

Reading
the
Skull
and
Crossbones

Being a system of carrrrtomancy for Green Ronin Publishing's *Freeport* setting
using the cards of Messrs. Hess & Sass's preternaturally playable *Walk the Plank* card game

Contents:

The Hands You're Dealt, part 1	Page 2
Introduction	Page 4
<i>Why would I use this?</i>	Page 4
<i>How does it work?</i>	Page 4
<i>Terminology</i>	Page 5
<i>General notes on reading the cards</i>	Page 5
<i>The cards in the game world</i>	Page 6
The Hands You're Dealt, part 2	Page 8
Card meanings	Page 10
<i>Suit meanings</i>	Page 10
<i>Number meanings</i>	Page 17
The Hands You're Dealt, part 3	Page 25
Divination techniques	Page 27
<i>Crossbones layout</i>	Page 27
<i>Skull layout</i>	Page 28
<i>Other divination techniques</i>	Page 29
The Hands You're Dealt, part 4	Page 30
Demonstration readings	Page 32
<i>Crossbones layout</i>	Page 32
<i>Skull layout</i>	Page 33
The Hands You're Dealt, part 5	Page 34
Summary tables	Page 36
<i>Table 1: Suit meanings</i>	Page 36
<i>Table 2: Number meanings</i>	Page 37
The Hands You're Dealt, part 6	Page 38
Credits & Legal Information	Page 40



ex gave a bloody smile, and said the riskiest thing she could.

“I know you’re not serious because my fingers are still intact.”

Trask’s face was stony. But it was stony just past its beat, and Dex knew that for the first time in two inventively excruciating, terrifying hours she was back in play. She pressed on in that extra half-moment of silence, before Trask spoke again.

“You know I’m your only shot at recovering Finn’s deck. I was the only one who could steal it in the first place, so who else is going to get it back?”

Trask laughed, and his face lit up with innocent amusement at the idea. In the last couple of hours of brutal interrogation, Dex had wondered more than once whether Trask’s magic was used to heighten the contrast between his grim enforcer aspect and this apparently wholesome, straightforward face that appeared so randomly, and jarringly. “Are you suggesting the Syndicate is short of options for theft?”

Dex grinned, hiding the wince as her torn lip burned. “I’m saying theft won’t cut it. Theft is a waste. You may or may not get the deck back, but either way Wednesday knows. What you want is a switch, like I pulled, and nobody else could have done that and nobody else can pull it off for you.”

Trask gave Dex a long, level gaze. His face imperceptibly hardened again, but Dex sat firm and added nothing. Words at this point would only prove she lacked the nerve to shut up.

Eventually the gnome blinked, and the grimness left his face. Promising. Or so Dex hoped, as hard as she could.

“Well, you get credit for nerve, trying for a job at this point. It might even be worth asking the boss.” Trask nodded at one of the guards by the door, who opened it and ducked through.

Minutes passed. Trask went over to the workbench against the wall on Dex’s right; Dex couldn’t see anything out of that eye, and knew better than to turn her head without permission, but she heard water pouring, and was unsurprised when Trask wandered into view drying clean hands on an incongruously fluffy towel. They sat in silence until the door opened again on a child-sized man not much taller than Trask: the halfling crime lord of Freeport, Finn.

Dex felt her pulse quicken, and struggled to keep her reaction from showing. It was clear both she and Finn were remembering their last encounter: richly dressed, well-fed, in an opulent room, staring across a card table, with a small but highly offensive pile of Finn’s money in front of Dex. The clothes, the setting, and even the condition of one of the two could not have been more different, but the palpable clash of appraisal and concealment as they focused their attention on each other was identical. The guards shifting, Trask pottering at the workbench; she was acutely aware of it all and none of it mattered. Dex felt an incongruous joy rising in her throat and struggled to keep it from sabotaging everything. Yes. She was back in play.

Finn spoke. “I knew you were running a deeper game.”

Dex smiled with as much charm, and as little desperation, as she could manage. “I know, and that means you did better than most.”

Finn raised his eyebrows. “Oh?”

Dex nodded. Blood from her scalp dripped on her knee. Neither she nor Finn reacted. “I originally planned to play a dupe, leave my stake on the table. But I knew you saw it, so I had to walk out with something. And so you caught me, because I never get seen and I overcompensated in a hurry.”

Finn’s teeth glinted behind stretched lips. It could have been a smile. “So what’s your offer?”

Dex didn’t hesitate. “Get me in to play Wednesday. I’ll swap the cards right back. He’ll never know; he doesn’t have your eye.”

Finn's eyebrows lifted again. "He may not have shown you his eye, but –"

"No, sir. Due respect, but I know my trade. He doesn't have your eye, not for this."

Finn glanced over his shoulder at Trask, now standing behind him, fidgeting with eight inches of blackened wood gnarled into disturbing shapes.

"Trask? What do you think?"

The gnome shrugged. "She could do it, but..."

Finn nodded thoughtfully. "When's she going to have the chance?"

Dex got her words out fast, hoping it sounded like urgency rather than haste, but not entirely caring. "He'll be playing them at his regular game, obviously. Why not show off a trophy like this? He –"

Finn frowned. And laughed, a single bitter bark. And Dex's heart sank.

"You think this is a *trophy*? How long have you been in town?" He glared. Dex said nothing; the only place this could be going was too –

"Those cards *knew* me. For longer than you've been alive, for longer than he's been alive, I've won with them all over the world. He's not going to play with them, and you're not going to get a chance to touch them. He's going to try to *read* them. He's going to try to read *me*."

As Finn turned away, Dex gave up any pretence of calm. "Wait! I could do the reading! I learn fast, I can fake it! Trask's an illusionist, he can disguise me! I can –"

Finn ignored her. "What should we do?" he asked Trask.

The enforcer smiled an unkind little smile. "We could ask the cards." He walked over to the bench, to the deck of substitute cards that Dex had so painstakingly swapped, one by one, mid-game, under the eyes of Finn himself and three other professional gamblers, for the cards of Finn's cherished deck. At the time it had seemed the kind of feat that would make her name as a cardsleight of truly legendary talent. Now it seemed it had ended her chances of even so much as an epitaph.

Trask looked at Finn. Finn nodded. Trask flipped the top card, and Dex's heart nearly stopped. It was an upside-down five of Hookhands. She didn't know a lot, but she knew that that Hooks meant force, and, obviously, hands. And she was fairly sure upside-down meant bad things.

Trask laughed, for all the world at a joke about three priests walking into a bar. "Sorry, Dex. Looks like we're serious after all." And he tapped her left hand with the wand he was holding.

Dex stiffened in her restraints and shrieked. The hand he'd tapped was blackening, shrivelling; the skin was splitting, and the muscles were contracting as they withered, forcing her hand into a rigid claw. The pain was agonising: cramps and burns and flaying all at once.

Trask coughed, and her eyes opened – she hadn't even realised she was pressing them shut so tightly; the pain was so intense she had needed no other explanation for the blackout – and she shrieked again, throwing her full weight around, trying frantically to jump the chair backwards or break free of the restraints, anything to avoid the wand that was now in Finn's hand and descending towards her right. But she could not escape, and she burst into tears of fear and distress and pain as she watched her right hand also turn into a wreckage like she'd picked a dragon's nose and made it sneeze. Her hands, the only thing in her life that she had always been able to rely on, her main source of a living, had been taken from her.

This time, the blackout was real.

Introduction

Apocalyptic cults spawning serial killings, mysterious magical calamities, insane gods from outside time, murderous hordes of barbarians and birds, to say nothing of all the familiar anxieties of international trade, high-stakes politics, class and racial divisions, and simple survival in a time and town where the only commodity cheaper than life is death – the future in Freeport is uncertain enough that people will grab at any chance to know what’s coming next.

This PDF presents a system that uses Green Ronin’s *Walk the Plank* cards for tarot-style cartomancy. You are welcome to use it for genuine divinations – experienced tarot-readers have been impressed with the coherence of the readings the system generates, and it’s been good fun every time I’ve done it for testing purposes – but it *is* just made up, so any insights in the readings come from elsewhere! It’s intended as a pirate-themed aid to roleplaying, and is especially suited to Freeport and settings like it as a result.

Why would I use this?

I’m glad I pretended you asked. Here are some ideas:

- Divination of any sort allows the GM to impart information to players. This can be background flavour, crucial clues to get a stuck plot moving, red herrings, or even false trails to lure players to their dooms. The point is that it gives you an in-character way to address player information needs.
- Using a unique, setting-specific form of divination, and especially one which players can themselves learn and decode to some extent, gives them a reason to invest in learning some of that background, but leaves the GM as the authority on the mechanics of the system.
- Using a divination system whose tools can be encountered outside of the fortune-telling context gives you a chance to drop particularly ambiguous hints. Did it really mean anything that the winning card in the last hand was a five of Parrots, capsized...?
- The GM can build future plots to correspond to the results of a reading, making the reading prophetic in the process and establishing the NPC who did the reading as a useful source.
- A fortune-teller NPC can try the same trick, arranging things to conform to the predictions in one of their readings, in order to dupe or divert the PCs.
- Any item that people believe has the power to grant them inside information or an advantage in the dog-eat-dog world of Freeport has the potential to become a MacGuffin; see the story hooks and adventure seeds under *The cards in the game world*, below.
- Finally, as with tarot or story-game tools such as the *Once Upon A Time* card game, laying the cards for a reading can help a GM generate plot ideas, and both GMs and players can use the system to generate character ideas.

How does it work?

The basic system is similar to the tarot: each card has a meaning derived from its suit and number, which is modified by the card’s position in the reading and its orientation (whether the top of the card is higher or lower than the bottom).

The two layouts detailed here are the Skull, used more for psychological insight and focusing on understanding a particular person; and the Crossbones, which explores the past, present and future of the subject and of external (not to say conflicting) influences, and is used for more pragmatic, action-focused readings.

Details of card meanings and layouts follow in later sections, along with suggestions for a range of “quickie” divination techniques. And of course, in addition to the custom layouts provided here, the cards can certainly be laid into standard tarot layouts, if you are familiar with how to do so.

Terminology

For additional flavour, characters in the game might use the following terms when discussing the cards:

- “Boards”** Cards (because a “deck” is made up of boards). To “juggle the boards” is to shuffle the cards; to “lay the boards” is place the cards, either for a reading or in play.
- “Fairweather”** Used of cards which are upright, angled such that the top is higher than the bottom, or, if perfectly horizontal, are clockwise from upright (i.e. with the top to the right).
- “Capsized”** Used of cards which are upside-down, angled such that the bottom is higher than the top, or, if horizontal, are widdershins from upright (i.e. with the top to the left). Often, but not always, implies a meaning opposite to the normal meaning, negativity, or complications.
- “Deckmate”** Someone who has played (and especially won) with a given deck recently and/or a lot; see *The cards in the game world*.
- “Querent”** The person requesting the reading. (The person about whom the reading is done, if a querent requests a reading about someone else, is the subject.)

