

# **The Chaos Lords and the Desert of Death**

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# Introduction

The Chaos Lords and the Desert of Death, from here on referred to as *Chaos Lords*, is a beer and pretzels, completely over-the-top, science fantasy role playing game that should not be taken too seriously. What exactly does that mean?

- *Beer and Pretzels game*: Simple mechanics, simple characters, almost no math beyond basic addition and dividing by two, and a setting that fully accepts unexpected characters.
- *Completely over-the-top*: The goal of the game is to ride out from the Last City with your group of heroes, destroy hordes of Death's minions, and, if you make it far enough, destroy Death itself. Who are these heroes? Just about anything you can dream up. In Appendix A, you will find a few sample characters, including a Viking warchief, the Martian alchemist responsible for destroying most of the dinosaurs on Earth, and a walking war machine being controlled by a brain cloned from Abraham Lincoln.
- *Science Fantasy*: Alchemists and cloned brains...
- *Should not be taken too seriously*: ... of former presidents.

To play *Chaos Lords*, you will need a few things beyond this book:

- A handful of ten-sided dice (d10s) per player, about 10 each should be sufficient.
- A few twenty-sided dice (d20s) per player, 2 or 3 should be sufficient.
- A single thirty-sided die (d30) for each player (if you do not have a 30 sided die, you can substitute two more d10s (preferable different looking from the rest of the d10s) and do a bit more rolling.
- Some paper and writing utensils.

There are examples littered through out the book; they are in *italics*.

# Character Creation

Character Creation in *Chaos Lords* follows this structure:

- Come up with a character description
  - Concept and Name
  - Something To Die For
- Create a list of exploits
- Record starting Power rating

## Come up with a description

### Concept and Name

The name you choose, while mechanically irrelevant, is fundamental to your character. It is more than a name, it is an *attitude*. The concept is an archetype that will give you and your group an idea about what sort of character you are playing.

*Chris is creating his first character. He happened to be listening to Led Zeppelin's Immigrant Song at the time, and decided he was going to play a Viking Warchief. After some deep thought, he decides on the name Grundar Olafson.*

### Something To Die For

This is another non-mechanical step, but it is the one thing that keeps your hero pushing forward on his impossible quest. Ponder the following questions and try to get in your hero's head.

- What made your hero able to disregard the laws of Death and find their way to the Last City?
- What burning desire means more to your hero than the boundaries of reality?

*Thinking about the questions and Grundar, there was only one answer: Grundar lives only for the chance to fight Death one - on - one. Chris writes down: Grundar has spent countless lifetimes stalking Death, waiting for the moment when he might be able to destroy him. Grundar is willing to die for the opportunity to face Death in one on one in combat.*

## Exploits

Your hero's exploits can be viewed as his list of skills, flaws, enemies, and even signature equipment. Come up with two suitably epic encounters for your hero. These are not strictly free form; they should contain the following elements:

- A specific, named enemy you have that Death can use against you OR a flaw or hindrance related to this exploit.

- One Aspect, typically in the form: Name, the Something or Other. This can be used to gain a major advantage in a Contest with Death situation.
- Enough flavor to come up with a few additional, less specific, Edges as the situation warrants.

*Chris likes dragons, and thinks Grundar must have slayed one at some point. He writes: Grundar Olafson single-handedly bested the dragon Sigflandadorn to gain access to the stream that grants eternal life to those who drink its water and survive. Sigflandadorn was not destroyed, and has been stalking Grundar ever since. Until the end of days, Grundar was known as Grundar, the Eternal Warrior.*

*From this example, we the following traits:*

*An adversary, Sigflandadorn the dragon  
Grundar has an Aspect: 'The Eternal Warrior'  
Grundar drank of the water of life and survived  
Grundar has bested a dragon in mortal combat*

*The remaining exploit of Grundar can be found in Appendix A: Sample Characters.*

## **Record starting Power rating**

*Chaos Lords* uses a dice pool to represent your hero's ability to act and his life total. For a starting character, this value is six. This should be noted in the field on your character sheet labeled Power.

That's it. If you've done it right, your character will look a bit like an elementary school book report detailing the adventures of your hero.

