

---

# Sacramancy

## - Preservation

---

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](mailto: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 979-8-9865871-6-5

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

---

# Sacramancy - Preservation

---

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
They Don't Want to Go Back	124

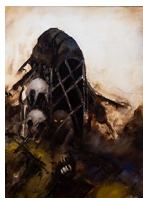
# Cards



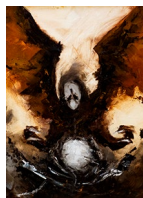
Attitude  
Page 38



Balance  
Page 40



Captured  
Page 42



Chaos  
Page 44



Cleansing  
Page 46



Contentment  
Page 48



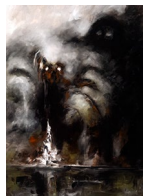
Darkness  
Page 50



Defiance  
Page 52



Delusion  
Page 54



Destiny  
Page 56



Elemental  
Page 58



Escape  
Page 60



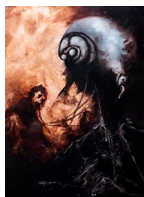
Forged  
Page 62



Forgotten  
Page 64



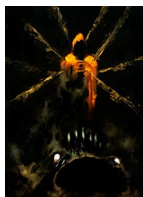
Guardian  
Page 66



Help  
Page 68



Hope  
Page 70



Imprisoned  
Page 72



Lacking  
Page 74



Listen  
Page 76

# Cards



Love  
Page 78



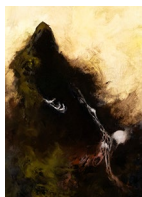
Missing  
Page 80



Nourishment  
Page 82



Obedience  
Page 84



Peace  
Page 86



Petition  
Page 88



Promise  
Page 90



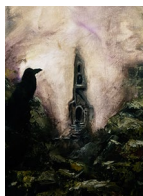
Release  
Page 92



Respect  
Page 94



Running  
Page 96



Secrets  
Page 98



Simple  
Page 100



Uprooted  
Page 102



Unwanted  
Page 104



Virus  
Page 106

## Preservation

---

Everyone has a core belief of who they are. This is based on how we perceive ourselves in the dark of the night when we are tired, our responses in various situations, our fears and desires, and our genuine thoughts when we are around others. Most of the time, our actions reflect these thoughts, but not always.

This deck is about understanding what those core values are. You may think that you know, but we all lie to ourselves at one time or another. This is most apparent when we are in stressful situations.

To truly safeguard your beliefs and who you are as a person, you have to understand yourself. This deck is all about preserving your inner self.

## 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



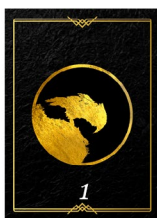
problem for you. Problem resolution can always be done faster if you understand the root cause.

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.

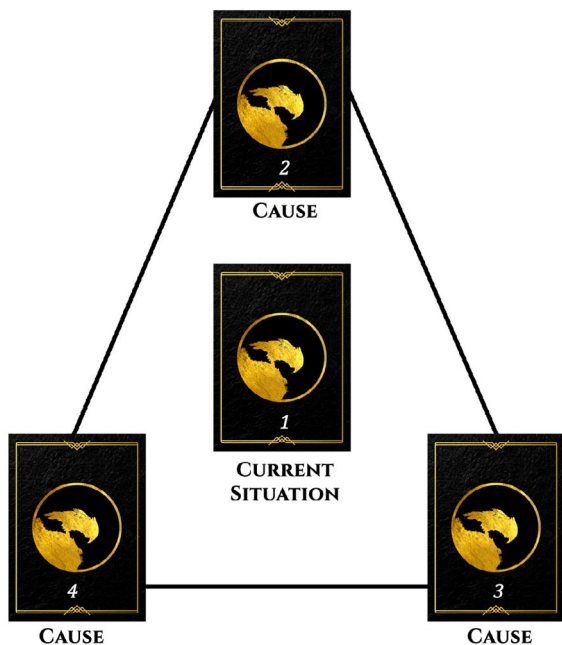
Shuffle the deck and draw three cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

**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:



**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

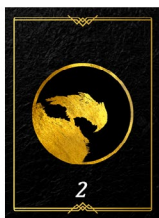
---

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.

