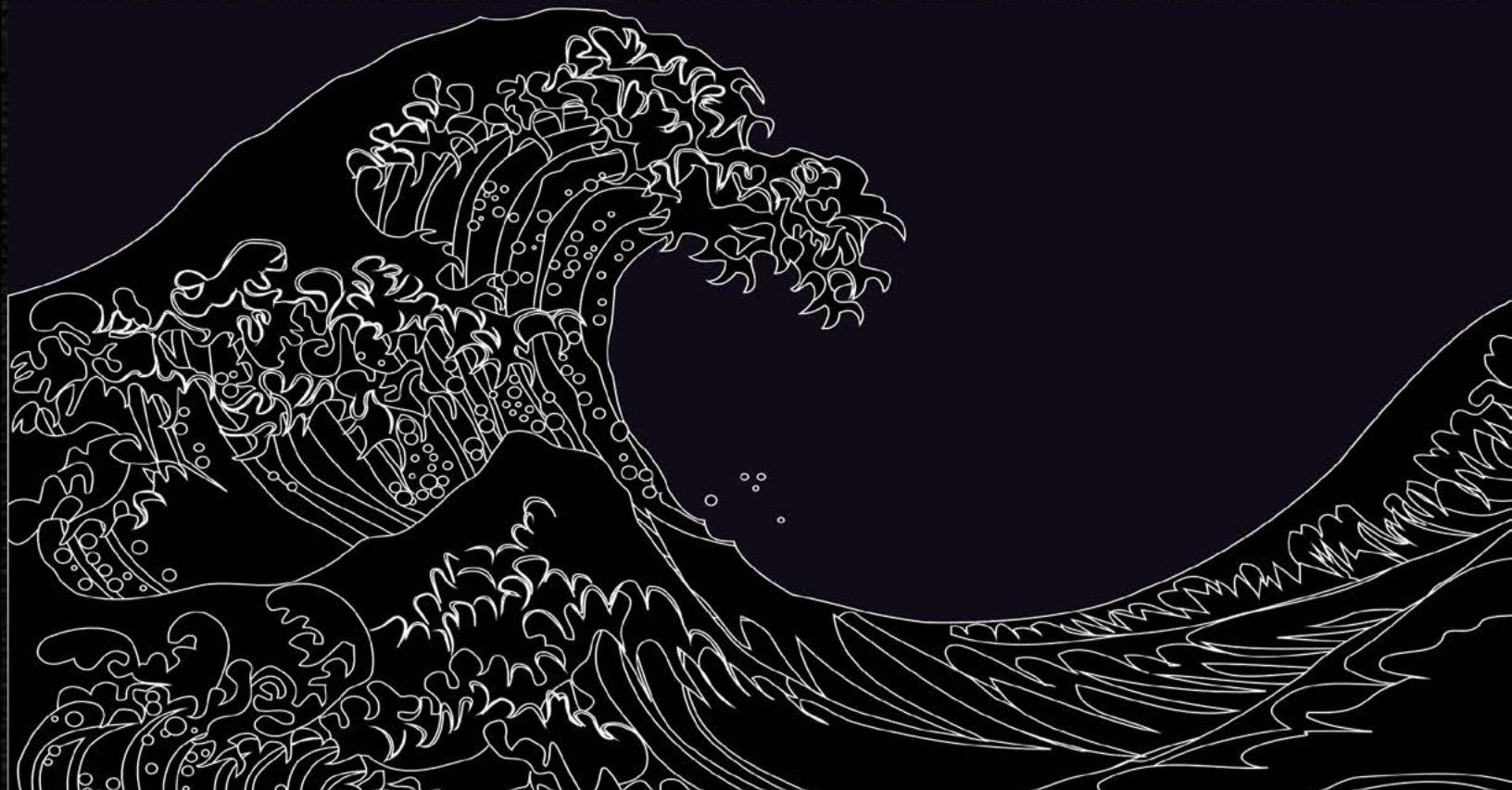


CULTS OF RUIN



FORBIDDEN GODS AND UNCLEAN POWERS

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CULTS OF RUIN

THE MEANS TO TERRIBLE ENDS

The world apportions power in certain familiar ways. Wealth, noble birth, great gifts of talent, or an exceptional capacity for violence are all traits that promise glory and comfort to those who are fortunate enough to possess them. These are the paths that society recognizes and rewards. These are the keys to great happiness.

Some people are denied these keys. Perhaps it is a consequence of their own faults, their own weakness and foolish choices that have brought them to their wretched estate. Perhaps it was the hatred and scheming of others that brought them low, a blow they cannot hope to now repay. Or it could be that they simply never had the chance at all, being born to misery and a humble estate.

