
Sacramancy

- Turmoil

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Cover Design and Illustrations by Doug Hoppes

Second Edition, First Printing 2025

ISBN 979-8-9865871-7-2

www.ShadowMyths.com

Sacramancy - Turmoil

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
Undesirable Effects	124

Cards



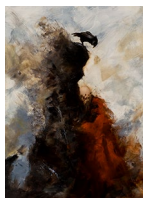
Bound
Page 38



Bravery
Page 40



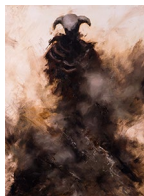
Captive
Page 42



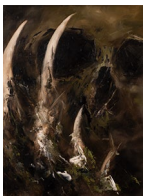
Closeness
Page 44



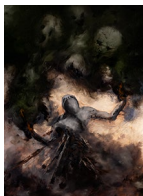
Crossover
Page 46



Decay
Page 48



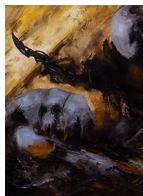
Decisions
Page 50



Demons
Page 52



Desire
Page 54



Discovery
Page 56



Distortion
Page 58



Doubt
Page 60



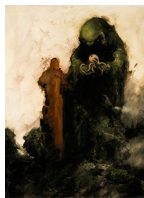
Emergence
Page 62



Exile
Page 64



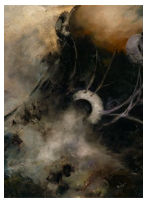
Fear
Page 66



Gift
Page 68



Hidden
Page 70



Home
Page 72



Lingering
Page 74



Madness
Page 76

Cards



Maelstrom
Page 78



Moment
Page 80



Nightmares
Page 82



Obsessed
Page 84



Past
Page 86



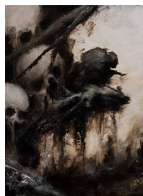
Pedestal
Page 88



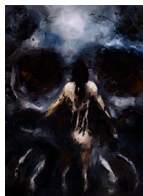
Racing
Page 90



Religion
Page 92



Sadness
Page 94



Scrutiny
Page 96



Shield
Page 98



Siblings
Page 100



Submission
Page 102



Tethered
Page 104



Waiting
Page 106

Turmoil

There are many times when we cannot control what happens to us. We lose jobs, homes, and families all the time. Life doesn't go as well as we would like. Yes, there are good times and bad times. It's how we deal with the situation that's most important.

This deck explores the concept of how our mental state affects what happens in our lives. We may think that we are in control of our emotions, but a single act may prove us wrong.

If you cannot control the situation that is happening, you CAN control how you react.

Evolution of Sacramancy

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

I wanted to do something different.

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

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

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

I gathered all the unused prints and rearranged them at

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

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

That was the moment the Sacramancy decks were created.

Beyond A Writing Tool

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

interested in writing.

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

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

Being True to Yourself

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

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

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

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

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

How to Use the Decks

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

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

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

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

You can also get there!

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

Now, let's get started!

Shadow Work Oracle Reading

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

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

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

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

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

Do I believe in this? Yes and no.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Here's a real-world example:

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

Well, I was game.

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

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

And guess what? Nothing bad happened.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Preparation:

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

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

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

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

Here are some suggested layouts to try.

Daily Reflection Layout:



WHAT ASPECT OF YOUR LIFE SHOULD YOU LOOK AT?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Dilemma Resolution Layout:



CAUSE



**CURRENT
SITUATION**



RESOLUTION

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

Remember: There is no white knight in shining armor

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

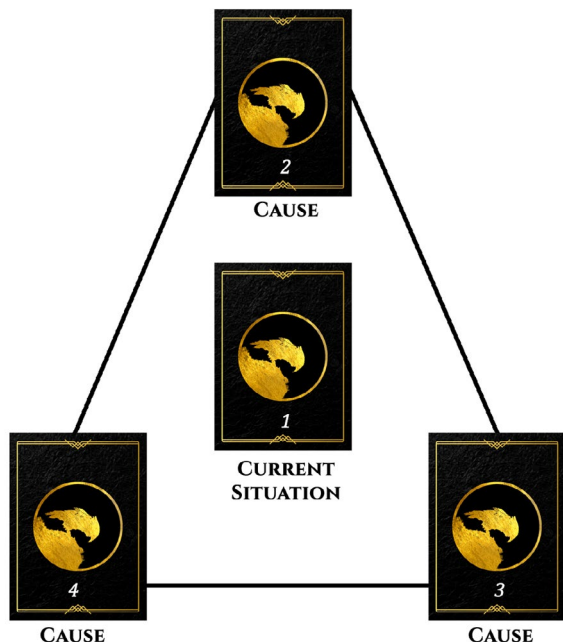
Shuffle the deck and draw three cards from the top. The cards are laid out in the order above.

