

# CAGE OF SAND

*Luciella Elisabeth Scarlett*

*You wake with a disturbing sense of déjà vu.  
You encounter strangers you seem to already know.  
You sense that there is something important that you're forgetting.  
You can only hope you'll remember this.*

CW: violence, murder

## INTRODUCTION

*Cage of Sand* is a time loop horror game for one or more players. You will need a deck of tarot cards, some paper and something to write with.

## MODES OF PLAY

*Cage of Sand* can either be played solo or as a collaborative game where each player takes turns drawing cards. All players contribute to the Act 4 discussion and may propose responses to prompts. A few additional modes of play are included under “Game Variants” at the end of the text.

## CARD INTERPRETATION

*Cage of Sand* uses tarot cards as story prompts. When you are instructed to draw and interpret a card, you may use either the card’s meaning (if you know it), its name, its image or even just its general mood or colours.

## REWRITING THE RULES

The instructions are there to help you craft your story. If you find at any stage that your story is taking you in a different direction to those rules, ignore or change them as you please.

## SETUP

Select or draw a card to represent your Avatar in the game world. Decide on their name, pronouns and personality if they differ from your own.

Draw three cards to determine the setting: one for the place, one for the time of year and one for the circumstances that bring the characters together.

Draw ten more cards and check them over. These represent the entire cast of named characters present in your story. If any card dissatisfies you, remove and replace it.

Finally, set aside a sheet of paper for your Revelations and your tally sheet.

## 54321

Take a scrap of paper, label it “54321” and place it at the centre of the table. At the end of any particularly intense moment in the game, search your real-life surroundings for the following:

- 5 things you can see
- 4 things you can touch
- 3 things you can hear
- 2 things you can smell
- 1 thing you can taste

If you or any other player is feeling distressed, take a tea break.

## MULTI-PLAYER SAFETY TOOLS

If you are playing as a group, begin with a frank discussion of the themes of the game. Allow players to nominate subjects that they would like to be entirely off-limits (lines) as well as any that can be present but not detailed in the game (veils).

Take a piece of paper, write an “X” on it and place it at the centre of the table. If any player taps on the X-Card, whatever subject led to the card being used is immediately removed from the game. Other players may ask for clarification but are not entitled to an explanation.

To learn more about safe gaming, check out the TTRPG Safety Toolkit: <http://bit.ly/ttrpgsafetytoolkit>

## THE TIME LOOP

Begin with Act 1 and work your way through the instructions below.

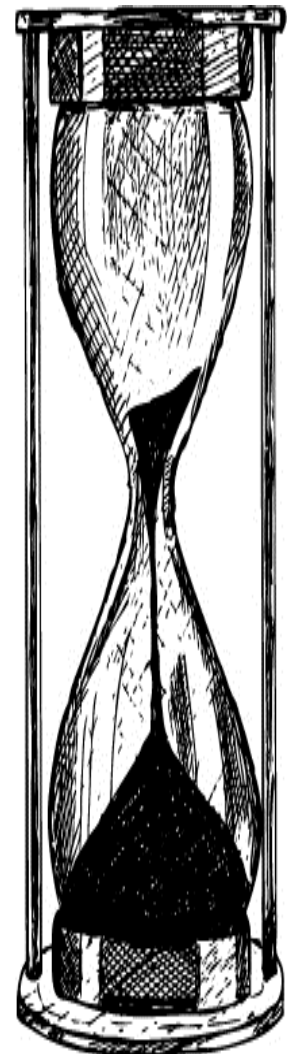
### ACT 1: AWAKENING

If this is the first loop:

- Your Avatar wakes from a nightmare that they cannot recall. Draw 3 cards, and for each describe either:
  - a) a minor detail of their surroundings that they perceive upon awakening; or
  - b) an insignificant task which forms part of their morning routine.
- Set those cards to one side. Do not shuffle them back into the deck.

If this is not the first loop:

- Consult your previous Act 1 cards to replay your Avatar’s morning.
- Your Avatar wakes with a strong sense of déjà vu. Decide which vague memory of the previous loop haunts them.
- For each tally mark, describe one unremarkable element of their surroundings or morning activities which seems either strangely repetitive or strangely out of place.





If three or more loops have occurred:

- Your Avatar changes their morning routine, or something changes for them. Replace a card and decide what happens instead.
- You may choose to impart any of the following upon your Avatar:
  - c) One or more of your Revelations.
  - d) Full or partial memories of a previous loop.
  - e) Awareness that time is repeating itself.
- Decide how this changes your Avatar's actions and/or the rules of the game.

## ACT 2: INTERACTIONS

During Act 2, your Avatar interacts with the other characters. Write down the details of each new character along with the card that represents them.

**Minor Interactions:** draw 3 character cards. For each, draw a prompt card to decide the topic of the conversation or nature of the interaction. Minor interactions reveal information about the world and/or the characters which may seem insignificant at first.

**Major Interactions:** draw 2 character cards. For each, draw a prompt card and interpret it as follows:

- **Swords:** the character makes an unreasonable request for your Avatar's help.
- **Wands:** the character makes a sacrifice for your Avatar's sake.
- **Cups:** your Avatar learns something about another relationship this character has.
- **Pentacles:** the character gives your Avatar a gift, or your Avatar gives them a gift.
- **Major Arcana:** a secret about the character is revealed.

Major interactions reveal important information, expose weaknesses or change the nature of the relationships between characters.