General notes on reading the cards

As with real tarot cards, the range of possible meanings is broad. Think laterally if no obvious application occurs to you. For instance, a six of Doubloons could mean a business partnership, but it can also represent taking a new lover – or, if taken as signifying a person, it could be a doctor, an accountant or a bawd.

“Capsized” cards (cards with their bottom higher than the top, or horizontal but with the top pointing left) can be tricky to read; capsizing can mean:

- the *opposite* of the typical meaning,
- a *negative* aspect of that meaning,
- or just something *problematic* about it.

Just to make things even more confusing, this can apply to the number meaning, the suit meaning, or the overall meaning made by combining the two!

It’s not as hard as it might sound, though. In almost all cases, the capsized meaning changes only the number meaning. If that doesn’t make sense, try “capsizing” the whole card. Only then should you try combining the normal number meaning with a “capsized” suit meaning; the alignment of the suits is more likely to be meaningful when looking at the reading as a whole.

As this last statement implies, looking at individual cards is only one element of the reading. You can also infer meaning from patterns in the overall layout – for instance, by counting the number of cards of each

suit, the totals in each suit (2 of Monkeys + 6 of Monkeys = 8 Monkeys), and how many of each are capsized versus how many are fair-weather. A reading which is short on Doubloons can indicate that wealth or physical concerns aren't a factor, for good or ill, whereas many capsized Doubloons indicate that the material aspects of life will pose problems. This is especially true when reading the Skull, where overall personality traits can be read by the number of cards; refer to *Suit meanings* below and the Virtues, Excesses, Lacks and Flaws columns of *Table 1: Suit Meanings*.

For instance, a subject who had many reversed Doubloons (3 or more cards or a total above 20, with larger totals more emphatic) would be showing signs of "Prodigality, recklessness, self-induced poverty or ill health, and/or depravity", and a subject with only one fairweather Hookhands card would appear to be biding their time, waiting for something. If there are no cards at all from a suit in a particular reading, either the Lacks or the Flaws column may apply; some readers will deal the cards until a card of each missing suit appears and take its alignment as indicating whether a Flaw or a Lack is present. The more cards that need to be dealt before the card turns up, the more severe the Flaw or Lack.

Obviously most readings will be missing one suit or another; before deciding that this is meaningful, consider the subject of the reading. Reading someone's Skull on a romantic matter should feature Parrots (for relationships) and Doubloons (for physical attraction); a lack of Hookhands is less meaningful in such a context than it would be in an assessment of a prospective business partner.

Although it is less common, multiple occurrences of the same number can also be meaningful. Three or more fives, for instance, might mean that magic is a major influence on the situation.

The cards in the game world

- Superstitions about the cards include the idea that the deck can get to know and even "befriend" someone – who is called the cards' "deckmate". Especially if performing a Skull reading, it is said that you will get more accurate results from a deck which belongs to the person you want to know about. A deck which has "given" them substantial wins – especially if they won the last hand played with it – also works. All these "attunements" stack.
- Just as some real-world tarot readers require their clients to shuffle the deck, some Freeport fortune-tellers require their client to play with the deck until they win, to indicate that the deck will obey them. (This also serves to randomise the deck.)
- As a result of the above, and also because the cards tend to be kept near at hand for quickie divinations (see *Other divination techniques*, p. 29), people tend to be possessive of their decks. Taking a deck that isn't yours isn't just annoying theft – it is potentially much more malicious than that.
- Also because of the superstition about a deck becoming attuned to those it gives wins to (or giving them wins because it is attuned), superstitious people will deliberately lose the last hand or few of a game. Particularly paranoid people even say that players shouldn't go home until the Sea Monster is played in the last round – as this means nobody wins and therefore nobody can be read.
- There are whispers of a hidden art of reading the cards during games, using the ebb and flow of play to divine things about the players, the relationships between them, and the future of both. Nobody admits to knowing for sure, but one common belief is that the single cards from the seventh round of *Walk the*

Plank are considered particularly revealing, especially if they win, and people may voluntarily lose in earlier rounds to see what card someone else wins with. Needless to say, people suspected of having this skill will find it hard to persuade people to sit down for a game with them.

- Conversely, some players attribute their gambling successes to an ability to predict the movements of cards based on their knowledge of people's characters and moods. Just as many unsuccessful players as successful ones claim this ability, and in any case a knowledge of your opponents is sufficient in itself to provide an edge, so this is widely regarded as superstition or self-delusion. If a player is extraordinarily successful, however, that might change – and fears of such a player reverse-engineering this knowledge to learn their opponents' secrets might lead to people refusing to play against them, as above.
- Story hooks and adventure seeds:
 - People's protectiveness of their decks leads to a range of story hooks to do with decks that must be found or retrieved – or kept safe.
 - The Brotherhood of the Yellow Sign are printing and giving away (or selling cheap, for plausibility) decks with a Sea Monster whose markings subtly replicate the Yellow Sign, and which have an uncanny tendency to fall in disturbing patterns when dropped or scattered. These decks are affecting their owners and players, tainting them slowly with madness every time they play a card (especially the Sea Monster), and when used for divination, revealing disturbing destinies as they entangle the owners' fates with that of the Unspeakable One. Destroying the cards isn't enough – the players need to do something more to undo the harm.
 - A card shark turns diviner after becoming convinced she can read the cards. Unfortunately she must have been reading in the wrong place, because she didn't foresee that her new career would be the last straw for the people she fleeced at cards, who band together and start looking for someone to retrieve their money – and possibly kill her.
 - A different fortune-teller comes to the PCs and confesses that he is a fraud – he has been using his sleight-of-hand skills to control which cards are dealt, according to his knowledge of his customers. All of a sudden, though, cards he is sure he didn't deal are turning over – and the readings are coming true.
 - A serial killer is stalking Freeport, leaving cards that are clues to the next victim. Can the PCs work out the pattern and use it to anticipate the murderer?
 - Cards start going missing from people's decks – and it's the same card every time. Alternatively, one entire suit goes missing.
 - Readings suggest that one of the party will betray them.
 - The PCs get hold of, and must subsequently defend, a deck whose pictures animate and actually give advice and explanations when used for readings. Or perhaps the pictures animate during play to tell the PCs what's in other people's hands and give them an unethical edge! Either way, how does it work and why are these images apparently sentient?
 - Someone is on a crusade against gamblers and/or fortune-tellers, placing *symbol* and *explosive rune* spells on cards around the city.

Dex woke up in the same cell where she'd waited for her interrogation. The pain in her hands was still intense, but steady now, and less overwhelming. She found she could set it aside and think. And that gave her hope, because it meant some part of her still knew itself to be in the game.

She was still alive. Why?

To be made an example of? Possibly. But that had already been done when Finn's men had taken her. Maybe they wanted to parade it a little more. That could be bad.

Vindictiveness? Finn was a crime lord, but not the type to let spite rule his actions. It was one of the things that had impressed her most about the halfling. He was certainly capable of brutal retribution, but only where it was necessary to protect his interests; his interests weren't the excuse that legitimised his brutality, the way they were for so many of his kind. Threats to his operations turned up dead, but usually not too much worse.

Information? She'd willingly told what little she knew about Wednesday's operations before the interrogation had even begun. Trask had sorcery and experience on his side, and everyone knew she was new in town; he would have known she had nothing more to tell.

No, the more she thought about it, the more likely it seemed that Finn had some other use for her. The only flaw in her reasoning was that her hands had been ruined. She wasn't sure what use she could possibly be without them.

But that only left being made an example. And if that were the case, there would be nothing she could do, and she wouldn't be thinking like this. Her instincts had been vindicated too many times for her to start doubting them now; and in any case, if her instincts were wrong, there was nothing she could do, so she might as well assume that they were right and she was being kept for something other than public exhibition.

Her thoughts circled. What use could she be without her hands? Why was she alive if she was no use?

And then it came to her, and she leapt up and bellowed for Trask.

The guards didn't take her seriously at first, but then that was hardly their job. The lack of desperation – indeed, the growing confidence – in her tone was so unusual, however, that they became uneasy fairly quickly and decided that Trask should be brought in after all.

The gnome walked into the room behind two guards. His eyes were narrowed in appraisal: he too had heard the calm certainty in Dex's calls. Dex fell silent as he entered, and as she waited for him to speak, she was struck again by the measured confidence that made him an imposing figure despite his child-sized frame.

He took his time, reading her carefully but giving nothing away. Eventually, calmly, he asked:

“What?”

Dex permitted a dash of smile to enter her eyes. Not enough to be cocky, just enough to send a signal.

“I accept.”

Trask gave her a questioning look, clearly amused.

“You want me to get your cards back for you. In exchange, you'll let me live and give me a job as a cardsleight. You'll want half my takings, but we'll haggle it down to a third because I'm that good and your cut will still be twice as much as anyone else in your stable. To save face, you'll insist on two thirds for a

year while I pay off my debt to you, and I'll impress you with my understanding of the situation by not only refusing to haggle, but offering to tell everyone it's four-fifths, because I look good too if the amount I'm keeping is only a fifth of my actual take. It's win-win, and since I came to Freeport to work with the Syndicate anyway, I accept."

Trask took his time responding, and did so with a laugh. "And what makes you think we're prepared to invest that much in healing magic for your hands?"

Dex could see him watching her closely, though, and smiled. "Trask, nobody needs healing from an illusion." And she held her hands up in front of her face, and smiled. To her eyes, and to her throbbing nerve endings, they were still withered claws – but she threw all her skill into convincing him that she saw only the nimble, smooth flesh she had relied on all her life.

There was a still moment, and then Trask's eyebrows rose slowly with a grudging admiration. She felt relief flood her, and tried not to let her sudden relaxation give away how tense she had been.

And a jag of alarm spiked through her as she heard Finn's laughter bursting out beside her.

The halfling appeared from nowhere, dismissing the magic that had made him invisible. He was laughing, shaking his head, and looking at Trask.

"She's got you, gnome. Hook, line, sinker and net. She's got you fooled. Her hands are still crippled as far as she's concerned. She's read our play, and she's bluffing because she knows that her brain is being more truthful with her than her senses."

Trask looked angry, but begrudgingly amused. Dex had clearly read the collegial relationship between the two small men correctly; another vindication of her instinct.

Finn turned to her. "I'm impressed, twiceling. Not many can lie to Trask."

Dex gave the halfling an innocent look. "Who's lying, sir?"

She saw Finn not pausing, and saw his amusement at her noticing him not do so. He smiled at her, with a hint of an edge. "Yes, well done." And as she smiled back at him, with just the right amount of twinkle, he punched her hard in the gut. Small as he was, he knew how to put serious force behind his fist; as she doubled over, he continued, "But *never* do that again. You work for me now, and I don't care how funny you think you're being, if you ever lie to me again – and lying to Trask *is* lying to me – what happens to you will be no illusion."

