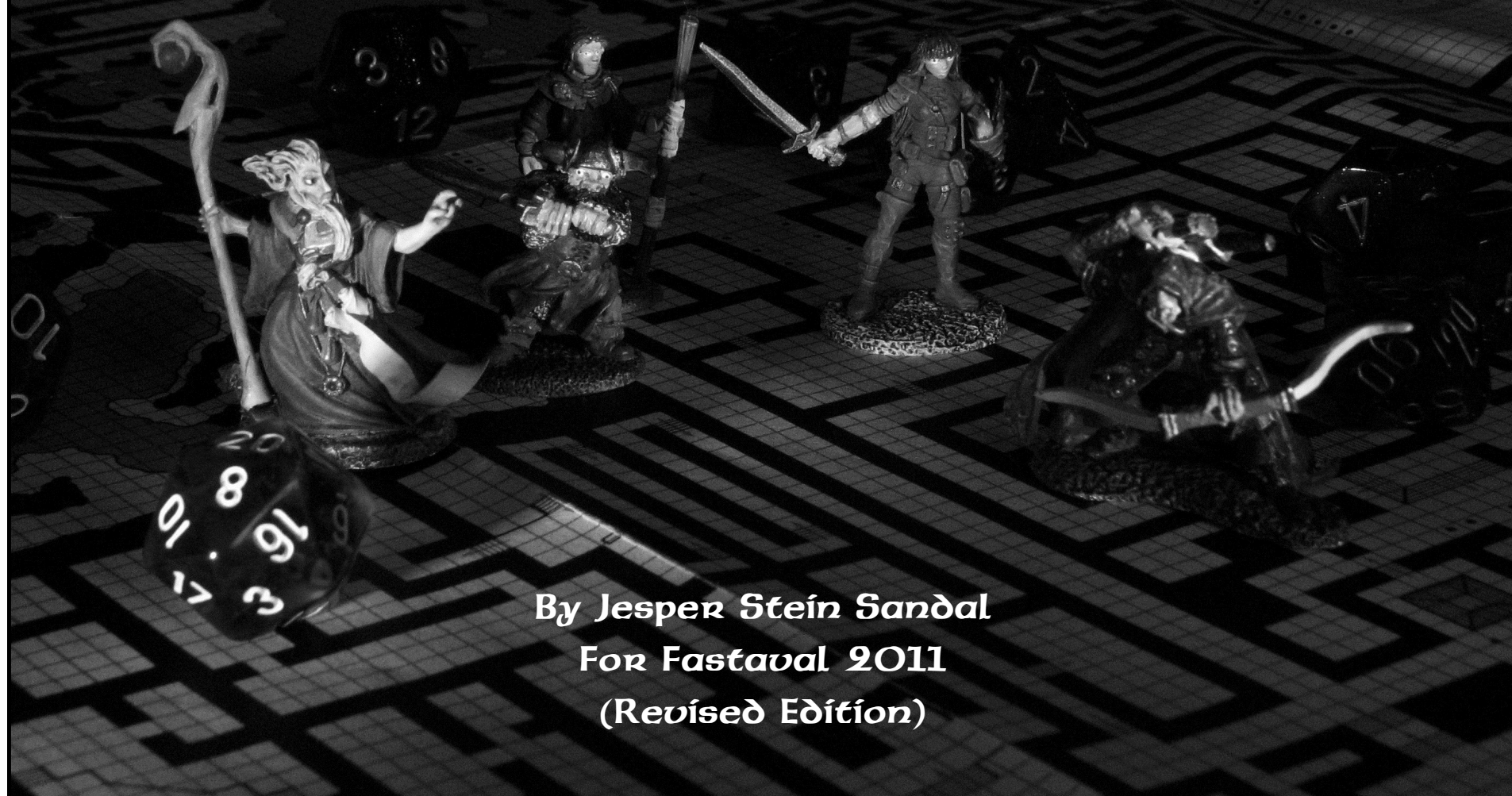


No Way Out



By Jesper Steín Sandal
For Fastaval 2011
(Revised Edition)

Introduction

Number of players: 5 players and a game master.

Estimated time: 2 hours including player briefing.

The story: A group of adventurers are trapped in an endless dungeon and finally realize that they have become monsters themselves.

Thanks to: Judges, game masters, and players who provided valuable feedback at Fastaval 2011 and made this revised edition possible.

Background: This game explores what can happen, when you take the classic dungeon crawl into the extreme. 'No Way Out' plays with the idea of a dungeon crawl that never ends. It is inspired by ridiculously huge super-dungeons like *Undermountain* known from D&D.

