



5e
HARDCORE
MODE



**DRUNKENS & DRAGONS presents:
5E: HARDCORE MODE**

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INTRODU[○]CTION

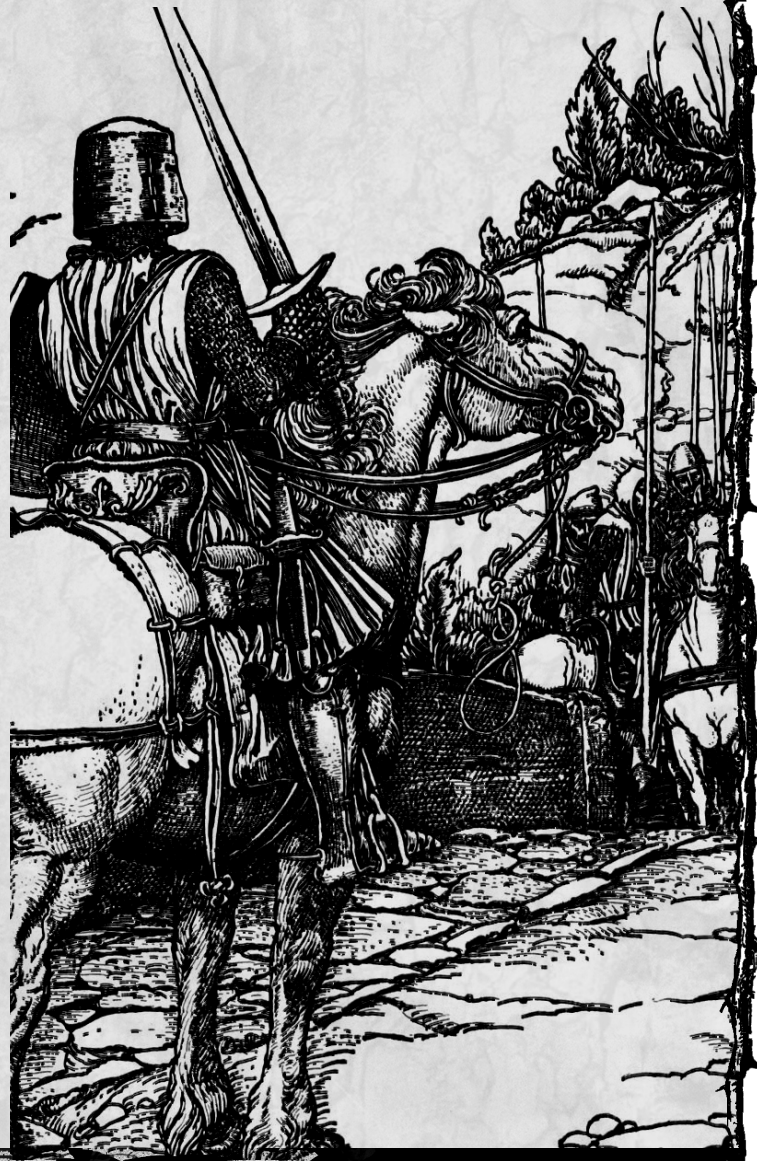
It's inevitable. Once an edition of a popular RPG reaches a certain age, the rules hackers and home-brewers (like you) begin creeping out from their subterranean hidey holes. It's not just THE game, it's YOUR game. As this process unfolds, groups and tables diversify. Some blaze forward into innovation, others recapture classic elements, and they're all right.

In a game's maturity, the chase of character evolution has limits. After a few life cycles, players are looking closer, thinking deeper, and asking for more substance. *Challenge* becomes a word often heard at the table, and the GM feels a pressure that isn't easy to satisfy. It's time, then, to cook with fire. It's time to go to **HARDCORE MODE**.

THE HARDCORE WAY

Fifth edition is, by design, built for a wide audience. In **HARDCORE MODE**, you will be building and running encounters for a far narrower, more committed player set. As a **HARDCORE GM**, you will live by a code:

- **Be fair, but merciless.** The numbers will be harsh, the rolls volatile. Get the dice out in the open, and be a guardian of their absolute authority, even when they are cruel.
- **Be a Friend of Death.** Killing characters is not your specialty, but when death does come, be decisive, have follow up plans and prep. Be ready for death to be part of play, not an ending.
- **Prize Intensity over Detail.** Go fast, go big, and let little details remain unspoken. Focus on the sharp, the sinister, the immediate. Leave minutia to scholars and historians.



INTRODUCTION



Here's your one-page cheat sheet of elements in **HARDCORE MODE**. This summary can also be handy to brief players on what your game will include beyond standard 5e. Everything in **HARDCORE MODE** supposes the use of the core books.

3D6 ATTRIBUTES

When creating characters, roll 3D6 for each Attribute, in sequence, with no re-rolls. (page 5)

PURE HIT DICE

Roll class **HIT DICE** once, even at level 1, with no modifiers. **HIT DICE** also replace some other stat systems. (page 6)

SIMPLE SKILLS

Feats, skills, and other abilities are all compressed into an 'on/off' bonus system. You're either skilled or not. (page 7)

INJURED

A binary state applied to heroes. Simplify the effects of lingering pain. (page 8)

DEATH

No more easy mode. 1 Death Save, instant death at -10 HP, and narrative continuance when death occurs. (page 9)

ZYMER'S CANDLE

A portable 'save point' that players can use for limited recovery. (page 10)

SPELLS BY LEVEL

No more slots. Unlock by character level, or use freeform acquisition. (page 11)

ROLL TO CAST

Keep all your spell details, but use **INT** or **WIS** to cast effectively. (page 11)

LEVEL 10

Characters can only progress to level 10. (page 12)

XP CLASSIC

Classes progress and evolve at very different speeds, counterbalancing their access to higher power. (page 12)

THE UPPER HAND

Compress mechanics, modifiers, and situational elements with a more potent version of the 'Advantage' system. (page 13)

MODDED MONSTERS

Keep your 5e monster books, and use easy methods to make them as nasty, and simple, as they should be. (page 14)

A GM STYLE

There will be player prestige in defeating your challenges. Here's how. (page 16)

ZONES

Forget about how many feet something is from something else. Moving and designing in zones gives your encounters definition and clarity, even without table terrain. (page 17)

THEME

The final section dips a toe into the grim-dark sea, and offers two adventures to start you **HARDCORE** journey. (page 19)

HEROES



3D6 DOWN THE LINE

When creating your PC for **HARDCORE MODE**, it is imperative to employ 'the honor system.' No fudging, no going back, no crumpling up the sheet and calling it a mining accident. You're locked in.

For each attribute, roll 3D6 **ONCE**. Record that score. Proceed thus, in sequence, rolling six times. These are the scores you keep until that character is killed in play.

At first, this may seem brutal or 'too weak,' but in time you'll see that this age-old method gives rise to more interesting, emergent stories and play.



ROLE PLAYING LOW ROLLS

Everyone knows what to do with a 16 STR or 18 DEX, but how to deal with a 6 INT or 7 CON? Be ye doomed? You are a hero of substance! Stand fast! Here are a few ideas to explain your worst stats. Work with your players and GM. Embracing flaws is a great way to jump start deeper role play.

ROLL 1D6 OR CHOOSE BELOW



1. **A Grizzled Veteran:** You have seen it all, been there, killed that, and barely made it out alive. All the wars and death have taken their toll. What you suffer in injury, though, you balance with cunning.
2. **The Blight:** Recent times have seen a terrible plague. You've survived, but at a cost. Can it be stopped?
3. **Accursed!:** Gods-forsaken wizards and their geases! Until this spell is lifted, your affliction will continue.
4. **Animal Kin:** By birth or druid meddling, you are part beast. You keep your hood low and your voice down, lest humankind cast you out.
5. **The Kid:** You took the adventurer's road after only ten winters. Your mind may be that of your adult kin, but you are yet small.
6. **Iron Touched:** A new kind of metal has been revealed by the mountain dwarves, but this iron poisons the veins of some, and vexes them with pain. What is the secret of Black Iron?



HEROES



HARDCORE HIT DICE

In modern games, we've become accustomed to large pools of Hit Points and healing resources. In **HARDCORE MODE**, much of this is stripped away. You will have precious few HP, forcing tactics, asking you gain the **UPPER HAND** (page 13) or risk a terrible death. Smaller HP numbers also alleviate the bloating math that can occur in some games.

In addition to smaller numbers overall, you can use Hit Dice to simplify healing, recovery, and a sense for size and mass. Remember, the Hit Die indicated in your 5e core books is still gospel!



