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PATH OF PENITENCE

GAME MASTER QUICKSTART GUIDE

v 1.0



Game Master QuickStart Guide

**“THE PATH TO REDEMPTION IS A TREACHEROUS JOURNEY WALKED ALONE,
EACH STEP RESONATING WITH THE SORROW OF A THOUSAND SINS.”**



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Welcome fellow Game Master (GM)! We are excited that you've decided to run Bestiarum's 5e campaign system, the **Path of Penitence** (PoP). This short guide is designed to get you started with your own campaign in the fallen world of Doaden as quickly and seamlessly as possible.

But first and foremost, we welcome you to our community of dedicated storytellers who enjoy dark fantasy, gothic, occult, horror, grimdark, and other twisted tales, and who share their passion with friends and family all over the world. The stories of Doaden are as much our own as they are yours, and these pages provide tools for you to build your voice and vision within this uniquely dark world.

As you read through this guide, you will be initiated into our mystic inner circle of GMs. So, it's time to don your favorite hooded robe and join the shadowy enclave of Bestiarum's occultist storytellers!

QuickStart Guides. The two documents you should read before running a PoP campaign are the *Game Master QuickStart Guide* (GM Guide), and *Player QuickStart Guide* (Player Guide). Both are easy to digest and aimed at getting you right into the action.

Player Guide. We recommend you start by reading the Player Guide, which covers the world's core history, politics, and cultures as well as the Player Character (PC) narrative that will develop over the course of their adventures.

GM Guide. On the other hand, this Game Master Guide covers mechanical rules and suggestions for running a PoP campaign, using Bestiarum's adventure modules, and

adapting your own homebrew or other adventures to this system. Most narrative elements in the Player Guide will not be covered here so if you have any questions make sure to check out the other guide!

Player Reading. We encourage you to have your players glance through the Player Guide before making their characters so they can design unique backgrounds that immerse their PCs in the world. However, we understand some folks do not like homework or have trouble fitting it into their busy schedules.

You can skip the reading assignment by holding a 'session 0' to cover the material in the Player Guide together, or briefly outline the important bits at the start of your first session. It is always good to get everyone on the same page before kicking off a campaign!

If all else fails, you can read the following *World Summary* to your players, which covers the bare minimum information to grasp the concept of the world and journey ahead.

World Summary. Doaden is a fallen world teeming with devious cults, hellish demons, rabid monsters, and more! Each PC takes on the role of a Penitent, an unfortunate soul who has been convicted of a crime by the Empire of Azerai and sentenced to 500 years of atonement as punishment.

To redeem themselves, the PCs have joined the Penitent Crusade, an army that fights evil throughout the realm. In their adventures, the party will be deployed on a series of deadly missions to stem the tides of darkness that threaten to consume the world.



"The only good cultists is a dead cultist" - Vozruk.

CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

The PoP campaign system is an adaptable tool that develops a meaningful character-centric story for PCs in a rich and persistent dark fantasy world, while linking together all of your favorite stories and adventure.

You can string together short episodic scenarios or even work a full-length campaign adventure into the mix. Whether you run Bestiarum modules, homebrew creations, or scenarios from other creators, the flexible PoP system shines at both building an immersive dark fantasy world and acting as a sandbox for your own stories in a persistent setting.

Bestiarum Modules. Each month, Bestiarum publishes several easy-to-run adventure modules. These require minimal preparation, with simple yet engaging encounters that can typically be completed in 3 – 4 hours, though some may run longer.

You can run these modules in any order so feel free to pick your favorites! The modules shine at building a dark fantasy atmosphere with scripts, characters, plots, story themes, and descriptive elements that quickly immerse players in the fallen world of Doaden.

Other Adventures. If you wish to run other adventures or homebrew, we encourage you to do so. A persistent problem in the dark fantasy and horror community is that many creators design amazingly gripping shorter adventures, but there is no structure to adapt them into longer campaigns that allow your party to continue playing their characters.

With the PoP system, you can easily throw any scenario into the mix while maintaining

the longer campaign narrative. Doaden is a vast world, and any town, culture, creature, or character can fit in somewhere. Sharing your own voice will make your group's experience even more unique and rewarding.