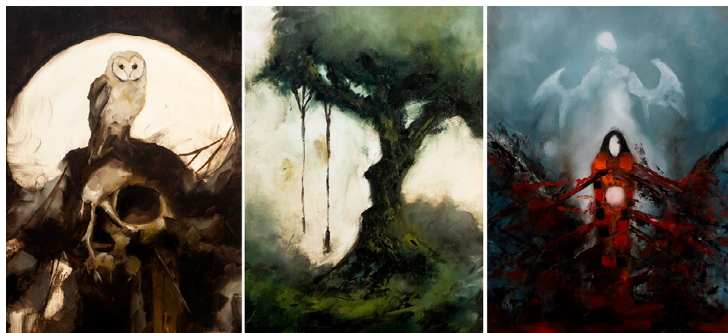
**Second Card (Second Act):** The second card focuses on how the characters deal with the stress created by the first card. This is typically the longest part and accounts for around fifty percent of the story. In this act, I'm focusing on different ways they are trying to get out of their situation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





I am first drawn to the owl sitting on the skull and the trapped woman on the far right. Are the skull and the woman somehow related? If so, why is there a tree with things hanging from it? Did something happen? Also, in the third image, what is rising above the trapped woman?

In this case, maybe my story runs along the lines of:

**The First Card (Left):** In the middle of the night, Jeremy, a chosen companion of the local wizard, found a resting spot among the many bones near the forest's edge. He checked within the skull but found no mice or small vermin that would fill his belly for the night. Typical. His master always sent him out searching on an empty stomach. Well, nothing to report. Just a bunch of skulls.

**The Second Card (Middle):** Jeremy took flight and noticed an odd green mist coming from within the forest. As he moved among the trees, he came across an old tree with two bottles hanging from it. The first bottle dissolved

as he approached, but the second bottle swung toward him and firmly stuck to his leg. Startled, he tried to fly away but couldn't escape. The feathers on his legs ripped, and a green mist emerged from the bottle, engulfing his leg. It was no use. He couldn't escape.

**The Third Card (Right):** Above Jeremy, a demon lord carrying a woman-shaped sarcophagus dropped to the ground from the tree canopy. Placing his arm on the sarcophagus, he murmured a short incantation and plucked a feather off Jeremy. He then shoved the feather into the glowing white sphere in the sarcophagus' center, pulled out a small silver egg, and placed it in Jeremy's free talon. The demon, the sarcophagus, and the bottle disappeared as Jeremy dropped to the ground. Was this why he was sent into the forest? Whatever. He had better get on with it and bring the silver egg home. Maybe his master would have his dinner waiting. As he flew away, the forest's mist followed him.

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.)



*“Chooooooooossssseeeeeee,” someone whispers. “Chooooooooossssseeeeeee.”*

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, there appears to be a common raven between the first two cards, and on the third card, a group of priests or creatures is preparing for something. The creatures can be anything from the *Monster Manual*, your own home-brewed monsters, or a monster in the Biomagy Deck.

What if we had a campaign where a woman intentionally unleashed the dark forces and set in motion situations she didn't want to happen? This campaign could be:

**The First Card (Left):** Serena is a low-level wizard tired of always doing menial tasks for her master, an archmage. Having had enough of being an apprentice and feeling destined for greatness, she thinks she can learn more powerful spells. During one study session, she summons a seeker raven to help her find someone who can give her the knowledge she needs to fulfill her destiny.

**The Second Card (Middle):** As the raven travels the land, it finds the answer to be a dimensional nexus. Between the dimensions, there are weak areas where items exist in multiple dimensions simultaneously. This is clear by observing shapes that are present but not visible. The raven discovers a doll within the shape of the trees, enters the doll, and ends up in another dimension.

