
Sacramancy
Eclipse

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Cover Design and Illustrations by Doug Hoppes

First Edition, First Printing 2025

ISBN 979-8-9991621-3-7

www.ShadowMyths.com

Sacramancy
Eclipse

An sacramancy journal by
DOUG HOPPES

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Eclipse

Shadows and Light. For many people, we want to always be in the light. We want to be noticed. We want to be loved by others. The light brings the warmth of a new day and new opportunities. Light, for the most part, brings hope.

...then there is the Darkness. In the darkness, we can hide from others and from ourselves. In the darkness, there is danger, but there is also safety. Others cannot see us, and many times that is very comforting.

This deck is about dealing with the darkness overtaking the light and recognizing that it won't be forever. We need the darkness as much as we need the light.

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, *Selik'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.

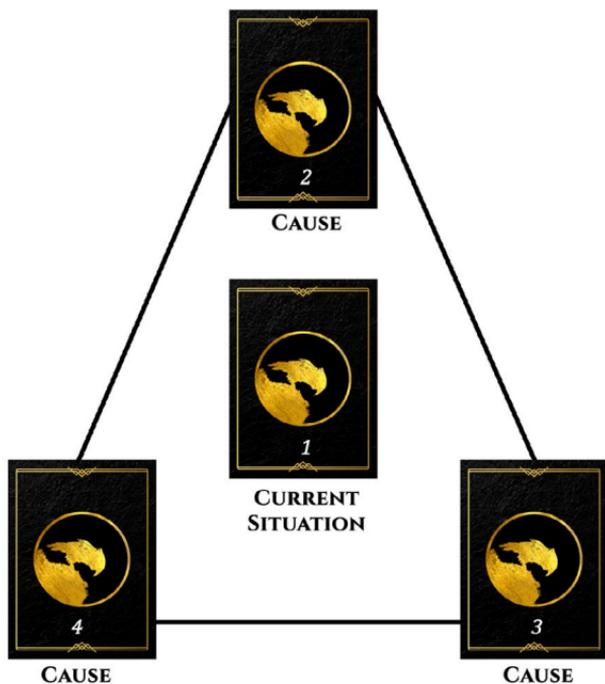
Shuffle the deck and draw three cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

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:



RESOLUTION



CAUSE



**CURRENT
SITUATION**



CAUSE



RESOLUTION

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!



This story appears to be about souls trapped in a special location. They are being held there by the weird demon with a sword. The red matches the first card, so maybe the people are trapped inside his body. The question would be... why is he trapped, and does he ever get out? The third card may be a savior or someone trapped in the body who has freed himself... or something even deadlier.

The First Card (Left): Markus sat across from Janus and decided that he needed that sword. Janus glared at him with his one red eye and laughed. This was a game as old as time. They would roll the dice to see which one controlled the Sword of Destiny. They were evenly matched in terms of power, so they always left it up to chance. Sometimes Janus won. Sometimes Markus won.

The Second Card (Middle): This time, the dice rolled in favor of Janus. He grabbed Markus and shoved him into the ever-widening slit in Janus' chest. With a wet, glooping

sound, Markus found himself back in the foul-smelling pit of Janus. As before, he could only move part of his head, and he saw all of the other bodies Janus had trapped inside. Unlike them, he couldn't decay. He just had to wait for his turn to roll the dice.

The Third Card (Right): Janus stood and prepared for the coming destruction. Fires burned around him, and the sword melded with his right arm. With Markus inside of him, he was now able to channel Markus' power and transform into the God of Chaos. He found it funny that Markus, the God of Order, could be used to create chaos.

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.)



“Chooooooooosssssseeeee,” someone whispers. “Chooooooooosssssseeeee.”

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 graveyard and some malevolent wizard. I have no idea what the wizard did, but he may be the one who attacked the man with the spider on the third card. The spiders and shadow wizard 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): The players step into a deceptively large room inside the tavern. In fact, this room felt much larger than the entire tavern—it had to be magic. In the room, three gravestones were positioned in front of the right wall. On the far wall, a skull emerged from the darkness. The lower jaw falls off as it says, “He is waiting...” and disappears.

The Second Card (Middle): In front of each tombstone, a skeleton appears, and the surrounding shadows flow around it as tissue forms. The players see three identical figures cloaked in shadows and glowing white eyes. In the right hand of each figure, they hold globes containing an old man, an old woman, and a young man. In addition, something is crawling around the globe, but the players can't make out what it is. "Pick one," all three figures say in unison.

The Third Card (Right): (Assume that the players picked the young man). The figures holding the other globes disappear, and the one holding the young man throws it to the ground as he disappears. From the broken globe, a man crawls out, and the players see dozens of 3' spiders crawling over him and biting him. In agony, the man says, "You have to help my parents..." as the spiders crawl towards the players.

Now, you've got an adventure where the players have to rescue the parents and find out why they were taken.

