

WIZARDS & LIZARDS

SYSTEM REFERENCE DOCUMENT

AUTHORING PLAYBOOKS, CREATURES, AND MAGIC



B E T A

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Jon Mayo. PUBLIC DOMAIN (CC0-1.0)

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ABOUT THIS DOCUMENT

This is the **System Reference Document** for Wizards & Lizards: the whole rules engine in one setting-neutral place, plus the guidance for building on it. Where the core rulebook teaches a player to sit down and play, this document is for whoever wants to **author**, a new playbook, a creature, a spell tradition, an equipment set, or a whole setting, and needs the rules stated plainly and the design dials laid bare.

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THE LAYERED DESIGN

The system is built in layers, and almost all extension happens **on top of the core, never inside it**:

- The **core** is the resolution engine: one die roll, one outcome ladder, four attributes, a stress economy, a skirmish, and a five-level advancement curve. It is small on purpose and it is the same at every table.

- **Components** are the plugins that vary by character or by gear: **playbooks** (archetypes), **inventory cards** (weapons, armor, kit), and **spell books** (caster bundles). Anything that differs from one hero or one item to the next lives here.
- A **setting** dresses the whole in a world: its gods, factions, geography, bestiary, and treasures.

The rule that keeps the system coherent: **when you are unsure where something belongs, push it out of the core and into a component**. A new archetype is a new playbook, not a core edit. A new weapon is a new card. A new kind of magic is a new bundle. The core only changes when something becomes truly universal to every character at every table.

HOW THE RULES ARE STATED

These chapters are terse reference; the worked *play* examples live in the core book. The authoring chapters are where the SRD adds what the core leaves out: the grant budgets, the suggested vocabularies, the balance levers an author needs, and a step-by-step **authoring walkthrough** (with a worked example) for a new playbook and a new creature.

A note on terms and dice: every roll in this game is **3d6 + an attribute**, read on one fixed ladder. Wherever a setting renames a thing for flavor (a tradition's "Warp" for falter, "Finesse" for Agility), the mechanic underneath is unchanged.

THE ENGINE

THE ROLL

When an outcome is uncertain and failure would cost something, **roll 3d6, add the relevant attribute** (and any skill or situational modifier), and read one fixed ladder. Otherwise the action simply succeeds; do not roll.

Total	Result
8 or less	Miss. It goes badly; the risk lands.
9–12	Partial. You do it, but at a cost, compromise, or with harm.
13–17	Success. You do it cleanly.
18+	Critical. You do it, with an extra effect.

The thresholds are **fixed**. A character's bonus shifts the roll, not the ladder, which keeps the table reading one chart all game. The 3d6 bell curve (3–18, centered near 10–11) makes stacked modifiers behave: a +1 is worth roughly a tenth of a result band near the center, and the curve absorbs situational pluses and minuses without the wild swings of a single die.

At +0 the miss / partial / success bands run about **26% / 48% / 26%**. The critical is read on the **total**, so it is rare for a low bonus (~5% at +2) and climbs with mastery (~16% at +4), which is how expertise shows.

Fumble (optional). A **natural 3 or 4** on the dice (before modifiers, ~2%) is a fumble: something goes wrong and the GM may make the outcome especially bad. It is read straight off the raw dice, so it stays a flat ~2% at every skill level, and no bonus spares it, not even one that would carry the roll to a Success. No character is ever too skilled to fail.

Masterstroke. A **natural 17 or 18** (before modifiers, ~2%, the mirror of the fumble) is a Masterstroke: a damaging blow deals **+(level + 1)** extra damage atop the band's result. It too is read straight off the raw dice, so no penalty spoils it (a blow that misses deals no damage to add to); creatures have no level and simply score a Critical.

ATTRIBUTES

Four attributes, each from about **+0 to +3** (a starting cap of +2; +3 by mid levels). They modify the roll only, not hit points or damage.

Attribute	What it covers
Might	strength, melee, toughness
Agility	speed, finesse, ranged attacks, stealth, dodging
Wits	perception, lore, magic, awareness
Presence	willpower, command, persuasion, bearing

A setting may rename an attribute for flavor (Agility to **Finesse**), but keep the four-pillar split: one attribute per mode of play, so every kind of scene has an attribute that owns it.

ACTIONS

An **action** is a named way of engaging the dice: a trigger, an attribute, and the ladder. Six are shared by every character and printed on the sheet.

Action	Attribute	Use
Strike	Might	attack a foe in melee
Shoot	Agility	attack a foe at range
Defend	Agility	dodge, parry, take cover, guard an ally, or hold ground
Maneuver	Might or Agility	shove, trip, disarm, grapple, feint
Endure	the fitting attribute	resist harm, poison, fear, magic (the save)
Skill	the fitting attribute	any task using one of your skills

Beyond the six, a character may always describe what they do; if it fits no named action and the outcome matters, the GM sets a difficulty and calls for 3d6 + the fitting attribute. Combat adds a few more actions (Move, Steady, Suppress, Stand, Recover, Interact) and the **Advanced Actions** a playbook grants; see Combat.

STRESS

Stress is nerve and effort spent under pressure, the universal “luck and grit” resource, and the reason **Presence** matters to everyone. The track is **4 + Presence** boxes. Mark stress to:

- **Push** (1 stress): +2 on a roll you are about to make, **or** +1 damage on a hit, **or** one extra quick action.
- **Resist** (2 stress): reduce a consequence by one step, shrug a condition, lessen a wound, soften a blow.

- **Fuel** an Advanced Action that lists a stress cost, including spellcasting. An Advanced Action with a **fixed effect** (a set heal, a bolt's damage) simply happens when fueled; no roll. One that must beat a target or has a variable outcome still rolls on the ladder.

Stress is **not** a fortune pool spent freely; it is finite and it bites back. If you would mark stress past your last box you **falter**: reset the track to zero and take a lasting **Shaken** mark (**-1 to all rolls**) until a full night's rest in safety. A short rest clears 2 stress; a full night clears all stress and lifts Shaken.

Stress is distinct from hit points: hit points are the body, stress is the nerve. A component may rename the falter (an arcane "Warp," a barbarian's burnout) but the mechanic holds.

TASKS AND DIFFICULTY

Most of play is the **Skill** action. The GM sets difficulty as a flat modifier; most attempts are **+0**.

Difficulty	Modifier
Favorable	+2
Ordinary	+0
Hard	-2
Daunting	-4

Tools, position, and circumstance shift the roll a point or two more. With no real risk and no time pressure, do not roll; it simply works.

Help. One ally who can genuinely assist grants **+1** and shares the risk: on a miss, the consequence may fall on the helper.

Exploration is the Skill action with the fitting attribute (read the land with Wits, climb with Agility, force a door with Might; find a trap with Wits, disarm it with Agility). A lock opens to quiet work (Agility and thieves' tools, plus Thievery) or a loud Might break that may mar the contents; a barred or spiked door is no roll and forces afterward at Hard or Daunting. On a Partial the deed is done at a price, the trap springs a lesser bite, the pick snaps or rings, the sneak is glimpsed. Between a fight (seconds) and travel (days), dungeon delving runs in loose **exploration turns** of about ten minutes, the clock a torch, a wandering threat, or a watch is tracked against, not the footstep. **Travel** crosses the wider world a day at a time on a chosen map scale (a hex or inch to taste): on foot the base rate, mounted or by cart twice it, by river or sail three times, by air or great magic four or more. Each day a nominated **navigator** rolls **Wits** (with Wayfaring, Seafaring, or Riding): Critical, an edge gained (a day saved, a shortcut); Success, the day as planned; Partial, you arrive at a cost (lost time, a hazard, supplies or a mount spent); Miss, lost or weather-pinned or waylaid. The slowest traveler sets the pace, and another may **Help**. **Social** play is a Skill action with Presence, the ladder shaping the reaction (Success wins them over, Partial is a grudging yes with strings, Miss hardens them). Dice sway the GM's NPCs only, not another player's choices.

Contests pit characters directly against one another. Each side rolls the action that fits it, and the sides need not match (a Might shove against an Agility footing, a Wits argument against a Presence charm); each reads the normal ladder, and the **higher band wins** (Critical over Success over Partial over Miss). A tie of bands goes to the higher total; if totals tie too, the rawer dice break it (a natural **17-18** wins, a natural **3-4** loses), else it deadlocks. The bonus sets the band first, so it never lets the raw dice override a band the modifiers decided. When **many** vie for one prize (a race, a bidding war), each rolls once and the best result wins, ties by total; a long struggle runs as a few rounds, first to an agreed number of wins. A direct attack is not a contest; it uses the combat roll against Defense.

