MONSTERS' GUIDE
TO COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

For Dungeon of the Mad Mage Level 18: Vanrakdoom

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About this Guide

Combat is one of three main pillars of the game, apart from exploration and interaction. And it takes a lot of time to prepare and run good combat encounter. The goal of this guide is to help DMs who are running Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage adventure to get better understanding on how to run combat encounters, how to make them coherent, memorable and fun!

Preparation process divided into 3 steps:
1. Determining Encounter Difficulty.
2. Determining Surprise.
3. Determining Creatures' Tactics.

First step will give you general understanding about how difficult combat encounter might be for your player characters. Each level of WDMM is designed for PCs of particular level. I use a guideline from Encounter Building section in Xanathar's Guide to Everything (XGE, p. 88) to evaluate how many PCs of corresponding level should be in the party to overcome the encounter. Math is simple. If you have the same number of PCs – it is good fight. If you have more PCs (2/3 of number of PCs is needed) – they will pass it with ease, but it still be challenging. If you have less PCs (3/2 of number of PCs is needed) – encounter will be hard, but still winnable. Also, I put notes about combat difficulty, which I think is important. Depending on this information you can adjust the encounter for your group, skip it entirely or think about possible defeat consequences.

Second step is always up to DM, so you should be prepared in advance. General guidance is written in Player's Handbook (PHB, p. 189). Basically, you should determine who is surprised when the first round of combat begins. To do so, you should know answers for these questions:
Are creatures trying to hide? They roll Stealth. Are they successful? Compare results to PC's Passive Perception score.
Are PCs trying to hide? They roll Stealth. Are they successful? Compare results to creatures' Passive Perception score.

Based on the results you will understand who will take actions in the first round of combat and who will not. I also put my notes for the encounters when circumstances may differ from the standard procedure.

Third step will help you to understand how to use creatures in combat. Where should they stand? What course of action will be most efficient and logical depending on the lore? Who do they need to attack? Will they fight to the death? Will they flee or surrender? I also put more detailed explanation on how some creature's abilities and traits work.

Abbreviations and Font Styles

The following abbreviations are used throughout this guide:

PHB = Player's Handbook

MM = Monster Manual

DMG = Dungeon Master's Guide

SCAG = Sword Coast Adventurer's Guide

XGE = Xanathar's Guide to Everything

VGTM = Volo's Guide to Monsters

MTOF = Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes

WDMM = Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage

WDH = Waterdeep: Dragon Heist

PC(s) = Player Character(s)

AC = Armor Class

DC = Difficulty Class

CR = Challenge Rating

hp = hit points

gp = gold piece(s)

AoE = Area of Effect

RAW = Rules as Written

The following font styles are used throughout this guide:

Bold style is used for the creatures' names

Italic style is used for the Spells.

Bold Italic style is used for the Abilities and Traits.

Level 18: Vanrakdoom

This level is designed for four 15th level PCs. If you have more than 4 PCs, you can add more creatures or maximize their hp to make combat encounters more challenging. If you have less PCs, you can decrease the number of creatures in combat or use less optimal tactics. All creatures in Encounter Difficulty section are compared to 15th level PCs.

Area 7a

Encounter Difficulty
1 **Cult Fanatic** (CR 2, MM, p. 345) = 1 PC
1 **Swarm of Rats** (CR 1/4, MM, p. 339) = 1 PC
6 **Cultists** (CR 1/8, MM, p. 345) = 1 PC
  Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from Area 7b and Area 7c.

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note that *Keen Smell* trait gives +5 to the **Swarm of Rats** Passive Perception score.

Creatures' Tactics
Cultists are intelligent humanoids. They can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Cult Fanatic** cast *Hold Person* on martial PC. On the next turn, if PC is Paralyzed, make the **Cult Fanatic** cast 2nd level *Inflict Wounds* to have a chance to deal 8d10 damage. If PC isn't Paralyzed, make the **Cult Fanatic** cast *Hold Person* again. If the **Cult Fanatic** has no 2nd level spell slots, make it cast *Command: Grovel* against martial PC. If the **Cult Fanatic** is out of spell slots, make it use *Multiattack* against less armored PC.

