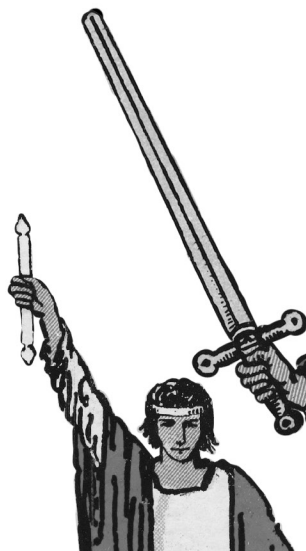


# THE GAMEMASTER'S TAROT\*

*\*idiot annotation edition*



# **THE GAMEMASTER'S TAROT**

*ed: maybe include an author credit somewhere?*

*ed: ed: no, i take no responsibility for this thing*

# WHAT IS THIS?

Many games and game systems use the Tarot deck as a conflict resolution mechanism, and many new game masters — and writers — like to turn to the Tarot for inspiration.

The reason for this seems pretty clear: the Tarot deck contains a lot of *bold, memorable archetypes*. It's like a hundred-year-old miniaturized version of TvTropes<sup>1</sup> that you can roll out in order to generate ideas on the fly. It's a starting point to help stave off the tyranny of the blank page.

This book is intended to serve as a *starting-off point*: what do these cards mean? How might I use them in a role-playing game or as writing inspiration?

For each card I try my best to describe the card's **interpretation**, as well as lay out some **characters, hooks, locations, treasures, and names** that might be associated with that card in specific. A lot of these interpretations are also very broad: I'm not here to write your stories for you, just to give you some ideas to riff on.

There are some other considerations you might considerate while drawing these cards:

You can draw more than one card and try to figure out how these concepts work together. Oh, I've drawn the Ten of Pentacles and Temperance. An **inheritance** of **self control**? Oh, that's an NPC with a hereditary werewolf curse who is very careful to lock themselves up every full moon. Or a vast cellar full of very expensive wine.

Each card has both an interpretation and a slightly different, "**upside-down**" interpretation. If drawn upside-down, you're expected to take the card's interpretation and give it a dark or nasty twist. The thing is: as a game-master you're generally expected to be providing a steady supply of dark or nasty twists, so I encourage you to *always* consider both the positive and negative connotations of a card's interpretation.

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1 if you are not yet familiar with TvTropes I may have ruined your day

# THE TAROT

There are lots of different styles of Tarot Deck, although the art that most people are familiar with comes from a very specific deck: the Rider-Waite deck — a deck that has proven enduringly popular for cartomancy<sup>1</sup>, on account of that being what the deck was designed for.

You would think that the Rider-Waite deck was authored by someone named Rider and someone named Waite, and you would be wrong: the artist behind this popular deck was named Pamela Smith, but because she was a woman it was decided to leave her out of the history in favor of naming the deck after the company that published it (Rider) and the man who shouted instructions at Pamela Smith (A. E. Waite)<sup>2</sup>.

Before its use as a divination tool, Tarot decks were just another kind of playing card deck, for a bunch of trick-taking games that have a lot in common with Bridge. Early Tarot decks featured things that make playing card decks useful for games, like “large, easy to read numbers”, “consistent iconography”, and “a form factor that is convenient for regular-sized human hands”. Instead of these things, the Rider-Waite Tarot has large, visually complex cards carrying a lot of symbol and allegory, allowing them to be interpreted in loads of different ways.

These complex visuals are packed to the gills with a potent combination of Jewish mysticism, astrology, Christian symbolism, and miscellaneous occult mumbo jumbo. The idea is similar to that of a Humble Bundle, in that if you mix enough garbage together into one package it starts to look profound and appealing. Nobody understands why people can be manipulated in this way, but here we are.

One of the greatest things about the Rider-Waite deck is that it is in the **public domain**. That’s right: you’re free to do pretty much whatever you want with these cards<sup>3</sup>.

1 “predicting the future with cards”

2 history is very frequently just like this.

3 like write a stupid book! not that this book is stupid. this book is very good and smart, and you are happy to have paid me money for it



# DIVINATION IS REAL

## BUT NOT REALLY

Did you know that it is actually possible to predict the future, very accurately?

No, really — astronomers do it all of the time. With access to a telescope the size of a building and a brain-melting amount of calculus, it's possible to do things like predict the precise locations of stars in the sky years in advance.

After thousands of years we've found a priesthood who can actually divine the future. Bananas. The prognostication Olympics have been cancelled because ballistics team took home every medal for 4 centuries straight.

Technically, physics calculations should also be able to tell you things like which pip on a numbered die will come up when you roll the bones, or what the weather will be like tomorrow — but it turns out that in complex systems like “fluid” or “most other things”, chaos intervenes: microscopic changes in initial velocity and position produce such wildly different outcomes that mathematical models can't reliably produce exact predictions.

Instead, probability and statistics had to step up and deliver the ability to predict the unpredictable. Despite being unable to accurately divine the outcome of a single dice roll, I can very accurately use mathematics to determine the probable outcome of 1,000,000 die rolls: their sum will be a stone's throw away from 3,500,000. Probably<sup>1</sup>.

We are, in fact, prediction engines, constantly engaged in the task of measuring, modelling, and predicting our surroundings. It would be impossible to participate in traffic or play Poker if we weren't.

I say this in order to establish that predicting the future is, in fact, possible.

Cartomancy, however, is utter and complete horseshit.

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1 i encourage you to prove me wrong by rolling 1,000,000 die

# COLD READING

What cartomancy actually **is** is a method of cold reading — a cleverly managed illusion whereby a clever huckster can attempt to predict the past, which, generally, is considered much easier to predict than the future, on account of its having *already happened*.

By presenting a series of cards with seemingly-specific interpretations — but which also have loads of alternate interpretations and “outs”, cartomancy offers a powerful tool for making predictions that can *seem* chillingly precise.

“The Lovers” and “The Emperor” together could mean “you will fall in love with a tall, dark, handsome man within the week” (whoa, chills), but it could also mean “you will have or have had a positive interaction with any man, at some point in the future or at any point in your past” — a prediction that, if you were simply to make it without the aid of fun cards, would be so non-specific as to be laughable.

Competent readers watch their clients closely as they draw cards: if they gravitate towards specific cards, it’s likely that those are the ones that have more meaningful and specific connotations for them.

By giving the target a lot of very broad patterns and then watching and refining, readers can zero in on specific details. This is easier with a willing audience, of course — most people are happy to reinterpret vague statements into their own frame of reference and volunteer a lot of information about themselves, because it is fun.

It’s also quite a bit more memorable when someone makes a spookily accurate prediction. Whoa: “Death” came up and my grandfather *just died last week*. But if that hadn’t happened, Death *could also* have just meant “there will be or has been some kind of change in your life”, and you wouldn’t have remembered that nearly as easily.

As a fun bonus, the cards themselves are very well designed to easily dovetail into answers for people's most common questions. Seemingly all of the cards with a woman in the art have "fertility" in their list of connotations, so that readings can converge on the enduringly popular "eventually you will have a happy family and a whole bunch of children". The four suits of the Minor Arcana are organized around things people usually want to know about: love and emotions (cups), money (pentacles), power (swords) and adventure (wands).

This doesn't mean that all fortunetellers are necessarily hustlers — although many of them are. Many fortunetellers are simply intuitive, empathetic people who are as invested in the accuracy of their readings as their customers are. They've had a few of their own whoa moments and, with a little effort they have been able to tune their own *third eye*.

Ultimately, it's my impression that this is mostly harmless. Talking over your life and experiences with an empathetic stranger who's doing their best, not just to listen, but to *listen so well that it seems like a spooky magic trick*, can be pleasant and even therapeutic for folks.

The question then: if I think that Tarot is nothing but hokum, why bother to get this far in the weeds writing a book about it?

Here's my justification: the cards are *well designed*. They've managed to produce this whole cold reading illusion by virtue of capturing a lot of oddly compelling archetypes and ideas. I just think they're neat.

**THE  
MAJOR  
ARCANA**

# THE MAJOR ARCANA

**The first 22 cards of the Tarot** are the Major Arcana — cards without a suit: from The Fool, The Magician, all the way through to Judgement and The World.

Calling them “arcana” is, of course, a habit from divination. When in use as playing cards, these cards are simply the trump cards.

These are the most “important” cards, the ones that people remember most easily when thinking about the Tarot, and they’re also the ones to which we’ll be devoting the most attention.

Each card I’m dividing into a handful of sections: a brief description of how the card is interpreted, followed by some Friends & Foes, Hooks, Locations, Treasures, and Names.

Most of these things are just loose scraps of idea<sup>1</sup>, intended to help you flesh them out (or rewrite them entirely) to create your own characters and adventures.

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<sup>1</sup> Earlier versions of this same concept involved a lot of extremely concrete worldbuilding, which felt actually really prescriptive and hard for GMs to adapt into their own games easily: so instead I’ve tried to adopt a style whereby you can read my loose archetypes and broad clichés and do all of the hard work for me.



THE FOOL.

# THE FOOL

**New Beginnings, Naivete, Freedom, Recklessness, Gullibility, This Is What You Get For Trusting The Maps App On Your Phone, Dumb Feather Hats, Weird Little Dogs, Wildcard, Getting Out of Trouble**

Look at this happy-go-lucky idiot!

They don't even see that they're about to fall off of a cliff!  
They're not even looking where they're going. They haven't packed anything but a small purse on a stick.

They've got a little dog trying to warn them that they're about to tumble to their death, but who has time to listen to little dogs?

They're holding a white flower, which is symbolic of "innocence" and also "not packing enough".

In some sense, though, they're brave: willing to stride headlong into danger without even looking at where their feet are.

In a much more real sense, though, they're a simpleton, who's about to discover whether or not that flower works as a parachute.<sup>1</sup>

Some people liken the Major Arcana of the Tarot to the Hero's Journey - and in that sense, the Fool is the hero. The zero card, the blank slate, an adventurer about to go on a journey.

In trick-taking games, The Fool is often a wild-card, the lowest-scoring trump card, the highest-scoring trump card, or a way to escape consequences from a bad trick: so it's thematically appropriate for The Fool to turn out to be a creature of immense power and influence, or for The Fool to allow your players to get away with something that they would not have, otherwise.

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1            it will not

# THE FOOL

## Friends & Foes

- a **Gullible Shopkeep**, who's a wonderful (and profitable) target for any thieves' gallery in town, *up to and including your party*.
- a **Naïve Grandmother** who has very clearly just been conned out of a lot of money.
- a **Friendly Performer** who wants to hear your party's stories, and believes them all - no matter how outlandish.
- a **Stock Shōnen Hero**, a big-hearted, energetic kid who's not too smart but believes in himself - way too much, to the point where they consistently manage to find danger
- a **Mischievous Spirit** who delights in tormenting the party because they're so fun to harass, but who draws the line at actual harm.
- a **Nasty Clown**, looking to entertain themselves by toying with your party, and who absolutely does *not* draw the line at actual harm.
- an **Inspector Incompetent** with some **Keystone Cops** investigating the party's real or imagined crimes - yet unable to make any forward progress.
- an **Unconvincing Doppelganger**, pretending to be someone important. How have they not been caught yet?
- a **Dull Goon**, sent to bust some heads but easily outwitted.

## Hooks

- A **carnival has come to town** - and it is a thinly disguised group of escaped criminals / demons / international jewel thieves / royalty / all of the above.
- Your players must undertake a **grand journey** to deliver a crucial artifact to the furthest reaches of the continent.
- Everybody is trying to get their hands on a **Priceless Golden Statue** - which turns out, if your players find it, to be gilded but not golden, rendering it essentially worthless. The best way to get any coin out of this thing is to pass it off as valuable...



# THE FOOL

## Locations

- The **Waterfall Cliffs** hang imposingly over a high vantage point. They can make a great way to evade or escape - or just explore, but the party will have to make a leap of faith.
- The **Mysterious Portal** glows and thrums with arcane energy. It will take the party to an exciting new location, but warning: it's a one-way trip.
- The **Twisted Dog Alehouse** is a classic tavern: the air smells of spiced roasted goat and ale, the bartender is gruff and seemingly always has mutton chops, and it's about the perfect place to start an adventure.
- The **Theater District** is a part of town devoted to the entertainment industry. A good place to find actors, set designers, and fresh-faced young adults with a dream in their heart and a song in their step.
- **Ambush Alley** looks pretty safe to me - I mean, bad things don't happen in cramped, dark spaces, right?

## Treasures

- The legendary **Monkey Cape** is a prize, granting dexterity and good fortune - but it cannot abide by the *cautious or careful*.
- When you reach into **Shufflebag** you're guaranteed to get something you didn't expect. Will it be useful? Who knows!
- Why, this shabby, mismatched suit, **Have a Knife Day!**, is covered in patches and seems to always have a knife in one of the pockets.

## Names

Lunette, Bells, Harley, Quinn, Penny, Pogo, Slim, Tati, Zig, Zag, Grimaldi, Bozo, Ronald, Grock, Emmett, Buster, Marx, Shaggy, Dope, Larry, Curly, Moe, Mump, Smoot, Pierrot, Harlequin, Pagliacci, Yorick, Costard, Falstaff, Puck, Pocket, Triboulet, Rigoletto, Jest, Wamba, Claypole, Folly, Motley, Clopin, Cicero, Jollo, Zorn, Thorn, Arlecchino,



THE MAGICIAN.

# THE MAGICIAN

**Resourceful, Mastermind, Knowledgeable, Conman, Charlatan, Manipulator, Skillful, Collector, Yard-Sale, Who Wants to Buy a Double-Ended Buttplug?, Infinity-Brain, Also a Surprisingly Talented Gardener, We Are Number One**

Now this is someone who's got their ducks in a row. They've got all four of the Minor Arcana symbols on the table, there, arranged in front of them: cups, wands, swords, and pentacles.

The Magician is an operator, someone who is ready to take their complex plans and schemes and will them into fruition with a lot of tools and know-how. Thus the infinity, the ouroboros belt, the table full of tools, and the action pose.

A modern reimplementaion of this card might be named "The Mad Scientist" or "The Executive".

It seems that the Magician — master of the occult in the modern Tarot — is derived from earlier versions of the card where they were a juggler, a mountebank, charlatan, a master of the cups-and-balls. Given my opinion of the nature of the occult, I don't regard this as too far out-of-scope for the Magician. This is the card of a deceiver. They have a bridge to sell you.