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

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

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

Pyramidal Energy Matrix:



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

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

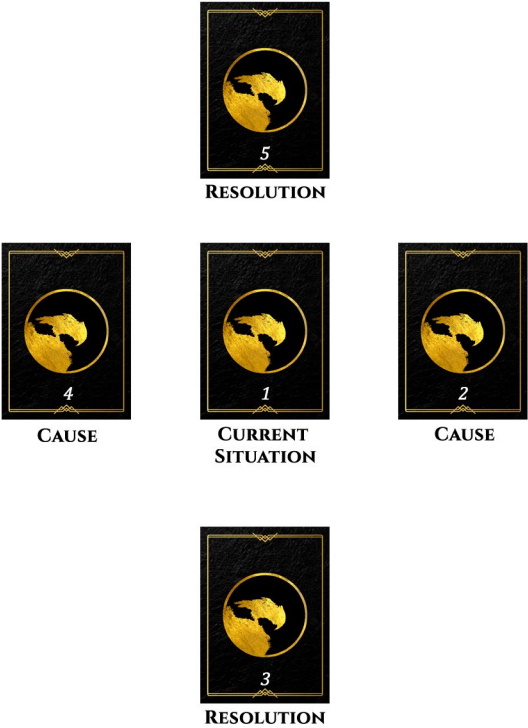
cards are laid out in the order above.

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

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

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

Cross Settlement:



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

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

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

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

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

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

Writing Prompts

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

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



**PRINCIPAL
CHARACTER**



**CHANGES FATE
OF CHARACTER**



RESOLUTION

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

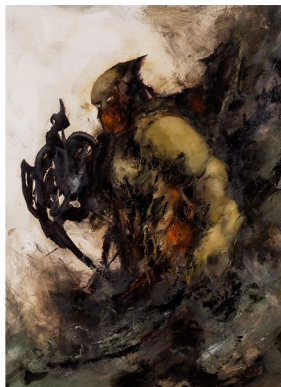
First Card (First Act): This card shows the story's inciting incident. This is where the story is set up and the main characters are introduced. In addition, for my short stories, I like to get to the point where something happens to my characters that causes them some stress.

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

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

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

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



My mind immediately drifts to the bridge on the left and the warrior in the center. How do the people on the bridge relate to the warrior? Is he chasing them? Have they taken something from him? Perhaps they were friends in the past, but he left them to pursue an adventure.

In my mind, I see people walking over a bridge, leaving, and the warrior is glad to see them go. He notices the skeletons and wonders if he will be trapped by the bridge and become part of it one day.

The First Card (Left): Johnny and his family were looking forward to moving to the next world. A better world. One where they were free to pursue their goals in peace. No more struggles or just scratching by. A life to be enjoyed rather than constantly running from danger. He kept looking behind them, though, because he knew his father-in-law was trying to prevent them from leaving.

The Second Card (Middle): Johnny's father-in-law was

a powerful warrior who believed their current life would strengthen the family. He felt his son-in-law was weak and had no business being married to his daughter. But as he stepped forward to cross the bridge, he sank into the stone. He couldn't move. He tried to call his daughter for help, but she didn't hear him as his family crossed the gateway into another world.

The Third Card (Right): As Johnny's father-in-law extracted himself from the bridge, he looked around and realized that the bridge wouldn't let him pursue his family. The bridge was built from the skeletons of those who had tried to cross but failed, and he realized the bridge might not want him to leave. Wondering why it let his weakling son-in-law and family leave, he decided this was the bridge's way of telling him that only the strong could stay. Or so he believed.

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.)



“Cho000000ssssseeeee,” someone whispers. “Cho0000ssssseeeee.”

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

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

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

Let's look at an example:



For this campaign, I notice a couple, a mage, and a creature watching over souls. The creatures can be anything from the Monster Manual, your own home-brewed monsters, or a monster in the ShadowMyths Biomagy Deck.

This campaign could be:

The First Card (Left): A wizard tells his daughter she should trust him as he is about to perform a ritual to return his wife from the clutches of a demon. He understands the spell is dangerous, but it has to be done now, or it will

never work.

The Second Card (Middle): A portal forms, and he can see where his wife is being held. Hopeful, he tries to reach and grab her, but at that moment, guards from the other side enter his plane of existence. They overwhelm him and drag him to the same place his wife is being held.

The Third Card (Right): A large demon, not the one who stole his wife, sits in the other realm, waiting. He collects mages from various realms to slowly consume their magical potential.

Now, you've got an adventure where the players must figure out how to get to this other dimension and rescue the daughter's parents.

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



Bound

Everybody has something that holds them back. It may be something that has happened to us or a failure that brought us to our knees. Many times, it is just fear. We are bound to whatever is preventing us from growing and improving. If you ask your friends, most will know exactly what it is. They've seen it in you over and over again. When you feel stuck, reach out to your true friends, for they may have a solution.



