
Sacramancy

- Darkness

Copyright © 2021 by Doug Hoppes Studio, L.L.C.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

For permissions, contact: doug@shadowmyths.com

Some characters and events in this book are fictitious.

Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover Design and Illustrations by Doug Hoppes

Second Edition, First Printing 2025

ISBN 979-8-9865871-5-8

www.ShadowMyths.com

Sacramancy - Darkness

An sacramancy journal by
DOUG HOPPE

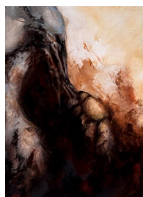
Table of Contents

Cards	6
Preservation	8
Evolution of Sacramancy Decks	9
Beyond A Writing Tool	10
Being True to Yourself	13
How to Use the Decks	14
Shadow Work Oracle Reading	15
Writing Prompts	27
Role Playing Game Ideas	31
Teaching Tool	35
Therapy Tool	36
Sacramancy Journal	37
Gallery of Nightmares	108
How I used the Decks	109

Table of Contents

Sythra and Death	111
War of Corruption	114
The Separation	117
Quarantine Zone	119
Elementals	121
The Price of Fame	124

Cards



Assimilation
Page 38



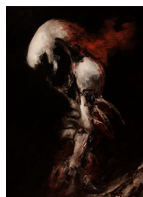
Belief
Page 40



Craving
Page 42



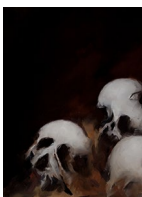
Different
Page 44



Disillusioned
Page 46



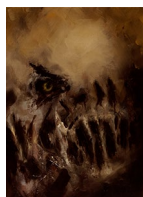
Durability
Page 48



Dwelling
Page 50



Failures
Page 52



Fearless
Page 54



Freedom
Page 56



Friendship
Page 58



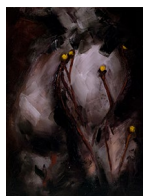
Focused
Page 60



Goals
Page 62



Immersed
Page 64



Imperfection
Page 66



Jealousy
Page 68



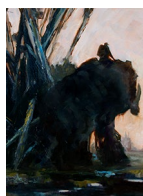
Judgement
Page 70



Karma
Page 72

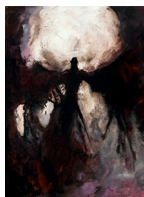


Knowledge
Page 74

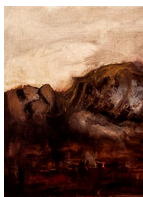


Loneliness
Page 76

Cards



Lore
Page 78



Lost
Page 80



Negativity
Page 82



Partnership
Page 84



Perception
Page 86



Perspective
Page 88



Power
Page 90



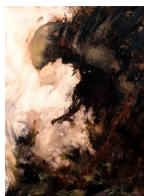
Pride
Page 92



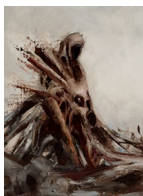
Resolution
Page 94



Sacrifices
Page 96



Shadows
Page 98



Trapped
Page 100



Tribute
Page 102



Unforgiven
Page 104



Wholeness
Page 106

Darkness

The darkness is not evil. It's not good, either. It's just the darkness.

This deck is about understanding that we need both sides to live our lives. Without comparing both sides, we cannot determine what is good for us and what is not. Life should never be about having everything work out and always succeeding. It shouldn't also be about constant failure.

Without failure, we don't learn and grow. Without success, we lack the energy and desire to try. Sometimes that darkness comes from within us, but this deck focuses on external influences that adjust the way we think.

Evolution of Sacramancy

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

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

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

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

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.

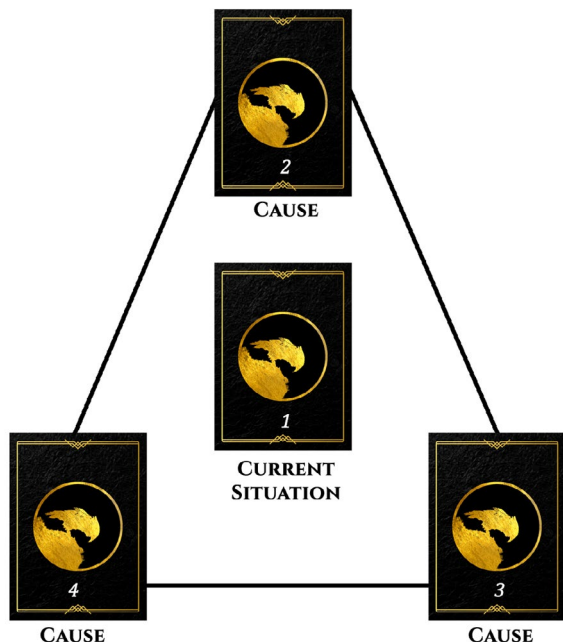
Shuffle the deck and draw three cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