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



Abandoned

We wonder where it went wrong. What did we do? What could we have done differently? Sure, it could have been our fault. However, it could also be someone else's fault. In the end, it doesn't matter what happened. Will we gather our courage and deal with the situation? Or shall we ignore it and stay stuck? All that matters is how we react because our reactions are the only thing we can control.



Authenticity

We all know those people who can't live a quiet life. The risk-takers. The rock climbers. The racers. The marathoners. The entrepreneurs. Many of them don't want the simple life of a family with children and the day-to-day of going to the same day job until they retire. They feel life is more important than that. They are right, and they are wrong. Life is not absolute, and one way is better than the other. Life is about being true to our nature.



Awareness

What are you feeling right now? Happy? Sad? Frightened? Calm? How we feel changes how we perceive things and what is spoken to us. A kind word or gesture can be seen as criticism during a bad mood. During a cheerful mood, a harsh tone may not even be noticed. The skull is a perfect example of this. When one is sad or depressed, the skull represents death and destruction. When one is happy or calm, the skull is beautiful and elegant. People are like that as well.



Centered

The warrior understands that the cost of a mistake is their life. During training, they are focused on what they need to do to achieve their goals. For most people, life doesn't require such commitment. However, it does require such focus. No matter our goals, we must understand what it takes to achieve them and the sacrifices needed to make them a reality. What are we willing to do to reach our goals?



Comfort

So many people think the solution to dealing with internal demons is direct action. Sometimes, a simple hug is all that is needed. A hug tells a person we care about them—no words, no grand gestures, just a soft connection that far exceeds any words. The hug. The touch. These simple gestures take little effort but can mean the world to those who are hurting. They show that you are there for them and that you care.



Courage

We never know the real reason why someone does or says something hurtful. Often, it is because they are under a lot of stress due to work, financial concerns, or relationship issues. It's a part of life to, sometimes, say or do the wrong thing. However, some people take pleasure in their negative comments and behavior, using them to control others and make themselves feel better. Regardless of the reason for their behavior, we don't have to tolerate negative behavior.



Curiosity

We react with curiosity or fear when we see something radically different from the norm. Much of this is based on past experiences. Yet, if we embrace that curiosity, we can learn what others teach and use that new information to improve our lives. We can always learn from someone else. Learning doesn't mean we have to accept what they are saying. It just means we are willing to listen and open our minds.



Emissary

Death is a natural part of life. Our deaths bring life to others. In the natural world, it feeds the animals who depend on death to participate in the circle of life. For humans, it reminds others that life is so much more than just working every day. It reminds people that there are friends to be enjoyed, people to love, young ones to care for, and adventures to be had. The knowledge of death brings nourishment to the lives of others, for we enjoy it more when we know we won't be around forever.



Equilibrium

Shadow, Light, and the world between. Cats easily move between all three and maintain a balance of what is essential. Work, Home, and the world between. We can easily move between all three, but many of us struggle with it. We spend too much time at work and bring it home. We spend too much time at home and do not advance in our careers. Balance the time in each world so that we have a balanced life.



Exposed

There is a part of us that is always shown to everyone around us. No matter how strong, pretty, or tough we are, everybody can see it. It is in the way we look at others, in the way we care about others, and in the way we define how we see life and treat others. It's our inner self, and no matter how hard we try to hide it, it is always there for others to judge. Our true friends are the ones who will accept our inner selves. No others.



Facade

We all wear a mask when we are out in public, and, unfortunately, sometimes that is the same face we show those closest to us. In reality, no one knows what we are going through and our current troubles. It doesn't matter if they could help; we just don't want to be a burden. So, we show them that everything is okay. This is the same lie that is present on social media. Be open with those you trust, for they may genuinely be able to help.



Forsaken

Sometimes, we're so focused on what we think is important that we forget what makes our lives enjoyable. The work deadlines, the money, and the life we think others will envy are all important—to a degree. What about making time for our loved ones? Our children? Our pets? Ourselves? When do they become important to us? Will we look back and realize that we forgot them? The now is guaranteed, but the future isn't. There is no better time than the present.



Frustration

Screaming. Fighting. Drama. Never a moment of peace. For some of us, home is not a place where we can relax and be ourselves. Home is a place where we are judged and criticized. Yet we hold it in until we can't. How do we escape such a situation? Sometimes, we can't. Sometimes, we need the help of a friend. Sometimes, we need a strong family member. Someone who will listen. Someone who will care.



Ghosts

We walk through a graveyard and only see death. However, the reality is that it is life—the lives these people have lived. This is apparent when families show up to pay their respects and remind the ghosts that they are loved. This doesn't only happen at a cemetery, either. It happens in our favorite rooms in the house, at the diner where we and the deceased hung out. All places have ghosts and memories. Appreciate the memories you have, not what you lost.



Gradual

Small changes over time almost always go unnoticed. The peeling of the windows in our homes is not seen until we paint the house. Gaining weight goes unnoticed until we realize our old clothes don't fit or a friend we haven't seen in months comments about it. Most of the time, it is when we no longer pay attention that it becomes a problem. Focus on the small changes, and the big ones will follow.