The Wizard in the Wizard of Oz is a absolutely perfect Magician, for a number of reasons:

- He's manifested quite a lot of very impressive stuff out of sheer force of will.
- He's *very* technically competent.
- It turns out, he's completely full of shit.

# THE MAGICIAN

## Friends & Foes

- an **Unpredictable Engineer**, with a workshop brimming with exciting tools that may or may not work.
- a **Stage Magician**. That's right, just... the thing it says right there on the card. Cards. Top hats. Abracadabra. Poof.
- a **Cryptid Collector**, with a notepad (or laboratory) filled with wild and henceforth-unknown flora and fauna. May attempt to collect the player characters.
- a **Snake Oil Salesman** rolls into town with a straw hat and sells miracle cures and curative elixirs that (of course) do not actually do anything.
- a **Gentleman Thief**, a smooth operator, cunning master thief, and magnificent bastard who has never been caught.
- a **Corrupt Chancellor**, skillfully manipulating power from behind the scenes.
- an **Eternal Lich**, willing to put anything and everything on line in service of their own quest for immortality.
- a **Cunning Witch**, with tricks, curses, hexes, potions, and a very visible jar filled with assorted eyeballs.

## Hooks

- Your players must accumulate a **collection of powerful objects**<sup>1</sup>:
  - i. A powerful sword guarded by difficult puzzles.
  - ii. A magical grail from a realm of literal nightmares.
  - iii. A valuable treasure protected by a wealthy cartel.
  - iv. The cudgel of the leader of a powerful tribe.
- An important council vote is coming up! Your players are asked to **influence an important councillor**. This might involve blackmail, bribery, or intimidation.
- In order to distract your players from an actual problem they should be solving, they have been sent on an impossible quest to find something called **blinker fluid**.

# THE MAGICIAN

## Locations

- The **Bazaar** has about anything you could possibly want to buy, for prices you couldn't possibly afford to pay. Some of the vendors only accept payment in incredibly obscure or abstract currencies, like "dreams" or "memories".
- The **Hotel Ballroom** has been rented out by a clever stranger with a unique sales pitch and a very memorable show.
- The **Potemkin Village** looks like a town from the outside, but nobody lives there. Why, then, was it constructed?
- The **Mock Storefront** appears to be a legitimate business, but serves mostly to conceal an entrance to a much more clandestine endeavor.
- The **Secret Laboratory**, laden with vials, charts, notes, things preserved in liquid, and incomprehensible machinery.
- Okay, I'm having trouble coming up with a pithy name for this one, you know the **Fireplace Near a Sconce And When You Pull On The Sconce The Fireplace Spins Around Like a Trap Door**, that thing. One of those.

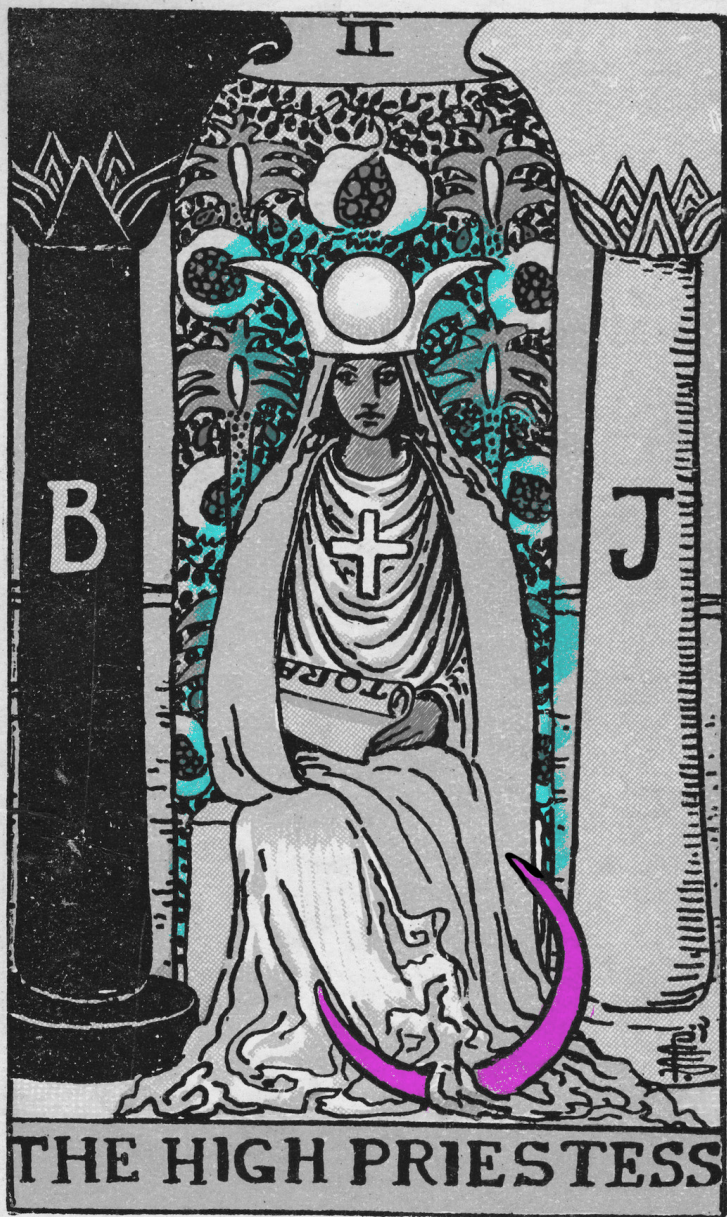
## Treasures

- The **Manifold Multi-Tool** has seemingly every tool that you can imagine packed into one compact, convenient package.
- The **Eternal Handkerchief** is tied to another handkerchief, which is tied to another handkerchief, which is tied to another handkerchief...
- The **Disappearing Act** blanket can cause the things it covers to become invisible, very briefly.

## Names

Celeste, Millicent, Glinda, Cereza, Ashley, Elphie, Ursula, Wanda, Agatha, Sarah, Samantha, Dion, Beryl, Circe, Lydia, Harry, Frank, Siegfried, Penn, Fergus, Ponzi, Willy,





# THE HIGH PRIESTESS

**Intuition, an Oracle, All Signs Point to Yes, Ouija, Real They/Them Energy, Mystery, A Conspicuous BJ<sup>1</sup>, Who Does Number Two Work For?, The Major Arcana Most Likely To Actually Read Tarot Cards, Jessica We Told You That You Can't Bring Your Crescent Moon Everywhere With You, It Is Not An Emotional Support Crescent Moon**

Sitting between yin and yang, black and white, the spiritual and the real, masculine and feminine, and two huge-ass pillars is the High Priestess. She does, however, lean decidedly on the side of the feminine, as you might notice that she is dressed as a [REDACTED]<sup>2</sup>.

The interpretation of female anatomy as sacred, mysterious, and utterly beyond the realm of understanding doesn't speak well of the sexual prowess of mystics.

Here's a fun fact about the Tarot deck: it used to be regular old playing cards, for a game played primarily by Catholics, so instead of symbols from esoteric Jewish mysticism, it was mostly stuff like "The Pope" and "The Popess". The High Priestess used to be "The Popess", which is to say, the lady Pope. Now, you might think, "every Pope ever to Pope has been a man, what do you mean lady Pope?"

I have good news for you: there was one, at least, apocryphally. It probably didn't actually happen, but the story of Pope Joan, the woman who pretended to be a man long enough to score the role of Pope for 2 full years — until she ruined it by getting pregnant — has been a popular and enduring one. To this day, in order to prevent this from happening, every new Pope is punched in the stomach on Pope inauguration day<sup>3</sup>.

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1 the B+J stand for "Bartles and Jaymes", the cheap wine coolers

2 i thought it would be more polite not to say "giant clitoris" except down here in the footnotes. footnotes are essentially a politeness free square

3 i don't know catholicism very well, but this sounds right

# THE HIGH PRIESTESS

## Friends & Foes

- a **Cryptic Oracle**, able to parse the weave of prophecy but not terribly clear or helpful about its meaning.
- an **Anonymous Informant**, providing helpful hints and clues from inside a larger organization while remaining safely out of sight.
- a **Small Town Fortuneteller**, who uses any method of augury they can get their hands on — tea leaves, chicken bones, that little thing you make out of paper and fold in your hands — and who is right more often than not.
- a **Large Medium**, who, despite their impressive heft, manages to serve as a bridge<sup>1</sup> between the world of living and the world of the dead.
- a **Cursed Weatherman**, who has, not once, not a single time in his entire life, managed to correctly predict tomorrow's weather.
- a **Cult Leader** bent on bringing the dark prophecy to fruition and finally summoning something deep and ancient and hungry.
- a **Mad Doomsayer**, covered head-to-toe in seemingly schizophrenic scrawlings, who is keeping close track of how much time that everybody has left until the grand apocalypse. It is not much time.
- a **Clairvoyant Assassin** who manages to always stay one step ahead of their targets.

## Hooks

- The prophecy makes it very clear that this particular young child will be **responsible for the destruction of the city**, and not long from now.
- A **terribly unlucky person** needs help on their quest to find out what they did to ruin their luck and if they can fix it.
- A medium needs your players to help conclude all of the **unfinished business of their dead client**, so that they might finally rest.

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1 more like a six-lane highway amirite?



# THE HIGH PRIESTESS

## Locations

- The **Orrery** is a pretty accurate and very large model of the solar system. It's got the big flat disc, it's got the four elephants, it's got the big turtle — everything one might need to predict the locations of the stars.
- The **Ritual Circle** is prepped and ready for something big to go down. Totems. Sigils. A whole mess of weirdly shaped rocks.
- The **Temple in an Unlikely Location** is formed when worshipers find a particularly large or unwieldy holy site or sacred object, leaving them no other option than to set up shop *near to* or *inside of* it.
- Most people don't like to go into the **Forest With Roughshod Hand-Carved Totems** at night<sup>2</sup> — the trees are crooked, visibility is poor, and people keep disappearing.
- The only thing worse than that is the **House Filled With Creepy Dolls**. Under no circumstances should you spend time in a **House Filled With Creepy Dolls**<sup>3</sup>.

## Treasures

- A **Magic Eight Ball** that actually turns out to be accurate, almost all of the time.
- A **Ouija™ Board** that can communicate with spirits.
- A **Crystal Ball** that can instantly allow its operator to see<sup>4</sup> something far, far away.

## Names

Cassandra, Sibyl, Delphi, Ellison, Pythia, Dione, Lyco, Orphe, Apollo, Professor Essy, Nostra, Damus, Virgo, Pisces, Aquarius, Bartles, Jaymes, Boaz, Jachin, Joan, Marty

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2 a survey estimates that 9/10 Blair Witchings start this way

3 the only thing worse is just the one creepy doll

4 but not hear, or smell

III



THE EMPRESS.

# THE EMPRESS

**Femininity, She/Her, Motherhood, Beauty, Harvest,  
Nature, Vanity, Lush, Self-Absorption, Pondering  
her Orb, Tradwife, Gaslight, Gatekeep, Girlboss,  
Looking For a Man In Finance, Juice Cleanse,  
Drinking 8 Glasses a Day of Water Because She  
Read Somewhere That It Was Good For Her,  
Incredible Hat Game**

It would be foolish for me, a notable Dude, to attempt to commit my ideas of what, precisely, constitutes *femininity* to print. It's an ever-changing cultural construct. The best I can do is simply to point out that this card connotes the concept of "woman" and let your mind run with it.

The fertile fields, the soft comfortable chair, the apparent beauty and harmony — This card is here to represent stereotypical, archetypal femininity: in the Barbie, Princess Peach, ballerina, romance novel, make-up, ponies, pink-aisle-in-the-toy-store sense. If this card were up to date, this woman would be sipping cucumber water from an extra large Stanley™ mug<sup>1</sup>.

This is one of the umpteen cards that communicate "fertility" for the sake of the all-important "you're going to have a whole bunch of children" reading.

The problem with using this card is that "archetypal femininity" is a really antiquated and gross concept actually? *Women be... shoppin'*? Yet, without these archetypes, there's not much to work with, here.

It's pretty likely that your gaming group is not going to be interested in a frank discussion of your biases when it comes to the topic of femininity<sup>2</sup>, so step lightly. It might be wiser not to use this card at all if you don't think you can do it without getting a little weird about it.

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1 i think that is the current Girl meta at time of writing but idk, i'm old  
2 maybe they are? i don't know your gaming group

# THE EMPRESS

## Friends & Foes

- a **Nan the Barbarian** used to be the most fierce and powerful warrior in her tribe, but she's slowing down in her old age<sup>1</sup>.
- oh no, it's **Any of The Player Characters' Parents**, here to tell them to stand up straight and embarrass them in front of the other heroes.
- the **Kind-Hearted Waif** is a little sickly, but nevertheless she's out there every day selling flowers to collect charity money for the orphanage's new roof. Right now the children don't have a roof. It's so cold.
- the **Evil Queen** is actually a very competent ruler, she wishes that you would stop calling her "Evil" just because she tends towards dressing in severe black colors and having dissidents immediately executed.
- a **Foreign Royal** is from a kingdom that is very wealthy and very powerful, but also very far away. They have come to expect a lot of very specific luxuries, many of which are not available or even comprehensible.
- a **Brood Mother** is hoping to make good friends with warm, inviting hosts — within whom to hatch her myriad skittering, chitinous offspring.
- a **Hive Mind** is a psychic entity that wants nothing more than to make as many people happy and productive as possible — and nothing makes people sad like free will.

## Hooks

- Your players need to infiltrate an **elegant ball**. They're going to need nice clothes, etiquette lessons, and they're going to need to learn how to dance.
- Everybody loves a **shopping episode**. Who doesn't want to outfit their character with cool new clothes and powerful equipment?

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1 "I want way more of this specific character" ok, go read Bone by Jeff Smith, then report back with your findings.

# THE EMPRESS

## Locations

- The **Healing Hot-Springs** are a warm, pleasant place to relax and recover after a long journey.
- Everything in **Stepford** is just a little bit *too perfect*. People won't even swear. It's very unsettling.
- The chase was going well until we ended up in this **Hall of Mirrors**. Now we can't find anybody. Wait — did my reflection just move?<sup>2</sup>
- Deep in unfriendly territory is a **Friendly Oasis** — a pleasant village with water, food, and shelter.
- The most expensive and exclusive luxury hotel on the island, **The Empress**, serves a lavish afternoon tea service. While relatively popular with the wealthy and well-connected, it is *not* worth it.