SKILLS

A **skill** is any named area of training (Stealth, Smithing, Folklore, Arcana). A relevant skill adds **+1**; a **mastered** skill adds **+2**. Without a fitting skill, roll the bare attribute. A few things, casting spells, deciphering deep magic, cannot be attempted at all without training that lives in a playbook. Skills are freeform in form but **granted, not invented at will**; see Skills for the suggested vocabulary and the authoring rules.

COMBAT

Combat runs one way: as a **skirmish**, played with tokens or miniatures and a ruler on freeform ground or a grid, measured in **spaces** (1 inch, or one square or hex). An optional abstract-combat supplement, **theater of the mind** with no map, exists outside the core.

ACTIVATION ORDER

Combat has **two opposed sides**. The player characters are a **party** and face each fight together as one side (with their pets, summons, and allied NPCs); the **GM** runs the foes as the other. They alternate, **one unit at a time**: the party activates one of its units, the GM responds with one, back and forth, until everyone has acted; when a side runs out, the other finishes its remaining units in a row. On the party's activation the players choose together which of their unacted units goes next (characters, pets, summons, level-0 units, just more units in the pool).

The side with the **highest-Speed** combatant takes the first activation each round (static, set at the start of combat, no roll). **Speed does not set activation order**, a global Speed track would break alternation; Speed is only **how far one Move action carries you in spaces** (heavy armor may lower it, and it breaks the first-activation tie).

SURPRISE

A fight that opens with one side unaware (an ambush, a hidden striker, a dozing sentry) begins **surprised**. The aware side takes the **first activation** regardless of Speed, and each surprised unit has **one fewer action** (two, not three) on its first activation; thereafter the fight runs normally. The **Wits notice check** (the engine's Skill action) tiers it: **Success or better** cancels surprise (normal order); **Partial** keeps the surprised unit's three actions, but the ambusher still acts first; **Miss** is full surprise, the first activation and the lost action both. Roll only when the noticing is in doubt; a unit with no chance to catch the danger is simply surprised.

YOUR ACTIVATION

Each activation you take **three actions**, in any order:

- **Strike** (Might), **Shoot** (Agility), **Defend** (Agility: **dodge or parry** one attacker for **+2 Defense vs that foe** until your next activation; **each action spent defending is another +2**, stacked on one foe or spread across several, so an activation slides between offense and defense; **guard an ally** by giving that +2 to an adjacent ally instead of yourself (a Defense bonus, not the guardian's blow-catching Intercept); or take cover for the terrain's cover bonus; or **hold ground**: each action you spend holding readies a free Strike at the first foe to break from your reach, **one per held action, no foe struck twice**), **Maneuver** (Might/Agility; also the **Disengage** — no roll — which for the rest of the activation waives held-ground free Strikes from every foe now in reach, lapsing the moment you enter a new threat's reach).
- **Steady** (no roll): your next attack this activation is at **+2** (does not stack with itself). The patient single-clean-blow answer to the attack penalty below.

- **Suppress** (Agility): ready a loaded ranged weapon over an area or a foe's path; the first foe to move into the open there draws your **Shoot** at once, and a hit or partial halts the move. The action is paid up front, so this is **not** a stress reaction; it holds until your next activation.
- **Move** (up to Speed; may be split across the activation, some spaces before an action and the rest after, though attacking — Strike, Shoot, or a Maneuver against a foe — ends it and discards any movement held back, so hit-and-run is not basic; a Disengage is no attack and still threads a line), **Stand** (from Prone), **Recover** (shake one condition), **Interact**, a **Skill** (a task mid-fight; the GM sets the difficulty), or an **Advanced Action** from your sheet (most cost one action; some cost two).

Multiple Attack Penalty (MAP). Each attack roll *after your first this activation* takes a cumulative -2 (2nd -2 , 3rd -4). On the 3d6 curve a third Strike is usually worse than moving, maneuvering, or defending, which is the point: mixing beats spamming.

REACTIONS

There is **no** universal reaction slot and no opportunity-attack bookkeeping. A reaction is an **Advanced Action** taken on another combatant's activation for **1 stress, once per round**, without spending an action of your own (now or on a future activation). A guardian's **Intercept** (catch a blow meant for an ally) is one. Active **stances** instead cost an action to maintain (a guardian's **Taunt** pulls aggro and costs one of the three actions). The free Strike from **holding ground** (and the **Suppress** shot) is not a reaction in this sense: it is an attack *readied* by an action paid up front, so it carries no stress cost and triggers on a foe's move. Opportunity attacks are not universal, they must be set up.

ATTACKING

Roll $3d6 + \text{attribute} + \text{modifiers} - \text{the target's Defense}$, on the ladder:

Result	In combat
Miss (8–)	No effect; an alert foe may strike back.
Partial (9–12)	Hit, but at a cost: reduced damage, or the foe counters or breaks away.
Success (13–17)	Clean hit, full damage.
Critical (18+)	Full damage $+2$, and one fitting condition (attacker's choice).

Defense = Agility + shield + cover (derived, not a separate stat). **Damage** = the weapon's value – the target's **Armor** (at least **1** always gets through), -1 on a **Partial**, $+2$ on a **Critical**. Subtract from **Hit Points**.

Position. Measure in **spaces** (1 inch, or one square/hex); reckon a space as about **5 ft (1.5 m)** and an activation as a handful of seconds (a full-move activation covers ~ 9 m, a quick-time advance under arms, not a sprint). A **Move** carries you up to your **Speed** in spaces; **Strike** reaches an **adjacent** foe (a **Reach** weapon, two spaces); **Shoot** carries to the weapon's range band, **short 4 / medium 8 / long 12** spaces, a band past that a **long shot** (-1), beyond that out of range. Leaving melee is free unless a foe **holds its ground** (a **Disengage** Maneuver, no roll, waives its free Strike for the rest of the activation, until you enter a new threat's reach). Move through an **ally** freely, never through a standing foe; a **downed, unconscious, or prone** foe is no barrier (a conscious prone foe still holds its ground like any active foe). You cannot **end** an activation sharing a space with another unit unless a trait allows it (a **Tiny** creature may share). Flat modifiers, each stacking with the others but never with itself: charging into melee $+1$, outnumbering/flanking $+1$, higher ground $+1$, target behind cover -1 to hit it, a long shot -1 .

Threading a line. A Move can be **split**, and a Disengage clears only the foes already on you, so a runner can advance, Disengage a defender met mid-move, and press on to land behind the line. It is a real play, but a costly one: two Disengages and a Move fill a whole activation, and the runner arrives with nothing left to Strike. The answer is depth. **Stack a second rank** to catch stragglers, since the Disengage that beat the front line has already lapsed against the foe behind it.

WEAPONS AND KEYWORDS

A weapon deals damage by **size**, **light** 3 / **medium** 4 / **heavy** 5, and carries one or more **keywords**. Bare hands or an improvised weapon deal **2** (a tier below light); bare hands are also **Quick**. Hurling something not made to be thrown (a rock, a chair leg) costs **1 stress**, the fatigue a proper sling spares. A **shield** is +1 Defense; a two-handed weapon leaves no hand for one.

Keyword	Rule
Two-handed	both hands, so no shield
Heavy	always two-handed, unwieldy: only one Strike an activation . A Success or Critical knocks the target Prone (Staggered if it cannot be felled), and the wielder may swing all-out: -2 to hit for +2 damage
Quick	one action makes two attacks; the second takes the Multiple Attack Penalty, like any extra attack (bare hands have it)
Reach	Strike a foe a step beyond arm's length (over an ally, a closing charge)
Ranged	attacked with Shoot , at a distance; each has a range band (<i>short</i> 4 / <i>medium</i> 8 / <i>long</i> 12 spaces); a shot a band beyond it is a long shot (-1)
Reload N	spends N actions to reload between shots (crossbow 2, windlass 5): one telling shot, then a long wind
Thrown	a melee weapon that may also be hurled as a Shoot (short range)

Action cost is a balancing lever. Most attacks cost one action. **Heavy** weapons are limited to one swing (their weight, not MAP, caps them); **two-weapon** fighting buys a second Strike that still takes MAP; a few attacks (the heavy weapon's all-out sweep, certain Advanced Actions) **cost two actions** and count as **one** attack for MAP, the price is the actions, not a worse roll. **Crit and precision are the multi-swing (finesse/light) weapons' domain**, not the one-swing heavy.

Armor soaks damage: **light** 1, **heavy** 2 (and **Speed** -1). Soak of 3+ is the mark of monsters and enchantment, and such a creature always carries a weakness worth finding.

CONDITIONS

A condition imposes a flat **−2** unless noted. Re-applying a condition a creature already has **escalates** it (Staggered becomes Stunned; pile on enough and it goes Down), so focus-fire and stacked maneuvers can break a tough foe without raw damage.