Make the **Cultists** use *Scimitar* against less armored, Paralyzed or Prone PC.

Rats are beasts, so they can't surrender, take captives or communicate without *Speak with Animals* spell or similar abilities, but they can flee.

Make the **Swarm of Rats** use *Bite* against nearest PCs.

Area 7b

Encounter Difficulty
2 **Cultists** (CR 1/8, MM, p. 345) = 1 PC
  Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from Area 7a.

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
See Area 7a.

Area 7c

Encounter Difficulty
2 **Vampire Spawn** (CR 5, MM, p. 295) = 2 PCs
  Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from Area 7a.

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
Vampires are intelligent undead creatures with insatiable hunger for the blood of the living. They can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives to drink their blood later.

The **Vampire Spawn** have *Spider Climb* trait which allow them to climb on the walls or ceiling to avoid melee attacks or set ambushes. Make the **Vampire Spawn** use *Multiattack* against less armored PC using *Claw* to inflict Grappled condition instead of dealing damage and be able to use *Bite* right after that. The **Vampire Spawn** can move grappled target up to half of its speed or 1/4 if moving vertically. Next turns the **Vampire Spawn** can deal damage with both *Claw* and *Bite* until PC escapes grapple.

Area 9

Encounter Difficulty
12 **Cultists** (CR 1/8, MM, p. 345) = 1 PC
4 **Swarm of Rats** (CR 1/4, MM, p. 339) = 1 PC
    Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from [Area 10](#).

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note that **Keen Smell** trait gives +5 to the **Swarm of Rats** Passive Perception score.

Creatures' Tactics
See [Area 7a](#).

Area 10

Encounter Difficulty
6 **Shadow Assassins** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 316) = 12 PCs
6 **Cult Fanatics** (CR 2, MM, p. 345) = 2 PCs
    Note. Fight in this area alerts creatures from [Area 7b](#) and [Area 9](#).

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
See [Area 7a](#) for the tactics of **Cult Fanatics**.

Shadow assassins are undead creatures who exist only to slay the living. They won't negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

If the party doesn't use light sources, make the **Shadow Assassins** Hide as Bonus Action using **Shadow Stealth** trait to get Advantage on next attack roll. Make the **Shadow Assassin** use **Multiattack** against less armored, Paralyzed or Prone PC. Note, that PC died because of loss of Strength will die right after *Revivify* or *Raise Dead* cast on him or her if Strength wasn't restored by *Greater Restoration* first. According to Jeremy Crawford's Twitter, magic items like Potion of Giant Strength and Gauntlets of Ogre Power grant immunity to Strength loss.

Area 13a

Encounter Difficulty
1 **Vampire Spawn** (CR 5, MM, p. 295) = 1 PC
    Note. Fight in this area might alert creatures from [Area 13b](#).

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
See [Area 7c](#).

Area 13b

Encounter Difficulty
3 **Vampire Spawn** (CR 5, MM, p. 295) = 3 PCs
    Note. Fight in this area might alert creatures from [Area 13a](#).

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. According to the book these **Vampire Spawn** are sleeping, which means that PCs can use **Vampire Weakness: Stake to the Heart** to kill them outright.

Creatures' Tactics
See [Area 7c](#).

Area 15

Encounter Difficulty
2 **Shadow Assassins** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 316) = 4 PCs

Surprise
As a DM you can make PCs surprised when the **Shadow Assassins** appear.

Creatures' Tactics
See [Area 10](#).

Area 18

Encounter Difficulty
6 **Wraiths** (CR 5, MM, p. 221) = 6 PCs

Surprise
As a DM you can make party surprised when the **Wraiths** appear.

Creatures' Tactics
Wraiths hate all the living and won't negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Wraith** can fly and have *Incorporeal Movement* trait, so make it use hit and run tactics. Use *Life Drain* against less armored PC and then hide inside the wall or under the floor. This tactic forces the party to use Ready action and lose benefits of Extra Attack or keep Concentration on readied spells in exchange of 1d10 force damage. Don't forget, that maximum hit points reduction lasts until long rest is finished. Make the **Wraith** use *Create Specter* if there is a chance.