# Mechanics

The basic resolution mechanism of *Chaos Lords* is a dice pool system with exploding dice and a fixed target number. The primary die type is a d10, but your pool may contain a couple d20s and or a d30, as well. These higher powered dice can be added to the pool based on the Aspects and Edges used to describe the hero. Up to two Edges that are relevant to a roll can be used to add a d20 each. A single Aspect can be used to add a d30 to the pool.

There are two situations that require dice rolls in the game, they are known as *Acts of Heroism* and *Contests with Death*.

## Reading Dice

- A value greater than or equal to 7 in the ones place is a success for that die.
- d10s are read as normal; they show a range of one to ten, with the ten usually displayed as a zero.
- d20s and d30s are read as successes + a d10 roll. For example, rolling an 18 on a d20 is two successes: the '1' is the number of automatic successes you get, and the '8' beats the target of 7. Following this logic, rolling a 30 on a d30 is four successes (three automatic and one for rolling a 0).
- All dice explode when a 0 is rolled in the ones place. The successes are noted, and the die is re-rolled.
- Dice can explode multiple times.
- Exploding d20s and d30s still grant automatic successes.

## Acts of Heroism

Unopposed actions are considered *Acts of Heroism*. If you need to spot a hidden entrance, scale a wall, read an ancient map, or break down a door, you can use this mechanism. The GM declares a target number of successes that the player or group of players will need to match to succeed. The GM is the best gauge of these values, but a good starting scale for challenges would be:

- Trivial (1 success)
- Easy (3 successes)
- Moderate (5)
- Difficult (7)
- Heroic (9)
- Epic (11)
- ... and so on.

*Grundar looks out across the ruined desert landscape. According to the directions he received from the Gremlin, the Beacon scientist had sought shelter nearby. He just needed to find the shelter entrance. Grundar had been beaten pretty severely by the dragon, and was down to just*

*three Power.*

*The GM declares this to be an easy task (3 successes) for Grundar, since Grundar's character sheet mentions that Grundar has been stalking Death for millenia. This was in his Something to Die For, so it does not give him an extra d20 Edge. Had one of his exploits mentioned this, he would be rolling  $3d10 + 1d20$ .*

*Chris takes the three d10s and rolls them. They come up 2, 7, 0. This is two successes, plus the 0 explodes. Chris re-rolls it, and it shows an 8. That equals three successes, so Grundar finds the poorly hidden entrance to the deranged scientist's hideout.*

## Contests with Death

*Contests with Death* are used for any sort of opposed challenge. Combat, negotiations, battle of wills, hiding in the shadows, and chase scenes can all be represented with this mechanism. Contests are structured into rounds with the following structure:

- Determine damage type
- Start the round
  - Roll initiative
  - Go through attacks
- Resolve the round

### Determine Damage Type

Any sort of combat does damage, but other types of contests may not. For example, a chase does no damage by itself. For these type of challenges, Power levels revert to pre-encounter levels for all parties. The only part that matters is determining the winner and loser.

### Start the Round

These steps will be repeated until one side gives up, is destroyed, or combat is otherwise interrupted.

### Roll Initiative

Order of action is determined by  $d10 + \text{Power}$  (number of dice in the pool). The hero (or servant of Death) with the highest value goes first, and the lowest value goes last.

### Go through Attacks

Every party gets a single attack and a chance to defend against attacks targeting them. Dice can only be used once per round, so it would be wise to save some back if there are opposing parties taking their action after you. Additionally, Aspects and Edges can only be invoked once per round. You are limited to a maximum of two Edges and one Aspect on any roll, attack or defense.

### Resolve the Round

Tally up remaining power and decide if the combat will continue.

*Grundar (played by Chris, has eight Power), Keeton (played by Eric, with six Power), and Abraham Lincoln Mark IV (played by Justine, with seven Power) are facing down Sigflandadorn the dragon (eleven Power) and a pack of rogue war machines (seven Power) that have been tracking Abraham Lincoln Mark IV.*

*Grundar and Siggie exchange some words (none friendly), and everyone rolls initiative. Chris gets a 11 (rolled 3 + 8 Power), Eric gets 10 (rolled 4 + 6 Power), Justine gets 13 (rolled 6 + 7 Power), Siggie gets 18 (rolled 7 + 11 Power), and the war machines get 8 (rolled 1 + 7 Power). This means the order of action will be Sigflandadorn, Abraham Lincoln Mark IV, Grundar, Keeton, then the war machines.*