## Treasures

- The **Pretty Princess Ball Gown** can make *anybody* or *anything* appear to be a beautiful princess. A very large man. Two short people stacked one atop the other. A log.
- The **Crown of Stars** allows its wearer to make subtle changes to the minds of people around them. Each use causes one of the stars to disappear.
- The **Very Large, Extremely Fancy Spoon** ("**The Spoon of Caerbannagh**") is just worth a lot of money. A lot of fancy spoon collectors really want to get their hands on this particular spoon.

## Names

Becky, Pamela, Tiffany, Peggy, Barbie, March, April, May, June, July, February, Smarch, Margaret, Helen, Zala, Gothel, Morticia, Sarah, Martha, Alana, Maria, Joyce, Marge, Linda, Beverly, Edith, Claire, Carol, Lorelai, Livia, Lucille

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2      yes. it did. it wasn't you.



IV



THE EMPEROR.

# THE EMPEROR

**Masculinity, He/Him, Fatherhood, Violence, Authority, Pragmatism, Reliability, Stoicism, A Tough Exterior, The Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch, Side-Eye, Uncomfortable Chairs, Building a Deck**

The opposite side of the coin from our last card<sup>1</sup>, The Emperor is archetypally masculine. Underneath that cloak is a sports jersey and cargo shorts. The shared themes of “masculinity” and “authority” also carry us to a place of intersection between those two things: fatherhood.

The mountain range, hard stone throne, glower, and armor indicate that this is a hard-edged, strong, well-defended fellow who is not under any circumstances going to reveal his vulnerabilities, or thoughts, or feelings. The Emperor works hard to present the false appearance of invulnerability — at the expense of his relationships and his own mental health, which suffer.

Thematically, narratively, the role of The Emperor is to be the first “boss” that you defeat. He’s a **Big Bad**, an antagonistic instigator, and he seems, at first, much more powerful than your players — completely unassailable. It’s only over time that cracks in their armor begin to appear.

The Emperor is also very *redeemable* as a character. If they *are* the first of the major antagonists in your story, once they’re defeated — should they survive — it’s great to reintroduce them later as an ally. Think Darth Vader, or Asgore Dreemurr<sup>2</sup>.

---

1 the middle of the coin is the High Priestess

2 the one of these that connected is a great predictor of your age

# THE EMPEROR

## Friends & Foes

- a **Lord British** will invite players to his palatial home, then asks them to perform quests on his behalf. He doesn't offer any kind of reward.
- a **Goofy Dad** is supportive, friendly, dressed very comfortably, and has a level on his person at all times. He's fond of terrible puns.
- an **Autocratic Leader** believes firmly that their domain can only thrive under their complete and unambiguous control. This is often not actually the case: repressive regimes breed corruption and inefficiency<sup>1</sup> — but the punishment for pointing out quibbles like that is often very severe.
- an **Inadvertent Puppet** is powerful and influential, but someone else has been pulling the strings all along.
- nothing happens in this town without the **Criminal Kingpin** knowing about it, and if there's money to be made, they want a piece of the action.
- a **Big Fish in a Small Pond** might be low-ranking or harmless in other contexts, but *here* they are a serious and threatening antagonist who holds all the cards<sup>2</sup>.
- a **Dr. Claw** is a distant, un-approachable antagonist who always seems to do their bidding through flunkies, henchmen, or goons.

## Hooks

- Everybody your players encounter is obsessed with **The Game**, although they are very short on details as to what, exactly, The Game entails<sup>3</sup>.
- Word on the streets is that there's a **Secret Underground Fighting Ring**, and anybody who can stand after three rounds with their champion stands to win good money.

---

1        neither Hitler nor Mussolini were *actually* able to make the trains run on time: in both of their regimes the trains became notoriously unreliable.

2        like the mayor of a small town, or the rival baker who makes a flawless sourdough

3        is this a Shirley Jackson Lottery situation? you have to tell me if it is



# THE EMPEROR

## Locations

- The **Seemingly Impregnable Fortress** stands imposingly tall and *as far as one can tell* is utterly impossible to breach.
- The **Long-Abandoned Throne Room** is a place where a vast and powerful empire once held court. Only dust remains.
- The **Colosseum** is a vast, oval stadium, hosting violent spectacles for enormous crowds.
- The **Winding Mountain Pass** is a hard, unforgiving road. The air is thin, and cold, and resources are light.
- The **Hall With Many Suits of Armor on Display** can provide moments of suspense. *Nobody* trusts a suit of armor on display: maybe it'll move on its own! If you leave spaces where there are no suits of armor and then later, chase the players through this hallway, prepare for them to *hold very still* in the unclaimed spaces<sup>4</sup>.
- The **Military Camp** is filled with rows and rows of tents — barracks, latrines, and mess tents, hosting a full legion of troops.

## Treasures

- The **Gabriel's Sledgehammer**<sup>5</sup> is an unstoppable force in the hands of someone capable of wielding it, but it weighs a ton.
- The **Unassailable Armor** is actually, one realizes when actually wearing it, just regular armor — not even particularly good armor. Its invulnerability is a complete myth.

## Names

Atticus, Clark, Hank, Gomez, Trent, Chad, Brad, Brock, Thad, Brent, Lance, Tucker, Dirk, Biff, Chip, Skip, Rip, Zeke, Mitch

---

<sup>4</sup> this may be different in my games than in yours, but cartoon logic almost always works: if the Scooby gang could pull off a move...

<sup>5</sup> this is a dirty joke / musical reference, and a quick Google search indicates that I'm nowhere near the first one to come up with it



THE HIEROPHANT

# THE HIEROPHANT

**Tradition, Conformity, Knowledge, Teaching, If  
Everybody Else Jumped Off Of A Bridge You Would  
Definitely Also Jump Off That Same Bridge, Perhaps  
The Most Impressive Hat So Far, Finger Guns,  
Two in the Pink, A Backscratcher I Found At A Flea  
Market, A Coterie of Bald Hangers-On**

I know what you're probably thinking: "What in the hell is a hierophant?" It's a word that basically doesn't see use any more, and that word mostly just means "High Priest<sup>1</sup>".

Remember earlier when I mentioned that the transition from Catholic playing cards to occult-themed divination cards involved The Pope and The Popess evolving into The Hierophant and the High Priestess<sup>2</sup>?

That's right: the Hierophant is nothing more than a dollar-store Pope!

That strong undercurrent of Pope provides a lot of this card's interpretation. Guidance. Big, institutional spirituality. There are a lot of common visual elements between this card and the High Priestess, but while the High Priestess is intuitive, flexible, and mysterious, the Hierophant is traditional, rigid, and well-established.

While the card has strong Catholic Church vibes, this particular institution can be substituted out for any large, traditional, didactic institution. Modern academia? Finance? Worship of the Great Old Ones?

---

1        whoa, man, like, I can see my hands  
2        like Pokemon? i'm sure I mentioned this

# THE HIEROPHANT

## Friends & Foes

- the **Anxious Actuary** has zero tolerance for risk or danger. They have a safe, stable job and wear gloves to reduce the risk of paper cuts. If forced to participate in any kind of adventure, they will drag their feet and whine.
- a **Professor Exposition** is vital for explaining a lot of complex information.
- a **Priest For a God With An Incredibly Niche Portfolio** has the same vibe as that one friend you have who's really, really in to trains. Some gods get to be about the Sun, but some gods get the short end of the cosmic stick and end up being the patron of something obscure, like transportation logistics or onion varietals.
- the **Insufferable Busybody** has never met a rule they wouldn't enthusiastically tattle on someone for breaking, and any opportunity to add new rules is a good one.
- the **Herald of a Plague God** is going viral: their enthusiasm is infectious. The challenge is honestly to avoid becoming one of their congregants.
- the **Sadistic Inquisitor** is here to root out heresy, and they are not interested in your feeble excuses: they are working on the side of good. Torture will bring out the truth.
- the **Big Tent Evangelist** is a charismatic, popular miracle-worker, bringing in new congregants by the hundred. Some might suspect they're accomplishing this through dishonest means - why do they need to grow their flock so quickly?

## Hooks

- If the players do not stabilize the devil's gate quickly, there's a very real risk of crossing the **demon inversion event horizon**, which I am told would be *very bad*.
- The **catalogue of creatures** is frustratingly incomplete, and your players have been enticed to contribute. There's talk of a particularly rare **Oobli** nearby.

# THE HIEROPHANT

## Locations

- The **College**, the **Library**, the **City Hall**, and the **Cathedral** are all hugely Hierophant locations that I don't have to describe to you in any more detail than that. You know what a library is like.
- The **Impossible Anomaly** is an otherworldly effect or object that absolutely should not exist, and it's right here. If it's been around for a while, researchers have been dispatched to very carefully study it from a distance. Why is it here? Where did it come from? Maybe gravity is getting wonky, or we're dealing with an Akira glob situation<sup>1</sup> - whatever it is, it seems dangerous.
- Not all research gets to be exciting, which is why **Research Station: Mundane** is out there, deep, deep in the boonies, remote and filled with lonely, bored scientists who very badly want to talk about their unexciting specialty<sup>2</sup>.
- The **Border Wall Entrance** is navigable by most folks, but in order to get through they're going to need to show some paperwork and go through an inspection.

## Treasures

- The **Junior Explorer Monster Identification Cards** are a vital resource when it comes to determining exactly what *kind of thing* that puddle of goop *is*.

## Names

Curie, Hillary, Anastasia, Ada, Lovelace, Alice, Grace, Jean, Paul, Peter, Linus, Clement, Alexander, Sixtus, Soter, Victor, Zephyr, Callix, Urban, Caius, Marcel, Mark, Max, Penrose, Lagrange, Babbage, Niels, Drake, Diesel, Cousteau, Gauss, Lysenko, Rutherford, Wilbur, Orville

---

1        tetsuo000000000000!  
2        it is moss.



VI



THE LOVERS.

# THE LOVERS

Love (Actually), Relationships, Asking Your Partner if They Would Consider an Open Relationship With a 12 Foot Tall Angel, The Garden of Eden, Forbidden Knowledge, Raphael<sup>1</sup>, Pairs, Twins, Gemini

This one's pretty easy. Love, dummy!

Not lust, so much — the express train to bone-town is more accurately represented by The Devil<sup>2</sup>. This is a gentler, “draw a picture of their face in your high-school notebook” love.

Of course, every Tarot card needs some easy outs in case the mook getting a reading doesn't fall in love, so The Lovers can also mean *any* relationship, *any* pair of people, and it contains a bunch of open-ended critical backup symbolism<sup>3</sup>. The Lovers are related to the astrological sign, Gemini, so the **twin/pair** motif is present and something to work with.

These lovers are chillin' in the Garden of Eden, with the archangel Raphael behind them<sup>4</sup>. Given the coiled snake and fruit tree, that solidifies the connection to forbidden fruit or forbidden knowledge.

---

1 the archangel, not the radical turtle

2 the Catholic verdict on human sexuality is that “bad”

3 the Tarot is an object lesson in “obvious reading” / “emergency backup symbolism”, which we can exploit for our own purposes

4 i believe the connection between Raphael and the Garden of Eden is more of a gnostic/occult retcon rather than Catholicism Classic, part of a heretical belief that the snake in the garden was Raphael, sneaking humans some knowledge as a treat for complicated reasons.

# THE LOVERS

## Friends & Foes

- The **Star-Crossed Lovers** are scions of two warring families. These two want to be together, but fate conspires to keep them apart.
- The **Buddy Cops** hate each other because they are so different from one another, but are forced to work together until each sees the merits of the other one's methods, and grudgingly earn one another's respect.
- The **Thunder and Lightning**<sup>1</sup> are a pair whose abilities perfectly complement one another, dangerous individually but nearly unstoppable when together.
- The **Meat Lovers** are cannibals won't rest until they've tried every kind of meat. *Every* kind.
- **Mr. Grim and Mr. Derby** are a pair of polite but depraved criminals who've always worked together, who enjoy their work and are very good at it.
- The **Good Twin and Evil Twin** might make it immediately clear which one is the evil twin, or it might be impossible to tell at first.
- a **Dr. Jekyll** seems nice enough at first, but what you don't know is that they harbor a terrible monster within.

## Hooks

- The players are being forced to work with an odious, difficult, **unpleasant NPC** who's only upside is that he's devastatingly effective at one small, crucial thing.
- There's a **wedding** planned, and the bride-to-be and groom-to-be have hired your players to head off any nonsense before it begins - oh, but there are so many things, small and large, about to go wrong.
- This humble librarian has stumbled upon **forbidden knowledge**, and is slowly going mad while parts of the library fold in around them.

---

<sup>1</sup> a.k.a. "the Sword and Shield" or the "Peanut Butter and Jelly" or the "Ham and Cheese" or the "Blue Cheese and Prosciutto" ... actually I'm starting to make myself hungry, I should stop.



# THE LOVERS

## Locations

- The **Palace Gardens** are rife with young nobles plotting against and falling in love with one another.
- The **Statues Facing One Another** were constructed long ago and their purpose is not immediately clear.
- The **City in the Trees** is interconnected within the boughs of toweringly high, healthy, long-lived forest trees.

## Treasures

- The **Teleporting Pyramids** are melon-sized glass pyramids, each allowing the holder to instantly teleport to the location of the other pyramid, bringing the pyramid along with them.

## Things That Could Go Wrong at a Wedding

- The Best Man has **lost the rings**. The last time he had them was just before a night of drinking at a run-down tavern.
- Something has happened to **all of the food**. Your players will need to find and prepare enough food to feed a hundred people on short notice.
- One of the betrothed is **having a panic attack**.
- One of the betrothed is **pregnant and trying to hide it** from their stern, judgemental relatives, but one of their party guests knows this and intends to spill the beans.
- The wedding is outdoors and the weather is **awful**.
- The two families have dramatically different wedding traditions, some of which are **dangerous or insulting** to the opposed family.
- "Is the officiant going to do the thing where they ask if someone objects? I need to know for, uh, personal reasons."

## Names

Romeo, Juliet, Bonnie, Clyde, Alexander, Cleo, Paris, Helen

VII



THE CHARIOT.