In No Way Out it is however not important which particular dungeon the adventurers are lost in. What matters is the idea of a dungeon with infinite rooms that never ends.

The players will get an opportunity to try the classic cliché characters from fantasy roleplaying games and the conflicts between the members of the party. But the clichés have undergone a dramatic transformation during their stay in the dungeon.

Synopsis: The party is trapped in an unknown level of a super-dungeon. They entered it, hoping to find fortune and fame, but got lost. Now, many years later, the characters themselves have almost turned into monsters themselves as they continue to explore the dungeon. They live on what they can scavenge or create with magical spells. They have adapted, but they suffer. The memories of life before they ventured into the dungeon are painful, and every day is a fight for survival.

The repeating pattern of fight, loot, go left, go right, fight, loot, move on, fight, rest – has turned the characters insane, so they are now living out the extreme version of their personalities. For example the greed of the dwarf has escalated to the point that he now literally swallows all the gold that they find.

The climax of the story in this game comes, as the characters finally find themselves trapped in a room with no doors, which is identical to the room in which they fought the first of the seemingly random encounters of the game. At this point, the players should realize that the monsters they defeated in the first fight, was really themselves.

The characters blame each other for their faith. A central point for initiating the conflicts in the party is the question of whose fault it was that the sixth character died. Each character also has his and her individual delusions and objectives to help escalate conflicts towards the final encounter. In the final encounter, the party will have the opportunity to settle the score between them, as they've finally reached the point, where there is literally no way out of the dungeon.

Game mechanics: Structurally the game starts with a short narrative scene, followed by a string of random encounters that the party has to defeat.

No Way Out uses a combination of *power cards* and *life points*. The mechanics for the random encounters is inspired by *Battlestar Galactica the board game* in which the players have to negotiate how to match the numerical value of a challenge using resources. In No Way Out the resources are the power cards that are an abstract representation of the character's skills and abilities. Each player has the opportunity to sabotage the effort using power cards with negative values. All the power cards are handed in face down to the game master, so the players cannot see, if the other players are actually contributing with the value that they say.

The frequency of the random encounters is controlled using an egg timer, which the game master will set to ring 5-10 minutes after the encounter. The purpose of the egg timer is to interrupt the players and bring their conflicts with them into the encounter, because they don't get a chance to resolve them between encounters.

The game master can manipulate the game by switching around power cards or moving life points between characters in addition to asking questions that help the players focus on the conflicts and secrets of the party.

Design, text, illustrations, and production:

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Running the game

Preparation: No Way Out is designed to be run with minimum preparation by the game master. Your primary functions are to explain the mechanics, initiate the play between characters, and most of all to set the pace of the game.

Before the game, you may want to set up the play area in the same fashion that you would for a classic dungeon crawl. Close the curtains, dim the lights, and use candles – just remember to leave enough light for the players to be able to read their characters.

You can also use old rulebooks or large dungeon maps to decorate the table. Props such as miniatures and dice are too much of a distraction for many players however, so I do not recommend using too many things that players can physically play with for this game. Mostly because of the time constraint.

Practical stuff: I recommend that you print out the power cards on either heavier paper or use colored paper to avoid that players can see the values through it.

Organization: You probably need to keep two or three pages handy for you reference during the game. First, you should have the page with the flavor text from the seven encounters handy. Second, you may want to have page with the suggestions for player manipulation ready, and last you may want to have the rules for resolving encounters within reach in case the players have any questions.

Distributing the characters: You can hand out the characters according to which roles you think will fit each player. There is no single character in this game that is more important than others, so you do not have to worry too much about giving a key character to a passive player.

The simplest way is to let the players chose their characters from the classical archetypes: The paladin, the cleric, the dwarf, the wizard, and the thief.

Tip: If you find yourself a player short, Tormund or Gretchen are probably the characters that can most easily be dropped based on player feedback from Fastaval.

Note: The character Penelope can be challenging for some players due to the more mature themes in the character description, so I recommend that you warn the players that Penelope should be played by a player who likes a challenge and can handle difficult themes.

Important: Instruct the players that they must read the characters one sheet at a time. This is important, because they will be instructed to crumble the first sheet into a ball and throw it away.

Important: Remember to hand out power cards and life points.

Instructing the players: Let the players know how the game mechanics works. Briefly, you can explain that they will face a series of encounters, and each of these will have value that the must match with power card that can have positive or negative values. They are allowed to bluff, play as many cards as they want, and if they fail, they have to pay with life points.