He walked out of the room, turning back at the door to say, "Get up. You don't have time to waste on this." Dex, still doubled over, nodded wordlessly. But she couldn't help herself: Finn was too good not to play with. Mixed in with the acquiescence and discomfort she knew were necessary, the corners of her eyes creased just a little: not an actual smile, but enough to indicate appreciation of his play. And she could have sworn that Finn showed just a hint of a response before he turned away, calling over his shoulder as he went, "Take that glamer off her hands, Trask, and get her to work!"

Card meanings

As explained earlier, cards draw their meanings from two elements: the suit and the number.

The suit supplies the broad thematic area to which the more specific meaning of the number applies, and is also used for quick, simplistic divinations – “how should I deal with this threat?” or “to which aspect of my planning do I need to pay closest attention today?”

The number supplies more detailed qualities. If the suit is the colour of the card’s meaning, the number is its shape. Even this is fairly broad brush-strokes, of course, but the combination of the two produces enough specificity to work with.

When a card is capsized, you will need to make a judgment call about which of these elements is modified. It might be the number, it might be the suit, or it might be the combination of the two. Generally speaking, however, it will be the number or the overall meaning; the meaning of a particular suit being capsized tends to be considered more when looking at the patterns in the reading as a whole.

Suit meanings

Each suit refers to certain *key concepts* or *keywords* which indicate the general aspects of life with which it is linked. There are also some additional specific meanings.

Each suit is also associated with an *element*.

Each can signify an *aspect of self* – or rather one of two aspects, one abstract and one bodily.

Each is linked to certain *places*, usually those thematically linked to its key concepts and its element.

Each can represent a broad category of *tactics* for dealing with situations of all sorts.

Similarly, each can indicate certain types of *strategic considerations*.

Finally, as previously mentioned, the numbers and alignments of each suit in a particular reading (especially a Skull reading) can be read as indicating *character traits*. These are grouped into *virtues* (for many fairweather cards), *excesses* (for many capsized cards), *lacks* (for a small number of cards of the suit, fairweather) and *flaws* (for a small number of cards, capsized). As previously mentioned, whether a total absence of a suit signifies a lack or a flaw may optionally be ascertained by dealing the cards until a card of the missing suit appears and looking at its orientation; the more cards that need to be dealt, the greater the flaw or lack.

Dobloons

The name is an obscure hangover from the history of the cards, but the suit is also interchangeably known as Coins, and depending on the wealth of the people playing or doing the reading, Lords, Skulls, or Pennies, or for that matter any other denomination local to the place the deck is being used. The suit of Dobloons is associated with the physical and material aspects of life.

Dobloons are particularly highly regarded in a mercantile, materialistic, often hedonistic society like Freeport's. Winning card games with Dobloons is said to be associated with winning exceptionally large stakes.

A quick technical note: It can be difficult to tell at a glance whether a Dobloons card is fairweather or capsized. The shadow on the edge of the coin is considered to mark the bottom half of the card – so if the shadow is towards the top or the right, the card is capsized.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the suit of Dobloons are:

- Being and living;
- Money, wealth, prosperity, and trade;
- Protection, resistance, and endurance;
- Knowledge recorded but not used;
- Material wellbeing, health, physical pleasure, and sex.

Capsized Dobloon cards often indicate poverty, ill-health, physical weakness, or injury, though they can also connote decadence and physical excess. A reading which is particularly heavy in capsized Dobloons may even indicate death.

Element:

Earth.

Aspect of self:

Body; in particular the lower torso and digestive tract.

Associated places:

- Places of relaxation and trade – inns, homes, shops, merchants, and markets;
- Rarely-visited archives;
- Mountains;
- Natural underground places.

Associated strategic consideration:

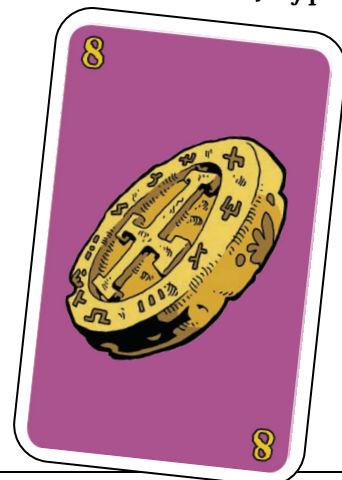
Provisions and equipment.

Associated tactic:

Dealmaking, compromise, bribery, and trying to find the win-win situation.

Character traits:

The virtues of a person who reads with many or high-value fairweather Dobloons are generosity, hospitality, wealth, shrewdness, and/or sexual prowess. A reading with a lot of capsized Dobloons indicates the excesses of prodigality, recklessness, self-induced poverty or ill health, and depravity. A small total of fairweather Dobloons indicates the lacks of poverty, ill health, or impotence, while the same shortage capsized indicates the flaws of miserliness, hypochondria, or frigidity.



Hookhands

Also known simply as “Hooks”, Hookhands are not associated with one of the four traditional alchemical elements, but rather with the “element” of making. Anything shaped by sentient hands is fair game. However, in the common imagination, worked metals (especially iron or steel) are most commonly associated with this suit.

Hooks are the suit of deeds and skill, and are believed to reward those who play shrewdly. A stranger who wins big with Hookhands will be treated with wary respect.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the suit of Hookhands are:

- Doing;
- Grasping and manipulating;
- Work, employment, effort, and struggle;
- Force, violence, aggression and power, especially willpower.

Capsized Hookhand cards often carry a meaning of weakness, incompetence, or lack of determination, but a mix of predominantly fairweather Hooks with some capsized can be taken to mean a deft touch, capable of both force and gentleness.

Element:

Making; in particular shaped metal.

Aspect of self:

Deeds, willpower, talent; occasionally the hands and arms.

Associated places:

- Places of work and effort – workplaces, anywhere things are made, jails, battlegrounds, and defended sites;
- Mines;
- Cities.

Associated strategic consideration:

Crew/personnel.

Associated tactic:

Violence or force.

Character traits:

A character heavy in fairweather Hookhands is effective, powerful, deft and skilful. If those Hookhands are capsized, they will instead be clumsy, over-handling things or handling them badly. A small number of Hookhands in fairweather alignment indicates deliberate inactivity – possibly just resting, but there are strong overtones of waiting and biding one’s time. If that small total is capsized, however, it suggests the flaws of laziness and ineffectuality.



Monkeys

Monkeys have interestingly contradictory associations. On one hand, they are the suit of erratic brilliance, and so they are widely believed to lend themselves to victories that come from nowhere and overwhelm the opposition with unforeseen cunning. On the other hand, that same connotation of fickleness leads them to be deemed unreliable – and even to be more likely to be involved in cheating. Being accused of a “monkey win” when you didn’t win with Monkeys – and even sometimes when you did – means you are about thirty seconds away from a faceful of barstool.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the suit of Monkeys are:

- Thinking and inventing;
- Cunning, mischief, and trickery;
- Close observation of the physical world, and learning through experimentation and direct experience;
- Intelligence, curiosity, ideas, and knowledge actively being used;
- Busyness, energy, and doing lots of things at once;
- Creativity.

Capsized Monkeys can represent either a lack of intelligence or too much intelligence poorly applied – the “monkey-mind” that prevents consistent application to and completion of tasks in favour of jumping around between interests.

Element:

Fire.

Aspect of self:

Mind; occasionally the head.

Associated places:

- Places of active learning and thinking – productive offices, schools, universities, anywhere art is practised or made;
- Hot places, especially deserts and tropical rainforests.

Associated strategic consideration:

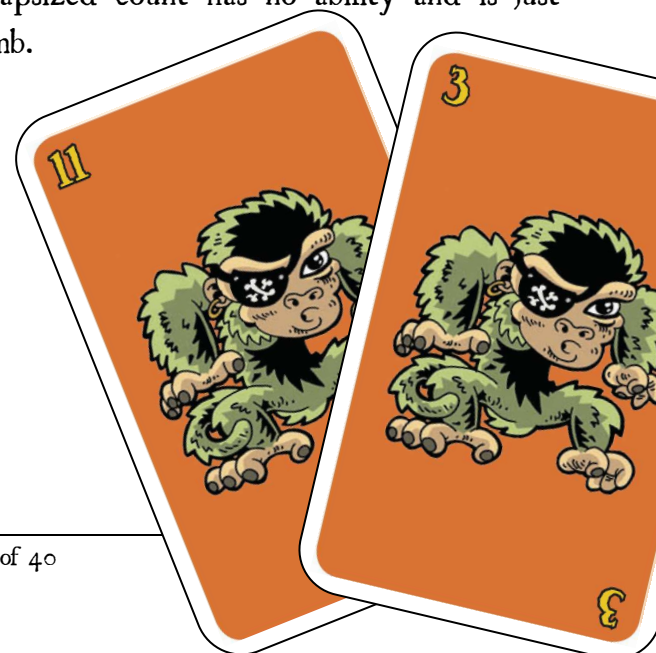
Opportunity – it’s no good having people and provisions if you have nothing to do with them. A good strategist will ensure that there is a chance to use what she has to best effect.

Associated tactic:

Trickery.

Character traits:

A character whose reading includes many fairweather Monkeys is witty, imaginative, and clever – or at least cunning. If those Monkeys are capsized, they are either too clever by half, burning themselves on their own half-baked schemes, or dangerously distractable and recklessly curious. A character with a low, fairweather Monkey tally in their reading is either ignorant or a very simple thinker – in other words, not making the most of the ability they have. A character with a low, capsized count has no ability and is just plain dumb.



Parrots

You would think that the sociable associations of the suit of Parrots, or “birds”, would make it well liked, but in a place as cynical as Freeport tends to be, being tuned in to other people doesn’t always play well: it’s assumed you’re either a mug or trying to make a mug of others. But as long as you’re entertaining the group, it’s all OK.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the suit of Parrots are:

- Feeling and speaking;
- Communication,
- Information ready to recall, learning from others, and memory;
- Social awareness, emotion, personal relationships of all kinds, and romance.

Capsized Parrots can indicate cluelessness, self-centredness, even sociopathy – anything which indicates an inability to fully and properly engage with other people.

Element:

Air (with strong symbolic overtones of breath).

Aspect of self:

Relationships, community; sometimes the upper torso & neck, particularly the heart, lungs, and throat.

Associated places:

- Places of discussion and collective learning – religious establishments, libraries, and political institutions;
- Places of conversation and relating – taverns, social clubs, town squares, and festivals;
- Windy places, mountaintops, and plains.

Associated strategic consideration:

Environment/climate – physical or social.

Associated tactic:

Persuasion & diplomacy.