TIPS & TRICKS

The central narrative of Penitents seeking redemption coupled with Bestiarum's official adventure modules, easily creates an immersive dark fantasy experience for your players. The following sections cover a few tips on how this is done, and some hints for you to do the same with your own stories!

CREATING ATMOSPHERE

Describing the sights, sounds, and smells of the world creates vivid images and reactions in your players. The visceral howling of a monstrous beast, the uneasy feeling of being watched in a gnarled forest, the haunting scent of grave violets in a sepulchral tomb, the supple leathery cover of a tome made from human skin.

The dark fantasy genre shines when your audience is a bit creeped out, but there is always a risk of offending or disturbing your friends beyond their limits. Knowing where to draw the line is critical so make sure you maintain open communication at the table in case your players need a break or wish to avoid a traumatic subject.

Also, remember that less is often more! A brief description is all you need to set the tone or create a feeling of dread. Overselling the atmosphere with long-winded descriptions of gore or horrific sights risks breaking the impact, losing your party's attention, or

turning them away by delving too deeply into a grotesque or disturbing theme.

VARIETY IS KEY

Though we love the dark fantasy genre, being too serious for too long can be disheartening. A little light and variety goes a long way to refreshing your party for the journey ahead!

Bestiarum's modules are designed with this in mind. Some are gritty and serious while others take a more lighthearted approach through comedy or satire. Here are a few ways you can spice up your own adventures.

Theme. Consider running scenarios with a variety of story themes to keep your game sessions fresh. Throwing in a little comedy, mystery, a detective investigation, political intrigue, exploration, or a revolving horror 'theme-of-the-month' will go a long way to keep your sessions engaging.

Setting. Doaden is a vast world brimming with exciting adventure locations. Bestiarum's modules explore primordial forests crawling with rabid beastmen, peaty swamps haunted by decaying zombies, sun-swept sandscapes hiding ancient demons, isolated shore-towns occupied by elder-god worshipping villagers, and even bustling cities may house devious cults or dark syndicates!

While the world might be harsh and unyielding, it is not devoid of beauty or intrigue. Keep this diversity in mind when designing your own adventures. The PoP system allows you to easily place any biome, culture, dungeon, or other location into the world for the party to explore.

Encounters. The party should be challenged with a variety of narrative, combat, obstacle, exploration, and puzzle encounters. New challenges will keep your players on their toes as they work out the solution. Bestiarum modules provide a range of encounters to keep things fresh!

NARRATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Lastly, to hook players on a long campaign, make sure you tell a story that engages their characters. The PoP system sees the PCs embark on an evolving character-driven narrative that develops naturally over a string of adventure scenarios.

Your PCs, the Penitents, seek a second chance at life. Each adventure is a deadly mission on their quest for atonement. Their journeys will be fraught with peril, puzzles, mysteries, and obstacles, challenging them to confront not only humanity's external threats but also their own inner demons.

The stories of the camaraderie they build and the struggles they overcome along the way is the heart of the PoP campaign, a narrative that will develop naturally as you run your chosen adventures. We hope you tell your own grand narratives inside of these scenarios, but just remember not to overshadow the players' journey!



RUN THE CAMPAIGN

Next, we cover the core mechanics and GM-related narrative elements you need to know to run a PoP campaign. This section will focus on using Bestiarum adventure modules. We will cover homebrew or other scenarios later, but in general you can simply apply the same principles covered here!

VOZRUK THE REDEEMER

The most important Nonplayer Character (NPC) you will roleplay is Vozruk the Redeemer. Redeemers are commanding officers of the Penitent Crusade, each in charge of several squads of Penitents.

Redeemers send teams of Penitents on near-suicidal missions around the realm, deploying them to accomplish objectives deemed too deadly or risky to expend valuable knights or soldiers on.

After each successful mission, Penitents are rewarded by having a few years removed from their remaining criminal sentence. The interactions between the party and their redeemer will weave a consistent thread through your campaign, bonding them together and deepening the narrative.

