Black Dogs

Unofficial house-rules and materials for
Lamentations of the Flame Princess

Issue II

by Daimon Games

Black Dogs is a dark fantasy collection of house-rules, materials, adventures and monsters, a toolbox to generate new content for OSR systems, particularly focused on Lamentations of the Flame Princess.

Issue II contains: how to portray the world
rules for encumbrance and gear
guidelines on dice rolls
short adventure seeds for improvisation
witches and smart zombies!

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BLACK DOGS #II

Unofficial house-rules and materials for
Lamentations of the Flame Princess

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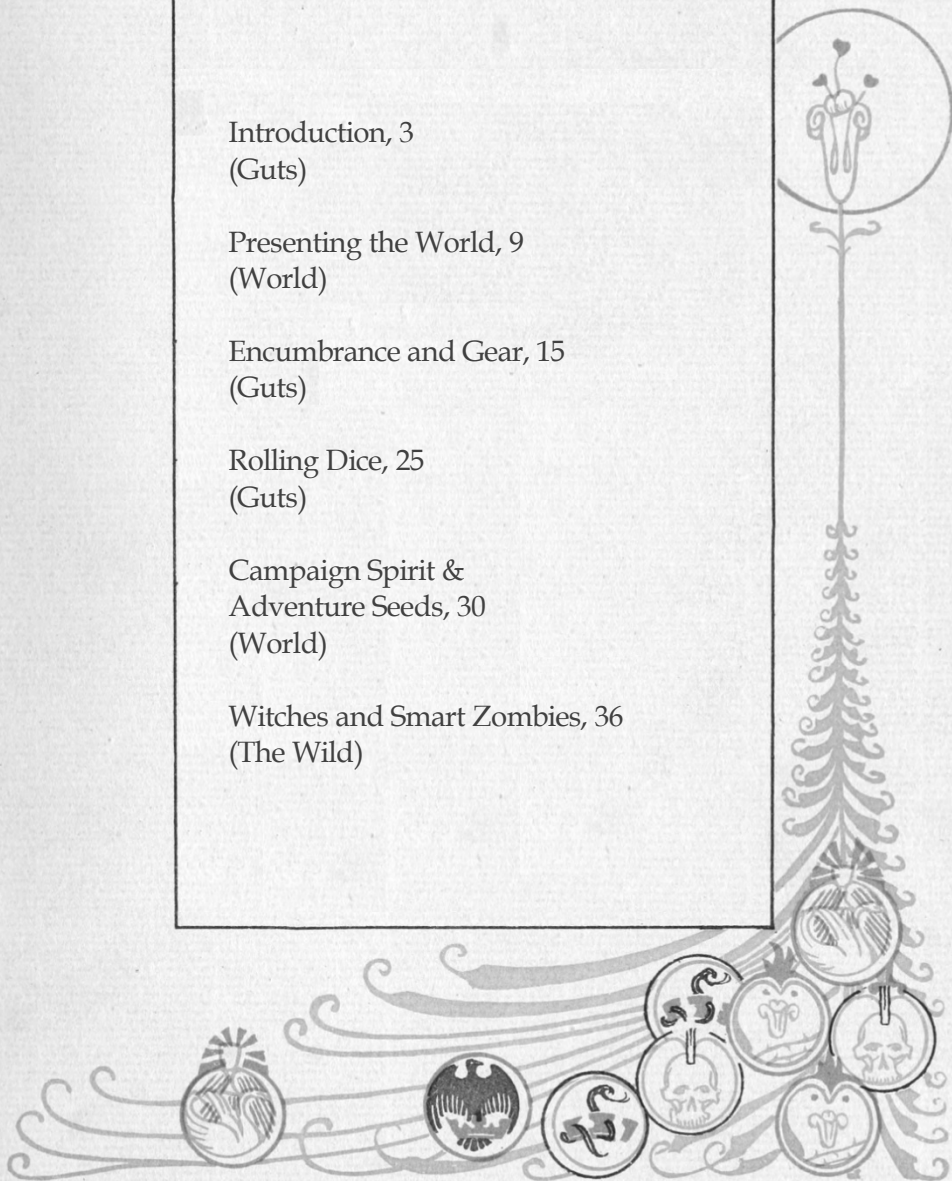
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INTRODUCTION

Black Dogs is a dark fantasy collection of house-rules, materials, adventures, monsters, and together a toolbox to generate new content for OSR systems, and mostly for the **Lamentations of the Flame Princess**. Black Dogs shares a common set of rules and esthetics with Lamentations, but it has its distinct flavor. Whenever a rule is not found (or not presented yet) in the Black Dogs 'zine, just use the default from Lamentations or whatever OSR system you're running.

Spirit

There's less horror in Black Dogs, although the material sticks to clearly dark fantasy tropes. In just a few words, Black Dogs is a dark, late medieval setting for monster hunters and mercenaries - brought together by the loose frame of an informal organization that lends some purpose to your characters.

When you play Black Dogs you play for three things mostly: **monsters**, **wilderness** and its encounters, and non-playing characters' **communities**. Basically, the material from Black Dogs aims to bring together three of the most popular fantasy literature and gaming tropes: fighting monsters, traveling in a foreign and fantastic world, and interacting with a fantasy community and its people.

Monsters

Fights are few, and are risky and important, with an emphasis on tactics. Monsters are many, but your characters hunt them with a purpose, and a fight is also an encounter, with all of the complexity that implies.

Wilderness

Wilderness and travel are handled with specific rules that can lead to additional encounters or different routes.

Communities

And there are NPCs to interact with: with their towns and villages, with their homes and jobs, with their troubles and their share of monstrosities.

Of course, there is some influence from a popular series of books and video games about a certain monster hunter, but Black Dogs shares very little with it. This is a game to play as a group, and while it has a taste for darkness, it has a different spirit than the aforementioned monster hunter books.

There is no complete roadmap for this project, but as of now, all the material presented will belong to one of the following categories:

Content

❖ House-rules, and character creation
❖ Combat related rules, usable independently
❖ Magic rules & spells, usable independently
❖ Everything about setting and adventures
❖ Everything about wilderness and creatures

Guts
Blood
Sorcery
World
The Wild

This is an index of topics as they appeared in issues I and II and some plans for the upcoming issues III and IV.

Index by 'zine

Call for editors

If you liked the first two Black Dogs issues and you are a native English speaker - I will gladly accept your help to edit the future issues of this 'zine. I am not a native English speaker and **I need editors and proofreaders**.

Sometimes my choice of words is rather poor, sometimes my sentences are too convoluted or cryptic, or my rules ambiguous.

If you'd like to participate, just drop me an email and get in touch. Usually **the deal is this**: if you submit changes or fixes which are accepted into the 'zine then you will get that issue in PDF for free. If there is a printed version available, you will also get a discount for it.

I don't need professional editors: even if you have no experience you're welcome to get in touch and give this a try. Of course, if you already have experience in proofreading or editing it helps, but since I cannot offer a real payment, I welcome everyone on board.

PRESENTING THE WORLD

Black Dogs games take place in the Europe of late medieval times, only darker and grittier than our real world. It's a medieval Europe where mythical creatures and magic exist; and their influence on human history was for the worse. This section helps the GM with information useful to portray this harsh landscape. Everything in this section assumes that you'll be playing in continental Europe, not in England. The political situation of any single nation is typically irrelevant for the scale of our adventures, so I've purposefully ignored it.