# THE CHARIOT

**Focus, Ambition, Middle-Management, Delegation, Making Other People Do Most of the Work, Determination, Success, Square Your Chest, The Moon On Your Shoulders, An Eye-Roll From the Black Sphinx, Straight-Up Just Not Having Legs, I Don't Think Chariots Actually Look Like That**

These sphinxes want to go in two totally different directions — The Chariot is the one guiding them, prioritizing and directing them. They are, in a practical sense, a manager.

Both The Magician and The Chariot are cards indicating problem solving through force of will — the difference is that while the Magician solves problems through skills, tools, plans, and schemes, the Chariot solves problems through leadership.

Not leadership in the paternalistic, violent way of The Emperor, necessarily, but more in the way the supervisor of a small fast food chain would. They're driven, focused, tactical but not strategic<sup>1</sup>, and calling you at 2AM to find out if you will cover Madison's shift.

Beyond that, there's the simple *transportation* angle to The Chariot: they're driving, they're on wheels. Movement is what is happening here.

The Chariot also doesn't have legs. Their whole body just stops at the waist. Between that and the "wheel" connection, Chariot-based characters are often portrayed in media in wheelchairs or other mobility devices.

---

<sup>1</sup> tactical is "smart enough to be the supervisor of a small fast food chain", strategic is "smart enough to stop being the supervisor of a small fast food chain"

# THE CHARIOT

## Friends & Foes

- The **Bounty Administrator** is a local appointee of the law who's handing out large cash prizes for apprehended criminals<sup>1</sup>.
- The **Small-Town Sheriff** is overworked and desperate for help, the ratio of deputies to bandits in this town is weighted heavily in favor of the bandits.
- The **Driver**<sup>2</sup> is in charge of, let's face it, just the coolest imaginable ride. Depending on the setting it might be an impressive car, a tricked-out airship, their own schooner, or a warp-enabled starcruiser – but whatever it is, *simply owning and operating it* is an impressive flex.
- The **Social Climber**<sup>3</sup> has been cynically and methodically working their way to the top by brown-nosing and betraying in equal measure. They're oh-so-friendly if they think that you can help them, and oh-so-dangerous if they don't.
- The **Fixer** is who the wealthy and influential call upon when they need a problem disappeared. They're well-connected, they seem to have “a guy” for everything, and they're utterly unscrupulous.
- The **Pit Boss** commands the fear and respect of a crew of terrifying low-lives despite having soft hands and a slight build. How could this be possible?

## Hooks

- Even good players struggle to resist the allure of a **Train Robbery**. Make sure there's something worth stealing on board and get heisting!
- The **Ghost Ship** understands that it needs passengers and keeps trying to collect more of them, to predictably tragic ends.

---

1        depending on the nature of the crime and the kind of community, “dead or alive” or “definitely alive, what is wrong with you”

2        or Pilot, depending on the setting and vehicle

3        a.k.a. “the duplicitous right hand man” or “the Starscream”

# THE CHARIOT

## Locations

- The **Regional Branch** is a small outpost of a much larger and more powerful organization. Most of the employees here are not terribly connected with the mission and values of the greater entity.
- The **Docks** are vital to the flow of goods and trade. Not only are workers constantly bustling around here, loading and unloading vast shipments – there is also a considerable amount of illegal contraband passing through here.
- The **Show Garage** is a personal collection of impressive vehicles, many of them luxuriously maintained but rarely used.
- The **Work Camp** is a collection of temporary structures located near a task that needs to be completed, and soon. Everything here is plain, serviceable, utilitarian, portable, and about as cheap as possible to get away with.
- The **Augmentation Lab** is a well-kept secret but people keep coming out of it with enhanced bodies. What are they doing in there?

## Treasures

- The **Pegasus** is a legendary vehicle - faster, better storage, more unique custom features than anything your players have encountered so far. The kind of thing the **Driver** would be behind the wheel of.
- The **Ceremonial Plaque** is awarded to the top performer every month, in lieu of financial compensation or any meaningful change in the day-to-day job. It is an almost supernatural struggle not to immediately throw away the Ceremonial Plaque upon receipt.

## Names

Michael, DeAngelo, Vickers, Go, Trixie, Takumi, Herbie, Prix



VIII



STRENGTH.

# STRENGTH

## **Courage, Bravery, Compassion, Resilience, Vulnerability, Pet Ownership**

This is a fun one to talk about, because it seems incongruous at first that Strength is a woman patting a lion on the head.

One might imagine Strength to be an impossibly buff dude stackin' weights and getting yoked: but nay!

It's just this lady, giving a friendly lion a nice chin scratch.  
*Who's a good boy?*

Therein lies the message: Strength doesn't mean raw, physical strength, but strength of character, strength of resolve. This woman is not wearing armor, but she's not afraid of the lion. Even if she feels fear in this situation, she is not letting it affect her.

The Emperor tries to appear invulnerable in his suit of armor and mountain fortress. Strength appears vulnerable in a soft white dress in a field, but she's still willing to go toe to toe with a deadly animal: who, then, is the braver of the two?

A relationship with an animal is – unfortunately – one that we know is doomed to end in pain and loss. It's hard to fall in love with something that has a lifespan so much shorter than ours, but being able to form new relationships knowing full well that their loss is inevitable takes strength. Courage.

That's what Strength is: staring at the void, staring at pain, and saying "no". Not today. Today we find a sunny place and give our lion friend a chin scratch.



# STRENGTH

## Friends & Foes

- The **Volunteer Firefighter** is huge, strong of brain, kind of heart, and thick of skull.
- **La Résistance** is a small organization fighting an impossible battle against a large, well-funded **Goliath Empire**.
- The **Animal Accumulator** can't even go on a nice forest walk without dozens of local creatures following them. Maybe they shouldn't sing so much. They've made it their mission to care for all of these creatures.
- The **Restrained Pacifist**<sup>1</sup> seems like a coward, because they refuse to fight – but what they're *actually* afraid of is *what they become* when they are unleashed.
- The **Master of the Boat Oar** is so dangerous that they only bother to fight with incongruous objects in order to give their opponents a fighting chance.
- The **Gymnasiarch** is responsible for organizing sporting events that are entertaining to watch, and has little concern for their safety or practicality.
- The **Misguided Hero** is courageous and indomitable in their quest – it is unfortunate that their quest is actively harmful and they just haven't realized it, yet.
- The **Scarecrow** stokes and manipulates people's fears<sup>2</sup> in order to control them.
- The **Craven** talks a big game, but when the chips are down, they fold immediately<sup>3</sup>.

## Hooks

- The inhabitants of small village outnumber the bandits, but the bandits are so violent and imposing that they've got everybody terrified. If only a hero could step in...

---

1           it's just himura kenshin

2           while Strength is the card of courage, we're, as always, trying to consider the card's inverse, which (in this case) is fear.

3           TvTropes calls this the Miles Gloriosus after a two-millenia-old play. Also, I apologize for the poker metaphor.

# STRENGTH

## Locations

- The **Zoo** is home to a collection of many unique and esoteric creatures. Were they captured from the wild or are they rescues? Are they happy and well cared for<sup>4</sup>?
- The **Pride** is a wild location, home to a pack of dangerous creatures who regard this as their territory.
- The heavy, oppressive mist in the **Nightmoors** conceals illusions that reflect your players' worst fears.
- Legend has it that the narrow, winding path to the **Mountain Pass Redoubt** allowed a small contingent of true-hearted heroes to hold off an entire army.
- The **Dojo** hosts dozens of martial students. Maybe they will allow players to train with them, or maybe they're just looking to test their mettle against hardened opponents.

## Treasures

- Maybe the real treasure was **The Friends We Made Along The Way**<sup>5</sup>.
- The **Tooth Necklace** strikes fear into the hearts of everyone who sees it, and it gets stronger the more teeth that are added to it.

## Names

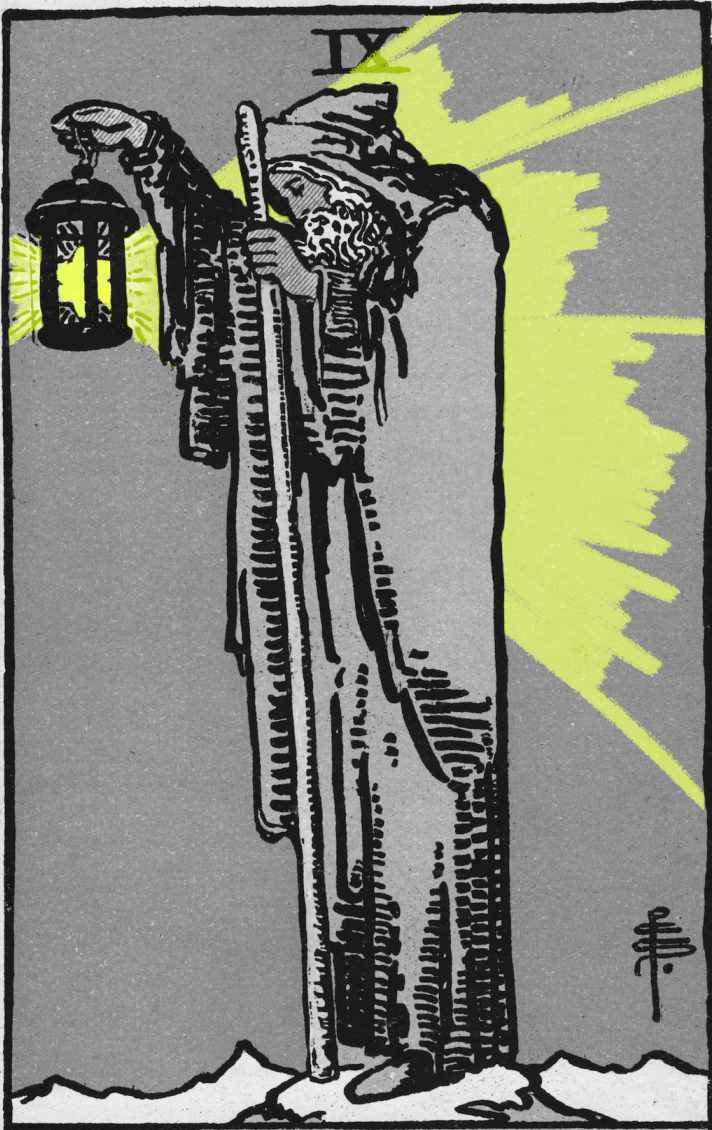
Leo/Leonidas/Leon/Leona/Leonard/Lionel<sup>6</sup>, Ariel, Hamza, Bernard, Callista, Orson, Dov, Arthur, Bjørn, Ursula, Mischa, Michael, Theodore/Theodora, Kaplan, Kyar, Shere, Zholbarys, Beowulf, Wolf, Lupe, Tala, Zella, Gawain, Yolani, Sokol, Baz

---

4 If this *is* a good place, it will invariably find itself under threat from an outside party who wants to take advantage of it for personal gain.

5 The Friends Would Still Like Some Treasure Though

6 blurred lions



THE HERMIT.

# THE HERMIT

## **Introspection, Introversion, Solitude, Loneliness, Keeping Your Star Safely Contained, The Property of Beard-Havingness, Bad Posture, Old**

The Hermit has gone somewhere, been alone for a long time, and returned with wisdom.

The Hermit exists in contrast with The Chariot: the Chariot drives, prioritizes, manages, and is utterly useless without others to carry them. The Hermit is self-directed and totally free: able to go anywhere and do anything, unrestrained by others.

Chariot: extrovert, Hermit: introvert.

The other contrast is with The Lovers, who exist totally and wholly within their relationship, growing around one another and becoming increasingly co-dependent, whereas The Hermit is strong and independent and don't need no man.

People who choose voluntarily to seek out total and complete solitude are often considered unusual: but the ability to define oneself outside of relationships to others, finding joy and meaning in self-direction, that's a muscle, too, a skill that people can develop. The abilities to be able to take shelter in one's own skin, to retreat, to introspect, these are vital to our development.

With all that being said, while the Hermit is possessed of wisdom, they are often awkward. Strange. Quiet. Eccentric.

# THE HERMIT

## Friends & Foes

- The **Wise Mentor**<sup>1</sup> might be too old to contribute directly, but their immense experience means that they can shape and train a new generation.
- The **Pinnacle** worked so hard to achieve their goals<sup>2</sup> that they have become disconnected, isolated, lonely, and a little bit crazy. It's not even clear if the thing they worked on for so long was worth the dedication!
- The **Black Sheep** is surrounded by others, yet still alone.
- The **Unintelligible** is simply unable to communicate meaningfully with others. Perhaps if they could be communicated with, they could be placated, but there doesn't seem to be any way to do so.
- The **Solitary Angel** was once good, but they have been trapped alone for so long that they have lost all trace of their humanity.
- The **Machiavellian** is highly social, manipulative, narcissistic, and utterly devoid of empathy for others. They have never once admitted to a mistake and they aren't going to start now.

## Hooks

- Your players are **separated!** The next phase of your adventure will have to be completed by the players operating individually.
- Only one person has the obscure knowledge that your players need to continue on their adventure. Unfortunately, they're – well, one of these hermit types. Kind of hard to track down.

---

1            this may seem like the world's most on-the-nose interpretation of The Hermit, because it is. That doesn't mean it's bad: wise mentor figures appear in something like 54% of all stories because they're useful to get the story started!

2            example in case: writing an entire book about how the Tarot might apply to tabletop RPGs

# THE HERMIT

## Locations

- The **Tiny Hut On the Peak of a Mountain in the Remotest Jungle** is about as far from society as it is reasonable to be. This kind of location is like catnip for recluses.
- The **Prison** is more social than you might give it credit for, but the inmates are still kept separate from society. Some are even kept in **Solitary**, considered a torturous and cruel additional penalty for the worst offenders.
- The **Distant Training Grounds** can turn even the most harmless mook into a full-fledged threat, given a bit of time and a lot of motivation.
- The **Cloister** is a self-contained little society of oddballs with an utterly confusing belief system.
- The **Lighthouse**, one of many in distant locations, must be kept lit every night to prevent nautical disasters.
- The **Once Busy Area, Now Abandoned** has the lonely feel of an empty mall. What happened to all of the people?
- The **Weeping Statue** sits within a fountain in an isolated location. It marks a place of solemn respite.

## Treasures

- The **Lone Wolf's Pendant**<sup>3</sup> makes its wearer stronger, but only when operating on their own.
- The **Lantern's** light always points in a specific direction, guiding the players to something specific.

