House of Masks

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Version 0.3

The Eldest Player reads:

Together, we are going to craft an epic fantasy story about secrets, power, greed, betrayal, romance and ultimately tragedy. We will each control a character in the story, but our goal as players is always to create a climactic narrative even if it harms or hinders our characters.

(*Show the players the Castor sheet and point out Castor himself.*)

Far, far away, the self-proclaimed "God-King" Castor rules a vast empire. With his mighty armies and powerful sorcery, Castor has conquered the neighboring kingdoms. Who wishes to control Castor?

(*Freely discuss until one person is chosen to portray Castor.*)

1

Castor's Player reads:

In Castor's palace, the physical world and the spirit world meet. This means that the spirit of your subconscious can manifest itself. All the thoughts and desires you quell and push to the back of your mind instead become a separate entity of its own volition. Either the physical or the spiritual Aspect of a character can control their body at a given time.

(*On the picture of Castor, point out Pollux.*)

Castor's spirit Aspect is called Pollux. Whereas Castor is suave, cool and calculating, Pollux is rough, violent and angry. Who wishes to control Pollux?

(*Freely discuss until one person is chosen to portray Pollux.*)

2

Pollux's Player reads:

Castor's nation has long been at war with a neighboring land. This brutal, bloody conflict is now over, and Castor will seal the newfound peace by marrying the princess Inanna.

(*Show the players the picture of Inanna and Kur.*)

Inanna is a clever, subtle manipulator and a highly skilled sorceress. She has her own secret plans for Castor. Who wishes to play Inanna?

(*Discuss until someone is chosen to play Inanna.*)

3

Inanna's Player reads:

As with Castor, Inanna has an intangible duplicate that seizes control of her form while she remains near Castor's palace. Inanna's spiritual aspect is Kur, the lying serpent.

(*Point out Kur in the image.*)

Though Inanna is a clever political mastermind, she never speaks outright falsehoods. On the other hand, Kur only speaks lies. He can never tell the truth, while Inanna can never lie. Who wishes to play Kur?

(*Discuss until someone is chosen to play Kur.*)

4

Kur's Player reads:

The war between the two kingdoms had many casualties. Among them was the entire mermaid race of the neighboring sea. Thus, everyone in the palace is surprised when the mermaid witch Thalia arrives at Castor's palace, the night before the wedding ceremony.

(*Show Thalia's picture.*)

Who remains to play Thalia?

5

Thalia's Player reads:

As with the others, Thalia's mind is split in two. Thalia is always happy, celebratory and positive. If she ever shows signs of frustration, sadness or defeat, the her spirit Aspect Melpomene takes over. Melpomene is always morose, unhappy and depressed. If she ever seems pleased with anything, then Thalia takes over.

Who remains to play Melpomene?

(*Discuss until everyone has a character.*)

6

Melpomene's Player reads:

This game uses a set of cards. Not regular playing cards. These cards are more like a specialized Tarot deck. Each card has a name, an image and a symbolic meaning. Much of what we do in this game will consist of interpreting these cards. The symbols of the cards will act as guides for where the story will go.

You will often be called upon to interpret a card from the deck. When asked to interpret the card, think of the card's name, image and meaning as symbolic of what is going on int he narrative. Briefly present new fictional details that tie into the card's meaning or imagery, as a Tarot card's image might relate to a prophesied event.

(*Deal two cards from the deck to each pair of Aspects.*)

7

Castor's Player reads:

*E*veryone wants something from somebody else. These cards will tell us what your Aspect wants from the other characters.

There are a few restrictions on your desires:
1. Each Aspect of a character wants something from a different character. Inanna's two aspects cannot both desire something from Castor. One must want something from Castor and one from Thalia.
2. One wants something external and concrete (*such as a magic artifact, wealth, political power*) while the other wants something intangible, internal and emotional (*e.g., fear, respect, revenge, love, etc.*)

Discuss with your character's other Aspect, and decide which card is which. Then invent an interesting, dramatic desire based on the card. (*Wait and discuss until everyone has made a desire based on their card.*) *8*

Pollux's Player reads:

*B*ut you can't always get what you want. Someone will get in your way. Each of the three main characters should have two desires directed at them. One of these is completely unacceptable to your Aspect.

You will choose one desire to refuse, while your fellow Aspect refuses the other. Discuss with the other Aspect's player and decide which desire you'll be opposing and which desire they will be opposing.

