

House of Hades

"We must go over the bridge and let it fall behind us, and if it will not fall, then let it burn."
--*The Dream and the Underworld*

It was, perhaps, inevitable: The world was murdered. And we now live in the ruins of that murder, its shadows affecting our every action and interaction. We continue to live, though our world is a grave. Sometimes, though, someone has a vision of something different, a clue to the unasked question, "*How was it the world was killed?*" This vision opens a door into the House of *Fear*, the House of *Dust*---the House of Hades.

And once you've been a guest in that House, well, things will never be the same again...

At the Beginning of Things

To play House of Hades, besides this book you'll need:

- 2-6 friends
- Three sets of double-six domino sets
- Pencils and paper
- One of the players to agree to be the Oracle of Hades. He won't make a character, but will play the part of the murdered world.

This game, while not necessarily *grim*, is darker in tone than many, and has the potential to become very bleak if the players decide to take it in that direction. It's a good idea for everyone to be clear on this before sitting down to play. Death is a strong theme, and if a player ever feels uncomfortable with how events in the game are unfolding, they should speak up, and the group can decide how to proceed.

Murdered World

The world is a vast grave. Cities are rotted and charred. Intimate ghosts crave warmth, bones clatter in dreams and darkness. The dead do not cast shadows, no matter how bright the moon. Fires are seen at night and, in the day, strange palls of smoke taint the sky. Wild dogs, worse than wolves, roam the ruins and wasted lands.

Yet still there are enclaves of the living---laughing, loving, and dying, all encompassed by the grave. Communities cling in the cracks and crevices, connected by lonely trucks and horse-drawn wagons bumping down broken highways and overgrown roads. Everything they do, their livelihoods, the root of all actions and interactions is in service to the grave. Death has become the meaning of Life, and none know when the end will come.

The Kind Ones

This is what the Quick call the Dead, hoping to avoid their attentions. A futile wish, at best. Since the world was murdered, the Kind Ones have come ever closer. Once they existed only in rumor and story and the visions of madmen. Now you hear them in the wind at night, and see them at twilight, standing, watching---always watching. They never speak.

Sometimes, for unknown reasons, the Kind Ones take someone away, or do something worse to them. This has become much more common. They may sometimes be appeased (a dangerous game at best), but only a Vagabond can drive them away.

Vagabonds

Those who have had a Vision and crossed the threshold of the House of Hades are no longer who they were. They are marked, inside and out, and must leave their life behind. The Kind Ones are drawn to them, as are the quick, as they walk in two worlds at once---such are always the locus both of discord and reconciliation.

They also recognize each other. One vagabond will always know when they are in the presence of another, and it's common for them to join forces for awhile, drifting in and out of each other's lives. Though profoundly connected, vagabonds are human, and it's never a given that they will like one another. They may well come to share nothing but a call to vision and and a raw hatred of each other.

The world was murdered, no one knows how, but the vagabond has discovered a clue in the core of his vision. This is the key for the door of the House of Hades. Using that key, he can enter the House and try to change things. Entering the House is fraught with danger. A visit there may help the vagabond in the pursuit of the meaning of his vision, but it may also confuse, damage, and destroy it.

The Quick

The occupations of the grave are many and varied. Some enclaves specialize in certain aspects, some in others, and thus is trade generated, marriages discussed, and knowledge shared. Before a vagabond had her vision, she worked the grave like all those around her. What she did, how and where she did it, and those she knew became the raw material of her vision, and the clarification of those elements will lead the way to the chance of its realization.

Occupations

You can choose any occupation you like. Each one is presented in the same format: Title of the occupation; four lines describing it; 10 places he might be found; 10 things he might have; 10 actions he might perform; and 10 people with whom he might have a relationship. The five occupations listed below are by no means all that exist; they will, however, give you a good start.

For each of the four character *elements* (places, things, actions, people), circle five of the ten possible *symbols* and write the number one next to each. Your character can be any age, gender, or ethnicity you desire. Give him a name, set his Vision score to one, and you're ready to go!

