

The Portal Tarot



THE APPRENTICE INSTRUCTIONS



XVII



The Star

IV

SYNERGY
The burgeoning energy of a community that is growing rapidly, each member driving the others on to greater heights. This card represents the expansion and prosperity created by people working together with a will to improve life for all.

EXPLOITATION
Taking advantage of friends, family, or employees, trades immediate gains for future problems in an unstable community. This card represents a failure to cooperate, or doing so in bad faith.

Four of Wands

CONTENTS	PAGE #
1: WHAT IS A TAROT DECK?	1
2: YOUR FIRST TAROT LESSON	3
3: HOW TO GAME WITH THE TAROT	8
4: THE FOOL'S JOURNEY	13

Whether you already know how to use a Tarot deck or not, this brief instruction guide will walk you through the basics, what makes *The Portal Tarot: The Apprentice* special, and how to use these beautiful cards to fire up your imagination, inspiring self reflection, writing, and role-playing!

CREDITS

Writing and design by Nathan Rockwood.

Graphic Design and Layout by Max Johnson.

Art by Elena Asofsky.





1: WHAT IS A TAROT DECK?

Originally--and still, in much of the world--the Tarot deck is just a different deck of playing cards. Compared to the more common 52-card poker deck, these Tarot (or Tarocco, or Tarock, or many other names, depending on the origin) decks usually have more cards, including an additional suit of named cards, and individually vary widely in exact contents. They have existed as gaming cards for hundreds of years, since at least the 15th century.

However, in about the 18th century, some people began using them for divination. The 78-card Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot deck (named after the publisher, the designer, and the artist) 10-year-old-me found on a dusty shelf in my dad's office came with a tiny booklet that tried to explain, in brief, the concepts of occult Tarot and a summary of each card, and was my first introduction to such things; I imagine a similar story is true of many people of my generation, since that particular deck has been one of the most popular of the last 100 years, even though it is far from the only option. There are dozens of Tarot decks available today, each following a similar formula but presenting their own unique take on it.

This sort of Tarot deck, meant for esoteric use, has four suits of 14 cards each, collectively called the Minor Arcana, and a fifth, 22-card suit called the Major Arcana. The Minor Arcana suits (Wands, Cups, Swords, and Coins, in *The Portal Tarot*) are similar to the suits of a poker deck, but with an additional face card each. The Major Arcana consist of the cards you've probably seen talked about in popular media: Death, The Tower, The Fool, and so on. Depending on where you get your information, each of these 78 cards has many possible interpretations, all of which can be given greater nuance by being 'read' in connection with other cards that are drawn alongside them in arrangements called 'spreads' (or 'throws,' sometimes).

While I have always been skeptical of claims about supernatural fortune-telling, I found myself drawn to the art, symbolism, and interpretation of the Tarot the same way I was drawn into role playing, writing, and creative work in general. Even without attaching occult significance to them, the cards offer prompts that help us reflect on our selves, our stories, and our shared world. I find value in that, as it supports both personal growth and creative endeavors.

HOW DO I USE A TAROT DECK?

The short answer is: Ask a question (or suggest a topic), draw some cards (probably three), and consider what those cards might mean in that particular context (or, if you're on TV/wanting to spook your friends, just look scared and refuse to tell them anything, and then leave quickly).

The longer answer is: Any one of a million ways, but the specifics depend heavily on your personal reasons for using them! See the next section of this instruction manual for more details.

WHAT MAKES *THE PORTAL TAROT: THE APPRENTICE* UNIQUE?

The Portal Tarot: The Apprentice (so subtitled in a hopeful gesture, because my goal is to someday make more decks with varied contents) is the deck of cards I wish I'd first stumbled across when I was a kid. In this hopefully-first-in-a-line-of-decks Tarot, the 22 Major Arcana have beautiful full-color illustrations, and the 56 Minor Arcana have explanatory text on them, so you don't have to look up their meanings while learning the cards!

The problem I had with the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, as a youth, was that I could not read the cards with any reasonable speed. With 78 cards to learn and only a tiny, onionskin-paper booklet and very limited 90s-level internet access to help, I never learned enough about the symbology of the cards to work from memory. Trying to interpret a spread was laborious and slow and frustrating.

