

The Artifact

A solo cosmic horror RPG



WRETCHED
& **A**LONE

Along the shore the cloud waves break,
The twin suns sink behind the lake,
The shadows lengthen
In Carcosa.

Strange is the night where black stars rise,
And strange moons circle through the skies
But stranger still is
Lost Carcosa.

Songs that the Hyades shall sing,
Where flap the tatters of the King,
Must die unheard in
Dim Carcosa.

Song of my soul, my voice is dead;
Die thou, unsung, as tears unshed
Shall dry and die in
Lost Carcosa.

-Cassilda's Song in "The King in Yellow," Act i, Scene 2.

-R. W. Chambers, "The King in Yellow"

Of such great powers or beings there may be conceivably a survival... a survival of a hugely remote period when... consciousness was manifested, perhaps, in shapes and forms long since withdrawn before the tide of advancing humanity... forms of which poetry and legend alone have caught a flying memory and called them gods, monsters, mythical beings of all sorts and kinds...

-Algernon Blackwood

-H. P. Lovecraft, "The Call of Cthulhu"

The Artifact

Writing and Layout - © Brian Smith

Art from Adobe Stock

Written for the Wretched and Alone Game Jam, 2020

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Special thanks to Caitlin S., Russell S., and Emily W. for playing/editing early drafts.



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Want to make your own? Find The Wretched and Alone System Reference Document here: <https://sealedlibrary.itch.io/wretched-alone-srd>

About:

The Artifact is a solo storytelling RPG about trying to keep your mind together when it is under assault by something you can't comprehend, and the loneliness of trying to convince others of something that you truly believe and they don't.

Many of the prompts in this game deal with an otherworldly mental assault and people not believing what you are telling them. If any particular story prompts make you too uncomfortable, please feel free to skip them and move on with the rest of the game.

The Story So Far:

You are an assistant curator of the natural history museum in the city where you live. It's a comfortable life; your antiquities department is well-funded and you have staffed it with hard-working people that you trust. Today, a new donation has arrived. The crate has no return address, and when you open it, it contains only one strange artifact nestled in packing material, and no other information.

The artifact is mysterious - you feel uneasy keeping it in your office, but don't want to store it anywhere until you figure out a bit more about it.

Strange things start to happen soon after you acquire this artifact, and you begin to have vivid disturbing dreams. You quickly realize that something is using this item to try and push its way through into your reality, and the strain is tearing at your physical and mental health.

Can you convince others that this threat is real before some otherworldly terror is loosed on the world? As your dreams and waking mind are corrupted by its influence, can you stave off madness long enough to find a way to destroy this accursed artifact?

You don't know, but the consequences of failure are too terrible not to try.

The Artifact was inspired by Chris Bissette's game "The Wretched," and is based on the Wretched and Alone SRD. It was also inspired by works of cosmic horror including the mythos of H. P. Lovecraft and R. W. Chambers, the "Fallen London" online browser game, the TV shows "Gravity Falls" and "Twin Peaks," and "The Beautiful Thing That Awaits Us All" by Laird Barron.

What You Need to Play:

In order to play this game, you will need:

- A standard deck of 52 cards, with one joker set aside
- A single six-sided die
- A tumbling block tower (recommended), or a device with an Internet connection
- 10 tokens or counters of some kind (coins, paper clips, etc.)

You will also need some way to record the events that occur over the course of several “days” during the game. This could be short videos, voice memos, physical journal entries, or online posts. I recommend audio logs, but use whatever you prefer and feels most natural.

There are two positive resolutions to this scenario, and each is more unlikely than the last.

First, you could destroy the artifact, denying the otherworldly entity a way into this world and freeing yourself from its mental torment.

Second, you could convince others around you of the threat the artifact presents to the world, and enlist their help in containing/destroying its malevolent power.

You can fail in more ways than that. It’s better not to think about it.