Mountains

There are mountain ranges to the south and west of your map. You have to cross tall mountains (over 4.000 mt./13.000 feet) in order to reach the lands to the south and the middle sea (the Mediterranean Sea). Italy and Spain are not only separated by mountains from the rest of the continent, but their own territory is also quite mountainous, once you move inland away from the coastline.

"Mountains are forested at the base, rocky at the top, and many of them are covered in ice and snow, all year, as you reach the peak. Summer is hot but quite short. Autumn and spring are rainy. Winter is long and snow is abundant (you can get enough in one night to block the door of your hut).

Think of:
Forests
Rocks
Ice and snow
Rain
Winter
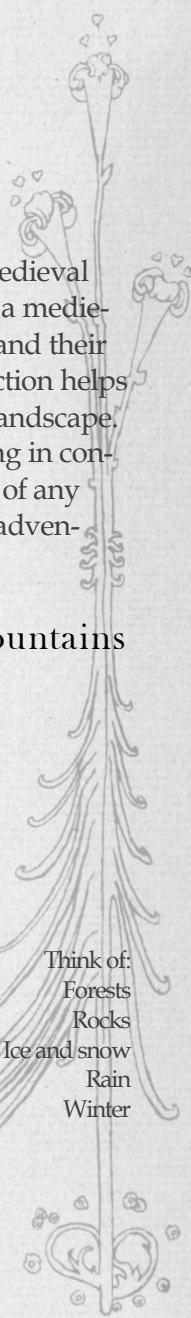
Lands

Think of:
Flat fields
Hills
Rivers
Ancient roads
Weather

Throughout the rest of the continent, center and north, the land is flat, although hills are common and often used as location for a castle, a tower, a church, or a cemetery. The land is fertile and the climate is favorable enough, although summers are hotter than you'd like, and winters colder and longer year after year, as if something was suddenly wrong with the weather. There are plenty of rivers, many large enough for barges and boats to navigate and use for travel and commerce. There is a large network of ancient imperial roads still in decent condition that can be used to move around the main cities, but nobody is taking care of those roads and they're going to fall apart, eventually.

Woods

Human settlements are small points of light in the middle of a dark sea of trees

Think of:
Huge forests
Tall trees
Thick vegetation
Slow travel
Short visibility
Orientation
Ambushes
... The Wild

When you think of woods, think of them **as the main feature of the land**. They extend to the size of kingdoms. Humans have just barely started cutting trees at the edge of the civilized areas, but woods, thick forests, remain the main feature of the land.

When you travel from town to town, you travel mostly through woods, with the exception of a few patches of cultivated fields. When you climb mountains, there are mostly trees around you, unless you climb high enough. Hills are also covered in trees, for the most part.

Woods are not just trees, they slow down travel unless you move on the road or on a path; they cut your line of vision; they mask the features of the land you travel across; they favor ambushes; they hide the monsters you fight; conceal the places you're looking for. **Woods are the heart of The Wild**.

Towns are the standard location for the character's interaction with human NPCs. They are bigger than villages but smaller than cities. Most buildings are still built from wood, but the homes of the nobles, the artisans, and those who accumulated wealth, are built in stone. It's not uncommon for buildings to have a second floor, or maybe even a little tower. Towns are "urban" environments yet surrounded by farms. While cities depend on travel for food and other goods, towns are self-sufficient; while villages depend on traveling traders, towns have artisans and can provide the characters with most of what they need.

There is a church in every village and there is often a monastery or an abbey within a few days walk from most places. Ordinary people are supposed to maintain certain moral behaviors, and it's not uncommon for someone to be excluded from a community based on some religious pretense.

While most folks go to church once a week, or even more often, and at least pretend to respect Christian morals, ordinary life can be a different matter. When faced with the tough choice between certain religious standards versus personal gain or personal interest (be it greed, or even simple lust), five out of six times any NPC will act **according to personal interest**. A smaller fraction of the population is instead peculiar enough to follow something greater than immediate satisfaction of desires: be it for the greater good, or instead directed by some twisted, evil scheme perpetrated by the demons.

Towns

Think: Smaller than cities Larger than villages

Think urban but farms all around

Customs and religion

Unless you decide to change the setting, the Christian religion is the only common religion

In alignment terms, consider five out of six to be neutral

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Church

A standard game features the Christian Church as the default religion for commoners and nobles. You know the subject, since you play RPGs, and it could be a good idea to have the Reformation happening at the time of your adventures. There are preachers in the streets. There is resentment towards the pope and the traditional clergy. There are few books and yet many pamphlets distributed in every town and in most villages. The Reformation developed differently in various regions of the continent; you are free to take some liberties with this.

Almost every NPC should feel like they have their contribution to make; cults, sects, and heresies blossom in every corner of the known kingdoms. Also: even though the public moral is one thing, the private behaviors of many of your NPCs are not necessarily aligned with their preaching or the dictates of whatever church they belong to - very much like today.

Nobility

It's not about pure blood anymore: there are merchants as wealthy as any noble, or even richer than kings. It's not about valor anymore: a musket can take out a knight in armor from a distance, with no shame. It's not about raising the commoners to arms: an army of professional mercenaries will make short work of them. It's not about owning the rights to the land: The Wild is the real lord here. Nobles begin to sense the decline of their caste. While a few smart ones will use their privileges to transform their families into something modern, most of them cling to their former glories with pride, disgust for the current times, and stupidity.

Most people live simple lives in villages or small towns, although the major cities are now more common and many - especially the young - move there seeking fortune. The majority of the adventures, though, will take place in the heart of the continent, where The Wild is strong and lingers just at the edge of civilized areas.

Commoners are not stupid; most of them possess enough common sense to see through bullshit and enough pride to defend their basic rights. Even so, the social order is still deeply unbalanced in favor of nobles - or of those strong enough to make a name for themselves.

Politics is simple enough: there is a local authority, and usually that's about it as far as commoners are concerned, unless a major war breaks out and a major army is drafted. For most of their lives, though, peasants have to deal only with the local noble, the constable or local judge, and the nearest priest or monks.

When making an NPC, consider this list of possible professions as inspiration:

People

Think of:
Simple lives
At the edge of
The Wild
Pride and basic
rights
Unbalanced
power
Simple politics
Everything is near

- ❖ Farmer
- ❖ Woodcutter
- ❖ Shepherd
- ❖ Servant
- ❖ Hunter
- ❖ Fisherman
- ❖ Carpenter
- ❖ Tanner
- ❖ Tinsmith
- ❖ Basketmaker
- ❖ Guard

- ❖ Jailer
- ❖ Boatman
- ❖ Artisan
- ❖ Shoemaker
- ❖ Tailor
- ❖ Gamekeeper
- ❖ Mason
- ❖ Baker
- ❖ Butcher
- ❖ Blacksmith
- ❖ Stonemason

- ❖ Jeweler
- ❖ Gunsmith
- ❖ Physician
- ❖ Herbalist
- ❖ Perfumer
- ❖ Merchant
- ❖ Bard
- ❖ Prostitute
- ❖ Bandit
- ❖ Thief
- ❖ Vagabond

Why the Black Dogs

The Black Dogs are not mercenaries, although they often act as such and can solve problems **with force**. They work for commoners and nobles alike, and demand **a fair price**. They are not adventurers, but they always have **their personal gain** in mind, and often prefer to survive a defeat than die in victory. They are not martyrs nor saints, not philosophers nor priests: yet they obey a **code of conduct** and sometimes are capable of great **sacrifice**. They know more than most people and have a way to judge and bring justice that seems fair compared to local tribunals and common laws. They are also known to pass moral judgment, often in forms which are in conflict with the standard doctrine of the church.