Condition	Effect	Cleared
Prone	melee hits it at +2; it acts at −2	Stand (1 action)
Staggered	−2 to its rolls	ends next activation / Recover
Stunned	loses one action	end of its next activation
Grabbed	cannot move; −2 to act	break free (Maneuver)
Entangled	cannot move; −2 to act; one snare can catch up to 4 adjacent	a successful Maneuver or Endure (a “save”); a miss spends the action for nothing
Slowed	Speed halved (abstract play: crossing a range band costs double); no −2 to rolls	ends at its next activation, or Recover
Disarmed	improvised attacks only	retrieve weapon (action)
Frightened	−2 near the source; cannot approach it	Endure, or source gone
Ongoing N	N damage each activation, ignoring armor	tend it, or it runs out
Weakened	takes double from one named kind of harm	Recover (1 action), tend, or it fades

A numeric condition does **not** stack: a second **Ongoing** (or Staggered, etc.) takes the **worse** value and resets its clock rather than summing, so a swarm’s many small venom-bites inflict only its single worst dose, not one per bite. One **tend** ends an Ongoing whatever its size.

An **ally** may clear a condition for you, paying the same action **and the same roll** it would have cost you. Automatic clears (**tend** an **Ongoing**, hand a **Disarmed** ally a weapon) take one action. A clear that is a roll, the ally rolls: freeing you from a **Grab** is a **Maneuver against the grabber’s Defense**, so a strong holder (ogre, roc) resists the rescue as it resists your own struggle, one action buys the attempt, not the certainty. Self-steadying paths (**Stand**, **Recover**, **Endure**) are yours alone, and time-based clears need no action.

A successful **Maneuver** applies its condition instead of damage (Shove/Trip → Prone, Grapple → Grabbed, Disarm → Disarmed, Feint → Staggered). Some creatures **cannot** suffer some conditions (a legless thing is never Prone, a mindless thing never Frightened); the stat line says which, and the Maneuver then deals its damage if any.

Entangled and **Slowed** are not on the Maneuver menu. They come from **snare gear** thrown at short range (a net, a bola, caltrops; see Gear) or from a creature’s trait (a spider’s **Web**, a tar pit; see Adversaries). Because they ride on a carried item or a specific monster rather than universal play, they are defined where they appear, not earned by any Strike or Maneuver.

HARM, GOING DOWN, AND RECOVERY

Damage subtracts from **Hit Points**. At **0 HP** a combatant is **Down**: a felled monster dies, flees, or yields; a Down hero is unconscious and dying. A blow past 0 does **not** overkill, so no single hit kills a hero outright (the heroic baseline; the level-0 funnel is far more fragile).

Death save. On each of your activations while Down, roll an **Endure with your best attribute** (the highest of Might, Agility, Wits, or Presence):

Save	Result
18+	Rally, conscious, back at 1 HP .
13–17	Stabilize (out of danger).
9–12	Cling on; save again next activation.
8–	You die.

Everything that helps a roll helps the save (Push, a Blessing, a reroll). Harm taken while Down forces a save **at once**; a foe who takes time to finish a helpless hero simply does. An ally may act instead: **first aid** (a Skill roll with Medicine, 13+ brings you up at 1 HP, 9–12 stabilizes) or **healing** that lifts you above 0. A hero who returns from Down rises **Shaken**.

- **Short rest** (food, water): a few HP back, clears 2 stress.
- **Full night's safe rest**: all HP and stress, clears Shaken.

Falling. A fall deals **crushing** harm. For **every 12 ft (about 4 m) fallen**, make an **Endure** roll (Agility to land with it or Might to take it, GM's call; a helpless or unaware faller gets none and takes each span in full): **Miss** = 6 a span, **Partial** = 3, **Success+** = 0. Falling **ignores armor**, but **Resist / Weakness** to crushing still counts. No overkill: a killing fall only drops a hero to Dying.

Combat conditions fade as their entries describe, usually within a round or two of leaving the fray.

CHARACTERS AND PLAYBOOKS

WHAT A CHARACTER IS

Part	At first level
Attributes	one at +2 (the signature), one at +1, two at +0
Skills	three , trained (+1 each)
Advanced Actions	two : one granted by the playbook, one chosen
Hit Points	12 + toughness (the playbook's 0–4)
Stress	4 + Presence
Speed	2 (a playbook may set 1–3)
Defense	Agility + shield + cover (derived)
Kit	a weapon, perhaps armor, a few useful things

An **Advanced Action** is the special trick of an archetype: a spell, a deadly strike, a guardian's catch, a fighter's tactic. They fill an unlocking track; a playbook also grants baseline archetype skills. Most playbooks may trade one Advanced Action for two extra skills, or the reverse.

ADVANCEMENT

Five levels. The GM picks the track: **milestone** (a level at a story beat), **XP** (one per significant challenge, a level every three), or XP plus treasure. Whichever, advance the **whole party together**.

Level	Gains
1	the playbook grant budget (the start)
2	+4 HP · +1 skill (new, or deepen one to +2) · +1 Advanced Action
3	+4 HP · +1 attribute (cap +3) · +1 damage
4	+4 HP · +1 skill · +1 Advanced Action
5	+4 HP · +1 attribute (cap +3) · +1 damage

The **die stays the same**; growth is hit points, skills, attributes, Advanced Actions, and damage. The **+1 damage** at levels 3 and 5 is **delegated to the playbook**: it raises weapon damage for a martial, spell damage for a caster, left out of the core. By level 5: ~30 HP, attributes to +3, five or six skills, four Advanced Actions, +2 damage.

A **level-0 character**, a villager swept into adventure, is the funnel's fragile starting state, set below the level-1 budget:

- **Hit Points 6**, no toughness (untrained, half a level-1's base).
- **One attribute at +1** (a knack from the old trade), the other three at **+0**; no signature +2 yet.
- **One skill (+1)**, from that trade or background.
- **No Advanced Actions**, and so no stress-fueled tricks, though the stress track (**4 + Presence**) is there for Push and Resist.
- **Speed 2**, a simple or improvised weapon, at most light armor.

The funnel is meant to thin the herd: a felled level-0 does **not** get the hero's death save (a drop to 0 is simply out, the GM's call on dead or dying), so run **several per player** and expect losses. A survivor who reaches the far side **chooses a playbook and takes its full level-1 grant budget**, the trial becoming their lifepath.

AUTHORING A PLAYBOOK

A playbook is the system's main plugin: a guided sheet that builds one archetype through a **lifepath**, grants its skills and Advanced Actions, and never touches the core. Write a new one and you have added a class with no rules change.

THE LEVEL-1 GRANT BUDGET (THE DIALS)

Build every playbook to this budget, then move the dials within it:

- **Attributes** +2 / +1 / +0 / +0 (the **signature** is the +2; cap +2 at first level, +3 by fifth).
- **Three skills**, trained (+1).
- **Two Advanced Actions**: one signature (granted) + one chosen from the playbook's list.
- **Hit Points 12 + toughness 0–4** (toughness is the per-archetype HP differentiator, *not* per-level growth, which is a flat +4 for everyone).
- **Speed 2** (range 1–3; heavy armor justifies 1).
- **Starting kit** (weapon, armor if the archetype wears it, signature items).

The balance lever: swap **1 Advanced Action** ↔ **2 skills** to tune a playbook that comes out a little hot or cold.

THE LIFEPAATH

Character creation is **roll-or-choose tables**, not point-buy, and the tables do the budgeting. The recurring shape that works:

- An opening **fiction** that states the archetype's identity (see niche, below).
- Three or four **1d6 tables** (origin, motivation, signature gear/token) that each grant a small package: an **attribute increment** and a **skill**, sometimes a small special. Across the tables these sum to the grant budget.
- A **party-binding** beat ("who fights at your shoulder?", "whom do you shield?") that ties this character to another player's, granting a small shared bonus. This is what makes the playbooks a *party* generator, not just a character one.
- An **express option**: offer the standard array (+2/+1/+0/+0, three skills, the granted Advanced Action plus one choice) for players who would rather skip the questions.

Keep tables on the d6 family only (**d6, 2d6, 3d6, d66, d666**); never a d4/d8/d10/ d12/d20/d100. Fit a menu of size N to one of those.

NICHE: DEFINE BY THE POSITIVE ROLE

Define each archetype by **what it does best** and **what it deliberately lacks**, and state the role **positively**, as the active job it fills, not apologetically. "Holds the line, keeps the pressure on, and picks allies up" beats "never the best at any one thing." Name what it cannot do **once**, confidently, and subordinate to the role; do not restate the apology in every section.