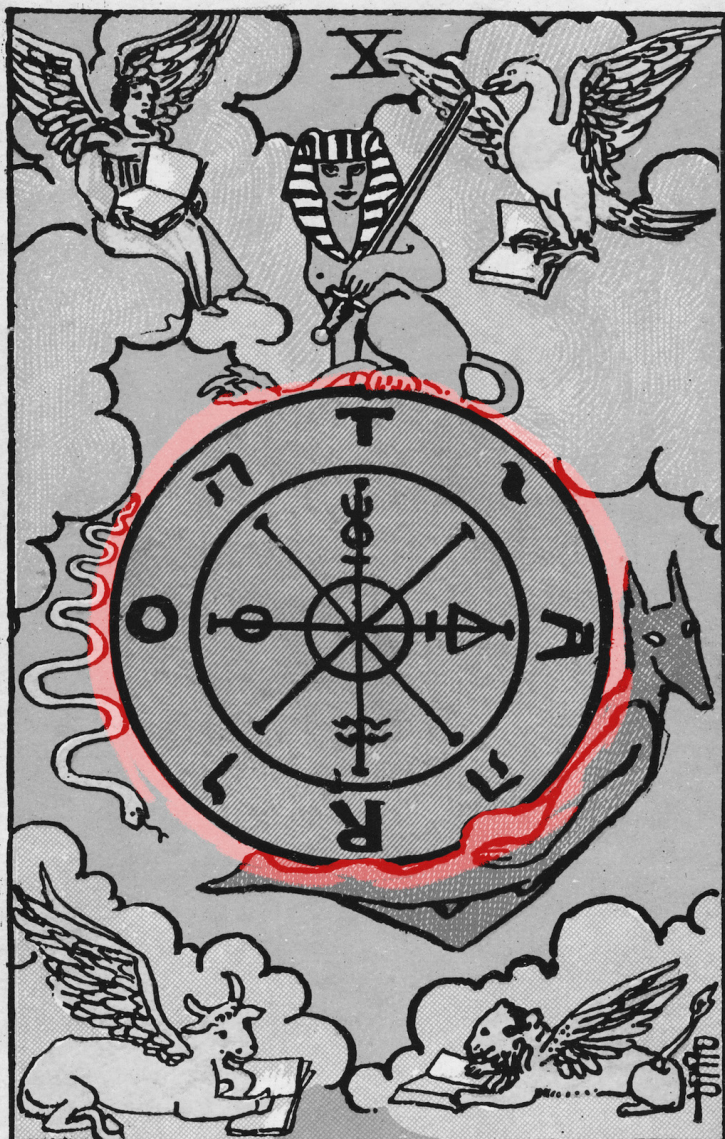
## Names

Aino, Alfred, Athena, Denzel, Enola, Isel, Lona, Uno, Eka, Scout, Ace, Tenzin, Roku, Sage, Strawberry, Veda, Won, Sophia

---

3 I'm not sure if I understand why "Lone Wolf" is such a common reference – wolves are pack animals, a lone wolf would be a lot less effective and happy than an average pack-having wolf. It should be a creature that customarily lives alone, right? "Lone Moose"? Or is that redundant, because moose already spend most of their time alone, but it's unusual for wolves?





WHEEL of FORTUNE.



# WHEEL OF FORTUNE

**Fate, Luck, Randomness, Coloring With Your Cool Animal Friends, Showing Off Your New Sword, Being Able To Support An Entire Cylinder With Only Your Incredibly Tight Buttcheeks, Pat Sajak**

The Wheel of Fortune means “random bullshit” and boy is this card ever covered in some random bullshit.

I’ve been mostly leaving out mention of the esoteric occult mythology while I talk about these cards, because if you read too much about Kabbalah your brain starts to pour out of your ears: it’s sort of a syncretic mishmash of “judaism but with the rails taken off after taking a bunch of hallucinogens”, astrology, alchemy, and Aleister Crowley’s sleep paralysis demons. The idea is, I think, if you pile enough bad ideas together they start to look like a coherent worldview<sup>1</sup>.

Anyways, that’s how this incredibly simple card ended up loaded down with a pile of symbols from astrology, hebrew characters, alchemical symbols, and a surprisingly thick-bootied Anubis.

Trying to read any concrete meaning into that is a fool’s game. This card is about one thing and one thing only:

Wheel! Of! Fortune!

The idea of the Wheel of Fortune<sup>2</sup> goes back thousands of years, to the point where it was already a time-worn cliché by Ancient Roman standards. King or peasant, whoever you are, you spend your life bound to the Wheel of Fortune: sometimes you’re up while other people are down. Sometimes you’re down while other people are up, and the turns happen entirely unpredictably.

---

1            any similarity to modern big-tent conspiracy theories involving adrenochrome and moon landings is purely coincidental

2            or “Rota Fortunae”

# WHEEL OF FORTUNE

## Friends & Foes

- The **Gambler** is almost pathologically willing to put everything on the line, often without much of a justification.
- For everything that could go wrong for the **Sad Sack**, it has gone wrong. They're profoundly unlucky. It's fun to play it for humor, but they are also very likely to be incredibly resilient.
- The **Fortunate Son** is the opposite of the Sad Sack - born into wealth, never suffered a day in their life, won the lottery, got in to the best school by accident.
- The **Dunce Confederate** is enormously pompous, whiny, lazy, badly dressed, pseudo-intellectual, demanding, slow, and convinced that everyone is out to get them. They will, once encountered, follow your players almost as if their life depended on it.
- The **Cursed** has invited some kind of extra juicy supernatural torment into their life.
- The **Captain Danger** is, honestly, not someone who should be in charge of other people's safety and well-being, considering how little regard they seem to have for it. Their risk-taking usually pays off – for them – although a lot of their underlings haven't been so lucky.
- **Lady Luck** doesn't believe in fortune. Either through magic or far more likely through sleight of hand, she manipulates her fortune so that she always comes out ahead.

## Hooks

- Your players owe a **significant debt** to a terrifying entity. Payments are coming up soon and the consequences for lateness are *dire*.
- In a chance event, it turns out that one of your players, despite their mundane upbringing, is **actually nobility**. There's a vast fortune and many jealous, angry new family members.
- High risk, high reward: it's time to pull a **heist**.

# WHEEL OF FORTUNE

## Locations

- The **Casino** is a classic location, flashy, dangerous, filled with gambling, bars, high-stakes games, high rollers flaunting their wealth, desperate folks putting it all on red, cheats, organized crime, vaults, heists, the works.
- The **Dragon's Hoard** is a vast pile of treasure slowly accrued over multiple lifetimes — protected by a dragon<sup>1</sup>. A dragon who is both extremely powerful and extremely motivated to protect their loot.
- The **Expedition Base Camp** is gearing up for an adventure that's either going to be incredibly lucrative or *nobody will ever be seen or heard from again*.
- A **Rick's Cafe** is a classy bar in a desperate location, filled with a steady supply of wealthy marks passing through and shady characters stealing from them.
- A **Bank** is a secure vault where the wealthy keep their money, providing financial services and security.
- The down on their luck end up in **Skid Row**, a part of the town given over to the poor, homeless and mad.

## Treasures

- The **Cursed Treasure Hoard** seems life-changing at first, but its negative effects are subtle and insidious.
- The **One-Sided Coin**, **Marked Cards** and **Loaded Dice** are invaluable tools for folks intending to cheat at games of chance.

## Names

Tresor, Lucky, Skarb, Dargums, Khajana, Kinz, Bahati, Felicity, Clover, Chance, Penny, Evangeline, Desdemona, Azar, Murphy

---

<sup>1</sup> depending on your setting the dragon might be more “metaphorical”, like, it might just be a very powerful guy with a dragon tattoo

XI



JUSTICE .

# JUSTICE

## Justice, Violence, The Property of Sword-Havingness, Accurate Weight Measurement

What is justice? Guess what, it's violence! Look at the sword that Justice has. That's not ornamental.

Deep inside your brain, in a dark place, there's a part that's been there for as long as people have existed: people who cheat or do wrong need to see consequences. Everything must be fair.

The mob have killed your family, or your dog: the only reasonable recourse is a roaring rampage of revenge. This is Justice in the Punisher sense: what has been taken from you is immeasurable so what must be taken in return is endless.

The thing is, the desire for vengeance is... outsized, hungry. We desire consequences that are way out of line with the original violation<sup>1</sup>. Of course, violence only begets more violence: lots of people are somebody's whole world, so every John Wick creates ten more John Wicks in their Wick wake.

As a result of having to deal with the fallout from a few too many John Wick Scenarios, thousands of years ago, society as a whole<sup>2</sup> decided that in order to keep every conflict from escalating wildly out of control, an impartial third party should step in and dole out a reasonable amount of vengeance. An eye for an eye. Reciprocal justice. State sanctioned violence.

Thus the scales: for every harm done to you, an equivalent amount of harm must be done in turn. It's only fair.

Jurisprudence is supposed to sound clinical, boring, legal, but at it's heart, it is a tall frosty Big Gulp full of violence.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 I know I've laid awake at night dreaming of exacting terrible vengeance on people who have wronged me in tiny ways.

2 citation needed

3 when you get to the bottom of the Big Gulp? It's **just ice**.

# JUSTICE

## Friends & Foes

- The **Revenge Sworn** is out to find the people who wronged them, and they won't stop until they've wreaked a terrible vengeance.
- The **Inspector Javert** is interested only and exclusively in enforcing the letter of the law. Authoritarian and stiff, they subscribe to a theory that the law has an unassailable moral mandate and devote themselves zealously to enforcing it.
- The **Honor Bound** is from a society where maintaining one's reputation is enormously important. They are very stringent about their own personal laws and codes, most of which have to do with maintaining the appearance of honesty and strength.
- The **Bounty Hunter** is willing to hunt anybody, for any reason, so long as there's a paycheck in it for them<sup>1</sup>. They just like their job.
- The **Blue & Orange Eternal** is vast and ancient and ascribes fervently to moral codes that seem nearly incomprehensible.
- The **Loophole Hacker** is brilliant at cleverly twisting codes, laws, and contracts to their own ends<sup>2</sup>.

## Hooks

- Your players have been **pickpocketed** of some small but important valuable or token amount of money, and word on the street will lead them right to the thief<sup>3</sup>.
- **Wrongfully accused of a crime**, your players now need to avoid the long arm of the law while they find out what really happened.
- A **serial killer** is out there... serially... killing.<sup>4</sup> Can they be brought to justice?

---

1 The "Private Investigator" is the less violent version of the same archetype, plus they get to say "dames" more.

2 Think "monkey-paw genie" or "a deal with the devil"

3 The less valuable the stolen object is, the more hilarious the collateral damage when your players explode the neighborhood.

4 this is widely considered to be (*checks notes*) bad

# JUSTICE

## Locations

- The **Lands of the McCoys and Hatfields** are properties divided long ago by a bitter blood feud that has gone on for multiple generations.
- The **Prison Industrial Complex** requires a ready supply of criminals to turn a profit, which is why so many seemingly trivial things are punishable by long prison terms. Even a simple infraction could snowball into jail time<sup>5</sup>.
- One of the reasons a **Kangaroo Court** is so terrifying is that they don't even pretend to make objective, fair, or even logical decisions. All of their rulings are motivated by something else — greed, politics, even showmanship<sup>6</sup>.
- The **Transcendental Holding Cells** are a prison as well, but what's imprisoned there are much more abstract than simple prisoners: gods, concepts, otherworldly creatures, curses, and the number 4<sup>23</sup><sup>7</sup>.
- The **Abandoned Police Station** was responsible for protecting the people here, until something went awry.

## Treasures

- The **Foreign Eye** is a gem that makes its carrier more effective against entities that have harmed them in the past<sup>7</sup>.

## Names

Valjean, Justin, Adalet, Eurydice, Nemesis, Regla, Tyr, Solomon

---

<sup>5</sup> one time Franz Kafka had a bad time with a Q99 form and wrote such a scathing indictment of it that from this point on incomprehensible human-created bureaucratic horrors are called Kafkaesque, and these are the exact kind of horrors to visit upon anybody who makes the mistake of wearing red on a white shirt day.

<sup>6</sup> if you draw “Wheel of Fortune” and “Justice” you are required by law to concoct a grim execution-based game show, that's just the rules

<sup>7</sup> UNO reverse card



XII



THE HANGED MAN.

# THE HANGED MAN

## A Different Perspective, Getting Stuck, Caught in a Snare Trap, I Woke Up Like This, Hangin' Out

With a name like “The Hanged Man”, this card sounds *way worse* than it is. I mean, it’s still *bad*, but the fella in the picture, here, is hanging by the foot, which is a darn sight better from the kind of hanging you might have been imagining, given the name “The Hanged Man”.

This card instead carries meanings like “a change of perspective”, on account of The Hanged Man looking at everything upside-downwards. He has a totally different viewpoint. If we were in Australia<sup>1</sup>, he would be right-side up and *you* would be the foolish one. The halo ringing his head also lets us know that this change in perspective is *working*: he’s unlocked *some* kind of wisdom from this fresh position<sup>2</sup>.

The Hanged Man is definitely trapped, and that unwelcome stasis is an important theme of the card. Whether he is trapped by his own devices or trapped by external forces isn’t entirely clear, but the one thing that is clear is that he is not going anywhere quickly.

---

1 I’m assuming you’re not reading this from Australia because honestly I am assuming that this book will, at best, be read by maximum 3 people, and none of them currently have plans to visit Australia

2 It could also symbolize all of the blood rushing to his head, slowly knocking him unconscious. Don’t hang upside down for long periods of time.

# THE HANGED MAN

## Friends & Foes

- The **Contented Royal** needs to be convinced that there's a problem that needs fixing in their domain, but they are too blinded by their own comfort to engage with the idea.
- The **Frustrated Creative** has been writing and rewriting the first few chapters of their novel for the past eleven years<sup>1</sup>.
- The **Sherlock Holmes**<sup>2</sup> is eccentric, with an unusual viewpoint that makes life difficult for themselves and the people around them — but they are brilliant at their chosen field.
- The **Obstructive Bureaucrat** has seemingly just the one goal in life: not to help you unless you have jumped over every conceivable hoop put between them and helping you.
- The **Rat Deserting a Sinking Ship** has determined that their own side is not as likely to win, and so has already concocted a plan to defect and reap the rewards.
- The **Trapper** is an indirect, defensive foe with a two part strategy. First: a *lure*, something irresistible to their prey<sup>3</sup>. Then: the *trap*, something elaborate and carefully planned.