These are your characters; and your players. They are a group that stands aside, **they are peculiar**, and in this form they are ready and willing to enter most of the adventures.

Code of Conduct

Fight against:
demons,
monsters,
evil humans.
Protect:
innocents and
children,
working
commoners,
humanity

This is a draft of the Black Dogs **code of conduct**: *in this order, fight against demons, monsters, outstandingly evil humans. In this fashion, protect: innocents and children, working commoners, humanity in general*. Share this code with your players, and discuss it if needed.

If you feel this doesn't suit your group's attitude, tune it, as much as you need. **Keep it simple**: it should be something that you can fit on an index card and keep on the table.

Please don't make a code for "other" Black Dogs and then play a group of exceptions to the exception; your characters should be the only Black Dogs in play (no Black Dogs NPCs).

ENCUMBRANCE AND GEAR

The encumbrance system works not by weight but **by slots**. Of course, for an item to be listed in the inventory, it must be something that a person can reasonably carry.

- ❖ An item takes **one slot**; either because of its weight, size or shape, or because it requires special attention
- ❖ Sometimes, heavy or big items require **2 or more slots**; in that case write them across the necessary slots
- ❖ **A few small items** (listed as 0 slots in the gear lists) can be combined together in one single slot

E.g. a ration is heavy, a bow is light but long, a bottle is fragile

E.g. heavy armor counts for more than a single slot

let's say 3 for a single slot

At character creation, setup the encumbrance slots on your sheet as follows:

Allowed encumbrance

- ❖ **Characters can carry** a number of items equal to their Constitution ability score + Strength modifier
- ❖ **Over-encumbrance boxes** by default have one slot each + the CON or STR modifier

whichever is higher

As soon as you need to start writing in the over-encumbrance boxes, you start to get penalties to your rolls.
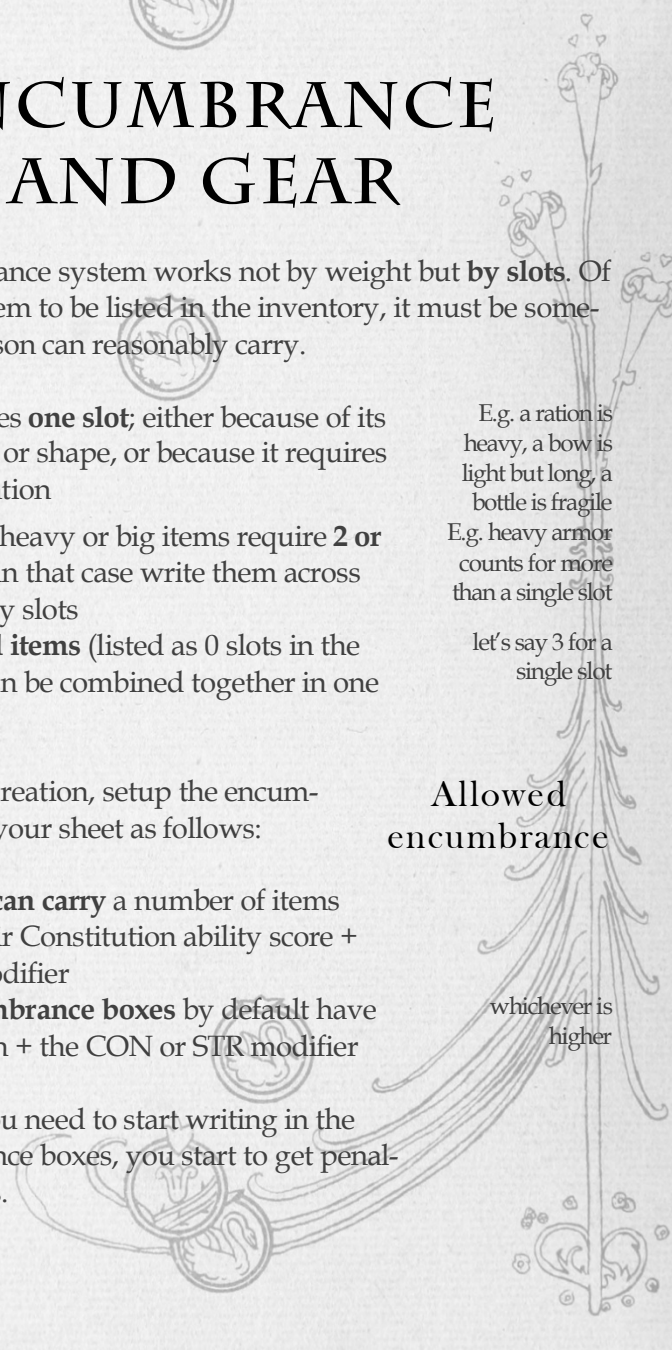
INVENTORY SHEET

Inventory	Avail. slots = CON score + STR mod	
1	8	15
2	9	16
3	10	17
4	11	18
5	12	19
6	13	20
7	14	

Encumbrance	Each box slots = 1 + CON or STR mod	
Light	*Medium*	*Heavy*
-1 to combat rolls	-2 to all rolls	All rolls at disadv
1	1	1
2	2	2
3	3	3
4	4	4

If your Constitution ability score changes, or your Constitution or Strength modifiers change, then adjust the number of available slots during the game. If the scores decreased, it may be necessary to remove gear from the inventory or become over-encumbered. If the scores increased, you can carry more gear.

Gear lists

Cost is the price in silver pieces to acquire this item in normal circumstances. You can get it down to half price if the GM allows you to bargain and you succeed, or if the conditions are favorable. Similarly, the price could go up to double if the conditions are adverse or if bargaining was done poorly.

Silver weapons

All metal weapons are forged, by default, in steel. The points of arrows and darts, as well as bullets, are also made of steel, iron, or a similar metal. Against supernatural monsters, though, you often need silver.

A silver weapon costs double, inflicts -2 damage (never less than 1) in a normal fight, and it breaks on a roll of a natural 1.

But a silver weapon also inflicts double damage (without the -2 penalty) against monsters vulnerable to silver, such as undead.

Damage

For all weapons, damage is the dice to roll if the attack is successful, and to subtract from the opponent's HP.

Small weapons	Easy to conceal and to use in close quarters. Allows use of a shield in the other hand, or a small secondary weapon.

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Improvised small weapon	1	1d3	-
Cestus	1	b1d3	3
Knife/Dagger	1	1d4	5
Club	1	1d4+1	4

Regular weapons	One handed and made to kill. Allows use of a shield or a small secondary weapon.

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Sword, rapier	1	1d6+1	40
Axe	1	1d6	20
Mace, flail, warhammer	2	b2d6	25

Versatile weapons	One or two handed; treat them as a sword (1d6+1 damage, and shield/sec. weapon) if one handed, by the table if two handed.