USING YOUR HD

At each Level, roll your class Hit Die and add that to your MAX HP. No CON modifier applies, no re-rolls, no max outcomes. It is possible to have 5 HP at 5th level. When recovering, **HARDCORE MODE** offers three ways to use Hit Dice:



Rest: *In short rests, expend Hit Dice as normal, rolling each to determine HP regained in rest and safety.*

Medical Aid: *When non-magical medicine, bandages, or tinctures are used, roll 1 Hit Die, without needing to 'expend' it.*

Grit Your Teeth: *In combat or danger, make a CON roll against DC 10. If successful, expend 1 Hit Die, roll and recover that many HP.*



Fed up with low HP? Perhaps a quest to discover a powerful vitality potion or bracing cure all is in order...

SIZE AND MASS

Hit Dice give a sense of size and average HP, and can be used for monster healing.

D4: Small, Halfling, Youngster, Gnome, Kobold or Goblin.

D6: Small, Human Peasant or wolf.

D8: Medium: Warrior, Giant Insect, Bear, Giant Bat or Roper.

D10: Large: Bugbear, Umber Hulk, Demons and Devils, Armored Knight

D12: Huge: Giant, Wyvern or Manticore

D20: Gargantuan: Dragon, Sea Monster, Titans and things of nightmare.

HEROES



SKILLED AND UNSKILLED

In standard 5e, rolls are modified by a number of factors including Attribute, Proficiency, Skill Ranks, and bonuses from equipment or magic. In **HARDCORE MODE**, this is all compressed into a binary state. You are either skilled at a roll or not.

KEEP YOUR PROFICIENCY

Your proficiency bonus is driven by your level. Keep it just as is. D&D got this one right. This number is your new best friend.



On any roll you make that is **SKILLED**, roll $D20 + \text{Proficiency} + \text{Attribute Bonus}$, aiming to meet or beat the target DC or AC.

On any roll that is **UNSKILLED**, roll a D20 with no modifiers, unless negative.



Yep, this is scary stuff. If **UNSKILLED** in Acrobatics, for example, you cannot use your DEX bonus when leaping a chasm. If **UNSKILLED** in Athletics, you roll a raw D20 to bend bars or climb a stone wall.

This method also removes ranks and other bonuses. Your rolls are easier to memorize, generally lower, and things you're not good at, you're **BAD** at. That's the **HARDCORE** aspect about this method! The gap between **SKILLED** and **UNSKILLED** is wider, forcing you and your team mates to create complimentary skill sets, or die when the dice go cold.



HEROES



INJURED!

In a **HARDCORE** game of 5e, Hit Points don't just come and go. Deep cuts, ripping bites, or aching sprains impair your core ability to function. Some systems introduce a table or roll chart for injuries, but **HARDCORE MODE** makes it simpler. Like 'SKILLED' it proposes a binary *INJURED* state.



Become *INJURED* any time you are hit with 10 or more damage in a single attack or effect.

Once you are *INJURED*...

- You cannot use **Grit Your Teeth** to recover Hit Points
- No roll you make benefits from an **Attribute Bonus**. Proficiency only
- Your **DEX** bonus, if any, no longer adds to your **Armor Class**



When modding monsters or enemy equipment, consider adding a 'Inflicts Injury' ability that can tag onto any attack, regardless of its damage.

AH, MUCH BETTER!

You are no longer *INJURED* once any of the following occurs:

- Receive 10 or more points of healing magic from a spell, item or potion
- Receive 10 or more points of healing from medical means (see page 6)
- Take a long rest in safety and recover to full HP



HEROES



DEATH

If it's going to be **HARDCORE**, death needs to be close, sudden, decisive, and terrible for the foolhardy. Cry a black tear, sing the dwarven dirge, and sit out the current encounter. You're toast.



You're **DEAD** if...

- You are reduced to -10 HP
- If you are unconscious and bleeding out for 3 rounds of play
- You fail a save against Death



BLEEDING OUT

When reduced to 0 Hit Points and knocked senseless, you begin to bleed out. Only the medical or magical aid of a teammate or external effect can revive you by healing 1 or more HP. The concept of 'down but stable' is simply not part of **HARDCORE MODE**.

WE GO ON

Death should never be a downer or session-ending event. Rather, it is a twist in the story of epic grief, oath-taking, and new purpose. As GM, have an idea of how players can introduce characters, or turn the story to a darker dimension. As a player, keep a spare PC around, and make yours a death worth remembering.



HEROES

ZYMER'S CANDLE

Death should be a constant companion to players in **HARDCORE MODE**. Without a way to learn from death, though, it is not useful as a story telling tool. What can be done? A cache of resurrection scrolls? Trivially easy necromancy? Not exactly.

The great wizard of Westburg, Zymer the Olde, grants a gift to the heroes early in their adventures: a single, flickering candle. This magical candle's flame has the power to capture an instant in time and space and keep it burning bright. The heroes can then return to that instant, within limits.

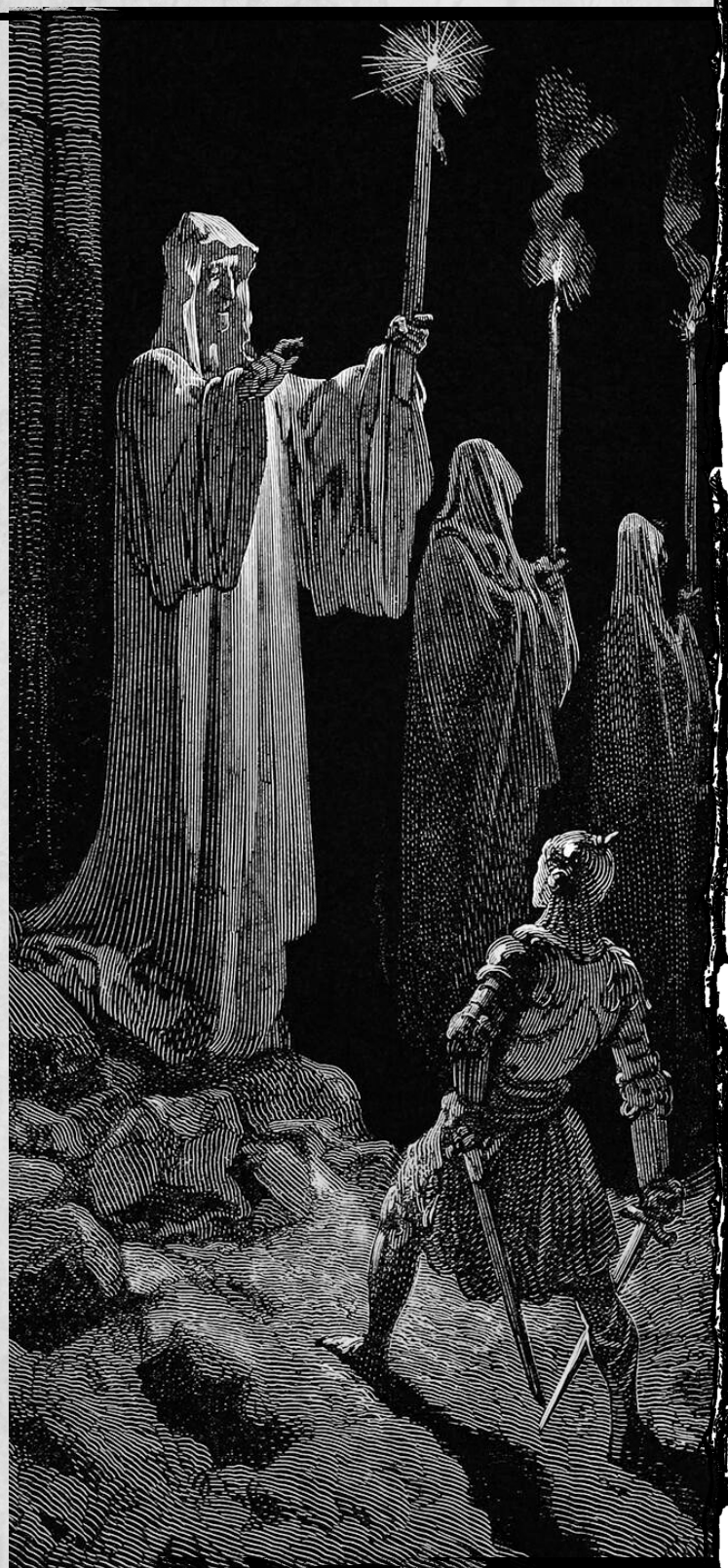


Heroes can materialize at a designated moment in time and space, where they place Zymer's Candle, if...