It is completely up to the players how they interpret and describe what they do with their power cards. A +3 can be everything from bribing the monster to a fireball. And the player may say that the bring +3 from

a fireball, but really play a -2, because other party members got trapped in the fireball. Encourage the players to be creative in their interpretations.

Tip: Tell the players that it may be more fun if they don't fire off all of their negative power cards in the first few encounters. By holding back just a little, they help build suspension later in the game towards the final encounter.

Important: Some players may be unfamiliar with this type of game, where they will have a great degree of narrative freedom as to what happens. So be sure to tell them that this game takes place in a dungeon, *but the story is about exploring the secrets and conflicts between the characters, not exploring rooms or magical items*. It is also up to them to decide, what goes on, within the framework of the story they want to tell. You can illustrate this by an example:

If a player asks »I search the room. What do I find?«, the game master would reply with »tell us, what you find«.

Sound track: The game has a sound track mixed from ambient sound effects to create a dungeon atmosphere. It is optional to use it, but most players have given it positive feedback.

The egg timer: At Fastaval we used cheap mechanical egg timers, but if you don't have one, most cell phones have a timer that you can use. Just make sure that you can trigger it, if you need to do it prematurely. Having the ticking sound of the timer can also work as a stress factor to help build suspense.

First scene: The ranger

Purpose: The first scene is used to get the players warmed up, get into character, and at the same time get them started with the internal conflicts in the party.

Form: The first scene is narrative. The players take turns describing what happened and what their characters saw and thought when the sixth character, Zilas the ranger, died. You can ask them questions such as what the dead character meant to them, and what they felt when he died. Expect to use a maximum of three minutes per character. The players should do the narration from their characters perspective and preferably in character.

Tip: Inform the players that this scene is warm-up, so they shouldn't worry too much about matching details with the content of their diaries or character descriptions. And it is perfectly fine, if the stories from the different characters don't match.

Important: Before you set this scene in motion, you should set the egg timer to ring about 15-20 minutes later. If you want to spend more time, you can always add more minutes to the timer during play.

Random encounters

Purpose: The seven random encounters have two purposes. First, the mix of random, absurd monsters in different, random rooms with no logical connection should make the players hate the random encounters and feel that it is truly hopeless to fight their way through the dungeon.

Secondly, the encounters force the players to bring out the party conflicts, because they have limited resources due to the game mechanics.

Preparation: Cut out the seven encounter cards from the two sheets you will find in the document with handouts. Printing on either card stock or laminating the cards may be a good idea.

Try to create the illusion that the encounters are random. You may pretend to shuffle the cards in front of the players, then put them in a stack in front of the players face down and then draw from the stack one encounter at a time. Or you can go all out and roll dice behind your screen and then show them the card.

Tip: Is No Way Out a comedy? It is not written as a comedy, but the situation is so absurd that even if players keep a straight face while they play, they will probably be laughing inside. Using props such as a GM Screen could push your game more towards an outright slapstick comedy, which is fine, but you may risk that players forget to use the more dramatic part of the game and lose a bit of the experience, but still have fun.

Important: Make sure to place Encounter 1 first and Encounter 7 last.

Form: The first encounter happens just after the first scene ends (the egg timer rings). Flip the encounter card and let the players see it. It will say how many points they need to beat it (Combat Strength). This way the players can see this number as they negotiate.

You can read the flavor text aloud from your copy later in this document. And yes, if you want, you may use your interpretation of the Dungeon Master voice.

Tip: If the players have a hard time working around the possibly illogical order of the encounters, tell them that the next encounter doesn't have to be in the next room. It could be days or weeks between them.

You should leave the negotiation (see *Rules* on page 5) to the players, but stand by to stop them from focusing too much on the mechanics. If they start speculating in beating the game, you can use the tools described later in the section on *player manipulation*.

When the players are ready, collect the cards face down, shuffle them, and perhaps switch one card for one of yours, and put them back on the table face up.

It is now up to the players to decide who will have to pay with life points if the power cards don't add up to beat the encounter.

Tip: This game was originally designed to run within a 2 hour time slot at a convention. If you have more time, and your players enjoy their interactions, give them a few more minutes between encounters. You can always remove an encounter from the game, if you feel that going through all seven of them would drag on for too long, and the players are already tuned in to playing and have a good story going.

Once damage has been distributed, you should set the egg timer to ring 5-10 minutes later. When it rings, the next encounter begins.