## Hooks

- Your players need to **file a W8 form** to get their B9 certification before they can enter the city.
- A small town is caught in a **Time Loop**. At the end of the day, everything starts again from scratch, and only by unravelling the mystery of the Loop can your players escape.

---

1 (cries)

2 public domain, baby, he's all mine, suck it Arthur Conan Doyle

3 Without a sufficiently attractive lure, the trapper is entirely defensive and mostly harmless.

# THE HANGED MAN

## Locations

- The **Licenses, Certifications & Permits Office**<sup>4</sup> is a place where time itself seems to come to a standstill as functionaries very slowly receive, process, and reject forms.
- The **Tarpit** can be anything that pulls people in and doesn't let go — quicksand, ooze, a portal, even just a big hole.
- The **Trap-Filled Mausoleum** was designed, long ago, to discourage intruders. It is filled with the corpses of grave-robbers who underestimated its defenses.
- The **Nazca Lines** are a location with long, seemingly meaningless lines virtually everywhere. These lines only make sense and resolve into an image when viewed from a specific angle.
- The **Wall**<sup>5</sup>: a large, well-guarded barrier between your players and their intended destination.

## Treasures

- The **Writer's Block** is a large cedar wood block that absorbs the creative and intellectual energy of people around it, like a sponge, rendering them frustrated and ineffectual. When burned, it releases all of the captured creative energy in a manic, hallucinatory explosion of loose ideas.

## Names

Aang, Hank, Strawberry, Jimothy, Crabitha, Bort, Giniphyr, Wendeigh, Moon Unit, Dweezil, Zeppelin, Onyx Ice, Ashtrae

---

<sup>4</sup> This one shares some headspace with the Hierophant and Justice, with “institutional stasis” sitting at the center of the venn diagram between “institutional knowledge”, “a code of laws” and “being stuck”

<sup>5</sup> could also be a “river”, a “chasm”, a “mountain fortress” ...





# DEATH

## Dying, Being Dead, Shuffling Off the Mortal Coil, Kicking The Bucket, Croaking, Passing, Being No Longer With Us, Literally Any Change At All

I don't actually think that this card requires too much in the way of a detailed interpretive lens.

One of the gifts of tarot readers everywhere is their claim that Death doesn't have to mean "actual physical death at the end of a life" but it can mean any kind of transition: the death of the status quo in favor of a New Thing.

The reason for this, however, is to give the tarot readers an *out*: if they flip this card and their mark gasps and goes "my uncle Brandon just died!" then the cards seem spooky and magical and omniscient. If they look at it with the blank look of someone who doesn't understand how it could possibly be relevant to their lives, then it is time to cook: this card just means *literally any kind of change*.

In my expert<sup>1</sup> opinion, this is a load of horseshit. This card could not be any clearer in its intended interpretation. Death comes for all of us<sup>2</sup>. There's a king lying in his wake, and this priest is begging for mercy, but we all know that's not going to work: this black-clad conquistador riding a pale horse doesn't discriminate, negotiate, or even communicate.

This is a force that is inevitable, unstoppable, and eternal. The best we can do is keep it at bay, for a little while longer.

---

1 citation needed

2 as pointed out in the Hierophant (Pope) and High Priestess (Popess) cards, the Tarot's original life was as Catholic playing cards. The "memento mori", or *reminder that you will die*, is an enormously common theme in Catholic media, partially because the church found it an enormously motivating tool for growth and retention



# DEATH

## Friends & Foes

- The **Priest and Undertaker** have made death a large part of their business and must often walk a difficult tightrope between solemn, caring, and professional around folks who are at the lowest point of their lives.
- The **Extremely Rare Good Necromancer** has honestly found a pretty groundbreaking new method of automating away farm labor and they think they could usher in a new age of prosperity and peace if people could just get over the “ick” factor of using skeletons productively<sup>1</sup>.
- **The Lich** leans on one of our most long-lived fiction tropes: to attempt to live eternally is, on the face of it, evil and unnatural<sup>2</sup>. In order to live eternally, The Lich has to do something absolutely monstrous: their eternity must be bought and paid for in blood and horror<sup>3</sup>.
- The **Grief Overflowing** has allowed their grief over a lost loved one to consume and destroy them. If it seems remotely possible to get their lost one back they'll take it regardless of any collateral damage — if not, they'll sink into destructive nihilism and take anybody they can with them.

## Hooks

- Healing, both natural and magical, has stopped functioning: a stubbed toe will last weeks and even the young are becoming frail. Something is draining life itself from the land.

---

1 by literary convention, this kind of character is rarely allowed to exist: fiddling with life and death always comes at some kind of *terrible cost*, but weirdly in at least one prominent fantasy universe featuring both dungeons and also dragons, necromancy is just bad because “bones are icky I guess?”

2 i think this is kind of sour grapes, I mean, I'd do it if I could

3 for the sake of argument here, “The Lich” doesn't have to literally be an actual Lich, but any character who's attempting to do something horrible in order to prolong their own life: a vampire is The Lich, Dorian Gray is The Lich, a scientist inventing a controversial new life extension product is The Lich: and the rule is that if you have a Lich, they must be scratched

# DEATH

## Locations

- The **Shallow, Unmarked Graves Outside of Town** are where folks are buried when nobody wants any fanfare around their departure.
- The **Ghost Ship** is packed to the rafters with hard-working skeletons<sup>4</sup>. It's not clear where this ship is going or why.
- **Bonetown** and **The Bone Zone** have been removed from this section because I am just now being informed that it is actually some kind of double entendre<sup>5</sup>.
- The **Whispering Tomb** is very, very quiet. So quiet, in fact, that people walking its halls often hear just the gentlest whispers. Many are driven mad.
- The **Plague Temple** is constructed in the hollowed out corpse of a leviathan, its rotting, fleshy walls propped up with bone and sinew. The congregants here each promised their service in exchange for a cure for their loved one, but the work just spreads more pestilence.

## Treasures

- The **Pearl-White Chessboard Pendant** is heavy and awkward to carry around, but it allows for something that most people will never get: a chance. *Just one game*, with the highest stakes of them all.

## Names

Raven, Crow, Rose, Maurice, White, Gray, Poppy, Anastasia, Rena, Morrigan, Cypress, Thane, Dirge, Requiem, Sharon<sup>6</sup>

---

4           it's a well known skeleton fact that, for recreation, they like to dance, drum, and play the xylophone on their own spines

5           scandalous

6           Sharon, ferrywoman of the underworld, beloved by Human Resources

XIV



TEMPERANCE.

# TEMPERANCE

**Balance, Moderation, Negotiation, Patience,  
Stoicism, Boundless Chill, The Golden Mean  
Fallacy, Habit, Watering Down Your Drinks**

Temperance eats a lot of vegetables. Temperance has a gym membership. Temperance washes the bedsheets with the laundry. Temperance pays their bills on time. Temperance has their shit together.

Temperance is often confused for abstinence. “Temperance” movements in the past have pushed for the total prohibition of alcohol, for example: but that’s not a very good example of *moderation*<sup>1</sup>.

Anyways, that’s kinda given Temperance the impression of being something of a wet blanket, when — at worst, they’re just being practical. More of a warm blanket: because I’m something of a nerd, I believe that developing good habits through sustainable, thoughtful routines is a route to lasting happiness.

Relax, take your time, make a little bit of forward progress every day.

---

1        Some people, for whatever reason, *can’t* exercise moderation, and for these people it is totally reasonable to embrace total abstinence. Also: some things literally can’t be enjoyed moderately: they demand total commitment. There aren’t a lot of people out there who just casually enjoy heroin, or Warhammer

# TEMPERANCE

## Friends & Foes

- The **Bartender Therapist** is always there, wiping a glass, always willing to lend an ear<sup>1</sup>. Their advice tends to be phrased in the form of questions.
- The **Foreign Diplomat** is here to be very friendly and upbeat as they advocate on behalf of a distant, powerful, foul-tempered, unpredictable, violent entity who doesn't have your best interests at heart<sup>2</sup>.
- The **Scorpio** is a particularly dangerous foe, because, while they're ruthless in their campaign for power and influence, they're also thoughtful, careful, organized, and take good care of their subordinates. They command virulent loyalty among their followers, and they have an awful tendency to befriend or employ their enemies: it is a terrible shame they're fighting *against* you.
- The **Lode Balancer** believes that maintaining a perfect balance in the cosmos is vitally important. Unfortunately, the thing that they believe that's out of balance is something that would be considered monstrous to remove a lot of, say, for example, "humans" or "cities"<sup>3</sup>.
- The **Bonsai Gardener** is unbelievably ancient and has been shaping the flow of society for eons — by pruning large parts of society that don't adhere to their vision.

## Hooks

- Your players have been dispatched as **diplomats to a distant nation** to try their best to head off a war.
- Your players must use all of their fanciful powers and skills to solve a series of **basic, mundane tasks** like "fixing the sink" and "paying the bills".

---

1 as far as I can tell, bartenders like this are more of a narrative construct than a reflection of the behavior of real life bartenders

2 like the United States of America, or a dragon

3 Ra's al Ghul and Thanos are both Lode Balancers. Also, to be completely honest, I think this is a pretty ridiculous villain motivation.

# TEMPERANCE

## Locations

- **The Scales** are a part of the dungeon carefully balanced around a fulcrum: if the stuff on one side is heavier, it'll sink.
- Which is different from **The Scales**, a gargantuan mountain range in the shape of an ancient dragon.
- Not at all like **The Scales**, a currency exchange service that somehow manages to have the same exact stall in every city in the world, staffed by the same exact staff member.
- **The Scales**, on the other hand, is a legendary music academy that only accepts one student out of every thousand applicants.
- Then there's **The Scales**, a tavern for lizardfolk, featuring a hot rock sauna and shrimp skewers.
- Let's not forget **The Scales**, a collection of objects considered unusual in size.
- Or **The Scales**, a fish shop with the fattest, happiest, friendliest cat you've ever met living inside. If you ask the staff, they'll sell you anchovies to feed him.<sup>4</sup>

## Treasures

- The **Balance Patch** is one of a set of hundreds of sticky patches, coming in "lighter" or "heavier" variants. When applied to an object, they make it lighter. Or heavier.
- The **Silver Tongue** is a viscous silver potion that, when consumed, coats the tongue and the inside of the mouth — granting, temporarily, near supernatural levels of persuasion.

## Names

Libra, Pendo, Trutina, Chastity, Harmony, Patience, Prudence, Constance, Clement, Amity

---

<sup>4</sup> i'm going to level with you, some of these aren't terribly good adventure locations, I just got carried away with the pun





THE DEVIL .

# THE DEVIL

## Addiction, Dependency, Excess, Toxic Dependency, Materialism, Lust, Idle Hands, Contract Negotiation, Hiding in Details, Going Down To Georgia Looking For a Soul to Steal

Like Death, I think The Devil needs no introduction. Why, it's possible that you've heard of this scalawag before. He's a firmly established fella.

This, like The Hanged Man, is *also* a card that is thematically about being trapped, but in the case of The Devil, one is trapped by one's own desires or limitations in some way. Trapped in drug use, an ill-advised contract, a job that's lucrative but awful, or a toxic mindset.

Technically the kind of trap implied here is one that can always simply be walked away from. Theoretically, a heroin addict could just stop taking heroin<sup>1</sup>, or someone in a bad relationship could simply just leave that bad relationship — but it's never quite so easy, is it?

---

1 if they can survive the withdrawals

# THE DEVIL

## Friends & Foes

- The **Abstract Addict** is addicted to something that's not chemical in nature, but much stranger, like "watching drama unfold" or "exasperation".
- The **Ball and Chain** are a pair who clearly do not like one another at all, and yet, are always together<sup>1</sup>.
- The **Substance Mercenary** can be counted on to help out, so long as they are provided with something they badly need a ready supply of<sup>2</sup>. They're not reliable in the long term, though — they can always be bought out by someone with better supply.
- The **Toxic Dependency** is not pleasant to be around, or useful, or dependable, or kind. The only time at all that they are palatable is when they are concerned they are about to lose someone they consider theirs, at which point they become attentive and helpful. For a while.
- The **Hunger Demon** is simple, unintelligent, obedient, all they want to do is eat. They can eat anything.
- The **Greed is Good** believes in nothing more than the primacy of currency. They're very wealthy and, despite this, they are deeply concerned with becoming even more wealthy.

## Hooks

- It looks like your players are in some trouble with the local authorities. The **mysterious benefactor** could help out with that — your players will just have to owe them a favor.
- Your players have been offered a contract — an enormous cash sum for what seems like an extremely **simple, very innocuous delivery**.

---

1           it's up to you whether their sniping is actually hiding a deep affection for one another or if they legitimately have not been in love for decades

2           A vampire needing a steady supply of a rare blood type, for example, or a teenaged boy in need of a steady supply of barely dressed anime figurines, or a *me* in need of rent money

# THE DEVIL

## Locations

- The **Cursed Object Store**<sup>3</sup> contains many useful, seemingly miraculous objects that are, of course, all cursed.
- Oh no, it's a **Portal To Actual Hell**, that's a serious problem. Someone should close that **Portal to Actual Hell**.
- Good ol' **Treasure Chest with an Armed Trap**<sup>4</sup>.
- The **Fractal Wall Mural** is so detailed that one can stare deeper and deeper in to it, revealing valuable information and exposition, but dealing increasing psychic damage to the people who attempt to take it all in. It's easy to become obsessed, because every detail seems to contain an even smaller detail.
- The **Extractive Industrial Zone** has been set up to strip every last resource from this place, leaving nothing behind but environmental ruin.

## Treasures

- Try your very best to convince your players that the **Not Actually Cursed Amulet** carries a terrible curse. It doesn't, it's just a nice, valuable amulet<sup>5</sup>.

## Names

Damien, Shift, Randall, Adam, Wormwood, Iscariot, Adrian, Lilith<sup>6</sup>, Siren, Thatcher, Jezebel, Alecto

---

3        it's not named this, obviously, it's probably named something like "things you might need" or "blatant Stephen King rip-off junction"

4        this is one of the very most basics of the genre, like a 10x10 room

5        you know you can't make an amulet without breaking a few eggs

6        want a male demon name? hundreds to choose from. want a female demon name? all aboard the "lilith" train





THE TOWER.