Haunted

We all have that part inside of us that haunts us. Past regrets. Past failures. Broken promises. Times we sabotaged our own efforts. That's a part of being human. No one is immune to it. The point to remember is that it's in the past, and it can't be undone. We can, though, fix it and make up for it. That's also a part of being human. Being sorry is not enough. We must work to regain lost trust and acknowledge what was done. Being responsible for our actions can truly make amends.



Healing

Over time, we've all experienced a broken heart. Hopefully, later, we'll also experience a healing heart. This is when someone changes our feelings, or we've learned to love ourselves. Either way, the pain diminishes. Not gone. Just not as strong as before. When we experience a healing heart, we'll find our bodies and minds repair themselves so we can become whole again. It's then easier to find joy in life and others.



Honesty

The phrase “the eyes are the windows to the soul” is fairly accurate. A simplistic beauty exists within someone just by looking into their eyes. Peering into the eyes of another gives a good indication of what they are thinking or feeling, of who they are. That look can often make others more beautiful than they first appear. However, by the same token, it can detract and make them appear uglier than they are. The eyes are a reflection of their thoughts.



Humanity

What happens when we are too focused on what computers can do rather than what we can do? Technology creates opportunities to realize our dreams, but it comes at a price. That price is the loss of who we are. The social media likes. The computer-generated art, stories, and articles. We think these are our ideas, but they aren't. They are the computer's ideas that we wish would happen. When do we lose ourselves and become just a part of a machine?



Illusion

The mantra of “Violence never solves anything” is unfortunately incorrect. Over time, if we rely on violence too often, we lose who we are and those around us. Usually, those who rely on aggression as a solution to their problems are weak in mind and inner strength. We can easily diffuse the situation by having confidence in ourselves and understanding when it is time to walk away and when it is time to act in defense.



Inertia

Most people do not like change. They become comfortable, and even if the change is demonstrably better and will improve their lives, they won't take the chance. Part of it is because of the fear of the unknown, but most of the time, it is because their routine is better than the chaos of something new. Change is hard. However, sometimes we only grow because of change. We must learn to embrace it, for it will make us stronger.



Infection

Little by little—drip by drip—we feel pain slowly take over in our bones until we feel nothing. Eventually, we won't care. There is only pain, an infection that takes over our minds, bodies, and spirits. It takes away all joy in our lives. Everybody has pain, but we can do something about it. We all learn to live with some level of pain. Those lessons can be taught to others in the hope that, by some small measure, their life can be improved.



Linked

Life is about creating and destroying ideas. The old ideas are not necessarily bad, but they may have no use in the world in which we currently live. Sometimes, this is good. Sometimes, this is bad. In everything, we are connected through the life and death of ideas, and they affect our minds and, in turn, our bodies. When we are open to those changes, no matter how much they may affect us, we can learn to grow beyond our wildest imagination.



Malevolence

Everybody wants the world to be perfect. However, what we want is different from what someone else wants. Some people are not nice. Their happiest moments are when they are bringing others down. They love drama. They are manipulative, and they care more about themselves. We don't have to have them in our lives. It is okay to cut them off, even if they are family. We are more important than the pain that others bring to us.



Nature

Nature can be cruel and harsh. At its root, it's about survival and taking care of our families. Sometimes, we need to be fierce and dangerous. Sometimes, we need to be caring and understanding. Being too fierce or too caring can both lead to problems—a lonely life or being taken advantage of. It's a balance. The wolf is a perfect example of this: Loving with their cubs but fierce in their protection of the cubs.



Parasite

For some, the unwanted host sneaks up on them. For others, it pounces and takes control at a moment's notice. That paralyzing feeling that renders us helpless. It's like being invaded by an alien creature that takes over our minds and bodies. We are no longer in control, and it's hard enough to get out of bed. Yet getting out of bed and removing the unwanted host may just be what we need.



Phobia

We all have that irrational fear that stops us in our tracks. Others may belittle us because they don't experience it. However, they have their irrational fears. No matter what people say, we don't have to overcome fear to live our lives. If we need to deal with the fear, consider learning how to adapt to it and lessen its impact. The fear will almost always be there, but it doesn't need to prevent us from living.



Regret

No matter how old we are, we've made bad decisions and mistakes that haunt us. It's not the decisions where we worked too much or didn't take a chance that bother us. It's the time we hurt someone through our actions or inaction. The past is the past, and, honestly, the only thing you can do is accept what happened, apologize, and move on. Life is about learning from our mistakes and making amends for past decisions.



Relapse

For many people, we're always welcome home no matter how long we've been gone. The memories are still there. Those who welcome us only remember the good times. We will too. However, we will also remember the bad times. The fights. The loneliness. The times we couldn't wait to leave. And no matter how much we've grown, we'll always find that going home forces us into the old habits we had before we left.