- *Zymer's Candle is still lit*
- *Zymer's candle is in a safe place*
- *At least 1 hero must be able to call upon the candle to activate it*



Using this powerful relic with care, players will be able to make strategic efforts to counter their doomed fortunes. This 'save point' also reinforces the fixed nature of challenges in **HARDCORE MODE** (see page 16). The real question is how to keep a candle burning in the rough and tumble life of adventurers...



HEROES



SPELLS, NOT SLOTS

We've all scratched our heads a few times about using and unlocking Spell Slots. In **HARDCORE MODE**, all this is stripped away. When choosing new spells at level-up time, gain access to *3 new spells of your current level*. These are cast at *their native level*. This makes leveling up far more expansive for a magic user, and removes all the math craft of using slots in the heat of battle. Use cantrips as normal. Will we still wait for wizards to choose their next cast? Yes. Yes we will.

RADICAL OPTION: ROLL TO CAST

For every uncertain action in the game, the dice must be consulted. How magic, the most volatile and uncertain force of them all, eluded this requirement is a mystery.

Mystery no more. In **HARDCORE MODE**, magic users must roll to cast. Frequency limits on spells still apply, and are only expended when successfully cast. This roll also introduces the potential of critical success/failure and advantage/disadvantage on casting spells. For the **HARDCORE GM**, these are powerful tools.



When attempting to cast a spell of 1st level or higher...

- *Roll with INT or WIS, and meet or beat DC 10 to succeed, unless other factors have increased the local cast DC*
- *Critical successes DO NOT expend the spell's use limits, and inflict double effect*
- *Critical failures fizzle, do not expend the spell, and induce a roll on the volatile magic table*



VOLATILE MAGIC TABLE ROLL 1D12 BELOW

1: Disaster: Expend the spell, drop to 1 HP, and cast a randomly selected spell at a random location in the encounter.

2: Mutation: Be twisted by formless energy. One of your limbs is that of a crab, insect, or tentacled thing.

3: Rift: A tear opens in space-time, sucking unsecured objects or creatures into deep space over 4 rounds time.

4: Imps: 1D12 Imps appear in a brimstone cloud, angry at the clumsy caster.

5: Seared: Be stricken with 1D10 arcane damage

6: Toxic: A cloud of poisonous smoke appears, engulfing the current encounter for 1D4 rounds

7: Spell Sickness: Forget this spell for 1D4 days, or until a long rest in safety

8: Dazed: Spend your next turn stunned

9: Misfire: Cast the spell, but at a random target or location, including allies

10: Dud: Nothing happens

11: Sparkles: Comical, colorful confetti fills the air, attracting unwanted attention

12: Late: The spell casts, but 1D4 rounds from now

HEROES



SPELLS: SO MANY QUESTIONS

Such a drastic change to slots can lead to a lot of new questions. 5e has an abundance of spellcaster types, all with varying means of acquiring, casting, and regenerating spell use. The abundance of books in 5e only compounds this. No written ruleset can prepare you, as GM or player, for every question. The binary demands of **HARDCORE MODE** ask you to flatten this variety into a more unified solution for casters of all kinds. A few possible solutions are provided below, if page 11 seems too brief.

CASTER CASES

Clerics, Druids, Paladins, innate casters, users of holy or nature magic have flexible access to their spells, choosing from their entire list each day. They bypass any sense of 'learning' as their magic is external, or beyond conceptual means.



Each day, **MEMORIZE your level + 2** of any spells at or below your level.



Bards, Sorcerers, Wizards, Warlocks and scholars of arcane art use their minds to comprehend and access magic. They must choose to learn certain spells, then study each morning to have access to a subset thereof.



At each level, **LEARN 3** new spells of that level. Each day, **MEMORIZE your level X 2** from your learned list.



Most importantly, remember to keep your GM mind open, and work with players to find simple, exciting solutions to magic.

PLAY EXAMPLE

GM: The sun rises at last, and the ruins come into view.

ELOS: I leveled up last night! Ok, how do spells work again?

GM: You're level 3 now! Choose 3 new level 3 spells to learn. Now you'll have 9 learned spells, and you can memorize any 6 of those each morning.

ELOS: Oh my gods! Fireball! Yes! So that's a level 3 spell. It always casts at level 3?

GM: Correct, imagine using a level 3 slot permanently. 8D6 fire damage!

ELOS: I see, so it will always just be 8D6... no increasing that with a higher slot.

GM: Correct. What you lose in amplification you gain in access and simplicity.

KORD: Guys? I'm still here.

GM: Did you level up, too?

KORD: Nope. I'm still neck deep in level 5. That is exactly why we need to conclude this wizard discussion and get after those bugbears!

GM: On that note, 3 of the beasts suddenly appear at your camp!!

KORD: I attack! FOR ANTERRA!

HEROES



LEVEL 10

HARDCORE MODE caps all characters at Level 10. Beyond that, they can only progress through equipment, knowledge, and acquiring magic via quests, discovery, and story paths. This keeps math clean, imposes a natural conclusion to a campaign, and avoids the kind of immortal oddity we've all struggled with in long-running games.

CLASSIC XP

The framers of our hobby had brilliant insights into the pace of level progression, especially in its diversity. The modern RPG has unified leveling pace across many classes and types, but **HARDCORE MODE** employs the former method. Wizards grow slowly, but access tremendous power. Fighters learn fast, but are limited by the materials, durability and availability of weapons and armor. Thieves learn fast, but die often, and so on. The following table proposes such diversity, but the GM should feel invited to create, tune, and research a leveling scale that works for your group.

CLASS	LVL	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
<i>FIGHTER</i>		250	700	2200	5000	8k	12k	18k	24k	30k
<i>CLERIC</i>		300	900	2700	6500	14k	23k	34k	48k	64k
<i>WIZARD</i>		400	1200	3000	7500	16k	25k	38k	52k	68k
<i>ROGUE/THIEF</i>		200	600	2000	4500	7k	11k	16k	22k	28k
<i>PALADIN</i>		300	900	2700	6500	14k	23k	34k	44k	56k
<i>RANGER</i>		300	1000	2500	6800	15k	24k	34k	44k	50k
<i>DRUID</i>		300	900	2300	6500	14k	23k	31k	40k	50k
<i>BARD</i>		200	600	2000	4500	7k	11k	16k	21k	25k
<i>BARBARIAN</i>		200	500	1800	4200	6k	11k	18k	24k	30k

HEROES

THE UPPER HAND

Part of playing **HARDCORE** is playing fast. This means rolls are easier to memorize, and conditions easier for GM's to moderate or mechanize.

Much of any game's table time is spent with players working to gain the upper hand on a situation. This involves use of cover, distance, henchmen or surprise. **HARDCORE MODE** compresses all of these variables into the established Advantage/Disadvantage system in 5e.

Rolls are never modified, nor penalties imposed, nor bonuses earned by gaining the upper hand. A character, or group of characters, simply earns advantage or disadvantage.

The GM can also announce 'You have the upper hand!' to the entire table. All players are now rolling with advantage. Conversely 'the enemy has ambushed you! You're caught flat footed!' The table is all rolling disadvantage now, and so on.

Like so many elements of **HARDCORE MODE** this simple step makes binary a wide array of narrative possibilities, even eschewing variable DC's. Apply The Upper Hand method, and follow this guideline for all DC's:

As a rule of thumb, the DC of any Check is 10. Calling 'Roll DEX' should imply 'Meet or beat 10 with a DEX roll.' Escalate the ambient DC as needed.



THE ENEMY

REAL CHALLENGE RATING

This bit is more radical. Using CR effectively has always been spaghetti in 5e. No more. **HARDCORE MODE** prizes a monster's CR above all else besides Immunities and Abilities. All of its stats can be derived on the fly by knowing the CR. Your Monster Manual is still critical for details, but stats are solved in one stroke.

CHALLENGE RATING FORMULAE



All monster stats are created thus:

- *Armor Class = 10 + CR*
- *Hit Points = 10 X CR*
- *Check and Attack Rolls = D20 + CR*
- *XP Value = CR X 200*



THIS IS MADNESS!

The ramifications of this method should be instantly apparent to a fielded GM or player. Higher challenge monsters are worth far less XP, stat diversity is flattened and homogenized, by Bruenor's Beard, heresy abounds!

In truth, this method will add greatly to the numeric streamlining of play, and fit with your lower-powered PC's and variable level progression. All the numbers are shrinking. It's all relative. At any time when creating or playing monsters, a GM should **ALWAYS** feel free to boost a stat beyond its formula for special reasons. Always augment a monster among its mooky companions! The CR formulae simply provide your base shortcut, and keep your head in the moment.