Area 25a

Encounter Difficulty
3 **Vampire Spawn** (CR 5, MM, p. 295) = 3 PCs
   Note. Fight in this area might alert creatures from .

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
See .

Area 25b

Encounter Difficulty
1 **Champion** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 312) = 2 PCs

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
Champion is intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Champion** use *Multiattack* with *Gratsword* against less armored PC. Use *Shortbow* only if there is no chance to attack in melee. The **Champion** has very high bonus to Athletic skill, so it can Grapple and Shove effectively. Make the **Champion** use *Second Wind* as Bonus Action once it loses more than 20 hp and use *Indomitable* when it fails saving throw.

Area 26

Encounter Difficulty
1 **Vampire** (CR 13, MM, p. 295, with changes) = 5 PCs
1 **Abominable Yeti** (CR 9, MM, p. 305) = 2 PCs
9 **Vampire Spawn** (CR 5, MM, p. 295) = 9 PCs

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. *Keen Smell* trait gives +5 to the **Abominable Yeti's** Passive Perception score.

Creatures' Tactics
Vampires are intelligent undead, so they can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Vampire** has Legendary Actions so even if it loses Initiative it can act right after first PCs turn. It can't use *Bite* until it grapples or charms the target, but it can use *Move* or *Unarmed Strike* if PC is within 5 ft. *Charm* is the most powerful ability the **Vampire** has, so make it use it against martial PC because spellcasters tend to have higher Wisdom saves. *Charm* isn't a spell, so *Dispel Magic* can't end it, but *Greater Restoration* and *Dispel Evil and Good* will work. Charmed PC isn't dominated, so don't force him or her to attack other party members. Charmed PC can't attack the **Vampire** and the **Vampire** can use

Bite against PC without need of grapple. Make the **Vampire** cast *Spiritual Weapon* as Bonus action for additional damage. Best course of actions for the **Vampire** is to successfully use *Charm* on as many PCs as possible, convince them to give up their weapons and armor and deal with them one after another. Don't forget that every time the **Vampire** deals damage to Charmed PC, he or she makes new saving throw, so it's not auto-win. If this tactic doesn't work, because of high Wisdom saves, spells or class features such as monk's Stillness of Mind, you can make the **Vampire** fight. Make it cast 4th level *Command: Grovel* on the party to give Advantage to its allies. Once the **Vampire** is out of 4th level spell slots make it cast *Destructive Wave* targeting as many PCs as possible. Next turns make the **Vampire** focus on less armored PC using *Multiattack* and *Spiritual Weapon* and continue with *Unarmed Strike* or *Bite* using Legendary actions. If there is PC attuned to *Sun Blade* make the **Vampire** focus its *Charm* and *Command* on him or her. Make it use *Command: Drop* or *Command: Flee* in order to avoid starting turn inside sunlight area. Assume, that the fog it thick enough to block the sunlight. Also, don't forget that Shadowfell affects light sources. Bright light is reduced to dim light, and dim light to darkness. If you decide that it's time to flee make the **Vampire** use Dodge and run away using its regular movement and *Move* Legendary action after each PC's turn.

See for the tactics of **Vampire Spawn**. Assume, that the fog it thick enough to block the sunlight, so they can crawl under its protection. Make the PC wielding *Sun Blade* their main priority.

Yetis are savage hunters stalking alpine peaks. They won't negotiate, surrender or take captives but they can flee.

Make the **Abominable Yeti** use *Multiattack* against PC wielding *Sun Blade* or less armored PC. Don't forget that Paralyzed PC (PHB, p. 290) loses Concentration automatically and all hits became Critical Hits. Make the **Abominable Yeti** use *Cold Breath* only if all PCs within reach are immune to *Chilling Gaze*.

