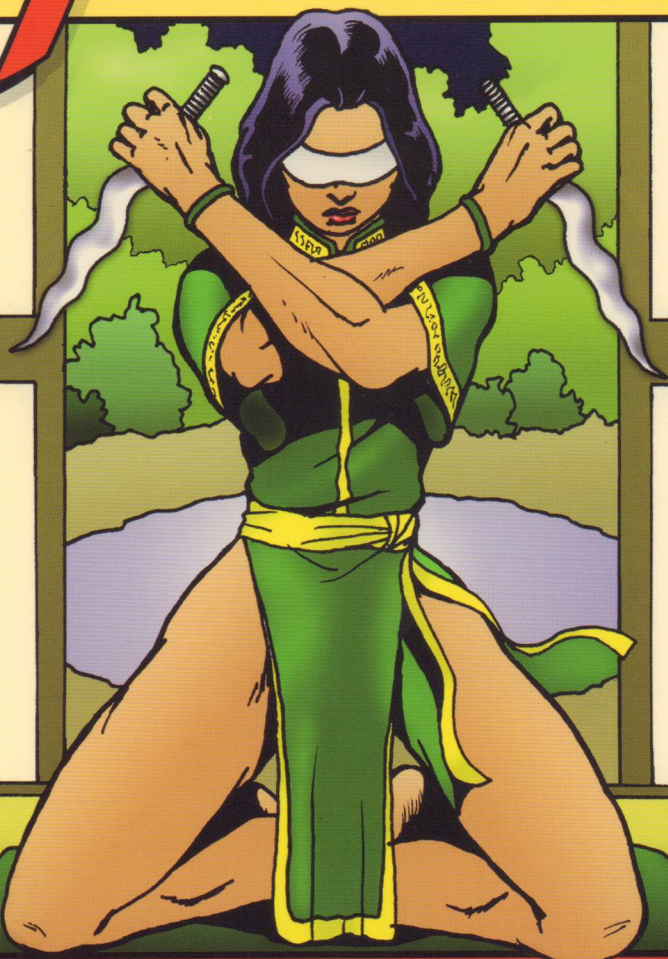


Fradella

ADVENTURE TAROT

WITH HEROES AND VILLAINS OF THE iHERO™ UNIVERSE



by **FRANK FRADELLA** with art by **J P Dupras**

Fradella ADVENTURE TAROT

Featuring Heroes and Villains
of the iHero™ Universe

Created by Frank Fradella
Illustrated by JP Dupras



U.S. Games Systems, Inc.

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Dedication

For Jade, my Lady Zmed, who showed me where to find the truth.

Acknowledgments

Extra special thanks for this deck must be given to Katrina Hutchins, who was instrumental in the early stages of this project.

Thanks to JP Dupras; who’s art continues to impress me and who remains, to this day, the best man for the job.

To Pam Gaulin; my eternal gratitude for getting this into the hands of the right people.

And to the right people—AnnMarie, Elizabeth, and Stuart—thank you for sharing my vision and giving it an audience. Special heartfelt thanks must be given to Jody for her amazing design on the cover, box, and book set. She’s turned this into something more amazing that I ever dreamed it could be.

I’d be just plain remiss if I didn’t give thanks to Pete, Dave, Frank, Garrett, Jon, Travis, Jimmy, Mike, and Gary. Scott Kuhnel deserves some of the blame here, too, as it was he who handed me my first polyhedron.

Last, but by no means least, there are the folks at iHero; writers, artists and readers, past and present, who have stood by me all these years. They’ve all got my thanks, but Sean Taylor, in particular, can take a double helping.

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Preface

On January 1, 1999, right in the middle of the dot-com boom, a new and exciting e-zine (electronic magazine) went live on the Web. That magazine was called *Cyber Age Adventures* (CAA), and for the next three years, we would deliver some of the finest fiction in the world. In fact, we did our job so well that *Writer's Digest* awarded us the Grand Prize in their Zine Publishing Awards in 2000.

Our goal with the magazine, myself and those who joined me later, was to deliver groundbreaking, thought provoking stories in superhero settings. And that's an important distinction there—that superheroes are a setting, not a genre.

What that means is that there are certain rules one must obey when telling a CAA story. The same way a writer would heed certain details when setting a story in deep space or underwater. But beyond those rules, we have the freedom to tell any *type* of story you can imagine. Romance, horror, science fiction, mystery, suspense, adventure—the gamut lies wide open before us, and we continue to take full advantage of that freedom.

The simple fact is that we tell stories about people. They just happen to be people with superpowers, or people who wear costumes. But people nevertheless.

It's that humanity in our characters that makes them such ideal candidates for representation in the tarot. They have the same basic needs and worries as you and I. The same joys and fears. And that goes for the villains, too. You won't find any cardboard stereotypes in our bad guys. Just normal people whose greed or anger gets the better of them.

Introduction

Superheroes have been around for decades, since the earliest days of radio and the pulp novels. When comic books came along, they began to measure superheroes in *ages*, like the Golden Age, or the Modern Age. When I put that first issue up on the Web on New Year's Day, I believed we were ushering in a new age of superheroes—the Cyber Age.

Though many of the settings and imagery in this deck may seem more modern than is usual for a tarot deck, upon closer scrutiny you'll find all the same hidden secrets, all the same wisdom, just waiting to be unlocked. This tarot deck features the characters from the iHero™ Universe* and takes our journey to a new level, allowing you, the reader, to examine the modern mythology.

It seems there's no doubt about it—the future of superheroes is in the cards!

And so is yours.

Frank Fradella
Boynton Beach, FL
April 2002

*Stories about these characters are available in print anthologies from Gold Rush Games (www.goldrushgames.com). You can also visit iHero Entertainment (www.ihero.net) for new stories, updates, and interviews with the creators.

Although we can trace the tarot back at least as far as the twelfth century, its true origins are lost to us. There's some evidence to support that gypsies are largely responsible for its widespread use, and introduction to so many vastly different cultures. Beyond that certainty, most of what we know about the tarot is myth and conjecture, with a strong smattering of fact thrown in.

The Fradella Adventure Tarot, on the other hand, has a history all its own. Understanding where these images come from and from what stories inspired them, you'll gain a much better grasp of their divinatory meanings, along with increasing your enjoyment of the deck.

First of all, before we truly begin with the exploration of this most unique deck, it's important to remember that while the tarot may at times be astoundingly accurate in its predictions, the only certain future is the one that you create. The tarot merely shows you the most likely outcomes to the forces that are present in your life right now. Those forces are nothing more than the momentum created by your own movement through life. They're the result of your own choices. Nothing more.

Therefore, when reading the cards, remember that it has always been your decisions and actions (or inactions) which have led you to your current place in life, and that the tarot is most effective when used as a signpost on your journey, pointing to what's up ahead. Whether or not you continue to follow your current path is entirely up to you! That being said, let's explore the tarot a bit more...

The Tarot's Legacy

Even the most casual observer can see the similarities between the ancient tarot and its modern counterpart, the playing cards. Both have four suits, both are numbered Ace through 10, with “court” cards following. The suits have changed some over the years, of course, but it’s not hard to see the evolution if you know where to look.

The original suits of the tarot (and I use the term “original” loosely), and even those in many of its modern incarnations, are Wands, Cups, Swords, and Pentacles.

The Wands are the suit of growth or energy. They symbolize things in motion or activities being done. Because of that, the Wands are almost always shown in bloom, or with some small greenery growing off of them. In time, the Wands (also called Rods and Staves) grew shorter, and artists chose to focus on the bloom, rather than the staff itself. Eventually, we were left with nothing but the shrubbery, or clovers, and they became the suit of Clubs.

The Cups are perhaps the least obvious transition, but if you understand that Cups are the suit of emotion, it’s easy to see how they became the suit of Hearts. Generally in the tarot, and the Cups in particular, water represents feelings and emotions. Stormy seas in the background of a card would mean a turbulent time for affections. Likewise, a calm and peaceful lake would reflect the serenity a person is feeling. The Cups are the holders of such emotion, and when you draw a card in this suit, you should pay special attention to relationships for the Querent (the person asking the questions).

Swords are the suit of conflict and struggle. Sometimes, in their depiction on old cards, they were shown as short

swords or even daggers. As the artists continued to simplify the imagery the once-mighty sword was reduced to a spade—a short, pointed gardening tool, not unlike a shovel.

Last but not least, we have the Pentacles, which are the suit of money and wealth. Is it any wonder that they became the suit of Diamonds when all was said and done?

These are the origins of our own standard deck of cards, their mystery revealed at last. And yes, somewhere along the way we lost one of the court cards, but it’s still the same deck underneath it all.

In the Fradella Adventure Tarot, we’ve evolved the suits once more. Wands have become Staves, a common tool of the modern crime fighter. Cups have become Masks, for they too convey emotion (or contain it). Swords have become Blades, for obvious reasons, and finally, Pentacles have become Discs, as the concept of currency expands to incorporate information in the digital age.

The Major Arcana

There are 22 cards in a standard tarot deck that bear no resemblance to those in our current playing cards, and they are the Major Arcana. (The word *Arcana* means secret.) And it's said that the Major Arcana, or Big Secrets, are the keys to our own subconscious where all the answers lie. That's why each of the Major Arcana here are called Keys, numbered Key 0 (The Fool) through Key 22 (The World). The other 56 cards of the tarot deck are called the Minor Arcana.

Some scholars have spent years attempting to understand the full breadth of knowledge that the Major Arcana offers, but like any good secret it's well kept, hiding within the imagery of these mystic artifacts.

The important thing to remember when reading these cards, either for yourself or others, is that the Major Arcana is first and foremost a story. It's an amazing tale of humanity, in all our foolishness and glory. Most of all, it's a story about a journey, begun with one blind leap of faith into the unknown. As we examine the Major Arcana in the following pages, I'll relate the steps of that journey, and why these heroes and villains best exemplify that portion on the path. This isn't a story about any one gender or race. It's the story of us all, and what we have the potential to become.

Being unnumbered, there's some debate as to whether The Fool belongs at the beginning or end of the Major Arcana. It's a question that scholars of the occult have pondered for years, but here in this deck there's no question that The Fool belongs at both. The journey of the Major Arcana, begun by The Fool, is not a straight line, but a circle. It is its own beginning and end. And just as every door that closes opens a window, so too is the journey of The Fool about opportunities.



KEY 0 — THE FOOL

Here we see Arachnid, one of our Core Heroes, as he takes that first fateful step from his homeworld and comes to Earth. His eyes are skyward, blithely unaware of the dangers that such a planet may pose to a four-armed alien, just as he is ignoring the six-armed bounty hunter who follows him.

In the three-part story “Arachnid,” our hero had spent a life being hounded and persecuted by those around him because he was different. He had been born with only four arms, while the rest of his people were born with six. When he learned of Earth, with its two-armed people, he believed that we would welcome him as a unique gift. Little did he understand that his appearance would seem freakish to us, and thus mark him as an outcast even more so than on his home planet.

It is this folly that makes Arachnid the perfect candidate for The Fool. His is a story begun without forethought, but with a great deal of hope. It’s about the beginnings of a journey. It’s also a reminder that the things that have troubled us, will continue to nip at our heels until we stop and deal with them. They cannot be outrun.

Arachnid was born different than his fellow arachnae in more ways than one. He was also born with the ability to reduce his size to that of an insect, a power that has saved his life more than once. It’s no wonder that Arachnid takes on such enormous proportions in this card, as he finally feels free to be himself. He is now as large as his hopes and dreams allow him to be.

Finally, it should also be noted that The Fool’s pouch includes the four elements that he’ll need on the next step of his journey: Staves, Masks, Blades, and Discs. He doesn’t know how to use them yet—but he will.



KEY 1 — THE MAGICIAN

Arthur C. Clarke once said that, “any significantly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” It’s no surprise then that Pulsar, master of the engineering marvel, is our Magician.

When he’s not in the Pulsar armor, safeguarding the public, billionaire inventor Ben Holliday is just a man. But, in or out of the armor, he’s a man who’s learned to use the tools that The Fool contains in his pouch. They are displayed on the table before him, with a staff of power arcing overhead. It’s the exercise of that power that opens up the infinite possibilities of the world for him.

Through all the stories featuring Pulsar, it’s his near-mystical ability with electronics that allows him to save lives, or vanquish his foes. Only the Magician possesses this innate power. This is the next step on the Fool’s journey, the mastery of the material world.

There are other areas of life, such as those of the heart or spirit that even Pulsar can’t touch. They’re beyond his bailiwick, but creating his armors and gizmos are a vital step in his development. The Fool has become The Magician and is beginning to learn to use the materials at hand to accomplish what he wants. It’s the exertion of willpower that makes the Magician powerful, and not the items he builds.



KEY 2 — THE HIGH PRIESTESS

Peering through the windows of the United Nations building, Etheria offers you a knowing smile. On either side of the window, the frame shows us two pillars, one dark, one light, signifying the balance of positive and negative forces. In her hand, she holds a folder full of classified documents as the moonlight reflects brightly off the window.

The High Priestess is the keeper of secrets and the bearer of ancient knowledge. In Etheria's case, keeping her secret isn't as simple a matter as having a dual identity. Her fellow teammates on the U.N. Peacekeepers have secrets of their own of course, but none so shocking as this...

Etheria is a vampire, having survived for thousands of years by keeping her true identity from those who could harm her. Some years ago she realized that in a world full of superhumans, the best place to hide would be in plain sight, and so she began to fight crime—seeking refuge amidst those who were most like her. (See the story, *Survival Instinct*, at the end of this book.)

After all, being able to fly isn't abnormal when your friends can do it too! Coming out only at night is standard operating procedure for any superhero still protecting a more mundane identity to his friends and family.

This is another step on the Fool's journey. Here, he begins to recognize his feminine power, and strives for things that are intangible. He begins to explore important concepts about life, such as truth. The High Priestess is the bridge between what we see and what remains unseen.



KEY 3 — THE EMPRESS

Just as Etheria as The High Priestess is the embodiment of all that is unseen, so is Aura as The Empress, the embodiment of all that we may manifest.

Aura is the wife of Ben Holliday/Pulsar, and it is in this role that her power truly shines. For The Empress is the eternal Earth Mother—she who gives life. Aura’s powers are those of the spirit, and with them she can both see and manipulate the human aura. She does so here by crafting a crown and scepter for herself, sitting in a green field, where the cycle of life is unbroken and things renew.

In her earlier years, Deborah Sachs took the name Aura and was part of a super-team called GeneSix. It didn’t take her long to realize that she wasn’t cut out for crime fighting and she quickly hung up her mask. The life of a costumed adventurer is not for everyone, but her time in the costume made her supremely qualified to be the wife of one of the world’s premier heroes, and the mother to his children.

The Fool’s Journey takes a vital step here as he fully realizes his feminine power, and the ability to create something without the use of tools, such as Blades and Staves. This is the polar opposite to The High Priestess, who holds only knowledge, but doesn’t exercise it. The Empress is about bringing things forth, of causing ideas and hopes to become a reality.



KEY 4 — THE EMPEROR

In the iHero™ Universe of superheroes, the Minuteman was the first among them. His career spans back to the 1940's, and a great deal about him can be gleaned from his stature in this card. He floats above the world, regal and majestic, with his young charge wrapped in the folds of his cloak.