Character traits:

The virtues indicated by a reading with plenty of fairweather Parrots are tact, wisdom in speech and dealings, loyalty, and romantic success. An excess of capsized Parrots, on the other hand, indicates one who is overly (and probably foolishly) talkative or friendly, overly dutiful or loyal, foolish in love or suffering from unrequited love. A character who reads as having a lack would typically be taciturn, isolated, and/or the one failing to do the requiting of another person’s love. A character with small numbers of capsized Parrots, indicating a flaw in this area, would be expected to be antisocial, pointlessly offensive, hard of heart or cruel.



Peglegs

Also called “Pegs”, Peglegs are the yin to Hookhands’ yang. Where Hookhands are about the character acting *on* the world, changing it, Peglegs are about acting *in* the world as it is, keeping your balance, adapting or moving or otherwise making the most of what life presents you with. In play, Peglegs are seen as the slow-but-steady quiet achievers of the suits.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the suit of Peglegs are:

- Movement and change;
- Travel, transition;
- Age, growth, mortality;
- Balance and flux.

Capsized Peglegs indicate imbalance, stasis or paralysis.

Element:

Water; occasionally wood by extension, since plants need water.

Aspect of self:

Resilience, balance; sometimes legs.

Associated places:

- Places of travel and change – vehicles (especially ships!), ports, gates, and roads;
- Woods and especially rainforests;
- Rivers, oceans, and to some extent islands.

Associated strategic consideration:

Terrain and particularly mobility therein (in Freeport, commonly taken to refer to a ship).

Associated tactic:

Avoidance or acceptance (run away or live with it, because it’s not going to change).

Character traits:

The core virtue you’d expect in someone whose reading showed many fairweather Peglegs is that of worldliness and balance: weathering change, changing with it and riding it out, being on top of it even if not in control of it. Characters with these traits, paradoxically, have a reassuring stillness about them. Many capsized Peglegs, by contrast, indicate restlessness, depravity born of an inability to cope with boredom; being excessively aged or worn out by one’s experiences is another possible fit. Those with a lack of Peglegs tend to seem naive, innocent, and possibly stagnant, while those with a flaw in this area actively resist change, staying insular and even xenophobic as long as they can, and then when they finally succumb behaving as victims of change.



The Power Cards

The power cards – the two Walk the Plank cards and the Sea Monster – are highly charged, similar to Major Arcana in the tarot. Because there are only two Walk the Planks and one Sea Monster, neither qualifies as a suit and so there are no character traits associated with them; their presence in the reading intensifies the overall “colour” rather than adding to the mix.

Walk the Plank

Having one of these cards in a reading should make the reader sit up and take notice; both cards in a reading clearly indicates a major crisis of some sort.

Keywords:

Key concepts for Walk the Plank cards are:

- Crisis, drastic sudden change;
- Externally imposed transformation.

Note that while this can include death, that is only one possible meaning. Capsized it can mean that the crisis is self-created, perhaps even intentionally. An insanely risky move which is genius if it succeeds and disaster if it fails would be expected to produce a capsized Walk the Plank.

Element:

Chance or fate.

Aspect of self:

Fortune.

Associated places:

- Somewhere impossible or extraordinary.

Associated strategic consideration:

Something for which you are unprepared and probably unequipped.

Associated tactic:

Survival is your priority, do what you must. Capsized, it can be taken as a recommendation to try something crazy, because your odds of success are just as good!

Sea Monster

Where a Walk the Plank card indicates a crisis, a crucial moment but not necessarily a bad one, this card is *always* bad news.

Keywords:

Key concepts for the Sea Monster are:

- Calamity;
- Disaster;
- Catastrophe.

It really is that bad. It's usually bad for everyone in the reading, too, though mainly the subject and querent.

Capsized, it means utterly bloody awful catastrophe, but it can sometimes take on a tinge of “...but there's a one-in-a-million chance!” Most old salts regard that as nothing more than fortune baiting querents with false hope.

Element:

Entropy, inevitability.

Aspect of self:

Mortality, doom.

Associated places:

- Lethal places; the deeps of the ocean, the planes, space, or madness.

Associated strategic consideration:

Something for which you can't ever be equipped.

Associated tactic:

Resignation. Seriously, you're *that* screwed.

Number meanings

Number meanings overlay suit meanings to provide more specific details. There being more variety between numbers, the meanings themselves are generally simpler, referring either to a basic theme or to a particular class of person. Each entry lists the fairweather meaning, the capsized meaning, and what kinds of people a given number might indicate. It then gives a quick example of how the number might combine with each suit, though note that these are simple examples and most certainly *not* exhaustive definitions of each card!

As previously mentioned, when a card is capsized it takes on meanings that are opposite to, are negative versions of, or call into question its regular meaning; this usually starts with the number meaning. For instance, a capsized seven (opportunity) of Parrots (communication & relationships) is more likely to indicate an opportunity for communication, not a lucky (seven) silence (capsized Parrot) or an opportunity (capsized seven) for miscommunication (capsized Parrot). You can never quite be sure, though, and always have to read things in context.

For advanced readers, capsized cards' number meanings can also take on tinges of the meaning of the previous number, but with a negative twist. For instance, a five ("mystery") capsized ("lack of mystery, obviousness") can take on tinges of the four ("unity, harmony, community"), thus signifying conformity or banality. This is especially common where the previous number is immediately adjacent in the reading.

For easy reference there are two tables on pages 37-38 which summarise the suit and number meanings contained in this section – print them out (along with pages 28-29 for the reading layouts) for a handy condensed guide to this system.

One

The one of a suit – for instance, parrots – is also known as the ace of parrots or the lone parrot.

Fairweather

A bare existence or sufficiency, but nothing more – also taken to mean moderation, and by extension, humility.

Capsized

Insufficiency or lack of even the bare minimum; it can also mean nothing, total absence, or a void of some kind.

Person

The self; capsized, it can sometimes mean a fragmented self or the internalised influence of others.

Sample card meanings:

Dobloons: Subsistence/Poverty

Hookbands: Employment/Unemployment

Monkeys: Engagement/Thoughtlessness

Parrots: Self-sufficient aloneness/Loneliness

Peglegs: Adaptation/Stagnation

Two

The two is also called the deuce or duo.

Fairweather

This is the number of partnership, close connections, trust and sympathy. As such it also often represents romantic or sexual relationships, and even marriage, but it can also represent platonic or especially solid business relationships.

Capsized

Opposition, mistrust or untrustworthiness, and antipathy; when it takes on elements of the one, it can also mean active rivalry, especially over a prize that only one person can hold.

Person

A lover, very close friend or trusted ally; capsized, possibly a traitor or rival.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* Sex or trade/Rivalry or dealbreaking
Hookbands: Alliances/Enmities
Monkeys: Likemindedness/Incompatibility of ideas or philosophies
Parrots: Love/Hate
Peglegs: Shared experience/Divisive experience

Three

A three is also known as a trey, a treble, or sometimes a trouble – especially when it's referring to children.

Fairweather

A three signifies growth, health, vitality, fecundity, and youthfulness – metaphorical and literal.

Capsized

Frustration, obstruction, decay, disease, age, decline; it can also refer to a person being isolated and oppressed by others, or to a relationship being broken up by the action of a third party.

Person

A child or young person, usually related by blood; capsized, it could be an elder or someone dying.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* Profit/Loss, especially through theft
Hookbands: Rewards of labour/Backfiring effort
Monkeys: Learning/Dementia
Parrots: Teaching/Squabbling
Peglegs: Becoming worldly/Sudden aging

Four

A four is sometimes called a square.

Fairweather

This is the number of all things combined solidly and/or well: in particular, it represents unity, community, harmony, and beauty.

Capsized

Disharmony, fracture, conflict, and ugliness; when the meaning of threes is considered, it can also mean a group outgrowing itself.

Person

Family, or a family member. Capsized, it means the same.

Sample card meanings:

Dobloons: Robust good health/An outbreak of disease

Hookbands: Collective effort/Too many cooks

Monkeys: Creative consensus/Artistic difference

Parrots: Shared goals/Dissension in the ranks

Peglegs: Sticking together through thick and thin/Allowing a wedge to be driven between you

Five

The five has no alternative names. It is noteworthy, however, for being one of the numbers which can be capsized without producing a negative meaning.

Fairweather

The five is the symbol of mystery, hidden depths, and magic; things unknown and possibly unknowable. None of these things need be benign, and illusion and deception are also possible meanings.

Capsized

More positive meanings of a five capsized include explanation and clarity; but it can also represent banality, mundanity, and conformity.

Person

A stranger, or occasionally a mage. Capsized, the same.

Sample card meanings:

Dobloons: Smuggling/Trade in cabbages (or other bulk cheap necessities)

Hookbands: Sleight of hand/Public displays of power and prowess

Monkeys: Illusion/Divination

Parrots: A text in an unknown language/A public proclamation

Peglegs: Teleportation/Paralysis

Six

Fairweather

A six represents a group expanding. That can include births into a family, but more often refers to bringing people in from outside through recruitment – or in a family context, marriage.

Capsized

Abandonment or diminishment of a group; with a touch of the five, it takes on tones of betrayal, untrustworthy new allies, or hidden agendas & influences within the group.

Person

New allies, colleagues, hirelings or professionals. Capsized, usually the same, but sometimes a traitor or outcast.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* Birth/Adult children moving out
Hookbands: Press-ganging/Drumming out
Monkeys: An idea that spreads like wildfire/
Disproving a popular misconception
Parrots: Persuasion, recruitment through rhetoric/Hate speech driving a group underground
Peglegs: Mutual shelter/Reduction of a group through attrition

Seven

A seven card is often called a “lucky” card, as in “lucky monkeys” or “lucky hooks”. Sevens are beneficial cards whichever way up they are, but that’s not to say that the benefit is always easy to claim...

Fairweather

Sheer bloody good luck. Things going right without any effort, and often totally undeserved.

Capsized

Opportunity, but there is a need to work to take advantage of it; where the six creeps in, it implies a need to all pull together to seize the day.

Person

Friends. Fairweather, a friend with whom you’ve shared good times; capsized, a friend with whom you’ve shared bad times. Note that these categories are not mutually exclusive.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* A financial windfall/An investment opportunity
Hookbands: A lucky blow/An exploitable weakness
Monkeys: A Newton-apple moment of fortuitous insight/A clue
Parrots: A chance remark leads to love/
Someone is interested...
Peglegs: Walking into the right place at the right time/An opportunity to travel

Eight

Fairweather

The eight in either orientation is the card of large systems. Fairweather, it represents order, civilisation, law, the state, transparent politics, reasonably efficient bureaucracy, society, and other massive organisations. It can also represent large trade deals, such as a merchant consortium with many shareholders, or even whole economies.

Capsized

When the eight is capsized, those systems still exist but are no longer functioning according to human ideals. Chaos, nature, anarchy, nasty politics, corruption, and repressive bureaucracy are all indicated by a capsized eight. So too are the logical results when power is unrestrained: conspiracy, mutiny, and rebellion. The influence of

the seven indicates randomness and total unpredictability.