Area 28c

Encounter Difficulty
3 **Shadow Assassins** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 316) = 6 PCs

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
See . Bright light in Shadowfell is reduced to dim light, and dim light to darkness, so make the **Shadow Assassins** use *Shadow Stealth* as Bonus Action before *Multiattack*.

Area 32

Encounter Difficulty
1 **Adult Bronze Shadow Dragon** (CR 15, MM, p. 86, with changes, see Shadow Dragon, MM, p. 84) = 6 PCs
4 **Shadow Assassins** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 316) = 8 PCs
11 **Shadows** (CR 1/2, MM, p. 269) = 1 PC

Surprise
Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics
A dragon affected by dark magic of Shadowfell (PHB, p. 300) becomes shadow dragon. It's up to DM if shadow dragon will negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Shadowfell affects light sources. Bright light is reduced to dim light, and dim light to darkness. This means that *Living Shadow* trait will always work on the **Shadow Dragon** and it can always use *Shadow Stealth* before or after attack as Bonus Action. The **Shadow Dragon** can fly so make it stay out of melee reach between its turns. Make the **Shadow Dragon** use *Legendary Resistance* to succeed on saves against *Hold Monster, Web* and other movement restricting spells or abilities. The **Shadow Dragon** has Legendary Actions so even if it loses Initiative it can act using them after first PC's turn. If any PC is within 10 ft. reach, make the **Dragon** use *Tail*.

If the **Dragon** is surrounded by two or more PCs make it use *Wing Attack* and fly away. Once the **Dragon's** turn is started make it use *Multiattack* against PC with strong ranged attacks and make it Hide as Bonus action after that using *Shadow Stealth*. Successful *Frightful Presence* gives Disadvantage on attacks against the **Dragon**, so you can focus on spellcasters until Frightened condition remains. Don't forget that *Sun Blade* creates sunlight and activates *Sunlight Sensitivity* trait. On the next turn make the **Dragon** use *Shadow Breath* targeting as many PCs as possible and repeat this attack whenever it's available.

See for the tactics of **Shadow Assassins**. Bright light in Shadowfell is reduced to dim light, and dim light to darkness, so make the **Shadow Assassins** use *Shadow Stealth* as Bonus Action before *Multiattack*.

Shadows feed on living creature's vitality. They prefer to attack good creatures, so you can make them focus on good aligned PCs. Shadows can't negotiate or surrender, but they can flee.

Bright light in Shadowfell is reduced to dim light, and dim light to darkness, so make the **Shadow** use *Shadow Stealth* as Bonus Action before *Strength Drain* attack. It is optimal to focus on one PC at a time until it dies, but it is very dangerous for PCs with low Strength score.

The **Cloakers** have above-average Intelligence score and can use advanced tactics. They easily surprise the party because of *False Appearance* trait. While the party is surprised make the **Cloakers** use *Phantasms*. It is very good defensive ability. Each time PC attacks the **Cloaker** or uses harmful spell against it, roll a die to determine the target. If it has 3 duplicates roll d4, if 2 – roll d6 and divide result by 2, if one – any die will work, you should only assign even or odd number for the real **Cloaker**. Note, that duplicate disappears only if it failed save against damaging spell, but not when it takes damage on successful save. After using *Phantasms* make the **Cloaker** use *Multiattack* against less-armored PC. With first successful *Bite* attack the **Cloaker** attaches to the PC and gets Advantage on subsequent *Bite* attacks. While attached to the PC the **Cloaker** also gets only half damage because of *Damage Transfer* trait and PC takes other half. Successful *Bite* attack with Advantage inflicts Blinded condition (PHB, p. 292) and PC can't breathe (PHB, p. 183). According to Jeremy Crawford's Twitter, PC can hold breath when affected by such kind of abilities, which makes them less dangerous. *Moan* doesn't look like effective attack, so it isn't recommended to use it.

Area 33

Encounter Difficulty
4 **Cloakers** (CR 8, MM, p. 41) = 8 PCs

Surprise
As a DM you can make PCs surprised when the **Cloakers** appear.

Creatures' Tactics
Cloakers are stealthy and patient underground predators. They can communicate and flee but won't surrender or take captives.