**The Third Card (Right):** Within the new dimension, the raven agrees to guide a demon to the wizard's dimension. In return, the demon decides to help the novice mage. However, he needs his most powerful priests to help him. Smiling, the demon and the priests step through the gate and head off to Serena.

Now, you've got an adventure where players must figure out the demon's plan, find how to stop him, or learn how to prevent the apprentice mage from causing more problems if she sides with the demon.

## 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

---

Whether we recognize it or not, we all build a cage around ourselves. Most of the time, this mental cage is created by fear and prevents us from venturing forward to explore and enjoy the world. If we look closely, though, the bars are spaced wide apart, and if we take the risk, we can leave the cage. Escaping the cage is a matter of freeing our minds from fear, judgment, and failure. We can easily step through the bars if we truly believe in ourselves.





# 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

---

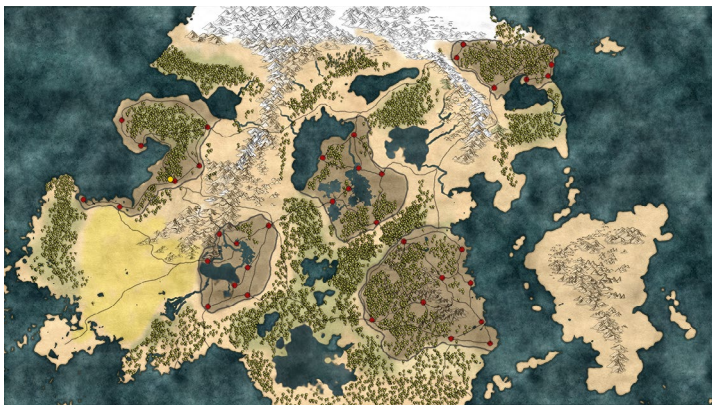
## How I Used the Decks

---

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

---





## They Don't Want to Go Back

---

*"They're looking for us,"* a soft voice said in the middle of the night.

*"They'll never find us,"* a rougher voice responded.

*"We must hide."*

*"We can't hide."*

*"We must make him leave."*

More voices responded, swirling in my head.

The voices. They were always there, and most of the time, I could continue with my day and ignore them. However, when I was tired or distracted, they wormed their way through my thoughts, and I found it hard to concentrate. I would sit to let them finish the conversation, to get rid of the voices, at least for a little while.

The worst part wasn't the voices, though. It was the feeling of something crawling under my skin. A million ants moving around inside of me and using my veins as pathways. Every so often, I swore they would bump into one another or get stuck in a traffic jam when they walked on a particular vein. At those moments, a muscle spasmed or a twitch I couldn't control.

At our usual Tuesday meeting, I tried to explain the voices and the ants to my counselor for what felt like the millionth time. As always, he sat in his chair and stared at me with no expression. Occasionally, he would hold up his memory ball and speak softly into it. But I rarely knew what he said. I just knew that whenever he spoke into it a lot, he would ask me brief questions like “Now, what do you think caused that?” or “What should you do if that happened?”

One session a month, every month, for the last three years.

Now, his confessional room always gave me a creepy vibe.

It wasn't like any of the counselors' confessionals I saw in the plays put on by the traveling troupes. You know, the types where they used some low-level ShadowMyths card to create illusions of the confessional as part of a new play they had written. Those plays were usually comedies where someone, almost always a male, would get into a mess with multiple females and couldn't escape it. I never understood why people thought those plays were so funny.

Those confessionals were almost always in a small room with a rug on the floor, light balls—floating wooden balls of light—and a central pedestal with a memory ball. Patients and counselors would sit opposite one another, with a pedestal between them. As the patient confessed what was on his mind, the memory ball recorded it.

No. Not like those. His confessional resembled a dark cell,

with walls made of old stone and a dirt floor. In this stark room were two chairs. That was all. Very little light. Just a couple of candles on the walls that gave the room a weird glow.