Resilience

In our minds, we view ourselves as young, strong, and physically attractive. On our way towards death, there are subtle reminders that this is no longer true. What was light is now heavy. Recovery from ailments and injuries now takes longer. Physical pain comes more easily. However, that doesn't mean that our life is over. It just means that the strengthening of our mind should replace the decay of our body. A strong mind can easily compensate for a weak body.



Support

Sometimes, all we can do is be there for someone. No giving advice. No giving money. Nothing. Simply be in the presence so that if they feel like talking or need a hug, you are available. To hug back. To listen. So many people want to give advice, but that person may not want to hear it. They just want to know you'll be there for them if they need help. They just want to know that someone cares about them.



Survival

We're drowning in a sea of sameness and conformity. When we stand out, we make ourselves a target for those who disagree with us. They laugh at us. They make snide comments and always criticize the way we live. It's hard to stray from what others consider normal, but... try. Your idiosyncrasies are what make you... well... you. Embrace them, for that will be your legacy of who you are... and you'll be much happier.



Unnatural

We see the approaching horror and cannot wrap our minds around it. Is it a weird creature coming out of the darkness or a spider? Both prey on our primal fears. Initially, the mind forms negative thoughts about what it cannot easily understand, but understanding overrides that fear after a while, which can help protect us. As we increase our knowledge, we may not accept it, but knowledge becomes our understanding.



Technology

Who's asking the question? The doctor or the patient? The doctors are so wrapped up in technology that they don't see the patient before them. They rely on the equipment, not the patient. The patient is so wrapped up in social media that they are comparing their lives to others, or they don't realize the "research" of their issues is misinformed. Technology is great until we lose who we are and how we feel. Until we lose our humanity.



Tranquility

We've had those days. The world beats us down, and everything around us is on fire. We need to get away from it all and decompress. We must remind ourselves of the good things—the friends who strengthen us, the family that loves us, and our pets that brighten our days. This is our armor that shields us, but it's important to understand that we can only control the world around us and our reaction to it—no sense worrying about things we can't control.

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.”

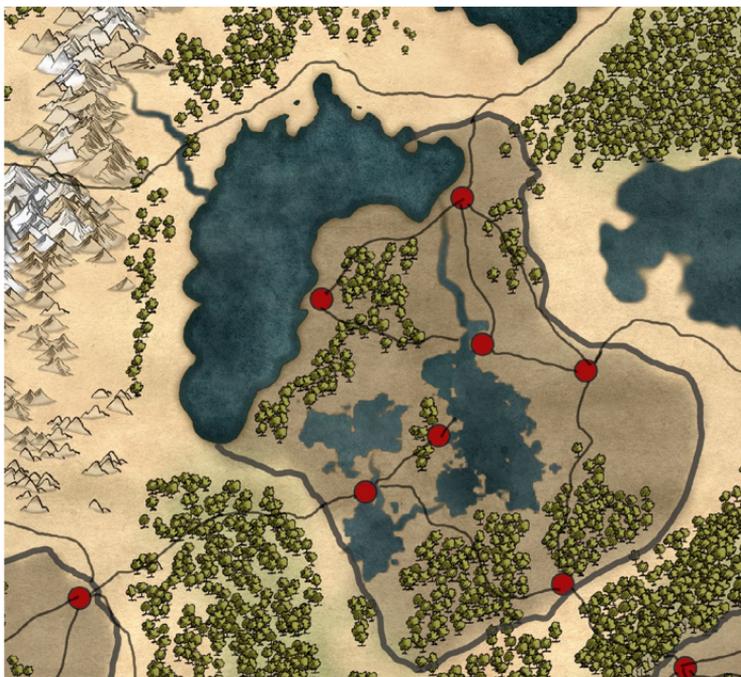
Death then faded away, and the room became brighter. In seconds, the elemental lords of water, air, earth, and fire started loudly complaining about his proclamations.

“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.

Short Story



It's Never Worth It

“Leave me alone!” I yelled at my mom as I slammed the door on the way out of the house. I hated going to school, but at least it meant that I didn’t have to be home with her.

My mom. How would I describe her? Strong? Resilient? Commanding? Maybe. How about...overbearing? Restrictive? Yeah. That’s how I would describe my loving mom, who gave up everything for me.

Now, I knew she loved me. She’d told me so every day since my dad had left. However, it was more like a comment than an actual emotion.

To her, I had to be perfect. Get the best grades. Be the strongest and fastest on our sports teams. Date the prettiest girl in school.

The problem was that...I wasn’t any of those things. I was okay in school. Sat on the sidelines more than I ever played. I didn’t have a girlfriend. I was just...average.

But that wasn’t good enough for my mom.

For the thousandth time, I sat in my afternoon Elders History class, learning about the town’s history and the elders, and wishing I wasn’t there. Behind and beside me

were my buddies, Cal and Markus. Cal was the smart one in our group, and Markus... Well, he was just fun. He wasn't good in class or sports, but he knew things—like what some classmates were doing after school or which teacher had problems at home.