Bravery

A brave person does not recklessly go out and do dangerous things. A brave person realizes that, even though they are terrified, they still must do what needs to be done. They understand the risk and possible pain that is associated with the action. However, they accept the risk to achieve that goal. Life is a series of risks, and through acceptance of those risks, we become braver than we ever thought we could be.



Captive

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



Closeness

Remember those friends that we had in the past? When we thought friendships would last forever? Over time, though, everybody went their separate ways, and contact was few and far between. Does it have to be that way? Can you maintain old friendships and new ones at the same time? Can the past and the present coincide? The past can be regained, but only if we reach out and bring it to the present, and there is no time like now.



Crossover

Death awaits in the darkness, and we fear him. However, we don't honestly know anything about the next journey we'll make. All we know is conjecture from people like us; this unknown makes us afraid. Yet, is it what we should fear, or should we see past what we have been told and judge what will happen to ourselves? Rather than worrying about the future, focus on the now and the loved ones around you. Why worry about something you cannot control?



Decay

We are not immune to the chaos that surrounds us. We need it. Every creature on this planet is linked to one another, and the decay of one's flesh becomes the sustenance for another. The important thing to remember is that we are not the same as our bodies. The mind lives in the memories of our friends and families...in our shared history. Sometimes, our minds become stronger as the body decays, and that strength can overcome the trials our bodies can't.



Decisions

We have a choice—to proceed with our plans or stay with the current situation. When we remain in our comfort zone, we feel the safety of the present, but this will most likely cause problems in the future because there is no growth. When we proceed, there is a good chance we will fail, and we are afraid of that. Life isn't easy. It's a balance between where we are comfortable and where we are scared. Small controlled risks can help us grow and put our fears at ease.



Demons

A powerful force exists within us, controlling us and our actions. Our experiences and the armor we build for protection shape this force, and if we are lucky, we can purge our inner demons and cleanse our souls. The hard part is determining what parts of our souls we can cleanse and what parts are necessary to exist. Rather than cleansing, sometimes, it may be necessary to control the inner demon so that it can be unleashed at the appropriate time.



Desire

There will always be things you want but cannot have in your life. The new job. That special person who doesn't know that you exist. That talent that seems to elude you no matter what you do. The importance of that desire controls your life and, in the end, defines how happy you are and what you do with your life. It can make you go farther than you have ever dared... or... it can hold you back so that you never grow.



Discovery

Seeking knowledge is not for the faint of heart. Some paths must be taken that can only be done with strength of mind and heart. At best, we learn something that enhances our lives. At worst, we challenge our assumptions. This is where the balance is the most difficult. How do we know that the path is necessary? Are there times when we've gone too far? In a perfect world, we always know the answer. In reality, nothing is ever straightforward.



Distortion

We're not very good at seeing our true selves because the picture in our minds is never the same as how others perceive us. For many people, how they view themselves is much worse than how others see them. This is because of their own insecurities and the lies their mind tells them. When we learn to see ourselves by our actions rather than what we say or think, we will see our true selves.



Doubt

What are we even doing here? They don't want us. Look at the way we look. All we will do is scare them until they run away or—worse—start laughing at us. We have nothing to offer. And we all have doubts and inner fears about the worst that can happen. However, if we give in, will we find that many of the best parts of life have passed us by? Sometimes, it is better to be alone until we find those who want us rather than be with those who don't.



Emergence

In the beginning, we are weak. However, everybody has an internal strength that can help them achieve their goals and improve their lives. This internal belief can help them overcome the hard times and continue moving forward. It isn't easy. It's prone to failure. However, the more we endure and find solutions to life's difficulties, the stronger we become. Nurturing that internal strength brings peace of mind because we can now fully believe in ourselves.



Exile

We like to think we don't need anyone and are an island unto ourselves. But that is not true for most people. We feel lost when we are removed from what we know as our life, and new patterns must replace our old patterns if we are to survive. The tough part is to determine what we need to survive versus what we need to make a good and enjoyable life. Remember that a survived life is not the same as an enjoyable life.



Fear

Many people define their fears by what others have told them rather than what they have experienced. Our natural reaction to fear is to eliminate the cause and to avoid that situation. However, if we think about the real outcome, we'll find that most of the time, what we believe will happen will not. How many times have we let fear make our decisions?



Gift

When we receive a gift from someone, it's a personal communication between the two. It doesn't matter what the gift is, it's personal. Most of the time, the gift represents how much that person understands us and values our relationship. Many may judge us or the person giving the gift, but it doesn't matter. They are not part of that relationship.



Hidden

We all have thoughts that control us and define us. Things that were done to us or things that we've done to others. Some of it, we've regretted. Some of it, we haven't because others truly deserved it. Yet that was all in the past. Would we do the same after we've grown older and supposedly wiser? Would we be comfortable accepting our actions, or would we make excuses and say that those actions were justifiable... even if they weren't?



