

MONSTERS' GUIDE TO COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

*For Dungeon of the Mad Mage
Level 23: Mad Wizard's Lair*

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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 23: Mad Wizard's Lair

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 4

Encounter Difficulty

6 **Helmed Horrors** (CR 4, MM, p. 183) = 2 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Helmed horrors are constructs with the ability to reason and adjust tactical decisions. They won't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Helmed Horror** can fly, so make them use hit and run tactics and stay in the air out of melee reach between their turns. Make them use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. As a DM you can choose PCs' favorite spells for **Helmed Horrors' Spell Immunity** trait based on what Halaster knows about the party.

Area 5

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Invisible Stalkers** (CR 6, MM, p. 192) = 4 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise. The **Invisible Stalker** under effect of **Invisibility** trait can Hide to surprise the party.

Creatures' Tactics

Invisible stalkers are air elementals transformed by powerful magic to hunt creatures and retrieve objects to their summoner. They won't negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Invisible Stalkers** can fly, so make them use hit and run tactics. While they are Invisible and PCs don't have active spell effects such as *See Invisibility* or *True Seeing*, the **Invisible Stalkers** don't provoke opportunity attacks and make all attacks with Advantage. Make **Invisible Stalkers** use **Slam** targeting less armored PCs and stay in the air out of melee reach between their turns.

Area 6b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Pit Fiend** (CR 20, MM, p. 66) = 8 PCs

Surprise

As a DM you can make party surprised when this creature appears from the shield.

Creatures' Tactics

Devils are lawful evil fiends from lower plane called Nine Hells (PHB, p. 300) collecting souls of mortals. They can't die on Material Plane, so they won't flee or surrender. They can take captives and can communicate via **Telepathy**.

The **Pit Fiend** can fly, so make it use hit and run tactics and stay in the air out of melee reach between its turns. Make the **Pit Fiend** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. Don't waste its actions on spells because they can be easily counterspelled or dispelled without any impact. All PCs starting their turn within 20 ft. of the **Pit Fiend** must succeed on DC 21 Wisdom save or become Frightened because of **Fear Aura**. Frightened condition (PHB, p. 190) greatly affects martial PCs, because they can't move closer and have Disadvantage on attack rolls, so you can make the **Pit Fiend** focus on spellcasters while this condition remains.

Area 9b

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Deva** (CR 10, MM, p. 15) = 2 PCs

Surprise

As a DM you can make party surprised when this creature appears from the shield.

Creatures' Tactics

Devas are angels that act as divine messengers. They can negotiate, surrender, flee and take captives.

The **Deva** can fly, so make it use hit and run tactics and stay in the air out of melee reach between its turns. Make the **Deva** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored PC. Its **Healing Touch** doesn't work on the **Deva** itself.

Area 10b

Encounter Difficulty

7 **Flameskulls** (CR 4, MM, p. 134) = 3 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Flameskulls are intelligent undead creatures. They can negotiate, but they won't flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Flameskull** can fly, so make it stay in the air, out of melee reach. Make the **Flameskull** cast **Blur** at the beginning of the fight or even before if there is a chance. On the next turn make it cast **Fireball** targeting as many PCs as possible. After that make the **Flameskull** cast 2nd and 1st level **Magic Missile** spells targeting PCs dealing most damage to them. Make the **Flameskulls** continue with **Multiattack** once they out of spell slots. Don't forget to cast **Shield** when appropriate.

Area 11b

Encounter Difficulty

2 **Scaladar** (CR 8, WDMM, p. 315) = 2 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Scaladar are constructs, so they won't communicate, flee, surrender, take captives or use any kind of tactics.

Make the **Scaladar** use **Multiattack** targeting nearest PC.

Area 13

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Trobriand** (CR 22, MM, p. 167, with changes) = 9 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

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

Make **Trobriand** cast **Forcecage** using 20 ft. cage option trapping as many PCs as possible, prioritizing martial PCs. If some PCs are still outside AoE of the **Forcecage**, make **Trobriand** cast this spell again on the next turn using 9th level spell slot. Don't overrate **Power Word Kill** because it is easily countered by 3rd level **Revivify** or 4th level **Death Ward**, so it's better to use 9th level slot for one more **Forcecage**. Make **Trobriand** cast **Counterspell** to prevent PCs teleporting outside or destroying **Forcecage** with **Disintegrate** spell. After all PCs are trapped, make **Trobriand** cast **Incendiary Cloud** over the