Person

Authorities, or if it's capsized, sometimes those setting up a rival power.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* The white market/The black market
Hookbands: Law enforcement/A crime syndicate
Monkeys: Culture/Philistinism
Parrots: Friendly, community-building chat/
Backstabbing, destructive rumour-mongering
Peglegs: An ambassador/A fast-moving guerrilla leader in a civil war

Nine

Fairweather

Fairweather nines most commonly signify triumph, but can also mean explosive growth or success without such strong overtones of defeating others.

Capsized

A nine capsized represents substantial defeat or loss; it can also mean triumph forgone due to restriction and compromise.

Person

Either way it means enemies; but fairweather it means those you have conquered or over whom you hold significant advantage, and capsized it means those who have conquered you or have you at a disadvantage.

Sample card meanings:

- Dobloons:* Making a fortune/Losing a fortune
Hookbands: Conquest/Rout
Monkeys: A world-shaking new idea/The old idea, or the same new idea if it is in fact false.
Parrots: Being appointed Sea Lord, or successful social change, e.g. the repeal of the Succession Laws/Being expelled from the Council
Peglegs: A gloriously successful voyage/
Limping home 3 days after leaving port – or not at all

Ten

Fairweather

The ten signifies secrets; when it's fairweather, it represents secrets kept.

Capsized

When it's capsized, the secrets are betrayed or exposed – or at very least exploited, for example through blackmail. If there's a tinge of the nine creeping in, this meaning moves beyond exposure into notoriety.

Person

Spies and/or liars. These may not be malign figures but it's obviously unlikely that they're fully trustworthy.

Sample card meanings:

Dobloons: A hidden treasure cache/Being blackmailed over a venereal disease

Hookbands: A surprise attack/Catching a thief

Monkeys: A secret new valuable discovery or invention (for instance, a new dyeing technique)/Such a secret revealed

Parrots: A clandestine love affair/A public scandal

Peglegs: Feats of stealth and infiltration/A pilgrimage

Eleven

The eleven is sometimes called the “captain”, as in “The Captain of Parrots”. This card is another which is alignment-neutral – both capsized and fairweather are equally likely to be good or bad.

Fairweather

A fairweather eleven indicates complexity. This entails not only lots of details, but emergent properties that are hard to predict; eleven is sometimes called the number of surprises.

Capsized

Capsized, an eleven means simplicity. The influence of the ten carries into the idea that something is “simpler than it seems”.

Person

Someone with a wide net of influence, especially if that entails command of a small community; the captain of a ship is a good example, which is perhaps where the name comes from.

Sample card meanings:

Dobloons: Complex deals with lots of investors/A single rich individual.

Hookbands: Complicated plots/Direct action

Monkeys: A symphony/A shanty

Parrots: Intricate academic philosophical debate/Idle chat

Peglegs: A maze/A highway

Twelve

The twelve is sometimes called the “lord”, as in “The Lord of Doubloons”.

Fairweather

The twelve symbolises abundance, prosperity, and general good stuff that affects not only the querent but their whole community.

Capsized

Capsized, a twelve is famine, widespread want, and/or destructive greed; the influence of the eleven can be felt in the idea that things are not going as planned and people are suffering as a result.

Person

A scarily powerful person, such as a lord.

Sample card meanings:

Doubloons: Boom times/Bust times

Hookbands: Peace, freedom, and the opportunity to make one’s life without fear/War, oppression, and totalitarianism

Monkeys: An age of enlightenment/A dark age

Parrots: Universal education and mutual benevolence/Widespread illiteracy, ignorance and fear

Peglegs: Freedom and prosperity enough to travel freely/Mass exiles or imprisonment, or refugee crises

Thirteen

The thirteen is occasionally called the “King”, as in “King Parrot”, “the Monkey King”, or “King of Pegs”. Aptly for Freeport, the King is always a bad card: it can be managed if it’s fairweather, but it’s still undesirable, though often tempting to short-sighted, live-for-the-moment piratical types.

Fairweather

Thirteen is the number of excess. A thirteen often carries connotations of getting what you wished for in spades and realising you should have wished more carefully. While it’s fairweather, careful handling can reduce the harm, but it’s a lot of effort and there’s no guarantee it’ll work.

Capsized

If, on the other hand, it’s capsized, that means a dangerous excess, which can’t be indulged at all lest it prove fatal. Addictions often show up as capsized thirteens and fit the despot motif nicely.

Person

Someone larger-than-life and/or ludicrous; a king, possibly self-proclaimed.

Sample card meanings:

Doubloons: More money than you can spend/Wealth that makes you a target

Hookbands: Too much going on/Facing an overwhelming opposition force

Monkeys: Inability to settle on anything and finish it/Pursuing dangerous lines of thought and fraying into madness

Parrots: Too many people pulling you this way and that/Being universally denounced or shunned

Peglegs: Trying to be in too many places at once/Statelessness, homelessness

Walk the Plank

It's worth revisiting this card and the Sea Monster here, as the definitions in the *Suit meanings* section didn't cover all the aspects the numbers do.

Fairweather

As we've seen, Walk the Plank refers to drastic, scary externally-imposed life-changing events. But this is truest of fairweather cards.

Capsized

Capsized, the cards take on a slightly different tone. While the change is still unavoidable and driven from outside, the catalyst was the subject's own actions. Tarot readers might like to think of the fairweather card as Death and the capsized

card as the Fool. For those less familiar, while Death represents dramatic, irresistible change, the Fool signifies self-triggered, scary, possibly unprecedented change or action – the kind of thing that makes you a visionary if it works and the worst kind of madman if it doesn't.

Person

Someone who inspires you to your best efforts (though possibly futilely, and possibly through enmity!).

The Sea Monster

The Sea Monster remains a hugely significant card.

Fairweather

Catastrophe, bad news for everyone.

Capsized

Really awful catastrophe, but just maybe a one-in-a-million chance.

Person

Someone or something universally and indiscriminately destructive.

The curtains parted, and Mister Wednesday entered. Not a grand entrance, nor a swaggering one, as you might expect from the only major rival for Finn's title of crime lord of Freeport; but nor for that matter was it a habitually surreptitious or cautious entrance. He moved simply, without inflection, but very definitely. Dex had noted this about him before. It made him imposing, to those who saw closely, as she did; but it also betrayed a certain... straightforwardness. Wednesday was working hard to overcome it, and had enough native intelligence that he would succeed eventually, but he was not as weathered by surprises as Finn, and it was still possible to slip something past him. Just. If you were as good as Dex hoped she was.

She glanced down at her elderly-looking hands. Trask had done a good job of artificially aging her; looking at herself in the mirror as he and his underlings wove their magic, she had had to work hard not to feel as weary and worn as she looked. She still found that her hands obeyed her better if she didn't look at them as she worked.

Wednesday sat opposite her, and placed Finn's deck on the table. Dex squinted nearsightedly at it, and rested her hand on top of it.

"You have brought a deck for me to read? Ah, but not your deck, I think." She closed her eyes, but glimpsed a hint of a reaction from Wednesday. He was guarded, even resistant; he was alert for fraud. A shame. Dex doubted he could have any idea who she was: Finn had gone to incredible lengths to conceal her identity, even smuggling her out of port on one ship so she transfer to another just out of port, sail back in, and visibly disembark with her new face and occupation as a wandering mystic. But his general alertness would make her job of substituting the cards much harder. Well, she had expected it. Indeed, it was another vindication of her instinct; she had been surprised Wednesday would be willing to expend resources on a superstitious line of attack, and it was reassuring to see that he evinced some reluctance, even wariness about it himself. It made her job harder, but made her more confident she was up to it. She would manage.

She opened her eyes and snatched her hand back from the deck, as though it were suddenly hot. "Not a friend's deck either, I think, eh? This one wants to keep its secrets."

Wednesday kept his silence. She picked the deck up and started to shuffle. "This may take some time, if it contin—" She broke off, eyes widening as the cards in her hands leapt out, spraying across the table, over Wednesday and onto the floor. Wednesday's eyes widened to match her own, and she knew she had begun to convince him. But with a man like Wednesday, the road to belief led through deep suspicion; she tried not to react to the fact that one hand was on the dagger at his belt and his bodyguards were peering in through the curtain, instead blinking in amused dismay at the cards scattered across the room. "Well, well. They do not want to talk, not at all. Perhaps you should shuffle awhile, eh? Let them get to know you." She began picking up the cards near her, and gestured for him to do the same. The beauty of this bit of business, aside from the effect on Wednesday, was that it gave her a chance to swap at least a quarter of the deck with the substitutes while he was occupied elsewhere, and set up the sequel.

Wednesday resumed his seat, waving his guards back outside, and she handed him the cards she'd picked up – or rather, their copies. She now needed to remember which cards she'd already switched, but she'd mastered card counting at six years old; she was unconcerned. "Shuffle," she said. He did, neatly and swiftly, until Dex triggered the enchantment on one of the substitute cards and made the deck spill everywhere again.

He did not bother concealing the wariness and shock on his face this time, but she could see it curdling into a suspicious glare. Dex was prepared for this. She tutted, smiling. “This time I think only you should pick up the cards. And then we make a little ritual, yes? One to reconcile them to their new owner.”

Her not touching the cards seemed to take. Wednesday’s face was suspicious, but he waved his guards away again, and his movements as he reassembled the deck were tinged – just slightly – with doubt. He was a little spooked, and that was good news; in Dex’s experience, the fearful were usually easier to fool because of their reluctance to look *really* closely. She sat completely still on her chair as he moved around her to collect the cards, the substitutes concealed safely out of view beneath her thighs.

He placed the completed deck in front of her, and before he could withdraw his hand, she pressed it gently down onto the deck and covered it with her own. She began to mutter under her breath, and stopped. “I think you maybe missed a card, dear.” She glanced around the room, squinting, playing the part. He followed her lead and swore, spotting a card face-down behind him. Reflexively, he rose, pulling his hand away from the cards – but Dex gripped his hand tightly, kept it pressed on the cards. “Do not let go of the deck,” she hissed. “You want it to give up its secrets, you must make it *yours*.” Wednesday met her eyes, nodded, and turned away, taking the deck with him. He picked up the card, and as he turned it over, she spoke again. “The twelve of Hookhands, yes? A card that could be you or your rival. Men of large deeds both, I think, yes? That card of all would be the one to try to escape.”