With that in mind, I created *The Portal Tarot: The Apprentice* to assist people like me: interested, creative types, probably into either spiritual interpretations for guidance and self-reflection, and/or writing and role-playing and fantasy fiction, but not relishing trying to memorize a few hundred years' worth of symbolic analysis all in one go.



Of course, *The Portal Tarot* is definitely not the same in content as the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot, or any other Tarot out there. Over the years, I've developed my own interpretations of the cards, and I tweaked them further while working on this deck, which is themed to reflect the fantasy fiction you see in popular stories and role playing games. The Major Arcana has been altered in imagery and, thus, symbolic meaning, and the four Minor Arcana (at least in current form, with text instead of art) have been written to fit into what I think of as miniature 'journeys' of their own, each showing the struggles and triumphs of one part of life. For more details, read on into the next section, **2: Your First Tarot Lesson**—or, if you're ready to skip ahead, learn how to use the deck in an RPG in **3: How to Game with the Tarot**.



2: YOUR FIRST TAROT LESSON

To dive into reading Tarot cards as quickly as possible, I suggest the following:

1. First, learn the basics about the deck and the way it is set up, which will help you learn the individual cards much more quickly.
2. Second, start with some simple three-card spreads and practice interpretations on them.
3. After that, depending on what you wish to use the cards for, you should be well equipped to decide exactly how you want to expand your knowledge: Individual practice? Searching for more advanced spreads on the internet? Trapping a demon in a circle of salt and forcing them to divulge their secrets in exchange for blood and/or a nice turkey sandwich?

LEARN THE CARDS

The *Portal Tarot* are divided into two groups of cards called the Major and Minor Arcana; the Minor Arcana are further divided into four suits. The most important difference between the Major and Minor Arcana in *The Portal Tarot: The Apprentice* is that, while the Major Arcana rely on your interpretation of the name and image on the card—or your understanding of them from your research—the Minor Arcana each offer written suggestions for what they might mean, in the form of key words and a brief explanation. While similar text exists for each of the Major Arcana, it is available separately, in the documentation included with the cards.

To begin learning the whole deck, break it into suits. Each of the five suits of the Portal Tarot corresponds to an overarching theme or concept; I suggest reading their descriptions below, and then reading through the corresponding suit at least once, briefly. Thinking about them in units may make it easier to digest!

THE MAJOR ARCANA

The 22 Major Arcana represent archetypal roles and experiences along the path of what is often called the Fool's Journey. Each card depicts a key state of being or turning point as The Fool—the first card—endures everything life can throw at them, until they achieve their ultimate destiny in the card called The World. As a whole, this 'suit' tells a story similar to (but not the same as) Campbell's "Hero's Journey," showing some of the people, places, and stages of life that many humans encounter in this mortal coil.

When one of these cards appears, life-altering forces are in play... but those forces are complex, nuanced, and

THE PORTAL TAROT: THE APPRENTICE

much more than they may first appear! Take a moment now to browse through these cards in sequence, view the images upon them, read my own interpretations (in section 4 of this document, on page 13)—and then, if you wish, seek out lore and alternative influence to expand your understanding of these cards. The well-known Rider-Waite-Smith deck has very different descriptions of the Major Arcana included with it, but even those are re-translated and re-analyzed on numerous websites. My hope is that you will view the art and, over time, generate or adopt your own preferred interpretations of this iconic sequence.

One note on The Fool: While it is numbered 0, some esoteric Tarot decks place it at the end of the Major Arcana, or between the last two cards, or claim it has no place within the sequence because it represents the soul traveling through all of the other cards. I don't have a strong reason to dispute any of these claims, but I place it firmly at the beginning because, by the end of their journey, they aren't actually The Fool any more—which is why, if you view the art of the Major Arcana, you may notice the characters recurring several times.



THE MINOR ARCANA

I think about the four Minor Arcana as each being a mini-Fool's Journey if its own. Each Ace card represents the start of something that grows, struggles, and eventually comes to a conclusion in the corresponding Ten card. Then, each category of face cards (Pages, Knights, Queens, and Kings) represents a different understanding of the concepts of the suit. Pages are youthful and inexperienced, Knights are all-embracing and zealous, and Queens and Kings represent different versions of what might be considered more mature outlooks.