Some suffer quietly. They accept the harsh decree that has been entered against them, whether falling into mute resignation or struggling to win an opportunity to change the fate they have been given. They strive in ways that society has deemed acceptable, even if few of them will ever attain their hopes.

Others refuse to submit. They will have their desires. They will have the gold, the flesh, the power, or the glory that they know they deserve. They will do anything to achieve this purpose, and most of them will dash themselves to pieces upon the uncaring walls of an indifferent world. Others, however, will plead with things that listen. And sometimes, those things will answer.

Now, GODS, STAND UP FOR BASTARDS

The cults exemplified here provide a small sampling of some of the most prevalent and malevolent powers that infect the Sunset Isles. They are by no means the only ones. Wherever there is a power willing to listen and a petitioner willing to pay the price, there will be dark gods and red-handed worshipers to serve them.

The heart of a cult is the pact between the devotees and the god. The god demands worship and sacrifice and in return grants supernatural blessings to its devoted followers. While usually a matter of initial choice, the devotees soon learn that obedience is not optional when dealing with their new master. Unworthy acolytes pay a price in blood for their failures, and those that displease the god may expect to become its next sacrifice.

There are few organized, coherent religions of this kind in the Isles. Two cults that worship the same foul god may have completely different concepts of its nature and beliefs regarding proper sacrifice- and as in most such cases, might hate each other even more than they despise those that hunt them.

Instead, most cults bloom from a single cursed prophet, a man or woman who was able to draw the god's attention with their pleas and with their promises of unstinting service. These prophets are almost always capable men and women, often gifted in their way.

This is because the dark gods have no use for fools. While a priest's sanity may be inexorably eroded by his service and his mind eventually crushed under the black revelations he receives, he must be coherent and cunning enough to spread the initial cult. It is the pleasant delusion of most honest priests and officials that the dark cults attract only the stupid, gullible, and useless. While some cults do draw a fringe of such dross, they are more often used as expendable foot soldiers and sacrifice fodder. The gods want effective minions, and that means they want the most capable they can get.

They attract these people with help that cleaner faiths refuse to give. The dark gods are very generous with their magical gifts, far more so than the more respectable deities. Whether it comes from their far fewer numbers of worshipers or their willingness to defy some celestial precept, their priests are often quite powerful and even their lay worshipers are touched by divine blessings.

Most cults are rooted out eventually. Their horrors and atrocities put too much pressure on their neighbors to be tolerated forever. Such work is dangerous and bloody, and adventurers are often the only ones strong and expendable enough to do it.

THE ELEMENTS OF DAMNATION

The cults listed here are given a brief overview along with details of the most important parts of their operation. First of these is the cult's particular appeal- what promises it makes and what kind of people are most likely to be drawn into it. A cult's appeal explains why worshipers choose to embrace such an awful power.

The cult structure section describes the basic outlines of an average cult of that faith, though individual cells might vary substantially. The gifts of a cult are also listed, providing the specific rewards that a cult priest or a lay member might expect to receive. And finally, each cult is listed with its price- the kind of hideous costs that the dark god demands for its favors. While a new cult might begin with smaller, more innocuous sacrifices, sooner or later the deity will demand its true due- whether or not its worshipers wish to give it.

As a GM note, it's often best to be vague and indistinct when relating a cult's foul rites or hideous sacrifices. Being too gorily specific about what the cult is doing with the children they've stolen is liable to be less than fun for a lot of players, and in point of fact, anything you specify is unlikely to be as horrific as the prospects their own imagination will conjure up for them.

One technique that is useful in such cases is to provide only allusions and half-evidences, things that speak of horror without explaining exactly what happened. Finding a child's smashed lunchbox with both chopsticks bloodied halfway up their length makes for far more effective horror than mere diced corpses.

THE CULT OF THE BLACK EMPEROR

The Ninefold Celestial Empire was old and great, and as with all such nations there was much that it wished to forget. One such memory was that of the Black Emperor Yong Ji, the cruel sorcerer-tyrant who sparked the great war with the Kueh some eight hundred years ago. After a band of heroes and loyal nobles finally managed to overthrow the despot, the records of the Empire were adjusted to blot out his inauspicious deeds and leave only the blandly inoffensive tale of a victorious war leader. The truth of the Black Emperor was left for garbled folk-tales and restricted scrolls held closely in the grasp of selected Imperial archivists.