The Minuteman is everything The Emperor should be. He's brave and noble, and while he is primarily a soldier, he engages in warfare only to safeguard the lives of those who cannot protect themselves.

When George Gordon volunteered to become the Minuteman, he understood that it would be a life of sacrifice, but he was more concerned with the needs and security of others. It's that sort of selfless dedication that has kept him in the skies for almost 60 years, tempering his Herculean strength with compassion.

In this step on the Fool's Journey, the Fool has adopted the natural counterpart of The Empress' motherhood and become a father figure. It's not enough to merely create something, as The Empress has done. The Journey may only continue as The Emperor protects and nurtures the child, offering discipline to the tenderness The Empress gives.



KEY 5 — THE HIEROPHANT

The Swan stands on the steps of City Hall in Lake Andersen, holding the keys to the city that the Mayor gave him moments before. At the foot of the stairs, reporters listen intently for anything the feathered do-gooder might say. The Swan has just rescued a few teenagers from their own folly as they attempted to drive their car over the frozen surface of the town's namesake.

Ordinarily, The Hierophant card is shown denoting a religious leader, but the comparison works here. The Swan has exhibited his own bit of salvation (though on a physical plane), and there's no doubt that his morality makes him a spiritual leader for the community. The keys he holds in his hands represent the keys to knowledge that he is responsible for disseminating to the public.

The most important aspect of The Swan is that he has no superpowers. There are no fancy gadgets in his costume, nor is he the heir to some vast fortune. He operates almost solely by daylight, choosing to inspire hope rather than instill fear. Indeed, the sound bite that the reporters are most likely to get from him is his signature: "We're all ugly ducklings by birth. We become swans by choice."

Anyone can be The Swan. There is no secret there. But The Swan knows that very rarely is the right thing to do also the easy thing to do, and so he continues to set the example that he hopes others will live by.

In respect to the Fool's Journey, The Hierophant grants the knowledge of things beyond himself, like religion or morality. In adopting those morays, The Fool becomes a different kind of leader than he had been in The Emperor, who ruled by raw power. Here, The Hierophant has no power of his own, but accepts that there are higher forces at work in the Universe.



KEY 6 — THE LOVERS

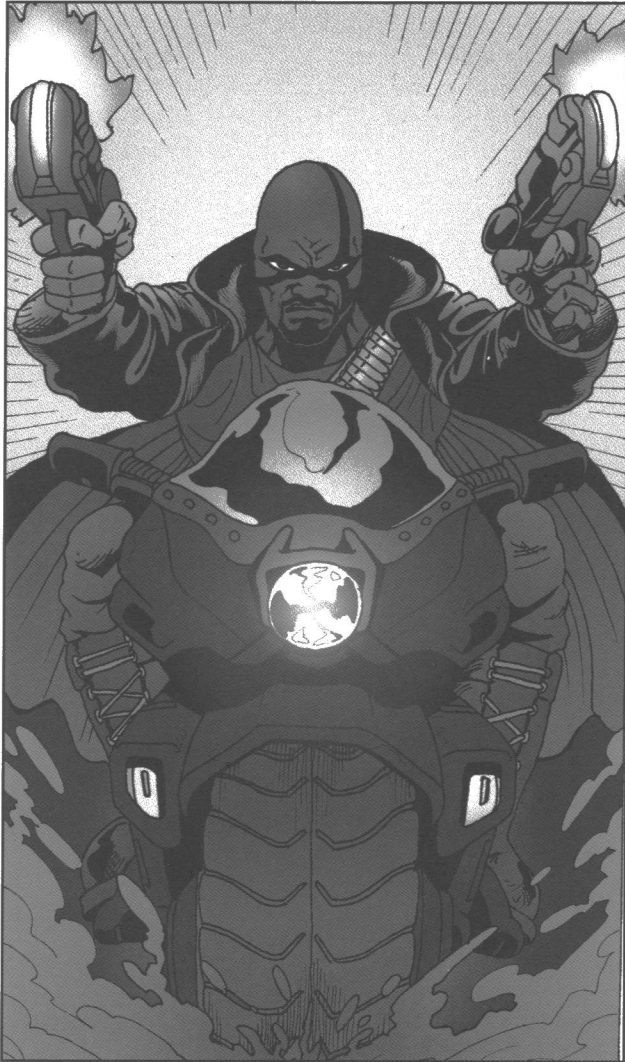
There are a lot of esoteric disciplines that can come into play when reading the tarot, especially a traditional deck. A student of numerology might note that this is the second triad (6) of the deck, and so the three characters here represent an even stronger unity.

The man is Lung Tao Kai, known to the citizens of Chinatown as Jade Tiger. He was born and raised on the mountain peak of Tai Shan, where he was instructed in the martial arts for most of his life by the war god, Guan di. In his last years on that mountain, his own foolishness incurred the wrath of the goddess Xi Wang-mu, who looks down on him here. While the relationship between Jade Tiger and Xi Wang-mu is less than amicable, the message of this card is overwhelmingly positive, as it shows harmony of the body, spirit, and the divine.

When Jade Tiger came to America, he met Lexicon, the woman across from him, and instantly fell in love. Lexicon is the Chinese representative of the U.N. Peacekeepers, and comes from a very different world than the one that birthed Lung. It's this bond between the past and the present—the mundane and the divine—that sits at the heart of The Lovers.

The Fool's Journey continues here, with both masculine and feminine aspects displayed. But we also have the spiritual aspect that now unites them, which we first began to explore with The Hierophant. Lexicon, gifted with the ability to understand any language, represents both The High Priestess and The Empress here, just as Jade Tiger's history and training make him both The Fool and The Emperor. The steps on the Fool's Journey become part of who we are so that we can continue on to take the next step.

For these two, the devotion is true, overcoming mountains and rivers for the sake of their love.



KEY 7 — THE CHARIOT

Though his real name is Malachai August, the denizens of New Babel only know him as Revenant, the scourge of the Shadowlands. Born into poverty, and betrayed by the woman he loved, Revenant screams down the highway on his ectocycle, tongues of fire licking from the mouths of his twin handguns, Wrath and Fury.

The Chariot and Revenant are both about having the strength to overcome hardships, and adversity. But more than that, they're the strength of will to conquer or destroy. The Chariot is the forward motion of an enterprise that cannot be stopped, even if that means someone must get hurt to accomplish his goals.

Revenant is not a villain, though his methods are often brutal. Nor is The Chariot a card of destruction, but rather a card of violent force in the quest for what's good.

On the Fool's Journey, The Chariot is the exercise of the power that The Fool has gained up until now. That power is unfocused, undisciplined, and it's heady sway may corrupt the charioteer as he continues in his quest for power, fame, or money without the capacity for mercy or compassion.



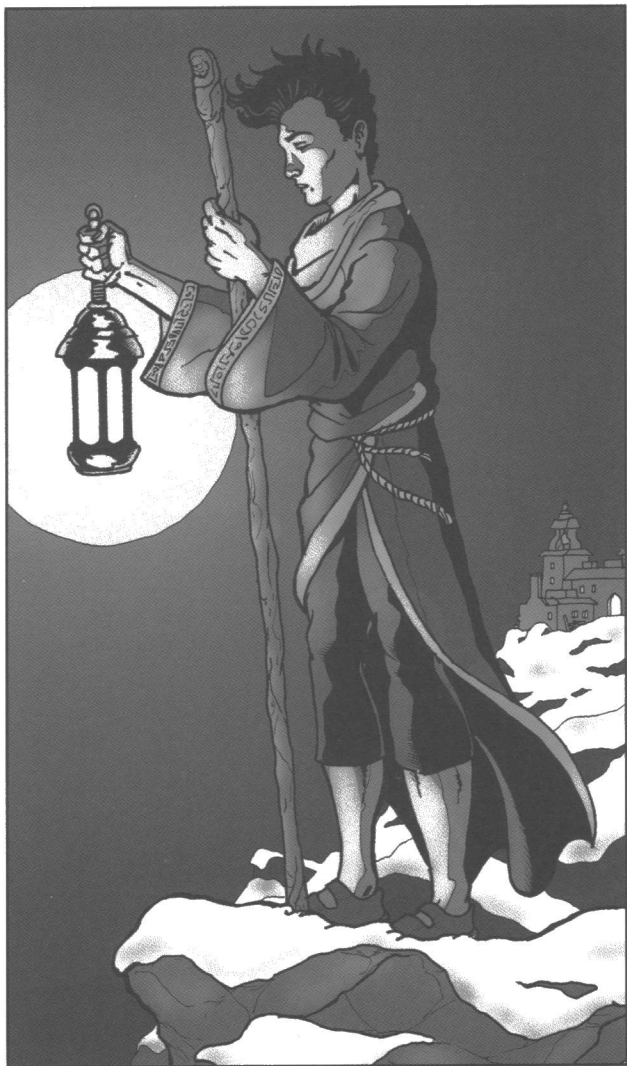
KEY 8 – STRENGTH

In case you haven't noticed by now, the Major Arcana and the Fool's Journey are about opposites and their balance. The Fool and The Magician represent ignorance and knowledge; The Empress and Emperor signify the female and male parental forces. In just this way does Strength both complement and oppose The Chariot card.

Ibn Al-Jinn wrestles Apep, the serpent god of ancient Egypt, as they tower hundreds of feet over the majestic pyramids. But unlike The Chariot, where the force being applied is violent and destructive, in the Strength card that force is not excessive, nor harmful, but rather is used to control his opponent.

Ibn Al-Jinn, whose name means "Son of the Genie," displays his wisdom here as his maturity allows him to exercise his gargantuan strength with only as much force as is needed to do the job. In the story in which this scene occurs (*Awakening the Genie*, found at the end of this book), the towering Peacekeeper pays a high price for this battle, as the serpent-god's venom took its toll. But sometimes a hero is measured by his restraint and compassion as much as he is by his strength and ability.

This is an important step on the Fool's Journey, as it shows a maturity we haven't seen before.



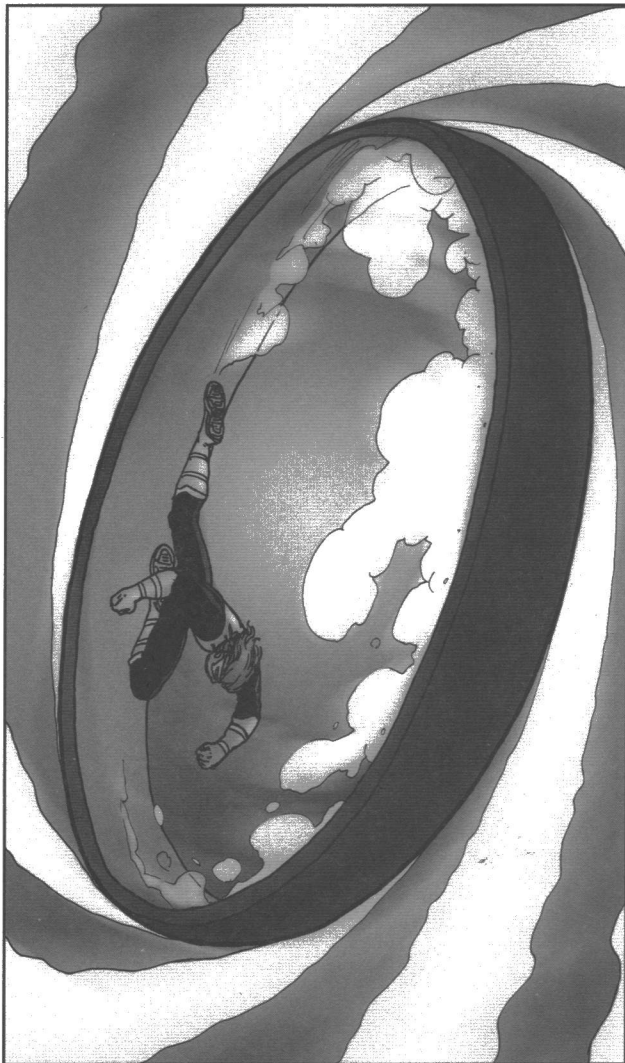
KEY 9 — THE HERMIT

Dressed in the robes of his secretive order, Prophecy stands atop the mountain and shines the light of knowledge down to whomever may seek it.

Prophecy's power is simple. He can see the future. Unfortunately, what he's seen there has terrified him and so he's withdrawn from society at large, going within himself to seek the answers that only he possesses. This is the essence of The Hermit—a soul apart from others, but willing to offer guidance.

Prophecy is no longer afraid of that future for he has learned the most important lesson of all—that the only future with no doubt is the one that you create. Fate and destiny play their parts, but a person's choice is an important part of that equation. From every decision we make, we alter the path of our own lives. For every mistake, there is a lesson to be learned.

The Fool has learned much on his journey thus far. He's discovered both the masculine and feminine aspects of himself, as well as his relationship with the divine. Now that he has begun to exercise his own will (The Chariot), and finally mastered it (Strength), the time has come to look within and reflect on what he has learned.



KEY 10 — THE WHEEL OF FORTUNE

Rush, still a teenager and gifted with unimaginable speed, runs hamster-like in the Wheel of Fortune. It's a never-ending cycle, not just for him, but for all of us. We are all—every one of us—free to move forward as Rush does here, but this card reminds us that there are some things that cannot *be* outrun.

With The Hermit, The Fool has completed the first portion of his Journey. He has gone inside himself, content in the peace he has found. But here, there is action once more. No longer content to merely contemplate life, Rush enters the Wheel of Fortune and rolls the dice, willing to take his chances.

The Wheel of Fortune is the great unknown, the cosmic variable. It's there to remind us that while we rule our own lives, there are some things larger than us, things over which we have no control.

Rush's own power, for example, while it grants him the ability to run at fantastic speeds, also ages him faster the more quickly he runs. This drawback to his powers is the result of his spin on The Wheel of Fortune. His decision to run anyway, to risk his own safety for others, is what makes him a hero.

The Wheel of Fortune is the next step on the Fool's Journey. He discovers that he is not the all-powerful being he thought he was. It's a signpost on the road that tells him there is much more to be learned.



KEY 11 — JUSTICE

Who better to stand for Justice than Patriot, the U.S. representative on the U.N. Peacekeepers? He stands here in a court of law, Scales of Justice in one hand, the Constitution in the other. Though superheroes often lead very violent lives, it's always in the pursuit of this—of justice—of the wrongdoer facing the consequences of their actions.

This is how we face the chaos that The Wheel of Fortune places before us, by creating laws and then adhering to them. In just this way do we forge some sense of order in the universe.

Patriot is an oddity among his superhuman peers. He has no powers of his own, but must rely on the technology of his office. In or out of costume, he is not well-liked by the public as he has proven himself to be a bully and a bigot, but he has also proven on more than one occasion, that he doesn't have to agree with everyone's way of life in order to defend it. That is what makes him uniquely suited for his role as leader of the Peacekeepers.

It's also what proves, time and again, why Justice is blind.



KEY 12 — THE HANGED MAN

Here, at last, The Fool has earned a rest from his endless journey. This is a time for inaction, where the events that The Fool has put into motion will yield their fruit. In regards to the Justice card before this one, The Hanged Man could be viewed as waiting for a verdict to be returned.