Forcecage area targeting as many PCs as possible. This spell deals damage every turn and also blocks vision, so PCs won't be able to escape casting *Misty Step* and target **Trobriand** with spells and abilities requiring seeing the target. Once his Concentration on *Incendiary Cloud* is broken or there is no PCs within its AoE because it has been moved too far, make **Trobriand** cast *Greater Invisibility* for additional protection. If PCs wasn't been able to leave *Forcecage*, make **Trobriand** cast *Fireball* or use *Poison Breath* if it's available targeting as many PCs as possible. If PCs managed to leave *Forcecage* you can make **Trobriand** cast *Chain Lightning*. If there is no chance to target several PCs at once with AoE spells, make **Trobriand** use *Multiattack* using *Sword*. Note, that in golem form **Trobriand** can restore hp targeting himself with fire spells thanks to *Fire Absorption* trait. Don't forget to cast *Shield* to boost his AC when needed.

Area 17

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Arcturia** (CR 21, MM, p. 202, with changes) = 8 PCs

3 **Champions** (CR 9, WDMM, p. 312) = 6 PCs

12 **Mimics** (CR 2, MM, p. 220) = 2 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Arcturia can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Arcturia can fly, so make her stay in the air, out of melee reach. **Arcturia** has Legendary actions, so even if she loses Initiative she can act after first PCs turn. Make **Arcturia** use *Frightening Gaze* if any PC is within 5 ft. If there is no adjacent PCs, make **Arcturia** cast *Ray of Frost* targeting less armored PC. Don't forget making **Arcturia** cast *Shield* as Reaction to boost her AC.

You can also make her cast *Counterspell* using Reaction, but raising AC for a round is generally better than cancelling one PC's spell. If **Arcturia** is aware about invasion of the party, make her cast *True Polymorph* in advance or at the beginning of the fight. **Adult Silver Dragon** is my personal favorite, but you can choose any other form up to 21 CR. Note, that **Arcturia** can't use Legendary actions, Lair actions and *Legendary Resistance* trait of obtained form (MM, p. 11). The form can be dispelled with *Dispel Magic* and successful DC 19 spellcasting ability check. PCs can also make **Arcturia** lose Concentration but it's not so easy because the **Adult Silver Dragon** has +12 bonus to Constitution save. The form will also be suppressed in *Antimagic Field* spell's AoE. Make the **Adult Silver Dragon** use *Paralyzing Breath* targeting as many PCs as possible. On the next round make it use *Multiattack* targeting less armored Paralyzed PC within 5 ft., so all hits will become Critical hits. Successful *Frightful Presence* inflicts Disadvantage on PCs' attacks while the **Dragon** is within line of sight, so you can focus on spellcasters until Frightened condition remains. Make the **Dragon** use *Paralyzing Breath* every time it is available and follow up using *Multiattack*. Once *True Polymorph* is ended, make **Arcturia** cast *Mirror Image*. It is good defensive spell which doesn't require Concentration. On the next turn make her cast *Feeblemind* targeting cleric or druid PC, so he or she won't be able to cast spells. On the next turn make **Arcturia** cast *Slow* prioritizing martial PCs. After that make **Arcturia** cast 5th level *Fireball* if she can target 2 or more PCs. Otherwise make her cast 7th level *Disintegrate* targeting heavily armored PC, preferably under effect of *Slow* spell. As any spellcaster **Arcturia** loses a lot of power inside *Antimagic Field* spell's AoE, but note that she is immune to non-magical weapons and her *Paralyzing Touch* still works inside this spells AoE, so she can try to break Concentration of the caster.

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

Make the **Champion** use *Multiattack* with *Greatsword* targeting less armored Paralyzed PC to make all hits become Critical hits. Make them

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.

Mimics are predatory monsters. They can't negotiate, surrender and take captives, but they can try to flee.

Make the **Mimic** use **Pseudopod** targeting nearest PC to activate **Adhesive** trait. On the next turn make it use **Bite** with Advantage granted by **Grappler** trait.

Area 20

Encounter Difficulty

4 **Ultraloths** (CR 13, MM, p. 311) = 12 PCs

Surprise

As a DM you can make party surprised when these creatures appear using **Teleport**.

Creatures' Tactics

Ultraloths are yugoloth – neutral evil mercenary fiends from Outer plane called Gehenna (PHB, p. 300). They won't flee, surrender or take captives but can negotiate using **Telepathy**.