Yet the Black Emperor and the Night Kings who were his deathless servants did not perish, but were forced far from the lands of men. Some say that he performed a dark self-transcendence, ascending to the plane of gods and spirits to persist in immortal majesty. Those who serve him and perform his obscene alchemies are said to be granted life unending, along with terrible secrets of sorcery long forgotten by mortal wizards.

Only the most erudite sages know the truth of the Black Emperor and his reign. Even well-educated scholars are content with the corrected histories, and those who read certain allusions and strangely specific folktales know better than to pursue such secrets. But still, there are always those who desire the things that a wholesome forgetting would keep from them.

THE APPEAL

The Black Emperor is a god of scholars and sages as well as those who live in terror of death. His cult has no patience for the ignorant or unlettered, and such devotees can expect no more than their eventual transformation into the reagents for some foul experiment. His chosen often neglect to mention this point, beguiling useful catpaws with talk of immortality and miraculous cures for their afflictions until they can be safely used for more profitable ends.

Those who serve the Black Emperor learn new spells, receive unique magical techniques, and are gifted with seemingly unending youth and vitality. Some sorcerers who fear that no funeral rites could protect their blackened souls from the hunger of the Hells are eager to take up the Black Emperor's service in order to postpone that day of reckoning a little longer, even if it should damn them more thoroughly still.

An adept must learn the truth of the Black Emperor before he can effectively invoke the deity's power. To simply learn the historical facts are not enough; he must learn details of the Emperor's rule, natality, and important reign events in order to form the astrological map necessary to contact the spiritual power of the god. The more of these facts he has, the more powerful his connection. Many cult priests pose as historical researchers or innocent scholars in order to salvage more truths from the wreck of ages.

Tales persist that the Black Emperor may sometimes be convinced to send one of his terrible Night Kings to aid a cult. These entities sail upon barques crewed by dead men and wield great sorceries.

THE CULT STRUCTURE

Unlike most cults, those of the Black Emperor are fairly egalitarian, though the first to found the cult usually has status as the first among equals. The rites and experiments of the creed often require learned assistants to perform them and the initial adept is often compelled to enlist other sages in order to have enough hands for the work.

Worship of the Black Emperor requires the performance of numerous terrible alchemical processes and the systematic defilement of flesh in ways pleasing to the Emperor's cold curiosity. While the deity never communicates directly with its devotees there is a sense of expectation to the god, and those cults that fail to push forward with the experiments sent in dreams and visions risk the sudden and catastrophic failure of their own sorceries- including that of their prolonged lives and health.

The special powers of the cult are often used to enlist less educated but still-useful members, rewarding them with health, insight, and vitality in exchange for their assistance to the cult. Once their service is at an end, they are promptly enlisted to a new use as components for the cult's foul research.

THE GIFTS

The Black Emperor's gifts are powerful; adepts receive both magic-user and clerical spellcasting ability equal to that of their hit dice or level, and maintain perfect health and disease-free vitality so long as their experiments continue. Once every six months, the adept learns a new magic-user spell, often of a kind unknown to other sorcerers and requiring terrible acts to procure its necessary components.

Those devotees that are not scholars, priests, or other learned souls gain no direct benefits from worshiping the Black Emperor, though the adepts can be expected to use their sorcery to aid useful lay worshipers.

THE PRICE

The Black Emperor is a more patient god than most of the dark powers, but he still insists upon inexorable progress in his worshippers' studies. The first experiments may be carried out upon random vagrants and expendable adventurers, but eventually there comes a point where more specific subjects are required.

These subjects are often particular descendants of those heroes and officials who participated in his overthrow. Many of these heirs are connected to important daifu families in Xian or sorcerous lineages in Tien Lung, and so both these states have a particular vigilance against this cult's appearance in their lands.

Other experiments simply require numbers- very great numbers. Dozens or even hundreds of victims may be necessary for the most elaborate workings of the greatest cult priests, and such numbers often require the cult to retreat to some isolated wilderness stronghold, where their experiments can be conducted beyond the reach of any conventional law.

THE CULTS OF THE GOD-BEASTS

While many gods have bestial aspects or iconography, the god-beasts are literal animals grown strong on strange magic and worship. Some think that they were proto-creatures devised by the gods at the dawn of the world and cast aside as flawed, while others believe that they are merely powerful beasts grown old beyond the normal limits of their kind. Whatever their origin, they offer very tangible, physical aid to their worshipers at the cost of terrible rites of propitiation.

God-beast cults appear when one of these beasts is found by an isolated community, unearthed from deep beneath the ground, descends on black-feathered wings from an ill-omened sky, or simply grows from a seemingly-normal beast. They last until the god-beast is slain by heroes or once more sealed up in its ancient tomb.