A Personal Flair. Roleplay Vozruk in any way that resonates with your table. The personality you give him can greatly influence the tone of their adventures. Vozruk might be modeled

after a stern and uncompromising drill sergeant, or perhaps a more caring and level-headed tactician. Even the name and gender are at your discretion. Whatever interpretation best suits your group dynamic, let it be so!

DURING, BEFORE, & AFTER ADVENTURE MISSIONS

As you run your chosen adventure modules, keep in mind this simple structure that will continually build the campaign experience.

STRUCTURED MISSIONS

Each adventure module represents a deadly mission that the Penitent Crusade has deployed the party to complete. There are innumerable evils throughout the realm, and it is up to you to choose which ones your party will face.

Mission Briefings. Missions should begin with a briefing to provide the party with an initial goal or objective. The briefing should hint at the adventure ahead, leading the party to engage with the scenario's central narrative. However, it should hide the exciting details they will cover along the way.

For example, before a scenario about a pack of ghouls that have recently occupied a cemetery and are now preying on the nearby villagers, the briefing might inform the party that folk in a town have been disappearing at night and that the villagers have been finding the gnawed limbs of their missing friends and family.

As the party investigates, they may discover that the graveyard stinks of rot and death, leading them to a crypt where the ghouls hide

during the day. To cap off the adventure, there may be an exciting encounter as the party descends into the earthen tunnels below the crypt in an attempt to exterminate the ghoul infestation, be it with fire, blade, or sorcery!

Any NPC can give the briefing, but Vozruk is often the most convenient choice. They can meet Vozruk in a rigid military encampment or he could move around between temporary headquarters, commandeering rooms in local taverns, churches, or apartments.

Mission Debriefings. After each successful mission, consider holding a check-in with Vozruk so the party can debrief him about what they found. These meetings will develop the party's relationship with Vozruk, and you can use them to track the party's progress towards redemption, thus building a feeling of continual character progression.

CHANCE ADVENTURES

Some adventures may happen completely by chance. They may be structured in a way that lends itself more naturally to starting without a briefing. For example, an adventure about an isolated cave of corrupted spiders in the woods may be started when the party simply stumbles upon the infested cave. Or during improvisation, it might turn out that a character they meet in a random town is evil.

Random events may trigger quests that nonetheless result in the party accomplishing some good for the Empire. In these cases, you don't have to have a mission briefing. But a mission debriefing and sentencing reward may still be in order.

GETTING STARTED

There are a few ways to kick off your first campaign.

STARTING ADVENTURES

We suggest you start the party at level 1 and run the starting adventures, *Burial Isle* followed by *Rise of the Jailer*. These modules are meant to be played consecutively. They advance the party from level 1 to 3 and quickly establish Doaden's dark atmosphere and include good examples of suggested mission structure including briefing and debriefing.

Over the course of these adventures, the party will come head-to-head with devious cultists as they uncover a sinister plot to summon a powerful demon into the world.

You can skip these scenarios and start at a higher level as long as you and your players have a good grasp of the PoP campaign structure.

SESSION 0 SHORTS

Burial Isle assumes the party is already familiar with Vozruk. However, you might consider running a brief scenario beforehand to build this relationship and strengthen their bond to this important NPC. Doing so will deepen the campaign experience and establish a unique history for your party.

Vozruk has several teams of Penitents working for him, each with their own story about how they came into his service! Here are a few prompts to choose from, but feel free to create your own!

PROMPT 1 –ESCAPE PLANS

After the PCs are sentenced for their crimes, the Empire sends them to the Mines of Tartari where they must dig for precious metals in unstable mineshafts filled with deadly gasses. No one has survived more than a few years working in the mines, and they will surely perish miserably if they stay. There is but one hope – they must find a way to escape.

The party hatches a master plan. Perhaps they rile the rest of the prisoners, stirring up a coup to overtake the guards. Or perhaps they make a distraction with a large explosion and slip away in the ensuing chaos.

Draw out the tension as their plan unfolds, increasing the likelihood that the guards will catch onto them the closer they get to their freedom. But just when they think they are safe, Vozruk and his soldiers arrive and capture them. Remember, the Crusade can track Penitent's marks of atonement, so they can never truly escape.