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

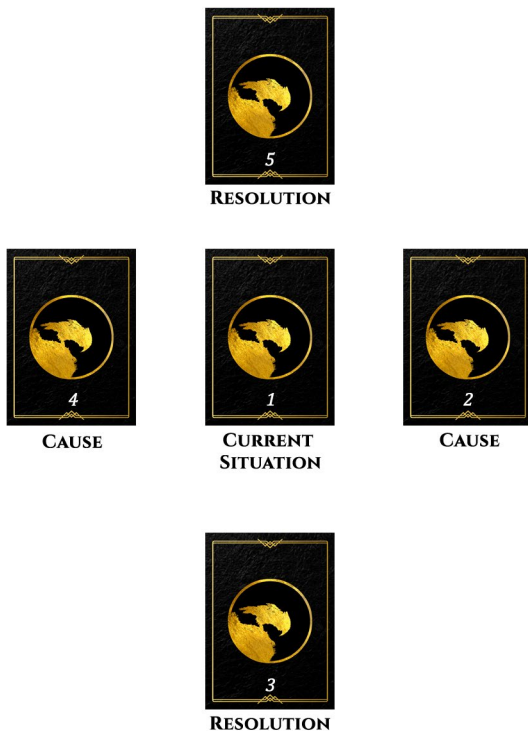
cards are laid out in the order above.

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

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:

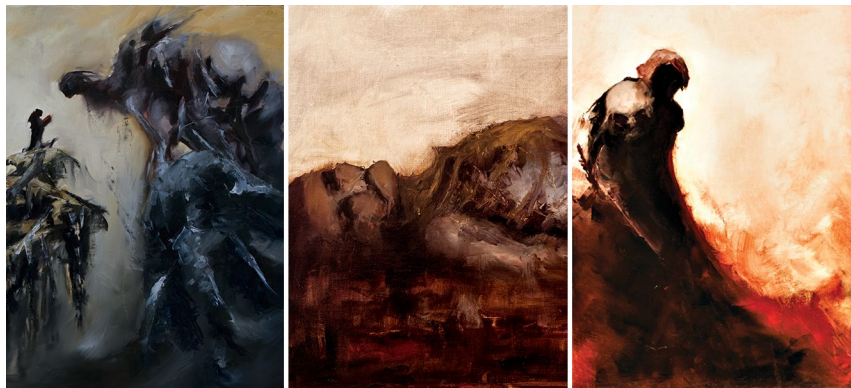
First Card (First Act): This card shows the story's inciting incident. This is where the story is set up and the main characters are introduced. In addition, for my short stories, I like to get to the point where something happens to my characters that causes them some stress.

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!



The first thing I do is to listen to what the images are showing me. My mind immediately drifts to the center image. Why is there a body on the table? Is this a live or dead person? Who are the other people? Do they know this person on the table?

In my mind, I see we have a sick person, possibly dying. Her husband is worried about her, and the doctors are doing everything they can. That would be the basis of the story.

Let's look at what happens when I apply my basic story pattern with the cards:

The First Card (Left): A doctor is worried. He knows he makes a lot of mistakes and doesn't know if he can help the wife of his friend, the head surgeon. She's very sick, but his friend informs him that this is his job, and he fully believes in him. The doctor pleads with another physician to take the case, but to no avail. Perhaps the other surgeon

is jealous because he knows the doctor is not very skilled, but has only secured his position because he is friends with the head surgeon.

The Second Card (Middle): The head surgeon's wife is lying on the table. She knows the doctor cannot help her and tries to convince her husband that he should not force his friend to do the surgery. She tells her husband to review all the cases from the past year because most of the issues are due to mistakes made by his friend. She doesn't want to die. She asks him which is more important—saving the pride of his friend or the potential of her death?

The Third Card (Right): The husband realizes his friend can no longer be a surgeon. He has fully believed in his friend for so long that he was unaware of what had been happening. The husband realizes that, as head surgeon, he may have caused the deaths of others in the past, too. He informs the doctor that he would rather have someone else perform the surgery on his wife.

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

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.)



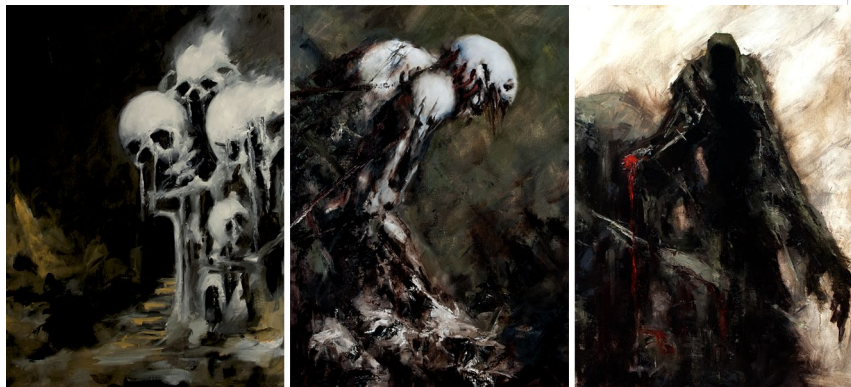
“Cho000000sssssseeeee,” someone whispers. “Cho0000sssssseeeee.”

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 location—a bone building—for this campaign, and two creatures. The creatures can be anything from the Monster Manual, your own home-brewed monsters, or a monster in the ShadowMyths Biomagy Deck.

When I look at the cards, I see a house party where guests have been overtaken, and the owner is in on it. This campaign could be:

The First Card (Left): At the edge of town, a popular merchant is throwing a house party. The merchant always has interesting items to sell and many out-of-town guests.