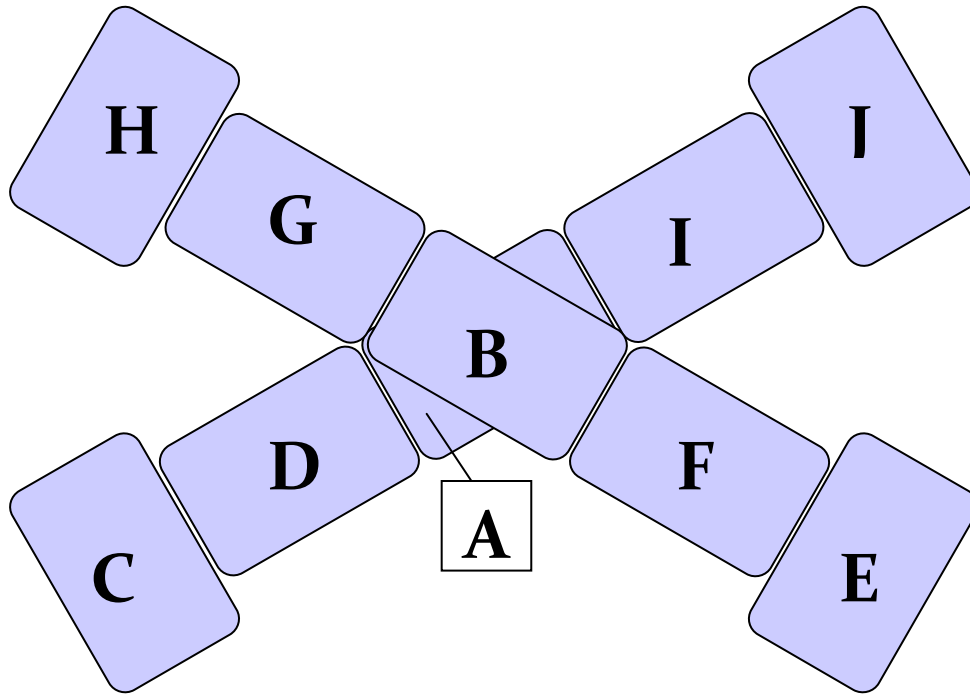
Wednesday looked at her expressionlessly, and put the card back on top of the deck. He methodically dealt the cards from one hand to the other, counting them. She stiffened, as though offended, and he glanced up and met her gaze; she held it for a moment, then looked aside and said in a slightly brittle voice, “Yes, this is a way to know them, to show them you own them. So it is good.” Her voice hardened as she went on, “But all of them will be there, and your twelve will not have a twin.” She sat haughtily upright and waited as he finished the count.

And exulted when he looked back up at her, and sat down, and began to talk.

Divination techniques

Crossbones layout

The Crossbones (sometimes just Cross or Bones; also occasionally called the Mark for the “X” many illiterate people use in place of a signature) is a simple format used for straightforward prognostication and strategic advice – roughly, “what’s going on and what should I do?”. A variant form can also be used to locate lost or missing items or people. Again, a deck belonging to or associated with a person or thing is believed to provide a better reading.



Meanings of the positions:

The pattern of the cross is simple enough: two lines reading past to future as they go from bottom to top, with the crossing point representing the present situation. The line moving left to right as it ascends represents the subject of the reading; the line moving athwart it is opposing or external influences on the person or question at hand (note that different influences may be present at different points on this line). Locatory divination is similar, telling two conflicting stories of how the object will be located and why doing so is hard.

Layout method:

- Card A is dealt, examined, and laid down face up, with the remaining cards laid face down in order.
- Card B is turned over and interpreted
- Card C&D are turned over and interpreted.
- The remaining cards are likewise flipped and read in groups of 2 – i.e. E&F, G&H, then I&J.

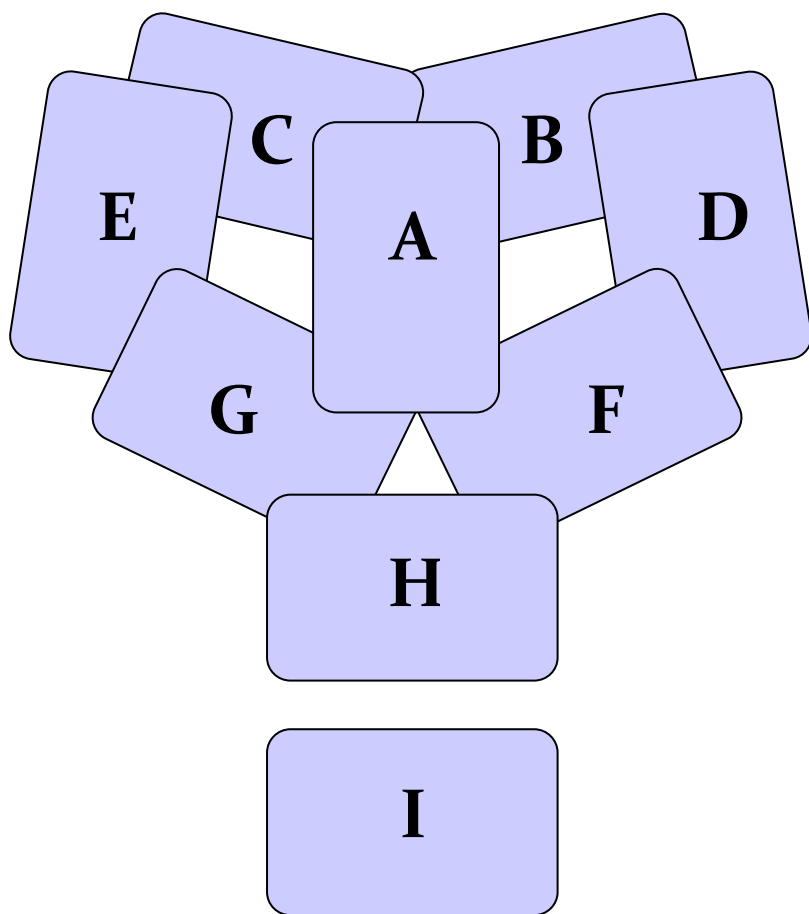
Standard fortune		Location divination
The subject of the reading, as they currently are.	A	The object of desire.
External influences on the subject at present.	B	The chief reason it’s hard to find.
The beginning or relatively distant past of the subject’s involvement in the topic.	C	What (or who) set you on the path to finding it.
The recent past of the subject.	D	Where to start looking.
External influences active in the beginning or more distant past of the topic.	E	Who or what made it hard to get to.
External influences active in the recent past, or recent changes to same.	F	What caused the person or entity in E to conceal it.
Near future or trends of external influences.	G	Complicating factors (which may not have been placed there by the original concealer).
The more distant future, conclusion or goal of external influences.	H	Warning; the final obstacle.
Near future, trends, or one possible course of action of subject.	I	What you will need to find it.
The more distant future, or outcome of subject if they do as described in I.	J	Where it will be found.

Skull layout

The Skull is also called the Mind, the Head, or, less respectfully, the Monkey. It's a more complicated layout (at least, that's what the fortune-tellers say when they're charging more for it) and is used for insights into a particular person, including oneself. These can be general character or psychological insights, or just glimpses of what's going on for the subject at this particular point in time. However, as always, readers claim that the cards have a mind of their own and there is no guarantee that the person you think you're asking about is the actual subject of the reading. The Skull is heavily associated with the superstition about decks being more likely to give a reading (and a more accurate reading) about the people they "know". The vast majority of decks stolen for reading purposes are used to read the Skull to try and gain some kind of inside edge over their owners or someone who recently won big with them.

Meanings of the positions:

The majority of the Skull – cards B through G – is divided into 2 parts: the outward on the left (C,E,G) and the inward on the right (B,D,F). "Outward" refers to the world of facts, rationality, actions, the overt and open, the public and the concrete. "Inward" refers to the world of feelings, emotion, instinct, the covert and closed, the personal and the subjective.



A	The subject of the reading, as they currently are.
B	The impression the subject is giving on "inward" matters, usually to those who know them well.
C	The impression the subject is giving on "outward" matters, sometimes the impression they give to strangers.
D	The impression the subject is getting on inward matters.
E	The impression the subject is getting on outward matters.
F	Where B & D lead, synthesis, and/or suggested action on inward things.
G	Where C & E lead, synthesis, and/or suggested action on outward things.
H	Where all this tends; the overall synthesis of A, F & G; overall advice.
I	Missing links, additional relevant information, fleshing out H; often has negative connotations, i.e. warnings, things to avoid.

H & I are also read by some fortune-tellers as the two halves of a choice, dilemma or even trap in which someone finds themselves, or two opposing forces acting on them. In these cases H is read as where things are innately tending to end up if things keep going as they are, with I as the most likely alternative. Fortune-tellers who use this variant call these cards the "jaws".

Layout method

- The person requesting the reading takes the top card, which will be card A, and keeps it aside face-down.
- The reader places B-G face up, and H-I face down.
- The client then places card A face-up in position and the reading begins with the information currently available.
- H and I are turned face-up when the rest of the cards have been read.
- Some readers will also lay an additional card over an "eye" hole that has predominantly capsized cards around it, or offer to do so. Such cards, sometimes called a "patch" or "blindfold" if there are two, represents the obstruction or negative influence acting on that sphere of the subject's life.

Other divination techniques

There are other ways in which the cards can be used even by the untrained for a range of quick divinations, and some people keep their decks with them at all times for this purpose.

The four most common are:

- Unsure what to do about an unexpected turn of events, a character can flip a card from the deck and match its suit to the “tactics” column on *Table 1: Suit Meanings*.
- Uncertain of the identity of someone (for instance, who left a mysterious package in their room), someone might flip a card and use the Person column from *Table 2: Number Meanings* – filtered through the suit meanings, of course – to work out who it is.
- Some people out at sea or on a mission flip a card at the start of each day or after each meal to try and anticipate the problems ahead (check against the Planning application column in the Suit Meanings Table; if your mission isn’t nautical, use the more general terms in brackets where applicable). “Fairweather” cards indicate relatively straightforward needs for those elements; “capsized” cards mean trouble in that area is ahead. The higher the number, the more the cards mean it.
- To get a superficial sense of someone’s personality, deal out the cards until you have one of each suit. Keep the first card of each suit that showed. The number of each card is the “power” of that component of the personality, similar to the quantity of cards of each suit in a normal reading; fairweather cards 7 or above indicate a virtue or excess, while 6 or lower indicates a lack or flaw.

She came out of sleep gently, suddenly, and irrevocably. Was there someone in the room? She listened, but heard only silence. She began to doubt herself. Why was she awake, then? Had she woken herself? That usually meant her dreams had shown her something she'd previously missed. And, now she thought about it, there had been *something*... She needed to bring it into her waking mind so she could act on it *now*. Her mind sped back over the day to work out what it was.

The remainder of the "reading" had gone exactly to plan. Wednesday had not only accepted her as genuine, he had revealed a lot – though only obliquely – about what was going on between him and Finn. It seemed as though the theft of the deck had been the idea of a senior member of his Canting Crew, who believed in these superstitions more than did Wednesday; Wednesday had gone along mainly as a way to visibly get one over on Finn, but was now warily delighted that he might have a genuine edge over the older, and smaller, man. With a series of gibberish readings, she had convinced Wednesday that he needed to play with the deck until he won – play being the best way to shuffle the cards before a reading, and a victory symbolising his dominance over the deck and its willingness to surrender its secrets. Of course, that meant she had the perfect excuse to keep winning, and over the following hands she not only swapped out the remaining cards from Finn's original deck but amassed a substantial pile of gold along the way.