Lying on his bed at midnight, waiting is all Eclipse (a member of The Misfits) can do. As he rests, his crimson cape is splayed in intricate folds around him. Eclipse is a former Soviet operative gifted with unprecedented control over the Oblivion Force, a dark quantum substance capable of creating anything he imagines. Unlike other heroes, Eclipse's unique ability may also be wielded by his subconscious mind, allowing his own nightmares access to unimaginable power. Thus, he has been forced to quell his dreams for years through the use of special medications. Unfortunately, an attack on the group's headquarters destroyed that medicine, and now he must fight off sleep until a new supply can be found.

It's a waiting game, a time when the Scales of Justice may tip one way or the other. This is not a time of decisions, but deliberations. It's a time when the focus is on the question, and not the answer. He is The Hanged Man, and all he can do is wait.



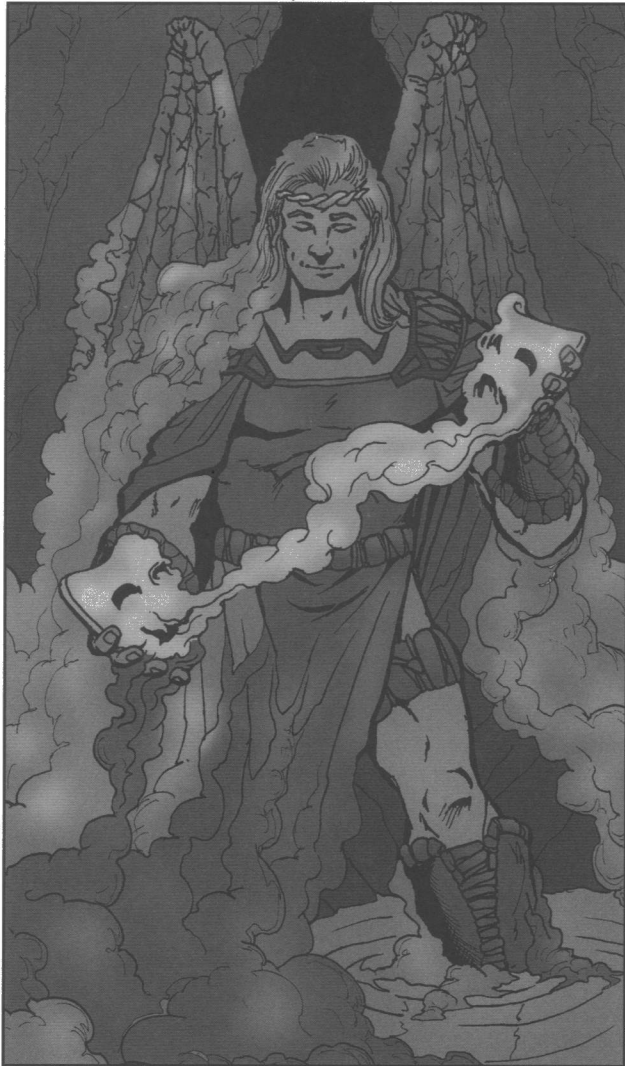
KEY 13 — DEATH

The Fool's Journey now brings us to Death, perhaps the most feared and misunderstood card in the tarot.

Locked in a chamber of his own devising, geneticist Terrance Scott subjects himself to an untested and dangerous procedure, bonding an ultra-dense alloy onto his own DNA. The results are spectacular as his body transforms, made invulnerable and strong by the golden metal that now pervades his whole being. The metamorphosis sweeps over his body like a tide on the shore, revealing a new, glittering continent of power.

This is the place where all journeys must eventually take us, for this card, in truth, is not about the death of our bodies, but rather the natural progress of life. This card is about change, about transformation, about becoming something else. That transmogrification can take a thousand different forms, as children may become adults, or normal people may become heroes. The important thing to remember is that there is a change at work here, and it is the natural result of all that has come before.

In light of the Fool's Journey, perhaps Justice has been served, and the verdict delivered to The Hanged Man. For Alloy, his own path lies still ahead of him, as it does for all of us, for Death is never the end. It's merely another landmark on the road.



KEY 14 — TEMPERANCE

Despite his rather angelic appearance, Monarch is one of the more vile and nefarious villains in the iHero™ Universe. This shouldn't surprise us, though, as so much of the tarot is about balance. That's especially true of Temperance. Everything about this card speaks of duality, of opposites and complements. But unlike Death, which is a time of transformation, Temperance is a time for modification.

Like his heroic counterpart, Crucible, Monarch has the ability to shape the primordial mist around him into useful objects. Here, Monarch displays the duality of Temperance by creating wings of stone, and warping the masks of comedy and tragedy from one to the other. Even the environment around him speaks of duality, as the mist connects both the water and the rock walls of the cavern.

A vital concept of Temperance is that, like the masks, nothing is either created or destroyed. It merely changes shape. But unlike the Death card, where we are the recipients of that change, here we are the originators of it. We are twice as far on the Fool's Journey as we had been in the Chariot card, where all we had was our will and our bodies. Now, at Key 14, we have the power to support that will and truly affect the world around us.

In some ways, Temperance is very much like The Magician, wherein The Fool is learning to master the tools that he's been given.



KEY 15 — THE DEVIL

There's an old saying that power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. With that in mind, what could be more powerful than the ability to destroy the world? The answer of course, is to save it.

In the towering shadow of a nuclear missile, the American hero Fallout* locks hands with his bearded Russian counterpart, Winter. Power emanates around their interlocking fingers, neither one willing to surrender, though the landscape around them suffers for their conflict. The missile itself doesn't care either way, for the power itself is incorruptible. Only those who wield it are affected.

The most fascinating aspect of The Devil card is that both combatants need only walk away to end the conflict. Nothing binds them to the situation but their unwillingness to leave it. It's this blind bondage to a material object that makes both men so dangerous. For the missile itself is not The Devil.

The Devil is the need that both men feel, and the call to power that neither can ignore.

On the often-treacherous path of the Fool's Journey, The Devil is a reminder that we are capable of both great and terrible things. For Fallout, his unshakable belief is that these weapons were never meant to be used. They exist merely as a deterrent. For Winter, however, the nuke represents a large cash reward for when he delivers the weapon across the border, and into the hands of his buyer.

This is the dark side of Temperance, where the meeting of two opposing powers can render both sides inert.

**Fallout is also known as "Ground Zero" in the iHero™ Universe.*

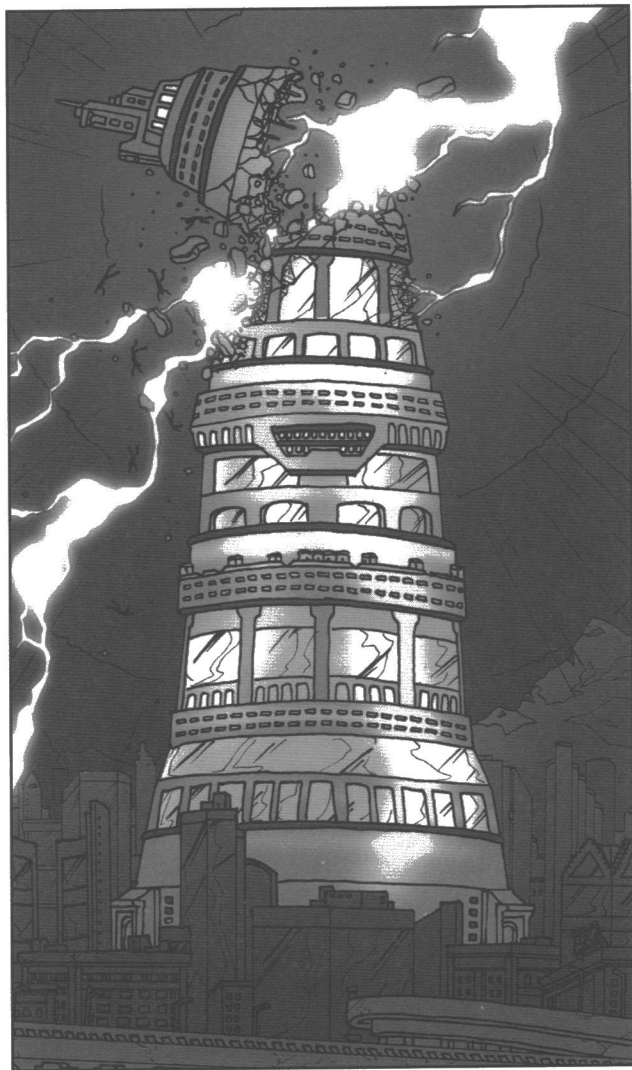
KEY 16 — THE TOWER

Witness the results of greed and ambition run amok. This is the Tower of New Babel, the city that Revenant (The Chariot) calls his home. It is here, in this very building, where Revenant finally comes to deliver his unforgiving justice on those who had sought to manipulate him for money and power. He is just a man, but the hubris of those assembled makes them a target for a more divine vengeance.

Though the building is a technological marvel, stabbing at the sky like a dagger at the heart of heaven, in the end, it is only a construct of glass and steel, and no match for the fury that smites it from on high.

No journey, even that of The Fool, is without its troubles, and The Tower is the worst of it. The dramatic leap in power that The Fool received after Death has brought him steadily, inexorably, to this frightening place. But even this is not the end of the journey. It's merely another lesson to be learned on the spiritual path. This is the result when our greed goes unchecked, as it was when Fallout balked Winter in The Devil card. We are the cause and effect of everything that happens to us.

This is the fall that follows pride.



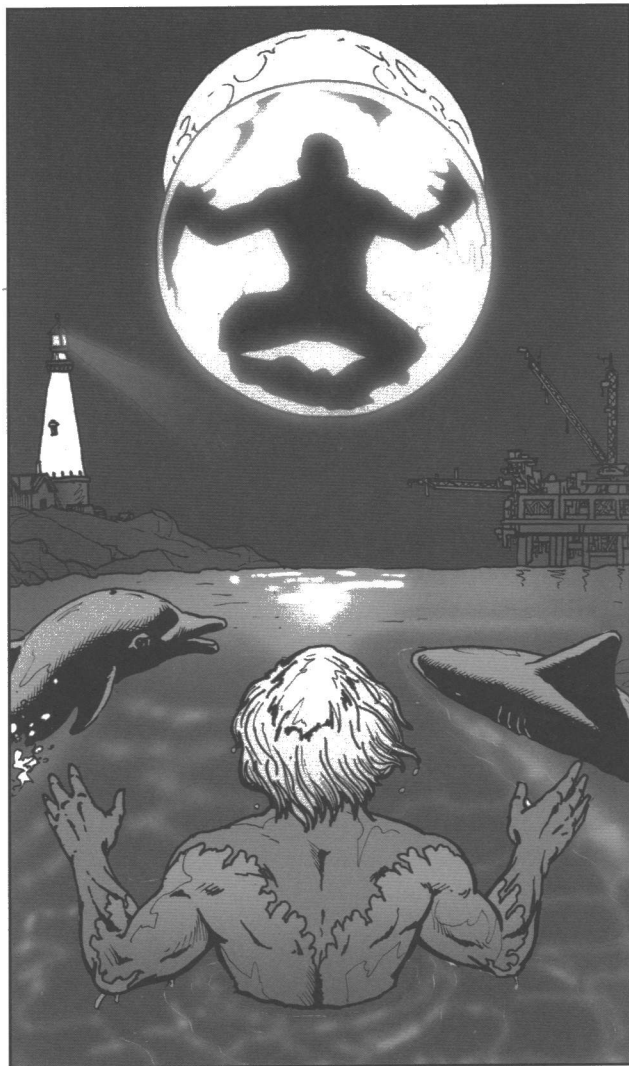


KEY 17 — STAR

In many ways, The Star is like Temperance, in its balancing of forces and elements. Here, kneeling by the edge of the water, Permafrost uses her cold powers to generate both water and ice—two forms of the same matter.

Once again the feminine power exerts itself and The Fool pauses on his journey to contemplate his actions. Permafrost, who has endured much in her life, finds a sort of serenity within herself. This peace allows her to be at home in her environment. This is the card of not only contemplation, but meditation as well. After the fall from The Tower, there comes a time to regroup, to gather one's forces and reflect on the successes and failures of the trip so far.

The Star represents the gifts from the spirit, those that transcend the physical world. Things like memory, insight, hope—these are important tools that we'll need if we're going to temper the experiences we've had. Permafrost, once just a girl named Cynara Harris, grew into the mature and cool-tempered woman she is because she learned from her past, instead of being ruled by it. She now enjoys the pleasures found in the little things in life, and no longer needs the trappings of power that the earlier cards offered.



KEY 18 — THE MOON

Yet again we see the balance of forces and concepts displayed. In *The Moon*, these images spring from the subconscious—from sleep and dreams—providing the cosmic balance to *The Star*'s meditation and thought.

In the foreground, the aquatic merman known as Naiad gazes up into the sky, faced by the silhouette of Sphere, backlit by Luna herself. All around them, the imagery of opposites presents itself: in the brightness of the lighthouse and the blackness of the oil rig, in the calm nature of the dolphin and the fearful teeth of the shark. Even the nature of these creatures speaks volumes, as one is a mammal and the other a fish, though they both swim the same seas. Naiad is a dichotomy here, as well.

He was born in a laboratory, half of a genetic pair, and though he can breathe air and walk like a man, he chooses to remain in the ocean. Sphere, on the other hand, has had little choice in his fate as his ability to surround himself with circular energy and forms grew too fast for him to control, and he was forced to exile himself in the heavens for fear that his growing power levels would endanger those around him.

Two men, both outsiders, as we are outsiders of dreams in our waking hours. Yet they are oddly alike, just as we are often the same but different in our nightly sojourns.

The Fool's Journey takes an imaginative step here, trespassing briefly into the land of the dreaming so that we may see beyond the perceptions of our senses. Naiad is a man who can breathe water. Sphere can survive in space. Yet both are supremely human. How often have we dreamed of such travels?



KEY 19 — THE SUN

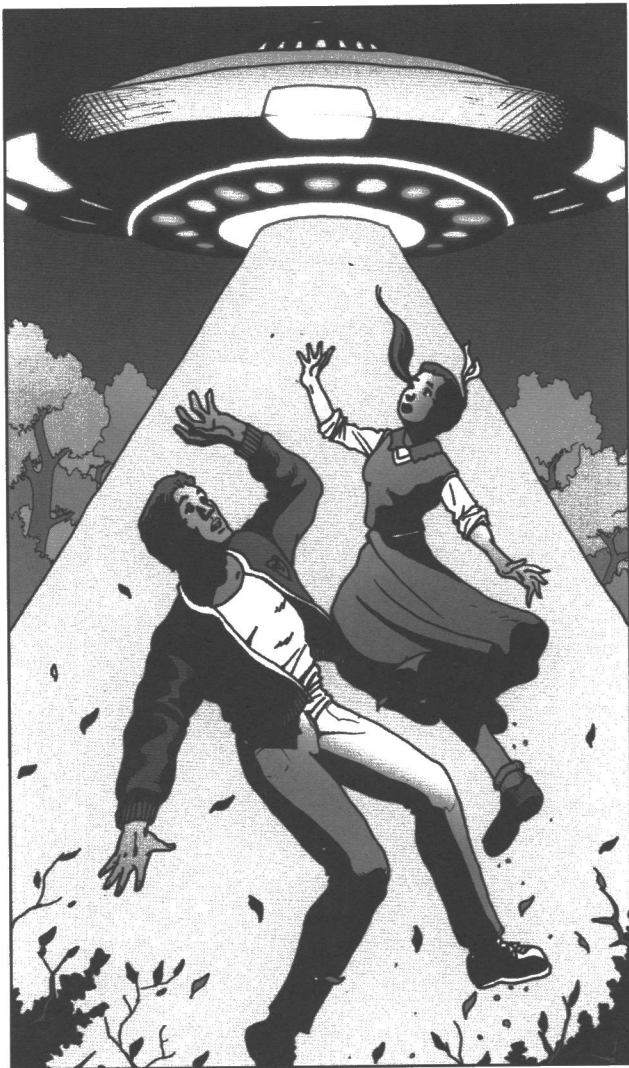
Don't be surprised if you don't immediately recognize the man being ridden like a horse by his children. That's Ben Holliday, better known to you as Pulsar from The Magician card. The two kids are the twins produced by the loving marriage between he and Aura (The Empress).