Set-up:

1. Generate a random 6 digit number. You can use an online number generator, roll your die six times and use those numbers, etc. This is the catalog number your new artifact will have in your museum's collection, represented below by [#####].
2. Set up the tumbling block tower as you normally would for games of that nature. Roll your die, and perform that many pulls from the tower. Replace the blocks back on top of the tower as usual. This is the recommended way to play.

Alternatively, if you don't have a block tower, you can use this website as a substitute:
<https://maxkaemmerer.github.io/wretched-and-alone-d100-dice-roller/>

Each time the rules ask you to pull from the tower, you will instead roll the online dice, digitally set aside any dice that show 1, and roll the reduced pile of dice the next time around. You start with 100 dice, and they will go more quickly than you expect. Roll your six-sided die, and perform that many online die rolls.

The tower (or dice pool) represents your state of mind and how well you are dealing with the otherworldly horrors assaulting your sanity. If the tower falls at any time (or if you run out of dice), your mind has fractured and you are now insane. Record one final entry in your log/journal, and the game is over.

3. Set aside the joker, and then shuffle the deck of playing cards. Place them face down nearby, within easy reach. If you wish to play a game with a higher chance of success, make sure that the Ace of Hearts is the top card of the deck.
4. Much of the storytelling in this game is going to revolve around your artifact. Before you record your first log, take some time to think about exactly what your artifact is. Some starter questions you may want to think about include:
 - What is it? An idol or figurine? A book? A weapon? Something else?
 - How big is it?
 - What does it look like?
 - What material(s) is it made of? What color(s) is it?
 - What condition is it in? Does it look brand new? Weathered? Stained?
 - Is there any writing or any symbols on it? If so, what do they look like?
 - What does it feel like physically? When you pick it up, what is the texture or temperature of the artifact? Does it feel unnaturally heavy/light?
 - Is there anything interesting about the crate or packing material it arrived in?

And anything else you want to record for posterity!

5. Record your first audio log entry, using the following script:

This is assistant curator [your name]. Yesterday, I received a donation of a new artifact, which was assigned the reference number [#####] in our collection. There was no return address on the package, and no information in the crate - just the artifact.

[Describe your artifact here].

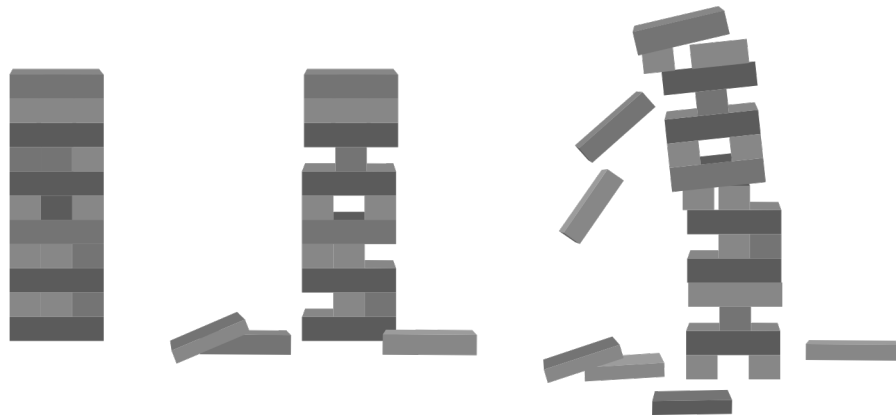
I'm starting this record because this whole situation is making me a little uneasy. Last night I had vivid, unsettling dreams, and the artifact was in them. I'm a person of science, but I can't help but think there is something... off about this object. The others in my office don't agree that there is anything strange about it, and I've had no luck convincing them so far. At the end of Day 1 with this object, I couldn't find out anything online about its history or provenance, and it doesn't look quite like anything I've ever seen before. I'm reminded of that one time we were sent a historical weapon that had recently been used in a murder, and the murderer was hoping that it would get buried in our archives.