The Second Card (Middle): During the house party, guests leave the main area and wander into different rooms. In one of the rooms, a guest lies down to rest, but a monster emerges from under the bed and grows over him as he sleeps. After a period, the growth will recede, and the guest will wake up. The guest doesn't know anything has happened and returns to the party.

The Third Card (Right): The owner's servants are notified that the room was previously occupied by a guest. They go into the room and remove a single red crystal from under the bed. In the crystal, an image of the guest pounds on its wall, screaming.

Now, you've got an adventure where the players must figure out what the host is doing with the crystals and save the trapped guests.

Teaching Tool

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

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.

Sacramancy Journal



Attitude

The world is not a nice place. The truth of the matter is...that it's not a terrible place either. It is what it is. How we see the world is often based on our nature and beliefs. If we only think of the horrible, that is what we see. If we only think of the lovely, that is what we see. Focus on the good things surrounding you; you'll see that it is not as bad as you think.



Balance

We strive for balance in our lives and our world. Balance doesn't mean all things are equal all the time. It just means that nothing overtakes everything else over a long period. This is especially true with work and relaxation. With balance, our mind is clear and relaxed, allowing us to adapt easily to changes that may overwhelm us. Learn when to upset the balance and when to reassert it.



Captured

We all are a part of our environment. It shapes, controls, and feeds off us as much as we feed off it. When we see someone who looks or behaves differently, we understand they are not part of the same region as us. Difference is not to be feared but to be celebrated... as long as it is not harmful to us. When we embrace differences, our own environment becomes richer and more interesting.



Chaos

Every one of us can create chaos. As more and more things pull us in different directions, it is important to stay focused and centered. Being centered and in control allows us to navigate situations so that the outcome is what we desire or, at the very least, what we can live with. Otherwise, the forces can pull us apart, and we can end up creating more chaos for those around us. How we control the chaos allows us to be a model for others to emulate.



Cleansing

We must purge the destructive forces in our lives, whether they are habits we have adopted or people who make us feel bad. It's a constant battle to eliminate what can harm us and embrace what is beneficial. The challenging part is that we don't always know which is which. Sometimes, the harmful forces are wrapped in a beautiful or comfortable shell. We need to trust our instincts to ensure that what we are doing will help us grow.



Contentment

We're always told we should help others and make their lives better. That is a great goal to have. However, what about us? When do we get to take care of ourselves? We are the gods of our lives, and if we allow others to control our lives, when do we get to be who we want to be? Helping others makes us feel better, but it shouldn't be at the expense of what makes our lives better. In the end, would we shed tears for the life we didn't lead?



Darkness

We don't like to admit that we have a bit of darkness inside. Secret thoughts we wish we could act on, but we don't. We bury it and pretend it's not there because we're ashamed of them. Yet we're human, and, as humans, we have our faults. We're not perfect. Search out the good inside, for everyone has some inside of them, and embrace it so the darkness is held at bay.



Defiance

The storm is coming. We know it. We can feel it. However, no matter what happens, we've decided to stand our ground. We have our beliefs, and no one can tell us differently. Yet, are we sure that we are right? Many people will stand for their beliefs despite harming themselves and others. We don't want to believe that we are wrong. Sometimes, that's okay. And sometimes, that is holding us back.



Delusion

We don't want to be forgotten, so we believe we are stronger, smarter, or funnier than we are. In our minds, we are the hero of their world and can always step in and do what is needed. Why? Because we want to be remembered positively. So, when we are no longer around, we are still thought of fondly. How we are seen in the eyes of others will never match how we see ourselves in our own eyes.



Destiny

There is a path we are meant to be on. That path reflects who we are and what we are meant to do. Everybody is important. Yet that doesn't mean that we are destined to do great things in the eyes of others. It means we are meant to lead an important life for ourselves and others. We define what makes our lives important, and our actions can impact others, whether we know it or not. That is our destiny.



Elemental

We stand among others and say, “This is who I am. I am the reflection of what you did to me and how I was treated.” We all reflect the world around us and what happened to us. We can’t let that bring us down or change how we feel. There is a strength within every one of us, and with confidence and true belief in ourselves, we can overcome what was done to us and show the world that we are stronger than we ever thought.



Escape

We try to be brave and think we can conquer all our fears. We're told that we should always be strong and persevere. Sometimes, we can't. We hide and bury our heads. We want to escape everything and go somewhere safe. Sometimes, life is hard, and we're not strong enough to face it. And you know what? That's okay. Learn to step back, take a breath, and then come back stronger. Running away is okay as long as you don't do it all the time.



Forged

We're forged in fire and tempered in love. How we deal with the issues and triumphs in our lives defines the person we are. Yet, it may not be the person we want to be. If we want to change, we must put ourselves in situations where we may succeed or fail. Failure strengthens us, but if we always fail, we become frustrated. It is a delicate balance. We have to take risks to grow and become stronger, but not too much risk, such that failure destroys us.



Forgotten

What was once important to us is now forgotten. It is a part of our past. It shaped us. It helped us define who we are. But like the hidden doll in a painting, it became part of the background noise of our lives. We can discard those memories, as we do with many things we purchase. Many people would like to forget their past, but it will not forget us. Learn to embrace the painful memories because they are reminders of our strength when times are troubled.