The suit of Wands represents fire, and the passion this element brings to both creation and destruction. Fire is power, enthusiasm, and spirit; it provides the primal spark of civilization. Fire is also ambitious, chaotic, and dangerous, especially if left unchecked. Skim through these cards, from Ace to King, and see them representing the evolution from the initial spark of ambition to confident, inspiring leadership.

The suit of Swords represents air, an element of freedom and the power of the mind. Their double-edged nature symbolizes the careful balance that must be maintained between intellect and action, the grace of constant motion and thought, even when those things are invisible to the naked eye. Review these cards from Ace to King and observe how they represent an understanding of a single truth prompting the growth of keen judgement.

The suit of Cups represents water, the element associated with emotion and insight; the wisdom to be adaptable, to forge strong relationships, and to perceive the world clearly. These traits are healing and nurturing, as long as the influence they grant is used for good, and is not overlooked or corrupted. Read through the suit from Ace to King, seeing the transition from understanding one’s own emotions to having the wisdom to understand others.

The suit of Coins represents earth and the material world: physicality, endurance, and health, but also finances, wealth, and human endeavors. Essentially, all ways that a person can be grounded in the world, seeking stability and support for their body, or even their ego and self-image. Consider the journey from Ace to King and how it demonstrates the opportunity that lets a person build a successful endeavor, as long as they have the seed to start.

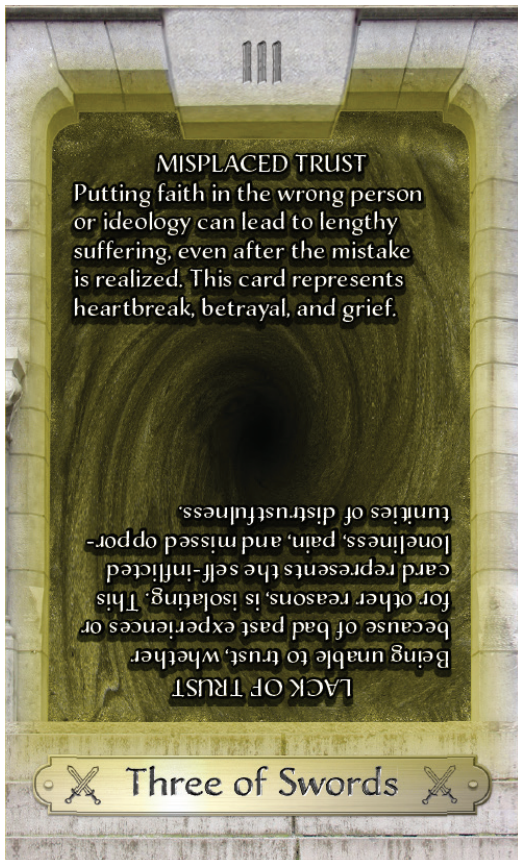
READ THE CARDS

The simplest form of a Tarot reading is to think of a question or topic—for example, someone’s love life, or the fate of a side character in a story you are telling—and draw a single card. “Reading” this one-card spread means considering the implications of the card on the specific subject in question, allowing context to color your interpretations.

You are likely to find that instinct will sometimes take over, trying to twist the meaning of a card to suit your expectations; depending on how you use the cards, this may be exactly what you want. The results may be confirming ideas already floating around in your mind, since you already knew the answer all along. On the other hand, you might get more interesting, unexpected outcomes if you resist this temptation. You’ll have to decide for yourself how to handle this situation, but I suggest erring on the side of instinct.

As an example, let’s consider drawing a single card in response to two different prompts. The card will be the Three of Swords, which reads:

- **Three of Swords:** Misplaced Trust: Putting faith in the wrong person or ideology can lead to lengthy suffering, even after the mistake is realized. This card represents heartbreak, betrayal, and grief.



PROMPT 1: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR MY CAREER?

Interpretation 1: Unfortunately, you’re putting faith in someone—or something—that is going to let you down in a major way. It may or may not be intentional, but they are going to put you in a terrible position, leading to suffering that might be the loss of the job entirely, or which could mean being stuck in a job or role you hate for a long time. You should consider evaluating your support structure and the things you count on; is someone planning on quitting soon, leaving you shorthanded at a critical moment? Does your computer’s backup actually work, or would a crash destroy all your files, projects, or designs?