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Spear	2	1d8	25
Long sword	2	1d8+1	60
Staff	2	b2d4	10

Large weapons	Must be used two handed; no shield and no secondary weapon allowed.

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Improvised large weapon	2	1d6+1	-
Halberd, pike	2	1d10+1	45
Great sword	2	b2d8	80
Great axe	3	1d10	45

All missile weapons allow **a number of shots (range)** as indicated in parenthesis, before the opponent can close the distance and engage in melée.

This is not just reload time, but an indication factoring the weapon's range with enough precision for a shot in the heat of the battle.

Missile weapons

If you throw a melée weapon, it inflicts its normal damage up to 1d6 and never more than that; it counts as range (1).

Thrown weapons

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Improvised thrown object (1)	1	1d3	-
Sling (3)	1	1d4	3
Blowgun (1)	1	-	3
Short bow (3)	1	1d6	20
Hunting bow (4)	1	1d6+1	40
Long bow (5)	2	b2d8	60
Crossbow (2)	1	1d8+1	45
Big crossbow (1)	2	b2d10	70
10 arrows or darts	1	-	10
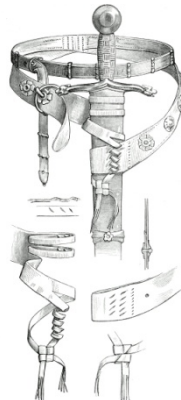
Fire weapons

Consider all fire weapons as **expensive and uncommon**, but not rare.

They use a flintlock firing mechanism (or wheellock if you prefer).

Weapon	Slots	Damage	Cost
Pistol	1	1d8	100
Arquebus	2	b2d8	120
Musket	2	2d10	150
10 gunpowder	1	-	10

Gun powder

All fire weapons require gunpowder and bullets. Regardless of how they're carried (in a bag, at the belt, on a bandolier), track those as generic gunpowder items. **10 gunpowder** are 1 slot and allow reloading 10 times. They take **4 rounds to reload** (empty, clean, load, setup).

Misfire

All fire weapons misfire (no shot) if rolling a damage of 1, and after that they need an additional cleaning round (5 rounds to reload).

Armor reduction

All fire weapons reduce targets' armor making all armor worth 1 AC and not more, regardless of what was the original AC bonus. If you're uncertain, just subtract an average 3 from all opponents' AC, including of course monsters.

Explosion danger

Any character carrying gunpowder must save vs. Dexterity **if hit by a fire attack** (not a fire weapon) or suffer 1 damage for every 3 gunpowder they carry, as they explode.

Armor is applied as a bonus to the AC. Unless otherwise instructed by the rules, do not add up two different types of armor except for shields. So for example furs + leather simply counts as +2 (the highest) as if it was just leather; while leather + simple shield indeed counts as +2+1=+3.

Be flexible in your armor description: basically anything that counts as armor has an encumbrance equal to the AC bonus that it provides, except that full plate armor is "only" 4 slots of encumbrance while providing a +5 AC, with an extra AC point.

Armor	Slots	AC	Cost
Heavy clothing or furs	1	+1	10
Leather or partial mail	2	+2	25
Chainmail or partial metal (such as a cuirass)	3	+3	80
Full plate or near full plate	4	+5	200
Simple shield	1	+1	15
Large shield	2	+2	50

Useful gear

For gear, food, services, and so on, always assume standard quality and size where not specified

Items listed with Slots "-" **cannot** be carried, while items with Slots "0" are considered to be **small items** of minimal encumbrance, and you can write two or three of them in a single slot.

As a rough indication, double the price for **better quality**, and double for **luxury**, fancy, exceptionally high quality items. Double the price also if you need to make stuff which is of a **better quality** and therefore lighter or smaller, to reduce its encumbrance.

Double the price for a **size upgrade** (a longer rope) **and double its slots too**.

Light gear	Slots	Cost
Bell	0	10
Candles (5)	0	1
Chalk	0	1
Flint & steel	0	1
Garlic	0	1
Holy symbol	0	20
Holy water	0	10
Hourglass	0	50
Ink and Parchment	0	5
Lock	0	10
Magnifying glass	0	50
Manacles	0	15
Mirror (small)	0	20
Nails	0	1
Pouch	0	3
Rogue tools	0	30
Sealing wax	0	5
Spikes	0	5
Tobacco	0	2
Whistle	0	1

Regular gear	Slots	Cost
Backpack	1	5
Barrel	4	5
Bedroll	2	2
Book	1	20
Bottle or flask	0	1
Chain (short)	2	25
Chain (long)	4	40
Chest	4	15
Climbing gear	2	30
Clothes (plain)	1	5
Clothes (regular)	1	10
Clothes (practical)	1	20
Clothes (fancy)	1	50
Crampons	1	2
Crowbar	2	2
Fishing gear	1	2
Grappling hook	1	5
Hammer or light tool	1	3
Ladder (short)	4	5
Ladder (long)	8	10
Lantern	1	10
Musical instrument	1	5
Oil (lantern)	1	3
Pick or heavy tool	2	5
Pole	2	1
Pulley	1	2
Quiver (for 20)	1	5
Rope (short)	1	2
Rope (long)	2	4
Sack or Saddlebag	1	2
Shovel	2	5
Tent (for 1)	2	10
Torches (3)	1	1

Food	Slots	Cost
Alcohol	1	5
Drink (tavern)	1	3
Meal (tavern)	1	1
Ration (normal)	1	1
Ration (dry)	1	3
Animal's food	1	1

Travel	Slots	Cost
Cart (buy)	-	50
Raft (buy)	-	25
Small boat (buy)	-	200
Daily coach ride	-	10
Daily boat ride	-	5
Short coach ride	-	3
Short boat ride	-	2

Lodging	Slots	Cost
Barn (night)	-	1
Inn (common)	-	2
Inn (private)	-	10
Inn (luxury)	-	50
Rent (room/month)	-	20

Animals	Slots	Cost
Small dog or cat	2	5
Dog (trained, hunting)	3	30
Dog (trained, fighting)	4	50
Horse (riding)	-	100
Horse (war)	-	500
Mule or pony	-	50
Other (small)	2	5
Other (large)	-	50

ROLLING DICE

As the Game Master, you are expected to decide **when and if** to call for a dice roll. In principle, use your best judgment and:

❖ When appropriate, just tell the player that **the character succeeds** in what they try to do (the task is trivial, there is no interest in seeing a failure, there is no difficulty or pressure or reason to think there could be any significant issue)

❖ When the situation demands it, just say that what they are trying to do is **plainly impossible** (beyond human capability, or perhaps clearly stupid; probably they didn't understand the situation)

❖ In those cases, prompt them **to ask questions** and **seek alternatives** or explain **what they can do instead**

Ask for a roll when it creates positive tension:

❖ There is **risk**
❖ There is **time pressure**
❖ There is **conflict**
❖ There is interesting potential **in both failure or success**
❖ When **complications** might arise
❖ When the character can perform something **critical**, something **delicate**, something **special**, something **unique**, something **daring**, etc...

In other words, don't be afraid to let things unfold without the need for dice as long as it makes sense

And don't be shy when the time comes to say no and present something as clearly impossible; there are things characters simply cannot do

Success and failure

When asking for a roll, you are leaving the response **in the hands of the dice**. If the dice determine a **success**, it must be so (within the limits of what's at stake) and if the dice determine a **failure**, there must be some dire consequence.