Rules

Each player has a number of *life points* and a number of *power cards* with either positive or negative values. A character is only dead, when he no longer has any life points or power cards left. So you are not dead, even though you run out of life points. You must always keep your power cards hidden from the other players.

A fight consists of five phases:

- ◆ **The Opening Phase:** The combat strength of the encounter is revealed. This is the total value that the players have to try to beat with power cards and life points.
- ◆ **The Negotiation Phase:** The players make their bids with what they want to contribute to the fight in terms of power cards or life points. You are allowed to bluff about the cards you are contributing with. Every player can contribute with as many or few power cards as he or she wants – even none at all.
- ◆ **The Collection Phase:** Every player hands over their power cards without showing them to anyone else. Life points are not collected until the end.
- ◆ **The Turning Phase:** The cards are shuffled and revealed. The total value is added up and compared to the combat strength of the encounter.
- ◆ **The Life Point Phase:** If the total value of the power cards is less than the combat strength of the encounter, the players has to negotiate, who will pay the life points to make up the difference.

Power cards: Each player gets 7 power cards. The values can be anything from +4 to -3. It is really not important how you distribute the cards, but a good distribution that matches the characters could be:

Alk: 3x(+2), 2x(+1), 1x(-1), 1x(-2)

Gretchen: 1x(+3), 3x(+2), 2x(+1), 1x(-1)

Kazir: 1x(+3), 2x(+2), 2x(-1), 1x(-3)

Penelope: 1x(+4), 3x(+2), 1x(+1), 2x(-2)

Tormund: 1x(+4), 1x(+3), 2x(+2), 1x(+1), 1x(-1), 1x(-2)

In addition, you get seven power cards that you can switch with the players' cards during the game and another five cards that you need to give to the players in the final encounter.

Important: Remind the players that the cards are abstract representations of what the characters do. What happens is up to the players to describe and interpret.

Life points: Each character has a number of life points that is used along with the power cards. As a physical representation, you can use the glass beads that are often used as counters in games.

Each character begins the game with the following number of hit points:

Alk: 3

Gretchen: 3

Kazir: 1

Penelope: 2

Tormund: 4

What happens when they run out of life? In some groups, the players go all out with their negative power cards early in the game, and may run out of life points to pay for a lost fight. It is fine to keep the players a bit in the dark of what will happen, but the easy solution is for the game master to steal a random power card from a player.

You can also introduce a second round of negotiations and let the players play more power cards.

Late in the game, you can also ask the players to pay 1 power card per life point they are missing. You can either ignore the face value of the card, or decide that only power cards with positive values can substitute for a life point. Odds are that if they are out of life points, they will have a lot of positive power cards left, and that will not make the final encounter as exciting.

Finally, if you think it would fit in the story, have the players decide which character has to pay the ultimate price for their failure.

The 7 random encounters

Encounter 1: A death knight, two ghosts, a shadow, and a ghoul.

»As you enter the room you hear the sound of stone grinding against stone. Before you can react, you notice how the walls seem to change shape and swallow up the doors. Out of the shadows, five ghoulish figures appear...«

Encounter 2: A Pyro Hydra

»You enter a large hall where several columns have been knocked over and bear scorch marks. From the center of the room, you hear several deafening roars, and a hydra raises its seven fire-breathing heads...«

Encounter 3: Two Stone Golems

»As you walk through a long hallway with statues of heroes from a long forgotten civilization along the sides, two of the statues suddenly begins to move...«

Encounter 4: A Flock of Kobolds

»The passage in front of you is partially blocked by rubble and trash. You spot something moving between the piles further up, but before you can see what it is, an arrow shoots right past you...«

Encounter 5: The Beholder

»You are walking through knee-deep foul and murky water, when out the darkness in front of you, a monster appears. It stares at you with ten eyes on stalks and a single evil eye above a large mouth filled with sharp teeth...«

Encounter 6: The Lich

»As you enter this throne room, a cold wind hits you. The room is filled with an unnatural emerald sickly light, and on the throne sits the undead remain of a sorcerer king...«

Encounter 7: A Hostile Group of Adventurers

»Just as you have made sure that this room is empty, the door in the other end is kicked in, and five adventurers storm in with their weapons drawn. Behind you, you can hear a grinding of stone against stone, as the only two doors in the room become one with the walls...«

Between encounters

After each encounter, you can help play along by focusing on one player and ask questions. When you get one player going, you can switch to another player and ask for his or her character's reaction or response. You should be ready to sense, when to step back and leave the rest to the players. You can steer play towards the internal conflicts using the tools for player manipulation listed later.