I didn't know if the room was an illusion put on for my benefit or not. The outside room, which contained the apothecary and waiting area, didn't have the same look.

Every time, our session started with "How are you doing this week?" I would then talk for almost an hour about everything bothering me or something unusual that had happened. Most of the time, he didn't even have the courtesy of mumbling, "Hmmm" or commenting, "That's interesting." After our session, he would prescribe some herbs to help me relax.

Sometimes, they worked, but sometimes, they didn't. However, I just kept using the herbs because I didn't know what else to do.

"You know, counselor. I really appreciate the herbs. The voices have been quiet for a while." I still heard them, but had figured out how to live with them. "I think I'm okay enough for a while. Can we not do this anymore? Can I just keep taking the herbs and come back later if there are any problems?"

He stopped whispering into the memory ball and stared at me. No emotion. Just stared into my eyes for a million

years. Or it was probably two or three seconds.

“Jonathan, I was going to ask you about that,” he said. “For the last couple of months, you haven’t been talking about monsters or shadows or voices in your head nearly as often as you did before. The nervous twitch and constant scan of the room when you first come in appear to be under control. I can still see it occasionally, but not nearly as prominently as our first sessions.”

“Really? You’ve seen the improvement?” I said. “I-I wasn’t sure. You spent a lot of time talking into the memory ball.”

“The notes? Yes. I must record everything to know which direction to take for the following sessions. For example, the last time we talked, you had just bought a new cottage. You were pretty nervous about whether it was a good decision or not. But you didn’t say whether the voices would follow you to the new cottage. That was a significant improvement from previous sessions.”

“Yeah!” My face lit up. “The new cottage! I’m pretty excited about it. I closed yesterday, and all my stuff was delivered last night. So...after this session, I’ll spend the day unpacking everything. No voices,” I lied.

If I told him the truth, I knew these sessions wouldn’t end. I just wanted to get the herbs and leave.

“That’s great to hear,” he said. “I think you are doing well. Settling into your new home is the first step to getting better.

You'll have a routine you can focus on. Just remember to continue taking your herbs, and if you need me, please don't hesitate to call. I'll be here."

We both got up from our chairs and shook hands. I didn't know if he wanted me to hug him goodbye or if that was inappropriate. I wasn't a hugger, although many of my friends, especially the guys, were. I found it uncomfortable.

"Thank you for the help," I said as I grabbed the note for the medication on my way out the door.

"Last day?" the counselor's wife, behind the apothecary counter, said as I approached with my new medication note.

"Yep. Last day." I tried to smile as I knew I wouldn't have to return here other than to get my herbs. Or I could find a healer closer to my home. I didn't want to run into the counselor and risk the off-chance that he would ask about the voices or notice that my twitch had returned—something to think about on the way home.

Outside the confessional, I hailed a carriage back to my new cottage. With the cost of the cottage, I didn't have any extra money to afford my own carriage, but that was okay. It would be good for me to exercise by walking several miles to work each day. When things settled down, I could look into getting my own carriage.

*"Don't go back,"* a voice said.



*“It’s not safe.”*

The ants crawled along my veins, so I tried stretching my neck in different directions to avoid the upcoming twitches. It never worked, but it felt good that I had at least tried something I could control.

I reached into my bag and pulled out the herbs that my counselor had given me. Rather than steeping them in tea, these were a special type where I would place a pinch on my tongue. Two pinches each time, twice a day. I did as I was told, and the voices reduced to a whisper.

“Here you go, sir,” the carriage driver said as I got out.

I paid him and then stared at my new cottage. It wasn’t a fancy place—just a small one with a large sycamore tree in the front yard. The previous owners had taken good care of the place, and more importantly, I could afford it on my salary. Was it my ideal cottage? Not at all. But it would do for now.

The day went quickly as I unpacked everything, and soon, it felt more like home than any other place I’d ever lived. The voices in my head were kept to a minimum, and most of the time, I was so busy that I didn’t even remember if they were there or not.