Luckily, Vozruk is impressed by their resourcefulness and offers them a chance at redemption if they enter his services. That – or a public execution to set an example for other would-be troublemakers!

PROMPT 2 – AH YOU'RE FINALLY AWAKE

Shackled and chained after their sentencing, the PCs are herded into a prison wagon headed to a distant town for, presumably, an unsavory work assignment. Vozruk and a retinue of Crusade soldiers escort the wagon to ensure the Penitents arrive intact.

Waking from naps after a long journey, the wagon draws close to the destination. As the party talks with the other prisoners, they find out one is a notorious rebel leader from the

north, a public enemy whose outlaw band stages guerrilla attacks on Empire's supply caravans. With such a high-profile criminal, there can only be one conclusion – all the prisoners are being sent to a public execution.

As the caravans draw into the town, something feels off. The townsfolk shuffle about nervously between buildings, shiftily keeping their eyes down to the ground. The PCs fearfully watch as the town's executioner begins chopping heads, until he turns towards the first of the PCs, demanding they approach the blood-stained chopping block.

Yet, before the PC can make a move, a sudden arcane blast strikes the Crusade guardsmen, stunning them and throwing them to the ground. Hooded cultists surge forth from every door and crevice wielding sharpened blades. In a maddened frenzy, they quickly slay most of the crusaders.

Vozruk desperately cuts the party's bonds, freeing them and throwing them weapons, promising a path to redemption if they stand and fight. After the party works together to fend off the cult ambush, Vozruk recruits them as a team of his Penitent operatives.

PROMPT 3 – I'M PUTTING TOGETHER A TEAM

For characters that are predominantly evil aligned, you might consider a different approach. The PCs may each be notorious criminals, too dangerous to be sent out to work as laborers, and too valuable to be executed or turned into husks.

They are being held in the Bastilla, the Empire's maximum-security prison located in the Southern Diocese, where each prisoner is kept under strict lock and key, guarded day and night by a tireless retinue of guards.

Vozruk approaches the party members in their holding cells, informing them that he is building a team of deadly killers, a uniquely promising method of fighting villainy with villainy. He offers each of them a spot on his team, suggesting their unique skills and affinities are just what the Crusade needs to advance its fight against evil.

This prompt works particularly well when starting a campaign with higher level PCs such as level 3 or higher.

STARTING AT A HIGHER LEVEL

You can start at a higher level to run your own scenarios or high-level modules. Just make sure you and your players have a good grasp of the PoP campaign structure beforehand.

MODULAR ADVENTURES

Bestiarum's easy-to-run adventure modules are friendly to GMs of all experience levels. They are quick to prepare and explore a range of dark fantasy and horror stories.

Party Size. Module balance is best with parties of 3 to 6 players but can be adjusted easily if the party is finding them too easy or too hard using a built-in scaling system.

Long Rests. Unless stated otherwise, modules are intended to be completed in one adventuring day, meaning parties may take any number of short rests, but no long rest until they complete the adventure.

Level Limit. To run a more grounded campaign, we suggest capping your party's max level at 11. This will give them access to all adventure tiers while limiting their magical and heroic abilities to retain the feeling of a gritty and dangerous experience.

SCALING SYSTEM

Bestiarum modules have scaling *Difficulties* which challenge parties from 1 to 20, offering a wealth of opportunities for your party to continue their epic campaign in Doaden.

Difficulties range from Beginner to Hell and correspond to an average party level bracket. For example, Beginner is appropriate for adventuring parties leveled 1 – 2, while Medium is for parties leveled 5 – 7.

With increased difficulties, enemies become tougher and more numerous, while environmental challenges and traps are more deadly or difficult to avoid. The breakdown of difficulties and level brackets is outlined on the *Difficulty Table*.