Four design truths from balance testing inform the niches:

- **Durability drives threat**, on both sides of the screen.
- A tank works by **aggro control** (Taunt, Intercept), not by raw Defense.
- **Offense beats healing**; a healer must *supplement* a working offense, never replace it.
- Each archetype should own a **stress-spend direction** as a niche marker: strike-harder/protect-self (Fighter, Barbarian), protect-others (Guardian, Paladin), create-an-effect (Mage cast, Cleric heal, Rogue escape), or control-the-field (Monk: spread conditions across a crowd, move where the blow is not). A **controller** is its own niche, distinct from a striker: its value is the conditions it lays on many foes, not the damage on any one.

ADVANCED ACTIONS

Advanced Actions are the archetype's kit, and the kit, not the stats, is what makes two playbooks on the same chassis play differently. Guidance:

- Most cost **one action**; a few cost **two**. A **reaction** Advanced Action costs **1 stress**, once per round, and no action (see Combat).
- **Gate open-ended chains**. An ability whose payoff feeds itself (a kill chains into another attack) needs a hard, finite ceiling, a stress cost per chain, a once-per-activation limit, or a fixed extra-attack count. Let players exceed the gate by investing in *other* abilities (rerolls, luck), which is combo design, not a hole.
- **Action economy is the sharpest lever, so gate it too**. An ability that grants extra attacks or relaxes the Multiple Attack Penalty multiplies fast. Tie it to weak per-hit damage and a partial relief, not a total one: a flurry of 2-damage fists with the penalty *removed entirely* (six full-rate hits a round) tested as badly overpowered, while the same fists at **half-rate** penalty (the pair shares a step) landed on par with a sword. Halve the lever; do not lift it.
- **Casting is an Advanced Action**, fueled by stress, never a separate mana or slot economy (see Authoring Magic).
- Skills are the soft currency: when in doubt, two skills weigh about one Advanced Action (the balance lever).

ADVANCED-ACTION COST PATTERNS

The kit varies by archetype, but the *cost shapes* recur. An author reaches for the one that matches **how long the advantage lasts**. Six cover almost everything:

- **One action** (the default), or **two actions** for a heavier effect, one roll that counts as a single attack for the Multiple Attack Penalty. The price is the actions it eats, not a worse roll.
- **Reaction** — **1 stress**, once per round, no action, taken on another combatant's activation (catch a blow, riposte, a warning shot). The stress and the once-per-round cap are the gate (see Combat).
- **Stance** — costs **one action to maintain** each activation it stays up, no stress (a guardian's Taunt, a duelist's guard). The action economy is the price: the stance is one of your three actions, every activation it holds.
- **Sustained (drain)** — opens for a stress, then **drains a fixed stress at the start of each of your activations** to keep running, and lapses the instant you cannot or will not pay (a rage, a battle-trance, a held ward). Use it for a *mode* that reshapes a fight while it lasts: the longer it burns the more it costs, and an empty track ends it (and **Falters** you if the track emptied under you). The drain is the self-limiting gate.
- **Limited-use** — a flat budget of **once per session** (or per day, or per scene) instead of a stress cost, usually tied to a relic, blessing, or signature feat. The rarest, fight-defining effects live here, refuse a death, a guaranteed escape, a single unanswerable blow, because a hard per-session cap is a sharper gate than any stress price. Reserve once-per-session for the big swings; per-day or per-scene for the smaller ones.
- **Resource conversion** — pay an action's cost in a **different currency**: Hit Points spent as stress (1 HP per stress, "blood magic"), or stress spent for raw output (1 stress for + damage on a hit). Conversion never makes a resource free, only fungible, and the pool you spend *from* is the one that can kill you, which is both the trade and the gate.

Match the shape to the duration: an instant edge → one action or a stress; an ongoing mode → a sustained drain; a rare, fight-defining trump → once per session. Whatever the shape, the gating rules above (cap chains, halve action-economy levers) still apply.

VERSIONING

Stamp every playbook with the rules version it was written against (a line near the title). When the project's `version.txt` advances past that stamp, on any change that could affect playbooks (actions, attributes, stress, combat calculations, the grant budget, progression), the playbook is flagged for review and re-stamp. New playbooks carry the then-current version.

THE STEPS, IN ORDER

Putting the sections above into a procedure:

1. **Name the niche.** One positive sentence on the active job it fills, plus the one thing it deliberately lacks, and which **stress direction** it owns.
2. **Spend the grant budget.** Set the four attributes (+2 / +1 / +0 / +0), the three skills, the two Advanced Actions (one signature + one chosen), HP (12 + toughness), Speed, and the kit. Apply the **swap lever** (1 Advanced Action ↔ 2 skills) if the archetype is meant to be *skilled* or *gifted*.
3. **Write the lifepath.** An opening fiction, three or four 1d6 tables that each grant an attribute increment plus a skill (summing to the budget), a party-binding beat, and an express array for players who skip the questions.
4. **Write the Advanced Actions list.** The signature granted action plus a handful to choose from. Gate any chain or action-economy lever (above).

5. **Stamp the version** and play-check it against the budget, not against the other playbooks: a new archetype need only be *on budget*, not a copy.

A WORKED PLAYBOOK: THE HUNTER

A fresh archetype, built setting-neutral, to show the dials in motion. (Reskin the flavor for your own world.)

1. Niche. *The Hunter owns the open ground: the first shot, the read of the trail, the foe singled out and run down.* It lacks a front-liner's armored staying power; it wants distance and a marked quarry. Stress direction: **create-an-effect** (mark a quarry; line up the killing shot).

2. Budget, with the swap lever. The Hunter is a *skilled* archetype, so it takes the swap (1 Advanced Action → 2 skills): **one** granted Advanced Action and **five** skills, rather than two and three.

- Attributes: **Agility +2** (signature, the bow and the chase), **Wits +1** (the trail), Might +0, Presence +0.
- Skills (5): Tracking, Survival, Perception, Stealth, Beasts. (The lifepath tables grant these.)
- Advanced Action (1 granted): **Mark the Quarry**.
- HP 12 + **toughness 1 = 13**. Speed 3. Stress 4 + **Presence**.
- Kit: a bow (medium, ranged), a long knife, light armor, snares and a week's trail-kit.

3. Lifepath (sketch). Two of the four tables, to show the shape:

Where did you learn the wild? (1d6) 1. A game-warden's child on a great estate. (+1 **Wits** · *Tracking*) 2. A border-scout, paid to walk the dangerous edge. (+1 **Agility** · *Survival*) ... (entries 3–6 each grant one increment and one skill)

What do you hunt? (1d6) 1. Beasts that have learned to hunt people back. (skill: *Beasts*) 2. Fugitives, for the bounty and the road. (skill: *Streetwise*) ... (3–6)

Whose trail do you guard? (party-binding) Choose another character; once per session, when you act on their behalf, one of you turns a partial success into a clean one.

Express: Agility +2 / Wits +1 / +0 / +0, the five skills above, Mark the Quarry plus one pick below.

4. Advanced Actions. The granted one is a **single-target rider**, deliberately *not* a chain:

- **Mark the Quarry** (*granted*). Spend an action to mark one foe you can see. Your attacks against the marked quarry deal +2. You may move the mark to a new foe by spending an action again. (*One quarry at a time: a rider, not a stacking chain.*)
- **Companion.** A loyal beast fights at your side. It is a **unit in your side's pool**, activated on your side's slots like any ally (see Combat, activation order), not a free extra action.
- **Volley.** A **2-action** ranged attack against every foe in a small area; mark **1 stress** to catch one more. (*Action-gated and stress-gated, per the action-economy lever.*)
- **Pathfinder.** +1 to Survival and Tracking, and the party ignores rough ground on an expedition.
- **Vanish.** In cover or wild, mark **1 stress** to break line of sight and not be found until you act (a reaction).

Every dial is visible: the **swap lever** (five skills, one granted action), a **single-target rider** that does not chain, a **companion handled as a side-pool unit** rather than an action multiplier, and an area attack **gated by both an action cost and stress**. The Hunter is on budget without copying any existing archetype.

SKILLS

HOW SKILLS WORK

A **skill** is any named area of training that adds to the **Skill** action (and to any other action the GM rules it touches). A relevant skill adds **+1**; a **mastered** skill adds **+2** and also sharpens how the GM reads the result. Without a fitting skill you roll the bare attribute.

Skills are **freeform in name and scope**. A player most often takes skills from their playbook's lifepath and from advancement rewards. **Playbooks are explicitly modular and self-contained**: each one defines its own skills, and nothing stops a GM or players from introducing a new skill at the table that fits the fiction. Name it, agree on its scope, and play.

The practical consequence: **the playbooks in play, plus whatever a table coins, form the working skill list**. Two tables running the same core with different playbooks may have different skill vocabularies, and that is fine.