That night, I settled into bed with one of my favorite books, *The Things in My Head*. I couldn’t afford a lot of books and usually preferred romance stories, but this one was given

to me by my counselor. It was about a young woman who was going through the same things that were happening to me. The voices. The ants. The writer understood me; supposedly, it was a true story, but most people claimed it was a fantasy. I had lost count of the number of times I had read it. My only problem was that I always fell asleep before the end.

The night grew quiet, and my eyelids drooped. When I placed the book on my nightstand and reached over to put the covering over the light ball for the night, a soft tinkling sounded just outside my curtained window.

What was that?

Tinkle.

Just a noise. New home. New street. Probably coming from some other cottage down the street. A wind chime or something. Always hated those things. Kept everyone awake at night.

Tinkle.

Tinkle!

*"Don't go to the window!"* one voice said, sounding louder than ever.

*"They're here!"*

*"They're here!"* multiple voices cried out.

More and more voices joined the first.

*“Run!”*

*“Leave now!”*

*“Yes! Must leave!”*

My body shook and twitched as the overwhelming voices rang out. The loud voices evoked a tinge of fear. I got up from the bed and slowly walked toward the window.

*“Don’t go to the window!”*

*“Run away!”*

My body slowed as if my legs were having difficulty responding to my brain. The clinking quieted; I could barely hear it now. With great effort, I pulled the curtains aside.

A couple of clear green bottles hung from the tree in front of my home, lightly illuminated by my bedroom light. I didn’t remember them being there when I came home earlier today. Did the local kids do this? Was this some prank for those who moved into the neighborhood?

The voices got quieter as I made my way back to the bed. I hadn’t had a reaction like that in a long time. I reached for my medication pouch in my nightstand drawer and took two more pinches of the special herbs.

I crawled under the covers, turned off the light, and tried to forget the voices.



---

---

That next morning, I went to the window to check on the bottles. No voices spoke in my head, and no bottles swung in the tree. The sun was shining bright, and the street looked quiet and peaceful.

Okay. It was just my imagination. Probably started with the voices last night or with the book I was reading. Strange that it had never happened before, though. Whatever. It was a new day, and I had unpacking to do. Only a couple more days off from the job to get the rest done.

I took my herbs in the morning, and nothing odd happened during the day. The voices in my head still spoke, but they were manageable, and most of the time, they reminded me to leave or to run away. I wondered if this was my subconscious warning me. I'd read stories about people not listening to the voices in their heads. I just always thought the voices were just their inner thoughts—not other voices like mine.

That night, as I prepared for another night of reading, I pulled the bedroom curtain aside to see if any bottles were in the tree. No bottles. Good. I considered sleeping with the curtains open, but rejected that idea. You never knew who would look in the window in the middle of the night and watch me sleep. That was just too creepy.



As the hour was getting late, the light ball became too dim for me to continue reading. Plus, I was tired. I put the book down and went to place the covering over the light ball. I still had some extra ones somewhere in one of the moving bags, but not a lot. Tomorrow, I would swap it out and bring the dimmest light balls to the sacramancer guild so that they can be reset with a stronger light.

There are times when I wish I weren't so poor. It would be easier if I had just the ShadowMyths card and could reenergize them myself.

Tinkle.

The noise was back!

Tinkle. Tinkle.

*"We told you! It's time to go! Leave!"*

*"Yes! Leave! They've found us!"*

*"They're here!"*

This time, I got up, opened the curtain with ease, and found dozens of bottles in the tree. Unlike last night, the tinkling sound didn't go away, only grew stronger. As I looked closely at the tree, a dark pair of eyes stared back at me.

What the...?!

I quickly closed the curtains and fell back from the window.

The feeling of crawling ants returned tenfold. On the ground, I twitched as the voices in my head grew even louder. So much noise echoed that I couldn't tell what they were saying. Just a lot of screaming and... brief cries of "*Leave!*" or "*Run!*"

The voices and twitching had *never* been this bad.

As I slowly gained control over my body, I crawled over to my nightstand, took out my herb pouch, and placed four, not the normal two, pinches of herbs on my tongue.