Guardian

The world will beat us down and not care about us one bit. No one is strong enough to withstand this, and we need someone on our side to help. When we are young, it's usually our parents and family. As we grow older, it's friends or family. These are our guardians. Their role is to help us get through life and enjoy it. As time moves on, we become the guardians of others.



Help

The old saying—“The road to hell is paved with good intentions”—is quite accurate. We often think we are helping someone, but in reality, we are causing them more harm. Not that we shouldn’t help. However, before trying to help, consider determining whether we are helping them or making ourselves feel better. Helping is about empathizing and understanding others, not showing how wonderful we are.



Hope

Sometimes, hope is all we have. Things aren't quite going our way, and we don't know what to do. We constantly watch for something or someone to help us and save the day. Sometimes, we're lucky, and help does come. Sometimes, we're not, and we must endure. Hope can strengthen our resolve in tough situations and allow us to endure our current trials. Sometimes, hope is all we have.



Imprisoned

In the night, there is a figure who watches us from the darkness. It follows us through the dark alleys and hidden crevices of our minds as we sleep. We don't know who they are but feel they've been with us our entire lives. We run, and yet they are always there. Some mistakes we've made control us our whole lives. We can't outrun them. We can't hide from them. All we can do is to acknowledge them and move on.



Lacking

Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. We like to think we are more intelligent than we are, but our decisions are often based on those we trust. This leads us to a falsehood where our beliefs are the masses' beliefs, not our own. Remember that the masses are not always correct, but more importantly, they are not always wrong. Like the owl on the skull, false wisdom can lead to the death of your true self. Learn to see what is true, not what others say.



Listen

Our ideas represent who we are and what we believe. They reflect how we see the world, and it is important to understand that they don't represent an absolute truth but how we understand it. It's good to listen to others and judge if their ideas have merit for ourselves. If so, add them to your collective knowledge. If not, try to understand it from their point of view. We can always build off their ideas to create new ones.



Love

Being in love is one of the best feelings we can ever experience. Not everybody is fortunate enough to feel this way. It doesn't have to be with another person. It can be our favorite books, hobbies, or pets. It's not a moment of passion but a lifelong adoration where we give part of our lives to our interests, and in return, our interests give a part of themselves back to us. When we share that love and passion with others, we'll find a community that brings more love into our lives.



Missing

We're always looking for that "thing" to make us whole. We feel something is missing but don't know what it is. It's just an emptiness that can't be filled. Some try to find it by burying themselves—in work, in alcohol, in addiction—and hoping it magically appears. We're frustrated, but if we look around at what we already have, we may find the solution right in front of our eyes.



Nourishment

Replace the phrase “You are what you eat” with “You are what you consume, and what you consume is who you are.” Think about it: the news we see, the books we read, the food we eat, the videos we watch, and the games we play. Consider how everything we consume defines us and how we see the world. That is our reality, and, like the food we eat, it is important to understand how this affects the way we react to the world around us.



Obedience

We do so many things without questioning because we have faith in those around us who tell us to trust them. Sometimes, it is for our own good. Sometimes, it is not. Like everything in life, it's a balance. Sometimes, you should be wary and consider the source of your information. Other times, you should have faith and believe. Your moral compass is a good guide when making these decisions.



Peace

We're tired. We were ready for it to end. We wanted life to be simple, but it wasn't. We wanted to be at home and relax, not worry about anything, relish in the embrace of our loved ones, and know we were loved. At the end of our lives, did we achieve our goals and help our loved ones live their best lives? Or were we selfish about thinking only of ourselves? Death is the final resting place and our final home.



Petition

What would we do to obtain what we truly desire? In the heat of the moment, we would do anything. It doesn't matter what it is or what we want to do; all we can think about is obtaining our goal. However, if we sit back and wait that moment out, a time of clarity may come. The time may be all we need to determine whether what we want is worth what we'd give up. Sometimes, it is too late. Sometimes, it's not.



Promise

When we make a promise, we are committing to someone else. We have given a part of ourselves. Too many promises trap the giver into a situation they cannot deal with. We are immediately seen as untrustworthy if we break our promises too easily, and if we promise too readily, they see us as a guarantee. Consider promises like our hearts. Be careful who we give them to.



Release

Letting go of children so they can grow up, of our childhood, of a favorite balloon—it's so hard. We can't hold onto something forever and expect nothing to change. Life doesn't work that way. So many people try to recreate that same feeling over and over, but over time, we change, and the way we think and feel changes. It's inevitable. We must embrace the change, for that is where growth really happens.



Respect

When someone passes away, it is standard to pay our respects. This is not for the dead. It is for the living. It allows the living to remember all the great things about the person. Before death, though, consider paying respect each day. Listen. Help. Make lives better and more enjoyable. We'll find that, by being there for others, we'll also make our lives more enjoyable. Enjoy the moment with others rather than thinking there will always be time later.



Running

We feel like we've spent our entire lives running. We have no idea who or what we are running from. All we know is that if we stop, it'll catch us. The fear keeps us running. The fear of people finding out who we are. The fear of them mocking us. The fear of realizing we're not good enough for them. We constantly run, but we don't know where we're going. One day, we'll find that we are just running from ourselves. Stop Running.



Secrets

A small cottage sits alone in a large, crowded neighborhood. The person sitting by themselves in a crowded cafeteria. The life of the party who keeps themselves distant from their “friends.” We all have secrets. Some good. Some bad. Sometimes, those secrets prevent us from living our lives to the fullest. We don’t take chances on relationships because we feel that we’ll be judged for our secrets. We may lead a happy life, but could it be better?