THE ENEMY



MONSTER A.I.

Choosing what a monster's next action will be is always a pivotal moment for the GM. Not only can it be a time-consuming moment, but one of conflicting motivation. The GM must consider monster tactics and motivations, but not spam a brutal ability or exploit meta knowledge of the overall tactical space.

Save time and strain by applying a simple 'Artificial Intelligence' to your monsters. Simply check the number of different Actions on the creature, and roll that # die. Count from the first action then downward, and execute the action rolled. Multiattack? Roll 2 or more of the same die and execute the results. The dice are now to blame, and the table can wonder and wail at their outcome, not your devious sadism.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL MONSTER

No creature is ever more deadly than the environment. It cannot be killed, contains the battle, and abides by no rules. 'Boulders fall from the ceiling! Save vs. Death!' What monster can dare such power? Be fair and consistent with your hazards, but also brutal. Forcing players to play the space as much or more than monster opponents is the key to any memorable encounter.



HORDES

When battling large groups of monsters or foes, which should happen frequently considering the heroic ambitions of your players, avoid chewing up time with lots of rolls and HP tracking by applying a **HARDCORE** trick: For each enemy in the horde, add 1 to your D20 attack. For each enemy, also add 1 to your damage outcome. On the player side, simply divide player damage by a constant and fell that many enemies at once. 10 damage from a fireball? Divide by 2, 5 ghouls are burned to cinders! Adjust your constant for tougher hordes. And yes, a horde of 10 or more will be terribly deadly given equal footing with heroes. Use this knowledge.

A GM STYLE

VERISIMILITUDE

This is a very cool word that means 'true to the truth' or 'similar to a truth.' As a **HARDCORE MODE GM**, one of your most important duties is to stay true to the adventure material, even when it proves difficult or impossible for players. This can be a paradigm shift for some GM's, who are accustomed to adapting content when things go terribly wrong, or when prep is insufficient.

In **HARDCORE MODE**, the numbers stand above reproach. It is the players who must adapt, not the content. Players can trust, and even celebrate extreme difficulty because it is openly known what they face. This is the gut feeling of verisimilitude.

FIXED CHALLENGE PRESTIGE

When players complete a block of play in **HARDCORE MODE**, the fixed nature of the challenge should come with it a great sense of accomplishment. 'We escaped the Red Castle alive! Finally!' Using Zymer's Candle to replay failed encounters will also reinforce this kind of victory prestige.

The first few times players hit a failure wall will be the toughest for a new **HARDCORE GM**. Your instinct will be to offer ways out, negotiate new details, or even (gasp) soften stats. You're reading this document for a reason, though... you've come seeking a deeper, more challenging, more exciting RPG experience. That first big failure is your chance to evolve.



A GM STYLE

SOLVING MOVEMENT

One tremendous barrier to play, in any style, is finding a solution to character and enemy movement, distance, and access to space. Measuring feet on terrain in tedious and asks too much of maps. Simply asking for a GM ruling on distance feels fickle and rubbery. Close/Near/Far systems can feel coarse to experienced players. Once again, **HARDCORE MODE** compresses all this to a binary state.

*You are either **HERE** or **THERE**.*

HERE is a term that implies co-location with other things. You are among these things, be they enemies, objects, or features of an area. You can affect these things directly without ranged ability.

To move to another relevant feature, object, or creature(s), to go **THERE**, requires the move action of your turn.

This may seem flippantly simple, but it can solve all questions of movement in play. This method is commonly called 'zones.' A ZONE is a relevant location in play. Fighting with a sword? You'll need to be in the ZONE the goblins are crouching, while a bow could be fired from another ZONE. Transitioning between ZONES? Use a standard move action to do so. This method is also ideal for 'theatre-of-the-mind' games, as no significant visuals are required to track the action.

ZONES EXAMPLES

Roc Pinnacle. Your players are trying to steal a Roc egg. The ZONES are:

- The Nest
- The Cliff Edge
- A Field of Boulders
- The Ascent Route

Ebonfang. The final battle on a magical spire roof is playing out! The ZONES are:

- The Altar Stone
- A Descending Stair
- Out-In-the-Open
- The Battlements

Spider Barrow. Our heroes dare a forgotten burial chamber. The ZONES are:

- A Giant Stone Coffin
- A Massive Stone Door
- Tile-Adorned Nave
- A Mass of Webs

GM: The skeleton is rising from the coffin! It has a massive, rusty blade, and glowing eyes!

KORD: Me and Elos are at the stone door. I'll rush over to the coffin, ready to attack next round... hold it there!

ELOS: I'll fire a cold arrow from here. (Rolls) Mod 19! My cold arrow does 6 damage, and freezes it there.

GM: The skeleton crackles with ice, unable to move. Kord, roll your strike!

KORD: Mod 17, only 4 damage. Is there any other movement in the room?

GM: Yes! You see three more skeletons in the Nave! They're coming your way!

A GM STYLE



ZONES... ABSTRACT?

At first, several questions might assault your 5e brain. But HOW FAR is a ZONE from another ZONE? How big is a ZONE in feet? If things are just ZONES, do maps even matter, 'cause maps are cool! What about line of sight? What have you done to my game?!:O

One of 5e's defining aspects is its concrete treatment of distance. A world measured in feet. So many players and GM's have spent so many words telling how many feet a thing is from another, or how many feet a thing moves. All the descriptive detail, visual depth, and tactical economy of this approach can be achieved by ZONES, especially if you apply one simple formula to ease into such a new way of seeing the game.

30' is a magic number in the world of 5e. So many things seem to be right around that size or distance. It is the base 'Lego' of the D&D world, and can be used to visualize ZONES.

1 ZONE = 1 30'x30' Area or Feature

Now, if you forget all the wiggly details of who moves 25' and what spell has a radius of 40.' Treat those as a single unit of simpler, thematic space.

A ZONE is a conceptual summary of what 5e describes in atomic detail.

GM: This corridor has 3 parts, all in a long, linear hollow. The metal door, a long stretch of sparse columns, and an inset grotto at the far end. Kobold eyes can be seen in the grotto.

KORD: Can I dash all the way to the Kobolds? "For Anterra!"

GM: Since these ZONES are all lined up, that's a double move, your entire turn to get there. Elos, Kord is charging!

ELOS: I'll move up just a bit, is there a column I can hide behind?

GM: Absolutely.

ELOS: Ok, I move up and fire an arrow!

GM: It's dark down there, and there's a barbarian in the way. Roll with disadvantage.

ELOS: Ha! Still got a mod 16! 8 damage!

GM: You hear a Kobold slump to the floor, followed by a menacing low growl.

KORD: Uh oh.

NOW TRIM THE FAT

As you master the ZONE method, and design content with it in mind, you'll find many element of 5e are ready to be cut. Here's a starting list:

- **Opportunity Attacks:** Just be rid of them. They cause battles to 'stick' which reduces dynamism and movement in combat.
- **Ranges:** If it's in your encounter, it's in range for magic or missile attacks.
- **Exact Speeds:** Let go of measuring feet. Fast things outrun their pursuers by description, not inches.

A GM STYLE

AGREED INITIATIVE

Few things slow the intensity of play like Held Actions, Bonus Actions, and other mucking about with turn order and timing. Start by removing these elements from your game for good. Initiative remains an exciting part of play, so employ the **HARDCORE** way.

AGREED INITIATIVE



Roll initiative as GM vs. all players...

- *If players win, they decide their initiative order and begin.*
- *If the GM wins, she goes first THEN players decide their order and go.*



WHEN PLAYERS GO FIRST

Agreed Initiative lets players array marching order, plan coordinated moves, or gain The Upper Hand against foes before they are detected. Winning the initiative roll should be a major factor in how players approach a scene.

WHEN THE GM GOES FIRST

Allow players to use Initiative Bonuses, while you roll a flat D20. Then, don't be shy, as GM, to exploit an opportunity to go first. Immediately begin a countdown to larger threats or escalations and deploy your forces and hazards within the bounds of the narrative. Often, a deadly opening move for a GM can be simply moving enemies into the heroes' point of arrival.



THE DARKNESS



DRIMGARK!

Part of capturing **HARDCORE MODE** is the tone of a ravenous, deadly story set in dire circumstances. At first, you may conjure scenes of demonic fire, ripping gore fiends, or hellish fires searing the flesh of the foolhardy. You might imagine black-forged chains, skeletons in heaps, or horned helmets marching to annihilate the world of men.