Home

No matter how different our homes are—how lavish or simple they are—they are home. It's where we feel comfortable and one of the few places to truly be ourselves. It's a living entity that constantly stores our memories—the good and the bad, the wins and the failures—a sanctuary. Comparison is the thief of joy when seeing other homes that are more lavish. Remember that a home is more than just a place to impress others. It's a place for you to be you.



Lingering

Wherever we look, shadows are ever-present. They may be actions we have taken or people we have hurt. Over time, we have forgotten loved ones. We see the echoes of these actions throughout our day—constant reminders of who we are and what we have become. The shapes and meanings will change as long as we accept responsibility and learn to live with those past decisions. The memories of the past can be the foundation for a stronger future.



Madness

Madness is always considered a bad thing. But what if it isn't? What if a person sees a different reality than us? Does it matter? If they are not harming themselves or others, why must that person conform to how everybody else thinks and sees the world? The unique way we see the world can be a beacon for those who are lost. Embrace those thoughts for they may bring peace and joy to others who think the same way.



Maelstrom

Entropy—the natural tendency for things to move toward chaos or disorder. If we don't pay attention, it quickly overtakes everything. Chaos swirls and turns, trying to dislodge us from our path. Rather than controlling the chaos, we should make use of it. Chaos brings unexpected results and changes that we usually wouldn't encounter. Small, chaotic changes every so often make life more interesting, and they can lead us in directions we never thought of.



Moment

That moment lasts a fraction of a second. We don't remember the thousands of hours before or after. We just remember that fraction in time. That moment when we first saw our significant other. That moment when we first laid eyes on our newborn. That moment when we felt the game slip away from us. We just remember that fraction of a second.



Nightmares

For many of us, our dreams are reminders of our deeper desires. They present pieces of our lives that we wish were different—fractions of the life we wish to have. For some, though, that fraction is easily distorted, and we're terrified of what we see. What is currently happening in our lives affects those desires. What we do or don't do with this information can transform nightmares into dreams or vice-versa.



Obsessed

We have the goals we focus on and know the path and how to get there. We're often so focused on the road ahead that we never see the world around us. We overlook the dangers until it's too late. We don't notice the beauty surrounding us. All we know is the goal ahead of us. By focusing partly on our surroundings, we may find that the goal is not that important or that something may help us reach our goal.



Past

We are all products of our past—the goals we've achieved, the mistakes we've made, the paths we've taken, and those we were too afraid to walk down. The past is always there, and the more we dwell on it, the more power it has over us. It is the shadow that controls us. Learn to step out of that shadow, for it guides us in directions we never thought we would take. The safe path is never as powerful as the paths riddled with risks.



Pedestal

There are parts of our lives that we hold dear. Moments that are important to us or people who we cherish. Forever in our minds, we have that moment on a pedestal, and everything is perfect. Whether or not the memory is true doesn't matter. All that matters is that it is important and we feel more alive than anything. Remember the feeling of that moment rather than the actual specifics. That cherished feeling will never leave.



Racing

We're so busy, rushing around and trying to do everything, that we have no time to live our lives. According to so-called experts, there are twenty things to do before breakfast, fifteen things to do before we retire, ten things to do every day, etc. We're so busy being busy that we never accomplish anything. One day, we'll look back and realize we don't remember having fun. It's okay to be busy as long as it is towards something that makes life enjoyable.



Religion

We all have our own beliefs. Some are appreciated by others, and some are ridiculed and called heresy. All religions are based on faith and the belief in what cannot be seen or measured—something more powerful than us. Something that can aid us when we are hurting. Something tangible, according to us, that we can hold onto when times get tough. Remember that our beliefs are just as valid as we aren't hurting ourselves or others.



Sadness

When we feel down, we all have a place we go to—some place we feel comfortable and safe. From our point of view, it's comforting and familiar. We can control what happens here. For others, it may be foreboding. They will judge it based on their perceptions and, most of the time, will not understand it. That place is not theirs—it's ours. It's free of judgment and ridicule. It's our safe place and the only place to be ourselves.



Scrutiny

We are not alone in the shadows. The darkness comforts us, wrapping us in a soft embrace, and it hides us from the world, our problems, and those who torment us. Learn to look around for others are hiding there with the same issues we are going through. They understand and won't judge us because they are like us. Learn to reach out to others in the darkness. We may find that darkness holds a ray of light.



Shield

Surrounding us, there is a wall of protection against the things that harm us. Our mental shield prevents someone from taking advantage of us, and we hide behind the facade we project. For some of us, it's because we've been hurt too many times. For others, it's because they are afraid to be hurt. Yet if the shield is dropped, we may also find more joy than we have ever experienced. We may find people who truly understand us.