God-beast cults can persist only beyond the easy reach of larger authority. Border villages, hidden communities deep beneath large cities, and isolated homesteads are the most common sites for god-beast cults. Most devotees try to keep the existence of the beast a secret, lest they draw the attention of heroes or worse. This secrecy is aided by a god-beast's habit of killing and devouring every outsider it encounters.

THE APPEAL

God-beasts are usually intelligent enough to make demands of potential worshipers, requiring sacrifices, degrading reverences, and golden treasure in exchange for their aid and the continued survival of their worshipers. Few of them give their devotees any choice in the matter, and some god-beast cults actually hate and loathe the deity they are forced to serve. Most come to accept their lot, however, especially when "encouraged" by the beast's priesthood and the fearsome creature itself.

The god-beast does serve very well to protect the cult community from its enemies, and many beasts are capable of enriching fields, siring great herds of monstrously deformed livestock, or shedding valuable body parts. The spells it grants its priests are also useful in aiding the community, and many eventually come to admit that the beast is worth the price in bloody sacrifices and depraved worship... especially when it's their neighbors that pay the cost.

THE CULT STRUCTURE

Most god-beast cults revolve around a single high priest who serves as the mouthpiece of the god-beast. Beneath him the lesser clergy serve the immediate needs and whims of the god-beast and keep order among sometimes-reluctant worshipers. The common folk are expected to provide the beast with whatever it desires, and its desires are often foul.

Most god-beasts draw no distinction between their own believers and outsiders. If sufficient offerings cannot be gleaned from strangers, prisoners, and neighbors, then the god-beast will harvest its own. This leaves most communities in a constant state of low-level struggle with their neighbors, always seeking fresh sacrifices from outside their own number lest they be made to give the creature its due.

THE GIFTS

A god-beast can imbue up to twice its hit dice in cleric levels on any of its worshipers, though no one priest can have more effective cleric levels than the creature's hit dice. The gift of these cleric powers usually requires a number of vile rituals and abasements, and cannot be done quickly. Ordinary worshipers receive no direct benefits from the god-beast, though the creature will fight to defend loyal devotees and its own place as ruler of its community.

THE PRICE

God-beasts are animals by nature, and demand the things that intelligent animals might demand. Even god-beasts derived from herbivores have a hunger for fresh meat, however, and often prefer manflesh over ordinary stock. A wide variety of other unclean hungers are taken out on their devotees, if suitable victims cannot be found to placate the beast.

Some god-beasts masquerade merely as very large and impressive examples of their species, the better to pass unnoticed by strangers, while others insist on living in a grotesquely human-like fashion, attended by slaves and minions. Such latter creatures will demand the finest silks and most splendid furnishings and will exact a cruel price in gold from their servants.

GOD-BEAST STATISTICS

Unlike most other dark powers, god-beasts can be slain. They are powerful foes, however, and can only be harmed by magic spells, weapons of +2 enchantment or better, or specially-blessed implements consecrated by a cleric of 9th level. Due to the godslaying heritage of their people, dwarves can always harm god-beasts. The average god-beast has 12 hit dice, though the weakest have as few as 8 and stronger specimens exist.

A common god-beast derived from a wolf or jaguar might have statistics of 12 HD, AC 4, 1d10 bite/1d6 claw/1d6 claw, Move 120' (40'), saves as a 12th level fighter and a Morale of 12. The treasure one possesses will depend on the wealth of its servitors.

1d12 SPECIAL GOD-BEAST POWERS

1	Noxious breath weapon that does 1d6 dmg/HD
2	Transforms its human guards into hulking beastmen
3	Perfect command of all beasts around it
4	Winged or capable of flight
5	Can bewitch others as per <i>Charm Person</i>
6	Spiked hide that does 1d6 damage to melee attackers
7	Dazzling beauty; save vs. Spells or stunned for 1 round
8	Bronze hide or other toughened skin; its AC is 0
8	Venomous bite; save vs. Poison or die
10	Damns foes; save vs. Spells or suffer the effects of <i>Curse</i>
11	Excretes gold or precious stones; 1d10 x 100 gp/week
12	Breeds 2d10 gruesomely deformed cattle per week

THE CULT OF THE HELL KINGS

The damnable lords of the Hells have been a scourge on the world since the first dawn of its creation. They despise the gods and all their works, and seek to drag all existence into the flames of their domain. They nurse an especial hatred for the thinking creatures of the world and are tireless in their efforts to despoil and blight the souls of the living. Those spirits that fall into their grasp can expect nothing but an eternity of unspeakable defilement.