Nope. That's *metal*.

The Darkness can be far more elusive. It involves stitching together convincing tension, evoking noble sacrifice, balancing the realistic with the supernatural, and placing the heroes at the epicenter of an all-too mortal struggle against immortal odds from darker dimensions.

True darkness in a game lies more in an empty cemetery than a burning hellscape. It hides in the dead trees, empty towers, forgotten cabins, and cold canyon air. Be subtle, be detailed, and seek evil in small places.

An unexpected but essential component to all this is humor. Not humorous themes or silly names in your game world, but humor **OUTSIDE** that world... between you and your players. Without humor about dark themes, the overbearing tone becomes melodrama, and is even sillier than metal.

See wicked comedy and sinister hatred in the same scene. Feel the wet bark ooze with blood. Whatever it is, it's watching.



THE DARKNESS



THE STAKES

If blood and horns aren't enough to conjure true darkness, what is? A big part of getting actual dread at the table, and heightening the suspense on those capricious die rolls, is the exact nature of what is at stake if players should fail or give up.

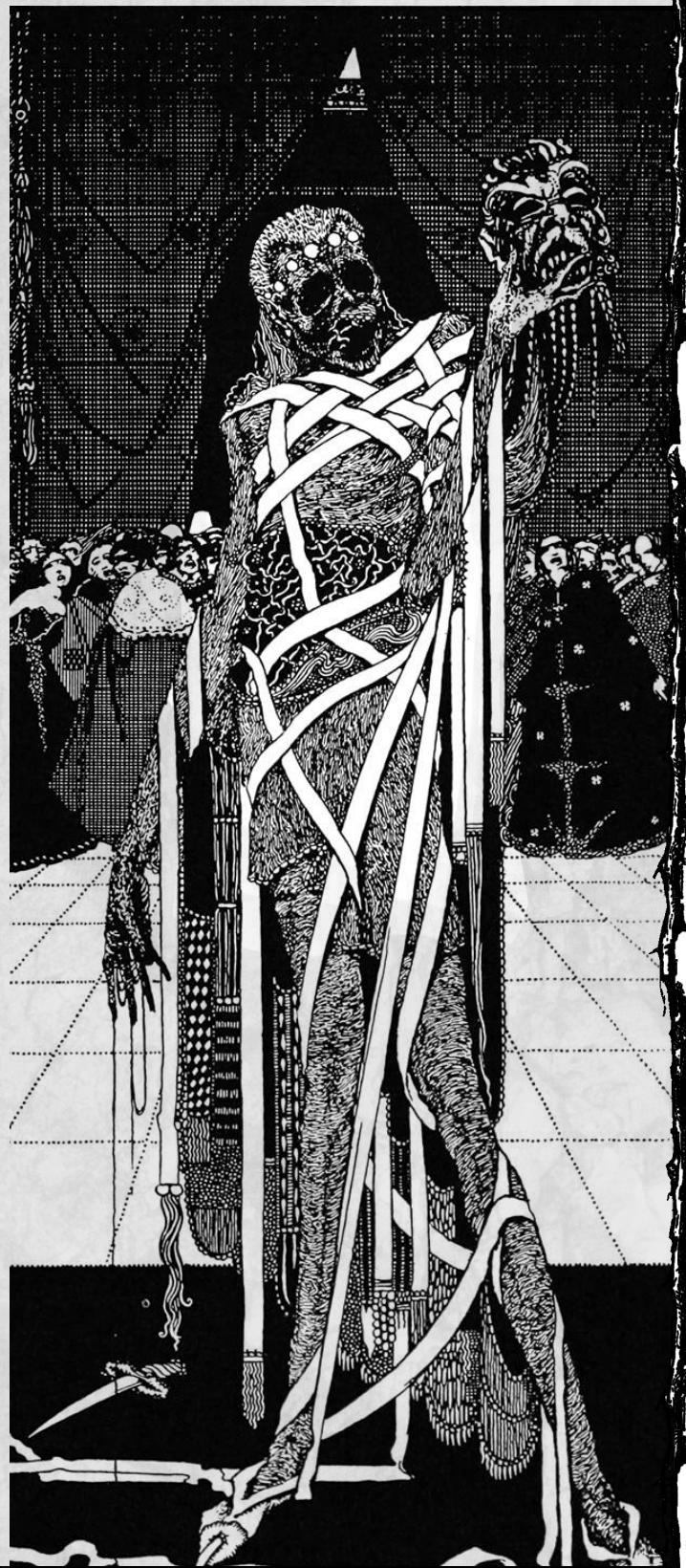
Here are some primers to put you in the **HARDCORE** mindspace.

A Dead King: Have you ever killed a king? I mean to. Thing is, he's already dead. All these lands have fallen into shadow, a pox without end, death on leather wings my night... all the work of our dead King, and I mean to end it.

They Never Sleep: Her lust is infinite, and as long as she walks free, the dead cannot die. They simply lay there, blinking, groaning. Muted mouths filled with wet muck and worms.

Guilt and Leverage: The hideous things you and your group have done, all in some fog of glory and youth. Now the dead want their due. Can you end the nightmares and clear your soul before your minds rot with regret?

Children in Snow: Dreamwalkers have no appetite for the full grown, they prey on the young, leaving their hollow corpses in the ice. Most don't even believe they are real, but you know better. You are the reason they're here.



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

JAR OF FLIES

JAR OF FLIES

In a remote village near the Storm Coast, a group of misguided, frightened elders have made a pact with an evil God. In return for the monster's mercy, they must keep a little girl captive... a vessel of evil power and an emotional food source for the abyssal deity. Our heroes stumble across this delicate situation, but the little girl cannot control her power, and the village has doubts if this grim pact can end in anything but death. Can the heroes find a path to salvation for this doomed place?

THE WHOLE TRUTH

The village of Reiligosk has kept an infinite evil in check for centuries by offering a little girl named Syrah as a sacrificial vessel of darkness. With this sacrifice, Syrah has terrible power, and it threatens to break free.

- The evil is a dark ocean God called Gargoth, who dwells in the deep
- The girl is eleven year old Syrah, who is kept asleep in an old mansion
- Syrah's moods and dreams control a vast, ravenous insect swarm
- A cabal of elders oversees her fate, keeping her peacefully asleep
- Heroes arrive in the village, where odd clues and ill omens mount
- A disastrous fire draws the heroes to the old Brehm house
- Below the Brehm mansion, a series of catacombs contains the key to this ancient evil

The adventure should juxtapose horror, mercy, ambiguous morality and difficult responsibility. **Can the heroes stop this madness AND save Syrah's life?**



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

JAR OF FLIES

HOOKING THEM

To endure the trials of this adventure, the heroes will need to be committed. Appeal to three types with these hooks:

- **LURE WITH TREASURE:** This village is known to draw treasure hunters. The Brehm family was once a mighty force of wealth in the North, and their hoard has never been discovered.
- **CALL TO HEROIC DUTY:** When heroes discover Syrah's horrific fate, Elsbeth will beg them, in secret, to help her. She's only a child!
- **LURE WITH SECRETS:** The residents of Reiligosk can be overheard discussing *Gargoth*. This dark ocean god is mentioned in several ancient texts and is believed to be pivotal in the region's history.

CHAPTERS AND PACE

To avoid getting lost in a mire of mystery, impose ever-changing time constraints on the action. This keeps things moving, and makes every choice feel immediate. Introduce each scene when the previous begins to slow.



The Village: Elders get more and more forceful that heroes must leave.

The Crags: A group of fisherman are attacked by the swarm and stranded on the rocks - doomed without help.

The Old House: After the fishermen fiasco, a group of villagers set fire to the Brehm house. Syrah and Elsbeth are trapped inside!

The Catacombs: Syrah loses control of her power and hides beneath the house.

The Precipice: Syrah tries to end her own life, but Gargoth intervenes, threatening to destroy the entire coast.



ADVENTURES

JAR OF FLIES

GM EYES
ONLY

A SLIMY CAST

The people of Reiligosk are troubled, angry, weary, and frightened by the dark power that has been contained in Syrah Brehm. Use these key NPC's to move heroes along or remind them of their importance in this grim scene.

Gordy Brehm: A bearded man in a soggy raincoat. Syrah's Uncle who keeps begging the village to end her torment, even it means risking Gargoth's wrath. *"The spells must be lifted! It's madness!"*
"Gods, she's just a child! Cowards!"

Fred Waters: An older man with highborn clothes. Fred hates being here but sent on a king's order to ensure the swarm remains contained.