A few capabilities are **hard-gated** behind training that only a playbook grants, chiefly **spell-casting** and the reading of deep magic. Everything else is open: a character without the Stealth skill may still try to sneak, at the bare attribute.

THE SUGGESTED VOCABULARY

This is a **guideline, not a closed list**. Its job is to help an author find the right power balance and keep skill scope consistent across playbooks, so that two authors do not write one over-broad skill and one hair-thin one. Reuse these names where they fit; coin a flavored variant when the archetype earns it, but keep its **scope** in line with the bucket it sits in (a duelist's **Footwork** is an Athletics of the blade, not a do-everything skill).

Domain	Suggested skills	Flavored variants seen in play
Body & movement	Athletics, Endurance, Riding, Seafaring	Climbing, Acrobatics, Footwork
Combat craft	Soldiery, Brawling, Dueling, Marksmanship, Command	Drill, Bodyguarding, Mercenary Lore, Tactics
Stealth & streets	Stealth, Thievery, Deceit, Streetwise, Disguise	Larceny, Contacts, Appraisal, Glamour, Sleight
Lore & craft	Old Lore, Arcana, Nature, Mechanics, Reckoning	Artifice, Spirit-Sense, Beast-Lore, Theology
Perception & wilds	Perception, Tracking, Wayfaring	Watchfulness, Vigil, Weather-Sense, Hunting
Society & will	Interaction, Oratory, Devotion, Insight, Resolve	Courtesy, Song, Intimidation
Medicine	Medicine	Surgery

Notes for the author:

- **Some suggested names are umbrellas the cast splits.** No published playbook grants *Athletics*, *Perception*, *Interaction*, or *Thievery* by those bare names; each fans out into the flavored variants beside it (*Perception* becomes a watchman's **Watchfulness**, a sentry's **Vigil**, a hunter's **Hunting**; *Thievery* becomes the rogue's **Larceny**, its locks, traps, and pockets). The

left column is the scope an author reaches for; the right is what the eight published playbooks actually grant. Pick the umbrella for a generalist or a variant to mark a specialty, never both for the same ground.

- **Keep a skill to one recognizable scope.** “Soldiery” is fielded war, drill, and rank; “Athletics” is the body’s feats. If a skill would answer everything in a pillar of play, it is too broad; split it. If it answers one specific trick, fold it into a broader name and let the *fiction* be the specialty.
- **Intimidation, Resolve, and the like ride Presence; Perception rides Wits; Athletics rides Might or Agility.** The attribute is set by the *attempt*, not the skill, so a skill can apply under more than one attribute (Acrobatics under Agility to tumble, under Might to break a hold).
- **Niche comes from grants, not gates.** What makes the rogue feel like a rogue is that the rogue’s playbook hands out Stealth, Deceit, and Thievery, not that other classes are forbidden to try. The only hard gates are class powers (spellcasting).
- A setting may rename freely (a city’s **Heraldry**, a faith’s **Devotion**) so long as the scope matches a bucket above.

SHARED SKILLS AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE

A skill granted by more than one playbook is a feature, not a redundancy: it says *these archetypes could have trained in the same hall*, and it is how the cast reads as one world rather than a set of unrelated kits. Author skills on two axes:

- **Broad, shared skills are the kinship.** The common competencies (Soldiery, Old Lore, Courtesy, Brawling, Devotion, Nature) recur across the archetypes that plausibly share them, and that overlap is the connective tissue. The default setting’s divine triad, the Guardian, Cleric, and Paladin, all share **Devotion** and **Soldiery** on their lifepaths; the martial archetypes share **Brawling**; the lore-touched share **Old Lore**. A player reading two such playbooks feels the link.
- **Unique skills are the niche-marker.** Reserve a skill to a single playbook to mark what only that archetype is: **Arcana** (Mage), **Theology** (Monk), **Seafaring** (Barbarian), **Glamour/Disguise** (Rogue). One or two such markers per playbook carry its identity; the rest should come from the shared vocabulary. The Rogue’s **Larceny** (locks, traps, pockets) is one such marker: it is granted, not rolled, so every rogue is the party’s lock-and-trap specialist by default.

Two deliberate moves to keep in your pocket when you write a new playbook:

- **A bridge.** If two archetypes share nothing and you want them to feel akin, grant one shared skill. The Rogue and the Barbarian, opposite in every other way, meet on **Tracking** (the city scout and the faewood hunter are both trail-readers) — their single point of contact, and it is enough.
- **A meaningful gap.** Withholding an *expected* skill characterizes as loudly as granting one. The Monk knows **Theology** (the lore of every god) but is pointedly never granted **Devotion** (the practice of one faith): the absence is the “sworn to no god” identity. Use a gap on purpose, not by accident.

When you finish a playbook, glance at what it shares with the existing cast: aim for at least one skill in common with a kindred archetype, one or two unique markers, and any bridge or gap you mean to make.

AUTHORING ADVERSARIES

A creature needs only a short line of numbers and **one idea** that makes it worth fighting. The GM rolls a creature’s attacks exactly like a character’s: **3d6 + its Attack – your Defense**, on the

ladder. Its saves use attributes by tier (below); everything softer still, skills, cunning, the shape of its plan, the GM simply plays.

THE STAT LINE

Name: HP · Defense · Armor · Attack +N (damage) · Speed · *special*

That is the whole block. Keep it to one line so a GM can field a foe at a glance and a reader can lift it into a new setting.

BUILD A FOE (THE TIERS)

Pick a tier and adjust to taste. **Danger comes from hit points, armor, and numbers, not from bigger damage.** A lone Dire foe drowns under four heroes' actions, so give it extra attacks or minions, not just a fat damage die.

Tier	HP	Atk	Dmg	Armor	Def	Acts	Typical
Lesser	4–6	+2	3	0–1	2	1	goblin, bandit
Common	12	+3	4	2	3	1	soldier, cultist
Greater	18	+3	5	1–2	3	2	gladiator, knight
Dire	30+	+4	6	2–3	3	2–3	ogre, chieftain

A **swarm's** danger is how long each body survives, not how hard it hits: give a weak foe a point or two of armor and a few extra hit points and it stops being a nuisance and becomes a threat.

Run a Dire foe with a retinue, and with cunning. A boss alone drowns under the party's actions, so the real fight is the boss behind its minions. Play it to hang back while the minions bleed the party, spending its actions to taunt, harry, and finish the wounded, and to commit in force only when the tide turns, or to quit the field and return later. Send it in early against a larger party, late against a small one. Run as a stand-and-trade slab of hit points, the encounter is a pushover or a wipe; run with tempo, it has a rhythm and a way out.

ATTRIBUTES AND SAVES

A creature **saves like a character**: 3d6 + the fitting attribute (Presence against fear or a divine Rebuke, Might against a shove, Wits against an illusion, and so on). Rather than write four numbers on every stat line, take them all from the foe's tier and note only the exceptions:

Tier	Attributes
Lesser	+0
Common	+1
Greater	+2
Dire	+3

So a Dire foe saves at +3 across the board by default; you note that the ogre's Might is higher still and its Wits lower, or that a drilled soldier has a steadier Presence. This keeps Attack (its offense) and attributes (its saves) separate, the same split a character has, and it gives every fear, morale, and resist roll a number without bloating the one-line block. A truly steadfast foe takes a high Presence or a flat immunity (see below), the way the mindless dead feel no ordinary terror.

TRAITS (THE “SPECIAL”)

A creature's threat should come from its **one trait**, not from inflated numbers. The toolbox:

