

MONSTERS' GUIDE TO COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

*For Dungeon of the Mad Mage
Level 22: Shadowdusk Hold*

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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.

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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 22: Shadowdusk Hold

This level is designed for four 17th 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 17th level PCs.

Area 1

Encounter Difficulty

6 **Grells** (CR 3, MM, p. 172) = 2 PCs

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Grells are flying ambushers, who attacks everything small enough to grab, paralyze, take away and eat. They are intelligent enough to flee and PCs can even communicate with them under effect of the *Tongues* spell. They won't surrender or take captives.

The **Grells** can fly and have 10 ft. reach, so make them stay in the air out of melee reach and use hit and run tactics. Make the **Grell** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. **Tentacles** attack is pretty nasty. If it hits, it automatically inflicts Grappled and Restrained conditions and potentially Poisoned and Paralyzed (PHB, p. 290-292). Restrained condition grants Advantage to all **Grell's** attack rolls and Paralyzed condition automatically turns hits into Critical hits. It is optimal for the **Grell** to attack only one target at a time. It can drag Grappled victim out of melee reach without speed penalty. Ceiling in this room is 40 ft. high.

Area 3

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Nothics** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

Nothics are cursed wizards, with no memory of their past lives, haunting arcane secrets. They are intelligent enough to communicate, flee, surrender or take captives. Nothics covet magic items, so you can make them focus on PCs who have it. Take a look to optional Disarm rule (DMG, p. 271) if some PCs have magic weapons or shields.

Make the **Nothics** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. Make them use **Rotting Gaze** only if it's impossible to attack in melee.

Area 4a

Encounter Difficulty

7 **Grells** (CR 3, MM, p. 172) = 2 PCs

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 1](#).

Area 4b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Nothic** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 3](#).

Area 8

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Nothic** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 3](#).

Area 9

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Will-o'-Wisp** (CR 2, MM, p. 301) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Will-o'-wisps are the souls of evil creatures. They feed on despair and fear. According to MM, they rarely speak, and they are intelligent enough to flee. They won't take captives or surrender.

The **Will-o'-Wisp** can fly and has **Incorporeal Movement** trait, so make it stay in the air between its turns or make it hide underground to avoid PCs' attacks. Make the **Will-o'-Wisps** use **Invisibility** at the beginning of the fight or even before if there is a chance. The **Will-o'-Wisp** has +9 to Dexterity (Stealth) checks so it can surprise the party. Make the **Will-o'-Wisp** use **Shock** as an Action, and if PC is down, use **Consume Life** as a Bonus Action.

Area 10a

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Archmage** (CR 12, MM, p. 342) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Archmage is intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

According to the book, if the **Archmage** is attacked it casts *Dimension Door* to Area 11. As a DM you can make it fight the party but it will be better if the **Archmage** joins forces with the **Champion** from [Area 10b](#). Assume that the **Archmage** pre-casted *Mage Armor* and *Mind Blank* before the combat. Start the fight casting *Time Stop*. This spell gives the **Archmage** an opportunity to take minimum 2 turns without interruption. During the first turn make it cast *Mirror Image*. On the next turn make it cast *Wall of Force* trapping inside the dome one or two martial PCs. If it has one more turn, use it to cast 7th level *Cone of Cold*, which will end *Time Stop*. If it has more free turns you can make it cast *Fire Shield* before *Cone of Cold*. The **Archmage** has

resistance to damage from spells already, but additional damage to melee attackers might be helpful. Continue casting *Cone of Cold* or 4th level *Lightning Bolt* spells targeting as many PCs as possible. Use *Counterspell* against harmful spells. If you decide that it's time to flee, cast *Dimension Door*.

Area 10b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Champion** (CR 9, WDM, p. 312) = 2 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Champion hates adventurers, so it won't negotiate, surrender or take captives, but it can flee.

Make the **Champion** use *Multiattack* with *Greatsword* targeting 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 13

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Zombie** (CR 1/4, MM, p. 315) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Zombies are mindless servants. They won't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Zombie** use *Slam* against nearest PCs. You can roll a die if several PCs are within reach to determine random target.

Area 16

Encounter Difficulty

3 **Will-o-Wisps** (CR 2, MM, p. 301) = 1 PC

Note. This is easy encounter, so you can skip it.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 9](#).

Area 17

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Archmage** (CR 12, MM, p. 342) = 3 PCs

Note. It will be better if the **Archmage** joins forces with other **Archmage** from [Area 18b](#) casting *Teleport*.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Archmage is intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Assume that the **Archmage** pre-casted *Mage Armor* and *Mind Blank* before the combat. Start the fight casting *Time Stop*. This spell gives the **Archmage** an opportunity to take minimum 2

turns without interruption. During the first turn make it cast *Mirror Image*. On the next turn make it cast 5th or 6th level *Confusion* targeting as many PCs as possible, which will end *Time Stop*. If the **Archmage** has more than two free turns you can make it cast *Fire Shield* before *Confusion*. The **Archmage** has resistance to damage from spells already, but additional damage to melee attackers might be helpful. Continue the fight casting *Cone of Cold* and 4th level *Lightning Bolt* spells targeting as many PCs as possible. Use *Counterspell* against harmful spells. If you decide that it's time to flee, cast *Teleport* to [Area 18b](#).