Simple

Remember when we were young? For most people, life was about playing in the fields with friends and running around without a care. No bills. No issues with work or family. Just having fun. And now, those days are gone, with the complexity of adulthood replacing the simplicity of life. Sometimes though, wouldn't we love to return and be that free again?



Uprooted

We all want stability and predictability in our lives. Too often, we are subjected to a major life event that makes us uneasy, and for many, that sudden change causes too much anxiety. Even if the change is good for us and needed, we still feel lost and helpless. Embracing change is always hard and can test even the most stable people, but that is what must happen. That is when we discover how strong we really are.



Unwanted

All we can do is watch. We've tried our best, but they still go off without us. Is there something wrong with us? Are we not funny? Are we not pretty enough? Are we not rich enough? We never know why we're not in that group or asked to join their activities. It's tough to keep putting ourselves out there and not be wanted. By being open, we'll find there is a group for us. One that embraces who we are and is happy that we are there with them.



Virus

A voice whispers to us when we are alone with our thoughts. It's the sound of the past that reminds us of our failures. The insidious seed that prevents us from trying something new. The laughter of everybody who has made fun of us. This virus has infected us, keeping us from being true to ourselves. Why do we let it have power over us? It is a disease that needs to be purged from our thoughts.

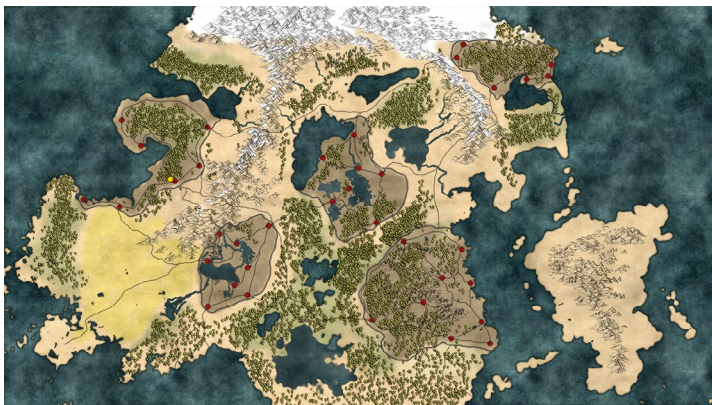
Gallery of Nightmares

How I Used the Decks

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)

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)

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)

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)

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)

"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.

Gallery of Nightmares

-Short Story



The Price of Fame

I loved sunny days.

The area I lived in wasn't used to such days, and when the sun did show, I made sure to take advantage of it as I walked down Main Street. No worries. Just some off time from work. I'd check in with the local fishing shop to see if they had any new bait or lures I could try. Realistically, it was not like I needed any more or had even used the ones I had. I just liked looking at them and imagining what I could catch.

As I headed down to my favorite fishing shop, enjoying the sun, I noticed an old woman approaching anyone near her on the street, several blocks from the shop. Her posture didn't look like she was begging for money; she was more likely trying to get their attention. Sometimes she grabbed someone by the arm, but was pushed away immediately. Some people just handed her coins, though.

I should have crossed the street so that she couldn't hit me up.

... but I didn't.

Hurriedly, she shuffled over to me with a look of desperation. "Please help!" she said as she grabbed at my shirt.

I was going to tell her no—how dare she grab my shirt—but a flicker in her eyes told me I shouldn't. She reminded me of my friend's grandmother. She was similar in height, with graying hair and a worried look in her brown eyes. It was as if life was too much, but she didn't want to give up and let it go.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you," I told her as I removed her hand from my shirt. "Here. This may help." I reached into my pocket for some spare change.

"Please. Can you help me find my son? Please! He's gone. I think I know where he is, but I need help getting him." She was almost to the point of tears. "There's a lady at the edge of town who will help me, but I must bring someone with me. She said that I can't do it alone."

"Uh, yeah. Sorry. I can't." I tried to move around her, but she stepped in front of me.

"Please! No one else will help. He needs my help!"

Those eyes. My friend's grandmother had the same pleading look when she had asked me for help when she had been evicted. She just wanted to stay at my cottage for a week while she found a new place to live. I also told her no, that I couldn't help. I honestly could have, but I didn't want to be bothered.

Weeks later, I received a memory ball from my friend, who told me about how disappointed he was in me. We hadn't

talked since I turned his grandmother down, and since his wife hadn't allowed her to stay with them and their five kids, he'd casually told his grandmother that she should ask me about it.

I had met his grandmother on several occasions, but it wasn't like we were friends. After I had told her she couldn't stay with me, she ended up on the streets for a while, where she got sick and passed away. All because of my selfishness.

I still couldn't believe that I had ever been so callous.

"All right," I muttered. "I'll help. But who are you? And where did you think your son went?"

Her face lit up. "You will? Thank you! Thank you! I'm Mary. My son, Dylan, left home last week. I'm sure he's with that famous sculptor named Cabal. You've seen his work. He does those glowing black statues in the gallery on Second Street. I told him not to go, but you know how kids are."