*Sigflandadorn starts cautiously by declaring an attack against Grundar with only four dice. Chris declares that Grundar will defend with three dice. Sigflandadorn adds a d20 to his pool since he is attacking Grundar (he is listed as an enemy on Grundar's character sheet). Grundar adds a d20 to his pool, because he has experience fighting dragons.*

*Siggie rolls his 4d10 + 1d20, and gets 8, 9, 3, 3, and 17, equalling four successes. Grundar rolls his 3d10 + 1d20 and gets 1, 9, 0 (re-rolled to 3), and 12, equalling 3 successes. Sigflandadorn has 1 net success, meaning Grundar is down to 7 Power.*

*Abraham Lincoln Mark IV is enraged by the sight of the war machines, and wants to unleash holy hell on them. Justine declares she will use all 7 Power dice in the attack, leaving Abe with no way to defend himself. The war machines, desiring retaliation against a wide open foe, commits 4 dice. Abe has familiarity fighting these war machines (+1d20) and invokes his Kinslayer Aspect (+1d30). The war machines do not get any additional dice in their defense; they are not an explicitly named foe on Abe's character sheet (if they were led by Abraham Lincoln Mark III, they would get the 1d20 bonus).*

*Abe rolls his 7d10 + 1d20 + 1d30 and gets 2, 7, 5, 6, 0 (re-rolled to 7), 5, 8, 13, and 29, for a total of 8 successes. The war machines roll 0 (re-rolled to 3), 9, 4, and 5 for two successes. Abe has a net of 6 successes, and an Overkill. The war machines are down to 1 Power, and Abe is now at 10 Power (and has 3 unallocated dice for defense).*

*Grundar attacks Sigflandadorn. Grundar is not worried about the war machines, so he commits his remaining 4 Power dice and his Eternal Warrior Aspect (Siggie was guarding the stream of life). He can not use his dragon fighting Edge because he used it for defense. Siggie defends with 3 dice (he is worried about the unscathed Keeton, and wants to conserve some dice.)*

*Grundar rolls his 4d10 + 1d30 and gets 4, 6, 5, 3, and 12, for 2 successes. Siggie rolls his 3d10 + 1d20 and gets 3, 5, 9, and 15, for 2 successes. No effect.*

*Keeton targets Sigflandadorn. He weaves an arcane web of energy that envelops Siggie and explodes. He puts all of his (6) dice into his attack, and uses an arcane attack Edge. Siggie defends with everything he has left (4 dice).*

*Keeton rolls his 6d10 + 1d20 and gets 2, 3, 3, 5, 6, 0 (rerolled to 8), and 17 for 4 successes. Sigflandadorn rolls his 4d10 and gets 5, 5, 7, and 6, for 1. Sigflandadorn loses 3 Power, leaving him at 8, and Keeton gains 2 Power for the overkill.*

*Finally, the war machines get a turn. They are reduced to a single Power die, which they use to attack Abraham Lincoln Mark IV. Abe defends with his 3 dice.*

*The war machines roll their 1d10, and get a 5. Since they didn't get any successes, Abe refrains from rolling.*

*After one round of combat, Grundar has 7 Power (down from 8), Abraham Lincoln Mark IV has 10 Power (up from 7), Keeton has 8 Power (up from 6), Sigflandadorn has 8 Power (down from 11), and the war machines have 1 Power (down from 7). Next, the players roll initiative and start the process again.*

## Special Rules

### Overkill

If one party (either a PC or the GM) has more than double the successes of the opposing party, the winning party gains half (round up) the number of successes rolled. Any undefended attack is automatically an Overkill.

### Epic Death Scene

Heroes in *Chaos Lords* do not go out with a whimper, but they do occasionally die. If this happens during a *Contest with Death*, that character has the option of getting an Epic Death Scene (EDS). At the end of the current round, you turn over narration to the player to describe his final blow, and then his death. The final blow will be an undefended attack with a Power equal to the hero's Power at the start of the encounter, up to two relevant Edges, and a single Aspect. The dice gained from the Overkill are evenly distributed among the living heroes. After that, the hero is claimed by Death, and can not be brought back to life. If a character does not take get EDS, they still die, but they may at some later point be resurrected.

### Healing

Heroes in *Chaos Lords* are creatures of action, and are not prone to lying bed nursing their wounds. To that end, there is no mechanism outside the *Acts of Heroism* and *Contests with Death* for gaining Power dice.