Grave Digger

*You turn soil to make the Grave.
Your breath steams in cold air.
Your shoulders ache, and
Your shovel scrapes stone.*

Places

Graveside; Five yards back from the ceremony; Digger's hut; Six feet below; Mending shed; Beneath the sky; Handle grove; Ironsmith's; Nearby bar; Bathing room

Things

Shovel; Sturdy boots; Copper flask; Leather wallet; Tarnished silver mirror; Tattered book on soil composition; Whetstone and polishing cloth; Notched hand-axe; Woolen cap; Leather coat

Actions

Digging; Lifting; Heaving; Breaking; Listening; Enduring; Estimating; Drinking; Chopping; Mending

People

Mother; Father; Sister; Brother; Spouse; Child; Lover; Friend; Enemy; Teacher

Grave Robber

*You seek to profit from the Grave.
Your strong fingers move quickly.
Your belly is empty, and
Your mind weighs everything you see.*

Places

Six feet down; Nearby bar; Among the mourners; The marketplace; The next enclave; The fence's; The estranged survivor's home; Smelting kiln; A cave; Abandoned building

Things

Shovel; Gloves; Leather bag; Perfume; Dark clothes; A small treasure; Parchment; Scale; Quiet shoes; Stout knife

Actions

Listening; Working in the dark; Digging; Lifting; Negotiating; Running; Assaying; Disguising; Sneaking; Hiding

People

Mother; Father; Sister; Brother; Spouse; Child; Lover; Friend; Enemy; Teacher

Mourner

*You suffer in the wake of loss.
Your voice rises over the world.
Your eyes are blurred by tears, and
You hold fierce sorrows, but briefly.*

Places

Before the grave; With the body; In the procession; In the house of the bereaved; A solitary field; Deep in the woods; In the rain; In a coffee house; With friends; In the marketplace

Things

Money; Head covering; Something torn; A piece of folded paper; Dress gloves; A dark suit or dress; A timepiece; A candle; An overcoat; A handkerchief

Actions

Speaking; Wailing; Embracing; Standing; Walking; Emoting; Kneeling; Laughing; Gossiping; Preparing

People

Mother; Father; Sister; Brother; Spouse; Child; Lover; Friend; Enemy; Teacher

Blossomer

You cut flowers to decorate the Grave.

Your gifts bind memory to color.

Your eyes are heavy, and

Your shears cut quickly in silence

Places

The garden plot; The seeding house; Atop the grave; In the home of the bereaved; At the knife sharpener's; The marketplace; In the fields; Out in the sun; Near water; In the woods

Things

A hoe; Sharp shears; A water vessel; Gloves; Twine; Wire; A wide-brimmed hat; Garden boots; A flower-identification handbook

Actions

Bending low; Arranging; Cutting; Watching the sky; Digging; Binding; Kneeling; Walking; Paying attention; Cultivating

People

Mother; Father; Sister; Brother; Spouse; Child; Lover; Friend; Enemy; Teacher

Ritual Guard

You keep watch to protect the Grave.

Your presence holds all fears at bay.

Your rifle is heavy, and

Your breath steams in the air.

Places

10 yards from the grave; In the procession; At the guardhouse; A nearby bar; The armory; Beneath the night sky; The tobacconist's; At the theater; The tailor's; The bathhouse

Things

Rifle; Uniform; A clasp knife; A tin flask; Boot polish; Cigarettes; A love letter; A rain slicker; A book of questionable poetry; A picture of someone

Actions

Standing; Shooting; Seducing; Enduring; Drinking; Assessing; Staying awake; Singing; Carousing; Focusing

People

Mother; Father; Sister; Brother; Spouse; Child; Lover; Friend; Enemy; Teacher

The Vision

Your vision is fundamental to your new life as a vagabond. When it found you, you were drawn into the House of Hades and everything else faded away. For a moment you understood, in the greatest of clarity, one part of the answer to the question of how the world was murdered. Unfortunately, a moment later you stepped back across the threshold, and the clear light of the vision compacted to a smoldering core inside your heart. It is at that moment you became a Vagabond, both physically and spiritually.