I had seen the statues, and they were *fantastic*. They had a lifelike feeling as if they were molded from real people and monsters. Each obsidian statue stood 15 feet or more in height, and small flickerings of lightning crawled over them—like nothing anybody had ever created. I hadn't realized the artist was a local.

"Okay. Let's go," I told the old woman.

We crossed some streets, and at the edge of town, we soon came upon an open field with a large, muddy lake. At first, I thought it was made of red clay, but after closer inspection, the dark, rich color reminded me of blood. An old, coagulated pool of blood.

“Sheba! Sheba!” the old woman yelled at the lake. “Sheba! I’ve done what you asked! Now, where’s my son?”

Nothing.

We waited some more.

Nothing.

Eventually, several thick bubbles floated to the top and burst with a gloppy wet sound. More and more bubbles appeared as if the lake was slowly boiling.

“Sheba! I kept my promise!” Mary cried. She frantically paced back and forth, wringing her hands. The look of desperation in her eyes grew.

A large red bubble appeared and burst, sending sprays of thick red liquid in all directions. From the bubble’s center, a mound of thin red spikes and rocks emerged from the water, as if the lake was giving birth to an island. The mound then moved toward the shore, to where Mary and I stood.

When it reached us, the air became quiet, and the water

stilled. A wet sound then slapped against the other side of the mound. Clawed hands and wings appeared above the top of the mound, and attached to them was the most beautiful woman I'd ever seen.

She rose and perched herself on top of the mound. From her chest, wiggling tentacles flailed in the wind as if searching for something to grab. Her blue wings were rock-hard and did not seem to have the normal delicate feel of a bird—more like the rigid structure of a perched gargoyle.

What should have been a normal face with eyes, nose, ears, and mouth was replaced by an obsidian black oval. A bright white line ran along the “jawline,” intertwined with small red and blue lightning bolts.

“Have you brought him?” a voice said inside my head.

Both Sheba and Mary looked at me.

“Yes. As requested,” Mary said. “D-do you know where my son is? You said you could send me to him.”

“Yes.” The winged beauty on the mound gestured to me. “Bring the man before me so that I can get a closer look.”

Sheba looked down at me, but I had no idea what she was thinking. Her lack of expression made my stomach drop. This didn't look like simple help that Mary would need from me. Instead, I could be sacrificed or given to this beautiful demon—probably my imagination. In Mazram's

Name! She was beautiful, though!

Not knowing what else to do, I stepped forward—closer to Sheba. The tentacles in her chest wound down toward me, grabbed my arms, and dragged me toward the mound. I screamed and tried to pull back, but more tentacles attached to my arms and dragged me forward.

I was right!

Sacrifice!

They threw me onto the mound, and with my back to it, I looked upward.

Sheba looked down upon me and then faced Mary. “Yes. He will do nicely. The payment is three fingers. Do you agree?”

“Yes. I agree. Three fingers, and you’ll send me to where my son is.” Mary looked at me sorrowfully. “I’m...I’m sorry. I just want my son back. I’m sure you would do the same thing in my place.”

With a quick spring, belying her age, Mary jumped onto my chest and gently stroked my chin. A wicked grin crossed her face as she grabbed my right hand and shoved my first three fingers into her mouth. With a crunch, blood gushed out of her mouth.

I screamed and pulled my hand away from her. Where she had bitten off the fingers, skin flowed over the open

wounds, and the hand sealed in an instant. No blood. No pain. Just old scar tissue. As if I had lost those fingers years ago.

Mary spat the bloody fingers onto the mound. Now, on their own, the fingers crawled toward the top of the mound and shifted into thin, red spikes. I turned my head. The entire mound was covered with many more of those long spikes. How many fingers had Sheba collected over time?

I didn't really want to know. I just wanted to get out of here.

Tears flowed down my face. I was not in pain. Just terrified. I'd never felt this scared in all my life. I couldn't stop crying.

Still on my chest, Mary just stared at me until I eventually calmed down enough to stop. I was tired and wanted this over with. What was she waiting for? She had taken my fingers. But instead of letting go, she wrapped her arms around my chest, and I slowly sank into the mound.

The tentacles holding me down let go, but I couldn't get up. The more I sank into the mound, the harder it was to move. I couldn't even push Mary off me. I struggled, but she wouldn't let go of my chest.

Claustrophobia swept over me as the mound worked its way to cover my face. This was it! Some people said that when the end came, I'd relive the happiest moments of my life. That didn't happen. Instead, all I saw was a mound of rock and dirt covering my face as we sank into oblivion.



When I came to, I sat against the rough bark of a very large tree. I was surprised to be alive, but not quite sure I was. I mean, think about it. Some crazy old woman bit off my fingers at the behest of a beautiful demon. I then sank into a mound covered in spikes that had emerged from a lake resembling blood. I saw no reason why I should still be here, breathing and leaning against a tree. But here I was.

I had no idea where I was, and my head ached like a thousand hammers were constantly beating metal. The ringing eventually died away.

A red rope curved around my neck, and ten feet away, Mary sat holding the other end.

“Good. Good. You’re awake.” She held the thin rope loosely in her hand as she looked around. “We’re here.”

“Where’s here?” I was still missing three fingers on my right hand. Anger boiled within me. “What have you done?!”

I tried to remove the rope from my neck, but as my hand grasped it, it glowed and burned a line across my palm and fingers. A sharp, hot sensation also stung my neck. I glared at Mary. There was no way I was going to get this rope off unless I did something about her.