The twins have their own destiny in the grand scheme of events, but this is how it begins, with love and laughter. Holliday is a doting father, playing happily with his children as the bright, pure sunshine cascades through the window, dissolving whatever fragments of the dream world may linger from The Moon card. Even the quality of light is vastly different, changing from subdued to brilliant.

The Sun is the most unabashedly optimistic card on the Fool's Journey. This is the culmination of all he has learned, all that he has strived for. Not power, nor wealth, but the simple joys that one obtains from love and family. There is no darkness here that The Sun cannot dispel, no fear that isn't insignificant in the light of such unbridled giddiness.

These are the moments that Pulsar thinks of when he faces the forces of Evil. This is what gives him strength. And this, above all, is why he does what he does. Not merely because he can. Not to show the world the magnificent technology that is his to wield, but to safeguard his children, and all of the innocents in the world.

Looking at the smiles on their faces, Ben Holliday considers his life a success.



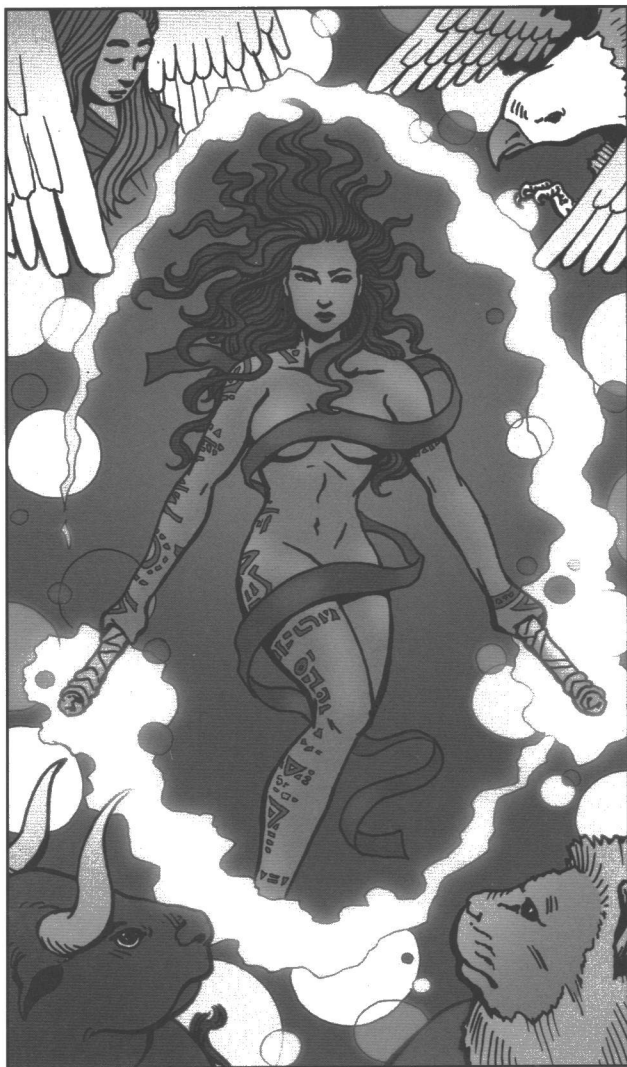
KEY 20 — JUDGMENT

After the success and contentment that we've achieved through this long journey, as evidenced by The Sun card, there is still the question of how our lives will fare when judged by a higher power.

For Thessaly and Trey Xavier, walking home from a pep rally at their mid-western high school in 1956, it was an evening like any other. Nothing in their quiet, suburban lives could have prepared them for what came next as the alien craft materialized in the sky above them and enveloped them in a bright and irresistible light. The reasons for the abduction remain a mystery, even after the twins were returned some 40 years later, infused with wondrous powers and without having aged a day.

Perhaps they were judged and found worthy. Perhaps they had been taken as a sample of our whole race, and their inherent worthiness saved us all. But none of that really matters here.

What matters is the moment when judgment comes, and we are called to stand for the crimes and heroisms of our lives. For these two, who represent the innocence of The Fool on the final leg of his journey, their hour of judgment comes unexpectedly. Just as it will for the rest of us. And there, in the light of all that has come before, we will face the unknown.



KEY 21 — THE WORLD

Swirling in mystic energy, Solitaire manifests her power, marking her as the most powerful sorceress in the world. Around her, images of the world's elements show themselves. Each of them represents more than one aspect of existence, as the angel shows us that he is both human and divine, and the eagle is both air and animal.

We have come full circle in The World, as Solitaire—in contrast to the Xavier Twins from the previous card—has come not from our past, but from the future. She is the daughter of Ben Holliday (The Magician), who was seen riding on his shoulders in The Sun card. We see her now, covered in ritual runes and coming into the power that she has earned through years of study and struggle.

Like Solitaire, The World is not about simply having such power, or wealth, or happiness, but rather the culmination of having earned all of those things. This is the last Key in the Major Arcana, and as such it represents a life well lived, a journey well traveled. The World is all we have ever hoped to become. And we have achieved it by using skill and willpower, opposing the sometimes-cruel twists of fate and the folly of our own judgment.

If the Fool's Journey had an end, it would be this. But all of life is a circle, and in a moment, Solitaire—naked as a newborn babe and announcing herself into the world—will take the first step on a new journey, where she will become The Fool once more.

The Minor Arcana

STAVES

The suit of Staves represents change.



AGE OF STAVES

Lifting her arm proudly against a cloud-strewn sky, Lady Liberty holds her flaming stave, allowing its light and warmth to shine down on us all. Though the original WWII sentinel hasn't been an active crimefighter since the end of the war, she has passed on the torch to a new generation.

The Aces are all cards of beginnings, and the Staves are the suit of growth, creativity, and enterprise. Thus, this card indicates the beginning of a new creative endeavor or project.

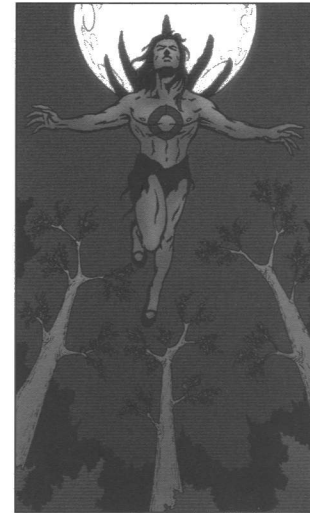
Like the earliest days of the American colonies, it shows a passion for the undertaking, and the bravery to accept the liberty being offered.



TWO OF STAVES

Atmosfear, one of Seattle's more dangerous super-villains, stands on top of his headquarters and uses the power granted him by the silver sphere to call down the lightning, while protecting him from being electrocuted at the same time. The staves here are lightning rods, channeling the summoned cloud discharge into a specially designed battery which will power his next bid to take over the northern hemisphere.

While Atmosfear will certainly be thwarted by one of the iHeroes, he exemplifies the spirit of the Two of Staves very well. It is a card about bravery, courage, and the beginning of a new enterprise. A villain being brave? He is if you consider that the only way to test the silver sphere was for Atmosfear to risk being fried by the lightning.



THREE OF STAVES

Framed by three giant redwoods and silhouetted by the moon, Jackdaw flies over the battle-scarred Native American reservation; having saved those below from the mystic evil that threatened their lives. This is the same black-winged hero of ancient lore, the one who stole the ball of light from the Trickster and placed it back in the sky where it belonged.

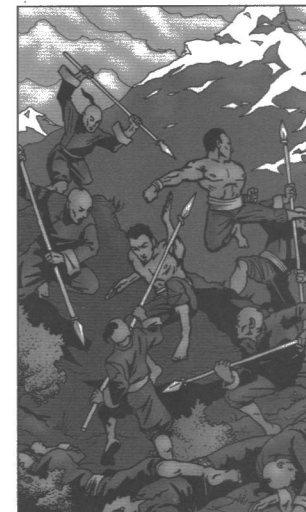
In the Three of Staves, Jackdaw fulfills that role once again, by granting hope through his strength and nobility. He is the fulfillment of the energy that was first displayed by the Two of Staves.



FOUR OF STAVES

Redcrest perches on the cross above the chapel, the sun shining brightly above him and the flowers in full bloom below. Emerging from the high-roofed church, its structure supported by four sturdy columns, is the loving couple that he rescued from a mugging just three days earlier. And though they begged him to attend the wedding, Redcrest knew that his masked visage would have distracted those assembled from sharing in the pure joy that belonged to the young lovers, so he's kept out of sight.

The heart of the Four of Staves is one of peace and prosperity, especially in a romantic endeavor.

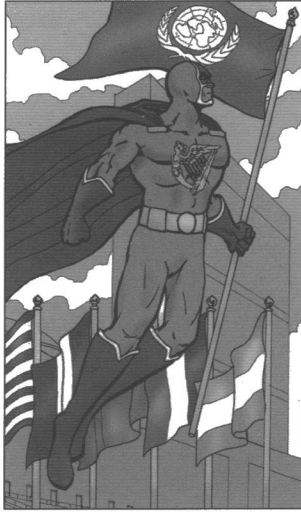


FIVE OF STAVES

Far from their native home of Tai Shan (seen in the distance), Lung Tao Kai and his big brother Yun Lung fight for their lives against the spear-wielding guards of K'un Lun. It was a mad plan for them both, to sneak into the home of the gods and drink from the river that would grant them immortality.

The gods, however, had other plans.

The Staves are a suit of energy, and here we see how that energy may be used negatively. But still, without this chain of events, Lung Tao would never have become Jade Tiger (The Lovers), and found true happiness. Sometimes obstacles are merely the things that we must overcome to be the people we truly wish to be.



SIX OF STAVES

If the Five of Staves is battle, then the Six of Staves is surely the proud victor, returning home from the war.

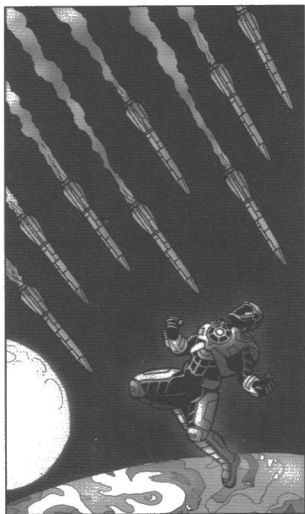
Visiting the New York office for the U.N. Peacekeepers, the British representative, Sceptre, glides gracefully by the arrayed flags of the member nations. His bearing is proud, and regal. His demeanor—confident. For Sceptre knows that one must be gracious in victory, as in defeat, and more than anything, he is glad to have the support of the United Nations behind him.



SEVEN OF STAVES

Flytrap, one of the Crusaders and master of the plant world, prepares himself for the foes who are rising from the dank pit before him. He is braced and ready as he operates from a position of strength. Though the fight will be hard, he will be triumphant.

Once again we see the negative use of force, but this time, the outcome is not in doubt. Flytrap is more than equipped to handle his staff-bearing enemies, especially when he can bring the whole jungle alive to help him in the fight!



EIGHT OF STAVES

No one knows the name of the man inside the VOID armor, but the astronauts on board the space station Ulysses speak of his heroism to this day. The official report on the missile launch is that it was an equipment failure, but the message it sent was clear to everyone. Luckily, VOID was close enough to intercept that message and his technological might prevented those missiles from falling to earth, saving thousands.

The energy of the Eight of Staves is not inherently destructive, but it does indicate that messages are being sent, or that there may be a journey by air. It may also indicate rash decisions.



NINE OF STAVES

Goldenrod stands outside the bars of the prison where he has just placed a trio of super-villains. His energy staff glows with a constant and steady light, and his costume, torn and tattered, tells us that the victory was not easily won.

The Nine of Staves reminds us that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty,” and that we often learn the most from those experiences that are most painful to us.



TEN OF STAVES

One by one, Viridian has used her magickal abilities to lift the ten candle staves into the air, causing them to surround her and rotate by sheer force of will. The ritual is one best left to those with more experience, and Viridian's poor use of her energy may end up being more than she can handle.

Carrying a great burden, or the selfish use of power is behind the Ten of Staves. Still, the card does not indicate failure. Quite the opposite in fact, but it does show that there may have been less strenuous ways of accomplishing the same goals.



PAGE OF STAVES

In the heart of the arid sands, Desert Fox emerges from the bunker and calls to the troops who are on maneuvers nearby. She's armed with a short staff, and her fair hair shimmers in golden hues beneath the open sky.

This is a card of courage and beauty. It speaks of messengers and enthusiasm.



KNIGHT OF STAVES

Riding a steed of solid rock and holding a flaming staff of molten lava, Fahrenheit of the Misfits charges forward into the inferno of an active volcano, unaffected by the searing heat around him. He gives no thought to his own welfare, and such is the spirit of the Knight of Staves—passionate and impulsive, but also brave and selfless.

Such people tend to be great friends and lovers, but also terrible enemies.



QUEEN OF STAVES

Now here's a woman who gets what she wants! Leonarra is fiercely loyal, and a staunch supporter of her homeland. She often prefers the company of her cats, whom she considers her family, to those of the outside world. And yet, despite these tendencies, she's remarkably practical when the need arises.

As the Queen of the creative suit of Staves, Leonarra is, no doubt, both fruitful and loving.



KING OF STAVES

Seated on his throne and clutching an ornate staff, the sorcerer Romani is both King of the Gypsies and King of Staves. He offers a small demonstration of his power here, eerie energies swirling around him with the quasi-tangible forms of a lion and a salamander floating above.

Like the Knight of this suit, the King is sometimes hasty in his dealings, but he is also quick-witted, loyal, and trustworthy.

MASKS

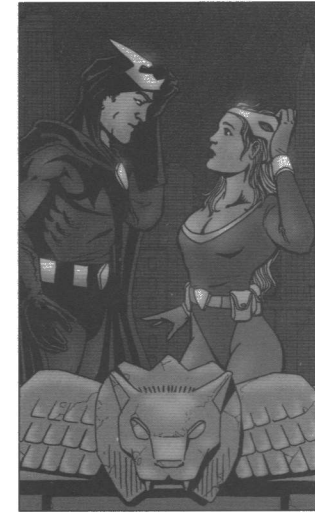
The suit of Masks represents love and happiness.