Now you are driven to *clarify* and *realize* your vision. Your ability to do this will, in large part, be determined by your vision score. At the beginning of the game it's set at one, and it will rise and fall as you succeed and fail in conflicts, especially in the House of Hades. The process of clarification (explained a bit later) will eventually leave you with one symbol remaining in each of your four elements. At that point, your vision is ready to realized, the form it will take suggested by the four remaining symbols and your experiences during play.

Conflict amongst the Quick

Conflicts are resolved using dominoes, hereafter referred to as Bones. Three sets of double-six bones should be gathered, face-down, in a pile called the Boneyard. All players should participate in shuffling them before play begins. Once the boneyard is set, you and the other players each draw three bones as your hand. You will use this hand for the rest of the game, discarding used bones and drawing new ones as necessary. The Oracle should draw a hand equal to twice the number of players plus one. These hands should not be revealed to the other players. In every case, your goal is to beat the Oracle's final total, determined by adding up the pips on all the bones played in your thread.

Stakes

Both players and Oracle can call for a conflict. When a conflict is called, you state your state your desired outcome. This is always from the point of view of the *player*, never the Oracle. The Oracle can offer amendments, but once your desire is set, the Oracle will offer the consequences of failure. This time you can offer amendments, but once the consequences have been decided upon, the stakes are set.

Play

- State which of your symbols you feel are relevant to resolving the conflict
 - Each symbol you connect to the conflict grants you an extra bone, drawn from the boneyard
 - The Oracle has final say on whether or not a given symbol is relevant
 - The Oracle also has setting symbols to use for extra bones; their relevancy must be agreed to by the players
- Whoever called the conflict plays first
- You can play as many bones as you like, as long as you can connect them in a line, called your *thread*, by matching equivalent numbers from one side of the bone to each other. Even a single bone is considered a thread.
- Once the first player has laid as many bones as they want, their opponent can do the same

- You can help another player at any point in his turn by declaring your aid and attaching one of your bones perpendicularly on their thread to an equivalent number
- Play continues until one side can either no longer play, or decides to relent
- The winner is the player with the highest total score
- If you win, your desire is realized, and you can increase the number of one of the symbols used in the conflict by one point
- If you lose, the consequences are realized, and you lower one of your relevant symbols by one point.
 - If a symbol is reduced below zero, cross it off on your character sheet
- When play is done, all used bones are returned to boneyard, and all participants refresh or reduce their hands to their starting totals (three for players and seven for the Oracle)

The Dead

The dead, properly called, are a vast and terrible multitude. The House of Hades is their dwelling place, but they drift into the world drawn drawn by the warmth of blood, the turmoil of emotions, and the presence of vagabonds.

Shapes and Shadows

The dead are also multiform. Whatever *eidola* they assume, they aren't bound by physics or logic, save that they only appear at night, make no sound, and they never speak outside of the House of Hades. Possible manifestations:

- A gaunt horse with black eyes and heaving flanks
- A shadowy group of mummified figures with hot points of white light for eyes
- A flayed corpse, jerking spasmodically on the ground
- Your dead relative
- An old woman with worms in her mouth
- A writhing mass of glistening centipedes
- A naked, crawling child whose twisted head gapes at the sky
- A fearful presence in the dark corner
- A roiling cloud, turbulent with weeping faces

House of Hades

The House of Hades is a perilous place. Opportunity, desire, failure, and regret all mingle there in awful, silent, hungry anticipation. It is a House of Fear, a House of Dust. Here the dead throng---drifting, lurching, moving, still, not speaking, all gathered in a vast and shadowy place. However, they turn their full attention to any of the living who arrive. The copper warmth of blood stirs them, and they sway and crowd and leap about. A growing murmur is heard, the rising of a wind of whispering voices.