Siblings

It's amazing how two people can be related by blood, live in the same location, and become vastly different. It comes down to the little changes. Initially, our friends and environments influence who we are and how we behave. Yet it's a snowball effect. Those little changes grow over time, and eventually, we grow apart and become two people with our own distinct lives. Our changes are from the clashes of our past and our current world.



Submission

There will be moments in our lives when we cannot just do what we want. We must obey and follow someone else's lead. In many cases, this will make us stronger and our lives better. However, if we give in too many times, it is easy to lose who we are and become just a vessel. Life is a matter of give-and-take, and as long as we are moving towards our desired paths, detours along the way are okay.



Tethered

We gain so much from others. So much more than we can ever do on our own. When working as a team, the sum is more powerful than the individual. Yes, we all may have some faults that make the objective impossible. But if we can work through them, can we imagine how much farther we can go or what we can do? Although we can make progress on our own, it is small compared to the progress of many.



Waiting

For many of us, we want a place to call home—a safe place where many of our loved ones and friends live, where we can be comfortable being ourselves and not have to be someone we're not. Traveling to find that place is not just physically relocating ourselves. It's a matter of knowing where we belong and who we are. When we find that place, remember that things change over time, and it is our responsibility to maintain the feeling of being home.

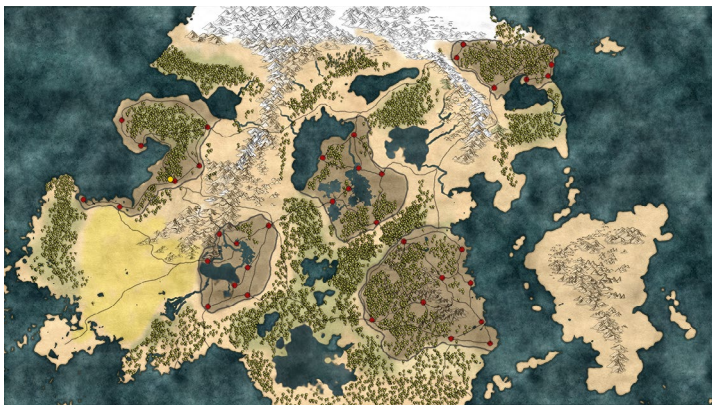
Gallery of Nightmares

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



Undesirable Effects

“Is there anything we can do?” I asked the healer.

It'd been almost a year since the boils first appeared on my wife's arm. Sara thought it was just a rash or acne, but when they covered her entire body and turned dark red, it was time to call for help.

The first group of healers just said it was a severe rash. Honestly, they didn't even look at them. They just told us to get some cream from the local apothecary and wash more often.

That didn't work.

When it got to the point where she couldn't stop scratching at the red marks, we made another appointment. We tried to explain that they were all over her body. Didn't rashes happen in a specific area? We were asked the usual questions: Was there a change in her diet? Did she go somewhere new? Had she bought any new clothing?

Change her diet. That should work.

It didn't.

Eventually, Sara stopped going to work or even going outside. She couldn't deal with the stares from people

anymore, friends and strangers. Too many times, she would cry in her room, and I had no idea what to do.

Over that year, the bumps grew into boils with clear white tops. We tried to burst them, but no pus or liquid came out, and with them, she couldn't sit or lie without being in pain. To help her get some rest, I added a special blend of herbs to her tea to sedate her. It was the only way.

Then it happened. I swore on my grandmother's life—they *moved*. At first, I thought she was panic-stricken. She came into the living room screaming that the boils were moving. Not a lot. Just an inch here or there.

However, I was skeptical, but I trusted my wife. I drew circles around most of the boils on her arm, and the next day, several had moved outside the drawn areas. They were...they were *moving*!

Over time, more and more boils moved, but they didn't move very far each time. When we told a healer about this, he went through the preliminary tests and said they were regular boils. He cut some open, and pus flowed out, but he could not remove them since there were too many, and he had no magic to eliminate them.

We told him they were solid, but he refused to believe us.

We told him they were moving, but he didn't believe us.

One day, the boils flowed up and down as if they were thin

eels swimming under her skin. She screamed and cried and even tried to grab a knife to cut them out. Fortunately, I stopped her before that happened. Sedation was the only remedy.

Sara was no longer the woman I knew. Large dark circles had formed around her eyes. She had stopped eating and washing and just wanted to die. All our town's healers said it was all in her mind. They were simply boils.

Some healers suggested we seek sacramancers who specialize in difficult cases from the next town over. The mages there were rumored to have some dark magic that could help.

Now, I'm a simple guy. I knew there was magic in those ShadowMyths cards others use, but I didn't trust it. My experience had been that they were people who took advantage of others.

However, I was desperate. I just wanted my wife to be okay again.

We hitched up a wagon and headed to the next town over. The specialist there tried many things. She laid Sara down and placed several ShadowMyths cards over the most infected region. Nothing. She then attempted to place a colony of celluloids over a cluster of boils, but the creatures flowed around the boils as water would flow over them. Finally, she had used an immolation card to burn the

boils. Nothing.