# THE TOWER

**Disaster, Hubris, Collapse, Calamity, Catastrophe, Coup, Thunderstruck, Renaissance**

Death is bad, of course, but it's both inevitable and final. It doesn't capture the full spectrum of possible human catastrophe. For everything else, there's the Tower, a more general symbol of "oh, shit". It's a real Critical Fail of a card.

While "shit hits fan in a big way" is the primary meaning of this card, it's intended to be a depiction of the Tower of Babel, and so the card takes on the second meaning: hubris, struck down. The Tower was too tall, it never should have been built, and now this folly is collapsing back down to Earth.

This is a stock market crash card, a Titanic sinking card.

Everything has an upside, though, even catastrophe. Something ruined is an opportunity to build something newer, better — and, in fact, if a system is rotten enough, it is only through total upheaval that it can be replaced.

When the rickety old furnace finally dies, it's an expensive catastrophe... but it will be nice to have a new furnace.



# THE TOWER

## Friends & Foes

- The **Reconstructed** was once amongst the lowest of the low, but through grit and self-determination they have rebuilt themselves and are more resilient than ever.
- The **Scorched Earth Revolutionary** has become convinced that the only way to improve existing power structures is to utterly destroy them and rebuild from the ground up. They are willing to embrace any extreme in the pursuit of this.
- The **Utopian Architect** is building something spectacular. They will drag society into the beautiful, idealistic future of their dreams, no matter how many people need to suffer along the way.
- The **Penitent Knight** has sacrificed too many lives for their personal ambition already. What was the cost of their ambition? Whatever it was, it was too much and they refuse to pay it any longer.
- The **Bulwark** is deeply invested in the maintenance of the status quo and will fight to protect it.
- The **Necessary Evil** doesn't like what they have had to become to prevent the catastrophe, but they feel like they have no choice in the matter.
- The **Become Like Unto A God** has found some way to achieve an incredible, unstoppable, seemingly unlimited amount of power.

## Hooks

- With just a ragtag group of rebels, your players are going to have to topple an entire **Evil Empire**.
- The **Great Calamity** comes every 1000 years and nobody is sure how exactly that happens or what exactly it does<sup>1</sup>, but it has been just about 999 years since the last one.

---

1 "all records of the Great Calamity have been destroyed in some kind of unexplained disaster"

# THE TOWER

## Locations

- The **Remnants of a Long-lost Society** still stick around, in ruins<sup>2</sup>, after something terrible happened to them a very long time ago.
- The **Titanic** is a vast ship, the largest and most impressive ever built, and its captain is convinced that no harm could ever befall such a magnificent vessel.
- The **City Underground**<sup>3</sup> was once the city proper, but after a landslide and a significant rebuild it's only accessible through tunnels and ducts.
- The **Phoenix Nest**, found in the caldera of a volcano, contains nothing more than a pile of ash and a single, delicate egg.
- The **Can't Make an Omelas Without Breaking a Few Orphans** is a society that seems, at first, to be happy and prosperous, but everything is built around something terrible at its heart — something that people don't even want to talk about.

## Treasures

- The **Chronicle of the Final Days** is a series of books and journals collected from a lost society, in the time leading up to whatever befell them: it also serves as something of a treasure map as the writers make frequent mention of an important item.

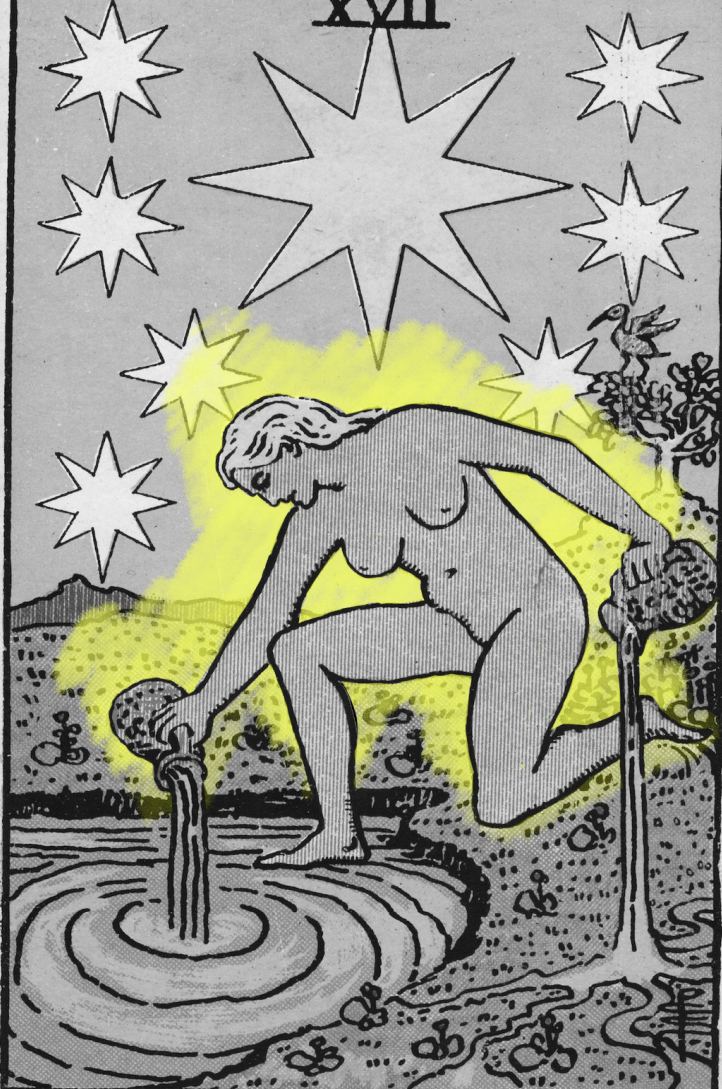
## Names

Calamity, Jinx, Mallory, Brescia, Halifax, Chernobyl, Banqiao, Pompeii, Transvaal, Vesuvius, Helens, Typhoon, Typhus

---

2 Two vast and trunkless legs of stone Stand in the desert...  
3 did you know that Seattle has one of these, for real?

XVII



THE STAR.

# THE STAR

## Narcissism, Celebrity, Vanity, ~~Hope~~, Healing

I have something to admit. Sometimes, my reads on Tarot cards do not align perfectly with the accepted standards. The Star is, at least according to most books on the topic, a card of hope, positivity, and healing, but I just see someone *utterly entranced by their own reflection*<sup>1</sup>.

It's not an intentional read of the card — the term “star” to indicate celebrity status doesn't seem to have taken root until the 1910's, some time after the initial printing of the Rider-Waite Tarot — but who am I to let authorial intent ruin a perfectly good pun?

Think of it as the focus on the self of The Hermit but without the ability to be alone, without introspection, growth, or empathy for others. The Hermit longs to be alone, The Star can not exist without being the center of their own little universe. The Star is selfish. The Star demands attention.

Before we judge too harshly, in some sense this is a healthy behavior. As a deeply awkward and embarrassing man of marginal consequence, I can respect that the thin line separating me from total ego death rests on the shaky house-of-cards of delusion. We, I think, benefit and even come to depend on the lie that we tell ourselves: that we are important, that we are special. Everybody deserves to feel like a Star now and again.

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1 I just think it's a better design: the Star is supposed to represent the rejuvenation and healing that comes *after* the destruction and catastrophe of the Tower, but why not just let the Tower own both the catastrophe and its rejuvenation in one card: giving the Star room to develop its own identity as the Card That Is About Fame And Narcissism? That's a topic that is insufficiently explored in a more classic reading.

# THE STAR

## Friends & Foes

- The **Never Meet Your Hero** is beloved by all, except for folks who have met them in person. It turns out that their legend is somewhat exaggerated: in real life they are very flawed.
- The **Diva** has let their fame go all the way to their head. They have an entourage and they refuse to show up at all unless their many pages of demands are met to the letter.
- The **Stalker** has developed an unhealthy obsession with their victim. They think about them all the time. They have a little shrine to them in their home. They follow them. They imagine being best friends.
- The **Notorious** is well-known for something *bad*<sup>1</sup>. Whatever shameful thing it is that they do (or did), their notoriety serves mostly to make their life worse.
- The **Fountainhead** is convinced that the world should be and *is* an every-person-for-themselves free-for-all, that the highest moral dictate is unrestrained selfishness. This tends to make them a very popular preacher among the wealthy and powerful<sup>2</sup>.
- The **Alien Geometry** is so beautiful and terrible that looking directly at them presents a significant risk to one's sanity.

## Hooks

- The players must **put on a show**<sup>3</sup>.
- One of the players enjoys a burst of sudden, **unexpected fame** for something they didn't actually do.
- One of your players has a skill or ability that hasn't seen a lot of use for the entire adventure: now is that skill's time to shine. Finally, a chance for that obscure specialty to be useful.

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1            i built all of the bridges in town but do they call me "Larry Bridge-builder"? no.

2            who badly need to manufacture a moral justification for their own selfishness and will absolutely glom on to whatever they can find, no matter how philosophically bankrupt it happens to be

3            to save the old community center!

# THE STAR

## Locations

- The **Perfectly Still Pool** offers up perfect reflections that are oddly mesmerizing. What lies under the surface?
- The **Grand Theatre** is intended to entertain a large number of people, with well designed sets, lighting, rigging, even trap-doors for dramatic entrances and exits.
- The **Tailor/Seamstress/Costume Shop/Barber/Salon** offer a wide variety of options to change one's appearance.
- The **Observatory** contains both a very big telescope and charts and murals detailing the cosmology of the universe. This is the sort of thing that can make one feel very small and inconsequential<sup>4</sup>.
- The **Cartographer's Guild** is responsible for upkeep and sale of *maps*. Not only can they help you find where you're going (for a price) but they can also sell you a map to an exotic destination, and they'll pay top dollar for new maps.

## Treasures

- The **Hallucinogenesis Shard** takes those who touch it on a revelatory, dreamlike journey through their own psyche.
- The **Pocket Disguise** is great for small changes to one's appearance on the go.

## Names

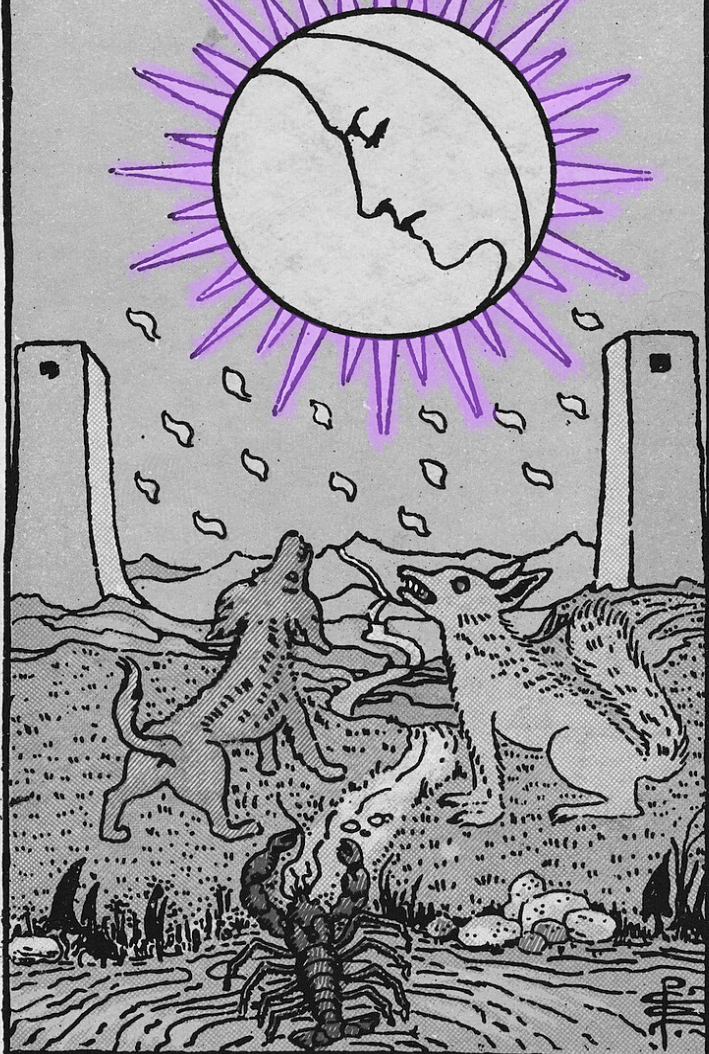
Marilyn, Dolly, Hepburn, Buddy, Brando, Presley, Lennon, Jackson, Spears, Cobain, Diaz, Bullock, Carey, Winslet, Gemini, Orion, Libra, Cygnus, Virgo, Vela, Crux

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<sup>4</sup> this is a bit of a stretch but the opposite of vanity is... a broad perspective?



XVIII



THE MOON.

# THE MOON

## Mirror Images, Illusions, Lies, Fear, Anxiety

Some people say that they see a face in the moon. There's no face in the moon. These dogs are getting very agitated at the face in the moon that doesn't actually exist.

This is the card of seeing things that aren't there.

It's kind of funny: our tendency to take random noise and weave it into patterns and stories, even when they don't exist? That's how the Tarot works, too! There is no card that better captures the Tarot than The Moon.

It's easier than you might think to create media that feeds into this mindset. Lots of details, all interconnected, all rich in symbolic meaning, all open-ended, specific enough to seem like they mean *something* but vague enough that that something can be *whatever one wants it to be*.

Some might even point out that most things in life are concepts that don't actually mean anything outside of the context of a gigantic made-up pattern we've all agreed upon. Love isn't a tangible thing that exists, and most money is just electricity dancing around on a computer somewhere. Why, what you're looking at right now is just squiggly black lines.

# THE MOON

## Friends & Foes

- The **Quixotic** has deluded themselves into the impression that they are a grand and impressive hero. They are probably going to get themselves killed.
- The **Lovelorn** is willing to go to hell and back for a romantic partner who... actually, isn't all that in to them<sup>1</sup>.
- **Ox is Short for Oxford** seems to be a big dumb lunk, but they are actually very intelligent, preferring to come off as huge and dim-witted to throw people off their guard.
- A **Munchausen Knight** is committed to protecting their ward from all manner of threats, even though they appear to be concocting most of the danger themselves.
- The **Mad Conspiracist** believes in something that is utterly absurd. In a twist of fate, it turns out to be completely true.
- An **Arch-Enemy** is a dark mirror representation of one (or all) of your players' characters — their nemesis, a reflection and amplification of their worst qualities.
- The **Absurdist Demigod** has become so powerful that they have ceased to think of individual lives as meaningful in any way, and simply acts to entertain themselves.