"None may approach the Brehm house."

Elsbeth: A kind, heavy set woman who shuffles 'tween village and the Brehm house, caring for Syrah. *"She is a lonely, innocent girl."*

Bargle: A disfigured, hunched figure in muddy rags and kelp tangle. In truth, Syrah's little brother, twisted by Gargoth. *"Bargle no like bugs! Bargle miss sissy!"*

Ol' Jenkins: The town drunk in black trench and droopy hat. Jenkins is always warning that the town is doomed. Doomed!

"The elders found her by the sea! Every hundred years they find her, and it begins again! We'll pay for this evil! Pay!"

THE DARK SECRET

When improvising your NPC's, keep these secret truths in mind at all times, partially to lay clues, and partially to stay consistent.

- If Syrah is set free, Gargoth will destroy the village and surrounding area
- The Elders have upheld this sacrificial pact for 3 generations
- Everyone in town knows it's cruel and wrong to use Syrah in this way
- Gargoth is feeding on Syrah's innocence via The Swarm



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

JAR OF FLIES

THE VILLAINS

Gargoth is a shadowy sea god that has poisoned the soul of this place. Its evil is almost boundless, and those in its power will kill to keep its secrets.

Syrah Brehm: A little girl who's mind contains the power of Gargoth. Her moods and reactions control The Swarm.

"I just want it to stop."

"Oh no, it's happening again! Run!"

The Plumed Hag: A flamboyant woman hidden in scarves and silks, but a skeletal hag beneath. She wants to agitate Syrah and destroy the village.

"Those fools cast me out, and they will pay dearly for it!"

"The child cannot contain such darkness... I will see to it she unleashes hell on this place!"

Eel-Men: The children of Gargoth: slimy half-eel creatures that prowl the shores and nighttime hours. These were once villagers.

The Swarm: A limitless mass of ravenous insects that respond to Syrah's mind.

Gargoth's Eye: A colossal, fang-rimmed eyeball from the deep that dwells just off the Reiligosk crags.

"Come to the waves, mortal. Return to the deep and dwell forever!"



ENCOUNTERS WITH EVIL

Reiligosk is divided into five locations, each part of a chapter. The heroes face the following threats in each...

The Village: Eel-Men and xenophobic villagers will try to scare off or even kill intruders to keep their town secret.

The Crags: Eel-Men prowl these seaside cliffs in large numbers, and drag the fool-hardy into the waves as food for Gargoth.

The Old House: Here, a few villager fanatics and The Swarm are the primary threats.

The Catacombs: The Swarm continues to build here, and the Eel-Men take on an undead, subterranean look.

The Precipice: In this final scene, heroes will face Gargoth's Eye on a precarious prominence of solid rock.

ENDINGS AND REWARDS

As things come to a close, reward players with soggy old sea chests and village heirlooms. If things end in tragedy, reward them with dark revelations or glimpses of new magic, which can take the form of WIS or INT boosts.

If Syrah can be rescued and Gargoth defeated, a whole host of hidden villagers reveal themselves, thanking the heroes and offering them their loyalty. The clouds part, the sun comes out at last, and word will spread for miles how the heroes have cleansed the darkness that ruled there for centuries.

ADVENTURES

JAR OF FLIES

GM EYES
ONLY

Reiligosk Village Zones

- Village Square
- The Green Coin Pub
- The Alley
- Mud Slums

The Craggs Zones

- Upper Cliffs
- Timber Ladders
- Rocky Docks
- Fisherman's Rock

The Brehm House Zones

- Great Room
- Hall of Elders
- Syrah's Room
- Thorny Garden

The Catacombs Zones

- Tunnel Landing
- Hall of Pillars
- The Burials

The Precipice Zones

- Base of the Fang
- Precarious Edge
- Crashing Waves
- Crumbling Point

Reiligosk Villagers

- CR 1/4
- D4 Hit Die (sickly)
- Fight with clubs
- Flee if injured

Eel-Men

- CR 1
- D6 Hit Die
- Jab with rusty blade
- Entangle with fish net
- Vanish into waves

Plumed Hag

- CR 3
- D6 Hit Die
- Two Actions
- Use Level 1 and 2 Spells
- Take Wolf form

The Swarm

- CR 8
- D8 Hit Die
- Save with DEX if engulfed
- If engulfed when at 0 HP, be defleshed completely
- Only harmed with area effects, no single target

Gargoth's Eye

- CR 4
- D12 Hit Die
- Two Actions
- Fear Blast
- Slamming Tentacle
- Once appearing, will destroy an entire zone every 3 Rounds



Treasure: Village Chests

- Fishing Gear
- Old Coins
- Deformed bones
- Bandage Kits

Treasure: Eel-Men

- Rusty Sword
- Fishing Net
- Trident
- Rope and Hook
- Poison Dart

Treasure: Brehm Chests

- Precious Jewelry
- +2 Silver Dagger
- 1D4 Lvl 2 Spell Scrolls
- 1D4 Healing Potions
- 1 Random Wand
- Gilded Skull
- Amulet of Protection
- Ancient Book, read to gain 400 XP



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

RUST PLAGUE

THE RUST PLAGUE

When *all metal* in the West Kingdoms begins to inexplicably turn to red dust, even gold, adventurers are sent in all directions to stop the destruction.

Our heroes stumble upon the source of the plague in a hidden canyon realm called Castle Valley, where a deranged wizard has sworn to end the world of decadence and civilization forever. Can he be stopped? Play the following scenes to find out.

Castle Valley: Heroes arrive at the hidden realm, suddenly encountering stone beasts that answer to a distant horn.

The Zealots: A legion of hooded madmen defend the valley with their lives, stopping at nothing to guard Zelos.

The Secret Forest: Beyond the towers, a dense woods of primeval age is hidden.

The God Zelos: Zelos is at his zenith of power, feeding off the Lifestone by breaking its wards. He must be defeated.

Cataclysm: With the Lifestone destroyed or contained, the magic that holds Castle Valley intact falls away, and the entire city collapses as our heroes flee for their lives. Can they escape the chaos?

THE WHOLE TRUTH

Although Zelo is to blame for the Rust Plague, his power actually stems from an ancient stone idol hidden in Castle Valley called the Lifestone. This idol is not evil, it simply despises metal. As long as its containment wards are restored, its destructive influence can be stopped. Then Zelo can be dealt with at far lower levels of magical, and destructive, power.



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

RUST PLAGUE

HOOKING THEM

This adventure assumes motivated, driven heroes sent here to accomplish their mission: save the West Kingdoms from total ruin. As they travel, you can use all kinds of means to have them notice the source of power in Castle Valley:

- A trail of magical beast tracks coated in dark red rust
- An eerie green glow on the horizon
- An evil psychic presence
- Use of an enchanted compass or relic granted by the king

To ensure they are driven, possibly at the cost of their lives, to succeed, employ these hooks:

A ROYAL ORDER

Utilize the primary power center of your game world to directly appeal to these specific adventurers. This includes an implication of their achievement, so levels 5 or higher will work best.

FAMILY DISASTER

As metal corrodes all over the realm, a series of row houses in a small town collapses, killing several innocent families. Among them, the kin of a hero character.

NO GOING HOME

As players set out on their dire mission, they look back, only to see bridges and cathedral towers crumbling to toxic red dust in their home city. It is succeed or die trying at that moment.

EXTREME CONTRAST

Heighten the excitement of THE RUST PLAGUE by maximizing the difference between Castle Valley: a medieval city built into a narrow mountain canyon, and the HIDDEN FOREST which is a primordial, jungle-like forest from ages past.

CASTLE VALLEY

Rounded cobblestones, vaulted battlements, narrow alleys and doorways, sagging masonry, dust drifting in motionless air

HIDDEN FOREST

Tangled thickets, bulbous flowers, gigantic aloe and ferns, squishy loam turf, damp mist in the air, rays of mottled sunlight



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

RUST PLAGUE

THE ONLY GOOD GUY

Castle Valley is a narrow stone cataract jammed with ancient stairs and chambers. A city of evil. One kind soul stands watch here, trying to find a way to stop Zelos.

Zaris the Hermit: A wizened old fellow who lives just outside Castle Valley, and tells of Zelos' mad plot. He also offers light healing treasure.

"I've watched this evil grow for an age! Thanks the gods you've come!"

ALL THE BAD GUYS

Stone Beasts: Lion-shaped ravagers animated by Zelos' magic. When still, they are as statues.

Metal Eaters: Stone Beasts, but longer, leaner, and more sinister. They feed on all forms of metal.