She turned to us. "I'm sorry. I don't understand what is happening here. I recommend that you seek out the Church of Absolution. It is rumored that they worship an elemental deity that may cleanse these boils. I'm sorry, I don't have anything else to help. I do know that these are not just boils." She looked at my wife. "Sara, you have a magical infection. However, that is all I know. I would suggest checking with the church."

The Church of Absolution could not help. Or would not. They wouldn't say anything other than to turn us away.

The ride back to our village was a long one. As I drove the wagon, Sara's head hung low, and she stared at her hands in her lap. She wept occasionally, and I tried not to look at her. I wanted to give her some space to be alone with her thoughts. Inside, I knew she was in pain, but the reality of it was that I could not understand that amount of pain and frustration. I wasn't her.

At home, she didn't want any dinner, so I tucked her into bed and gave her more of the special sedative tea. I kissed her forehead. "We'll figure something out. I love you very much. I'll always be here for you."

And with that, she pulled up the covers and slept.

In the living room, I was a nervous wreck. That was our last hope, and I didn't know what to do. I tried to clean

the house—anything to keep myself moving—but that didn't work. So, I grabbed a blanket, finished my tea, and fell asleep on the couch.

The next morning, after getting ready, I headed to the kitchen to make breakfast for us while she was still asleep. I tried not to disturb her in the mornings, as she only found relief when she was sleeping.

To my surprise, on the dining room table was an envelope addressed to her. I tried to pick it up, but I couldn't. Every time my hand got within an inch of it, I stopped as if a clear piece of glass surrounded the note. Curious, I grabbed a nearby book and tried using it to push the note, but the same force stopped it.

As I thought of moving the table, Sara walked into the room, wearing her soft robe and favorite comfortable slippers. The slippers had so much padding that the boils on her feet didn't bother her as much.

"What are you doing?" she said as she awkwardly walked toward me.

"This note. I found it on our table." I gestured to the envelope. "It's addressed to you, but I can't even pick it up. There is something around it."

Rubbing her eyes, she made her way to the table and reached for the envelope. The word Sara glowed in gold, and the envelope turned black as her hand approached it.

She pulled her hand away, but when nothing else happened, she picked the envelope up and opened it.

Five little skulls flowed out of the envelope, spun around her head, and spread out in every direction around the room—toward the ceiling, behind the couch, and toward the windows.

After several minutes, they floated toward the far living room wall and formed a circle on it. They spun around and around in that circle, creating arcs of black lightning between themselves. A blue mist soon appeared in the center, and the wall behind them turned into blue mist.

The skulls stopped spinning. Twigs and fibers flowed out of their mouths and embedded into the wall. The blue mist thickened to resemble water, and from our vantage point, it appeared as if a large bird's nest had been painted on our wall.

The nest briefly wavered and then floated off the wall and toward us. The wall behind it quickly returned to normal as if nothing had happened, but now there was a bird's nest floating in the center of our living room.

I turned to Sara. I didn't know what she was feeling—she was a lot stronger than I was—but terror gripped me.

She just stared, and I could have sworn she knew there was more to come. Her body leaned forward as if she were waiting for more.

Black smoke rose from the top of the nest and formed the largest raven I had ever seen. The thing looked at her. And then at me.

Returning its view to her, it said, "Would you like to take care of that thing inside of you?"

"What?" I asked the raven. It could...talk?

"Sara, would you like to get rid of that thing inside of you?" it asked again.

She nodded.

"Good. Everything will be taken care of if you step through the portal."

With a glazed look, she took a step toward the weird nest, but I grabbed her arm and pulled her back.

"What are you doing?" I asked her. I then turned to the raven. "Who are you? Why should we trust you? We don't know what's going on!"

"I know exactly what your wife is going through," the raven said. "She's not the first person to have this happen. And she won't be the last." Stretching its wings, it turned to her again. "I was created to help people like you. Most of the boils will go away when you step through the portal. The thing inside of you will not go away until you are fully submerged in the lava lake. Once you leave the lake, don't go back in." It snatched a spider walking along the outside

of the nest and ate it. “Once you are through the portal, follow the path to the cliff’s edge. That is where the lava lake will be. Jump into it. It will be painful, but you will survive, and the pain will not be nearly as bad as what you are going through right now. This portal won’t last forever, though. And you don’t want to wait too long when you go through it.”

Sara pulled her arm away from mine and turned toward me. “I’m going through it. I...I can’t deal with the pain anymore. I can’t deal with the boils. And this is my only hope. Our only chance.” She turned toward the portal.

“Sara! Sara!” I cried out.

I grabbed her hand, and we stepped through the portal together. No matter what happened, we were going to get through it together.

I had promised her.



How could anyone breathe in here?