### A Little Help Here?

Heroes can assist each other if it makes sense, story-wise. To assist, do one of the following:

- Choose one applicable Edge and add a d20 to the other hero's die pool for this roll. You can not use that edge again in this round.
- Choose one applicable Aspect and add a d30 to the other hero's die pool for this roll.

- You can not use that Aspect again this round.
- Give part of your dice pool (d10s) to the other player for this roll. These dice must be unallocated for this round, and now are considered used for this round.

This works the same for either *Acts of Heroism* or *Contest with Death*.

## **Use Normal Dice!**

If you do not have any d30s to use with this game, you can substitute two d10s that look different than the rest of the d10s in your Power pool. For these d10s, designate one as the tens digit and one as the ones digit. When you roll them, if you roll anything above a thirty, roll them again.

# Setting

## The Set-Up

For the first ninety six billion years, existence across the universes moved along as expected, countless births and deaths every second, with births generally outnumbered deaths. At the ninety six billion year mark, however, everything changed. The universes seemed to grow tired, became stagnant, and started to die. The gods still meddling in the affairs of the living disappeared one by one until only a single extra-living entity remained, Death. It was his job to pick off the stragglers, close up shop, and end the grand experiment that was existence.

This game takes place around the year 98 billion. The infinite variety among the infinite universes has been culled down to a single city, in a single universe. Existence is coming to an end.

## The Last City

### Architecture

The Last City is less a city, and more an holding pen for the last of the living. Architecturally, the City is a melange of styles and components from across the universes. Some of the refugees there say that there is something pulled from every universe that ever was in the City. There is only one common feature: decay. The nearness of Death and the Maelstrom is having a negative affect on the physical city. In many areas near the walls (and many sections of the walls, themselves) structures are slowly turning into sand, joining the rest of the desert. The center of the city is dominated by the Beacon, a massive antenna rising three miles into the air; up to the edge of the Maelstrom above the city.

### The Beacon

Nearly one thousand years ago, before the sickness started, the leading minds of the Last City began a desperate project: construct a beacon to draw the greatest heroes of the many universes' past to this final plane. The heroes are the result of the thousand year project; the last hope for the Last City. The Beacon was both a great success and a great failure. The device was destroyed in the summoning of the heroes, and the psychic backlash of the summoning melted the minds of those operating the machine. There will not be another Beacon.

### Residents

The residents of the Last City are just as diverse, with individuals of countless species from countless locations. Like the architecture, the greatest shared feature is decay. Among the

populace, this decay is known as the Sickness. The Sickness manifests itself as weakness of the mind and body, eventually resulting in a comatose state. Although it is not terminal itself, it has spread despair among the unaffected. The appearance of the heroes has breached the sense of malaise, returning the city to a bit of its former glory.

## **Resources**

The residents of the city have almost everything they need, materially speaking. If the heroes need something, there is a very good chance it will be available.

## **The Desert of Death**

The remainder of the last universe is the Desert of Death, an eroding coastline between the Last City and the Maelstrom. Historically, the Desert has been a barren wasteland devoid of activity. In the past few days, the Desert has begun filling up with servants of Death.

## **The Maelstrom**

The sea of non-existence that encircles the Desert of Death and is consuming it slowly. The throne of Death sits in the Maelstrom as an island of existence in the non-existence. No one except the servants of Death ever emerge from the Maelstrom.

# GM Section

## Mechanics

Do not let rolling slow down the game. If you hit a good tempo, and you feel calling for an *Act of Heroism* (or a *Contest with Death*, for that matter) would unnecessarily slow down the game, skip the dice and just narrate the action. You might want to keep an eye on the character's power rating, however. You don't want the heroes to be too underpowered when they eventually come up against Death.

### Creature Power Dice Levels

The *Acts of Heroism* target numbers provide a good guide for difficulties. Named enemies should be three or four dice more powerful than their unnamed counterparts. For example Sigflandadorn the dragon was an Epic (11 Power) challenge, but a normal dragon would be either a Difficult (7 Power) or Heroic (9 Power) challenge.

Standard creatures will normally roll just their Power values, but feel free to get creative with named creatures. Perhaps give them the ability to target multiple heroes, or give them their own Edges.

### Killing Death

To state the obvious, the encounter with Death should be a struggle for heroes of any level. To that end, Death should be the most powerful being the group fights, with a power level at least of Epic, but probably higher. Additionally, Death shouldn't fight alone.