Zealots: Cloaked madmen in the service of Zelos who maintain and protect Castle Valley. They are mad with loyalty.

"Die, intruder! Metal addict! Worshipper of false Gods! Die!"

Zelos: The wizard at the center of all this, who sees civilization as a blight, and metal as its poisonous weapon. He has broken the protective wards on a Lifestone, and is using its power to spread the Rust Plague.

"Fools who have come to die. Welcome."

"Linger here, heroes, and watch your metal dissolve, as will your world!"

THE ENDLESS CASTLES

When running the baffling, stacked city of Castle Valley, feel free to create maze-like quagmire of stairs, archways and corridors. Don't worry about 'believable structures' or specific layouts. This place is simply chaotic architecture.



ADVENTURES

GM EYES
ONLY

RUST PLAGUE

THE FOREST TIME FORGOT

Zelos has used powerful magic for decades, preserving a pocket of primordial forest in the far reaches of Castle Valley. This is a secret place, held back in time. It would not be strange, even, to see giant lizards or saurians in the gloom here.

Depending how your adventure is going so far, you can run the Hidden Forest a few ways, based on player choices and use of time.

- **Chase Montage:** If short on time, bypass most of the forest with a high speed pursuit as Zelos retreats to the Lifestone.
- **Searching for Zelos:** For the mystery solver types, leave a trail of clues to find where Zelos is in the tangle, and what he's doing.
- **Epic Battle:** Attack players with a huge pack of Stone Beasts and Metal Eaters, placed here to guard the Lifestone.

THE LIFESTONE WARDS

The Lifestone was once surrounded by a magical circle. Zelos has broken this to leech on its power. If heroes can restore this magic ward, Zelos will lose his power, and the Rust Plague will end. This can also be accomplished by destroying the Lifestone, but the Hidden Forest will wither and die in a matter of minutes. Once warded or destroyed, the Lifestone will no longer be in Zelos' power and he will be greatly weakened.



ADVENTURES

RUST PLAGUE

GM EYES
ONLY

Castle Valley Zones

- Outer Wall
- Stairs upon Stairs
- Overlook Court
- The Parapets

Hidden Forest Zones

- Tangled Glade
- Mush Pit
- Gigantic Growth
- Grand Clearing

Lifestone Zones

- Lower Ring
- Upper Ring
- Containment Wards
- The Lifestone

Cataclysm Zones

- Crumbling Stairs
- Rubble Mass
- Crumbling Wall

Stone Beasts

- CR 2
- D6 Hit Die
- Bite/Claw
- Stone +6 AC
- Always fight until crushed

Metal Eaters

- CR 3
- D6 Hit Die
- Tail Lash
- If Tail Lash does 4+, destroy one metal item

Zealots

- CR 3
- D8 Hit Die
- Giant Ivory Sword
- Reckless attacks rolls +3

Zelos

- CR 9
- D12 Hit Die
- Two Actions
- Regenerate 2 HD/Round
- Magic Missile (no roll)
- Vine Lash (no roll)
- Thunder Wave (no roll)
- Clings to the Lifestone

Zelos (Weakened)

- CR 4
- D6 Hit Die
- One Action
- Fireball (No roll)
- Teleport (1 Zone)
- Escape at all costs



Treasure: Dusty Barrels

- Wooden War Club
- 1D4 Level 2 Scrolls
- 1 Level 4 Scroll
- Wooden Armor

Treasure: Zealots

- Bone Blade +2
- Bone Armor
- Red Cloak of Stealth

Treasure: Zelos

- Giant Emerald
- Giant Ruby
- Robe of Eyes
- Robe of Regeneration
- Wand of Vine Lash
- Water Walk Ring (Bone)
- 1D8 Scrolls of Level 1-4
- Map of Lifestones

CONCLUSION

WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

After every great session, there is a moment of glow. We sit together at the table, feeling that sleepless rush of what we just accomplished, or survived, or endured. Our dreams are filled with next chapters, our character sheets tattered and scribbled upon, the GM has 1 more beer, finally able to breathe. This is the essence of our hobby, and nothing else.

This seemingly obvious truth deserves saying. Any force that divides us, or places barriers in the hobby, or claims unassailable truth, or puts down any style of play, or disrespects those who give respect, is of no use.

Our hobby belongs, in every way, to every single one of us. For my part, I am constantly amazed at the diversity, kindness, imagination, and innovation of my players and GM's. There are simply too many to list, so I tip my helmet to the empty waves, and set sail on another adventure.

Never lose sight of it: *We are stronger together.*
Thanks for reading.

Strength, honor, and beer.
-Hankerin Ferinale



CLASS & LEVEL

BACKGROUND

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER NAME

RACE

ALIGNMENT

EXPERIENCE PTS

PROFICIENCY BONUS

INSPIRATION

ARMOR
CLASS

INITIATIVE

HIT POINT
MAXIMUM

CURRENT HIT POINTS

STR

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS
- — ATHLETICS

DEX

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS
- — ACROBATICS
- — SLEIGHT OF HAND
- — STEALTH

CON

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS

INT

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS
- — ARCANA
- — HISTORY
- — INVESTIGATION
- — NATURE
- — RELIGION

WIS

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS
- — ANIMAL HANDLING
- — INSIGHT
- — MEDICINE
- — PERCEPTION
- — SURVIVAL