(*Wait until this is sorted out. Shuffle the desire cards back into the deck.*) *9*

Inanna's Player reads:

*T*he game consists of a series of scenes like a movie, or chapters like a novel. Three cards call Boons govern the structure of a scene. The person with the Boon of Beginnings controls the start of a scene. The holder of the Boon of Endings controls how a scene resolves. The owner of the World's Boon makes sure we're focused on the details of a scene, making the world come alive.

(*Hand out the Boon of Beginnings to Melpomene, the Boon of Endings to Pollux and the World's Boon to Kur.*) *10*

Kur's Player reads:

*T*he Boon of Beginnings and Boon of Endings work identically. When the time is appropriate, the holder draws a card and asks another player to interpret it. That player describes briefly how the scene opens or closes according to the card. They don't describe more than a sentence or two, and make sure that the description tells us how the action of the scene will go.

Once this interpretation has been given, the Boon holder points at another player and asks for a different interpretation. The second interpreter can modify or expand on the first interpretation, but must change at least one key detail. (They can change everything, if they so desire.) The Boon holder then decides which of these interpretations is true and gives the Boon to the author of that interpretation. *11*

Thalia's Player reads:

Each scene begins with an interpretation for the Boon of Beginnings. But thereafter, the players have freedom to roleplay and narrate as they see best for the story. Roleplay your character with gusto and try to move the story into dramatic situations. During a scene, you are free to create minor NPCs and setting details as are appropriate for the narrative to continue. The holder of the World's Boon will be watching to see places where additional details will make the game more vivid

If the scene ever starts to drag on and be aimless, then the holder of the Boon of Endings should draw a card to decide how the scene resolves. The Boon of Endings can also be used to decide how a chancy or uncertain action turns out for the character. In both cases, the boon holder decides on an interpretation and then the cene is briefly roleplayed from there until you can wrap the scene up.

12

Melpomene's Player reads:

During a scene, each character will be controlled by one of their two Aspects. Each personality controls the earthly vessel in sequence, though it is unclear to other characters who is in control. Each character has specific triggers governing when the Aspects must switch control. (If a single Aspect is in control for an entire scene, then the other Aspect will be in control to start the next scene.)

Each character is a highly skilled spellcaster, and proximity to Castor's palace increases their spellcasting ability. Consequently, you each have a card representing your magic. Whenever you are interpreting a card or asking others to interpret a card, you can substitute your magic card for the card from the deck. In this case, the interpretation(s) must involve narration of your character casting a magic spell themed along with the card.

13

Now we are ready to play.

Shuffle the Fate deck.

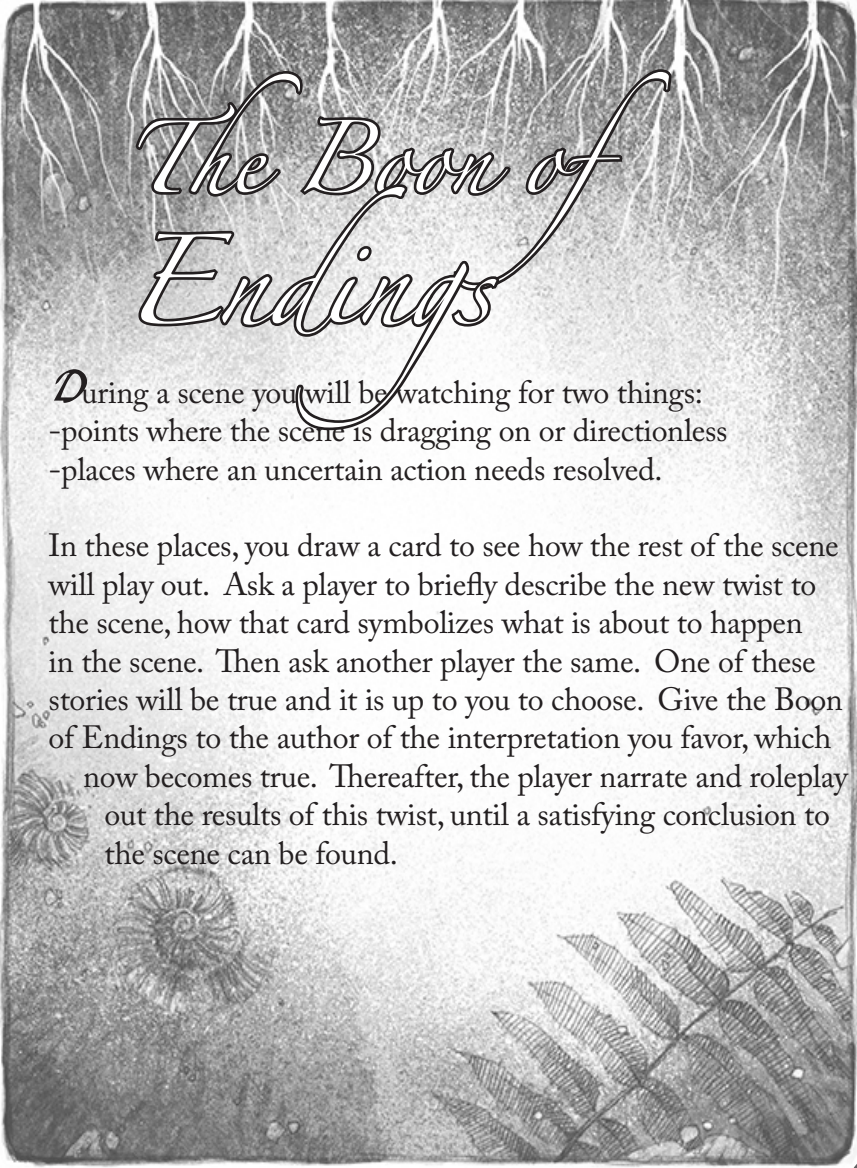Have Melpomene draw a card and begin the first scene.