PROMPT 2: I INTRODUCED A MINOR CHARACTER INTO A STORY IN ORDER TO HAVE THEM GIVE THE MAIN CHARACTERS IMPORTANT INFORMATION; HOW DO I... DISPOSE OF THEM?

Interpretation 2: Their trust has been betrayed—or they betray the main characters! Consider which would be more interesting and motivating: Does the side character wind up dead, imprisoned, or injured, leading to the protagonists seeking justice for them? Or would it be more intriguing if it turned

out that this character had lied to the protagonists or concealed critical information, leading them into danger? Depending on whether you wish to devote more time to them or not, make the decision that would lead to the best story!

Hopefully, this sort of interpretation is fairly simple. Adding more cards to the spread then means considering how they each interact with the context of the prompt and the other cards drawn; I suggest upgrading to three cards, and seeing how they work together. You may wish to decide, as you draw, that each card will play a specific role in your reading: Past, present, and future, or problem, solution, and outcome, or something like that. However, I personally tend to just draw the three cards and see how they feel once I have them together.

To demonstrate, let's add two more cards to the spread above, and reexamine those two prompts again:



- **Three of Swords:** Misplaced Trust: Putting faith in the wrong person or ideology can lead to lengthy suffering, even after the mistake is realized. This card represents heartbreak, betrayal, and grief.
- **Eight of Coins:** Craftsmanship: A master of a craft will not only pay attention to the details of their work, but they will know what details matter the most. This card represents mastery, expertise, or time well spent.
- **Queen of Wands:** Independence: The Queen of Wands is energetic, self-assured, and always moving. They may work well with others, but always on their own terms: they rely only on themselves. They represent efficiency, assertiveness, and the execution of a plan.

PROMPT 1: WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR MY CAREER?

Interpretation 1: With two more cards to consider, my interpretation begins the same, but it evolves to include more details. The Three of Swords suggests that there is a danger in trusting someone or something too much, as it is soon going to betray you. The Eight of Coins might suggest the betrayer; does someone in your workplace stand out, or want to stand out, as the ultimate expert? Is someone putting in a lot of overtime, or behaving like a perfectionist? Possibly their micromanaging or second-guessing of your work is going to cause problems. The Queen of Wands is all about independence, but I think it sounds like the most relevant idea here is assertiveness and the execution of a plan. Someone may try to question your decisions, or call your abilities into doubt, painting themselves as the person to listen to. When this happens, you should stand up for yourself! You need some follow-through; if you persevere, you will win in the end.

PROMPT 2: I INTRODUCED A MINOR CHARACTER INTO A STORY IN ORDER TO HAVE THEM GIVE THE MAIN CHARACTERS IMPORTANT INFORMATION; HOW DO I... DISPOSE OF THEM?

Interpretation 2: In combination, but not in the order I drew them, I get the sense of a consummate villain: someone who is planning for every contingency (the Queen of Wands), who knows every trick in the book (the Eight of Coins), and who will be the source of the betrayal mentioned on the Three of Swords. I think this side character is a patsy: The information they existed to convey is accurate, but it leaves out crucial details, and it makes it look, in the end, like this bit-character-nobody was trying to get the protagonists killed. Will the protagonists discover who is really at fault, or will they kill the messenger, so to speak? And if they do, what will that leave them thinking and feeling when they later realize the truth?

OTHER TIPS FOR TAROT READING

- Some Tarot readers consider ‘reversed’ cards--ones drawn upside-down--to have different meanings than they do when upright. However, this is not universal; many readers simply turn all cards upright as they place them in a spread. Even amongst those that do differentiate between upright and reversed, some take reversed cards to mean the opposite of what they do when upright, whereas others view reversal as indicating a lesser, ‘blocked,’ or otherwise incomplete version of their upright status. *The Portal Tarot: The Apprentice* includes both upright and reversed meanings, because I felt it was interesting to offer my thoughts on each card in two ways. However, in my own use of the Tarot, I usually find that I leave cards upright, just for simplicity’s sake.
- More nuanced spreads of cards, with many more than just three, are certainly possible. Even if you start with three, it may sometimes seem worth drawing more cards to expand upon any of the ones already drawn, or to provide further details as your interpretation grows. Search around online, or read books about the Tarot, and you’ll find many different combinations--or make your own!
- Some sources you may find in print and online will suggest interesting connections between cards; sometimes, finding two that feel related may alter their meanings in your spread. While I myself have never felt the need to try and research ‘historical’ connections between cards, since many different Tarot decks exist, I have definitely come across pairs or groupings of cards that seem especially relevant in context with each other. Don’t be afraid to pair up or combine cards together as you draw them, if it feels right to do so.