...Was that it? She had been careful to lose a lot of it back in the final victory, a victory so convincing that she was fairly sure Wednesday's returning suspicions were allayed; and after the reading she had raised the subject of having won more than her fee, and Wednesday had waved his hand and gifted her the difference. He had seemed genuine. No, she didn't think that was it.

Once he had "subdued" the deck, she had performed the "genuine" reading, planting the information Finn had instructed her to; some detail about a major job supposedly planned for the following week, a laudatory reference to a local mystic she assumed was in Finn's pocket, and some psychological gumpf which sounded less generic than it was. That had all gone well; she was fairly certain he had taken the bait. It wasn't that; but it *was* something to do with the reading. Or – no – not *that* reading. She'd been dreaming about the rubbish readings she'd been doing.

She lay perfectly still, running through the layouts in her head. One of them – the first one, a Skull reading she'd done to show the deck's supposed resistance to betraying its former owner – was being reinterpreted, its meanings shuffling around and falling out a different way.

She'd made sure the reading ended with a Sea Monster and a Walk the Plank in the "jaws", the positions which indicated the two possible outcomes facing the querent; the two cards meant total catastrophe and externally-driven crisis respectively, and she'd thought it a nice spit-in-your-face touch for the imaginary personality of the deck. But she hadn't been too bothered by what other cards had led into the reading at the time, and had just let the boards fall where they willed. The thing was, now it swam into focus, she could see that although the cards hadn't made much sense for Wednesday, they might very well apply to her, and that would put her in terrible danger. If she believed in this stuff. Which she didn't.

But nonetheless, she wracked her brain for the subsequent reading, the Bones, which supposedly offered more practical advice to querents. She'd made sure that ended in a Walk the Plank too, but she had dealt a capsized eight before it, and had joked that perhaps Wednesday was being told he would make a new life in the countryside. Perhaps she should flee there now?

Or perhaps she should lie still and listen for that noise again. The one that sounded like silk sliding gently past silk over by her trunks.

She laughed at herself internally as she focused outward again. She had been thinking about these superstitions too much. They were designed to catch the part of the mind that looks for meaning and pattern; of course a brain like hers would find it hard to resist. She was grateful for this reminder to keep her thoughts fixed on the delicate interplay of fact rather than a random tumble of symbols, and glad her instincts hadn't been too dulled by her distraction to wake her.

As she listened to the thief, she wondered who had sent him. Finn? Wednesday? Neither; just a freelancer, she decided, as she listened to the thief find her decoy stash and leave. Not after the cards, and no idea how much money she actually had with her. She smiled, let go of the dagger she was grasping under the covers, and composed herself for sleep. The pittance he'd found was nothing to her, and it was worth every penny for the lesson she'd been given tonight. He had chosen a good night to steal from her.

She went back to sleep.

Demonstration readings

These are actual readings, made of randomly drawn and placed cards, to give a sample of the system in action. The character asking for the readings, Captain Jacta Est, is a privateer captain who is about to depart on a make-or-break journey to recover a treasure cache for which she's just decoded a map. (This backstory was decided before the cards were dealt, as context is all-important to a reading.)



Crossbones

Captain Est does a prognosticatory reading to see how the trip is going to go. The predominance of Peglegs suggests the cards are indeed describing a trip, but the lack of Doubloons is worrying.

Card A, the 11 of Monkeys, refers to a clever influential person or captain – clearly her! She is crossed by an 8 of Doubloons, though, which confirms her suspicions that a major merchant consortium she's targeted recently has a spy in her ranks and plans to steal her loot.

The capsized 3 of Monkeys refers to the difficulty she's had decoding the map, and the 7 of Hooks to the lucky break that delivered the key to the cipher into her hands during another adventure. The 8 of Parrots confirms her suspicions that someone has been talking to the consortium about her plans, and the 2 of Peglegs capsized suggests that they're planning to beat her to the stash and/or prevent her making the return trip.

The 1 of Parrots capsized could be a good omen, indicating that they'll lose track of her, but it could also be that they're planning to sabotage her journey by concealing hazards from her, and the 5 of Hooks suggests a magical attack is, well, on the cards. By now Captain Est is thinking she needs to make haste if she wants a safe journey, but the next card being a 1 of Peglegs reassures her that haste is unnecessary. She decides that taking her time to prepare will not only see her better equipped, it will let her foes think she's ignorant of their plans. Finally, the 7 of Peglegs is both pleasing and disturbing – it promises a fortunate *voyage*, but where's her money!?



Skull

To find out who the traitor is, Captain Est does a reading of her first mate, a prime suspect.

The first card being the 2 of Peglegs – a travel partner – bodes well for the accuracy of the reading; it also corresponds to the previous reading – Card F must have referred to the suborning of her mate.

On the outward side, the 1 of Peglegs corresponds to his appearance of adequacy for the trip, but the capsized 9 of Monkeys reversed indicates he’s been badly outwitted – and the consortium look likely as culprits, given the “negative twist on the previous number” angle. Where it’s all leading is an excess of communication in the outward world: he is definitely and concretely talking too much – but because it’s fairweather, the excess can still be managed. Maybe she can feed him false information?

The 2 of Parrots indicates that he seems like an honest partner, or might refer to love; but the Walk the Plank says he’s really feeling caught in some sort of crisis – external forces have him well and truly in their grip. Maybe he’s not a willing or even knowing spy, and a lover is to blame? Certainly the total lack of Doubloons suggests money isn’t on his mind, and the 11 of Hookhands reinforces this idea, with its suggestion of convoluted deeds.

It all leads to the conclusion indicated by a capsized 2 of Hookhands, that he’s no longer an adequate adventuring partner. But, as the 7 of Parrots rightly points out, he’s a good friend... perhaps what the reading’s saying is that her choice now is between solving things with violence and appeals to that friendship...

Dex waited impatiently for Finn to sit. It seemed to her that he was taking unnecessarily long with the civilities – offering her a drink, which she refused, and enquiring after her health. Ha! That was the whole problem. Trask’s illusion was too good. She still looked like an old woman, and it was getting harder and harder to convince herself not to feel like one. It was impressive, sure, but it was also exhausting, and she was keen to get her old, graceful body back as soon as she could.

Finally Finn asked, “And so how did it go?”

Dex smiled broadly, and placed Finn’s deck on the table in front of him. He leafed through the cards swiftly, his face expressing satisfaction. He looked up at her when he was done. “And?”

Slightly smugly, she launched into a report of the readings and Wednesday’s reactions to them. Finn listened keenly, glancing at Trask from time to time to get his reaction to Dex’s description. When she was done, he leaned back in his chair.

“It sounds as though you did well.” He looked at her thoughtfully over his steepled fingers, and nodded to himself. “I think – yes, I think we can make good on that job offer we discussed earlier.” He leaned forward again, looking intently at her. “But you need to understand that there will be sacrifices. After your part in all this, you will need to leave your old identity, your old life behind.

“Are you willing to do that?”

Dex smiled. “Yes sir. I’ve only had this identity a few years; I’m not that attached to it.”

Finn smiled back at her. “I’m glad.” He reached out a child-sized hand, and they shook. He sat back again, and his smile grew edges. “But I’m not sure you appreciate how literally I mean what I say.”

Dex felt alarm stirring in the pit of her gut. “Look, Finn, I – well, I do want to work for you, but I’m only going to do it if I can have some kind of life along the way.”

Finn shook his head. “We’re past the point where you can negotiate the details, Dex. You’ve accepted my job offer, so you’re going to have to let me arrange things my way. And we still need to tie up the loose ends on this business with Wednesday.”

Dex tensed up. “What exactly does that mean?” She began to assess the available exits; goons by the door, Trask by the window...

Finn shrugged apologetically. “You’re not going to like the sound, I’m –”

Dex snatched up the deck and leapt to the fireplace. She thrust her hand towards the flames, threatening to spray the cards into the fire. “Well then, keep it to yourself. I’m not kidding, I’ll burn the deck if I need to.”

Finn threw his head back and laughed. “Dex, I know as well as you do that the deck in your hands is a forgery.”

Dex snarled; her ruse had backfired. Her hands flickered in and out of her coat, and in an instant both hands held decks over the flickering coals. “Well, one of these isn’t a fake. But if you want to find out which, you’ll have to get this illusion off me and give me safe pa–”

Suddenly she couldn’t move. Trask’s voice came from behind her. “Actually, illusions aren’t all I do, Dex.” And she felt a sudden cold, shiny sensation just below her shoulder blade. She rolled her eyes desperately, trying vainly to bring him into view as she cursed herself bitterly for being stupid enough to let a mage out of her sight. The mocking tone from behind her indicated he was aware of her futile efforts. “I’m fairly practiced at paralysis, for one thing.”

Finn came forward and removed the decks from her hands, replacing the forgery on the table and flicking through the genuine deck. He sighed. "The job offer was perfectly sincere, Dex. Stealing a deck of cards from under the noses of both me and Mister Wednesday demonstrates a skill I could use, and your ability to misdirect has proven even more valuable." The real deck in his right hand, he picked up the forged deck with his left and waggled it at her. "And these were impressive too. You have a real counterfeiter's eye. I don't know how you mocked up the board to feel as weathered as my old deck, but you did an exceptional job." He turned back to the table and replaced the deck, then faced Dex again.

"You did miss *something*, though," he said over the sound of liquid spattering on the stone floor behind her, and swung his right arm, releasing the cards he held into the flames.

Dex's mind froze. Then it raced. But Finn was already answering her question.

"It was never about the cards for me, Dex. They're a keepsake from earlier days, and I'm – I *was* – fond of them, but that's all. I planted the idea that they be stolen in the first place because Wednesday has a distressingly sharp mind and having him start making some irrational decisions for a change would let me devote fewer of my resources to keeping him in his place." He nodded, correctly reading her thought processes. "That's right, Dex. Your real job was to get him to start believing in mumbo-jumbo. And it sounds like you did admirably. When he interrupts some of my more troublesome men at what they will regrettably have been misled to believe will be a sizeable heist, it will confirm that the cards can be trusted. I'll launch a few efforts to retrieve my deck, but the finishing touch will be when his fortune-teller dies."

Dex blinked vehemently. It was the only movement she could make, but she managed to convey her dissent with remarkable clarity. Finn smiled sadly. "You're hoping I mean that she disappears mysteriously? And I take the illusion off you, rough you up and throw you out on the streets as your old self suitably chastised? Sorry, Dex, but I don't let people off that lightly; the old you's already widely known to be dead, and I don't want to confuse the message that sent. Besides, to really cement the idea that I'm worried about him having the cards, I need the dead body of the woman who initiated Wednesday into the mysteries of cartomancy to be found floating in the harbour."