ACE OF MASKS

Held by the hand of Aphrodite, the golden mask sheds tears of joy and bittersweet sorrow, which flow into the great pool of emotion below. The ripples spread outward, as love begets love and those around us are touched by the sincerity of our feelings.

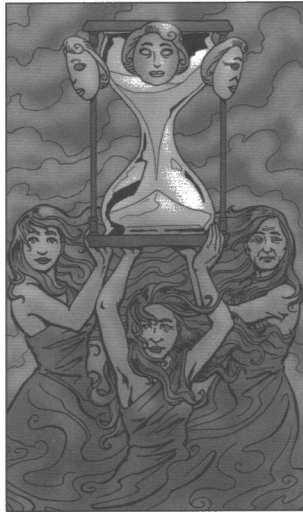
The Masks are the suit of emotion and, as the Aces mark the beginning of things, this card represents the start of a great love, joy, or contentment.



TWO OF MASKS

It took them months to come to this, chasing and evading the convictions of their own world-weary hearts, but in the end, Dr. Twilight and Serenity met on the rooftop and took that leap of faith that every great love requires. Hands trembling, they entrusted each other with their most closely-guarded secret as they pulled their masks from their faces.

The Two of Masks is about beginnings too, but in this case, there is also reciprocity in the affection. The emotion here is one of love and trust, as well as desire.



THREE OF MASKS

Though it appears that there are three women here, what our eyes see is actually three phases of Hourglass, morphing between her Maiden, Mother, and Crone aspects. She's holding a large hourglass above her head, to which three golden masks have been affixed.

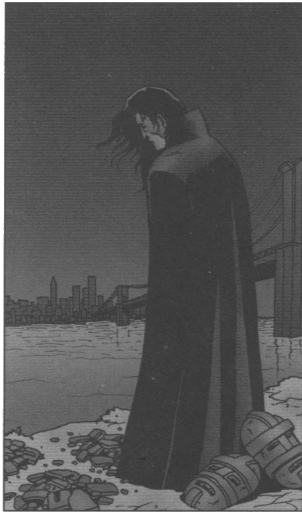
What is depicted here is a unity in an undertaking, ensuring its success. The card tells us that good fortune will abound and that prosperity is assured.



FOUR OF MASKS

In the heart of the city and bathed in the moon's light, Kestrel scowls, considering the mask in his hands. He is at that stage that nearly every superhero encounters, when they wonder if what they're doing is making any difference, and they contemplate quitting. On the ledge before him, two more masks wait to be donned, and his faithful partner, Toro, offers him a fourth, which he also ignores.

This is a time for rest and reflection. There may be some dissatisfaction, but there is also the kindness and support of others present, as shown here by the hovering Toro.



FIVE OF MASKS

In the pre-dawn hours, The Goth pauses at the foot of the New Jersey shore, with the New York skyline emerging from darkness on the opposite side of the bridge. On the ground before him are three of the five Masks of Amontillado. Behind him, the remaining two masks lay intact, but The Goth, true to his nature, is more focused on what he's lost instead of what he has.

Throughout the tarot, the Fives are among the least pleasant cards and this one is no exception. This card shows us loss, perhaps of friendship or love, and speaks of regret and disillusionment.



SIX OF MASKS

In the middle of New York's Central Park, a young and smitten boy chases the object of his affections past the memorial statue erected to Omega Six, the veteran super-team that finally retired after nearly 20 years of adventuring. The children are oblivious to the nostalgia that most New Yorkers feel when they see this monument, lost as they are in their own youth and play.

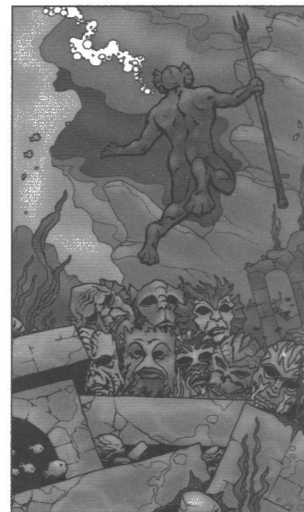
Happy memories of childhood abound in the Six of Masks, and as the flowers in the boy's hand suggest, there may be a gift from an admirer coming your way.



SEVEN OF MASKS

Dressed in black and gold, Dreamweaver exorcises his powers of illusion to manifest the seven masks that dance before him. Each one comes from a different culture, representing different aspects of both the illusion and its creator.

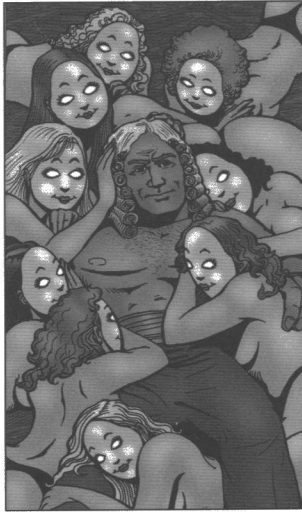
This is a representation of an imagination that has been given too much rein. Dreamweaver may soon discover that the Seven of Masks indicates his powers are spread too thin, and deceptions are the order of the day.



EIGHT OF MASKS

Tens of thousands of years ago, at the bottom of the sea, Aquarius and his people opened wide the Pandora's Box of quantum science and their civilization was destroyed by it. One by one, their once-human race adopted the aquatic characteristics of the sea creatures around them until Aquarius, an amphibious hybrid, was the last of his people.

The masks he leaves behind are the abandoned faces of his ancient brethren, and his heart is too heavy with regret and disappointment to look at them any longer.



NINE OF MASKS

Unlike the rest of the Masks suit, which deals largely with emotions, the Nine of Masks deals with sensual pleasure and material success. It is a card that tells us that wishes will be granted, as they have here for Maliferous, archenemy of the Minuteman.

Despite the fact that Maliferous is a card-carrying Bad Guy, the energy of the Nine of Masks isn't itself negative. It is, in fact, a very positive card!



TEN OF MASKS

Whereas the Nine of Masks speaks of sensual pleasure and success, the Ten of Masks speaks of emotional fulfillment and everlasting happiness. This is the pinnacle of human love, of marriage, of family. Canadian superhero Limelight uses his dazzling light powers to display an array of ten golden masks in the clear night sky, his arm around his wife's shoulders. Scampering nearby are their children, who share in the beauty of the moment.



PAGE OF MASKS

Whalesong sits in melancholy silence, contemplating the very human mask in her hands. Like the Little Mermaid of old, there is something in her that dreams of being more like her land-locked cousins. Whalesong is the mate and genetic counterpart to Naiad (The Moon), and both of them are alike in their imaginings.



KNIGHT OF MASKS

Soaring above Greece, Paragon urges his winged steed to greater heights, his shield emblazoned with the Mask of Medusa. For generations, his family has been the keeper of their pantheon's greatest gifts: the shield of Perseus and the herd of pegasi that are the descendants of the mare that Perseus rode himself. Paragon is first in his family to do more than just tend the herd and polish the armor. He alone has taken to the skies to safeguard his people.

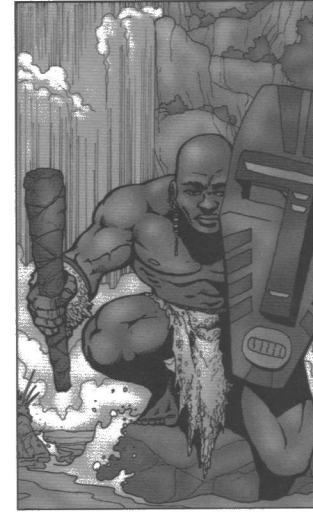
The Knights are all men of action, and the Knight of Masks is no exception. Such a person is a poet and dreamer, and will often come bearing a message.



QUEEN OF MASKS

The Queen of Masks is also the Queen of emotions and this describes Courtesan perfectly. She is neither hero nor villain, but remains steadfastly loyal to her own code of ethics, bringing happiness and joy to those who would not otherwise know the warmth of another. Her face is half-hidden by the mask she holds, indicating that there is an air of mystery around her.

Such a person makes an excellent spouse or partner, as they are extremely loving and true, once their heart has been given.



KING OF MASKS

The African Peacekeeper Serengeti stands poised on the rocks with a stone club at the ready and a giant mask before him as a shield. Save for his loincloth, Serengeti needs nothing to face the world around him, as his nobility is evident in his every action. It is this strength of character that makes him respected by the animals of the jungle, and by his fellow Peacekeepers. Perhaps more importantly, his kindness and compassion have earned their trust as well.

BLADES

The suit of Blades represents conflict and trouble.

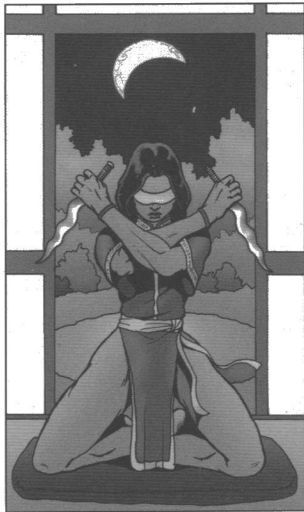


ACE OF BLADES

Behold the sword—Widowmaker! Throughout the millennia since the sword's forging, tyrants and kings have wielded it, each of them finding their own natural strength and ferocity greatly augmented by the power within the blade. What's more, the blade has a malevolent intelligence all its own which may, at times, subjugate the will of its owner!

The nigh-unbreakable blade has spent the last several centuries in the hands of an extra-dimensional champion who has used Widowmaker to enforce an uneasy peace. It rises here from the water, not unlike Excalibur, waiting to be found again and used for conquest and glory.

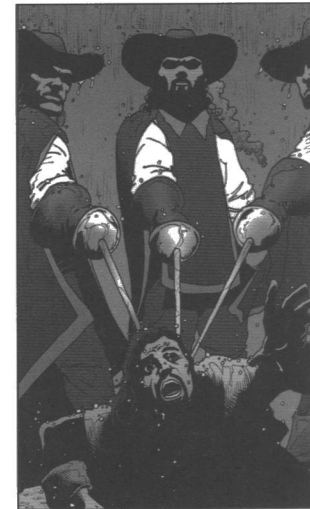
The Ace of Blades signifies the beginning of an action, or conflict. It could also mean the birth of a child with a heroic temperament.



TWO OF BLADES

Kneeling and blindfolded, kris clutched tightly in each hand and prepared for an attack, Bao Chou waits. She is the daughter of Xi Wang-mu, a goddess from K'un Lun, and her name means "revenge." This is why she sharpens her senses, knowing that she must soon face Jade Tiger, who was trained by the war god, Guan di. He is perhaps the only living being who could claim to be her equal.

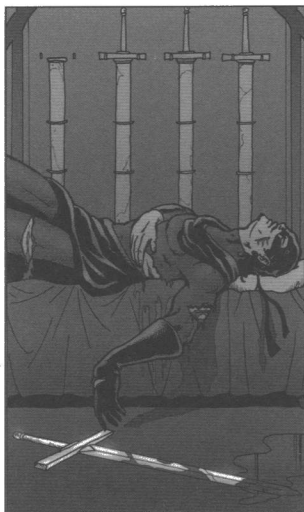
The Two of Blades is a card of balanced forces, and tension. It's a card of stalemates, and energy without direction.



THREE OF BLADES

For a small time crook like Vinny Fusco, it was just a matter of time before the rapier-wielding Tribunal caught up with him and made their point known. The way his day had been going—from the rain, to his car breaking down, and his girlfriend leaving him—Vinny was barely surprised by the turn of events.

Murphy's Law comes into play on the Three of Blades, when nothing seems to be going your way, and your whole day seems to be one heartache after another.



FOUR OF BLADES

Beaten, bloody, but victorious, Jynx finally lays down for a well-deserved rest. With the rest of the Crusaders away on missions, he was forced to defend the headquarters on his own and the battle has taken its toll.

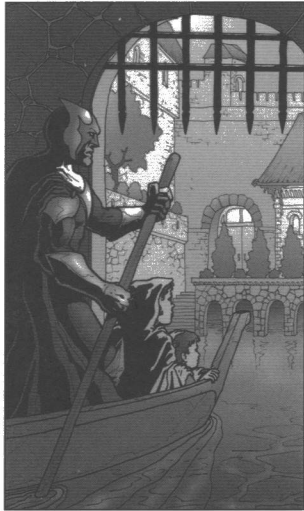
Don't let the violent nature of this card misguide you; the Four of Blades is a card of rest, and a release from stress or suffering.



FIVE OF BLADES

Under the dark and threatening sky of Japan, Stormgate picks up the abandoned swords of his enemies as they flee into the distance. He is himself unharmed, and the mark of shame at their retreat will burden his foes for some time.

Unlike most cards, the focus of the Five of Blades is not on the hero, but rather the villains who flee from him. This card represents cowardice and defeat.



SIX OF BLADES

Pushing his craft under the six-bladed portcullis, Italy's Gondolier ferries his charges to a safe haven. As most heroes know, sometimes the troubles aren't over once the villains have been vanquished. Very often the victims must make their homes elsewhere to avoid retribution. Here, the Gondolier takes the time to secure the enduring safety of those he has helped.

As one might expect, the Six of Blades indicates a journey by water, and the possible start of a new life. It also tells us, by the sunlight-glinted shores, that the future will see an improvement.



SEVEN OF BLADES

A burglar scurries away from the antique store where he has looted five swords. In the window behind him, two more swords remain on display.

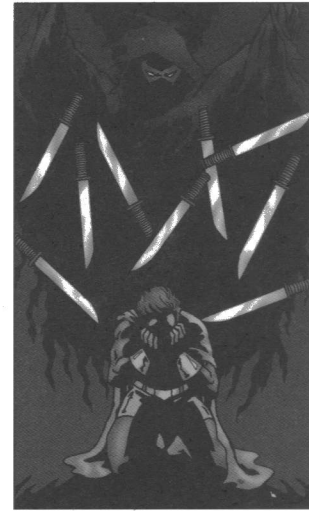
This is a perfect example of a plan that may fail, or will only be partially successful. It may also indicate dishonesty or theft.



EIGHT OF BLADES

Bound and blindfolded, the Brazilian beauty known as Fascination tries to quell the fear in her belly as her unseen captor hurls eight deadly blades at the giant bull's-eye. How she got here remains a mystery, though she can't rule out that one of her teammates may have betrayed her!

The Eight of Blades illustrates how we are often afraid to move out of our current surroundings or situations. We're not usually as captive as Fascination here, but our fear of the unknown makes it seem as if we are. This card also cautions us about whom we trust.



NINE OF BLADES

Though it has been many years since he worked as an operative for the IRA, the Scottish hero Freedom has his nightmares to keep him company at night, endlessly reminding him of the horrible acts he committed before he joined the side of good. Unbeknownst to Freedom, however, is that his nightly guilt sessions are courtesy of the villain, Sleepless Knight, who is bent on making sure that Freedom never forgets the sins of his past.

Guilt, remorse, regret...they're all keywords for the Nine of Staves. This card could also mean illness or the death of a loved one.



TEN OF BLADES

There are many forms of magic in the world, and here we see the practice of voodoo at work. This is referred to as sympathetic magic, and woe is the poor soul who dons the costume shown here.