3: HOW TO GAME WITH THE TAROT

Below, I describe several possible ways to use the Tarot in role playing games, but these are only a small taste of how you can use the cards to create stories. Also, as you'll notice, I tend to draw three cards in my examples, because any three tarot cards gives you about 450,000 possible combinations. Having almost half a million results to work with makes it highly unlikely you'll duplicate results any time soon! However, you can also use just one or two cards for a quick idea, or try out much more complex spreads as you become more familiar!

CHARACTERS: BACKGROUND, QUEST, AND PERSONALITY

This can be a great way to quickly generate flavorful, unique characters. For example, pretend you drew the following cards:



- **Queen of Swords:** Open Honesty: The Queen of Swords is always honest, direct, and willing to communicate no matter the difficulty of the subject. She represents clarity of thought, open-mindedness, and frank conversation.
- **The Hierophant:** This card represents learning from others, or existing together in a society, but not necessarily in complete conformity to expectations.
- **Seven of Wands:** Making a Stand: The Conviction to stand up and fight for something, not only with valour and bravery, but with the wisdom to take an advantageous position. This card represents assertiveness, moral defiance, and sheer force of will in the face of evil.

Seeing these cards for a character, I immediately rearrange them in my head:

- **Background:** The Hierophant. This person is a—or was—a teacher, priest, or other servant of the community.
- **Quest:** Seven of Wands: Making a Stand: This character has apparently decided they will do what is right, no matter the cost, and is probably already sacrificing for their choice.
- **Personality:** Queen of Swords: Open Honesty: If their primary personality trait is their directness and honesty, I would say it is very likely they have spoken their mind too much, and are now in trouble because of it.

Together, this makes me think of a true believer of a faith who has discovered corruption in their religious order. They could not stomach just doing what they were told, even by their supposed leaders, as they believe too strongly in honesty and truth. Cast out, they seek to redeem their brethren by encouraging others to take a stand against deceit and falsehoods.

ENCOUNTERS: WHAT HAPPENS, WHY IT DOES, AND THE STAKES

Whether you just want to mix things up in the moment, or you are hoping to come up with the idea that launches a long term quest, this can concoct some interesting stuff. Consider this spread:



- **Seven of Coins:** Reaping Rewards: After much time and effort, work is paying off, not unlike the reaping of a crop. The investment is repaid many times over. This card represents the fruition of plans, earned rewards, and the harvest festival.
- **Six of Coins:** Altruism: Those who have resources and advantages can do great good simply by sharing their wealth with others. This card represents charity, granting personal assistance, or giving aid of some other kind.
- **The Lovers:** The Lovers can represent any form of strong, loving relationship, romantic or otherwise; the bonds between people give them strength and the power to withstand danger.

Considering how to combine these cards, I first thought I would move the Seven of Coins: Reaping Rewards to the END of the encounter, but that feels too common. Instead, I think I'll keep them in this order!

- **What Happens:** Seven of Coins: Reaping Rewards: I choose to think of this, for now, as what is happening at the beginning of this encounter. The characters are getting their rewards for a job well done, when something else comes up!
- **Why it Happens:** Six of Coins: Altruism: I interpret this to mean that the characters have an opportunity here to be altruistic. If they do that, they will get an even greater reward (which shouldn't be apparent before they act).
- **What is at Stake:** The Lovers: This could represent the formation of a romantic relationship, but as a reward that kind of thing is extremely problematic. Instead, I think that it must represent a strengthening of a relationship between the characters as a group and some other power or entity.

Taking them in that order, I think this suggests that, after receiving a reward for a job well done, the characters are leaving with their spoils when they stumble across a family being turned out of the inn they run for failing to pay their taxes—times have been tough. If they characters use their newfound wealth to help these people and ask for a reward other than the free rooms for night they will be offered, the family will happily grant a reasonable request, and that will be that. However, if the characters help without asking for anything else in return, and especially if they insist on paying the family for any rooms they do take, then, when their adult child returns from adventuring and questing, they will seek out and aide the characters at some important moment in the future as a thank-you for saving their parents.