I tried to pay attention to the teacher, who was pointing at an old guy on the board, but it was hard. I just didn't care about the subject. I mean...who would? Nothing I would be learning would help me later in life.

Cal looked over at me, giving me a concerned look. "You okay?"

I nodded. But the fight I had with my mom earlier today was still on my mind.

After the class ended, Cal stopped me near my locker as Markus headed off to his next class..

"Hey, bud," he said. "What's going on?"

"Look, not today," I said. "Don't feel like talking about it. Okay?"

Why couldn't we be the type of friends who hung out without having to get into personal stuff? But he always had to ask.

He just stared at me...

And stared...

And—

“Dude, you’ve been like this for the past two weeks,” he said. “What’s going on? Is it your mom again?”

I leaned my back against my locker, and the words just poured out. “Yeah. She’s getting worse. She keeps yammering about my grades... And how I didn’t start the last game... And how I’m always with you guys instead of studying... And when I’m going to—”

“Whoa! Whoa! Got it.” He held his hands up. “Sorry, dude. Look, we know how your mom is. My dad’s the same way. He always says he wants the best for me, but he’s full of crap.” He looks over, glaring past me and at the hall of students hanging out near us. “Hey, want to come over to my place once we are out today? Markus and I are heading to the bog to see if we can get some callow mushrooms. My dad said that some of the guys at the docks pay good money for ’em.”

“That’s okay. I don’t feel like hearing my mom scream at me more. Every time she does it, I feel sick and want to hide from her. I’ll just hang out in my room and pretend to be studying. That’s what I usually do anyway. Thanks, though.”

“Your call. If you change your mind, let me know.” He then walked off to his next class.

At the end of the day, I saw Markus and Cal hanging

out at the front of the school. They were busy chatting with a couple of other guys, laughing and pushing each other around. I wanted to go with them and avoid my mom for that night, but she would be mad if I didn't come directly home after school.

This sucked.

Instead of telling them why I couldn't go again, I just hung out near the entrance, waiting for them to leave first. But I guessed I wasn't as hidden as I had thought because Markus saw me, said something to the guys, and waved to them as they left. He kept his head down as he headed into the building and pulled me aside.

"Hey," he said. "I was talking to Cal earlier, and he said your mom's been giving you a rough time lately. More than usual. Look, our parents do that too, but man, your mom has got them all beat." He looked around and lowered his voice. "If you want, I can get you something that may help."

"Thanks, but there's nothing you can do," I said. "There's no way you can change my mom's mind."

He leaned against the locker next to me and said, "I'm not talking about changing her mind. I'm talking about helping you get great grades and be better at sports."

I stopped grabbing the parchments out of my locker and looked at him.

“What are you talking about?”

“Remember that guy in Aberdare? On that team we played against last spring? The one who broke those records?”

“Yeah. He beat us all by himself. My mom wouldn’t stop talking about him for a month. She kept asking why I couldn’t be like him.”

“Well, from what I heard, did you know he was also up for being a sacramancer apprentice?” Markus said. “His grades were some of the best in the school, and he was handpicked to join the mage guild. The word is that he left school early to do that.”

Closing my locker, I placed a memory ball against it so that it locked, and, more interested, I turned to face Markus.

“So? He’s smart and athletic. Who cares? What does that have to do with me?”

He looked around. “You could be the same as him. From what I heard, he was just like us. You just have to eat some leaves from the dark lotus.”

“Yeah. Right,” I said. “If this plant is so special, how come you haven’t taken it? What about Cal? He’s already smart, and I bet this would make him even smarter.”

“Tried it. Didn’t work. Don’t know why, but it only works on certain people. It may or may not work for you, but it would get your mom off your back if it does. Besides, you know Cal. He’s always thinks he’s too smart to do stuff like this.”

“I don’t know. I can’t afford much...”

“Don’t worry about that. I know where I can get one. Won’t cost you anything. A buddy of mine owes me a favor, and he’s got a couple of them at this house. I think he grows them. Not sure. Either way, I’ll bring you one tomorrow.”

“Uh... Thanks. I appreciate it.”

That afternoon, when I got home, my mom was sitting in the living room reading her book. She briefly looked up and stared at me. She didn’t say anything about the argument we had before school, but she was waiting for answers. I knew she wanted to hear about my classes, see the grades from any of my tests, and see if I had practice that day and how I did. Like always. Then she’d ask about what I was planning to do that night. To know I would be studying.

It was the same routine. Every. Freakin’. Night.

Some days, it was just questions. For the last two weeks, though, it felt more like badgering. And I had had enough. Instead of answering, I ignored her, walked straight into

my room, and locked my door.

Her fists pounded on the bedroom door. “Jonathan! You open this door right now!” Bam! Bam! Bam! “Jonathan!”

I threw my books on my desk, lay on my bed, and I felt my stomach turn as the pounding continued.

The dark lotus plant. I wondered if it would work. It couldn’t be worse than what I was going through now.

Finally, silence. She was gone.

I stared at my books, and instead of getting up and working on homework, I pulled out a sketchbook and doodled for a while.