Sara and I were surrounded by a desolate rocky terrain splattered with bubbling pools of lava. The thick and rich air was mixed with a strong sulfur odor, and the dull gray sky seemed to have never seen the comforting light of the sun. It was odd that, even with the pools of lava surrounding us, the air was somewhat cool, just like the rocky terrain beneath our feet.

In front of us, a thin path circuitously wound around various lava pools of different sizes. At times, the path split into multiple smaller ones to skirt around some lava pools, but those paths all merged into a landing area next to the drop-off. That must be where we needed to go.

I hesitated, but Sara didn't. In an instant, she let go of my hand and headed toward the edge. The more she walked, the faster she got. She soon shed her robe and stepped out of her slippers—naked. Not all, but a lot of her boils had disappeared from her body, and by the time she reached the drop-off point, all but the largest boils were gone.

I followed and stood by her at the cliff. At the bottom was the lava pool. I assumed she would have to wade in because there didn't seem to be any path downward, and it looked

like a dangerous dive, at least a hundred feet or more down. This was the type of dive that cliff jumpers would easily do, but she wasn't that type of person. It was not in her nature to even consider jumping.

I held her hand, which was devoid of boils, and said, "I don't see a way down. I think you're going to have to jump."

She nodded, staring down at the pool of lava. "I know," she quietly said. "But...but I can't do it. We're too high."

There was nothing I could do. I wouldn't push her. This was her decision.

She stared at it for a while longer, which got me thinking about the time.

"Sara..." I gently said. "The raven said you don't have much time to do this."

She stared at it some more. Her body leaned toward the edge but stopped. Leaned again but stopped. Subtle but noticeable. She wanted to do it, but couldn't.

Pop!

A boil on her shoulder burst, and she screamed. An odd tiny spider crawled out of the broken skin. Attached to its body was a figure that resembled an old man. She swatted at the spider thing—

Pop! Pop!

More boils on her arm and shoulder burst as more spiderlike creatures crawled out of the boils and dropped to the ground. Now that I had a better view, they all looked like nightmarish versions of centaurs.

The little monsters' bodies swelled on the ground, and each leg became longer and thicker. A loud crack echoed as their humanlike torsos stretched and twisted. Some creatures were old men. Some were old women. They all had stringy hair and long, sharp talons. When they reached the height of my knees, they smiled at me with wicked sharp teeth.

I stepped away from Sara and the monsters. She now rolled around on the ground. More boils broke, and more monsters crawled out and turned toward me.

I was now separated from her, and between us were the mass of nightmarish horrors that I could have never imagined. Collectively, they crawled toward me, speaking in a deep, low tone.

“Food... Food... Food...”

At the edge of the cliff, Sara glanced at me with tears in her eyes. She stood and jumped.



“Food... Food... Food...” the little monsters repeated as they skittered toward me. They rubbed their hands as they wickedly grinned at me with their mouthful of fangs.

With Sara gone over the cliff’s edge, I had to think about myself. I didn’t dare fall with those things around me!

Run! my mind screamed.

Sprinting as fast as I could, I jumped over small lava pools to get as far away as possible. Sometimes, the little monsters split up to cut me off. Other times, they grouped to force me in a particular direction. But every time, they kept coming, and it was apparent they were herding me away from the cliff and the portal.

Every time I stopped to take a breath—I wasn’t athletic, and the thick air was not helping—I panicked, and one or two monsters would be close enough to scratch or grab my leg. The scratches burned, and combined with my tiredness, I tripped and fell more than I ran.

They were getting closer. And I was losing the battle.

I couldn’t avoid them forever.

I saw the cliff’s edge where Sara had leaped. If nothing else,

I could do the same. I didn't know what would happen, but it had to be better than being eaten alive by these things.

It became clear that I had only one option, but they were herding me away from that option: the cliff edge. My only hope was one path between me and my one option, but three of those little monsters, a man and two women, stood between me and it.

I growled, put my head down, and dashed toward them. The two women grabbed at my left ankle but could only scratch it. The man-monster gripped my calf and sank his teeth into the soft area behind my kneecap. Short of breath, I stumbled and almost fell, but somehow got my footing. Other monsters from the different paths now rushed in our direction. In a panic, I grabbed the one behind my knee, feeling it tear the tissue, threw it into a nearby lava pool, and ran as fast as possible.

I made it!

On one side, the monsters clustered between me and the portal. On the other, with my back to the cliff's edge, was a jump I was terrified to make. Neither option promised that I would get out of here alive.

And what about Sara? Even if she survived the jump, how would she get out?

I looked down in hopes that she was down there, but my heart told me she was probably dead. Tears ran down my

cheeks, but I knew she was in a better place. I didn't know if I couldn't breathe because Sara was gone or from the air, but I knew she was no longer a part of my life. She would be happier that way than living with the nightmare boils and the creatures crawling inside her.

Near the edge of the lava pool, someone tall and thin broke the surface and crawled onto the shoreline.