The Ten of Blades is a card of defeat and ruination. It's not a card of death, but one can expect trouble and tears on the horizon.



PAGE OF BLADES

Hailing from Spain, El Matador slices his blade through the air, his cape swirling the dust inside the arena. It's no wonder that his arch-nemesis is El Toro Negro, the Black Bull, as their respective families have long harbored a hatred of one another.

Unlike his ancestors, though, El Matador thinks more of diplomacy than action, as befits his station as the Page of Blades.



KNIGHT OF BLADES

Thundering across the barren sands of the Middle East, Dunerider raises his scimitar, ready to impart a savage justice to any evildoer he finds. His white horse, an uncommon breed for the nomadic desert tribes, races fearlessly to meet their fate.

Dunerider is dashing, brave, and courageous—the embodiment of the Knight of Blades.



QUEEN OF BLADES

Odyssey grasps the bladed spear in her hand, guarding the entrance to the Temple of Artemis. Approaching from above, a snow-white owl descends, lighting on her outstretched arm. The clouds in the distance speak of foul weather, but the Greek heroine is unconcerned. She is prepared to face all comers, be they mortal, god, or element.

This is the kind of fierce determination, combined with beauty and grace, which comprises the Queen of Blades. As the Chosen Huntress of Artemis, Odyssey must remain chaste and pure, and as such—she has no children. Very often this card will appear in a reading when children are missing, either by distance or infertility.



KING OF BLADES

Seated on a throne of solid ice, GlacialRift rests his hand lightly on the crux of his double-bladed axe. His strength is massive, his power staggering, and yet he wields quiet compassion. GlacialRift has proven himself to be a steadfast member of the U.N. Peacekeepers, and many of the members seek the wisdom of his counsel.

It's this combination of strength and wisdom that are the trademarks of the King of Blades.

DISCS

The suit of Discs represents money and finance.



ACE OF DISCS

Awash in the data stream of the PWI mainframe, the digital avatar for the AI known as Nanny holds aloft a shining disc, full of Pulsar's most vital secrets. In the electronic age, the Cyber Age, the new currency is information and so the disc that she holds represents not only vast power, but wealth as well.

The Ace of Discs is more than just a signpost on your journey. It's a huge, glowing spotlight indicating that you're at the beginning of an extremely prosperous endeavor.



TWO OF DISCS

Lighting nimbly on the delicate petals of a daisy, Dragonfly juggles two shining discs, joined together by the infinite energy of the cosmos. His hi-tech suit grants him the ability to shrink to near-insect size, allowing him a joyous perspective of the world around him.

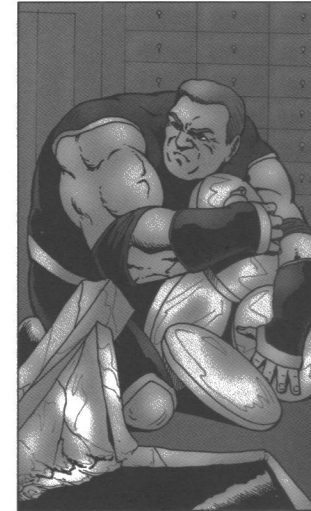
The spirit here is clearly one of joy, and lightheartedness. It also shows us the ability to juggle two situations at once.



THREE OF DISCS

It's an unfortunate side effect of most superhuman battles that the neighborhood gets trashed in the process, but the owners of this pawnshop are in luck as The Craftsman sticks around to repair some of the damage. Some say he's a handyman in his secret identity, but no one knows for sure. For the moment, the shopkeepers are just grateful that he'll have them back in business in just a few hours.

A skill in the crafts and a task nearing completion are the call signs of the Three of Discs.



FOUR OF DISCS

The solid steel door of the vault lays like crumpled paper on the floor and Tantrum, inhumanly strong, clings greedily to his ill-gotten gains. He hears the sirens in the distance, but he is confident that nothing will separate him from his money.

The Four of Discs speaks of assured financial gain, but it may also tell of a miserly nature.



FIVE OF DISCS

Wrapped in a flimsy overcoat and huddled against the building for warmth, Cerulean has seen better days. The eviction notice on his front door is clearly the cold icing on a bitter cake. In front of him, strewn with refuse, are five trash can lids.

Destitution, ruin, and loss are just some of the things that the Five of Discs indicates. But it always means misfortune in a fiscal sense.



SIX OF DISCS

Taking the shortcut down the alley, Troubleseeker passes by two panhandling bums, and tosses six silver coins behind him without looking. It's an act of generosity that he doesn't think twice about, even though the man behind the mask is hardly rolling in money himself.

The Six of Discs is a card of shared wealth and good fortune, for even though only one of the transients receives the six coins, he will surely share them with his unfortunate friend.



SEVEN OF DISCS

In the quiet seclusion of his laboratory, Michael Tremere, also known to the world as Chimaera, searches desperately for the cure to his odd genetic disposition. The holographic computer model floats before him—seven golden discs swirling in the midst of his DNA—as he waits for the results of the latest simulation.

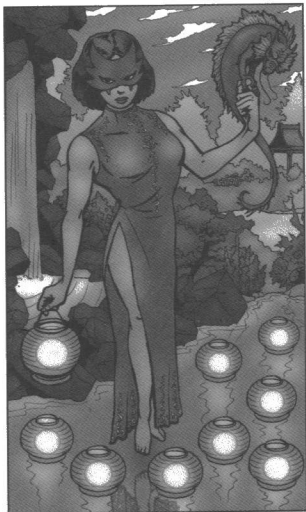
The Seven of Discs indicates a rest in one's labor, or disappointment in an undertaking. This card can also point to worry about an outcome.



EIGHT OF DISCS

The Olympian takes his soldering rod to the inner workings of one of his specialty discs. Designed by his mentor, The Athenian, each one of them performs a different function in his pursuit for justice, such as his Explosive Discus, or the Boomerang Discus. The Olympian is nearly a perfect physical specimen, but he is still in the apprentice stage of his development where the discs are concerned. He has learned enough to repair his weapons, but doesn't yet possess the skill necessary to build his own.

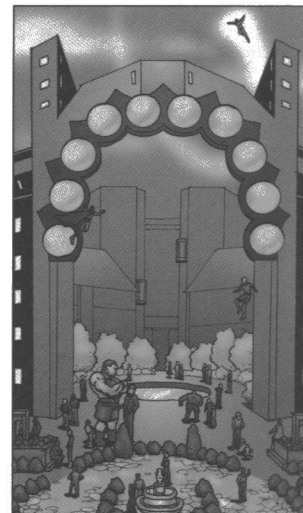
This is the card of the apprentice and of a new skill being learned. It also indicates the early stages of a successful venture.



NINE OF DISCS

Being a superhero isn't all bruised knuckles and broken windows. Sometimes, as Dragon Queen shows us here, there's time to take a moment and enjoy the simple pleasure in life, like this unique Japanese garden. Dragon Queen uses her powers of levitation to rise just above the water's surface, tiptoeing across the reflections cast by the nine disc lanterns, while her dragon companion, Shiro, perches lightly on her hand.

The Nine of Discs is for those who have learned to enjoy a quiet, solitary life, and those who enjoy gardens and homes.



TEN OF DISCS

Behold—Sanctuary! Created by billionaire hero Ben Holliday (Pulsar), this island retreat was created to allow the super-powered population a retreat from their ordinary lives. Heroes and villains walk openly here, free from their usual grudges and battles. Sanctuary has one immutable law: Peace.

Wealth, affluence, and a happy home are the trademarks of the Ten of Discs. An inheritance may be in the future as well.



PAGE OF DISCS

In 1954 a young lady named Thessaly Xavier and her brother, Trey, were abducted by a craft of unknown origin (Judgment), only to be returned some 40 years later with extraordinary powers. As a member of The Misfits, Thessaly goes by the code name Cryptic, and in this card, she uses her telekinesis to lift herself and the golden disc into the air, above the tree line.

Cryptic is still learning the extent of her powers and so she suits the Page of Discs very well, as this is the card of the scholar. It's also a card of cautious action, and of messages of a financial nature being delivered.



KNIGHT OF DISCS

Like his sister (Page of Discs), Trey Xavier was once a normal human being until an alien abduction granted him inhuman strength, resiliency, and endurance. As the strongman member of The Misfits, Trey goes by the name Temper, and his primary goal is safeguarding his sister.

The Knight of Discs, like Temper, has a strong moral compass and he works diligently to uphold what he thinks is right. Judging by the huge coin on his shoulders, one can expect to see some money changing hands in the near future.



QUEEN OF DISCS

Using her powers of the mind, SpiritQueen tries to decipher the psychic impressions left behind on the giant pentacle. The disc is the only clue of what happened to the rest of her teammates, The Crusaders.

SpiritQueen's nobility and selflessness here are exemplary traits for the Queen of Discs. It's a card for those who put their talents to a practical use, and those with a motherly instinct.



KING OF DISCS

As all of the suits identify with one of the four elements, it's no wonder that Golem, one of the Crusaders, is the King of Discs—a suit that represents the earth and material matters.

Golem's nature matches his temperament perfectly, being slow to anger and completely grounded in his thoughts and opinions. He's an excellent leader for the team.

Reading for yourself and others

Before we get to the different types of spreads and how to read them, we'll need to understand the basic guidelines for using the tarot. There aren't many, but each one is important to remember.

CARE AND HANDLING

As I've mentioned before, the tarot can be an invaluable tool in clarifying the path that your life is currently on. As such, it should be treated with the respect it deserves.

Many people find it helpful, when they first get their deck, to wrap it in a silk scarf and place the wrapped deck under their pillow for a few weeks while they sleep. This allows the deck to pick up on your unique vibrations, or auric signature, and you may find that the deck will respond better when doing your readings.

Whether or not you place any stock in "psychic vibrations," your Fradella Adventure Tarot should be put away in a safe dry place after every use. The more respect you show the deck, the more accurate your readings will be.

With this in mind, you should never try to read the cards when you're overly excited, or desperate for an answer. The cards respond best when the question guides the answer, not the emotional state of the reader. Always do your best to be centered and relaxed when doing readings for yourself and others.

SHUFFLING, CUTTING, AND DEALING THE CARDS

No matter what else you may read on the subject, there is no single right way to shuffle or cut the tarot cards. The method I am about to impart to you is the combination of various disciplines I've encountered over the years, and is the method that best suits *me*. As you begin to familiarize yourself more and more with your deck, you may arrive at a completely different method of shuffling—and that's fine! Above all else, you must feel comfortable with your deck.

I begin by taking the deck out of the box and placing it face down before me on a clean, dry mat, keeping the "head" of the deck on top. (That means the part of the deck that was closest to me when I opened the box is now farthest from me on the table.)

Next, I rotate the deck a quarter turn, counter-clockwise, so that the head is now on my left and the deck is sitting horizontally on the mat.

From there I slide off the top half of the deck until I have two roughly equal piles, sitting side by side. Then I take the right pile and rotate it on the mat 180 degrees, so that half the deck is always upside down as I shuffle. This is how we get the "reversed" cards in our spread. With each shuffle, half the cards are being turned upside down. (Of course this means that some of the reversed cards are now right side up again.)

When I shuffle the two piles together, I concentrate on a specific question that I'd like the cards to answer. I try to visualize myself shuffling the question *into* the cards.

When I'm satisfied that the cards are evenly shuffled, I place the cards back on the mat and rotate them a quarter

turn again, this time clockwise, so that the “head” of the deck is once again upright.

Taking the deck in my left hand (the hand of the subconscious) I cut the deck into three equal piles *to my left*. Then I take the pile on the right and place it on the pile in the middle. Finally, I take the new, larger pile and place it back on top of the pile farthest to my left, creating a whole deck once more.

Now, at last, it's time to deal the cards. In all the examples I've read or seen, it's always been done in just this way:

Using your right hand, turn the card in a left-to-right motion, instead of bottom-to-top. The maneuver is exactly the same as if you were looking at the back of your own hand, and were to turn it over to look at your palm. You don't want to flip the card so that you turn it upside down as you deal it.

READING FOR OTHERS

When you do a tarot reading for someone else, you become the Reader, and the person receiving the reading is called the Querent. There are some very important legal and ethical considerations when doing readings for others. These are not to be taken lightly, as the counsel you give may very seriously affect the Querent's emotional state.

On the subject of legality, it should be noted that the laws vary from state to state, and country to country, so it might be a good idea to research the local legislation before hanging out a shingle as a master psychic. One common stipulation is that the Reader must inform the Querent that the reading is for *entertainment purposes only*. If you've ever seen a commercial for card readers on TV, you'll always see this disclaimer on the bottom of the screen.

But more important than the technicalities of the law, there exists a certain code of ethics that every tarot reader should adopt. When a person sits across from you and looks to you for guidance, they're seeking enlightenment on their own life's journey. However much they may protest that they “don't believe in this sort of thing,” they may be surprised themselves to see how much your words stay with them. While reading for others can be very entertaining, it should always be taken very seriously, as you can never underestimate the weight that someone will place on your predictions.

To that end, you have a responsibility to behave in a certain manner. First and foremost, *never* tell someone that they're going to die. Even when the cards indicate that a family member may become ill, or might pass on, it's your job to portray such news as what *may* happen. Remind them that the tarot is just a series of signposts on their own journey, and that everything that the cards show may be altered by the decisions we make tomorrow.

If you see sickness in their future, don't say affirmatively, “You're going to be very ill.” Instead, help them see how they might avoid such a fate. For example, you might say, “Make sure to take extra special care of yourself in the coming weeks. Get plenty of rest and try to eat better. There might be a flu going around.” This approach not only conveys the same basic information, but it also puts it in their heads that they can affect the outcome of the reading.

Also, when performing a reading for someone else, you may want to let him or her shuffle the cards themselves, so that their question gets thoroughly mixed into the deck. Direct them to concentrate on their dilemma while they shuffle, and then let them hand the deck back to you.

As you progress through the reading, you may find that the cards don't seem to be answering the question that the Querent asked. There is no need to panic. This is not unusual. I've had many such cases when what the Querent was really concerned about had nothing to do with the question they asked. If the cards seem to be telling a different story, don't be afraid to ask the person if there was something else on their mind.

Lastly, as you begin to do readings for others, keep this book handy. There is a lot to learn about the tarot and no one expects you to memorize the whole litany in one or two sittings. If a card comes up that you do not recognize, don't hesitate to look it up. Never just make up something.

GENERAL NOTES ON READING THE TAROT

For reasons not entirely clear, having a working knowledge of all the card's meanings will somehow make the deck perform better for you. Your readings, both for yourself and others, will grow increasingly more accurate as your understanding of the deck deepens.

That being said, never let "book learning" replace your own intuitive feelings about a card or reading. The tarot, some say, is nothing more than a collection of 78 keys, each one designed to free a locked away portion of your subconscious. If you feel a certain insight into a particular reading, don't slam the door just because a book says differently. You'll have to learn, over time, to trust your own instincts in this matter. It's a hard leap of faith to make (especially when doing readings for others), but as time progresses and you find that those instincts get validated, you'll discover once again a new level of proficiency with the deck.