Several hours later, I smelled anarok stew wafting from under my door. My stomach growled. I carefully opened the door, expecting her to be on the other side—but she wasn’t. Instead, on a tray in front of my door was a cup of milk, the stew, a couple of pieces of bread, and a note that said “We’ll talk in the morning. — Mom.”

I took the tray into my room, ate, and slept, dreaming about how great my life would be if the dark lotus worked.



The following day, I got up early and left the house before my mom even woke up, wanting to see if Markus had this miracle plant. I was pretty sure it wouldn't work on me, but at this point, I would do anything to get her off my back.

This could be my only chance for a normal life.

The day dragged until my Elders History class, though Markus wasn't there.

Before class started, I leaned over to Cal. "Where's Markus? Thought he was coming today."

"He said he had something to take care of this afternoon," Cal said. "But he did say you're supposed to check your locker after class. He left something for you."

"Really?" I couldn't contain my smile.

He smirked back at me. "You going to try it?"

"Try what? Don't know what you're talking about," I said in a low voice.

"Yes, you do. Markus didn't tell me what it was, but it's pretty obvious. You think you're the first one in this school to try it? Didn't work for me. Hope it helps you, though."

I was shocked to learn that Cal had tried it. Thought he was too smart to do something like that.

“Mr. Cal and Mr. Jonathan!” the teacher called out as he looked up from the parchments on his desk. “Would you like to share what you’re discussing with the class? Or may I continue with the lecture?”

“Sorry,” I said.

We both shut up and looked ahead.

It took everything I had to stay in my seat until the class chimes echoed throughout the building. I jumped up, pushed everybody out of the way, and headed over to my locker.

In there was a small potted plant sitting in a box. The plant had dark purple petals surrounding a tiny brown skull and a note that sat in front of it.

Keep the plant in a dark place and eat ONLY one leaf per day. The leaves will grow back. Do not eat more than one leaf per day! — Markus

I had two more classes until the end of the day, but I couldn’t wait. I broke off one leaf and ate it.

Nothing happened.

My heart sank. Well, guess that was it, back to dealing with my mom.

I grabbed the papers for my next class and closed the locker.

On the way to my Dangerous Fauna class, my tongue tingled a bit, and my breathing became quicker. Was this because of the plant? Saliva increased. I tried to swallow it as quickly as possible. My stomach rumbled as a wave of nausea worked its way up my throat.

I had to get to the restroom as quickly as possible.

Some other students were looking at me, but only for a moment as I sped past them toward the restroom. But as fast as it had started, it ended. My breaths came easily, and I could swear the hallway seemed brighter. Everything I saw looked so much clearer. I noticed small details on some students' clothing—a rip, a tear, or a dirt smudge—across the hall. I heard what some girls were saying ten feet away.

As I walked down the hallway, my pace quickened, and no matter how fast I moved, I never seemed to tire or become out of breath.

It worked! The freakin' plant worked!

In my final two classes, I recalled all the information from my previous studies and quickly came up with unique solutions whenever I was asked a difficult problem. Some other students smirked at me, but the teachers looked amazed.

At the end of the day, I grabbed the box containing the dark lotus from my locker and headed home. Fortunately, I didn't have practice after school. I had to get home as fast as I could

In the hallway, I ran past Cal near his locker.

"Cal! Cal!" I yelled on my way out. "Tell Markus that it worked!"

I ran out of the building and all the way to my house. After rushing into my house, I headed toward my bedroom and put the dark lotus in my closet. Once I had dropped off my books, I headed out to the living area. "Mom? Are you home?"

"Jonathan? What is it?" She emerged from the kitchen. "Is something the matter?"

"No! Not at all. Look, I'm really sorry about the way I've been acting lately. I know you want the best for me. I'll try to do better. I promise. I've got some studying to do now, but I'll be out later for dinner. Okay?"

"Okay..." she said quietly, her eyes narrowing at me.

Back in my room, I took the dark lotus out of the box and gave it an open, secure spot on my closet shelf.

This was going to work!

I pulled out my parchments and was able to read

them all within a matter of minutes. And I retained all the information I had read. Excitement bubbled in me. In some chapters we would cover in the future, I quickly understood what was going on and how to solve the problems. We hadn't even covered this in class yet, and I knew the answers. This was amazing!

Over the next couple of months, classes had never been easier. My mom stopped bothering me after I showed her my high test scores. Several write-ups in the town journal discussed my impressive plays against other teams. Every so often, a local talent scout stopped by the house to discuss my plans with my mom and me. Even girls who would never talk to me stopped by and asked if I wanted to hang out with them.

I did feel bad that I didn't have much time to hang out with Cal or Markus, but they didn't seem to mind. When I did spend time with them, my mind always drifted off anyway. Their conversations were so boring! How could they live such uninteresting lives?

School and sports also became boring. No challenges.

I found that even though I was good, I wasn't good enough. I needed to be smarter. Faster. It was time for me to start taking more than just one leaf per day. Markus said not to, but how would he know? The plant didn't work for him.