Whatever it is, the artifact doesn't really fit into our collection at all. I'm going to try and learn a little more about it and then dispose of it, either to the authorities or to a museum where it will be a better fit.

It's closing time, and I'm going home.

All subsequent entries should begin with "This is assistant curator [your name], day [X] working with artifact number [#####]", in order to assist anyone attempting to reconstruct your experience and figure out what happened to you, should you fail. The exact content of the rest of the entry is up to you, but it should at least summarize the events of the day and what has happened to you.

6. Now, you are ready to begin your next day with the artifact. Lucky you.



Days:

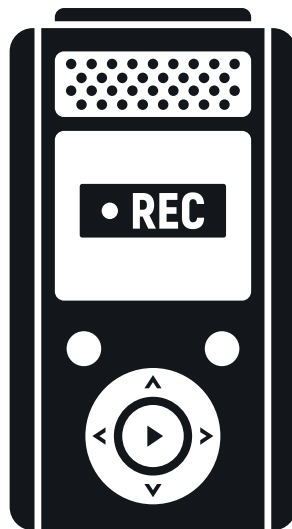
The game is divided into days. Each day has two phases: the **events**, and the **log**.

Phase One: The Events

- Roll your die and then draw that number of cards from the deck, keeping them face down. These represent events and other things that have happened since your last recorded log.
- Turn over the first card you drew and consult the Reference Library section. If the Reference Library asks you to do a specific thing, do it.
- Continue turning over the cards you have drawn and consulting the Reference Library until the events of the day are complete. You may want to jot down some notes to use when recording your log in Phase Two.
- When you are done with the events of the day, discard the cards you have used, unless you were instructed otherwise by the Reference Library.

Phase Two: The Log

- Take a few moments to consider the events that occurred during the previous 24 hours, keeping in mind anything new you have learned about the artifact or what's behind it, anything that has happened to you or that you have done, any noteworthy dreams, and how you are feeling.
- Record your audio log for the day. Remember to start your entries with:
"This is assistant curator [your name], day [X] working with artifact number [#####]"



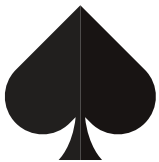
Reference Library:

Consult the reference library each time you flip over a card and complete whatever it tells you to do. Sometimes these tasks will involve pulling blocks from the tower. Others will involve answering questions or quiet reflection. Some will do completely different things.

Note: any instructions that say “pull from the tower” mean to pull and replace as usual.



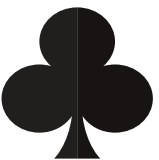
Hearts represent the artifact itself. When you draw a heart, you are usually interacting with the artifact in some way, learning new information about it, or trying to dispose of it.



Spades represent your dreams. You don't know how, but the artifact is infecting your dreams. When you draw a spade, you are remembering and trying to process events that happened to you in your dreams.



Diamonds represent your physical body and your state of mind. When you draw a diamond, you are dealing with strain on your body and mind, perhaps from supernatural causes, perhaps from stress and not sleeping very well.



Clubs represent your relationships. When you draw a club, you might be trying to convince friends or family about the malicious intent of this artifact, and persuading them to help you. Or you may be dealing with the strain of alienating someone you care about due to your fixation on this artifact.

It is highly recommended that you do not read past this page until you need to look up the effects of the cards in the reference library, and even then, not to read more than you need to resolve the cards.



The Artifact

A You've posted on message boards far and wide across the Internet, and someone has finally responded, saying they've encountered an artifact like this before. You reply, asking them for information on how to destroy it. **Pull from the tower; do not discard this card.** Place this card aside and face-up, and put the 10 tokens on top of it. At the end of each day, after you have recorded your log, roll your six-sided die. If you roll a 6, remove one token from the card.

If you successfully remove all the tokens from this card, a letter arrives. It is sealed with wax, and a strange sigil is stamped in the wax. **Make one final pull from the tower.** If the tower stands, you break the wax seal and read the instructions inside, allowing you to successfully destroy the artifact. If the tower falls, your mind is broken by the power of the sigil, and you are now insane. Either way, record one final audio log, and the game is over.