- **Multiattack N** — makes N attacks at full (no MAP). The action-economy equalizer for a solo foe facing a whole party.
- **Resist (kind)** — takes half from that kind of harm (or *Tough Hide N*: a flat $-N$ from non-magic); a puzzle that rewards the caster or the right tool.
- **Weakness (kind)** — takes **double** from that kind of harm. The mirror of Resist, and the far-milder kin of Bane. Can also be **inflicted** as a brief condition (a curse like *Brittle Bones*; see Conditions), which is how a debuffer sets up a striker. Caution: keep the named kind narrow, and do not give a whole encounter the same exploitable kind, or the doubling compounds into a wipe.
- **Knockdown / Knockback** — a solid hit knocks Prone (a crit also knocks back), costing the victim actions and spreading disruption.
- **Tiny** — too small and quick to crush with a glancing blow: a **Partial** hit deals it **at most 1 damage** (an attack that would have hurt it does just 1, one already turned aside does nothing) and bats it flying (knocked back, costing its next action). Only a **solid** hit lands clean. A swarm of Tiny things outlasts its hit points, so keep each one's damage low and let numbers carry the threat, a natural first fight (about a dozen) for a green party. Small enough to **share a space**: a Tiny creature may end its activation in an occupied space, and other units may end in its. Co-occupancy only, so it still cannot move **through** a standing hostile (it perches in a blocked doorway, it does not slip past).
- **Venom / Fear / Grab / Stun** — a hit inflicts Ongoing / Frightened / Grabbed / Stunned (set a chance or a save).
- **Web / Snare** — a hit (often ranged, often an area) inflicts **Entangled**: held fast until a *successful* Maneuver or Endure tears free, so it is stickier than a Grab. A spider's web, a net-caster, a binding spell. A heavy strand can catch several in one cast, up to four adjacent.
- **Hobble / Mire** — a hit inflicts **Slowed** (half Speed): a tar pit, a frost ray, a hamstringing bite. The thing that lets a slower ranged foe keep its distance, or stops a fast one from reaching your line in one bound.
- **Charm** — a gaze, song, or dance; the target Endures or is **Charmed**: it cannot harm the charmer and treats it as a friend until the charmer or its kin draws its blood, or the source is broken (ears stopped, eyes averted, the song cut short). The beguiler's lock, a soft control that turns the party on itself. Give it a plain off-switch so it plays as a puzzle, not a stun.
- **Blind / Dazzle** — a flash, a roar, a face full of sand; Endure or be unable to see, striking at -4 (and unable to aim a ranged attack) until it clears. Levels a strong attacker for a round, or covers a retreat; the staple counter to a deadly gaze or a sharpshooter.
- **Paralyze / Hold** — a touch or gaze that locks the body; often **staged**, a first failed Endure Staggers, a second leaves the target frozen, unable to act, until it shakes free (an activation's struggle, an ally's hand). A lasting form, turning to stone, holds until a remedy is found, so keep it telegraphed and rare. It removes a hero from the fight without killing, the gaze-and-undead classic.
- **Engulf / Swallow** — a maw so large that a Success or Critical on a **Grabbed**, smaller foe swallows it whole: **Ongoing** inside, and the swallowed can only act to claw free. The set-piece threat of the great beast; pairs with Grab, and the answer is to free the caught before it goes down.
- **Snatch / Carry** — a hit **Grabs** and bears the victim aloft or away: out of the fight, and the fall is its own danger unless it is freed fast. The flier's signature, it removes a hero and splits the party's attention; counter by grounding the carrier or freeing the carried.
- **Pack / Outnumber** — gains **+1 to hit** (or **+1 damage**) while it outnumbered a single foe, and stands to fight only in numbers; when its leader falls or the odds turn, it may break and flee (a Presence save). Coordination, not bulk, is what makes a weak body a threat, the wolf-pack and the warren-folk. Counter by thinning the pack, felling the leader, or splitting them up.

- **Regenerate N** — heals **N HP at the start of each of its activations** unless one specific harm stops it (fire to a troll, a blessed flame to the risen dead, a seared stump). A durability puzzle: ordinary damage is undone, so the table must find the harm that sticks and finish the foe before it recovers. Telegraph the counter, a wound that will not close, charred old stumps, and keep it findable.
- **Bound (to a place)** — tied to a grave, a tree, an idol, a charge it was set to keep. On its own ground it is strongest (a bonus to hit, or it Regenerates) and it **cannot or will not pursue past a threshold**. The anchor is the counter: lure it off its ground where its strength fails, or remove what binds it. The guardian and the haunt; pairs well with Regenerate.
- **Parley (not a fight)** — some creatures are answered by words, not steel: a messenger, an oracle, a proud warden that would sooner test a trespasser than gut one. The counter is an offering, a true name, a right answer, an honored rite, and harming it is the failure state, not the goal (it may carry an oath that turns on the oath-breaker). The mirror of Bane: the puzzle ships with its answer, and the answer is rarely violence.
- **Bane (type)** — harmed only by that type; all else passes through; see below.

These three are one family on a “harm-sensitivity” axis: **Resist** (half) → normal → **Weakness** (double) → **Bane** (only its kind). All are per-creature plain language, not a universal damage-type chart, and the “kind” is GM-adjudicated.

IMMUNITIES

Note in the stat line the conditions a creature’s kind ignores: a legless or bodiless thing **cannot be knocked Prone or Grabbed**, a mindless thing **cannot be Frightened**, an unarmed thing **cannot be Disarmed**. An immunity makes a foe markedly harder (the party loses the openings those conditions buy), so grant it deliberately, as you would any defense. When a condition will not stick, the Maneuver that would apply it simply deals its damage, if any.

BANE (THE PUZZLE CREATURE)

A creature with a **Bane** takes damage only from its named Bane; all other harm passes through and deals nothing. It is a **puzzle, not a wall**: the Bane IS the **telegraphed weakness** in plain language in its stat line, something a player can discover and exploit (fire, a blessed blade, the environment, a parley, a retreat). The core rule: **a Bane names its own counter, so the puzzle ships with its own answer**. Keep such creatures low-HP so the puzzle drives the encounter, not a damage grind.

- **Telegraph it**. Show the untouchable chill or the steel passing through like smoke *before* it matters, so the puzzle is fair.
- **Magic is the common answer**. All magic deals **magical harm**, so a spell is often the Bane; do not, however, make magic the *only* answer, or a party without a caster is simply stuck.
- **Keep hit points modest**. A lone caster cannot grind down a high-HP Bane creature, so keep the creature’s HP low and give more than one approach to the counter.

Do **not** build a universal damage-type chart (fire/frost/holy/profane with a grid of resistances); that was rejected on purpose. Name an element for color, but treat each creature’s Bane as a **per-creature, plain-language** counter.

THE STEPS, IN ORDER

1. **One idea first**. Before any number, name the single thing that makes this creature worth fighting: how it threatens, what it does that a sword-and-shield foe does not.
2. **Pick the tier**. Read HP / Attack / Damage / Armor / Defense / Acts and the default save attribute straight off the Build-a-foe and Attributes tables, then adjust to taste. Remember: danger comes from HP, armor, and numbers.

3. **Write the one line.** Name: HP · Def · Armor · Attack +N (dmg) · Speed · special.
Note only the attribute *exceptions* (the brute's high Might, the mindless thing's missing fear).
4. **Give it its one trait.** Pick the toolbox entry that *is* the idea (a lurker gets Grab, a solo gets Multiattack), and note any **immunity** its kind implies.
5. **If it is a puzzle, telegraph it.** A Bane (or any hard counter) must show its answer in plain language, and the creature must be **low-HP with more than one route** to the counter, so it plays as a fair puzzle.

WORKED EXAMPLES

The typical case, a Fen Lurker. Idea: *it drags you off your feet and under the water.* That is Grab. Common tier, lightly adjusted, one trait, done:

Fen Lurker: HP 12 · Def 3 · Armor 1 · Attack +3 (4) · Speed 2 · *Grab (a hit holds the target; Maneuver to break free; while held, it drags toward deep water).*

No special damage type, no inflated numbers. The threat is the Grab and the water behind it, the players answer with a Maneuver, an ally's Strike, or staying out of reach. That is a whole monster.

The puzzle case, an Ashen Revenant. Idea: *a burned dead thing that ordinary steel cannot touch.* That calls for a Bane, so keep the HP low and telegraph the answer:

Ashen Revenant: HP 8 · Def 2 · Armor 0 · Attack +3 (4) · Speed 2 · *Bane: fire or blessed flame. Mindless (cannot be Frightened). A struck blade slides through the ash and does nothing.*

- **Telegraph (before it matters):** the first sword passes through it like smoke, and the air around it is grave-cold. Now the puzzle is fair.
- **More than one answer:** a torch, a thrown flask of oil or alchemist's fire, a blade dipped in holy oil, or luring it onto a brazier or a burning beam. Magic is *an* answer (all magic deals magical harm), not the *only* one.
- **Low HP** so that once the party finds fire, the fight resolves fast: the point is the discovery, not a damage race.

The two together show the rule of the chapter: most creatures are a **tier plus one trait**, and a puzzle creature is the same with its **counter named and telegraphed**.

AUTHORING MAGIC

Magic in this game is a **plugin on the core engine, not a subsystem inside it**. The core rules define no spells. A caster is just a playbook that grants the **Spellcasting** Advanced Action and a themed bundle of spells; the spells live on that playbook and on the player's spell-book sheet. This section is for whoever writes new spells, bundles, traditions, or caster playbooks. It tells you how to keep new magic balanced and in voice without touching the core.

The whole point of the design is that a community member can add a wholly new kind of caster by writing a playbook and a handful of spells, with no change to the rules everyone already knows.

HOW A SPELL IS CAST (THE ENGINE YOU ARE BUILDING ON)

A spell is resolved as a **Skill action**: roll 3d6 + the caster's **casting attribute** (Wits for arcane study, Presence for divine or innate power), add trained edge and situation, and read the standard ladder:

Total	Result
8–	The spell fails. The cost is still paid; in a desperate spot it may misfire.
9–12	It works at reduced effect. The player may spend +1 stress to get the full result instead.
13–17	It works.
18+	It works, plus an effect (extra reach, an extra target, a rider condition).