Always something steps forward, the Oracle of Hades for this current moment. This too is one of the dead, but filled with a horrible, intimate vitality. It may look like someone you know; it may look like nothing you've ever seen; but it will know you as only the dead can know the living.

Now you must speak what you desire, quickly and firmly. The Oracle may agree, or may offer a different outcome. Argue if you must, but do not be over sure, for the outcome is never certain. Once agreement is reached, do not tarry. Though your vision grants you entrance to this House, it is not a place for the living to dwell.

Conflict in the House of Hades

Conflict here is resolved using bones as well. However, symbols *cannot* be used to add bones to your hand by either you or the Oracle. Instead, as play progresses, at any time you may spend your vision score to buy more bones for your hand, on a one-for-one basis. This option is not available to the Oracle.

Stakes

Stakes are set as for conflicts amongst the quick. However, as part of the process of play, desire and consequence shift and change from round to round. Your initial desire is a statement of how you want to use the nature of the House of Hades to change reality, right now. There are no clear boundaries to this, though the more profound the change, the greater the potential consequences.

Play

- You and the Oracle both choose two bones from your hand and place them face-down in front of you.

Round One

- The Oracle either *relents* or *counters*
 - Relent: Both of turn over your bones; high score wins
 - Counter: The Oracle amends your desire.
- Both of you flip one bone

Round Two

- You either relent or counter
 - Relent: Both of you flip your remaining bones. High score wins
 - Counter: You amend the Oracle's previous amendment
 - Both of you flip your remaining bones
 - Both of you draw another bone from the boneyard
 - You place yours face-down *without* looking at it
 - The Oracle can look at her bone, and can decide to place it OR a bone from her hand face-down. If she places a bone from her hand, the drawn bone replaces it in her hand

Round Three

- The Oracle either relents or counters
 - Relent: Both of you flip your remaining bone; high score wins
 - Counter: The Oracle offers a *completely different* desire; the consequences remain the same
- Both of you flip your remaining bones
 - The Oracle draws a bone from the boneyard and places it face-down
 - You draw no bones
 - You lose a vision point

Final Round

- You relent or counter
 - Relent: The Oracle flips her remaining bone; high score wins
 - Counter: You desperately restate your original desire
 - The Oracle flips her final bone
 - You draw no bones
 - You lose two vision points
 - High score wins

Note: Whatever the *most current desire* is, whether set by you or the Oracle, becomes the desire you are trying to realize.

Outcomes

There are three possible levels of outcome to conflict in the House of Hades. The level of any given conflict is determined by your final score compared to that of the Oracle.

Agreement

You beat the Oracle by six or more points. The most current desire is realized.

Fallout

You beat the Oracle, but by less than six points. The most current desire is realized, but something harms one of those listed in your People element. You choose the person, and the Oracle narrates the harm, which is usually thematically related to the real-life conflict for which you entered the House of Hades to begin with. The harm they suffer is in the here-and-now. You watch it happen, but can do nothing to prevent it, and therefore lose one vision point. If you ever cross that person off your list, they will know the harm they suffered was your fault.

Refusal

The Oracle ties or beats your score. The consequences occur as originally stated. You lose two vision points.

Vision Redux

As a Vagabond, your whole purpose is to figure out the meaning of your original Vision. This, however, does not change the fact of your essential humanity, with all of its complexity. You will have to make hard decisions, both to realize your vision and just to survive. You will make friends and enemies along the way; normal people, while not necessarily hostile to vagabonds, view them with both fascination and suspicion. They will always want something from you.

So will the Kind Ones. They are drawn to the warm scent of blood emanating from all the Quick, but you, vital with vision, call to them like nothing else. You can never predict their actions, but you are the only ones who can drive them off, returning them unwilling to the House of Hades.