Do not dilute success earned with the dice, and do not hold back punishment for failure.

Interesting failures & fail-forward

A lot of times, failures are described by GMs as a "miss". The character fails to pick the lock, to lift the heavy gate, to hit the enemy. Failure can be described as much more than that.

You can describe failure without the need to resort to a "miss". Sometimes the characters are doing their best and did their thing properly, but... **something else went wrong**, or the conditions were **different than expected**, or there is a **new element of complication** that gets introduced. Also, failures become sometimes a hard stop in the characters' progress and might transform an intense scene or session into a slow grind searching for alternatives.

This is why you can describe failure with a **fail-forward approach**, which means giving the characters what they want but either **introducing a new complication**, or twisting the effects of their action or the objective of their actions, in a way that **makes this "success" a pricey one**.

Examples

So, you may describe failure as in the next pages (these are just examples, not an exhaustive list; some are proposing alternatives to failure and others are fail-forward examples, and some are a mix of the two).

- ❖ You are picking the lock but it takes more time than you expected… do you give it another Turn of trying?
- ❖ The lock clicks and opens, but the door seems to have been barred from the inside
- ❖ The lock clicks and open but you feel a sting on your finger; and it burns like hell
- ❖ The lock clicks and the door opens with a loud noise; you hear steps from the nearby corridor and alarmed voices

As you can see the above are not plain failures but: a waste of **time**, a **new situation** (a bar requires strength), a **new danger** (a trap), a **fail-forward** (guards approaching but you have access).

- ❖ They accept your request for a discount but then their business partner shows up angry and rejects the deal
- ❖ The local priest agrees to ask the villagers to help you in your hunt, but the villagers apparently are not taking orders from him, and flatly refuse
- ❖ They are ready to give you access and let you in, but all of a sudden someone else turns up

See how the first is basically a failure (no discount) but from the actions of a **different NPC** (the negotiation was good, but the other angry bastard showed up); how the second introduces a **new situation** and **possible complication** (do you persuade the villagers? Why do they not listen to priest?), how the third is a mixture of **fail-forward** (they are giving you access, you're half way in…) and **complications** (someone else is coming… do you take the risk and enter? Do you wait, perhaps to be denied access by the newcomers?).

Climbing a wall and failing the roll	❖ You can climb but the bricks are old and crumble under your fingers, stones falling on the street below; you are going to make a lot of noise
	❖ Halfway up you notice that the wall is slippery with moss; you cannot safely reach the top from here
	❖ You almost get to the top of the wall, but manage to go no further; perhaps one of your companions is strong enough to pull you up

Here we have an example of a **complication** (noise possibly attracting guards), a failure that does not depend on the character's skills but on a **difficult condition** (the moss on the wall), and a failure that involves **someone else** (one of your friends must take some risks to help you: maybe a Strength check at the risk of falling?).

Adding details	Note that by introducing new elements, new NPCs and presenting complications, you make the world richer with details and **at the same time** you present the characters not as incompetent losers failing at their tasks fairly often, but as adventurers facing harsh difficulties.
No hard stops (unless when you want them)	Moreover, all those twists and complications will help you to keep the narration fluid and going forward, **instead of hitting a hard stop** as a consequence of a simple "you don't manage to do it".
Avoid flat descriptions and retries	And last but not least, twists and complications and fail-forwards present **new situations, new challenges**, avoiding flat repetitive descriptions and the classic loop of endless re-tries sometimes characters fall into.

- The enemy raises their shield and blocks your blow, or your blade just dents their armor
- The scales of the monster seem thick enough to stop your blade, or you perhaps should use silver instead of steel
- The enemy dodges, jumping aside; if they have a weapon they may parry your blow (and when the GM rolls the enemy's attack, a successful hit may be described as a skill-ful counterattack)
- The enemy is hit and bleeding but seems to just shrug the pain away and prepares for a counterattack
- Your arrow flies in a perfect trajectory, but misses the enemy's head by just an inch
- Your pistol or musket is aimed surely at your target, but when you pull the trigger the charge fails to ignite

When describing failures in combat, remember that **Armor Class** (both for characters and opponents) is not just how difficult it is to hit them, but **to hit them and cause harm**. So for example you can describe how attacks are **blocked or dodged**.

Hit Points are not just "blood"; they are also **resilience to pain** (hence hitting the enemy for 0 HP damage or a low amount) and even pure luck or misfortune (missing by an inch).

If a monster has a large number of Hit Points, describe it as fearsome, near invulnerable, insensitive to pain and bleeding, capable of fighting on despite terrible wounds.

CAMPAIGN SPIRIT

While it is perfectly possible to use the Black Dogs 'zine as an inspiration for specific house-rules, bestiary, setting, or as a source for adventures, it's when all the pieces are put together in a single game, that the material really shines. In this context, it's important to understand the game spirit.

A game of exploration

The Black Dogs is a game of exploration. It is other things too, but it's not about saving the world, and it's not just about looting treasure. In other words, it's not epic fantasy, and it's not a slow grind of level-up and power-up by the means of XP and gold.

I don't like to define it by just saying "not epic" and "not grinding", so let's try with a better explanation: the Black Dogs is a game of exploration, **for the GM and the players**.

Exploration for players

A game of exploration **for the players**, means that after going through adventures at your table, players will be tougher and harder: they'll know what to fear from the world of the OSR, and they'll be wiser. They'll know how to take risks, in exchange for the experience (not the XP) of seeing this world of imagination, its monsters and its mysteries.

Characters as instruments

Players will have a unique experience in taking decisions for their characters in Black Dogs, and in using those characters **as instruments to explore this fantasy world**.
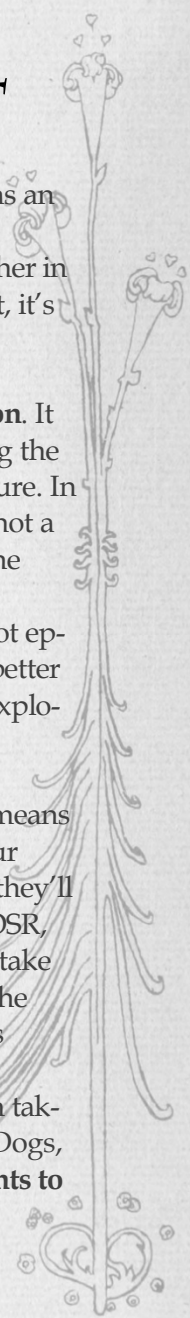
Players will know and discover this world according to the risks they agree to take.

Their party is made of a limited number of characters: the experience of exploration from the players' point of view, will be **the sum of all the many things they've seen** before the group of the Black Dogs will fall apart. And there will be value - you'll see - also in what they've left behind and unexplored.

In this sense an adventure, or in a broader sense a campaign, **are like a dungeon**. Regardless of their real location and content, what's important is which doors have been opened and which rooms have been explored. And the experience of the adventure or campaign is shaped as much by those decisions that have left **some doors unopened and some zones unexplored**.

Taking risks is part of the players' job, so that they can balance their two instincts: keeping characters alive if possible, and see as much as they can of the situation.

The adventure (or the equivalent dungeon) is experienced in a different way every time, depending on the choices made by players, on the risks taken, on the paths chosen.