## INCITING EVENT

If this is the first loop, draw a card to determine the event that heralds the beginning of Act 3. This same event occurs in every loop.

- **Swords:** an argument.
- **Wands:** a letter or phone call.
- **Cups:** a weather event.
- **Pentacles:** discovery of a strange item.
- **Major Arcana:** a festival, ceremony or party.

*If your Avatar has begun to perceive the time loop:* how do this event impact them now? What changes in their behaviour now compared to their initial response? Replace this card if desired.



## ACT 3: THE TURN

Shuffle and draw 6 character cards for the corpses that your Avatar discovers. Reveal 1-3 cards at a time and for each discovery draw from your tarot deck to decide what your Avatar perceives and the conclusions they draw:

- **Swords:** the killer leaves obvious signs of the cause or time of death.
- **Wands:** the time or cause of death or the identity of the victim(s) is hidden.
- **Cups:** another character reacts strangely to the murder.
- **Pentacles:** something has been stolen from or left with the victim(s).
- **Major Arcana:** the murder is unusually gruesome, showy or ritualistic.

Time passes between each discovery. Decide on any key events that occur or any key actions that your Avatar takes.

## ACT 4: REVELATIONS

The loop closes. A disaster occurs. At the end of the loop all remaining characters, including your Avatar, die mysteriously.

*If this is the first loop:* draw 1 card to determine the LAST thing that your Avatar perceives or thinks before the curtain falls. Draw 1 card to determine the FIRST thing the rest of the world perceives – either how it is reported in the news or who discovers it and how. Set the cards to one side.

*If this is not the first loop:* reflect on the cards you drew previously. Did the same event reoccur, or has something changed? Replace either card if desired.

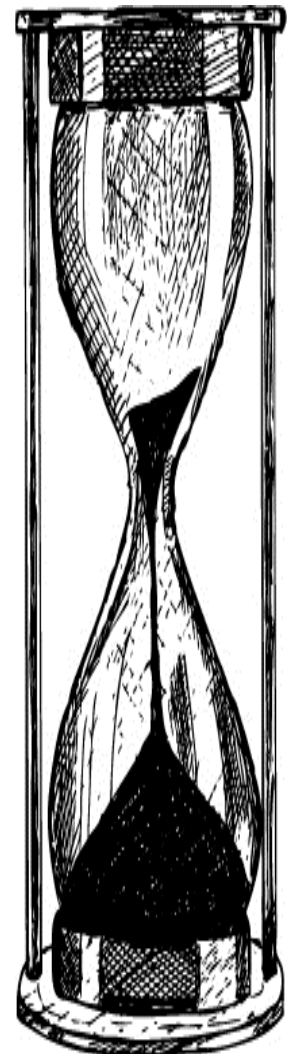
Reflect on the events that occurred and any patterns that have begun to emerge. Complete the 54321 exercise and then record one or more Revelations, as follows:

- Select a character. What do they know that your Avatar doesn't?
- Select 2-3 characters. Describe a bond they share.
- Who or what is responsible for the murders?
- Who or what is responsible for the time loop?
- Do any other characters perceive the time loop?
- What is the true nature of the disaster at the end of the time loop?
- Is it possible to end the time loop? What would it take?
- What does your Avatar desire most in this situation?

Clear your space and shuffle the character cards. Make a new mark on your tally sheet and return to Act 1.

## ENDING THE GAME

You can decide whether the time loop closes or if you simply abandon your Avatar to their fate. Write the conclusion of your story and shuffle all cards back into the deck. If you wish to keep your notes, fold them and place them somewhere safe. If not, burn them and erase these events from your mind.





## GAME VARIANTS

This section provides a few alternate ways to play the game. Each involves some extra complexity, so you are encouraged to play the standard mode at least once before trying these options.

### MULTIPLE AVATARS

Draw two or more cards during the Setup phase, each to represent a separate Avatar. Either respond to prompts by playing both/all Avatars at once, or switch between Avatars as you please.

### SWITCHING PERSPECTIVES

At the beginning of each Act 1, draw a card from your deck of characters and tell the story from their perspective.

### OBSERVER CHARACTERS

Each player takes on two roles: that of the Avatar(s) and that of an Observer. An Observer exists outside of the time loop but can influence the events that occur as if they were a player. Draw a card to represent the world the Observer(s) inhabit and a card to represent the Observer themselves (one per player). Decide on their name, pronouns and personality. Optionally, give them a title.

### GAME MASTER AND AVATAR CONTROLLER

One player acts as the Game Master (GM) and at least one player acts as an Avatar Controller (AC). Each AC has sole control over their own Avatar, and, optionally, their own Observer. They respond to prompts during Act 1 and decide on their Avatar's reactions to Acts 2 and 3. The GM responds to all other prompts and decides on the actions of the other characters. During Act 4, the GM writes Revelations which they do not share with the AC, instead hinting at them through the actions and words of the characters in the game world.



## CREDITS

*Cage of Sand* is copyright Luciella Elisabeth Scarlett, 2020. The hourglass graphics were created by Olha Turchenko and sourced from CreativeMarket.com. The Lines and Veils system was created by Ron Edwards and the X-Card was created by John Stavropoulos ([tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg](https://tinyurl.com/x-card-rpg)).

*Cage of Sand* was created for the Scraps Burgers anthology, targeted for release in late 2020: <https://www.scrapsburgers.com/>

*Cage of Sand* was created on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation. The author has committed at least 1% of her income to the First People of Australia as part of the #PayTheRent campaign.

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