DESTINY, FATE, OR TIME SKIP: PROBLEM, SOLUTION, AND RESULTS

When passing large blocks of time for game reasons (or even just world-building before a game starts), it can be difficult to pick a satisfying fate for a character or group; using the cards can provide inspiration! For instance:



THE PORTAL TAROT: THE APPRENTICE

- **Six of Wands (Reversed):** Ill-Repute: Failures, actual or perceived, have led to a loss of support and goodwill. This may in turn damage self-confidence and cause a downward spiral. This card represents the results of being perceived as a failure, disappointment, or loser.
- **Three of Wands:** Leadership: It takes energy and foresight to take charge and persuade others to follow, especially into new endeavors. This card represents the strength of character, and confidence, to lead others down untrodden paths.
- **Nine of Cups:** Satisfaction: Short-term pleasure is sometimes derided, but it is important to emotional well being. Finding enjoyment in life can make it much easier to weather the storms. This card represents celebrations, small victories, and wish fulfillment.

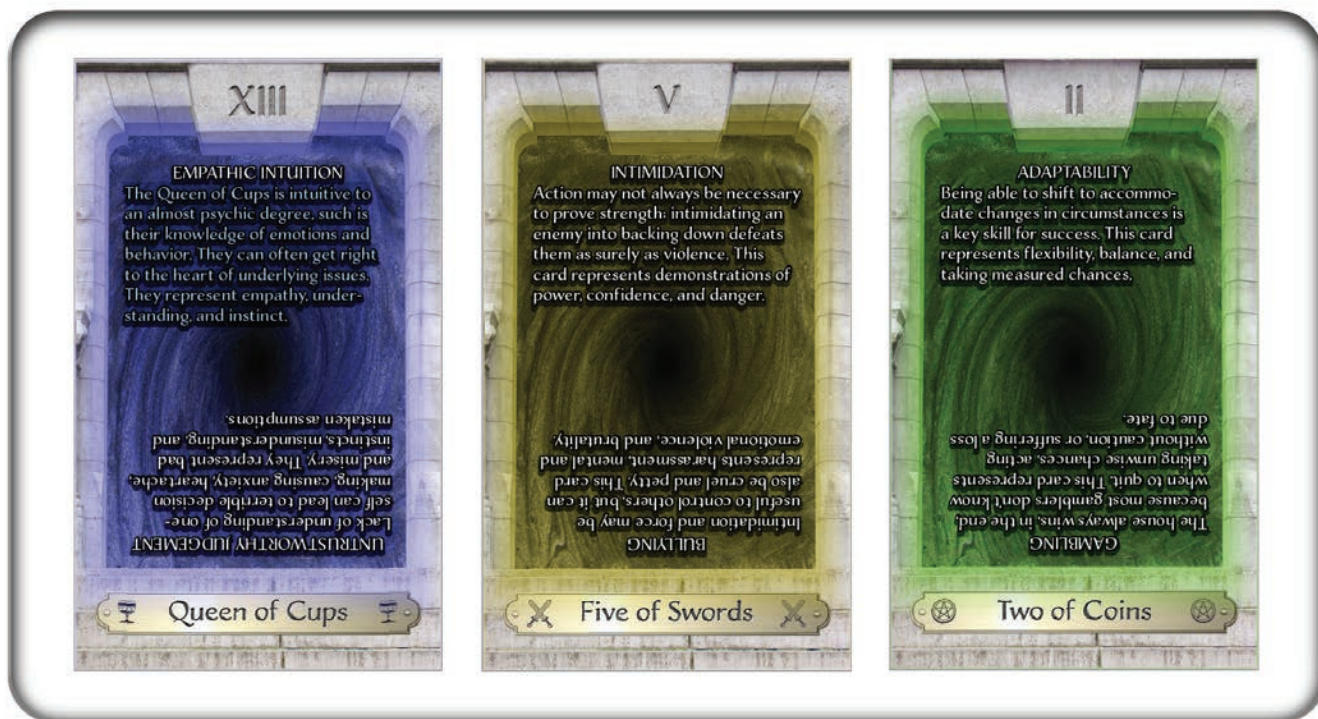
This seems to tell a story almost without needing any interpretation at all:

- **Current problem:** Six of Wands (Reversed): Ill-Repute: Some person or group has developed a bad reputation; they are falling out of favor.
- **Tactic to use:** Three of Wands: Leadership: The same person or group should start taking charge and lead by example.
- **Outcome:** Nine of Cups: Satisfaction: This is notably not a card about repairing the damaged reputation, but it suggests that the subject will feel better about themselves, and take pride in what they have accomplished through their leadership.