For the GM, a game of exploration is presenting the single adventure (or the entire campaign) as a situation, to make it evolve according to its premises and react to the players' actions (or lack of). It's witnessing the story emerge by the players' decisions to open this door or leave that one closed.

The key to do that, is **always keeping an open mind**. Yes, there is some prep done for the adventure, and maybe even for the campaign. Yes, there are some pieces that you "programmed" to react in certain ways. All those things just make sense. What instead should **not** be there, is a danger, an NPC, a monster, or any sort of fictional piece that as GM you will use to direct the players in the direction you wanted.

Your players are the ones driving here: you present many paths, an open scenery; they decide which way to take. There should not be single, unique, GM-determined, solution.

The secret to having a lot of fun as GM, is **not to know what's going to happen**. It is not knowing what direction the session will take. Your favorite NPC might die, your great monster be slain with a clever plan, the great secret in the hidden cave never discovered. All these are possible, and positive outcomes.

They are the fruit of the interaction between the players' characters and the world you present. They are what's called exploration. They are what gives life to your adventure, setting and campaign.
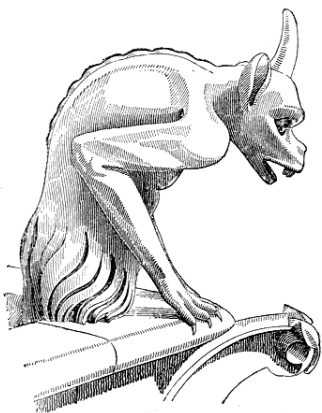
ADVENTURE SEEDS

This small section presents a few adventures seeds generated with the **random tables** that will appear in the next issue of the Black Dogs 'zine. These are not full adventures, but just simple descriptions to spark your imagination into some improvisation at the table. They are presented with a summary of what I rolled on the random tables, to show how these elements can be put together into an adventure seed.

When running improvised adventures, don't be afraid to keep them short: not too complex, not too messy. Keep them **straight to the point**: they can be done within a single session. The only things you need are starting ideas, guidelines on how to proceed, and a few stats.

An Old Lover

These are the rolls on the random tables:

L: 6-2 = Medium town; Important merchants and nobles

Add. feature: 1-4 = An important crossroad
P: 2-5 = Lover or spy; An old grudge
P: 4-4 = Priest or bishop; Disposition to abuse
M: 6-7 = A Witch fighting the church
C: 8 = Someone is in great danger; Or power

The town clearly is about merchants and trade, and it is in turmoil because of a Witch: she has a personal feud against the local church and the Bishop in particular. If the characters investigate the Bishop, it will be clear to them that he's the bad guy here: he's abusive and corrupt and the Witch is bent on revenge.

Note that there is also a lover or a spy; perhaps the Witch (or someone she loved) was the Bishop's lover or spy?

What side are the merchants on in this fight? What about the nobles?

The Black Market

These are the rolls on the random tables:

L: 3-1 = Medium village; Interbreeding families

Add. feature: 5-2 = Thriving market

P: 5-5 = Addict or drunk; Blackmail

P: 3-2 = Herbalist or druid; Greed for power

P: 6-7 = Beggar or vagabond Part of a cult

M: 3-1 = Two unusual, smart Zombies

C: 6 = Disease or mental instability; Cruelty

This looks like a nest of wasps, although it has a thriving market. Addicts, drunks, beggars and vagabonds: what might they be selling? Organs or blood, perhaps. That's why those families are interbreeding: they sell their offspring. The market is by custom held in secret at night, in the nearby woods, and alchemists and wizards, scholars and medics, necromancers and witches send their apprentices to buy at the market. All agreed not to go in person to avoid futile confrontations.

There is always 1d10 of them buying random body parts, blood, organs, entire corpses

The village looks small but the streets are filled with addicts, drunks, beggars and vagabonds, even of very young age: they are the wicked offspring of generations of interbreeding and the source of what's sold in the night market. At night, they retire in barracks just out of the village; there they are fed once a day by their relatives, which also make sure they don't wander off to far from the village. There is a minimum of farming getting done, but the "normal" villagers seem to be a bit too rich and quite secretive, and the few local shops rival those of a proper town.

Cruelty is definitely the mark here: even the characters might end up being sold in pieces at the night market if they don't pay enough attention

- ❖ **The local families**: the "normal" ones; they want to keep their wicked offspring under control and keep selling them in the night market and of course preserve the dark secret of their village. They also have a problem with zombies that live in a nearby catacomb: those zombies are desecrating their cemetery, they say (actually they are concerned the zombies will steal body parts or cause trouble at the night market)
- ❖ **A druid or herbalist that lives in the village**: his pockets are filled with silver and he attends to the wealthiest of the locals as physician, but now her wants more. He does not fully understand what's going on, but he is collecting information. If he manages to gather info about the night market, he will try to gain a fraction of its proceedings, rather than stop it. To gain power over the market he's ready to harm a few local families in the process, if needed
- ❖ **The smart zombies**: they were created by an accidental spell cast by a necromancer's apprentice. The apprentice was not too evil, and all evil and stupidity in the area has been already channeled in the wicked practice of the market and in its human goods. The zombies are not stupid and not evil; they are actually as smart as regular humans and have a plan to free the dead from the desecration of the night market. They cannot speak nor write, but they can make clear gestures (as clear as the GM can mimic). They live in a nearby catacomb and exit only at night (sunlight kills them)

So how can the characters get involved in what's happening? There are three major forces at work in the village, as shown in this page

If the characters make contact with the smart zombies, the zombies will try to gain their help and support

Corpses or living creatures bitten by the smart zombies will become smart zombies too

WITCHES AND SMART ZOMBIES

This section contains basic stats and reference information for some of the characters that you might need if you run any of the adventures seeds proposed in the previous pages. You probably will find these stats useful as a reference and inspiration to make additional NPCs: of course you can always tune numbers and abilities to fit your game. If you want to share your creations, send them to me and perhaps they'll get into one of the next Black Dogs issues.

Remember that **Saves for monsters** are written as x in 6 chances (roll a d6 equal or under x), same as for characters.

Rules for morale

When the characters deal with humans, remember that unless it's truly inevitable, humans do not fight to the death. NPCs that are hurt more or less severely will look for an opportunity to escape or surrender, unless they expect to be killed even if they give up arms.

Use your regular rules for morale, or simply replace them with **a d6 Save vs HP**. Roll equal or lower than the HP left and the NPC stays in the fight, roll higher and the NPC will try to escape or surrender, depending on the situation.