The Hell Kings have limits on their power, however. The proper funerary rites can protect the soul of a deceased from their talons, even if their crimes would otherwise merit damnation. Even those who die alone and untended can escape the Hell Kings if they have led a good life, earning the favor of the gods and their protection in the world to come. While the spirits of the untended wicked are at a great risk of damnation the only souls that are certain to enter the flames are those who freely pledge their service to Hell and who are deprived of holy rites before burial.

As a consequence, it's not enough for the Hell Kings to cultivate sin in the world. They must also ensure that their devotees are deprived of proper burial if they are to collect on their investment. Fortunately, the more damnable the life, the more elaborate the rituals that are required to protect a soul. A man of ordinary sin might be kept safe by a poor but decent burial by a village priest, but a truly hardened monster might require the smoke of a hundred golden braziers and the fevered prayers of an arch-prelate to escape his fate. A willing devotee of the Hell Kings has little hope of salvation without extreme penitence and careful rites.

THE APPEAL

The Hell Kings work through visions, whispers, and the very rare manifestations of servitor demons. They rarely approach aspiring devotees who have not already made significant efforts to contact them; they have no interest in dilettante-priests, and prefer to deal with those who have already damned themselves with their sins. They especially favor persons of power and authority who can be used to drag unsuspecting underlings into the cult as well.

The Hell Kings offer tangible rewards of wealth and prosperity, giving priests secret knowledge that will benefit their plans and leading them to hidden treasures and lost artifacts. An active cult can bless fields with rich abundance, swell mines with precious ores and gems, and grant uncanny luck to the “blessed” of Hell. They particularly offer power over other men and women, gladly granting the sordid or vengeful desires of their priests.

Outsiders often wonder how the Hell Kings manage to enlist their worshipers, when it is obvious that temporary mortal delight will be followed by an eternity of agony. The Hell Kings teach their followers that those who submit to the burning lords will be spared the worst of the punishment which all men deserve, and will eventually rule in glory over their unbelieving fellows when all humanity finally falls into the grasp of Hell. The more foul and detestable their mortal life, the more glorious their place in Hell shall be.

These promises are lies, of course. The damnation that awaits them is no different than that which the Hell Kings would visit on all creation, and those who are elevated as servitor demons merely experience a more specific form of defilement. They excel at concealing this fact from their mortal worshipers, however, and sometimes give revelations of the glorious depravities which await the faithful in Hell.

THE CULT STRUCTURE

Hell cults are led by a single high priest, usually a figure of authority and importance in the community- if not originally, then surely after the Hell Kings finish elevating him or her. The high priest is served by a selection of underpriests, each of whom can be expected to seek every opportunity to overthrow their master and take the cult for their own. These underpriests are necessary for the cult rituals, however- the Hell Kings want to ensure that a useful level of churn occurs in their cults, lest one of their priests delay their damnation.

Beneath the underpriests are the devotees of the cult. Most of these are either prosperous figures in the greater community or desperate souls who have yet to prove their devotion and earn the blessings of Hell. These new recruits are used for most of the cult's dirty work, as they don't know enough to threaten their masters. In lands where the cult is proscribed the devotees meet with masks and assumed names, with individual members known only to the high priest and to the underpriest who initiated him or her into the infernal mysteries.

Disobedience to the cult is punished in various spectacular ways, with simple execution being one of the gentler rebukes. The fates of those who deeply disappoint the high priest can drag out for months, both as punishment and as an illustration to the other faithful of the consequences of reconsidering their commitment.

THE GIFTS

Hell cult priests add the *Charm Person*, *Phantasmal Force*, *Charm Monster*, and *Limited Wish* spells to their allowed clerical spell lists at the same level as the original magic-user spells. The dark patrons of a cult allow them a *Commune* spell to be used once a month.

All members of a Hell cult are blessed with uncanny luck, and may reroll any one failed saving throw or ability check once per day.

THE PRICE

Hell cults expect their members to all vigorously pursue the classical sins, particularly those that objectify and degrade other people. The more vigorously each devotee damns himself, the better- and those who are suspected of virtue, or worse yet, of seeking aid from conventional faiths can expect a hideous punishment.

During the group ceremonies of the cult, sacrificial victims are subjected to the unspeakable hungers of the faithful- and those devotees who have proven lacking in their zeal often join them.

THE CULT OF THE RED GODS

The “red gods” are a collection of bloody-handed, savage tribal gods that demand the sacrifice of outsiders and grant physical might and bestial prowess to their chosen. Only one red god is worshiped in any given cult, as they are jealous of their followers, and are as willing to sacrifice devotees of other red god cults as anyone else.