14

The Boon of Beginnings

You are in charge of deciding how a scene begins. At the start of a scene, you draw a card from the deck. Choose a player (preferably one you haven't heard from recently) to interpret the card to say how the scene begins. They should limit their initial narration to a sentence or two that tells us where and when the scene is, who is there and what is happening, based on the card drawn.

Then you ask a second player for an alternate interpretation. Now you choose between these two possible scenes, based on whatever you think will make the best story. Hand the Boon of Beginnings to the player who authored that interpretation. Play out the scene from there.
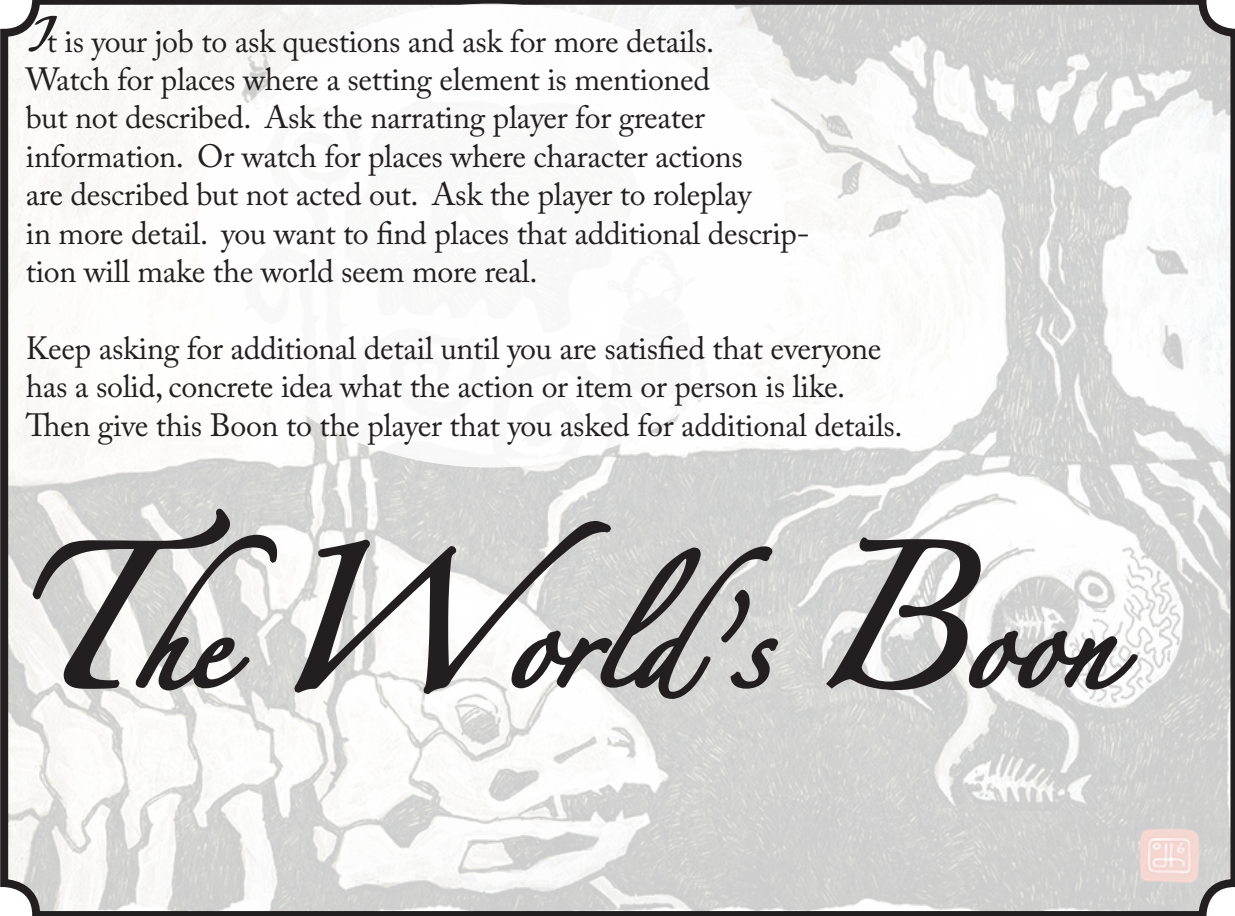
The Boon of Endings