The **Ultraloth** can fly, so make it stay in the air out of melee reach and use hit and run tactics when attack in melee range. Make the **Ultraloth** cast **Fear** targeting as many PCs as possible to decrease their combat effectiveness. Next round make the **Ultraloth** cast **Fire Storm** targeting as many PCs as possible. After that make the **Ultraloth** use **Multiattack** targeting less armored martial PC, because spellcasters isn't very dangerous for the **Ultraloth** thanks to **Magic Resistance** trait and resistance to cold, fire and lightning damage.

Area 24

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Demilich** (CR 18, MM, p. 48) = 7 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Demiliches are intelligent undead creatures. They can negotiate, but they won't flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Demilich** can fly, so make it stay in the air out of melee reach. The **Demilich** has Legendary actions, so even if it loses Initiative it can act right after first PCs turn. Make the **Demilich** use **Cloud of Dust** if any PC is within 10 ft. If there is no adjacent PCs, make the **Demilich** use **Vile Curse** targeting martial PC to decrease his or her combat effectiveness and saves. If the **Demilich** has less than a half of its hit points at the beginning of its turn, make it use **Life Drain** targeting as many PCs as possible. Otherwise, make the **Demilich** use **Howl** positioning itself to target as many PCs as possible.

Area 33

Encounter Difficulty

1 **Halaster Blackcloak** (CR 23, WDM, p. 310) = 10 PCs

1 **Empyrean** (CR 23, MM, p. 131) = 10 PCs

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Halaster is mad so it is up to DM if he will negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Assume that **Halaster** pre-casted *Mage Armor* and *Mind Blank* before the combat. He is absolutely useless inside *Antimagic Field* spell's AoE. If the party has access to this spell, I'd suggest to make him cast *Wish* in advance to get immunity to this spell's effects (as it is written in alternative effects of *Wish*, but don't forget about stress damage). According to the book, **Halaster** is sitting on the throne which gives him benefits of *Improved Invisibility*, so it's better for him to sit on it every time. As an option you can make **Halaster** sit on the throne under *Wall of Force* hemisphere before the fight. It costs only one 5th level spell slot, but at least he won't get alpha-striking. **Halaster** has Legendary actions, so even if he loses Initiative, he can act after first PCs turn. Every round make **Halaster** use *Spell Ward* as his first Legendary action to gain 20 temporary hit points burning 4th level spell slot. As a second Legendary action make Halaster cast *Fireball* or *Dispel Magic*, depending on the situation. Don't forget making **Halaster** cast *Shield* as Reaction to boost his AC. You can also make him cast *Counterspell* using Reaction, but raising AC for a round is generally better than cancelling one PC's spell. Once **Halaster's** first turn starts, make him cast 5th or 6th level *Confusion* targeting as many PCs as possible. On the next turn make **Halaster** cast *Meteor Swarm* if he still has 9th level spell slot. Continue the fight casting *Chain Lightning* using 7th and 6th level spell slots and then *Fireball* targeting as many PCs as possible.

Empyreans are the celestial children of the gods of the Upper Planes. They can negotiate, flee, surrender or take captives.

The **Empyrean** can fly, so make it stay in the air, out of melee reach. The **Empyrean** has Legendary actions, so even if it loses Initiative, it can act after first PCs turn. Make the **Empyrean** use *Attack* targeting less armored PC prioritizing *Maul* over *Bolt*. If the **Empyrean** is standing on the ground, save 2 Legendary actions to use *Trembling Strike* right before its turn, so there will be a chance that some PCs will be Prone when the **Empyrean's** turn starts. Otherwise continue to use *Attack*. On **Empyrean's** turn make it use *Maul* targeting less armored Stunned or Prone PC to attack with Advantage.

Area 35

Encounter Difficulty

2 **Flesh Golems** (CR 5, MM, p. 169) = 1 PC

Surprise

Follow the standard procedure to determine surprise.

Creatures' Tactics

Golems are elemental spirits bound into material form by powerful magic. They blindly obey any commands given them by their creators. They don't feel pain and don't afraid of death. When golem's body is heavily damaged the elemental spirit tries to break free causing golem to go berserk. Golems can't communicate, flee, surrender or take captives.

Fire damage decreases the **Golem's** combat effectiveness a lot because of *Aversion of Fire* trait. Make it focus on PCs who deal fire damage. If the **Golem** goes *Berserk*, and several creatures are at the same range, you can roll a die to determine random target.