2 The artifact has deteriorated or aged somewhat since you last looked at it. What has changed about it?

3 You find a fragment of the artifact in the packing material and have it carbon-dated. The results indicate that it is older than the human race. The lab apologizes for the mistake - is it possible they were correct? **Pull from the tower.**

4 You have tried to post pictures of the artifact online, but the photo files are always corrupted. What happens when you call your IT department for help?

5 Sometimes when you gaze at the artifact, it looks like it has some sort of aura. When you blink, it's back to normal. What did you see? **Pull from the tower.**

6 While attempting to take measurements of the artifact, three different tools in a row all broke. Is this just a coincidence? Were you able to get any useful information?

7 You touched the artifact, and it was surprisingly, brutally cold. Your fingers stuck to it briefly. What happened when you pulled your fingers away? **Pull from the tower.**

8 When walking through a different part of the museum, you see a newspaper clipping of a disaster from 100 years ago. You think you see the artifact in the photo, but can't corroborate it. What happened 100 years ago? Can you use this to convince others?

9 Something about the artifact changed while you were on your lunch break. What changed? What does this signify to you? **Pull from the tower.**

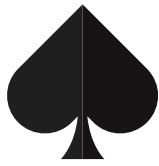
10 You realize that something about the collection number is nagging you - does it correspond to a date, or map coordinates, or something else you can use to get more information?

J You leave a webcam recording overnight, and you see the artifact move in the dead of night. You show your colleagues the recording in the morning, and they claim not to see it move. How else can you convince them about this artifact? What else can you try? **Pull from the tower.**

Q Exhausted, you try to throw it out, depositing it in the dumpster behind the museum on your way out to eat. When you return, it's right back on your desk. How did it return? Is there any logical explanation for this? **Pull from the tower.**

K You work late one night, and after several frustrating failures, you try to rid yourself of the artifact by burning it. This attempt fails. How did you try to burn it? How did it fail?

Do not discard this card. Place it face-up where you can see it. If this is the fourth king that you have face-up, turn to the rules section titled "Four Kings" and follow the instructions there.



Dreams

- A You briefly fall asleep sitting at your desk - your dreams are surprisingly peaceful and serene. What did you dream about? You awake feeling more refreshed than you have in days. **If you have previously drawn the King of Spades, you may shuffle it back into the deck.**
- 2 The artifact appeared and whispered a word or short phrase to you in your dreams. What did it say? What did its voice sound like? **Pull from the tower.**
- 3 You are flying in your dream above a turbulent sea, approaching a city. The city is wrong - describe what you see as you fly towards it. **Pull from the tower.**
- 4 In your dream, you are in a normal setting; everyone is smiling. You witness something awful happen, and everyone is still smiling. What happened? Why is everyone smiling? **Pull from the tower.**
- 5 You are wearing a robe and holding a knife in your dream. The artifact is on an altar before you, and so is an unconscious person. Do you recognize them? If so, who are you about to sacrifice? Do you complete the sacrifice? **Pull from the tower.**
- 6 In your dream, part of your body is growing longer and longer. Which part? The artifact is there and is laughing at you. **Pull from the tower.**
- 7 You dream that you are in a crowd with thousands of others, praying/chanting to something. What is it? The artifact is nowhere to be seen. **Pull from the tower.**
- 8 You dream you are in a familiar room from your childhood, but several things are terribly wrong. Describe them. **Pull from the tower.**
- 9 You open your dreaming eyes and see a hallway full of mirrors. As you walk down the hall, what do you see through the mirrors? What are they showing you? **Pull from the tower.**
- 10 You are trapped somewhere alone in a dream with the artifact. Where are you? How do you try to escape? Do you escape before waking? **Pull from the tower.**
- J In your dream, you are surrounded by friends and family at a holiday event. You hear familiar crying. As hard as you try, you can't locate it, and no one else can hear it. Who was crying? **Pull from the tower.**
- Q You dream that you see yourself at your desk, with the artifact on it. You are looking at yourself through the eyes of someone you love, and you despise yourself. What do you hate about yourself, from the perspective of this person? **Pull from the tower.**
- K In a normal dream, you suddenly sense the presence of something ancient, powerful, and malevolent. You look into the sky and glimpse a vast monstrosity. What do you see?