“No,” she said, pulling the rope a little tighter. “Not just yet. I’ll free you once we find my son. I promise.”

“*Promise?* How am I supposed to believe you?” I yelled.

Her eyes became taut, and the rope became warmer.

“I promise. I just want my son,” she mumbled. “Sheba said that when I approached the sculptor, I had to have a strong man beside me.” She nodded a few too many times. “Now, calm down, and this will be over soon enough.”

Mary then got up and lightly pulled on the rope.

I rose and took a good look around to see where I was. I really had no clue where we were. I’d been all over Abettily and the surrounding countryside, and this looked nothing like I’d ever seen. The trees were larger and made of darker wood. I would say that the air smelled different, too, but that would be a lie. My sense of smell was not exactly normal. In fact, it was probably nonexistent.

I noticed the sky was cloudier than when I agreed to help Mary. I didn’t think it was because it was later in the day, but I could be wrong. Honestly, I had no idea how long I’d been unconscious.

Mary gestured over to an open field near where we sat. “Recognize those sculptures? This is the home of the artist, Cabal.”

Beyond the trees stood the large, dark lake that looked similar to the one where I had first met Sheba. Surrounding the lake, large black obsidian statues glistened in the sun as small arcs of red and blue lightning flowed over them. Truly magical.

Not all the statues represented humans. Some looked like angels, demons, and other weird creatures. Some were realistic, while others were angular. But the more I looked, the more I saw that most possessed a screaming face.

Every so often, small streams of red liquid from the lake wound their way to a statue embellished by red lightning. The water crawled up the statue, melted it, and receded back into the pool. A random statue with blue lightning would disappear from its current spot and reappear where the previous statue stood. In its new spot, the blue lightning changed to red.

As terrified as I was, just watching statues melt or vanish and reappear was fascinating. The process had an elegant beauty that fit the statues' beauty.

"It's time to go." She slightly tugged on the rope. "We need to get my son."

She led me down a wide, flat path through the woods, leaving the statues far behind us. The woods grew darker and quieter, and the only sounds I heard were the crunching of our feet on fallen leaves. Some leaves appeared to be

skulls, but that was probably my overactive imagination at this point.

I didn't know how much more of this I could take. A part of me reveled in the beauty that I'd seen when I met Sheba and the view of the gorgeous statues in the field. Another part of me was terrified from losing my fingers, being absorbed by the mound, and the thin burning rope around my neck.

At the end of the path, we came upon another clearing. In this one, twelve cages, each fifteen feet tall, were in a semicircle that faced the path we had just come down. Skulls adorned all the sides and front. Off to our right were two mounds of skulls of various types. Many were human, but others were animals and creatures that I couldn't identify.

"Dylan! Dylan!" Marie cried out to her son.

All but four of the cages were empty. The only human I saw, who must've been her son, Dylan, looked up but turned away. In the cage next to him, a small bald creature stared at me with its glowing orange eyes. What was that? A few seconds later, it hissed at me and moved toward the shadows in the back of the cage.

"Dylan! It's me!" the old woman cried. "I've come to take you home."

Her cries forced my eyes back toward Dylan. He seemed to be the only human present.

“What are you doing here, Mom? I told you to leave me alone,” Dylan said in a frustrated voice. “I’m going to study with Cabal. He told me that with some work, I’m going to be famous. I have a natural look and talent, and I’ll be well-known.”

“He’s lying to you! How many times do I have to tell you? You’ve got to stop trusting people.”

“He’s not lying! He’ll make me famous.”

He held up a small black obsidian statue with both hands, in which his right hand was also missing three fingers. What he had was a crude variation of the statues we had seen in the field. Even small arcs of lightning flowed over it.

“See? I’m learning so much!” He caressed the statue with his left hand. “I could never have done something like this at home.”

“If he is so good to you, why are you locked up?” Mary’s tone sounded worried. “Why aren’t you free to leave or walk around? Do you call this training?”

Although she had dragged me into this mess, honestly, I couldn’t shake the uneasy feeling when I looked at Dylan. This seemed too odd. Some creatures in the other cages had a beaten look as if they knew something Dylan had yet to learn.

“No, Mom,” he said. “This is part of the training. The

magic only works inside the cage, and I can focus here. No distractions. Plus, once I can easily create what I envision, the next step is to slowly take me out of the cage and see if I can recreate the magic outside.” He scoffed. “Besides, I wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for you.”

“What...?” she said. “How is this my fault? I told you not to seek him out. If you want to be an artist, you can take a day job and work on your art at night.”

“We’re *poor*!” he screamed with such venom.

I was knocked back by pure hatred in his voice. Mary seemed so too.

“If I had been able to join my friends at the Cathedral School of Arts, I wouldn’t be here. But we’re poor. You should have provided a better life, but you didn’t! *You* are the reason I’m here.” He hit the bars. “I took the only opportunity I could. Without Cabal, what would I be? Instead of being as famous as I deserve, I’d be another poor person living on scraps. Throughout my entire life, you have told me I was destined for great things. Well, here I am, Mom. I’ll be well-known, and it’ll be of my own doing. Not because of you!”

Dylan turned around and hid in the cage’s shadows.

The confused look on her face told me everything about her. As much as I wanted to be mad at her for doing this to me, I couldn’t. Pity consumed me.