Shivering, I lay on my bed, trying to figure out what to do. There were so many bottles! The tree had *eyes!* And the eyes looked back at me!

The voices roared into a chorus of people in pain, and the twitching... The twitching... The twitching took complete control of my body.

What was in that tree?

After the herbs suppressed the voices and I regained control of my body, I got up and approached the window again. I had to know what was going on. I wasn't going to be able to sleep that night because the fear of the unknown was always worse than the fear of the known. Sweat soaked my pajamas, and it felt like I had old wads of cloth in my mouth. I could feel the thickness of my tongue.

Gently pulling the curtain apart, I peeked through the

separation.

The eyes were gone, and among the many bottles, I saw little men, about an inch or two in height, crawl up and down the strings that suspended the bottles. They wore robes or breeches, and some held small swords and pikes. The ones who carried no weapons had long claws. They scrambled down the trunk, gathering at the base. It was as if an army of ants were on the march. Many of these little men at the tree's base pointed toward the house, specifically, toward the window where I was standing.

They turned and walked toward my window.

No! No! No! No!

I didn't know if they saw me, but I wasn't going to take a chance. I made sure the window was locked and headed back toward my bed.

What were those things? Some had small weapons! And they were coming to get me. Me! Why me?! What were they?

*"See!? We told you!"* a soft voice said.

The voices have returned... The medicine didn't work...

*"You didn't want to run. You didn't believe us. Now, it's too late. They're coming for us."*

*"It's too late."*

In bed, I pulled the blankets up to my nose so that the only parts of me exposed were my eyes and the top of my head. I clutched the blankets so hard that my fingers stiffened. I couldn't slide any farther under the sheets.

I waited...

And waited some more...

Nothing.

Those things must have left. Maybe they didn't really see me. Perhaps I was going to be okay.

*"No... They will come."*

Skritch.

What was that?

Skritch. Skritch.

The scratching came from the base of my windowsill. The sounds crept up the sides of the window, inching their way toward the top—more and more scratching.

Tap. Tap.

The tapping was from different parts of the window. Left. Down. Right.

Tap.

The voices stayed silent. As if they knew the creatures outside the window would break through and come for us. I had no idea what would happen. The voices in my head seemed to know, but they weren't sharing this information. Fear froze me in place.

All I could do was hold my breath and wait.

Nothing.

For a long time, everything stayed quiet. The tapping and scratching had disappeared. Still no voices.

Only silence.

I wasn't going to sleep tonight.

I reached into the drawer on the nightstand to take some more herbs, but the pouch was gone, nowhere to be found. I was sure I had returned it to the drawer earlier. I needed more of that medication, not to hear the voices and to sleep. Where was it?

I got out of bed and searched under it.

Nothing.

I searched the rest of the room.

Nothing.

As I searched the bed and nightstand once more, the voices

in my head returned.

*“We’re leaving!”*

*“No! You can’t have control!”*

*“It’s too late!”*

*“We have to leave!”*

My body convulsed, and I fell onto the bed. The right side of my body tried to get up, but the other side clung to the sheets. As if the voices had full control, and the right side was losing. Lying on the bed, my legs twitched, and once they were still, my arms contorted. Sometimes, one of my eyes opened, and sometimes, it closed. My neck moved my head in various directions. I couldn’t stop it. Any of it.

I didn’t know how long that lasted, but in the end, whoever was trying to make my body leave the room failed. Exhausted, I lay still on the bed and cried. It had never been this bad before.

Darkness took over as I fell asleep.





---

---

The next morning, I threw open the curtains once more. The bottles in the tree were gone. I checked my nightstand. My herb pouch was gone. After a thorough search of the room, I was convinced it was nowhere to be found.

My pajamas were stiff from dried sweat, and I needed a shower to clear my head. Fortunately, no voices accompanied me as I got ready for the day. My last day before I had to return to work. I wasn't sure if I was going to be in any shape for it, but there would be questions if I took any more time off.