Do not discard this card. Place it face-up where you can see it. If this is the fourth king that you have face-up, turn to the rules section titled "Four Kings" and follow the instructions there.

If this is the first time you have drawn this card, it didn't see you. **Do not pull from the tower.**

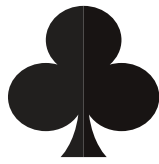
If this is the second time you have drawn this card, it sees you. **Pull from the tower twice, and do not replace either block.**



Body and Mind

- A You go on a walk to clear your head, and it is your favorite kind of weather outside - what kind of weather is that for you? You feel uplifted, and return to your work with more vigor. **The next time a card tells you to pull from the tower, you may ignore that instruction.**
- 2 While taking notes, you get the distinct feeling that someone is watching you. When you look up, the artifact is directly in your line of sight. Did you put it there? Are you sure? **Pull from the tower.**
- 3 You notice that you have developed a disturbing new body habit/ache. What is it? **Pull from the tower.**
- 4 You awoke in the morning and see from the damage to your room that you did something in your sleep. What happened? Were you trying to give yourself a message? **Pull from the tower.**
- 5 A certain everyday word seems to appear more and more frequently in all the conversations happening around you. Which word, and when did you first notice it? **Pull from the tower.**
- 6 You just can't focus today. You're tired and your mind keeps wandering away from your work. Where does your mind go when it wanders?
- 7 There was something wrong with your vision for parts of today. What did you see through your distorted vision? Did it keep you from doing anything? **Pull from the tower.**
- 8 You realize that you have been staring at the artifact for many minutes. What choices in your life brought you to this place and job that this artifact ended up with you?
- 9 You keep catching movement out of the corner of your eyes. It might just be insects, but what do you think it is? **Pull from the tower.**
- 10 While brushing your teeth, you suddenly see something in the mirror behind you. Panicked, you spin around. Nothing is there, and when you look back in the mirror, it is gone. What did you think you saw? **Pull from the tower.**
- J Something fell off of you in the shower (fingernails, hair, teeth, etc.). What was it? How did you react? **Pull from the tower, and do not replace the block.**
- Q Someone at work makes a joke, and you laugh. You keep laughing, and end up laughing hysterically long after everyone stops and looks warily at you. What did you do to escape the situation? Some of your colleagues are now avoiding you. **Pull from the tower, and do not replace the block.**
- K You notice a new scar or discoloration on your skin in a particular shape, somewhere covered by your clothing. What does it look like? Why are you sure it is related to the artifact? When you try to show it to someone who has seen you naked before, they insist you've always had it.

Do not discard this card. Place it face-up where you can see it. If this is the fourth king that you have face-up, turn to the rules section titled "Four Kings" and follow the instructions there.