CHA

- ◇ — SAVING THROWS
- — DECEPTION
- — INTIMIDATION
- — PERFORMANCE
- — PERSUASION

PASSIVE PERCEPTION

HIT DICE

INJURED

SUFFER 10+
DAMAGE IN
A SINGLE HIT

DEATH

-10 HP

OR
DOWN 3
ROUNDS

NAME

ATK BONUS DAMAGE/TYPE

ATTACKS & SPELLCASTING

FEATURES & TRAITS

OTHER PROFICIENCIES & LANGUAGES

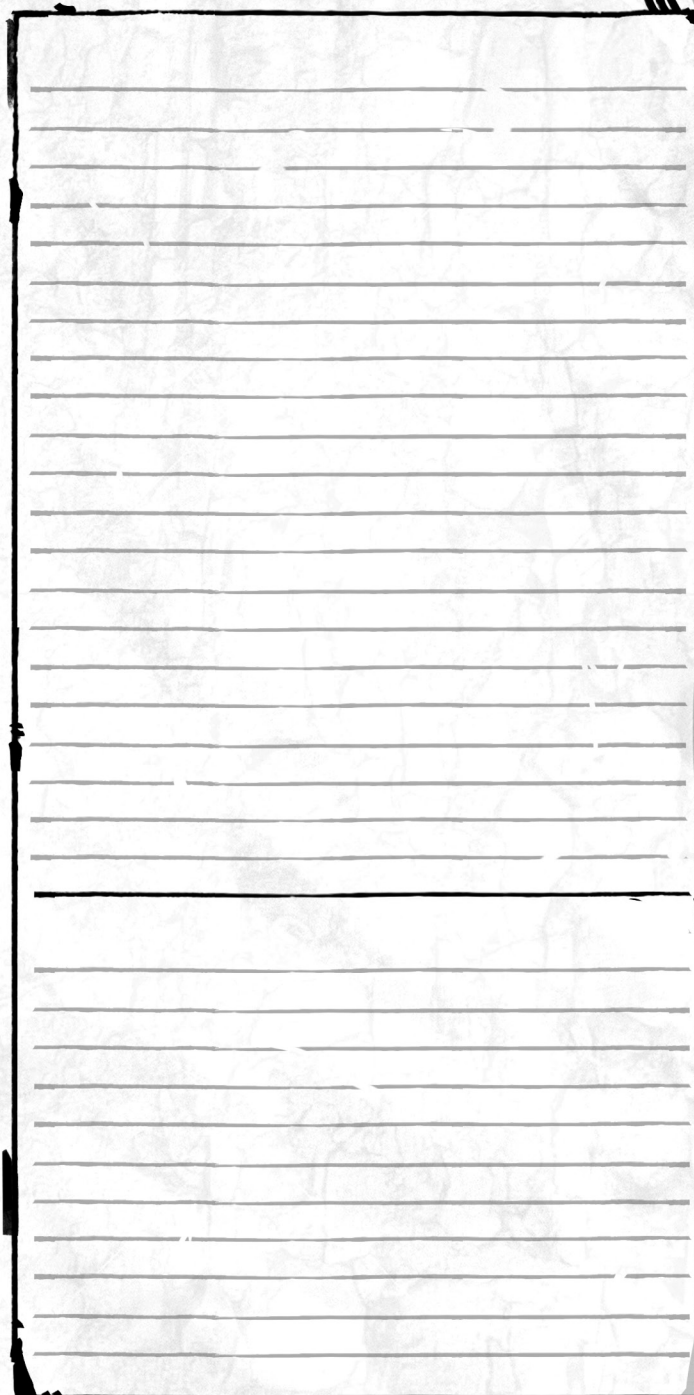
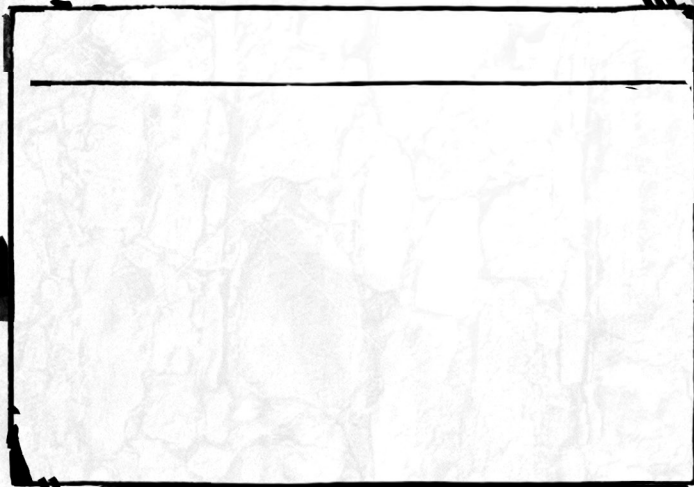
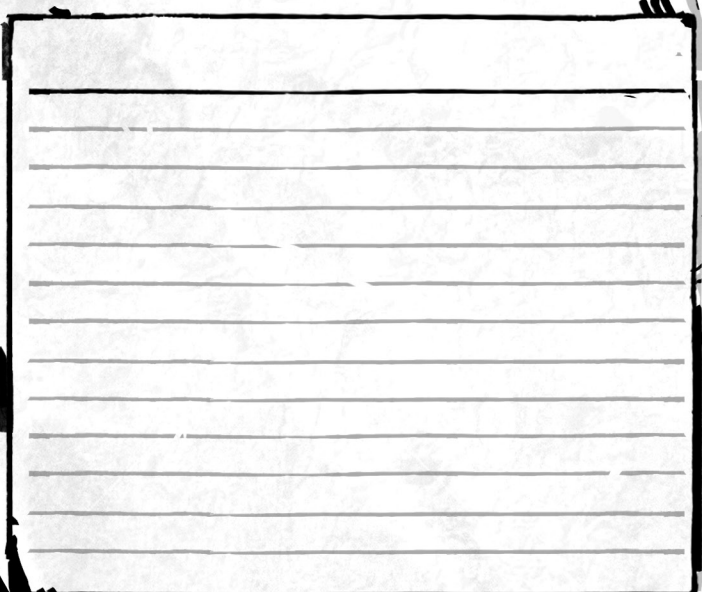
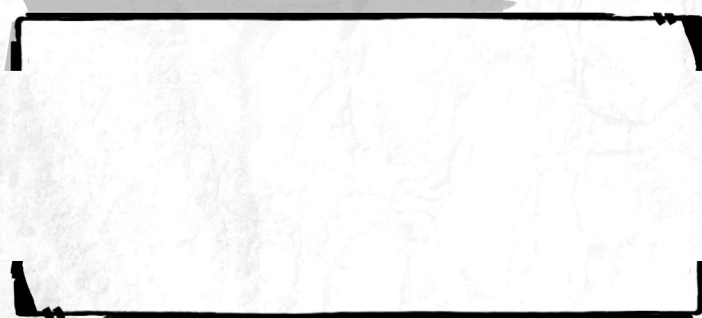
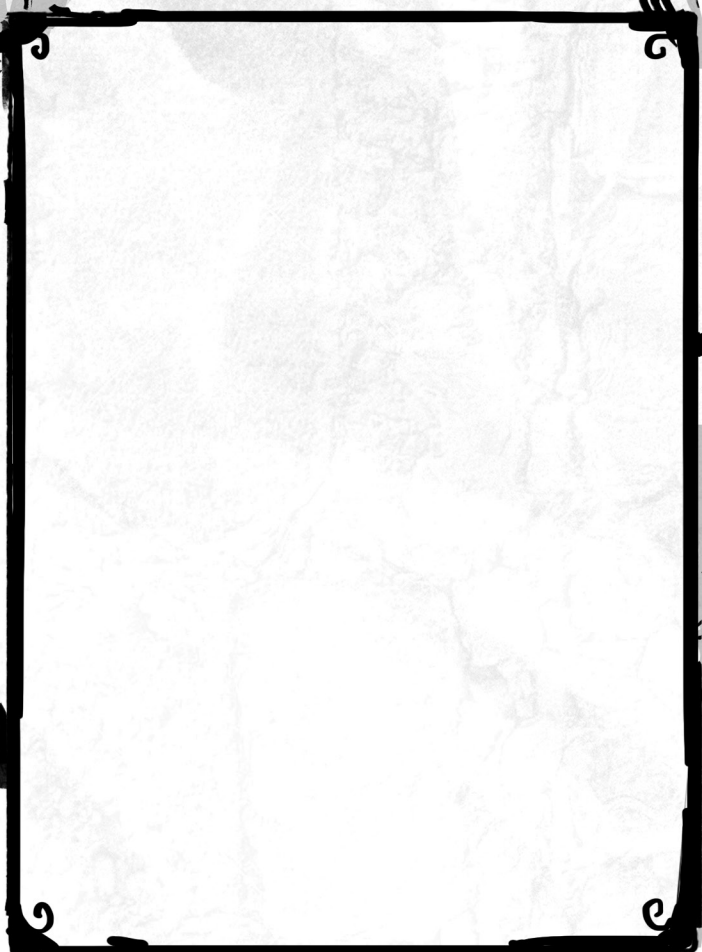
EQUIPMENT & NOTES

CP

SP

GP

PP



HARDCORE MODE

HIT DICE

Roll class **HIT DIE** at each level and add to max HP, no CON modifier

- **Rest:** In short rests, expend Hit Dice as normal, rolling each to determine HP regained in rest and safety.
- **Medical Aid:** When non-magical medicine, bandages, or tinctures are used, roll 1 Hit Die, without needing to 'expend' it.
- **Grit Your Teeth:** In combat or danger, make a CON roll against DC 10. If successful, expend 1 Hit Die, roll and recover that many HP.

INJURED

Become **INJURED** any time you are hit with 10 or more damage in a single attack

Once **INJURED**...

- Cannot use **Grit Your Teeth** to recover
- No roll made benefits from an **Attribute Bonus**
- **DEX** bonus, if any, no longer adds to your **Armor Class**

Cure **INJURED** status by...

- 10 or more points of healing
- Long rest in safety / recover to full HP

DEATH

- Reduced to -10 HP
- Unconscious and bleeding out (0 HP) for 3 rounds of play
- Fail a save against Death

ZYMER'S CANDLE

Heroes can materialize at a designated moment in time and space, where they place Zymer's Candle, if...

- Zymer's Candle is still lit
- Zymer's candle is in a safe place
- At least 1 hero must be able to call upon the candle to activate it

SKILLED/UNSKILLED

On any roll you make that is **SKILLED**, roll D20 + Proficiency + Attribute Bonus, aiming to meet or beat the target DC or AC.

On any roll that is **UNSKILLED**, roll a D20 with no modifiers, unless negative.

CHALLENGE RATING FORMULAE

All monster stats are created thus:

- $Armor\ Class = 10 + CR$
- $Hit\ Points = 10 \times CR$
- $Check\ and\ Attack\ Rolls = D20 + CR$
- $XP\ Value = CR \times 200$

AGREED INITIATIVE

Roll initiative as GM vs. all players...

- If players win, they decide their initiative order and begin.
- If the GM wins, she goes first THEN players decide their order and go.

ZONES

Prepare and describe your encounters in **ZONES** of interest or conceptual definition.

- 1 **ZONE** = Roughly 30' X 30' Area or Feature
- Melee weapons reach within a **ZONE**
- Use a standard move action to move between adjacent **ZONES**, use a double move action to through a **ZONE** to another
- All **ZONES** in an encounter are within range of ranged attacks and spells

THE UPPER HAND

Simplify all tactical elements, surprise, terrain, cover, and the like to **THE UPPER HAND**.

- If players have **THE UPPER HAND**, they all roll with advantage.
- If monsters have **THE UPPER HAND**, players roll with disadvantage.