“D-dylan...? Please come home with me,” she said in a soft, sorrowful voice.

My heart broke.

“No, I’m not leaving,” the voice said from the darkness.
“Sorry, Mom. This is my home now.”



A tall man wrapped in shadows stepped out from behind Dylan's cage. He focused on Mary. "...And you, madam? What are you doing here?"

"I'm his mother," she said quietly, pointing at Dylan.

"Ah... I see. I'm Cabal." He glanced over at the boy. "And he is here of his own free will. However, you are not welcome here. You have not paid the proper tribute to remain here." He then glanced at my own hand, and I swore his eyes squinted a bit, and a smile briefly appeared in the shadowed portion of his face.

"I'm his mother!" she screamed. "I'm here to bring him home, and you can't stop me! He's coming home with me!"

I wasn't sure what my role was now, but I knew that until she let go of the rope around my neck, I was still a bystander.

"No," he said. "I'm not sure why Sheba allowed you here, but I will have a talk with her. No one can stay in this realm for long unless they have paid the tribute. And I see that you still have all of your fingers, so it is time for you to go."

"Dylan! Dylan!" She turned back toward him, getting closer to the cage. "Stop being a child. You're coming home with me right now!"

“No, Mom!” Dylan yelled. “I told you. I’m not going anywhere!”

With a wave of Cabal’s right hand, which was missing three fingers, she faded from view.

“Noooooooo...” her voice said, disappearing with her. “I’lllll beeee baaaccckkkk...”

The thin red rope around my neck also vanished.

I was free!

I turned and ran back toward the path. I was not going to be locked in a cage. I wasn’t sure how I would get out of here, but I needed to get away so that I could think.

Black mists covered my feet and the path before me. They lifted me, and an empty cage opened with a low-pitched creaking sound. As I entered the cage, I tried to grab onto the bars to prevent the mist from fully dragging me inside, but to no avail. I didn’t have the strength.

The gate slammed shut with a resounding bang.

For long moments, Cabal stared at Dylan and me.

Rubbing his hands together, he then said, “Well, this is interesting. I hadn’t expected to work with two humans today. Now, what should I do with you two?” From the shadow area beneath his eyes, that cold smile widened. “Ah! I have it. Dylan, you shall be a demon of the apocalypse.

And you”—he pointed at me—“shall be a knight who is in mortal combat with the demon. Yes... That’s it. It’ll be a masterpiece that everybody will talk about for *years*.”

Black mist poured off Cabal and covered our cages. The tops of the cages dissolved, and the mists flowed down onto our faces, hands, arms, and bodies. I would say I heard Dylan scream, but it might’ve been just my own. The burn from the red rope was a tickle compared to the pure pain from the mist.

Dylan’s body grew larger, with scales and fur covering what was once human skin. Orange slits replaced his blue eyes, and large horns grew out the side of his head. Two razor-sharp fangs, extending well beyond his mouth, replaced his slightly yellowed teeth.

The burning mists turned my hands and forearms into spiked gauntlets. My fingers had grown back but were now encased in the solidified mist around me as a helmet formed on my head, and tusks appeared on its side. My body felt heavier as the mist created plate armor over me. With one final addition, a long ebony sword formed out of my left hand.

Dylan screamed as large, pointed wings, reminiscent of those found on bats, tore his skin as they emerged from his back. Like the rest of him, the wings were as black as night.

His cage door opened, and he roared, seeming to fully

intend on attacking Cabal. But he never got that far. Cabal raised his hand, and blue lightning struck him. In an instant, he was frozen in place.

I didn't know what to do. My cage door had also opened, but I just stood within. I knew I couldn't defeat Dylan or Cabal. I couldn't run. I just stood frozen with a fear I had never felt in my life. I didn't know what to do.

"You might as well come out," Cabal said. "You know, I could force you."

Shakily, I stepped out of the cage.

He waved his hand from Dylan to me. Dylan, now free to move, expanded his enormous bat wings and swung a large claw toward me. On instinct, I crouched and brought my sword up toward his chest.

"Yes!" Cabal cried.

With that, we both froze in place—he with his claw outstretched toward me and me with my sword rising.

"This will be my most famous creation!"

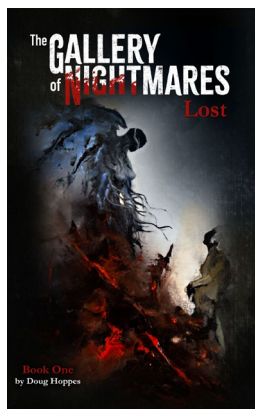
More mist flowed off Cabal, and Dylan and I were carried along the path, back toward the large, dark lake. Even though I couldn't move, I still heard and saw everything. Well, at least I could see in the direction my eyes were facing.

Mumbling to himself, Cabal seemed to be in a very good mood. “I know exactly which museum you’re going to. Both of you are going to be so well-known.”

His laughter faded as we floated on the black mist.

Read the Creepy Stories

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.



www.shadowmyths.com

Learn more about ShadowMyths



Everything that happened to Jonathan in The Shadow Nook was created using the Sacramancy Cards. The cards are used for Tarot/Oracle reading, DnD campaign idea generator, writing prompts, and therapy tools. Each short story was created by laying down three cards in random order and seeing what happened.

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