Relationships

- A You have convinced someone at work to help you investigate the object. They don't believe you about the artifact's true nature, but it's a start. **Do not discard this card** - for the rest of the game, if you have drawn the Ace of Hearts, a roll of 5 or 6 will remove a token from it.
- 2 You stop in a local cafe to get a drink on the way to work. The barista, whom you know casually, asks what you are working on. Do you tell them about the artifact? Why or why not?
- 3 You try to convince a friend that there is something odd about this artifact - what did you say? How did they react?
- 4 Who could have possibly sent the artifact? You notice a postmark on the shipping label - does this give you any helpful information?
- 5 You start writing an article for publication about this artifact - what evidence do you actually have that could convince others of its true nature?
- 6 You tried to tell one of your bosses at the museum about the artifact, and they thought it would make a great exhibit for next Halloween. How do you convince them this is a bad idea?
- 7 A colleague stops by your office, but when they look at the artifact, they go glassy eyed and forget why they came. What do you do next? **Pull from the tower.**
- 8 After a little research, you identify a couple of experts who might be able to help. Describe them, what they study, and why you think they can help.
- 9 You bring the artifact to a meeting to ask others what they think of it. Your colleagues start talking in a different language around the artifact, but don't seem to notice - what did this language sound like? Could you understand any words? You had to grab the artifact and flee the meeting room. Later, your colleagues seemed annoyed with you. **Pull from the tower.**
- 10 You try to convince your romantic partner that there is something wrong with this artifact. They say they believe you, but what about their response makes you think they are just humoring you?
- J You lost a close friend while trying to convince them about the artifact. What happened? **Pull from the tower.**
- Q You fired a member of your staff for disagreeing with you about the artifact. What happened? **Pull from the tower.**
- K You tried to convince an important family member about the artifact; after a long interaction, they called you crazy, and are now ignoring all of your attempts to contact them. What happened? **Pull from the tower.**

Do not discard this card. Place it face-up where you can see it. If this is the fourth king that you have face-up, turn to the rules section titled "Four Kings" and follow the instructions there.

Four Kings:

If you have all four kings on the table in front of you, whatever supernatural force is behind the artifact is on the verge of breaking through into your reality.

You now have a choice to make:

Maybe you are too exhausted or too tired to keep fighting. Maybe you think you can bargain with it after it gets loose. Maybe, at this point, you want to welcome it into the world and join forces with it. Either way, you decide to give in and allow it to enter this world before you lose your sanity. If you choose this option, turn to the “It Is Loose!” section later in these rules and follow those instructions.

Or...

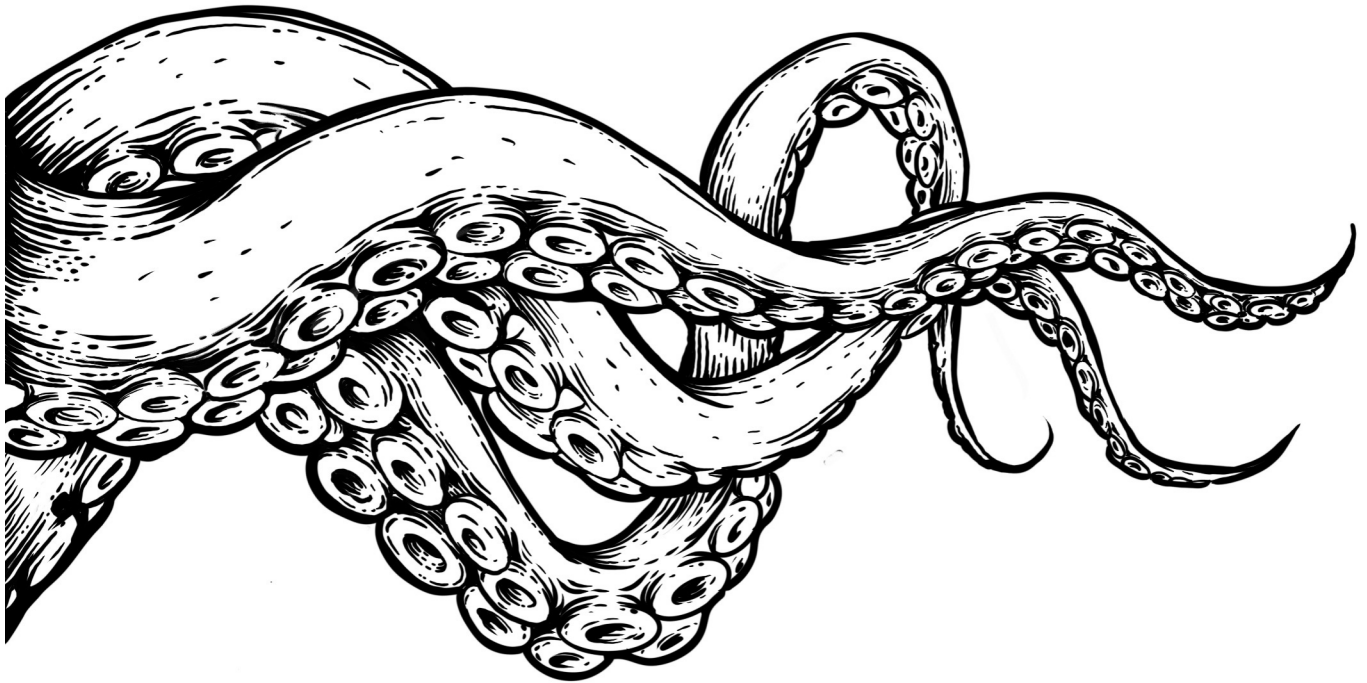
You have figured out some way to delay its entry into this world, and you are desperate to survive and preserve your own mind. Record a log explaining how you have set back its progress, and shuffle the joker into the remaining deck of face down cards. You have bought yourself a little more time, but at what cost? Continue playing the game as usual until you draw the joker card. When the joker is revealed, turn to “The Joker” section in the rules and follow the instructions there.