After my shower and breakfast, I felt better. Last night's memories became distant thoughts, and I made plans for the day. The first thing was to contact my counselor, and after that, I had to get rid of that tree.

At my desk, I pulled out a pouch containing a very special card from the package where I kept the notes from my previous counseling sessions. My therapist said it was a biomagy card to contact him at any time. On the card was a strange, dark green-robed figure holding a scale in its left hand. According to rumors, these cards allowed people to communicate with other elementals, but that was not the case. Just fanciful imagination that kids and some older and not-so-wiser people thought.

I never knew how he got this card, but he did warn me not to show it to anyone. I recall that he gave it to me during one of our early sessions, as I had mentioned that I was seeing monsters in my dreams. Maybe it was a way of calming me down. I didn't know.

I had only used it a couple of times in the past, and it really did allow me to contact him. I didn't know how, but it worked.

So, I placed the card on my dining room table, pressed the center of it with my right forefinger, and said, "Doc? Can you hear me? It's Jonathan."

The card floated a couple of inches from the table and glowed. From its center, a green mist formed around the hooded figure on the card.

"You gotta help me!" I said, my words running together. "These small creatures crawled out of bottles in the tree outside of my house. Last night, they tried to get in. The convulsions are back, and the voices are louder than ever! I-I need more herbs! Those things took it! You told me that—"

"I'm so sorry," the green hooded figure said. "I'm unavailable for the next couple of days. Please leave me a message, and I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

I just stared at the card.

He had said I could contact him at any time, but he lied! I knew he was just taking my money! He didn't care about me! Never cared.

Next... Next, I need a lumberjack. I've got to get rid of that tree!

That afternoon, I headed out and grabbed a carriage toward the center of town. Of the local wood shops, there was only one I could afford. He couldn't remove it until tomorrow, but it would be gone first thing in the morning.

That was fine. I could do one more night.

My funds were pretty low, so it wasn't like I could stay the night at a local inn. My friends had all long abandoned me, so that was out of the question.

One more night. I could do one more night. Keep the window locked. Maybe have some weapon on me. Like a knife. No. That wouldn't work. I'd probably end up just hurting myself more.

When I got home, I carefully checked over the tree. No bottles. The grass around the tree hadn't been disturbed. I checked the outside of the window—no scratches on the sill or the glass. Yet there was a small hole near the bottom right corner of the window. Did one of them get in last night and take my medicine? I jammed some small spare pieces of wood from my workshop into the hole to make sure nothing could get in that way.

That night, I checked all the doors and windows. Nothing would be able to get in. Once everything was secured, I crawled into bed, leaving the light on.

There was no way I could sleep tonight. Not without my medicine. I would stay awake all night, and after the lumberjack came tomorrow, I could take a nap in the afternoon. Work tomorrow was out of the question. I'd deal with the questions later. This had to be taken care of.

Tinkle. Tinkle.

The bottles were back. But I stayed in bed. No way I was getting out to look.

Tinkle. Tinkle.

Then...silence. Nothing.

Skritch.

They were at the window. The voices in my head spoke at once.

*"They're coming!"*

*"They're coming!"*

*"We gotta run!"*

Skritch. Skritch.

The little robed men were crawling up the sides of the

windowsill. They had to be.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

My heart raced faster and faster. Would tonight end like last night? Would it be all over after I cut the tree down? It had to be...right?

*"No! No!"* the voices said, louder this time.

*"Time to run!"*

*"Time to go!"*

The book I was reading—*The Things in My Head*! This was what had happened in the book! Wait! What happened to her at the end? I didn't remember. I always fell asleep!

With a loud crack in the night, the window broke, and shards of glass fell onto the floor beneath the curtains.

*"No time!"*

*"No time!"*

...then the voices silenced.

The curtains flowed and ebbed like a calm ocean. At the base of the curtains, the little robed men with their tiny weapons gathered. They looked at each other and pointed at me. Each time, they stepped out from the shadow under the curtain, though, they disappeared into a puff of smoke.