When I pulled off a second leaf that day, the plant's skull shifted and smiled. Skin had grown over the left side and bottom jaw, and I could see the faint appearance of hair on top.

Had to be my imagination.

"Jonathan? Are you in there?" my mom called from the living room.

Hmm... Why did my upper arm itch so much? As I scratched the area just below my shoulder, a piece of skin came off as if a snake was shedding its outer layer. The pulled skin was thin and clear, and the area underneath showed the bright pink appearance of new skin.

What the...!

The exposed area didn't hurt or burn, but...what was happening? My legs, chest, and neck also started to itch. I tried to ignore the itches but couldn't help myself. Every time I scratched, a piece of my skin came off. And the itching would just...stop. No bleeding. Just the exposed tissue and muscle.

"Jonathan? Could you come out here for a second?" my mom said again.

"What?! I'm busy!" I yelled. I grabbed some gauze and tape from my sports bag and wrapped up the areas where skin had come off.

“I know, dear. Just for a moment.”

“Fine!” I put on a long-sleeved shirt and stared at the plant’s skull. I could have sworn it looked a bit like me.

In the living area, my mom was sitting on the couch with a wrapped package on her lap. She saw the wrappings on my hand. “Are you okay?” she asked in a worried tone. “Do we need to take you to a healer?”

“I’m fine!” I snapped.

She frowned.

I lowered my head and quickly said, “Sorry... Didn’t mean to snap. It was just an accident from practice. The coach wrapped it up and said it should be fine in a couple of days. I’m fine. Really.”

“Uh... Okay. Well, this is for you.” She handed me the wrapped package as I sat beside her. “I know you’ve worked hard over the last couple of months. And I’m very proud of you. I knew you were capable of great things. You just needed to believe in yourself. Hopefully, you see that now and can see that you can do anything you want.”

I opened the package. Inside was a quill pen set and several parchments. Additionally, there was an old book titled *All That Is Holy — A Sacramancer’s Guide*.

I clenched my jaw as anger rose in me again. “What is

this garbage?” I tossed the package back to her.

“I’m...sorry. I thought you would like this. It’s a handmade quill pen and special handcrafted parchment paper,” she said, her eyes watering. “The book will help you get started after you finish school. To join the local Sacramancer’s Guild.”

“What is wrong with you? I don’t want to go there. I’ve never wanted to go there!” I yelled. “I did what you asked, and you still want more?! You’re so stupid, and this gift is stupid!”

Her tears came out in sobs. “I...I thought you’d like this. I’m so sorry...”

I knew I should have apologized. I should have taken the package and thanked her. But I couldn’t. The local Sacramancer’s Guild? They were just old men who preyed on the locals. What could they teach me? They weren’t worth my time.

I got up, went back to my room, and closed the door on her.



The following week was a nightmare.

The itching wouldn't stop! And because of it, I couldn't concentrate on my schoolwork or sports; I was easily irritated and short-tempered. I avoided Cal and Markus, and on several occasions, I also avoided class altogether.

What was worse was that the areas where my skin had peeled had started to rot and smelled awful. Also, some areas had gotten too large that the gauze wouldn't cover them unless I added more bandages. It was easier to wear bulky shirts, even though the days were hot, rather than cover up all the sores.

The more the skin itched, the angrier I got.

My mom avoided me most of that week, too, always looking disappointed and sad. Barely talked to me.

I didn't care, though.

But everything fell apart at dinner one night.

Tentatively, she said, "Jonathan, did you have a chance to talk to the sacramancer guildmaster this week? He wanted to discuss an early application with you. He thinks he can get you into the school for free."

“No,” I said, trying to concentrate on the bowl of vegetables and noodles rather than the itches and my awful smell.

“Okay... Well, he contacted me several times this week, and I told him I would speak with you about it.”

“Would you just leave me alone about that guild?!” I snapped. “If you want it so bad, why don’t you go yourself?! I don’t care about it. I was just doing this stuff so you would get off my back!”

The room darkened as if a terrible storm was about to wash us all away. She lowered her head slightly—right before anger replaced her nervous look.

I had gone too far.

“Excuse me?!” she said in a low and, frankly, scary voice. “First of all, I’m your mother. You will not talk to me like that. Second, I was only looking out for your best interest. I care about you and am happy things are going well, but that does not mean you can treat me like you have been lately.”

“Everything I do is for you!” I screamed back. “My entire life has been about you! I was never good enough! And now that I am, I’m still being hassled about it!” I pushed my chair back, got up, and turned toward my bedroom.

But my mom grabbed my arm. Apparently, we weren't done talking.

She pulled on my hand, and the gauze on my hand slipped. "What is wro..." She stopped when her eyes fell on my hand's open, rotting wound.

I tried to pull away, but she held my sleeve firmly, which exposed more open wounds on my shoulder.

"Take off your shirt now!" she said.