It Is Loose!

You couldn't bargain with it or even communicate with it. You were beneath its notice; just a vessel to help speed its entry into the world. When it entered your reality, everything changed.

Record one final log entry detailing what has happened since it arrived, and then the game is over.



You are unlikely to be remembered.

The Joker:

The extra time your clever trick bought you is running out. You can feel madness clawing at the edges of your mind, and whatever malevolent force is behind the artifact seems closer and closer to escaping.

Unable to bear this pressure any more, you pack the artifact back up in the crate that it arrived in, address it to the first museum whose address you can think of, and ship it out the very same day. You lock your notes and logs away and drink heavily, hoping to scour the memories from your mind, or at least keep the dreams at bay.

And it works. The artifact doesn't reappear in your office, and in a week, you can barely remember what it looked like or what happened while you had it in your possession.

Two weeks after that, you see an article online about a curator at the museum you sent it to who went insane. The article never mentions the artifact.

Record one final log entry about what happened to the other curator and how you feel about that, and then the game is over.



Debrief:

Take a moment. Breathe.

What happened? Did you destroy the cursed artifact? Were you able to hold on to your sanity in the face of an assault by a being you can barely comprehend?

Or, did your mind shatter? Are you now locked away in an asylum? Did the malevolent force behind the artifact find a way to escape into your reality? Knowing that these things might happen to you, did you inflict this fate on someone else?

You tried to warn others of the danger and get them on your side. You had hope that this could be done. Everything you knew about the situation you were in told you that it could be done.

That was a lie.

You have been telling a story during this game, but the story began before you drew your first card. The rules in this book are a story, and they were told to you by an unreliable narrator - the human capacity for hope, and the desire to survive against all odds.

There was never any hope of convincing others of the danger. No matter how many events you endured, your family and friends were never going to believe you. The best you could do was to cling to sanity long enough for help to come from an unknown source, and even that was unlikely. And what was your mysterious benefactor's motive? You will never know - you were so desperate to succeed.

You were doomed from the start. And somewhere inside you, you knew this, even as you were desperately clinging on to hope.

You may not have succeeded, or even survived, but the log of your final days lives on. What becomes of it now? You have created a new artifact, a warning of the dangers you faced. Perhaps it will pass into some other reality, attempting to warn them about what horrors befell yours. You could ensure that it lives on by sharing your logs and/or this game with others.

Or is it lost forever, locked away from future eyes, trapped in a devastated reality?

When you close this book, put down this game, what will become of all you have done here?