If Death does die, he should get an Epic Death Scene. He should try to at least take the hero that delivered the killing blow with him.

## Story Telling

*Chaos Lords* was designed primarily to be a sandbox. Not in the traditional sense of a wide open wilderness to explore and little overarching narrative to tie events together, but almost the opposite. The players have the daunting, straight-forward goal of destroying Death, but are not given any information on how to go about doing that.

For that matter, you, the GM, isn't given any particular information on how to kill Death. Our advice is to let the player's explore a bit - they are the epic heroes in this story. When they come up with a plan, run with it.

## Game Length

The optimal length for a game of *Chaos Lords* is the mini-campaign of three to five sessions. The single minded focus on the destruction of Death and the limited size of the campaign world could lead to player boredom if stretched much beyond that. Additionally, the mechanics appear to work best for heroes with less than twenty or so Power dice. Your mileage may vary.

## **Optional Rules**

### **Character Advancement**

Heroes in *Chaos Lords* are at the pinnacle of their careers, and arguably shouldn't advance in the course of a campaign. If you feel that your players need some sort of reward, or the heroes deserve a quick respite, let them tell a story. Give the players a chance to recount a tale of an exploit they do not have recorded on their character sheet. After each hero has told their tale, let the players add the new exploit to their character sheet.

This shouldn't be done too many times in a campaign, as heroes can get unwieldy as the number of exploits grow.

# Appendix A: Sample Characters

## Introduction

Here are a few sample characters ready for use in a *Chaos Lords* epic.

### Grundar Olafson, Viking Warchief

Grundar Olafson is a Viking Warchief seeking revenge for the death of his family and tribe in a tragic accident. Grundar has spent countless lifetimes stalking Death, waiting for the moment when he might be able to destroy him. Grundar is willing to die for the opportunity to face Death in one on one in combat.

Grundar Olafson single-handedly bested the dragon Sigflandadorn to drink from the stream who's water grants eternal life to those who survive the quaffing. Sigflandadorn was not destroyed, and has been stalking Grundar ever since. Until the end of days, Grundar was known as Grundar, the Eternal Warrior.

Grundar Olafson led an army of one thousand warriors to victory against the million strong Nazi horde led by Grand General Otto von Klaus of the Thousand Year Reich. The victory cost him his left hand, but earned him the name Grundar, the Iron General.

### Kaltax Keeton, Martian Alchemist

Kaltax Keeton is a Martian Alchemist seeking redemption for his role as a priest of Death in the decadent, declining Martian empire. He is willing to die for the chance to make Death answer for his crimes against Mars and Earth.

Kaltax Keeton acted as Death's avatar on Earth sixty five million years before the rise of humanity. It was his arcane magics that summoned the meteor that decimated life on the planet at the time, including the dinosaurs. From that point on, Keeton was haunted by his crimes, and by the name Keeton, Bane of Life.

Kaltax Keeton forsook Death, fighting to keep his dark influence from completely overwhelming Earth. He turned his back on Mars, and for that he gained the enmity of his people, who ever after sought to destroy him and all he loved. Those on Earth who knew of his secret war gave him the name Keeton, the Glorious Benefactor.

## **Abraham Lincoln Mark IV, War Machine**

Cloned from illicit DNA stolen from a historical figure, Abraham Lincoln Mark IV is a war machine of the great Kandian Empire, circa Earth, 10,093 AD. After breaking his indoctrination, he seeks freedom for himself and others. He is willing to die to gain the greatest freedom for the living, freedom from Death.

Abraham Lincoln Mark IV led the great revolt against his Kandian masters; destroying thousands of fellow war machines, freeing the human remnants of the empire, and causing the empire to be conquered by neighboring nations. Until the end of his days, he was hunted by rogue war machines, primarily Abraham Lincoln Mark III. For this act of treachery Abraham Lincoln Mark IV was known as the Kinslayer.

Abraham Lincoln Mark IV, wanting to understand himself better, devised a time travel machine that he used to meet his namesake. This did not turn out as Abe Mark IV intended, as the original Abraham Lincoln was shocked and stunned by the stories his future iterations told. Abraham Lincoln Mark IV was ashamed of himself and what he represented to his progenitor, and for that, gave himself the name Abraham Lincoln Mark IV, the Paradox.