I wiped my eyes to look closer, and my heart beat faster.

She made it!

From a distance, she looked young and healthy! It reminded me of the first time I had seen her at the park. She had a glow to her that, even then, I couldn't forget.

I had my wife back!

As she stood and pulled her hair back, she looked even better than when I first met her. Her smooth skin had now taken on a light golden brown hue. There wasn't any evidence of boils, and she had a definite muscle tone and leanness that had never been present the entire time I'd known her.

"Food... Food... Food..."

The creatures' chanting reminded me that I was still in danger. I wondered if I would also become young and healthy again if I jumped into the lava pool. Most likely

not. The raven did tell Sara not to reenter the lake once she was done. It probably had to do with the creatures moving inside of her.

Either way, it might be my only way out.

I caught movement from the other side of the lava pool—a bubbling of lava and flashes of fire. A figure with a large humanoid skull on his right shoulder and a wicked, pointed weapon in his right hand rose from the pool. His long cloak dripped lava as if he were covered in blood from many battles. A dull, pitted helm hid his face, and lava dripped off it.

It looked like a soldier of death was coming for my wife.

I ignored the monsters, slowly making their way toward me. I wasn't important. Only Sara.

"Run, Sara! Run!" I screamed, pointing at the soldier who emerged from the lake.

But she didn't move.

"Food... Food... Food..."

The monsters were getting closer, but I couldn't help but stare at the soldier near my wife. My heart sank.

"Food... Food... Food..."

The lava flowed around the soldier as he dragged his long

sword behind him. The sword parted the lava as easily as if it were cutting flesh—possibly the flesh of a nearby young woman.

To her credit, she didn't run. She firmly stood her ground as the figure approached.

When he was within striking distance...she held her hand out. Carefully, he picked her up and slung her over his shoulder. After looking at the cliff beside him, he began climbing it easily. His spiky gauntlets pierced the rock wall, and his cloak still dripped lava.

“Food... Food... Food...”

I turned back toward the creatures in front of me. I could feel their breaths as they grabbed at my ankles and legs. They must be trying to prevent me from jumping, and... they were succeeding. When my wife and the soldier got here, would they help? Would I still be alive?

I had no answers.

Fortunately, one of the creatures near the cliff's edge saw the soldier climbing. The creature rushed over to the others and gestured wildly. They all looked at each other with big eyes and fled from the cliff—and me. They huddled near the far lava pools, squatting and watching.

I didn't have to jump!

Finally, the soldier reached the top of the cliff, where I stood, and rolled Sara in front of me. I tried to reach a hand down to help him up, but he waved me away. Using both arms, he lifted himself and stood by Sara, who had gotten up and moved away from the edge.

Smiling, I went to hug her, but she took a step away from me.

“Sara?” I asked.

Her eyebrows furrowed, and she stared at me quizzically.

“Sara...? It’s me. Your husband. Jonathan.”

Desperation tinged my voice as I grabbed her arms, but she pulled away.

She didn’t know me!

Sara, or the woman I thought was her, continued staring blankly at me. It was apparent that the woman I thought was my wife was not the same woman I loved. She didn’t seem to recognize me anymore.

She moved closer to the soldier beside her instead and touched his arm. He turned her toward him and softly stroked her cheek as if they were lovers.

But that couldn’t be. She was *my* wife!

The soldier looked at me and lifted his helmet. His face...

was mine... but he was a younger and stronger version of me. He was me... and not me! I stared at a perfect version of myself as if I had been a warrior on some crusade.

At that moment, I knew I would never leave this place.

He slowly approached me, and when he was close enough, he shoved his left fist into my chest and grabbed my heart. The motion happened too fast, for there was no pain—just the sensation of tugging inside of me.

I didn't fall.

The strength of his left arm held me up as his fingers squeezed my heart, and the muscles in my body failed. Looking down at my hands and arms, I noticed that my skin had become pale and wrinkled, my vision had blurred, and my hair had become thinner, falling out in clumps.

In one swift motion, he pulled out my beating heart and shoved it into his chest. I fell to the ground, watching him hug my wife.

"It's time to go home, dear," he told her, gesturing toward the portal in the distance. The one we had come through when I was hopeful she would be healed.

They both turned around and walked away from me.

"Food... Food... Food..."

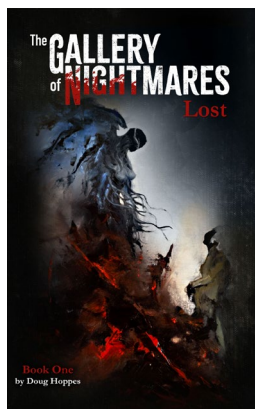
The closer the soldier and my wife got to the portal, the

more the little monsters skittered around the lava pools en masse and ran toward me.

With one last look, I saw the perfect couple walk through the portal, as I rolled off the cliff.

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



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