down the walls. The slight crackling sound got louder and louder, and I could see my breath. Uncontrollably, I shivered.

A giant skull emerged from the ceiling pool overhead, and with a quick flap of her wings, she flew up and clung to it. Her wings held her in place as she kissed the forehead of the skull.

She screamed as the ooze flowed off of her body and into the skull's eye sockets. The more she melted into the ceiling, the more human she appeared. Her sores and scars disappeared, and her body decayed.

Then, she was gone.

After some time, she crawled out of the skull's left eye socket with fully formed wings and no scars. From what I saw with her back to me, her body was as black as ever but fully healed. Still clinging to the skull on the ceiling, she twisted her head like an owl and fully faced me.

Her face had a wicked grin as black ooze fell from her eyes and hair. It was thick as oil and smelled of carrion, and the first droplets fell onto my chest, neck, and face. Intense pain burned those areas as more and more ichor dropped to cause even more agony. The smell of charred flesh was sickening, but the sores healed as quickly as they appeared.

The ooze fell like heavy, concentrated rain, and I tried to move my head out of the way, but hands appeared from

the edge of my pillows again and held me in place. More hands appeared from the edge of my bed and held the rest of me down.

As it fell, the ooze flowed down my throat and coated my eyes, and my vision blurred as I tried to spit it out of my mouth. I couldn't even close my mouth because taloned hands forced it open. Sensations of gagging, pain, and burning overwhelmed me.

Eventually, everything stopped.

The angel of mercy dropped from the ceiling, or at least, I was pretty sure it was her. Things were getting harder to see. She landed beside my bed, and the hands holding my head and body dissolved. I immediately wiped as much of the black ichor from my face, but everything still appeared blurry. The skull on the ceiling and the ice on the walls receded while an intense darkness covered most of the room.

"Remember. You agreed to this," she laughed softly.

Something was wrong. No more ooze coated my mouth, but... something... my stomach! There was something in my stomach! Whatever was in there forced it to grow larger and larger. Tighter and tighter. Under my skin, I could see the outline of hands and... Was that a face? What was happening!?

I tried to scream, but all I could do was gag. And the gagging

wouldn't stop. The thing in my stomach was coming up, and I couldn't stop it. Ooze, mixed with dead roaches and other insects, poured out of my mouth, burning me.

The room got even more blurry.

My jaw dislocated as I vomited, and from somewhere in front of me, the cry of a child pierced the air. A tiny baby about the size of my fist: it was perfectly formed but smaller than usual.

From the side of my bed, a dark shape I was sure was the angel of mercy, picked up the baby and cradled it in her arms. "It's okay, little one. You're going to be okay. Shhhh... I'm here for you." Her eyes then landed on me. "I have fulfilled your wish. You will no longer see dead and decaying things. And I will be back for three more children."

She laughed as she faded into the darkness.

At this point, the entire room was pitch black. The coldness and smell of dirt were gone. But why was it still black? I felt my eyes. The burning ooze was no longer there. My hand reached out to the light ball on my nightstand, but it was already warm... the light ball was already on!

Nothing.

She fulfilled her promise. I no longer saw death and decay. I no longer saw anything.



## Learn more about ShadowMyths

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Jonathan knew life would never be the same when he entered the Gallery of Nightmares. Inherited from his mother, the gallery flooded his sense of reality with mysterious shadow people and dark voices from creepy paintings. He thought he could handle it until he stepped into the Shadow Nook. In that room, he was transported to a world of nightmares and realized his problems had just begun.

You can learn the life lesson behind each painting in the gallery by checking out the Shadows and Light series of books which are available at

[www.shadowmyths.com](http://www.shadowmyths.com)