Important: Be mindful about time! The game shouldn't go on for too long, so you may have to remove one or more of the random encounters to avoid that the game drags on. However, you should also give a good group of players enough time to play out their characters. You can always remove an encounter.

Important: If you remove an encounter, you should make sure to eliminate the points from the game that the players would have used to defeat that encounter. You can do that by switching out power cards or stealing life points from the players.

The Final Encounter

The final encounter is more than just a fight against a monster. It is also the opportunity for a showdown between the characters. The fight uses the same basic mechanics as the previous encounters, but with a few additional rules.

- ◆ Everybody keeps their current life points or receive one, so everyone has at least one life point at the beginning of the encounter.
- ◆ Everybody gets one of the bonus power cards.
- ◆ All cards played against other players are deadly, no matter the value of the card. The values only matter against the monsters.
- ◆ They can play as many cards as they have on both the monsters and other players.
- ◆ Payback: If another player plays a card against you, you are dead. But you get the chance to make payback against any single target you want, as long as you still have at least one power card left.

Tip: If you want to make the game slightly more complicated, you can ignore rule number 3.

Important: When a character dies, the player of the killer describes, what her character does, but the player of the dying character gets to describe or act out the actual death scene.

If all characters die: The other adventuring party in the encounter wins. Unless the players have played

enough power cards against the encounter to defeat it. In that case, everybody dies.

Characters and encounter survive: If the surviving character cannot defeat the encounter, he or she is defeated by the adventurers.

Only one or more characters survive: The survivors get to describe what happen to their characters in the years after the fight and how they finally end their adventuring career.

This is the end of the game.

Player Manipulation

Questions between the encounters: To facilitate interaction between the characters after an encounter, or to steer the players towards the secrets and conflicts in the party, you can pick one or more players and ask their character questions such as:

- ◆ *How did you react when you saw the monster?*
- ◆ *What did you do during the fight?*
- ◆ *How were you injured?*
- ◆ *Whose fault was it?*
- ◆ *Did you notice anything suspicious?*

You can initiate a dialogue by asking another player to respond:

- ◆ *What did you feel, when you saw...?*
- ◆ *How did you react?*

You can also lead them more directly towards the conflicts:

- ◆ *Is it fair that...?*
- ◆ *What do you think of...?*
- ◆ *Can you forgive... for...?*
- ◆ *Is it the first time that you...?*

Questions during the encounters: During the negotiation phase, you probably won't have to interfere, but for some players you may have to move their focus away from the game mechanics towards roleplaying the negotiation. Your questions should provoke the conflicts between the characters:

- ◆ **Penelope:** She needs souls, so she will only help in fights, where there are souls to collect.
- ◆ **Kazir:** He is afraid of the undead, and he thinks that they have a vampire amongst them. Anybody able to walk away from a fight unscathed could be the vampire.
- ◆ **Tormund:** He wants to sacrifice himself. Is he sacrificing enough?
- ◆ **Alk:** He is waiting for the others to die. But at the same time, he wants to prove that he is superior to humans.
- ◆ **Gretchen:** She is convinced that they cannot fail. But can she forgive the others for sabotaging her quest?

Manipulating life points and power cards

Each player begins with a set amount of life points and power cards. But you don't have to give them the chance to think too far ahead.

During an encounter: You have five extra power cards, and you'll collect the used cards from the players. You can switch these for the cards that the players have put into their pool to defeat the encounter, when you collect them from the table. It is up to you, whether

you want to be absolute subtle, or let the players suspect that you are messing with them.

After an encounter: Between the encounters, you can steal or add life points to a character's pool. You can also move life point counters between two characters. The players should notice, and you should only do this a few times. The objective is to initiate conflict.

Important: If you remove an encounter from the game, you will have to compensate by switching out some of the players' power cards with your extra negative cards to make up for it.

Things you can whisper to the players

- ◆ **Alk:** Whisper things such as spotting one of the others picking up a gold coin, or hearing dwarfs singing.
- ◆ **Gretchen:** She catches a glimpse of a tattoo of a symbol of an evil cult on one of the others.
- ◆ **Kazir:** One of the others casts no shadow, or has blood dripping from her lips.
- ◆ **Penelope:** Her hands are covered in blood. She sees the number 9,999 above the head of one of the others. In the final encounter, a voice whispers 'One'.
- ◆ **Tormund:** Gretchen wants to pray with him. He hears Penelope whisper the name of a demon. Since Tormund wants to sacrifice himself, it is very obvious to steal life points from the others and give to Tormund.