It is unclear where the red gods originated, as the limited theological texts that survived the Exile make no mention of them. Some believe they were attached to idols and relics brought over in the flight from the Tide, while others think they are Shou relic-gods willing to accept human sacrifice now that the Shou revere only Shakun. A few even think that they were native place-gods awoken by the sudden surge of human inhabitants.

Red god cults are almost unknown outside of the frontier or the worst slums, where bestial behavior and feral urges are scarcely noticed by others. Now and then a cult takes hold in noble quarters where some sickly potentate suddenly regains his vitality- and his remarkable appetites. These cults rarely last long, but they can inflict horrific damage upon a community with their wild hungers and thoughtless passions.

THE APPEAL

The red gods make their followers strong- literally so. They harden their believers to withstand great hunger and privation, allowing them to suffer through the harshest conditions without perishing. Their priests are mighty warriors and chieftains, gifted with an incredible vitality and inhumanly acute senses.

The red gods approach desperate acolytes in starving villages, the beggared dwellers of urban slums, and the wasting victims of plague-struck towns. Their priests are invariably on the very edge of destruction through starvation, sickness, or privation, and the red gods offer them strength in exchange for their obedience. Those who refuse this offer rarely survive long enough to speak of it to others.

Those who do serve a red god swiftly regain their strength and health, though at a progressive cost to their more human aspects. They become more and more bestial in nature, and not simply in the amoral fashion of true animals. The cultists of the red gods mix all the cruelty and malevolence of human nature with the unthinking violence and rapacity of the beasts. In time, the cultists no longer care about what they have lost, and degenerate into a tribe barely distinguishable from a pack of two-legged wolves. The wolves, at least, have less loathsome hungers.

THE CULT STRUCTURE

The chieftain-priest is the biggest, strongest, most vicious member of the cult, though he is subject to rapid replacement should he weaken. His priestly underlings are rarely sophisticated enough to plot against him, but if he becomes badly wounded they may turn on him even in preference to attacking the foes that maimed him.

Beneath the priest are the devotees, ranging from the most recent recruits who still retain an almost entirely human perspective to those elevated acolytes who are barely capable of thinking more than a few days ahead of their present condition. The cult has a distinct line of authority from the alpha chief to the most wretched omega underlings. The cruelties and debaucheries inflicted upon the weaker members of the cult are occasionally fatal, especially if they seem likely to break from the pack's embrace.

THE GIFTS

Red god priests have instinctive magical abilities, able to cast spells as if a cleric of a level equal to half their hit dice, rounded up. These spells are gained and cast reflexively, without invocations or formal preparation. Red god priests can cast a spell instantly once per round, in addition to a normal attack or action. Priests also regenerate 3 hit points per round, albeit only while alive.

All devotees of the red gods gain an immunity to disease and poison, a +1 bonus to hit and damage rolls due to their great strength, and the ability to survive on only a third of the food and water required by normal humans.

THE PRICE

Devotees of the red gods are expected to abandon the refinements of civilized society, degrading into a mere pack of zealots who often go naked and bestially unkempt. Cannibalism is expected among them, particularly of the weakest members of the group, and outsiders are to be seized for bloody rites of defilement and consumption. Communities rapidly disintegrate under the precepts of the cult, men and women becoming mere human locusts.

1d6

KNOWN RED GODS

1	Kikkil, the Eater of Corpse-Eyes. A roach-god who feasts upon carrion and filth, his devotees can survive any environment and brew plagues within their bodies.
2	Howling Lao. Grants command over other beasts to his devotees, and demands they swarm forth to devour the contemptible unbelievers.
3	Igati the Lioness. A goddess of female supremacy, she imbues her amazonian followers with great size and strength. Often appears to female slaves and other oppressed women, luring them into desperate pacts.
4	Yilil, the Swarming One. A beetle-goddess of fecundity, she makes both male and female devotees breed at a horrific rate.
5	Lom of the Nine Jaws. A consuming god of hunger and famine, Lom's devotees eat even wood and clay, devouring the crops in their neighbors' fields and devouring even the bones of their prey.
6	Suam, the Burrower. Teaches its devotees to dig great tunnel-traps beneath the earth and dwell in darkness.

THE TIDE CULT

The most terrifying of all the damnable cults of the Isles are those that worship the Red Tide, the encircling mists that threaten to devour the last bastion of humanity upon this scoured world. The Tide churns and waits a hundred miles from the shores of the Isles, but the cults that worship it may open a path for it to manifest deep within the human lands.