DIFFICULTY TABLE

Difficulty	Level Range
Beginner	1 – 2
Easy	3 – 4
Medium	5 – 7
Hard	8 – 10
Nightmare	11 – 13
Torment	14 – 16
Hell	17 – 20

ADVENTURE TIER TABLE

	Difficulty 1	Difficulty 2	Difficulty 3	Difficulty 4
Tier I	Beginner (1 – 2)	Easy (3 – 4)	Medium (5 – 7)	Hard (8 – 10)
Tier II	Easy (3 – 4)	Medium (5 – 7)	Hard (8 – 10)	Nightmare (11 – 13)
Tier III	Hard (8 – 10)	Nightmare (11 – 13)	Torment (14 – 16)	Hell (17 – 20)
Tier IV	Nightmare (11 – 13)	Torment (14 – 16)	Hell (17 – 20)	

Adventure Tiers. Each module fits one specific *Adventure Tier*: I, II, III, or IV. Each tier scales through three or four difficulty modes, as shown on the *Adventure Tier Table*. As a quick breakdown, each tier is appropriate for the following level ranges:

- **Tier I:** 1 – 10
- **Tier II:** 3 – 13
- **Tier III:** 8 – 20
- **Tier IV:** 11 – 20

Bestiarum’s adventure modules clearly and simply lists each scaled encounter design. Once you jump into your first adventure, you will see how easy it is to run the system!

Adjusting Difficulty. Parties of 6 or more, or of very skilled players may find the adventure balance too easy. To increase difficulty, you can simply move them to the next difficulty, even mid adventure.

Picking Adventures. You can run whichever module you wish that fits your party’s level. Or you can leave the choice up to your players! Vozruk can give the party a choice of several missions, giving them multiple mission briefs and allowing them to choose their own path.

LEVELING, REWARDS, & ADVANCEMENT

For each successful mission completed, reward your party with levels and years of atonement paid off from their sentences.

Experience (XP). You don't have to track player XP in a PoP campaign. Instead, use a milestone method to track progression more easily. Refer to the following *Mission Rewards Table* to determine the number of successful missions the party needs to complete before they reach the next level.

Years Atoned. After each successful mission, Vozruk should reduce the number of years left on the party's sentences based on the *Mission Rewards Table*, reflecting the difficulty of the challenges they faced. With each successful mission, the PCs be one step closer to their freedom.

MISSION REWARDS TABLE

PC Level	Missions to Level	Years of Atonement
1, 2	1	2
3, 4	2	3
5, 6, 7	4	4
8, 9, 10	6	5
11, 12, 13	8	6
14, 15, 16	11	7
17, 18, 19	15	8

Treasure & Items. The party will naturally accumulate gold and magical artefacts during the adventures. Also, each boss has their loot table that drops unique magical items!

Team Name. As your players forge ahead on the path to redemption, they will inevitably grow close, forming a distinct team identity. A heroic act, a moment of humor, or unexpected turn of events may inspire a team nickname – perhaps bestowed by their commander, suggested by fellow Penitents, or coined by the party themselves. A team nickname builds their identity and immersion, so work with it if it should present itself!

Free Reign. Once Vozruk trusts the party, he should give them free reign to travel and explore as needed to accomplish their objectives, allowing them to explore Doaden with minimal constraints on their freedoms.

Crusade Advancement. The final way your party can advance in a PoP campaign is through narrative rewards. As they complete dangerous missions, they will build their reputation in the Crusade and grow in rank and esteem. In turn, the Crusade may give them access to allies to support their cause.

Bestiarum will release official options and mechanics for companions, but here are a few suggestions, in case you'd like to create your own!

- **Priestess.** An Azerai priestess who heals injured PCs and blesses them before missions.
- **Quartermaster.** A requisition officer who acquires nonmagical weapons, armor, ammunition, and supplies for the party.

- **Scout.** A special agent who can assess the mission deployment zone, providing a bit of valuable information about enemies or environmental challenges the party may face there.

YOUR IMAGINATION

The world of Doaden is a vast canvas awaiting the brush strokes of your creativity. As you run these modules, we hope you impart your own quests, NPCs, and lore to enrich the world and weave an experience that is distinctively your own. As a GM, you're not just a storyteller; you're a world builder.

Embrace this role and use the flexible structure of the PoP system to shape the realm in a way that reflects the party's unique narrative. By doing so, you will ensure that their adventures are not just quests, but truly their own epic journey.