## Hooks

- Every time your players are about to find the Big Boss, the villain at the end of a quest or major arc, they find them **already dead, their eyes gouged out** and replaced with opals.

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1      what if Eurydice was just being polite the whole time

# THE MOON

## Locations

- The **Potemkin Village** is a fake village, constructed on stilts and hastily painted to look impressive from afar — perhaps to impress visiting nobles, or perhaps as a trap.
- The **Hall of Mirrors** confronts people with dozens of their own reflections. The deeper in that they get, the more that these mirrors reflect.
- The **Mirage** looks like a beautiful watery oasis in a dry, sandy desert, but it was just a trick of the eyes, and nothing.
- The **Fool's Paradise** is a ratty resort filled to the brim with cheap entertainments, watered down liquor, and luxuries that are easy to tire of, crowded with scammers eager to fleece patrons with extended stay packages.

## Treasures

- The **Illusory Crystal**<sup>2</sup> allows its holder to project an image of themselves, with sound, for a short distance.

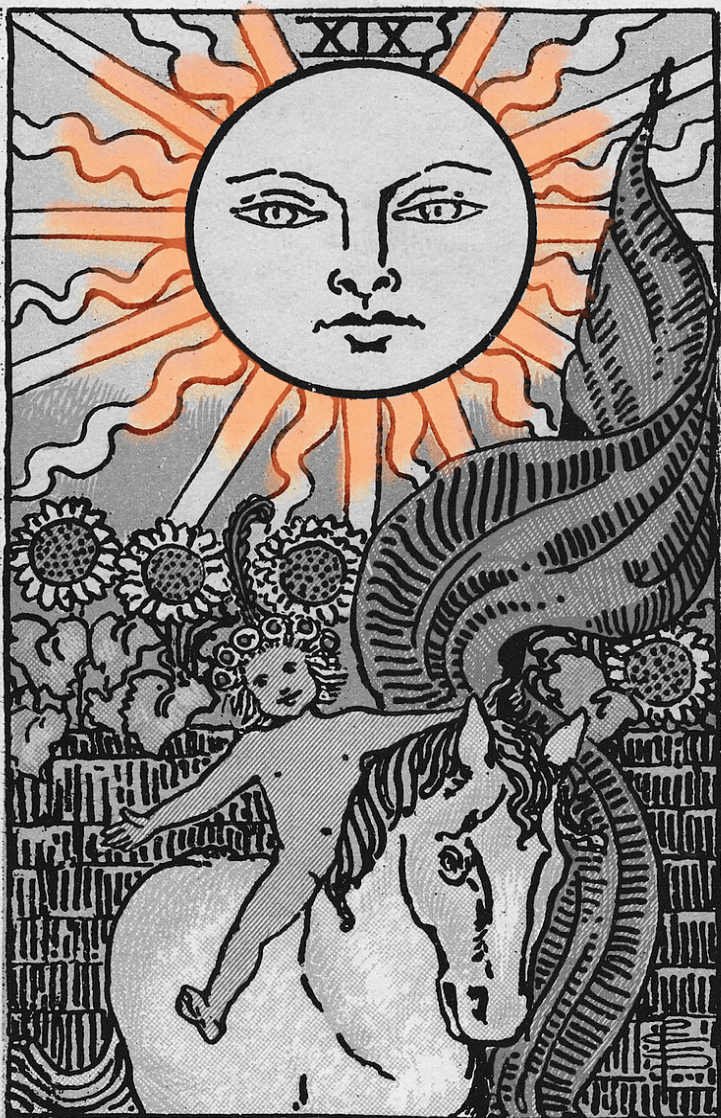
## Names

Lua, Luna, Selene, Europa, Titan, Ganymede, Callisto, Dia, Ersä, Rhea, Tethys, Helene, Atlas, Tàrvos, Fornjot, Kari, Titania, Oberon, Ariel, Miranda, Ophelia, Max, Deimos

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2        it could be a “holographic broadcast chip” in a science fiction story - uh, actually, you know what, if I want to include sci-fi name analogues in footnotes throughout this whole book that’s going to take up way more space and patience than I can muster, forget I said anything





THE SUN .

# THE SUN

## **Optimism, Truth, Light, Solarpunk, Naked Horse Rides, Success, Childishness, Innocence**

We've been through a dark set of cards, you and I, but finally we've made it through to The Sun.

There's no negative interpretation here: The Sun is a good card. I guess the Sun earned it by being the thing that all life on Earth depends on and rotates around.

The Sun is all good vibes and warm days. This is a beach vacation. The only people who don't like the sun are vampires and software developers.

There's a certain naivete and childishness to being this optimistic: the naked child on that horse is happy in a pretty uncomplicated way. Don't they know that they have responsibilities to attend to?



# THE SUN

## Friends & Foes

- The **Shonen Hero** is young and so optimistic and determined that they'll win the day, even if they aren't the smartest or most skilled.
- The **Baby Soft** can always convince people to help by just being so soft and sweet and helpless. They're so naive you can't help but want to protect them, right?
- The **Helpful Stranger** doesn't need to provide assistance, they just do, because that's the right thing to do.
- The **Good Turn Deserves Another** remembers a time that they were helped and are looking to return the favor.
- The **Well-Meaning Extremist** believes in their goals and ideals so strongly that they are blind to the damage that they can cause if applied naively.
- The **Recurring Comedy Antagonist** makes up for not being terribly dangerous by being funny to keep defeating.
- The **Lawful Stupid** is good, good in an uncomplicated black-and-white way that makes them very easily to manipulate. The ability to perceive shades of gray would make them much more effective.

## Hooks

- The **Beach Episode** is a great opportunity to take your players and put them in a different context than they're used to: sure, they're brave heroes who stare down the odds of death every day, but what happens when they have to throw a birthday party?
- The **Calm Before the Storm** is a period of rest and relaxation before a big event. Players can shop, level up, regain hit points, tune their lutes, sharpen their swords, and generally hit a relaxing beat before continuing on their journey. Metagamers have grown to fear a particularly generous calm before the storm: a full heal and an equipment shop right next to a suspicious black door? Things are about to get *real saucy all up in here*.

# THE SUN

## Locations

- The **Hope Spot** - a physical representation of a moment of respite or hope in a dark place. An oasis, a shaft of light with a flower growing, a pleasant clearing in a terrifying forest.
- The **Weird Little Town** exists in a place where no town should exist, occupied by unusual creatures or people. Despite its strangeness, it's still a place to restock and rest.
- The **Treasure Hoard** is just an uncomplicated pile of riches. That's nothing but upside! - so long as greed doesn't ruin it. But that won't happen, right?
- The **Tea & Potion Shop** is a warm, friendly place, with a greenhouse and a lot of regulars.
- The **Gardens** are host to a plethora of well-maintained plants, some dangerous, many of them delicious.
- The **Desert Dunes** have to deal with *too much* sun. The heat here is a threat, and managing shade and water start to become a matter of life and death.

## Treasures

- The **Warm Ring** doesn't do any one thing well, but instead makes a lot of little things slightly more effective.
- The **Dazzling Light** is not just useful for lighting – it's also so extremely, disarmingly bright that it can be used to briefly stun the unwary.

## Names

Ray, Sol, Sunny, Apollo, Cyrus, Elio, Helia, Helios, Ravi



**JUDGEMENT.**

# JUDGEMENT

## A Great Reckoning, Rapture, Rupture, Game Over, The Final Chapter

An enormous percentage of the world's population subscribes to one religion or another that calls for a Great Reckoning of some kind.

Even Flat Earthers believe in the day, some small amount of time in the future, when everybody finally comes around and realizes that the Earth has been flat the whole time and that they were right, all along. The promise of "this will all turn around in our favor, not long from now", is extremely common in cults of all stripes.

It's again important to note that behind the Rider-Waite Tarot and its mishmash of gnostic nonsense and occult bugaboos, lies the Tarot of Marseilles, a deck of playing cards used by French Catholics: what this card depicts is judgement day.

At some point in the future, God himself, so the theology has it, is going to come down, fold up the gameboard and toss all of his pieces back into the box.

Like with most any weird cult reckonings, the date that this is going to happen is always not long, now. Even after thousands of years, the apocalypse is always just a handful of months away.

I can't imagine the effect on long-term decision making it has to assume that everything is going to wrap itself up neatly, on its own, within our lifetimes. I'd think we should check if people believe that before we let them hold public office.

So Judgement is "The End". The final boss. The high muckamuck. The climax. It's time for the story to wrap up and for all of the loose-ends to get tied up, before we put all of the pieces back into the box, and if we're going to feel like we got the most out of this experience, we want to see a grand finale to really cap it off.

# JUDGEMENT

## Friends & Foes

- The **Doomsayer** preaches that the end is near, predicting an apocalypse, sudden and dramatic, and soon.
- The **Not Today** is a hero of last resort, willing to put their life on the line to buy just a little bit more time for our heroes.
- A reluctant villain to the very end, the **Redemption Equals Death** saves the day at the last minute, protecting everyone at the cost of their own life.
- The **Apocalypse Agent** isn't just predicting the apocalypse but actively working to bring it about. Perhaps they think that they will be exempted, perhaps they are being compelled, or perhaps they think that humanity deserves eradication, but whatever their motivation they are on the side of the end.
- The **Big Bad** has been the true villain behind the events of the story this whole time.
- The **Final Boss** is intended to test all of the skills gained throughout the adventure, an ultimate challenge. The most difficult, high-stakes battle the players will face. It's time to use those saved up potions!
- Oh, you think you've defeated the Final Boss? You fool! That was just Stage 1 of a **Multi-Stage Boss**. Bigger, nastier, more abstract, this model has more wings, more eyes, and towers above its foes.

## Hooks

- The **Reminder of the Stakes** is an event designed to refocus our players on the task at hand. A key NPC is killed, a castle falls, the Big Bad makes concrete forward progress on their plan – something carries us closer to the bad ending.
- The **Brush With Death** is there to keep the stakes high at the story's climax. Someone needs to die, almost die, or metaphorically die for the story to feel weighty.

# JUDGEMENT

## Locations

- The **Ominous Tower** is the last structure standing, reaching to the heavens, proclaiming the villain's impending victory.
- The **Post-Apocalyptic Landscape** serves to show what happens when the heroes fail. Nothing remains except ashes and the remnants of society.
- The **Place Beyond Time and Space** establishes that this reckoning, if it isn't stopped, won't just end one story but all stories, forever.
- The **Last Redoubt** is the final fortification protecting humanity. When it falls...

## Treasures

- The **Power of Friendship** was the real treasure all along, and it's the only way to win in a situation this dire. All of the allies you've made, all of the skills you've gained, all of the clever tricks you've learned along the way intervene to help in your time of need.
- The **Single Tear of Resurrection** can bring a hero back from the brink of death.

## Names

John, Daniel, Ezekiel, Wormwood, Woe, Gog, Uriel, Michael, Raphael, Gabriel, Geddon, Arma, Quiyama, Ragnarok



XXI



THE WORLD.

# THE WORLD

## Completeness, Achievement, Wholeness, Denouement

That's it! You did it!

You reached the end! You defeated the final boss!

You watched the credits! You found the monster at the end of this book!

There's a sense of emptiness to it, a whole vibrant world disappearing before your eyes. Maybe there will be a sequel, maybe you can go back - but it'll never be the same as your first time.

I hate this part most of all. Even a good story has to come to an end eventually, and the better the story the harder it is to go back to The World.

The cycle, however, continues: maybe not with this story, but with another, and every pass through you grow and evolve.

The World is also a place for metanarrative exploration. It describes the story itself, and so it can be a useful placeholder for the idea of the story.

# THE WORLD

## Friends & Foes

- The **Heroes From an Earlier Era** were the ones who rescued the world the *last time* that everything was on the line. They can still hit hard and their technique is legendary, but they aren't as sharp or clear as in their halcyon days.
- The **Aeon** is older than time, cryptic as heck, and utterly certain that the story will end well. They offer a key bit of information or artifact.
- The **Iconoclast** has begun to see the pattern of the story, the cycle, and what they're trying to do is to break free of it rather than continue to feed in to it.
- The **True Believer** has heard of that same cycle and they're wholly devoted to defending, maintaining and further propagating it.
- The **Eternal** has simply *been around* for a very long time.
- The **Chessmaster** has been manipulating everybody else throughout the story to try and bring their own plans to fruition.
- The **Nihilist Void** is inevitably going to win, but their unlimited power is offset by the useful detail that they're supernaturally patient so they don't mind waiting just a little longer.

## Hooks

- The players are astonished to encounter a local **Play Recapping Their Adventure So Far**. It's a good way to both re-tell the story up to this point and also see it from different perspectives.
- In **The Big Goodbye**, players get an opportunity to have one last interaction with their favorite NPCs.
- Players who spend too long in the Fantasy Realm become infinitely powerful, but gradually go insane, which is why **You Have To Leave**.

# THE WORLD

## Locations

- The **Portal Home** signifies the end of the adventure: our heroes returning to their mundane lives, improved and changed by the events that have transpired.
- The **Ship** gives the players a kind of freedom that they've never had before: now they can go anywhere.
- The **Clock Tower** is an utterly deterministic space, everything fully planned before arrival.
- The **Lemniscate Fractal** is an interdimensional place containing doors to all kinds of different worlds at all kinds of different times.

## Treasures

- The **Ouroboros Ring** allows for time itself to be rewound to correct one error in the timeline.
- The **World Map** provides an overview of the whole entire world, often with fun details to explore.

## Names

Atlas, Amaia, Amit, Finn, Eric, Erica, Phoenix, Gwen, Khalid, Nitya, Constantine, Cantor, Zermelo, Anaximander, Apeiron, Zeno, Russell, January, December

**THE  
MINOR  
ARCANA**

# THE MINOR ARCANA

**The remaining 56 cards of the Tarot** are the Minor Arcana — cards with a suit: the Ace of Wands, the Seven of Pentacles, the Four of Hams.

And that's a lot!

Which is why... the book ends here, for now! That's right! You just get the Major Arcana, and nothing more! The last half of this book is locked behind something even more insidious than a paywall, an ... attention wall?

Honestly, if this first third of the book becomes wildly, career-definingly popular, I'd be happy to finish the last two thirds, but I'm not going to lie: I regard that as pretty vanishingly unlikely. (Prove me wrong, internet.)

Anyhow, uh... thanks for reading!

<3 - Cube Drone