Tide cults are extremely unstable, swiftly building to the point where they can open a pathway for the Tide. This madness almost inevitably results in their own destruction. The Tide does not seem to use its cults in a rational way; it is almost as if the cult's formation is simply a natural process of psychic parasitism that ends with the destruction of its own mental host.

The native Shou of the Isles never belong to Tide cults and cannot be affected by the blandishments of the mist. Many horrific Tide incursions deep within the wilderness are extinguished by furious Shou warriors, the tribes protecting the unsuspecting humans without their knowledge or intent. Something about the Tide inspires a visceral hatred in the Shou, and they will even break off hostilities with humans and other tribes in order to expunge the stench of the alien mist from their lands.

The authorities of the Isles do their best to hide Tide cult outbreaks. The ancestral terror of the Tide threatens witch-huntings and mass panic should the people of the Isles believe that the ruin of the world is reaching out for them. It is not unknown for authorities to hire adventurers and other expendables to go in and burn out cults, demanding only silence and utmost thoroughness.

THE APPEAL

The Tide offers happiness to its acolytes. Initial believers experience unusual good luck and a feeling of hope and quiet joy. As the cult matures, however, this initial euphoria starts to divorce from reality. Even as the believer loses friends and family, even as they experience crushing misfortunes or actual physical transformation by the Tide, they are unable to perceive it as anything but wonderful good fortune and blessed luck.

Some portion of their reason remains capable of recognizing the horror that is overtaking them, but their dominant mind remains relentlessly delighted by what is happening. Such victims eventually become completely delusional in a shared madness with the rest of the cult. Even as they are being devoured alive by swarms of Tidespawn, the cultists will be convinced that the kisses of winged angels are elevating them to glory- a conviction briefly interrupted by lucid moments of agonized horror.

THE CULT STRUCTURE

Tide cults begin with strange dreams that whisper and allude. The subject awakens with strange words on his tongue and the image of peculiar patterns hanging in his thoughts. These dreams may persist for some time, but if the subject ignores them they will eventually fade away. If he chooses to speak the words and form the patterns, however, the first hooks of the Tide are buried in his mind. These petty rituals catalyze the first of the changes.

Those subjects who perform the rites notice distinct good fortune following, small but perceptible bits of luck after each ceremony. Fresh words and patterns seep into their dreams, and if these too are performed the luck seems to strengthen yet more. A certain blithe euphoria begins to build at this stage, a conviction that everything that happens to them is some subtle blessing.

This is the last stage at which it is possible to escape the Tide. Priests who persist in these rituals for more than a few months will become utterly enthralled to the Tide. It may be that powerful magic could break the connection, but by the time a cult is identified it is usually far past the point of any practical intervention.

The priest soon feels the urge to include others in this rite, often unconsciously spreading their dreams to susceptible minds in the surrounding community. Outcasts, the oppressed, and the tormented are most often enlisted by the priest, coming together in quietly sinister rites that still have no obviously horrific elements. Once the cult reaches a certain critical mass, their delusion starts to demand atrocious cruelties and hideous rites, all of them believing that they are sharing a joyous truth with the world.

Eventually, a Tide Cult that isn't checked by outside forces will grow strong enough to open a path for the Tide, unleashing a swarm of monstrous Tidespawn on the area and usually becoming the first victims of the monsters. These rents usually seal shut after disgorging a wave of abominations, but some holes last until they can be closed. Rarely, a Tide cult actually creates a stable bubble of molten madness, persisting in a lasting delusion even as their bodies warp and twist into monstrous shapes.

THE GIFTS

Tide priests are gifted with strong magical powers, often acting as potent clerics or magic-users, ones who cast spells by instinct rather than education. Those fast in the grip of the Tide are almost always mutated or deformed in some hideous way and gifted with remarkable vitality- maximum hit points for their hit dice, most often, with occasional regeneration or extra physical attacks depending on the nature of their change.

Tide cultists of all kinds can be very difficult to root out. At early stages they are not aware that they are actually worshiping the Tide, and at later stages their altered perceptions often allow them to escape detection and lie-perceiving spells. Those belonging to metastasized cults often share the mutations of their priest-leaders.

THE PRICE

The Tide inevitably destroys its worshipers. In most cases, this destruction comes from the final opening of the gate, when the monstrous Tidespawn that pour forth will devour the laughing, joyous cultists in an orgy of blood and torment.

The less fortunate servants are permitted to live on, usually in a hideously misshapen form, one cancerous with semi-autonomous tumors and wild delusions. These survivors can taint and twist their very mundane surroundings into monstrous hellscapes.