When doing a full spread (or a spread that expands beyond the basic Past/Present/Future 3-card spread) take a moment to look at the whole reading. If there are a lot of Masks, or a lot of Major Arcana cards, it could indicate that there are certain energies at work. Use the following as a guide:

- A lot of Masks indicate love and happiness.
- Blades mean conflict and trouble.
- Staves show a lot of change.
- Many Discs tells us that there's money and finances involved.
- If there are a lot of Major Arcana cards in the spread, it could mean that the outcome of the reading will largely be determined by outside forces, or other people.

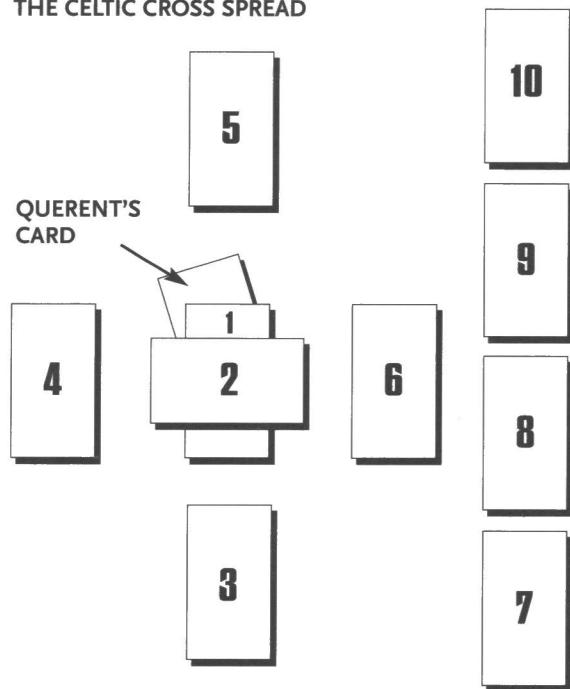
Let's do a few sample readings to see how it all works.

THE CELTIC CROSS SPREAD

This is certainly one of the most popular, and well-known spreads for reading the tarot. It's an excellent example of how a card's position in a spread can enhance its meaning significantly. The Celtic Cross Spread involves 11 cards total, 10 of which will be used to explore the Querent's question, and one to represent them in the reading (usually a court card).

This one card is the Querent's card (also know as the Significator card). It is taken out of the deck before any shuffling is done and is placed in the center of the reading, as all the other cards build outward from it. The rest of the cards are placed in the order shown in the diagram on the next page.

THE CELTIC CROSS SPREAD



Each of the positions means something different:

- 1) **WHAT COVERS YOU** – This is the general atmosphere surrounding the situation.
- 2) **WHAT CROSSES YOU** – This is the thing that most directly blocks you from getting what you want. (Always read in the upright position.)
- 3) **WHAT'S BEHIND YOU** – This is a relevant experience from the past that will influence the Final Outcome.

- 4) **MOVING AWAY FROM YOU** – This is an influence which has very recently passed.
- 5) **WHAT'S NEAR YOU** – This is an influence that may happen in the future.
- 6) **WHAT'S BEFORE YOU** – An event, person, or thing coming into the picture very soon.
- 7) **YOUR FEARS** – Your own anxieties about the situation.
- 8) **FAMILY/FRIENDS OPINION** – The atmosphere of those who are closest to the Querent.
- 9) **YOUR HOPES** – Your positive feelings on the situation at hand.
- 10) **FINAL OUTCOME** – The end result of the question at hand.

Note: Variations do exist on the Celtic Cross Spread. The author's preference is what is depicted here.

PAUL'S READING

The following reading was done for an acquaintance. We'll call him Paul for the sake of anonymity.

Paul's been running an Internet business for some years now and recently decided to take his business to the streets, opening a traditional storefront. Together with his new business partner, they were going to see about getting a loan to finance the endeavor. Paul shuffled the deck, silently asking his question, and then I dealt the cards. Here's what came up:

QUERENT (*Ace of Discs, reversed*) – Ordinarily, a Reader would remove a card from the deck to represent the Querent, but I'm always leery about eliminating what could

be a vital card from the layout. Instead, I use the first card I deal as the Querent's card. In this case, the card was the Ace of Discs, reversed, representing the beginnings of a new business venture and Paul's anxiety about it. (Paul had not divulged his question to me, but I was able to surmise the nature of it given that his card was the Ace of Discs.)

- 1) **WHAT COVERS HIM** (*Four of Staves, reversed*) – After what I had gathered from the Querent's card, I could have assumed that the Four of Staves referred to Paul's feelings about shutting down the Internet aspect of his company, as he had worked very hard on it for a long time. Still...there was a definite feeling I got from the imagery in the card. I trusted my intuition and asked if he'd recently gone through any sort of romantic upheaval. Sure enough, Paul had just broken up with his long-time girlfriend. It's a good example of how everything in your life is related. Love doesn't exist in a vacuum, and Paul's new business endeavor will certainly be affected by the heartache he's feeling.
- 2) **WHAT CROSSES HIM** (*Five of Discs*) – This represents the thing that most directly blocks the Querent's ambition. Finding the Five of Discs here is no surprise at all. This is a card of poverty, and given Paul's concerns over getting the bank loan, it could very well bring his plans to an end before they actually start.
- 3) **WHAT'S BEHIND HIM** (*Seven of Masks*) – Paul's years of running an Internet company amounted to a lot of wishful thinking, as shown here in the Seven of Masks. Though he started the company during the dot-com boom, it never really took off like he hoped it would. I interpreted this card to mean that Paul harbored some feelings of bitterness

toward those days, and that those feelings would probably play a large part in his decisions where his current brick-and-mortar company was concerned.

- 4) **MOVING AWAY FROM HIM** (*Four of Discs*) – Here's a decision that is clearly motivated by money. Speaking with Paul about this card, he confirms that his decision to leave the Web was motivated almost purely by financial concerns. His company simply could not survive on the online revenue it was earning.
- 5) **WHAT'S NEAR HIM** (*Eight of Masks, reversed*) – Sometimes finding a card in the reversed position can also reverse the card's meaning. In this case, however, the feeling I got was that the energy of the Eight of Masks was *amplified* by being reversed, not negated by it. Paul's new direction in life was causing him to turn his back on things that have meant a great deal to him—his girlfriend and his online business. Those feelings of loss will stay with him for a period of time, and I try to council him to maintain a more positive outlook on the future. I remind him that he's learned a great deal from both experiences and won't be likely to make the same mistakes again.
- 6) **WHAT'S BEFORE HIM** (*Knight of Staves*) – What an excellent card to find in this position. Just look at the fiery energy coming off that Knight! I got such a strong vibe off this card that I was absolutely sure that he'd get the bank loan. (Of course, I didn't say it like that!) What I said was more along the lines of, "Things seem to be in your favor where this new enterprise is concerned. Don't be surprised if you hear some good news about that loan."

- 7) **HIS FEARS** (*Two of Discs, reversed*) – Speaking with Paul about this card, we arrived at the conclusion that what he’s most concerned about is being able to handle new and unfamiliar parts of the business. Running a traditional storefront will require more than just money, it’ll require him to juggle responsibilities to make sure that everything gets done.
- 8) **FAMILY/FRIENDS OPINION** (*Six of Staves*) – This indicated to me that those closest to him agree that Paul is making a move for the better. They saw the last few years as a necessary stepping-stone for him, and think that the new venture will bring him much happiness and success. I relate this to Paul, who agrees that this is almost exactly what his friends and family members have said.
- 9) **HIS HOPES** (*Eight of Discs, reversed*) – Here’s a perfect example of how a reversed card means the opposite of the card’s original meaning. The Eight of Discs would ordinarily indicate a period of waiting, a time when one’s efforts may or may not bear fruit. In this case—given the card’s position in the spread—it’s clear that Paul’s hopes are that his years of effort will finally be rewarded, and the waiting is now over.
- 10) **FINAL OUTCOME** (*Ten of Staves*) – Success! While there will surely be difficulties to be managed, I feel confident telling Paul that his hard work will pay off. The Ten of Staves tells us that struggles will be overcome, and success is assured. A very fortunate card to have in this position.

Had any of these cards landed in a different place on the spread, their meaning would have altered dramatically. It’s

important to look at the reading as a whole, and do your best to relate the results as a story in progress.

This reading was made easier for me by the dominance of both Staves and Discs. Even if I hadn’t been able to divulge Paul’s question in the first card (the Ace of Discs was a dead giveaway), I would have surmised the nature of the question by the results of the remaining cards that appeared.

AMY’S READING

This was a quick Past/Present/Future spread, accomplished by dealing three cards, left to right. Once again, Amy was an acquaintance. She shuffled the cards without telling me what her question was.

- 1) **PAST** (*Judgment*) – My immediate reaction to this card was that there was a singular event around which her question was centered. It looked to me as if something had happened, years ago perhaps, for which she had either not forgiven herself or was unforgiven by someone else. I didn’t get the feeling that she was being judged unjustly, but more likely a bit too harshly. I related my feelings to Amy and she partially agreed, saying that there was no particular moment to which she could point, but that instead, there was a relatively short period of time where things seemed to fall apart for her.
- 2) **PRESENT** (*Three of Masks*) – Even though this is ordinarily a card of happiness and unity, I’m reminded that the three women in the card are actually one woman, shown in three aspects. I interpret this to mean that Amy has moved on from those former events and is at a good place in her life, though they do still weigh on her from time to time.

3) **FUTURE** (*Six of Discs*) – This is one of those cards that could go either way on a final outcome. The way Troubleseeker tosses the money to one derelict and not the other could indicate either joy or sorrow—or both. There's energy in the motion of the hero, and I focus on that, where I finally find my answer. Looking at the other cards (which is not a lot to go on) I tell Amy that it might be time to move on from the situation. Regardless of who has been doing the judging in the past, she alone has the power to forgive herself for whatever mistakes she has made. Troubleseeker is tossing the coins behind him, a good indication not to look back, and to direct her energies toward the future.

Suggested Reading

The tarot is a wonderfully rich tool. There are a great many disciplines, like numerology or astrology, which can really enhance your enjoyment of the tarot, and may offer additional insights into the readings you perform.

For myself, when reading the Fradella Adventure Tarot, I find that my own perceptions are multiplied immensely by my familiarity with the characters depicted on the cards.

If you're interested in learning more about the tarot, or the great characters found in iHero™ Entertainment, head over to your local bookstore and pick up some of these books:

- *A Complete Guide to the Tarot* by Eden Gray (Bantam Dell Publishing Group, 1972)
- *The Power Within* by Frank Fradella (Gold Rush Games, 2002)
- *Burn Down the Mission* by Frank Fradella (Gold Rush Games, 2002)
- *Survival Instinct* by Frank Fradella (Gold Rush Games, 2002)

Special Bonus

Included in this section are two stories from the book, *Survival Instinct* by Frank Fradella. Find out why Ibn Al-Jinn is the perfect embodiment of Strength, or why Etheria is the ideal candidate for The High Priestess...

AWAKENING THE GENIE

I burst through the doors of the temple and out into the sunlit streets of Cairo with the Minions of Set hot on my heels. The Heart of the Serpent, the mystic artifact I had reclaimed from their altar, pulsed like a thing alive in my hand as I shouted across the street for Jessie to start the Jeep.

"GO GO GO!" I shouted, narrowly avoiding the swing of one of their ceremonial swords. The blade embedded itself into the wood of the doorjamb and stayed there. There were maybe 30 Minions, all fanatical and all dressed in the ancient attire befitting their station as acolytes of the Egyptian god of the night.

Jessie's eyes were wide with astonishment as I barreled across the busy intersection, dodging death from both Minions and motorists alike. A few of my pursuers weren't quite so agile as I, falling victim to dust-covered automobiles that sped recklessly down the narrow thoroughfare. Their bodies smashed into the oncoming traffic with a sickening thud that caused my stomach to clench involuntarily. Horns blared as one of Set's men dove to tackle me and I launched myself into the air, landing on the hood of a stopped car. He hit the ground hard, and his compatriots trampled him underfoot in their zeal to get to me.

One of them grabbed my ankle as I was in mid-leap off

the car and I went headfirst down to the hard, compacted earth. The wind knocked out of me, the Heart of the Serpent slipped from my hands and went tumbling back and forth underneath the speeding cars.

"Sam!" shouted Jessie, throwing the Jeep into reverse and jamming her foot onto the accelerator. The Minions of Set gave no notice to the fire-haired female who bore down on them. The majority of them were blindly stepping into the chaos of the traffic to reclaim their master's Heart, while a few of them rushed towards me, intent on delivering the punishment that my transgression demanded.

I heard the screech of tires even as the omnipresent sun glinted off the impossibly sharp steel of their descending blades. I rolled to my right, my body colliding with the legs of one man and sending him sprawling to the ground. The rear of the Jeep slammed into the glassy-eyed maniacs and bowled them over like a straw house in the face of the sandstorm.

Scrambling to my feet, I ran after the group who had retrieved the artifact, ignoring Jessie's quite vocal protests. I snatched a heavy clay urn from a street vendor as I ran past and introduced it to the skull of the lead Minion, knocking him unconscious and the Heart of the Serpent from his grasp. I jumped over his fallen form and scooped up the mystic item without breaking stride.

For all their tenacity, the Minions of Set aren't the brightest of groups. Most cult members aren't, choosing to give up their will to that of their leader, be it god or prophet. Usually, I frowned on such fanaticism, but in this case it worked for me and I was halfway down the block before they realized what had happened.

I was also, unfortunately, going the wrong way.

Behind me, I heard the squeal of tires as Jessie sped away from the scene. With so many bodies littering the street and traffic at a standstill, it would have been impossible for her to follow me. I could only hope we'd intersect somewhere in the maze of streets that was the City of the Living.

I felt a small twinge of guilt as the urn's merchant shouted after me in Arabic, demanding his money. I knew I'd make good on it. Well...eventually. If I lived long enough.

The Minions of the Snake God came after me and they weren't quiet about it. Their sacred temple had sat in the middle of Cairo, unnoticed and undisturbed by anyone, for thousands of years. Until this afternoon, that is. With nothing left to lose by their discovery, they ran down the street after me wearing clothes that no one had seen since the last pharaoh walked these sands.

I was breathing hard before too long and my shirt was soaked through with sweat. I ran my fingers through my long black hair, pulling it away from my face and peered around the corner.

Maybe a dozen of them were going door-to-door on the narrow alley, rousting the occupants and making a general nuisance of themselves. As for the residents themselves, they made no trouble. The garb was strange, but they knew these men for who they were. Oh, yes...the gods of Egypt were very much alive.

I smiled, knowing I had lost them. Retreating back around the corner, I turned and came face to face with a dozen more, arranged in a phalanx. The smile vanished instantly from my face. They glared at me, their lips collectively drawing back into a nasty snarl as they stood brandishing their weapons menacingly.

I flashed another smile and tossed the Heart of the

Serpent into the air. As the lead Minion lifted his eyes to follow its movement, I kned him in the groin and then grabbed his head and shoved him backwards into his friends, toppling them like tenpins. I caught the Heart and ran like the wind in the other direction.

Minions seemed to pour from the doorways like water from the Nile and I pinned myself against the wall as I avoided a sword thrust. My fist connected with a jaw here, my elbow with a temple there, acting solely on instinct and adrenaline. They kept coming—the only thing saving me was that they weren't using their swords anymore in the narrow alleyway for fear of impaling each other.