Considering this spread, I actually think this might be the start of a redemption tale for a villain who didn't originally realize they were the bad one. The head of an evil megacorporation turns out to be the head of a badly misguided megacorporation, or similar. Having been shown the error of their ways, they divert their resources to fixing problems they helped create. They may not ever be loved by the populace, but they eventually feel like what they are doing is giving them new meaning.

THE TAROT AS GAMEMASTER: CREATE THE NARRATIVE

The story begins with a group of adventurers entering a tavern, having recently completed a dangerous quest. They want to relax; I, as a GameMaster, want to interfere in fun and interesting ways... I draw one card (and the next two are also pictured below, even though I did not draw them at the same time):



- **Queen of Cups:** Empathic Intuition: The Queen of Cups is intuitive to an almost psychic degree, such is their knowledge of emotions and behavior. They can often get right to the heart of underlying issues. They represent empathy, understanding, and instinct.

I think this suggests that, as they drink and talk and boast about their accomplishments, someone with a very keen sense for motivations is listening. I describe a traveler who asks them a few questions about where they have been and what their plans are next, and who seems to smile knowingly to themselves at the end. This is, of course, enough to get the characters curious. Who is this person, and what do they want? I draw another card!

- **Five of Swords:** Intimidation: Action may not always be necessary to prove strength; intimidating an enemy into backing down defeats them as surely as violence. This card represents demonstrations of power, confidence, and danger.

This could theoretically mean that the traveler tries to intimidate them, but... why would they? Instead, I choose to have this mean he sees the adventurers as a potential threat: well-meaning, but prone to violence, and likely to bring danger to their friends. The traveler tells the story of another, similar group of wanderers who, in the name of honor and glory, slaughtered a nearby but relatively peaceable goblin tribe, and then killed some of the local youth who had taken up banditry in order to survive the oppressive taxes of the distant monarch who supposedly rules this land. The traveler is slightly saddened, but not surprised, to see more such characters come through.

The adventuring party takes some umbrage at this accusation, and defend their motivations—they even offer to take care of these other, apparently evil, adventurers. But what does the traveler say about that? I draw a card.

- **Two of Coins:** Adaptability: Being able to shift to accommodate changes in circumstances is a key skill for success. This card represents flexibility, balance, and taking measured chances.

The traveler is skeptical, but not unwilling to give them a chance. In fact, they are flexible enough to say that it might actually be worth trying, but only if the party is equally flexible in their offer: they must try diplomacy first, and even if a fight breaks out, they must not kill their opponents, as justice must be served. If they agree, the traveler will join them and record their story for posterity! And that, apparently, is how the characters got their next quest, and met a lawful-good bard who will immortalize them as either champions of justice, or lying and deceitful menaces to society!

THE TAROT AS GAMEMASTER: ARBITRATE ACTIONS

Draw cards to arbitrate the action in a role playing game, drawing multiple cards to oppose each other when relevant, or otherwise drawing a card and deciding success or failure based on the meaning, or the suit and number combination, or both!

This is a topic that would take more than this quick introduction to do justice to, but remember that whether you want to arbitrate something numerically (draw a card for each person; higher numbers win, Major Arcana beats Minor Arcana, and perhaps the most relevant Suit breaks ties!) or narratively (draw a card, and use the meaning to try and justify success or failure, or just to describe what actually happens), there are nearly infinite ways to use a Tarot deck, and none of them are wrong!

If you want to see further examples of how the Tarot can be used in role playing games, check out the website linked below and scroll to the bottom; as of this writing, there are links to ideas for creating villains and granting characters surprising new powers, but more will be added over time!

<https://www.larcenousdesigns.com/tarot-rpg>