As an exception, humans fighting for the Bishop, to protect him or while on a mission on his account, roll morale with a d4, which makes them braver.
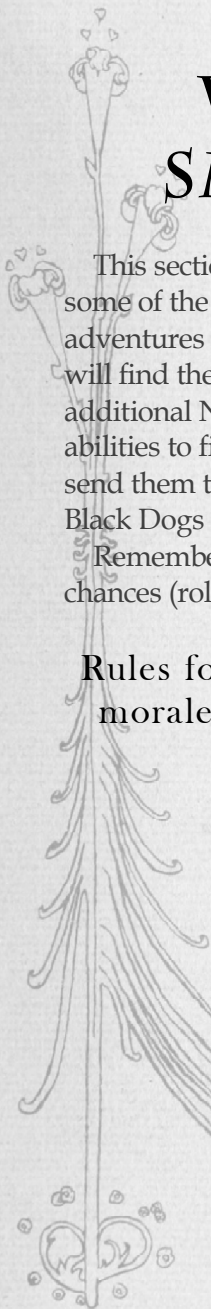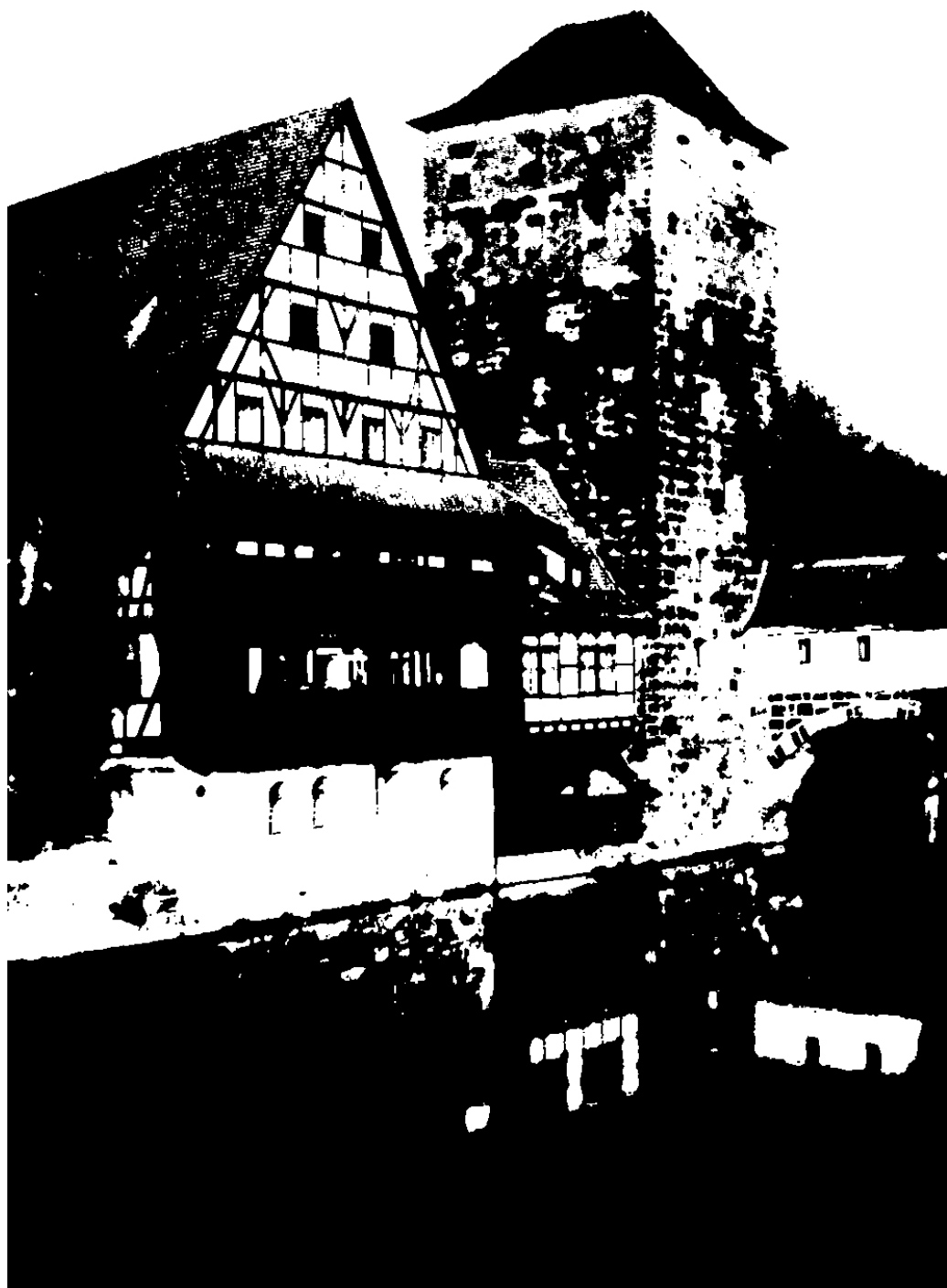
Marked by all the sins he committed, the Bishop of this town is a portrait of everything that's wrong in the church: fat and with an angry mouth, greedy for power and wealth, obscene in his display of gold and silver, abusive with anyone around him. But still: he's a careful listener, and can be a sweet charmer when it comes to bending you to his will. Everyone around him seems inclined to keep him happy, and not just out of fear.

Strong charm

If the Bishop has the chance to speak with the characters, while they gather information about him or even in the middle of combat, he will use anything at his advantage.

Characters **failing a save vs magic** will not be able to attack him or even try to capture him for 1d4 rounds, and for the rest of the fight will inflict only half damage. To trigger this spell, the Bishop can select one target per round and the target must have spoken to him; even answering a simple question like: "Why are you attacking me?" makes them susceptible to this power. Their answer needn't be true: it's the conversation that counts; the Bishop will seed doubts and uncertainty in almost anyone.

If the same character **is targeted twice** - because they keep speaking to the Bishop - a second failed save vs magic will **bind them** to the Bishop: every 1 HP lost by the Bishop will result in 3 HP lost by the character. Only a successful save vs magic (permitted once per day) or the Bishop's death will break the bond.

Bishop

Bishop
AC 10
Save 3
(4 vs magic)
HD 2d6 (7 HP)

1 attack:
unarmed (1d2)
or small
weapon (1d4)

Weak charm
All attacks against the Bishop inflict -1 damage, and -2 damage if magical
He's somehow warded against negative actions by this inexplicable charm

A stronger charm, a real spell, can be used if characters provide the Bishop with information he can exploit

Witch

The Witch can cast 3 spells per day (in combat they count as an attack)

Witch
AC 12
Save 3
(4 vs magic)
HD 3d6 (10 HP)

2 attacks:
unarmed (1d2)
or small
weapon (1d4)

Plus spells
as described

She's a woman past her 50s but still quite charming. She appears to be younger unless someone makes a save vs magic or stays in her presence for over 1 hour. She's dressed as a commoner and does her best to hide her features without being conspicuous with too much concealment. She has a chest full of different clothes, also appropriate for mundane occasions and has a couple of religious disguises.

* **Stealing words**: save vs magic or the GM can pick up to 3 words from anything the character says. If you repeat those words again, you will lose 1 HP per word. The Witch can have up to 3 words marked for each person in sight, marking one person per round or changing words once per round
* **Dark marks**: every physical injury inflicted by the Witch will develop into a dark, goat-shaped mark, and inflict 1 HP loss every day for the following week
* **Negative charm**: the Witch needs some body part (a hair, clipped nails, will do) of the victim. An hour long ritual allows her to reduce the victim's Charisma to half, or for the Bishop, to negate new Charm spells (those already active will remain as usual)
* **Mask**: the Witch needs some body part of the target. An hour long ritual allows her to take the exact appearances of the target, until next sunshine (save vs magic to detect)
* **Crows**: 1d6 crows will appear and attack the target, AC 8; Save 1; HP 1; 1 attack beak or claws to face (1d2)

If the Witch is killed, she will return the night after from the dead, unless her corpse is burned or destroyed, or somehow sealed away. Or just use the Undead Witch for some other adventure. The Undead Witch looks ragged but is of uncanny speed and agility for a corpse, and a certain bitter beauty from her former self still lingers in her appearance.