Over and over again. Gone.

Wait! They couldn't get to me! They didn't like the light!

More and more creatures fell out of the broken window and into the light. Yet they all perished in a puff of smoke. I considered getting up from the bed and opening the curtains to destroy them all, but...I was afraid. It was better to just lie here in my blankets and never turn the light out. Although, the light ball by my table became dimmer and I didn't know how long it would last before going pitch black.

*"Light!"*

*"Bad light!"*

*"No like light!"*

The voices... They weren't in my head anymore. Instead, they came from the little creatures disappearing in puffs of smoke.

What was going on?

The room was no longer secure. Did they also come in from the other windows in the house? Rooms that were now dark? Would I be trapped here? I had to take the chance and turn on all the lights in the rest of the cottage. I wasn't going down without a fight!

I got out of bed and headed toward the door. I grabbed

the door latch, but it wouldn't budge. Locked... The door was locked! In desperation, I pulled on it as hard as I could, but nothing happened. It was firmly closed. I couldn't leave the room...

Below the curtains, more small creatures fell and burst into smoke when they hit the light.

Carefully staying in the light, I went over to my dresser and uncovered another light ball. I had to flood the room with as much light as I could. But when I approached the final covered light ball in the corner, a pair of eyes appeared in the shadows. They looked like the same eyes I had seen in the tree the night before.

From the shadow, a masked man stepped out into the light. Half of his hood and the left side of his clothing were covered in dark, worn brown leather. The right side, which was exposed to the light, was covered in blue leather that was smoking, the vapors rising an inch at a time. Below the hood, a white mask covered the face, except for those dark black eyes that stared at me.

In his hand, he held up a bright white sword. It didn't look like any I had ever seen. The glistening white blade shimmered in the light, and the room felt colder around it. As if it were made of a solid piece of snow that could easily cut me in half.

All I saw was the sword and the stare from behind the



mask.

I fell back toward the bed—but missed it. On the floor, my body twitched more and more. The feeling of ants crawling along my veins returned, but the voices were still gone. The creatures now waited at the base of the curtain, just in the shadows. Some worked their way over toward the masked man with the sword, but most stayed under the curtain.

As the masked man stepped further into the light, more smoke slowly dissipated off his clothing. But he ignored it as he got closer. Weird lines shifted on his mask, appearing to form symbols and words I couldn't read or understand.

All I saw was the sword and the stare as he approached.

Pointing the sword toward me, he lifted the mask from his face with a grin.

It was... *my counselor*?!

"You know. You really did a good job at hiding from us, Jonathan," he said. "It took us quite a while to find you. Once we did, we weren't even sure if it was you or not. However, the biomagy card did you in. If you weren't an elemental or a sacramancer—and it was obvious you weren't either of those—you couldn't have used the card to contact me. You did such a good job."

I just stared at him. Elemental? Sacramancer? Good job? What was he talking about?

Confused, I tried to get up, but my body wouldn't respond. It just sat there on the floor. Staring at the sword pointed toward me and the face of my therapist.

"It's time to return to the army," he continued.

What army?

"No!" the voices screamed, louder than ever.

"No!"

*"We like it here!"*

*"Leave us!"*

*"We won't tell anyone!"*

"Don't want to go back?" my counselor said. How did he hear the voices in my head?

"Sorry. That's not an option."

With a wave of his hand, the lights in the room went out at once. I only saw his glowing mask return to his face and his bright white sword. He brought the sword over his head and swung down in a smooth arc that cut into my chest.

Pain flashed, and I rolled onto my side. Thousands of tiny creatures the size of ants poured out of me. As they hit the darkness, they grew larger and larger until they were the same size as the little men that crawled through my

window. Some tried to run, but they were dragged back. With their heads down, they all joined their comrades by the curtain.

“Yes. I think we are about ready,” my counselor said as the creatures continued to pour out of me.

## Learn more about ShadowMyths

---



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

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

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