I disappeared under a pile of bodies, bells ringing in my head as they rained blow after blow upon me. I fought back desperately, swinging wildly and connecting now and then. From somewhere far away, past the bells, I heard the blaring of a horn.

"Sam!" Jessie screamed. "Throw it here!"

Between the flailing limbs, I caught a glimpse of her, standing up in the driver's seat and holding on to the roll bar. With everything I had left, I hurled the Heart of the Serpent toward her and breathed a guilty sigh of relief as the Minions abandoned me in favor of new prey.

Jessie caught the Heart and dropped into the seat, slamming the Jeep into gear and speeding away. She cut a hard right at the corner and was gone. So was I. I ran in the opposite direction and made my first left. My left eye was already swelling shut and my ribs hurt every time I inhaled. And I was inhaling a lot.

I hadn't gotten two blocks before Jessie's Jeep appeared before me at the end of the alley. Grinning like an idiot, I climbed into the passenger seat and then looked behind us.

The Minions of set were growing smaller by the minute as Jessie navigated the back alleys of Cairo as if she were a native.

"You call this archeology?" she said over the rushing wind, her voice heavy with sarcasm. Her scarlet hair whipped about, nearly masking the devilish smile that danced over her lips.

"Shut up and drive," I said, leaning back into the seat and biting back a smile of my own. Jessie was unlike any woman I had ever known. Women had always been the weaker sex in my eyes. It was the way of my people. Even after my rather liberal education in America, there were certain attitudes and perceptions that were too deeply ingrained to discard. But it was on a trip to New York City that I met a certain crimson-haired cab driver who would forever alter my perceptions.

She was outspoken and brash and very, very sexual. Everything a woman was not supposed to be. I felt that, in her, I had stumbled upon some great lost continent, laden with hidden treasures and knowledge. I took great delight in exploring that newfound land. Perhaps even more than I enjoyed showing her mine.

But still...there were secrets that I was not yet ready to share.

"Head for the pyramids," I told her. "We've got to return this to its rightful resting place."

"That's a relief," she quipped. "I thought you were going to say it belongs in a museum."

Looking behind us, I felt a gnawing fear begin to grow in my belly. The Minions of Set were no longer following us.

* * *

Most people think that the pyramids are deep in the heart of the desert, when the truth is that they're not far outside the city of Cairo.

Darkness was falling fast over the desert and we were half way to the Sphinx when something beneath the sand erupted underneath us and violently overturned the Jeep. We rolled a few times and then came to a stop on our side, banged up and bruised but otherwise none the worse for wear.

In the diminishing light, I could see the sand around us shifting in huge waves and knew that there was something very large moving underneath the dunes. The secret I had so carefully guarded from Jessie, and the world in general, was in a very real danger of being exposed. Then again...my alternatives were even less pleasant.

"Run," I said softly to Jessie, my eyes never leaving the shifting sand.

"But I..."

"Run!" I shouted, shoving her in the direction of the pyramids. Reluctantly, she turned and headed for the peaks in the distance. Towards the flickering lights of Cairo, I could see the hordes of skeletons pushing their way up from the sand and I knew that I had made an enemy of the night god, Set. He had called forth all those wayward travelers over the years who had died in the unforgiving heat and animated their remains to do his unholy bidding.

Running to the Jeep, I grabbed the spare gas can and doused half of it on the abandoned vehicle and then turned it upside down as I hurried to catch up to Jessie. She saw me coming and stopped at the peak of one of the dunes. Looking into each other's eyes, she knew my plan as if reading my mind and smiled at me. I returned her smile.

"Got a match?" I said. Instantly, her face fell. She looked

at the Jeep and then back at me and placed her hands on her hips.

"Don't you?!" she fired back.

I opened my mouth to reply, but then the great desert snake was upon us, rearing its head up out of the sand and striking with unbelievable speed. I dove for Jessie and carried her with me to the ground. The slithering beast was bigger than could be imagined, if the head was any indication, its massive jaws easily capable of swallowing a tank, its body moving beneath our feet as if through air.

"Apep," I whispered, calling the serpent by its name. It was the king of all serpents, having a counterpart in nearly every other culture. The Norse called him Jormungandr, the Midgard Serpent.

My mouth set into a grim line, I pressed my lips against Jessie's ear and said, "I'm going to owe you a very large explanation later."

She pulled away and searched my face, suddenly very afraid. I kissed her hard on the mouth and then turned to face Apep.

I stood up, my bearing proud and unafraid, giving the great serpent pause. In a language older than time, I whispered the words of my forefathers and felt the change overtake me. I offered myself up to the spirit of vengeance, the hawk-headed god, Horus, the avenger, and felt his swift reply.

What mortal frame could ever hope to contain the anger of a god? What being made of mere flesh and muscle and bone could command the awesome and ageless power that is theirs to give? There was but one way...

My body began to change, increasing in mass and size as the power of Horus infused my limbs. The very nature of my skin altered, becoming like polished obsidian, or some

precious gemstone, as my stature increased geometrically with each passing second. In mere moments, in the tumultuous tornado of the desert sand, I rose out of the desert and towered over the Serpent King.

Others had seen this transformation once, from several miles away and believed me to be the last of the great Jinn, the genies that once populated this land in dreams and storybooks. They had called me Ibn Al-Jinn. Son of the Genie. They call me that still.

The serpent struck with unbelievable swiftness, its venomous fangs sinking deep into my forearm. Instantly, its body had wrapped up the length of my arm, and its tail coiled around my throat. I recoiled at the ferocity of the attack, but managed to withstand its force for the moment.

Reaching down, I gingerly picked up the dumbstruck Jessie and, after a dozen or so footfalls, placed her gently on top of the Sphinx's head.

"Wait here," I gasped around the strangling tail.

"Samad Falil," she said, pointing her finger at me warningly, "you put me down right now. Do you understand me? Sam? Sam!"

I pretended not to hear her as I turned and walked back into the heart of the desert. Feeling the astonishing power swell in my muscles, I unwound Apep from my arm and throat, slamming him into the ground with all my strength.

The giant snake lay stunned for only a moment before it fired itself at me once again. This time I was ready for it and I caught the beast in mid-strike. There was the unmistakable tinge of fear at the base of my skull as I realized I was wrestling with a god—and I was winning.

Still, the fear was there, reminding me that I had asked for none of this. That this power was thrust upon me, and

with it the responsibility to avenge those who had been wronged. I was not the son of a genie. I was Samad Falil. A simple archeologist...who had the power of a god at his disposal.

The battle with Apep was brief, but fierce, and he departed with a rather troublesome knot in his midsection that would take some time to unravel. And when the skeletons finally came, I did what all brightly colored superheroes do in such a situation.

I smashed them. I smashed them all.

* * *

Apep's venom left me very sick for a few days and Jessie took care of me, all the while promising to never forgive me for leaving her on top of the Sphinx. Not to mention that I had been lying to her for months.

In due course, I told her everything. She learned all about the U.N. Peacekeepers, the international superhero task force, of which I was a member, and even met the group's spokesperson, Patriot.

And finally, the Heart of the Serpent was returned to the crypt from which it had been stolen and Horus, the avenging god of Egypt, was appeased for one more day.

SURVIVAL INSTINCT

The last drops of blood trickled down his neck and collected in the hollow at the base of his throat. The twin puncture wounds at his jugular had coagulated, seemingly by magic, and his eye stared vacantly forward, open yet unseeing.

Etheria absently pulled her hair behind one ear as she slowly withdrew from him and, her lips crimson and pleasantly sticky from the feeding, pressed a small kiss to his cheek. For a long minute, her face circled closely to his, inhaling his scent, her full, warm lips brushing his lightly. She looked into his eyes once more and saw that he was not there, not in any true sense anyway, and she smiled as she planted a tiny kiss to the tip of his nose.

"Oh, Jack," she whispered huskily, her voice heavily laden with a French accent, making his name sound more like *Jacques*, "whatever shall I do with you?"

With great tenderness, she brushed his cheek with the back of her fingers and searched his eyes once more for signs of comprehension. Lifting his chin with a forefinger, she ran her tongue down his throat and drank the last of the thickening red liquid. Bubbling up pleasantly from somewhere inside her, she purred, savoring the warm, heady feeling she was now experiencing.

She turned away from him, releasing his jaw from her iron grasp and he collapsed to the floor, the wooden stake in his right hand clattering across the tile noisily. He lay there, his limbs crossing at odd angles and his eyes still wide open and vacuous. His chest continued to rise and fall in a slow, shallow rhythm.

Without looking back, she crossed the darkened room and looked out the window over the cityscape. Her eyes took in the city, and in her mind, she superimposed the city

that had once been there...and the city before that. With the fleshy tip of her middle finger, she drew a line underneath her lower lip and collected a few stray drops of blood. Placing the finger in her mouth, she suckled it gently for a few moments and then sighed. Spinning back towards him, her cloak twirling with an inhuman grace, she felt his blood coursing through her veins. She felt a little flush, but pleasantly so.

"You see, Jack? You are a part of me now. Now and forever. Someday, when all of this is over and you have been dust for many years, I will speak of you fondly to some lover who shares my bed. I will turn to them and I shall say that I once drank the blood of the mighty Outback Jack, member of the U.N. Peacekeepers, and they will be so very impressed."

She stood over him in the darkness, her cloak casting a long shadow across the cool tile. Crouching beside him, the wooden stake caught her eye and she picked it up, turning it over in her hands as she continued to talk.

"Oh, *oui*, Jack," she cooed, spinning the sharpened pike in the air and then catching it again, "I am much impressed by you, *cheri*. I suppose I always knew that one of you would figure out my secret eventually, but I did not expect it so soon. But you are the hunter extraordinaire, no? I suppose I knew it would be you."

With a casual snap of her arm and without looking, Etheria threw the stake out and away from her toward the rear wall. The wood impaled itself into the support beam with a satisfying chunk, bypassing the reinforced concrete as if it weren't there. Grabbing the tan shirtfront of his costume, she stood in one fluid motion, lifting him off the ground effortlessly.

"But you underestimated me, didn't you, *cheri*? Me and all my nocturnal brethren. We are so much more than man-sized mosquitoes, *mon ami*. More than you can imagine." Still holding him aloft with one hand, she brought him closer, brushing her lips against his ear as she whispered. "Could you have killed me, I wonder? Could you have put aside your superhero ethics long enough to do the job? And did you really think that I would just stand there and let you run me through?"

Chuckling softly, she licked his earlobe and then planted him in a soft chair in the corner. Sitting sideways across his lap, her arm draped around his neck, she removed one of the boomerangs from his costume and examined it before dropping it on the floor. "I shall keep this as a memento of our time together, dearest Jack."

"Ah, *cheri*...do you know how important it is to me to be a part of this team? No...I don't suppose you could. You cannot imagine how tired I had grown of hiding my abilities. For centuries, we have been forced to conceal ourselves and our special talents." She paused then, waving her hand nonchalantly and the big double windows opened to allow the night air entry. For a frozen moment, she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply. "Oh, how wonderful it is to fly, Jack. How liberating. But already you know how wonderful it feels to have this sort of strength, *mon ami*. I have heard that you have wrestled alligators and huge oxen into submission...and yet my strength dwarfs your own. Why must I hide these things?"

"But it was my speed that took you by surprise, was it not, *cheri*," she giggled. "I wish you could have seen the look on your face when you burst into the room, stake at the ready, prepared to accuse me of all sorts of unholy

atrocities, only to find me at your throat before the first syllable passed your lips.”

Biting her lower lip, she patted his cheek affectionately. “Poor Jack.”

Running her fingers absently through his hair, she laid her head on his shoulder and sighed heavily. “I remember, all too well my friend, how people have always looked upon me in terror when they realize what I am. I have known moments in my life where the only thing between Death and me has been the dozen footfalls between the panicked mob of superstitious villagers and myself. So try to understand how it is that I came up with this plan of mine.”

“I was in Belgium during the Second Great War, living very well and serving as a nurse in the makeshift hospitals. Blood was plentiful and no one noticed if there were a few pints missing now and again. Also...I admit that I enjoyed helping people. Having been worried about my basic survival for so long, it was a pleasant change to be met with smiles and flirtations from the wounded soldiers. It was also during that time that I first saw the Minuteman. The Sentinels of Liberty were on everyone’s lips and the germs of an idea began to form in my head.”

Etheria paused for a moment, a thought poised on the tip of her tongue, and she tapped her lips repeatedly with her extended forefinger. “But not right away, I must confess. My first thought was that I wondered how long the blood of such a man could sustain me. You must understand, *cheri*...the healthier my victim, the longer I can go before I need to feed once again. On your blood, dearest Jack, I shall be able to go without feeding for perhaps an entire month. Had I but tasted the blood of the Minuteman, it may have sustained me for a year or more.

And so, when I was approached by the Nazi super weapon, Uberwher, I agreed to help them oppose the Sentinels of Liberty. Calling ourselves the Reich Strike, we failed miserably...as you have no doubt read in the history books.”

“It was then that I gladly shed my identity once more and moved back to Paris. Then slowly, over the next 50 years or so, hardly any time at all to me really, more and more of you began to surface. Then it occurred to me...I have abilities and powers that could be used to help people, too. And though I must feed to survive, I do not need to kill to do so, nor do I need to turn my benefactor into a creature of the night like myself. When the call went out to all the nations for the U.N. Peacekeepers, I knew I had found the camaraderie that was sorely lacking in my existence. After all, it is not unusual for those in our unique occupation to have rather mundane daily lives, only donning our masks and costumes once the sun goes down, so no one questioned my disappearances during the daylight hours. I could not have planned it better.”

“All the adoration...all the open arms and gratitude from those we help...I found a new purpose in my life, *mon cheri*. Some reason to live beyond the fact that I simply cannot die. You must surely understand then, dear Jack, why I could not let you take it away from me.”

Slowly, and with great tenderness, she turned his face toward hers and pressed a soft, sweet kiss to his lips. His eyes never blinked or fluttered, and they looked at her with all the purpose of stone. Her fingertips traced the hard lines of the muscles in his neck, pausing momentarily at the freshly closed wounds. She sighed heavily and then stared deeply into his eyes. When she began to speak again, her voice was different...more suggestive. In his current state, his will was no match for hers and she knew it.

"I have no wish to kill you, *mon cheri*. My time here has given me that much respect for life, at least. So this is what we shall do: I shall talk and you shall listen, and my words will be your law."

"You will forget all that has transpired here, dear Jack. Forget that you ever suspected my true nature. You will only know that we were lovers for a short time, but that I could not return the depth of your affection. Realizing that this distraction could jeopardize the safety of the whole team, you have decided to return to your homeland and go on a long journey in the outback that you love so much and try to forget me. Do you understand all that I have said, my love?"

Silently, with his eyes still transfixed on some faraway place, Outback Jack nodded once and was still again. Etheria smiled and patted his cheek gently. "Sleep now, *cheri*, and when you awake, you shall prepare for your trip back home."

Outback Jack's eyelids closed almost immediately. With a final poignant touch of her fingers upon his face, Etheria dissolved into mist and became one with the night once more.

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