Her blows are unnaturally powerful and she possesses all the spells of the regular Witch (Stealing words, Dark mark, Negative charm, Crows) but "Mask" is accompanied by some serious necrotic stink (save vs magic or wisdom, whatever is higher, rolled at advantage to detect something's wrong).

The Undead Witch can cast 3+1d6 spells every night, but cannot move outdoor in broad daylight.

She can also cast:
❖ **Curse**: reduce an ability by 1d6 points for 1d10 weeks
❖ **Plague**: first and second casting do nothing, the third hit against the same character makes them develop the plague (see The Undercroft 'zine issue I, page 6, buy it!)

❖ They can be turned
❖ They do not roll for morale
❖ They can be harmed by normal weapons
❖ But **normal weapons** inflict half damage
❖ **Silver weapons** inflict double damage
❖ **Spells** inflict normal damage
❖ **Fire and fire spells** inflict double damage

Witch (undead)

Undead Witch
AC 14
Save 3
(4 vs magic)
HD 4d6 (13 HP)

3 attacks:
claws (1d4)
or small
weapon (1d4)
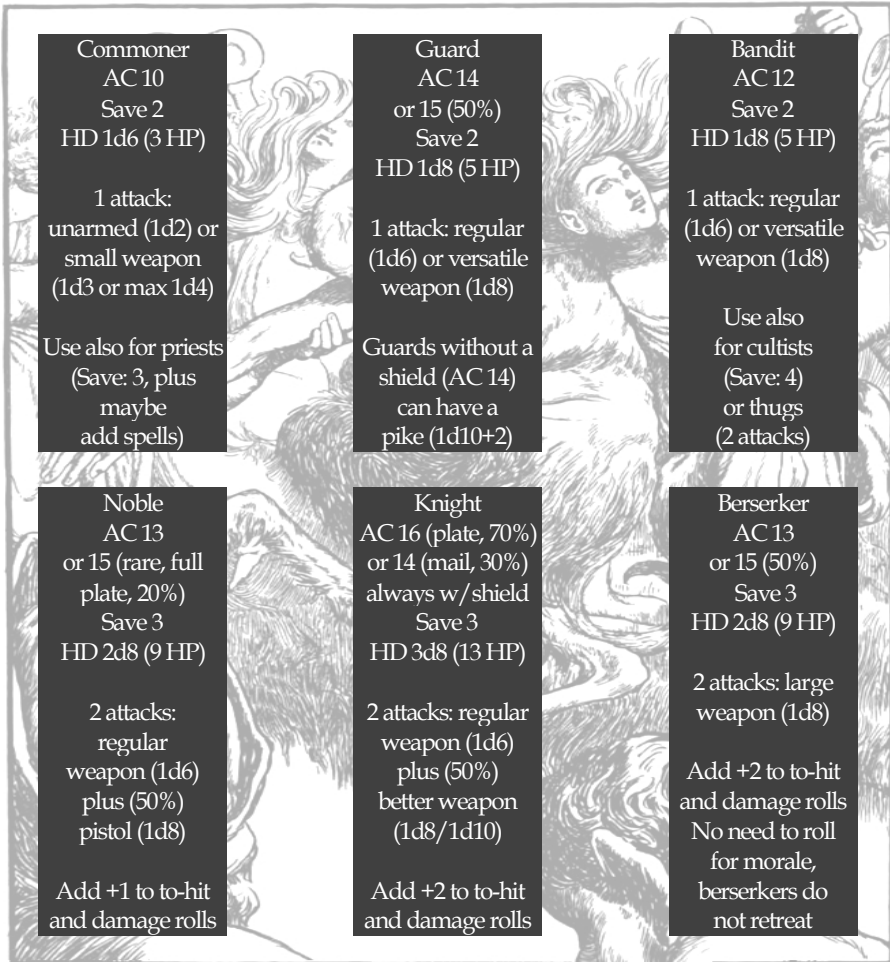
Plus spells
as described

Undead (reminder)

Other Humans

This section provides useful guidelines to determine stats for human NPCs.

Remember that humans fighting for the Bishop, to protect him or while on a mission on his account, roll morale with a d4, which makes them braver.

Commoner
AC 10
Save 2
HD 1d6 (3 HP)

1 attack: unarmed (1d2) or small weapon (1d3 or max 1d4)

Use also for priests (Save: 3, plus maybe add spells)

Guard
AC 14
or 15 (50%)
Save 2
HD 1d8 (5 HP)

1 attack: regular (1d6) or versatile weapon (1d8)

Guards without a shield (AC 14) can have a pike (1d10+2)

Bandit
AC 12
Save 2
HD 1d8 (5 HP)

1 attack: regular (1d6) or versatile weapon (1d8)

Use also for cultists (Save: 4) or thugs (2 attacks)

Noble
AC 13
or 15 (rare, full plate, 20%)
Save 3
HD 2d8 (9 HP)

2 attacks: regular weapon (1d6) plus (50%) pistol (1d8)

Add +1 to to-hit and damage rolls

Knight
AC 16 (plate, 70%)
or 14 (mail, 30%)
always w/shield
Save 3
HD 3d8 (13 HP)

2 attacks: regular weapon (1d6) plus (50%) better weapon (1d8/1d10)

Add +2 to to-hit and damage rolls

Berserker
AC 13
or 15 (50%)
Save 3
HD 2d8 (9 HP)

2 attacks: large weapon (1d8)

Add +2 to to-hit and damage rolls
No need to roll for morale, berserkers do not retreat

Smart Zombies are a twisted necromantic accident. They have human-like intelligence and feelings, but are still truly undead. Sunlight kills them quickly and they live in caves or catacombs. They cannot speak but can make themselves understood with gestures and are usually not hostile.

In the adventure seed proposed in this issue of the Black Dogs, they want the cruel villagers dead but especially they want to bite as many corpses as they can, so they can save them from the night market.

Every night, unless stopped, the smart zombies **will turn 2d4 corpses** into smart zombies, and there's at least 200 corpses in the area. There are all the premises for a full war between zombies and villagers; the zombies are dead set on stopping the desecration of the bodies of the dead, the villagers willing to do anything to save their immoral trade.

The big problem is: **zombies must eat**. They are content with eating one live human every 10 days or so, and 10 zombies can feed on it.

At the start of the adventure there are only 2 zombies and they recently fed, but every night they'll create 2d4 zombies and those awake hungry and will try to feed soon enough.

If the colony grows to 200 zombies, they'll need to kill and eat two humans per day to sustain; it's clear how this might become a problem for the entire region. Especially since these zombies are not stupid at all. They will exploit not only tools and weapons, but also their bite and capability to generate more zombies.

Smart Zombies

Smart Zombie
AC 12
Save 2
(1 vs magic)
HD 1d8 (5 HP)

1st attack:
claws or
bite (1d4)
or regular
weapon (1d6)

Add +2 to to-hit
and damage rolls
if more than one
swarm the same
character

Their bite turns corpses into other smart zombies, and a living human bitten will lose 2 HP per day (unrecoverable) in fevers and pains, then turn into a zombie once dead

The only way to cure the infection is by spell: if cured the human will not turn into a smart zombie when dead, and lost HP is regained normally