During a scene you will be watching for two things:
-points where the scene is dragging on or directionless
-places where an uncertain action needs resolved.

In these places, you draw a card to see how the rest of the scene will play out. Ask a player to briefly describe the new twist to the scene, how that card symbolizes what is about to happen in the scene. Then ask another player the same. One of these stories will be true and it is up to you to choose. Give the Boon of Endings to the author of the interpretation you favor, which now becomes true. Thereafter, the player narrate and roleplay out the results of this twist, until a satisfying conclusion to the scene can be found.

It is your job to ask questions and ask for more details. Watch for places where a setting element is mentioned but not described. Ask the narrating player for greater information. Or watch for places where character actions are described but not acted out. Ask the player to roleplay in more detail. you want to find places that additional description will make the world seem more real.

Keep asking for additional detail until you are satisfied that everyone has a solid, concrete idea what the action or item or person is like. Then give this Boon to the player that you asked for additional details.

The World's Boon

What if no one volunteers?

Some players may wish to hear more about other characters before choosing. This is no problem, as long as characters are chosen before you begin play. Simply continue reading until someone volunteers to play a specific character, then let then read from there until the next player volunteers, etc.

1

Setting

Setting details iin this game are deliberately sparse. You won't find names of the kingdoms or information about their size or trade goods or anything. Partly this is to create a deliberate, fairy tale atmosphere where the kingdoms can be any two nations. Partly this is also to give you the player maximum narrative control. As you play, you are free to introduce new setting details. (The holder of The World's Boon should pay particular attention for places the setting could be fleshed out.) Try to build o the details others add, and never contradict what they establish about the setting.

3

Aspect Confusion:

It's easy to get confused between Aspects and characters and players. Players are real world people sitting down with you to play this game. Each player controls one Aspect of a character, not an entire character., Each character has a physical Aspect, whose name is known to the other characters (Castor, Inanna, Thalia). Each also has a spiritual Aspect, which can take control of their physical form. To other characters, it is impossible to tell which Aspect is in charge (barring sorcerous methods), even though it is clear to you the player.

If ou're unclear if a narration affects both aspects or just one (e.g., "Castor is driven insane"), ask for clarification (perhaps Castor is insane but Pollux remains sane. Perhaps both are driven insane.)

2

What if we don't have six players?

Sometimes you just can't muster a full group. As long as you have at least three players, you should be able to play (though it should work best with 6.)

If you have less than six players, one or more players will pick two Aspects. No player is allowed to play both Aspects of a single character. You're also not allowed to be the Aspect of one character denying the desire of your other character's Aspect.

Boons are on a per-player basis, not a per-character basis. You can't ask yourself for an interpretation or offer two opposed interpretations, even if you're playing two or more characters.

5

Kur never lies?