I didn't want to, but I recognized that look and the sound of her voice. She wouldn't let it go. I took off my shirt.

My chest, back, and arms were covered with open sores that oozed.

"Does...does it hurt?" she quietly asked.

"No," I said. "But it does itch a lot."

"Put your shirt back on. We're going to the infirmary. Now."

I did as I was told, and she summoned a carriage to get us there. On the ride over, she kept saying not to worry about this. She'd take care of this; everything would be all right. She kept asking questions, too, about when it started and why I didn't tell her.

I ignored her. And honestly, I was surprised she didn't get mad when I didn't answer her.

In the healer's office, I sat on the exam table and removed my shirt. The healer just stared at me. He didn't examine me or ask any questions, but simply shook his head.

"Would you like to tell me where you got the plant?" he finally asked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," I said. "This was just a rash that I got from playing in the woods with my friends."

One eyebrow arched. "Really? Just a rash?"

"What plant?" my mom asked. "Are you talking about stims? He's a good kid. He's smart and doing great now that he's applied himself. He's not like those other kids who are into that." She waved her hand between us. "Aren't you going to do something? It's like he said. It's a rash."

The healer just kept staring at me. "Where's the dark lotus?"

I lowered my head. He knew.

"Are you going to tell her, or am I going to have to do it?"

For a long time, I stared down at my hands and watched

how they shook. I tried to keep them still, but that was impossible. I felt the stares of everyone in the room and knew I had to say something, but I was too embarrassed to face anyone at the moment. In a low voice, almost too low for them to hear, I said, "It's at the house. In my closet."

My mom held my hand. "What are you talking about?"

Years of stress broke me.

"Just leave me alone!" I snapped as I pulled my hand away. "How many times have I got to tell you?! Leave me alone! I'm tired of you and your questions. I just wanted to be like everyone else and hang out with my friends. You wouldn't let me do that. I had to be better than everybody. I had to be special. I didn't want to be special! I just wanted to be like everybody else!"

The healer stepped into the hallway and called out for a caretaker. "We've got another one," he told her once she was at his side. "Can you please escort his mom to her house, retrieve the dark lotus from her son's closet, and bring it back here?"

After my mom and the caretaker left, I asked, "Can you stop the itching?"

"No. I'm sorry," the healer said. "It's too far gone." He then left the room.

Too far gone? What did he mean?

With my shirt off, I watched as the open sores expanded and shifted toward one another. On some exposed muscles, the veins looked more like plant roots than veins. The more I saw, the more the sores shifted, and the roots increased in length and thickness.

Gripping the table, I was too scared to move. The moving roots scared and fascinated me at the same time.

Eventually, the healer, the caretaker, and my mom returned with the plant. The caretaker placed it on the table next to me.

I tried to concentrate on it, but I had a hard time focusing on what was happening. My breathing was slower. And the plant's skull... It now looked exactly like me.

"As I had thought," the healer said. "You're not the first one we've treated with this issue, and I'm sorry to say, you won't be the last. Last year, we treated a young man from Aberdare. The year before, three more cases came across my desk. You're the first case this year."

He lifted my arm, but I barely felt it move as he examined my sores. I tried to open my mouth to ask him a question, but my mouth didn't move, and the words didn't come out. It was as if my mind was trapped in my body, and I couldn't move.

Instead, the plant shifted its head several times and tried to open its mouth—as if to speak.

“What is that?!” my mom screamed. She recoiled back toward the far end of the room and pointed at the moving plant.

The healer gestured to the caretaker, who left the room and soon came back with a pouch and a cup of water.

“Please take this,” the caretaker told my mom. “Trust me. This will help.”

My caretaker opened the pouch, pulled out a pinch of black herb, and dropped it into the cup. She sat with my mom on the bench at the far end of the room and handed her the cup. My mom just stared at the plant before gulping down the contents of the cup.

“The plant beside your son is called a dark lotus,” the healer said. “We’re trying to remove it from the school systems, but we’ve been unable to do so. It’s simply too big a problem, and unfortunately, it’s worsening every year.

“The dark lotus is an enhanced food plant. Students, like your son, ingest it, and they gain abilities far above the average person. For some, they become stronger. Others become more charismatic or smarter. The abilities don’t last that long due to the transition phase.”

The caretaker got up, and the healer took her place next to my mom.

He held my mom’s hand and took a deep breath. “The

body you see is no longer your son. He probably consumed more of that plant than he should have, and that triggered the transition. Your son's consciousness is now within the body of the dark lotus."

She just stared ahead at the plant on the examination table.

"That plant is a living creature that has adapted a unique method for survival. It transfers its consciousness from the plant to your son's body and vice versa. The human body can't handle the transfer, so it rots. We need to dispose of the body."

As he got up and walked over to the table, the room became blurry, and I fell to the side. In front of me, I stared as his monstrous hands reached down and picked me up. I saw my body decay, rapidly decomposing, on the table as he carried me to my mom and placed me in her hands.

"Help me," were my last words.

She screamed and dropped my pot to the floor.

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