Trask's voice floated up from the small of her back. "For what it's worth, Dex, I couldn't have removed the illusion anyway. Unfortunately we couldn't assume Wednesday wouldn't have some kind of glamerpiercing magic to see through it, so the aging was entirely real. A colleague of mine devised it; we haven't yet got it to work on unwilling subjects, and we can't reverse it yet either. But we do appreciate your assistance with our research."

The splashing sound was slowing now. She was finding it hard to breathe. Her field of vision was shrinking. Inside her head she was shrilling curses at the two child-sized men.

Finn took her hand. He felt so warm. She could no longer hear him, but she heard him say earnestly, "Don't forget, Dex, you accepted the job with me. We have an agreement." She wondered what in all the Hells was wrong with him, why he was taunting her with it. Then, randomly, she wondered whether she was right in thinking he'd swapped the decks in the moment he'd turned away from her. She had a moment of amusement at herself; she was incorrigible, still trying to read the play, even now. And then there was nothing.

Summary tables

Table 1: Suit meanings

Suit	Themes	Element	Life aspect	Places	Virtues (many, fairweather)	Excesses (many, capsized)	Lacks (few, fairweather)	Flaws (few, capsized)	Strategic consideration	Tactic
Doublons	Being and living; money, prosperity, protection, material wellbeing, health, sex	Earth	Body	Places of relaxation and trade – inns, homes, shops, merchants, markets; mountains, underground	Generosity, hospitality, wealth, shrewdness, sexual prowess	Prodigality, recklessness, self-induced poverty or ill health, depravity	Poverty, ill health, impotence	Miserliness, hypochondria, frigidity	Provisions, equipment	Dealmaking
Hook-hands	Doing, grasping, manipulating; action, deeds, work, effort, battle, attacks, power	Making – shaped metal in particular, but anything made	Deeds	Places of work and deeds – workplaces, defended places, jails, anywhere things are made; mines	Effectiveness, power, deftness, skill	Cack-handedness, clumsiness, overhandling	Inactivity, waiting	Laziness, ineffectiveness	Crew (personnel)	Force
Monkeys	Thinking and inventing; cunning, mischief, trickery, intelligence, learning, creativity	Fire	Mind	Places of active learning and thinking – offices, schools, universities, anywhere art is practised or made; hot places, deserts	Wit, imagination	Being too clever by half, tripping oneself up, dangerous curiosity, distractability	Ignorance, simplicity	Stupidity	Opportunity	Trickery
Parrots	Feeling and speaking; communication, information, memory, awareness, emotion, romance	Air	People	Places of discussion and relating – taverns, religious establishments, libraries, political institutions, social clubs; windy places, plains	Wisdom in speech and dealings, romantic achievements	Being overly talkative or friendly, being overly dutiful or loyal, folly in love, or unrequited love	Taciturnity, isolation, not returning another's love	Antisocial, pointlessly offensive, being hard of heart or cruel	Weather (environment)	Diplomacy
Peglegs	Moving and changing; travel, transition, motion, change (age, growth, mortality)	Water	World	Places of travel and change – vehicles (esp ships!), ports, gates, roads; woods, rivers, islands, rainforests	Worldliness, balance, being on top of change	Restlessness, depravity, showing age, wearing out	Naivety, innocence, stagnation	Insularity, victim of change	Ship (mobility)	Avoidance/ acceptance
Walk the Plank	Crisis, drastic sudden change; NB this card is highly charged, like Major Arcana in tarot		Fortune (being subject to outside whim)	Somewhere impossible or extraordinary	-	-	-	-	Something for which you are unequipped	Survival is your priority, do what you must – or do something crazy
Sea Monster	Catastrophe, bad news for everyone; this card is a big deal too		Entropy, inevitability	Lethal places; underwater	-	-	-	-	Something for which you can't ever be equipped	Resignation; you're screwed

Table 2: Number meanings

No.	Fairweather	Capsized	Person
1	Sufficiency, moderation	Insufficiency; nothing, emptiness	Self
2	Partnership, sympathy	Opposition, antipathy; “this town ain’t big enough for the two of us”	Lover, very close friend or ally
3	Growth, health, vitality, fertility, youth	Decay, disease, age, decline; being constrained or even compressed, especially by others	Child, youth
4	Unity, community, harmony	Disharmony, conflict; outgrowing, “not enough to go round”	Family
5	Mystery, hidden depths, magic (can include illusion and deception)	Explanation, clarity; banality, mundanity, conformity	Strangers, sometimes mages
6	Recruitment, new allies, expansion of a group	Abandonment, shrinkage of a group; betrayal, untrustworthy new allies, hidden agendas & influences	Colleagues, hirelings or professionals
7	Luck (windfall – no effort required)	Opportunity (need to work to make the most); need to all pull together to seize the day	Friends
8	Order, civilisation, state, politics, law, massive organisations or deals	Chaos, nature, anarchy, nasty politics, corruption, mutiny, rebellion; randomness	Authorities
9	Triumph	Loss; restriction, compromise	Enemies, conquests
10	Secrets	Betrayal, exposure; notoriety	Spies, deceivers
11	Complexity	Simplicity; “simpler than it seems”	Someone with local power and/or a wide net of influence; a captain
12	Abundance, prosperity	Famine, widespread want, destructive greed; things not going to plan and people suffering as a result	Scarily powerful person; a lord
13	Excess (can be managed if handled OK, but a lot of work and no guarantee)	Dangerous excess; glut, decadence	Someone larger-than-life and/or ludicrous; a king, possibly self-proclaimed
Walk the Plank	Drastic, scary externally-imposed life-changing events	Self-imposed, scary, possibly unprecedented change or action – the kind of thing that makes you a genius if it works and the worst kind of madman if it doesn’t	Someone who inspires you to your best efforts (possibly through enmity!)
Sea Monster	Catastrophe, bad news for everyone	Really awful catastrophe, a one-in-a-million chance	Someone or something universally and indiscriminately destructive

Howling winds. Pain. Fear. And, unexpectedly, the sound of Finn's voice reminding her of the job offer again. Gods, yes; anything to get away from here!

Her vision slowly returned. It faded back in much as it had faded out, but once it was back it *kept* fading in; when it stopped, her sight felt like it had never been so focused before. Leafy branches were rustling overhead, and she could see the texture of the leaves more clearly than she ever had. Near her she heard the sounds of two people, one small and one regular-sized, and at least three largish animals panting; beyond that, the breeze and a burbling stream off in the distance somewhere.

Finn's small face poked into view. He looked into her eyes with concern, and his own eyes crinkled as he saw her focus on him alertly. He smiled disarmingly and said, "No, no! You're safe, Dex. Here, sit up."

She felt his tiny hands support her shoulders, and larger hands followed his lead and help her to sit. She felt so weak! But... *fresh*. And more graceful, somehow. What...?

The larger hands belonged to a slightly smelly man in a long, simple robe, with a sickle hanging from his rope belt and a garland of some sort of ivy around his neck, who knelt on the moss beside where she lay. Beside him were an old leather bag, and three wolves. They gazed at her solemnly, without menace other than the fact of their wolfness; she nodded respectfully to them, and one of them blinked slowly, apparently amused.

Finn came around in front of her and offered his hand. Bemused, she reached out to take it – and snatched her hand back to look at it more closely. Its partner came up to her face as well. They were *not* her hands. They were... more slender, and if anything *more* graceful. She scowled, confused.

Finn spoke. "I'm sorry, Dex. I tried to explain what I had planned, but... well, the upshot is you're an elf now."

Dex's jaw dropped. "*What?*"

Finn looked apologetic. "Well, I explained how we needed you dead. I had planned to explain how I was going to employ you after that, but you got a bit... assertive, and Trask took matters into his own hands. I should apologise; I didn't realise quite how much of a grudge he was holding for you pulling the wool like that... but he's got it out of his system now, so it's fine. He knows, of course, and he'll be keeping an eye out. For you *and* on you. No offence."

Dex shook her head angrily. "Knows *what?* How am I an elf?"

Finn gestured to the silent human kneeling beside them. "Pell here, well, he can bring people back in new bodies. And that seemed like kind of a perfect fit for your situation, really. Nobody's going to recognise you, are they? And as it turns out, you get an extra 500 years or so on top of it all." Her brows knotted, and a note of impatience crept into his voice. "You really should be pleased, Dex; you're the first person I've done this for, and it isn't cheap." He smiled, and the edge in his voice faded. "You see how serious I was about wanting to hire you."

Dex considered. "Why an elf?" she asked.

Pell spoke for the first time, a quiet, slightly hoarse voice. "Nature's choice."

Finn grinned at the druid, some old friendship evident in his gaze. "In other words, luck of the draw. You can never tell what people will come back as. I've seen a kobold once. An elf seems like quite a good

match, all things considered.” He smiled at her, and turned to the druid. “I think she’s all right now, Pell. Give us a moment?”

Pell nodded and stood, striding across the clearing. The wolves followed, taking their not inconsiderable musk with them. Finn turned back to Dex and gave her a direct look. “So...?”

Dex scowled. “I don’t know, old man. You *killed* me!”

Finn showed a hint of a frown. Dex took the point. She sighed. “Do you have –”

He smiled and reached into his bag. Something glinted in his hand. Dex shied away, but he froze, and then slowly brought it clear so she could see it: a mirror. Dex relaxed, and reached for it, saying, “Thanks, but that wasn’t quite –”

Finn coughed. His other hand was still coming out of the bag, and in it was a deck of cards, which he proffered with a courtly flourish. Their eyes met, and she smiled. “All right. I don’t really have a choice, do I?” She took the cards, and began one of her basic routines. The cards felt slightly larger than usual, and she was still not quite used to the new body, but she warmed up quickly, and she began to suspect that the agility for which elves were famous would be a considerable asset in the long run – which, as Finn had pointed out, was now a *very* long run.

Finn hemmed again, distracting her from her thoughts. He saw her attention return to him and smiled. “So we have a deal? You’re working for me, as we discussed?”

Dex shrugged, then smiled, and flipped the top card. A six of Hookhands: a skilled new recruit.

Finn rubbed his hands. “Excellent. So let’s talk about repayment plans.”

Credits and legal information

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The author offers his humble thanks to Brian Hess, Evan Sass and Green Ronin for *Walk the Plank*; it has whiled away many a boring airport lounge and is thoroughly recommended to travelling gamers as both a diversion and a way to meet people who share one's interests. In a remarkable feat of versatility, it is also quite fun to play at home. Those of you unfortunate enough to not yet own *Walk the Plank* can purchase it from [Green Ronin's online store](#), from [their Amazon store](#), or from the nearest game store of distinction. Thanks also to the fontographers listed above for the fonts used in this PDF. My personal thanks to CJP and to JD, for support both moral and practical, not to mention the far greater boon of their long-standing friendships. Thanks finally to HTT, with whom those airport lounge games were shared, on whom the system was first tested, by whom the author is tolerated, supported and indulged, and to whom this PDF is dedicated, with much love.

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