USING THE MAP

The Player Guide includes a map of the Empire of Azerai. You can also find a high-definition version of this asset as a separate file. The map notes some important cities, towns, and geographic features throughout the Empire.

However, you should consider that the vast majority of interesting points have been left unmarked. The space between two cities may be filled with countless towns and adventure locations. The *Lore & History* section in the Player Guide establishes the core thematic details of the Empire's five regions: The Sunlit Citadel, and the Northern, Eastern, Southern, and Western Diocese.

This information gives a general sense of the regions, suggesting what types of locations and adventures may take place there. However, it remains vague enough to stay flexible, allowing you to place adventures nearly anywhere with ease.

Ultimately, you can build your own adventures, towns, and points of interest wherever you wish. All you have to decide is which region the adventure best fits in and if there are any nearby landmarks. There are no wrong answers!



Look for sections marked with this *Crusade Sigil* icon in Bestiarum adventure modules for extra Path of Penitence tips, content, and options!



* LIFE *

As the GM, you will preside over your PoP campaign just as the Grand Ecclesiarch Vitalinus presides over the Empire of Azerai.

Over the course of months or years, you can run a single PoP campaign that grows ever richer and more storied. Each adventure tells a compelling story of its own while the character narrative of the Penitents fighting for redemption continues to develop.

While the broad story of Doaden is told through these adventures, your PCs and party members may shift in-and-out due to life and character events. Yet, their combined story weaves together a single campaign. Players may come and go. Their PCs might be slain by

monsters or pay off their sins. Yet the campaign lives on, and the story of the world continues to grow!

COMMON ISSUES

Remember, Vozruk has several squads of Penitents working for him. Teams rarely meet each other and Vozruk does not often share the identities of one team with another. Presumably, each squad has its own characters, stories, and history. This can be used to solve all manner of common campaign issues! Here are a few tips on handling various situations that may present themselves over the life of a campaign.

PLAYER LEAVES OR PC SLAIN

If a player takes a break or leaves the campaign, you can easily bring a new player in to replace them. Just have Vozruk assign the new PC to the party's squad. Perhaps they are a new recruit, or their own team suffered heavy casualties and they are the only survivor in need of a new home.

Likewise, if a PC perishes on their journey, the player can create a new character and join the team to replace the fallen hero.

DROP-IN PLAYERS

You can easily accommodate friends and drop-in players for a single or a handful of sessions. Just add them to the team on a temporary basis. Perhaps Vozruk is assigning members from two teams to work together for a limited time to handle a particularly deadly mission. If you add players to the group, consider increasing the difficulty mode as well.

STARTING HIGHER

When a new PC joins an ongoing campaign, they should start at the same level as the rest of the party and have a similar number of years remaining on their sentences. You can assume they have already been working for Vozruk for some time to pay off these years.

Hardcore Mode. If you'd like to run a particularly punishing game, you can start new PCs fresh at 500 years of atonement remaining, or with a level penalty. In this case, they are fresh recruits into Vozruk's services, though they may have been much more experienced heroes before they were sentenced for their crimes.

YOUR OWN ADVENTURES

Adventure Placement. The Empire of Azerai map leaves plenty of space open for creativity to grow. If you run a homebrew adventure or scenario designed by another creator, just use the adventure briefing and debriefing, or chance adventure structure to convert any scenario into a PoP mission. You can insert the scenario anywhere on the map or even make a foreign continent to use for culturally thematic backdrops or exotic locales.

Leveling & Penance. If your adventures run longer or shorter than the Bestiarum modules, just match the leveling speed on the *Mission Rewards Table*. The pace does not have to be exact, but if you keep the party progressing similarly, you will maintain a good timeline for leveling throughout the campaign.

Do the same for the number of rewarded atonement years for successful missions, giving more on longer adventures and less for shorter ones.

WHAT NEXT?

The Path of Penitence is a constantly evolving supplement. It is a living system which receives periodic updates including new class options, backgrounds, lore details, cultures & ethnicities, crusade rewards, campaign features, narrative events, party companions, and much more!

To get the most out of this system and fully immerse your players in this dark setting, make sure you check back regularly!