All of the things listed beneath your elements of Places, Things, Actions, and People are potential symbols leading to the realization of your vision. As you win and lose conflicts connected to those symbols, their numbers, or *potency* will increase and decrease. The net loss or gain at the end of a session will affect your vision score. Eventually you will be left with only

one symbol for each element, and these will point the way to the realization of your vision. Drive for that realization in all your actions and interactions.

Clarification

The process of clarification is as follows:

- For every conflict you *win* in the world, choose one of the connected symbols and increase it by one point
- For every conflict you *lose* in the world, choose one of the connected symbols and decrease it by one point
- At the end of a session of play, total your net gain or loss of points from ALL conflicts. Raise or lower your vision score by that many points.
- At the end of a session of play, cross off one of the symbols, from any element, that was never raised or lowered during play

Once clarification is achieved, you must reflect on the meaning of the remaining symbols---what was one of means by which the world was murdered, and what does your vision tell you you can do to make that part whole again? The realization of all visions should inspire the living to look up from the grave, at the here and now.

Some possibilities:

- A garden built in the heart of an enclave as a place for the elderly to rest
- The founding of a singing academy whose repertoire is focused on the beauty of the existing world
- A wayhouse built on a lonely stretch of road as a place for travelers to safely rest
- The invention of a way to harness sunlight as power in an enclave clinging to life in the barren wilderness
- The creation of a light source that keeps the Kind Ones at bay

Once your vision is realized, your character is retired from play, remaining involved with its realization. They enter into the slow rebirth of the world forever, and may well be encountered in later play. If your vision score ever becomes less than zero, your spirit is broken, and your character is retired from play.

Whispers in the House of Darkness

As the Oracle, you speak for the House of Hades. Here, however, is a secret: The House touches the world at *all points*; this is how the dead enter the world, and the living enter the House of Hades. The House is the soul of the murdered world, and though it is your job to push the vagabonds, press them hard at all points, it is in the service of their vision, which is born from a potentiality in the heart of one of the living. You will force them to clarify their vision or die in the process, joining the throngs of the dead who, silent and hungry, wait for life.

Elements of Tone

Just as vagabonds have elements with attached symbols to use as a resource during conflict, so to do you have elements with attached symbols to reflect the tone of setting for that session. You may decide to make a new list for each session, or reuse one list over the course of several sessions. Every session, you set the initial scene of action. This is reflected in your initial choice of four symbols, one from each element. Those four will give you a framework to describe the surroundings and situation at the beginning of play.

Make your list in the same format as the occupations: Places, Things, Actions, and People. Then list five symbols below each, indicative of a particular tone you'd like for that session. This doesn't need to (and probably shouldn't be) rigidly defined. All of your symbols also start at one, and are increased and decreased just like the players'.

A possible table of Elements:

Places: A ruined house; A dark alley in a prosperous enclave; The deep woods; A narrow, winding cave; The charred shell of an ancient city

Things: An old truck; A pack of wild dogs; An ancient statue; A wedding dress; The ruined hulk of an enormous, enigmatic machine

Actions: Running; Hiding; Spying; Weeping; Sharing

People: An old couple tending an orchard at the edge of the forest; A mechanic who runs a shop in a prosperous enclave; A young woman, hungry for love; A boy, angry at the world; An enigmatic figure said to waylay those on the road at night

I decide to start with: The deep woods; A pack of wild dogs; Running; An old couple tending an orchard at the edge of the forest. This pretty clearly sets the stage for the opening conflict.

Remember constantly apply pressure to the players, force them to make decisions, maneuver them into situations where it at least seems like the only option is to enter the House of Hades. But also remember: No one knows what direction events are going to take you, vagabonds and Oracle alike. If a vagabond is successful in the House of Hades, his desire can change the world in subtly fundamental ways, wreaking havoc with any hint of prepared "story". Instead, watch what happens, pay close attention to what the players think and do, as well as what they fail to notice. Remain flexible and follow their lead.

They're searching for their vision. Make them find it.

Much of the inspiration for this game, as well as some language and themes, came from the profoundly insightful book, The Dream and the Underworld, by James Hillman