Partial (9–12) reduced effect is defined by the spell, but the default heuristics are: half damage or healing, half duration, half area, or one fewer target. The design principle is that players are never *forced* to spend stress on a partial; they always have the lesser outcome as a free option and the full outcome as an optional stress buy.

Against a willing target or with no one to stop you, casting usually needs no roll at all; you simply pay the cost. Roll when an unwilling target resists or when failure would bite.

Three fixed truths the core already establishes, build on them, do not restate them in a playbook:

- Magic is **magical harm**. It bites creatures whose Bane is fire or blessing, so it is often the answer to a Bane creature.
- Casting is fueled by **stress** alone, not a separate mana or slot economy.
- Spending past your last stress box makes you **falter** (reset to zero, take a lasting *Shaken* mark). A tradition may rename its falter (the arcane “Warp,” a divine “withdrawal of favor”), but the mechanic is the same.

THE FOUR MAGNITUDES (HOW TO PRICE A NEW SPELL)

Every spell sorts into one of four magnitudes. This is the single most important authoring tool: decide the magnitude first, then write flavor to fit. Do not invent new costs.

Magnitude	Cost	What it can do
Cantrip	free, at will	A cosmetic or personal trick, here and gone: a light, a spark, a mended cup, a sensed lie, a whispered word. No real harm. (See guardrails below.)
Spell	1 stress	One real effect, now: single-target harm about a weapon's worth (often ignoring armor), one condition on one foe, a solid heal, a useful utility.
Greater spell	2 stress	Reach beyond one subject: an area, several targets, strong control (a binding, a barrier), a large heal, a revival.

Magnitude	Cost	What it can do
Ritual	time, no stress	The slow, safe path. Anything you have calm minutes to do out of a fight, and the grand effects that should never be cheap: sanctify, scry, speak with the dead, raise the dead, lasting enchantment.

Rules of thumb when you are unsure:

- If it would replace a martial character's whole activation and then some, it is at least a **greater spell**.
- If it ends an encounter or trivializes a pillar of play (always know the truth, always escape, raise the dead at will), it is a **ritual**, not a spell.
- A combat **bolt** is the workhorse spell: a ranged attack, 1 stress, harm about equal to a weapon and usually ignoring armor. Most arcane bundles include one.

THE DRY-CASTER MINOR ATTACK (THE AT-WILL POKE)

A caster who has spent their last stress should not be reduced to throwing rocks, so every casting bundle grants a single **at-will minor attack**: the dim ember left when the fire is out. It is **not** a **cantrip** (cantrips deal no harm worth a number, see the guardrails); it is a deliberate, capped baseline. Author it to all of these limits:

- **It must not outclass the dedicated attacker archetypes.** It is the caster's floor, not a free bolt. Keep it clearly below a real weapon strike and well below the 1-stress bolt.
- **It costs 1 or 2 actions** to use (set by how much it does), the same action economy as any attack, never a free extra.
- **It does one of two things, not both:** a touch of **single-target minor damage**, or a **single-target minor condition** (a brief Staggered, a flicker of Frightened). Not an area, not multiple targets, not a lasting effect.
- **It is a normal 3d6 attack roll, so nothing auto-hits.** Do not write a magic-missile, an auto-hit dart, or any "always lands" effect; the caster rolls to hit like everyone else.

This is the always-available fallback the **stress-track** balancing relies on (a caster is burst, not endurance): when the fuel runs dry the caster still contributes a little, without ever competing with the martial's damage. Name and flavor it to the tradition (an arcane spark, a divine rebuke), but hold the limits.

DURATION, AND COMPONENTS THAT ANCHOR IT

Most spells are **immediate**: they resolve and are done (a bolt, a heal, a shove of force). Lasting effects need a way to *hold* the magic, and this is where the stress economy needs care. Stress clears on rest, so a ward "that lasts the night" paid for with a single stress would cost nothing by morning. Resolve it with one of three durations, named on the spell:

- **Immediate.** Resolves at once. The default; most combat magic.
- **Concentration.** The effect persists while you hold your attention on it. It costs nothing beyond the casting, but it ends the moment you **cast another spell, are Stunned or Downed** (you lose the action that sustains it), or choose to let it go. There is **no concentration check** to make or to roll against: damage alone does not break it (no per-hit save to track), but an enemy ends it by taking your action (**Stun** you), your feet (**Down** you), or forcing you to spend your cast elsewhere. Cheap, but it occupies the caster and is fragile, and that fragility is the point: a *hostile* sustained effect, a curse, a binding, a *Brittle Bones*, is answered by **breaking the caster's concentration**, which is why crowd control (Stun, a shove, pressure) earns its

place against a caster. (An **anchored** version, below, cannot be broken this way, the trade for spending the component.)

- **Anchored (consume a component).** You spend a named, consumable **component** as you cast: a palmful of salt, a chalk circle, a pinch of silver, a burned feather, a drop of blood, a costly reagent. The component holds the magic so you do not have to. The effect then lasts its full stated duration with **no concentration**, and your stress clears on rest as normal. Fire and forget, at the price of a thing.

This is the recommended improvement to the stress system for any spell that should linger: a sustained ward, a flying boon, a light that lasts the watch, a lasting blessing. It keeps the stress track free for the fight, gives material components a real job, and turns preparation into play. A caster who is out of a component can still produce the effect by **Concentration** or by casting it as a **ritual**; they just cannot fire and forget.

Authoring components:

- Make them concrete, consumable, and **listed on the spell** (“Wardlight, anchor: a palmful of salt”). The spell-book sheet has room to note them.
- **Abstract the common ones as a pouch.** Do not make a caster itemize every pinch of salt. A caster whose bundle uses anchored spells starts with a **bag of spell components valued at X** (a coin amount). Anchoring with a common component draws that value down by the component’s small cost; restock the bag in town for coin. Only **rare or strange** components are tracked as discrete items (a good fit for an **inventory card** or a story reward). When the bag runs dry, the caster falls back to Concentration or ritual casting until they can resupply.
- Price the component to the spell. A night-long ward burns cheap salt (pennies off the bag); binding a spirit until dawn burns a silver chain (a tracked item). Scarcity is the lever.
- A ritual that makes something **permanent** should usually consume a component too; permanence is the most expensive duration there is.

A rough heuristic by source: **divine and innate** traditions tend toward **immediate grace**, mercy and wrath spent in the moment, plus the odd one-round aura, and so rarely need anchors or a pouch. **Arcane** traditions are the ones that *build* lasting things, wards, lights, bindings, and so are where anchored durations and components earn their keep. A divine caster who only heals, smites, and raises brief auras carries no component pouch at all.

CANTRIP GUARDRAILS

Cantrips are free, so they need fences, or a clever author will write a cantrip that does a costed spell’s job. A cantrip must **not**:

- deal harm to more than the one subject, or any harm worth a damage number in a fight (a spark that lights tinder is fine; a spark that wounds is a spell);
- last beyond a moment in a fight, or beyond a few minutes out of one (for duration, write a spell with **Concentration** or an **anchored** component);
- compel, charm, or dominate a will;
- create a battlefield effect: a wall, a zone, darkness, difficult ground;
- strengthen or weaken in a way that persists or stacks across a party.

A good test: a cantrip is **personal**. Its magic is sustained by the caster’s own presence, so an object a cantrip enchants goes dark the moment it leaves the caster’s hand. You carry your own light.

EFFECT TAGS (FINE COST DIALS)

When a spell sits between two magnitudes, a tag nudges it. Use these sparingly and note them on the spell.

Tag	Effect	Cost shift
Unavoidable	ignores the target's Defense (no roll to resist)	up a step
Silent / Unseen	no visible or audible signature	up a step
Selective	spares chosen allies inside an area	up a step
Loud / Obvious	announces itself; no stealth	down a step
Concentration	must be held (see Duration)	down a step
Material	consumes a component beyond any anchor	down a step

“Up a step” means treat a 1-stress spell as a 2-stress greater spell (or move a greater spell into ritual territory); “down a step” means the reverse, to a floor of a free cantrip.

HARM AND DEFENSES

This game keeps **one** distinction that matters at the table: ordinary harm versus **magical harm**. Magical harm is what lets a spell hurt a creature whose Bane is something other than steel. Do **not** build a chart of fire/frost/holy/profane damage types with a matching grid of resistances; we rejected the universal damage-type table on purpose. Name a spell's element freely for color (a frost ray, a holy flame), but treat the element as flavor, not as a defense category.