AZURE INQUISITORS

A CLASS FOR LABYRINTH LORD

Charged with the protection of the Isles from the Tide Cults and the other cysts of dark worship, the Azure Inquisitors are a secret branch of the Xianese government. Operating out of the forbidden prison-island of Qincheng, they go forth alone to root out evil and protect the people of the Isles from the powers of darkness.

The true purpose of the Azure Ministry is unknown to all save the highest echelon of Xianese government. Most know Qincheng only as an island of torment and exile, a place for Xian to dispatch its Shou prisoners and human traitors, a place where they will be drained of every secret before death is permitted to them.

In truth, the Azure Ministry has guarded a secret for centuries. A branch of Archmage Lammach's own family has descended from the Shou witch-priestess Ilahti, a wife taken in the first early years of the exile, when men still imagined the Shou could be subjugated. These secret heirs were gifted with the same powerful talents against the Red Tide that other Shou received, and over the centuries many Shou "prisoners" have actually been enlisted into their numbers and wedded into their line.

Over the years other agents of other races have come to serve on Qincheng, to accept the binding sorcery that stops their mouths from talking of the island's secrets and the truth of the Ministry. They are gifted with powers honed for the destruction of sinister cults and dark powers and sent forth into the world to root out evil from the hidden places in the lands.

Azure Inquisitors have no official standing. They do not exist, as far as most Xianese officials are concerned, and masquerade most often as other clerics. If they are caught killing "innocents" they can expect only a noose, and the Ministry is unlikely to be able to give them any help. They must rely on their own cunning and the aid of their friends to seek out and break the powers of darkness.

Azure Inquisitor Class Table

Lvl	Title	XP	HD
1	Brother/Sister	0	1d6
2	Initiate	1,750	2d6
3	Agent	3,500	3d6
4	Senior Agent	7,000	4d6
5	Chief Agent	14,000	5d6
6	Post Director	28,000	6d6
7	Provincial Director	56,000	7d6
8	Regional Director	115,000	8d6
9	Chief Director	230,000	9d6
10+	High Inquisitor	+115,000	+1/lvl

The Azure Ministry grants certain titles to expert agents. These titles command respect from their own kind, but hold no authority over other agents unless granted specifically by the Ministry.

THE AZURE INQUISITOR

Race	Any	Armor	Any
HD	1d6 per level	Weapons	Any
Attack	as Cleric	Shield	Yes
Saves	as Cleric	Alignment	Any

The special training of the Azure Inquisitor can be utilized by any race. If using a race-as-class game system an Azure Inquisitor loses all the usual benefits of their racial class, as the demanding training forces them to reject their more natural traits in order to maintain an inquisitor's special powers.

CLASS ABILITIES

An Azure Inquisitor gains certain special abilities by virtue of their training and unique discipline.

- Azure Inquisitors use the saving throw and combat tables of a cleric of their same level, with one exception- they use the halving tables for purposes of their saving throw versus Spells, as they are gifted with powerful wards against hostile magic. If using a system that doesn't have racial saving throw tables, they gain a +6 bonus to all saving throws versus Spells.
- Azure Inquisitors can use any weapon, any armor, and use shields. They can use magic items usable by a cleric.
- Azure Inquisitors cast spells as a cleric of their own level. They can choose their spells from the normal clerical spell list, but their special training limits their flexibility. Azure Inquisitors cannot use any spells that heal hit point damage, cure diseases or poisons, or otherwise restore a subject. The reversed forms of these spells that inflict damage may be still be prepared, even by Lawful inquisitors. If a spell repairs damage in addition to doing some other effect, the spell may be prepared but the curative portion of it will not work.
- Azure Inquisitors cannot be perverted from their duties by magic or detected by supernatural means. They are immune to all magic that affects or reads their mind or divines truths about them. When targeted by such a spell they become aware of the attempt and may dictate the results the spell returns.
- Azure Inquisitors are ensorcelled to protect the secrets of the Azure Ministry. They are completely incapable of revealing the truth of it or their real mission to anyone not a fellow inquisitor or cleared to know by an inquisitor of 6th level or higher. Most such outsiders can expect to be forced to a similar silence through a special spell that can be cast by a 10th level inquisitor.

Those GMs who wish to use inquisitors in other settings can just as easily reskin them as zealous investigators and hierarchs of some other watchful faith, dropping their final class trait for those faiths that need not hide their true allegiance.

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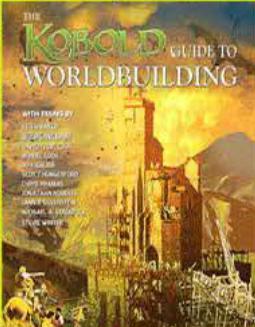
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