Each character has two Aspects, and two players controlling those Aspects. Each character also has rules for 'switching' who is in control. When Inanna tells a lie, or when Kur tells the truth, control of Inanna's physical form changes hands from one player to another. These switches may happen repeatedly in a scene, or they may happen rarely.

If a player acts on the trigger for their switch, you can call for a change of control, even if you are uninvolved in the scene. There's no harm or penalty for switching... it's like tag-team roleplaying. "Hey, can you take over this scene for a while and deceive Castor for me?"

4

Tone and Explicitness

As with many GMless roleplaying games, players have a large degree of freedom to introduce new plot elements. Consequently, the story sometimes takes a turn that may make certain players uncomfortable. As a stupid American, I'm more comfortable with depictions of violence than I am with depictions of violence than I am with depictions of sexuality (and depictions of sexual violence are particularly worrying to me.)

If play ever seems to be moving in an uncomfortable direction, then you should call for a timeout. Discuss the manner in as calm and frank a manner as you can manage. If someone tells you that your narration is making them uncomfortable, be gracious and work to modify it to be more acceptable. Even if uncomfortable topics must be addressed, they don't need to be seen 'onscreen' or described in great detail.

7

Alternate Tarots

House of Masks is designed to work with a specific deck of specialized Tarot-like cards. I didn't want to work with real-world Tarot cards, as they come with their own baggage that was not entirely desirable. (I also wanted to be able to customize the deck as needed for gameplay purposes.)

Players could easily take the game and use a regular deck of Tarot cards with it. Or get a different custom 'art' Tarot deck and use that instead. The imagery of the deck you choose will influence the story that you are telling, so try to find one that suggests interesting new narrative possibilities.

6

Why are Desires so important?

Desire drive play forward. Everybody wants something, and no one can just have what they want. Each needs a different PC to achieve their goals. This creates a tangled, shifting web of loyalties that makes for a shifting back and forth in gameplay. But to make the game work, you need to be working to fulfill your Aspect's desires, and shutting down another character's desires... but at the same time accept that you are likely to fail or be thwarted in your aims. Pursue your goals as fully as possible, but don't get so invested that you are unhappy when your character dies a tragic death, none the richer for all their striving.

9

Player conflict?

Even though the characters are in conflict with one another, the players should never be. All the players have one single, unified goal: to tell a dramatic story full of twists and turns and drama and action. My character may wish to kill yours, but that implies no animosity between you and me.

8

Player Disagreement

If ever two players cannot agree on how to resolve a scene, the player with the Boon of endings can step in and ask for interpretations on how to resolve the scene (from the conflicting players or from others). Don't hold a grudge if your ideas are passed over or abandoned: you'll likely find that even ideas that were initially rejected get reincorporated later on into the game.

11

Boons and Wallflowers:

Boons are a great way to keep people involved in a scene even when their character is not present. Any time you invoke your Boon, you're free to ask any player in the game.

Now, it's likely that in any game, some players will be more vocal and active and some will be more reserved and shy. Boons are useful to make sure that you are getting input from players who are typically overlooked. Find the shyest player at the table, who hasn't spoken up all scene, and ask for their input. Sometimes they'll be hiding a great idea for what happens next.

10

Who controls NPCs?

NPCs are under everyone's control. The only important characters are the six Aspects of the three PCs. All other characters are secondary, and so they cn be shuffled around as needed. If you want, you can recruit a player currently uninvolved to roleplay an NPC. Different players might wind up playing the same NPC over the course of a game.

If there's disagreement on how an NPC should act, then that may be a reasonable time for a Boon to be invoked and differing interpretations selected.

13

When are we done?

Some GMless games have a defined 'endgame' mechanic. The game itself tells you when you're finished. ***House of Masks*** doesn't have any mechanic like this. The narrative is free to flow as desired, but I think that you'll find the game spiralling in more and more chaotic directions until something finally passes a tipping point and then settles down. As you approach the end of your gaming session, be on the lookout for ways to resolve the situation entirely. My sense is that the game will naturally resolve itself with relatively little pushing, but it is still the responsibility of th eplayers to wrap everything up. (You can lways leave an opening for a sequel story, whether or not you plan on playing again.)

12

What if the deck runs out?

Just wait until there are no more cards in the deck, then reshuffle the discard pile into a new draw deck. Simple as can be.

14