When a creature should take damage only from a Bane, write that as a **per-creature, telegraphed counter** in its stat line, in plain language, exactly as the core directs for Bane. The Bane is the puzzle; the player should be able to learn it and beat it.

BUILDING A TRADITION OR BUNDLE

A caster playbook does not hand out a spell list. It hands out a small **bundle** gated by the character's origin, the teacher, god, school, or pact that defines them. The recurring shape:

- One **cantrip** + one **spell** (often the bolt) + one **ritual**, themed together, granted by the lifepath beat that says where the power came from. Give three or so such bundles to choose among; the choice is the character.
- Set the **casting attribute** by source (Wits arcane, Presence divine) and say whether the tradition **casts in armor**. Arcane study usually cannot; divine and innate power usually can. This is a real niche lever, do not give it away.
- Differentiate a new caster by the **shape of its cost**, not by bigger numbers. Every caster spends stress, but a tradition can layer a distinct tell on top: a pact that ticks a patron's clock, a faith whose off-tenet spells cost more, an alchemist who prepares anchored effects as cards in downtime. The fuel is shared; the texture is the playbook's.
- Put the right **starting kit** in the playbook. A focus (staff, wand, holy symbol) names the tradition; if any granted spell is **anchored**, the kit should include a **bag of spell components valued at X** so the caster can use it from the first session. A caster who only casts immediate and Concentration spells needs no pouch.

BALANCING AGAINST THE STRESS TRACK

A caster's track is **4 + Presence**, so at 1 stress per spell they get roughly four to six castings between rests before the falter risk bites. Author to that budget:

- A caster is **burst, not endurance**. They cannot, and should not, carry a long fight alone; the falter ceiling is the intended brake. Lean on it rather than inventing per-day limits.
- Do not grant an Advanced Action that meaningfully widens the track or refunds stress for free; that is the one dial that breaks the economy.
- Because a lone caster cannot grind down a high-hit-point **Bane** creature, design such puzzle creatures with modest hit points and **more than one** answer, so a party that lacks magic is not simply stuck.

RUNNING FOR YOUR TABLE

The encounter calculations in this game, and the threat tiers on the Gamemaster's Screen, assume a **party of four**. Fewer or more heroes changes a fight more than the headcount suggests, because actions and focus-fire compound: three heroes are not three-quarters of a party, they are meaningfully more fragile, and the gap shows up as **attrition across a delve**, not in any single fight. This section is how to adjust.

PARTY SIZE

In testing, a balanced level-3 party cleared a punishing five-wave delve about **90%** of the time at four heroes. Drop to three (keeping a healer) and that fell to **~70%**; drop the healer too and the trio **wiped almost every run**. The fixes below restored a three-hero party to a comfortable clear rate.

THREE PLAYERS (OR FEWER)

Use any one lever; combine them for an easier ride.

- **Thin the opposition, about one foe per missing player.** Cutting roughly a quarter of the bodies from a four-player encounter brought a three-hero party back to near-certain victory. Cut the **durable** foes first, a Greater, a Dire's escort, not the Lesser foes: durability is what survives to land hits, so removing one tough foe helps more than removing two weak ones.
- **Add a body.** A single **hireling or NPC ally** (a hired spear; see Equipment) restores a three-hero party almost exactly to four-player survivability. This is the cleanest fix when you want to keep full-size encounters, and it gives a player a second character to run.
- **Open the rest gate.** Small parties recover slower in absolute terms, so let them rest more often. A generous rest gate rescued even a **healer-less** trio, from near-certain death to a comfortable clear of a thinned camp. The rest gate, whether the party gets to recover before the hard fight, is a stronger difficulty dial than any stat block, at any party size.
- **Mind the healer gap.** Going without healing is survivable at four heroes; at three it is dire. If the group has no Cleric or Paladin, make sure they carry **healing draughts** and other remedies (see Equipment), and lean harder on the levers above.

The danger at three players concentrates in the **late, durable waves**, not the opening skirmish, so spend your difficulty budget there: an easier road in, and a fair chance to rest before the worst of it.

FIVE OR MORE PLAYERS

The opposite problem. Four heroes already bury a lone foe under their actions, so a fifth makes single big enemies trivial. **Add bodies and a Dire foe's escort, not just hit points:** give solo Dire foes Multiattack and minions (see the bestiary's Dire notes), and add about one foe per extra player. More players also out-action attrition, so the rest gate matters less, tighten it if you want the tension back.

TACTICS: DEFENSIVE PLAY, AND KNOWING WHEN TO RUN

A fight's danger is not fixed by its stat blocks; it bends to how the party plays. Trading blow for blow, every hero attacking every activation, is the deadliest way to meet a hard fight, and it is the floor the encounter calculations assume. The levers that climb off that floor are **defensive**: a wounded hero who spends an action to **Defend** trades offense for the durability to stay upright, and an upright hero keeps swinging. A guardian's **Taunt** and **Intercept**, **focus-fire** to drop a foe an activation early, and a fair **rest gate** do the same work.

HOLDING A LINE, AND THE SHAPE OF A SET-PIECE

Position is the strongest defensive lever of all, because **no one may move through a standing foe**. A passage one or two bodies wide lets a handful hold off a crowd: only as many attackers as the gap is wide can strike the front at once, so a swarm's numbers stop counting. Ten rats or a dozen goblins simply queue; the line takes them one or two at a time and grinds them down. A **second rank** behind the first is not a second wall but a second *life* for the line, the instant the front defender falls, the one behind steps up. Anyone sheltered further back, a caster, a wounded hero, an NPC under guard, is safe exactly that long: until the last defender drops. (In the open, where foes can go around, **holding your ground** adds a free Strike at anyone who tries to slip your reach; in a true chokepoint the body itself is the wall and the free Strike is a bonus, not the mechanism.)

What breaks a held line is **not more bodies but harder ones**. Raw per-hit power, a Dire bruiser whose blow cracks the tank and whose knockdown steals its actions, chews through a chokepoint that a whole swarm could not. So does anything that refuses to play the geometry: a flyer, a burrower, a foe that flanks a second entrance, or archers who shoot *over* the line at the soft targets behind (a body blocks bodies, not arrows). A lone runner can also try to **Disengage** past the front, but it spends its turn doing so and arrives spent among your back rank, where the second rank meets it.

Design a *hold the door* or *protect the envoy* set-piece around exactly this. Give the defenders a real chokepoint and **name it**, so the choice to hold is visible; then decide how you mean to threaten it. Send **numbers** if you want the line to hold and the players to feel unbreakable; send **per-hit power or a way around** if you want dread, and let them feel the second rank thinning. The tension of such a scene lives in the geometry, not the stat block.

PRESSURE ON THE STRESS TRACK

A hero who is desperate can dig past a full stress track for one clutch spend, a finishing Push or a life-saving Resist, then carry the **Shaken** -1 until a full rest. That valve only matters in a fight that drains the track to empty, and it reshapes how you build threats:

- **A trivial or short fight is untouched by it.** If the party never bottoms out its stress, whether they would dig deep makes no difference. Stress becomes a real decision only when a fight runs long or hits hard enough to exhaust it.
- **One big deadly foe is where the valve pays most.** Against a single brutal target the party spends freely and a clutch Resist saves a life, so a set-piece boss is markedly easier for a table that pushes than for a cautious one. Build the boss expecting they will, or it lands soft.
- **A missing answer is not rescued by desperation.** Against a Bane with no counter in hand, digging deep only softens a loss; it does not turn it. Give the tool or expect the retreat.
- **Rest cadence sets the price.** Shaken lifts only on a full rest, so back-to-back waves make the -1 compound into the next fight, while a rest before the climax washes the cost away. Where you place the rest, not the stat block, decides whether clutch spending is cheap or punishing. This is the same rest gate that governs attrition; it governs desperation too.

Telegraph the defensive option. In testing, a punishing set-piece that wiped the party more often than not when run as a slugfest became a **better-than-even** fight once the party Defended its wounded and held its line. A table that does not know it may Defend, hold a door, or fall back to a chokepoint will trade itself to death. Name the terrain and the exits so the choice is visible.

Defensive play cannot beat a wall. It buys time against a foe you *can* beat, and nothing against one you cannot. Against a **Bane** with no answer in hand, no fire for the wraith, no blessed steel for the revenant, turtling only prolongs a lost fight, and *more* heroes fall in the extra rounds. The answer is a different plan, not a better stance: find the counter, or **retreat**. Keep retreat, surrender, and parley live at every table; foes have morale and take the same exits. The deadliest fight is the one neither side can leave.

Beta: not yet playtested. This is a working draft (version 0.7). Its numbers and procedures are reasoned and simulation-checked, but unproven at the table, so expect them to change between versions. Play it, push on it, and report what breaks.