Area 18b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Archmage** (CR 12, MM, p. 342, with changes) = 3 PCs

2 **Grells** (CR 3, MM, p. 172) = 1 PC

Note. It will be better if the **Archmage** joins forces with other **Archmage** from [Area 17](#) casting *Teleport*.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Note, that this **Archmage** is aberration, not humanoid, so some spells and magical effects won't work on it, for example *Hold Person*, and others will, for example *Protection from Evil and Good*. Follow the tactics from [Area 10a](#) section and don't forget to cast *Fire Bolt* or *Shocking Grasp* as Bonus Action. The **Grells** are immune to lightning damage, so use them to move Grappled targets in one line to cast *Lightning Bolt*. Don't forget, that Paralyzed PCs automatically fail Dexterity saves against *Lightning Bolt* and hit with *Shocking Grasp* become Critical hit automatically.

See [Area 1](#) for the **Grells'** tactics.

Area 20a

Encounter Difficulty

5 **Will-o-Wisps** (CR 2, MM, p. 301) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 9](#).

Area 20b

Encounter Difficulty

5 **Nothics** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 3](#).

Area 24a

Encounter Difficulty

12 **Nothics** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 2 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 3](#).

Area 24b

Encounter Difficulty

2 **Nothics** (CR 2, MM, p. 236) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. Note, that the **Nothics** have **Keen Sight** trait which grants them +5 to Passive Perception score (see Passive Checks, PHB, p. 175).

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 3](#).

Area 28

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Death Slaadi** (CR 10, MM, p. 274) = 8 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Slaadi are the creatures of pure chaos native to Outer Plane, called Ever-Changing Chaos of Limbo (PHB, p. 300). According to MM, their goal is to sow discord on the Material Plane. Death slaadi are intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Death Slaadi** cast *Fear* at the start the combat targeting as many PCs as possible. The less PCs will be able to attack the **Death Slaadi**, the better. On the next round make the **Death Slaadi** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. Always use **Greatsword** instead of **Claw**. Make the **Death Slaad** cast *Fireball*, if it can target 3 or more PCs. If Concentration on *Fear* is broken or all PCs succeeded on their saves, make the **Death Slaad** cast *Cloudkill*. This spell deals decent damage and blocks vision which helps against ranged PCs and casters.

Area 31b

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Death Slaadi** (CR 10, MM, p. 274) = 8 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

See [Area 28](#).

Area 34a

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Death Knight** (CR 17, MM, p. 47, with changes) = 6 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Death knights are intelligent undead creatures. They can negotiate, but they don't have fear of death, so they won't flee or surrender and they have no reasons to take captives.

Make the **Death Knight** cast 5th level *Hold Person* targeting 4 PCs at the beginning of the fight. Next turn make it use **Hellfire Orb** and don't forget that Paralyzed PCs will fail their Dexterity saves automatically. On the next turn make the **Death Knight** use **Multiattack** with **Nine Lives Stealer** targeting Paralyzed PC. Any hit will automatically become Critical hit and if PC has less than 100 hp it must succeed on a DC 15 Constitution saving throw or be slain instantly. Continue to cast *Hold Person* when needed and follow up with **Multiattack** until the end of the fight. Don't forget to use **Parry** to avoid melee hits.

Area 38c

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Death Knight** (CR 17, MM, p. 47, with changes)

= 6 PCs

6 **Wraiths** (CR 5, MM, p. 221) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Follow the tactics for the **Death Knight** described in [Area 34a](#) section with the exception that this creature doesn't have **Nine Lives Stealer** so its hits against Paralyzed PCs will become regular Critical hits. Make the **Death Knight** use Bonus Action to heal 10 hp for itself or its **Wraiths**.

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 Paralyzed 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 39

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Archmage** (CR 12, MM, p. 342, with changes) =

3 PCs

1 **Gray Slaad** (CR 9, MM, p. 274) = 2 PCs

1 **Grick Alpha** (CR 7, MM, p. 173) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Follow the tactics for the **Archmage** from [Area 10a](#) section. Cast *Cone of Cold* and 5th level *Fireball* spells using **Staff of Power**.

Slaadi are the creatures of pure chaos native to Outer Plane, called Ever-Changing Chaos of Limbo (PHB, p. 300). According to MM, their goal is to sow discord on the Material Plane. Gray slaadi are intelligent enough to negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Make the **Gray Slaadi** cast *Fear* at the start the combat targeting as many PCs as possible. The less PCs will be able to attack the **Gray Slaadi**, the better. On the next round make the **Gray Slaadi** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. Always use **Greatsword** instead of **Claw**. Make the **Gray Slaad** cast *Fireball*, if it can target 3 or more PCs. At the beginning of each turn the **Gray Slaad** regains 10 hp, if nothing like *Chill Touch* cantrip prevents its **Regeneration**.

Gricks won't negotiate, take captives or surrender, but they can flee.

The **Grick Alpha** is not very intelligent, so make it use **Multiattack** against nearest target.

Area 40

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Adult Blue Dracolich** (CR 17, MM, p. 84, with changes) = 6 PCs

Note. The **Dracolich** has very good protection thanks to crystal pillars which make it almost immune to most attacks until destroyed.

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Dracoliches are intelligent undead creatures. They can negotiate, but they don't have fear of

death, so they won't flee or surrender and they have no reasons to take captives.

The **Adult Blue Dracolich** can fly so make it stay in the air out of melee reach between its turns. Make it use **Legendary Resistance** to succeed on saves against *Hold Monster*, *Web* and other movement restricting spells or abilities. The **Dracolich** 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 **Dracolich** use **Tail**. If the **Dracolich** is surrounded by two or more PCs make it use **Wing Attack** and fly away. Make the **Dracolich's** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC at the first round. Successful **Frightful Presence** inflicts Disadvantage on PCs' attacks while the **Dracolich** is within line of sight, so you can focus on spellcasters until Frightened condition remains. Next turn make the **Dracolich** use **Lightning Breath** targeting as many PCs as possible and use this action every time it's available. Prioritize PCs who are trying to destroy crystal pillars.