

ABOUT THE CULT

“Humans are sheep. They gather in flocks, relying on the group to provide safety and comfort without consideration for their own role in achieving the goal. On its own, man would perish. Without others, man is without direction. When the masses move, man moves with it.

But a flock needs direction. A flock without a shepherd does not move at all and erupts in chaos and quarrelling. The flock does not think for itself, nor act rationally or even pragmatically. The flock is stupid, as sheep are stupid.

To ensure the flock provides the safety and comfort that man craves, one must rise up, and be its shepherd. Few dare, for there is little appreciation to be gained. Sheep do not love their shepherd, taking the benefits of direction for granted and resisting any control they see as an imposition on their freedom.

Being a shepherd is difficult, and hardly ever is the station reached through the flock’s consent. But someone has to take that post, by force if need be, and if none will, then I, Havra Zhou, shall rise to it, and provide direction to the flock – whether it desires it or not.”

The Dictum – Section 3: On the Nature of Masses

Moonlight glimmers on a blade, and moments later, a brigand lies dead.

A thief loses his life as a garrotte is slipped around his neck as he sneaks out of his target’s house.

A group of thugs find their intended victim wields dark magic – and do not live to tell the tale.

A corrupt magistrate finds himself chased out of town when his indiscretions are exposed.

In a town plagued with crime, the tide seems to be turning. Those who break the law find themselves the target of a deadly group of vigilantes. Known among the populace as the Order of the Dictum, dark clad men and women stalk the night dealing with the town’s most nefarious criminals. The town guard lets them be – in fact, some guardsmen have joined the Order or voice their support of the crime fighters. People grow to trust the Order more than the sitting magistrates, whose efforts to deal with the rampaging crime fail due to corruption and inefficiency.

But the Order is less noble than they seem.

They are a cult, whose members secretly pray to obtain dark powers, worshipping not a divine entity but the concept of absolute subjugation of the masses, as proclaimed by a tome of power, *The Dictum of Havra Zhou*.

In their secret meetings, they plot the downfall of the current rulers. They seek to install their own leaders as absolute rulers in a state free not only of crime, but of individual freedom.

The populace, however, remains ignorant, seeing the cultists of Havra Zhou as their saviours. The nobles who sponsor them,

the Lords Vederian and Berevos Soulbright and Lady Deanne Huyn-Veneer, are quickly gaining in influence among the populace – influence the sitting magistrates are finding it hard to ignore.

IN YOUR CAMPAIGN

The Order of the Dictum is a cult that, on the surface, appears benevolent. It fights crime and corruption, and initially makes a good ally for the PCs. Playing it up as a benevolent force allows the PCs to get acquainted with the various NPCs (and vice versa). Allowing them to become better informed about the intrigues surrounding the cult gives both sides opportunities to prepare for when they inevitably come into conflict.

It is possible that one or more PCs are drawn into the Order, even becoming members, before its dark side is revealed. Make sure your players can appreciate such a plot twist. Some players will enjoy the additional role-play that comes from getting involved with the “wrong” crowd, while others dislike having their characters duped.

Also, make sure that PCs who fall under the cult’s influence eventually realize their error, so you can avoid inter-party conflicts.

Regardless of whether PCs get drawn into the Order, you may want to hint to your players that many people in the Order – especially the new members – are not evil, and that it can actually be salvaged and turned into a force of good. If the PCs succeed in identifying and eliminating the bad elements, they could well take over the Order and make it into what it appeared to be in the first place. An additional twist may be when the PCs fail to identify all threats: it is quite possible for them to deal with Vederian and Havra Zhou but never realize Deanne’s hidden role within the cult.

Similarly, the Order is not all evil; most members have their good side. They care for family and are loyal to their friends, and some of them act out of a (twisted) sense of idealism. Making the NPCs human and showing their good side at some point may cause your PCs to view them as more than opponents to fight.

Allow your PCs to use other means to defeat the Order, for example by convincing Vederian that *The Dictum* has corrupted him (a very daunting task), or turning Berevos against the Order by showing what it does to his brother.

In the end, the PCs should face the true evil: Havra Zhou and her Dictum, and possibly Deanne Huyn-Veneer. These are the true villains, and while they may be able to avoid the PCs’ attention by hiding behind Vederian, the PCs should ultimately discover their duplicity and face them.

FORMATION OF THE CULT

The founder – and main sponsor – of the Order is Lord Vederian Soulbright, one of the most respected people in town. While maintaining the façade of a benevolent noble, Soulbright seeks to establish himself as the town's absolute leader.

Lord Soulbright's ambitions are fuelled by *The Dictum*, a tome of power. It is written by a far ancestor of the Soulbrights, the paladin Havra Zhou, who recorded her philosophies on what makes an ideal human society. Havra was a zealot, whose views on an ordered and lawful society eventually drew her towards dark ambitions and into conflict with her peers. When she turned to dark rites to gain for herself the power to make her dream society come true, her opponents joined against her. She was slain, and the noble house of Zhou was cast down. Most of her remaining descendants scattered, and the Zhouls were forgotten. The few holdings not taken by the state were handed to the Soulbrights branch of the family, who in subsequent years managed to establish themselves as a minor – though nearly landless – noble house. Among these holdings was Zhou Keep, a fortified tower that guards a mountain pass.

During one of his forays in Zhou Keep, Lord Soulbright discovered a secret door in the keep's cellar. Behind the door, he found a hidden chapel centred upon an altar bearing a leather tome, *The Dictum of Havra Zhou*. Inscribed therein are the teachings of Havra Zhou: her philosophies, her journal and the dark rites that brought her to power (and ultimate damnation).

Lord Soulbright started reading, initially out of a curiosity to learn more of the woman who brought such misfortune to the family. The writings at first seemed extreme, the ravings of a madwoman. The paladin's desire for a structured society, which lord Soulbright could sympathise with, were eclipsed by her fanaticism and self-centred nature.

But after a while, he started to see sense in her arguments, and as he progressed through the text, he came to new insights, until finally the thoughts on the pages made sense and mirrored his own. Moreover, he slowly gained understanding of the rites in the book; even reading simple passages somehow imbued him

with spells, as if they had simply leaped into his mind.

In truth, Lord Soulbright had been enspelled by the tome – and thus was incapable to realize the truth: that he was slowly being possessed by the fell spirit bound to the tome: that of Havra Zhou herself.

He became obsessed with realizing *The Dictum's* society and started recruiting others to fulfil the dream, starting with his brother Berevos and the riotous widow Huyn-Veneer. Slowly, a group of like-minded people gathered around him. Some he introduced to the tome's texts, others he manipulated with promises of a better, ordered society. Under his direction, these folk actively worked towards the fulfilment of his dream, and when the first vigilante actions against the town's nefarious criminals got noticed, it was he who named them the Order of the Dictum.

THE DICTUM

The Dictum is not a mere tome of lore. It is an intelligent artefact, crafted by the fallen paladin Havra Zhou shortly before her death. The tome not only holds her thoughts – and made them its own – it is also a soul trap, holding Havra's soul.

When Lord Soulbright delved into the book, he awakened the evil within. As he read Havra's words, he opened his mind to the tome, and it corrupted him. In time, as he read on, he tied his own soul to the book.

Havra, trapped in the book, became aware of him, and found that she could influence him. Havra realized that Vederian's body could become a vessel that she could actually possess. With only a bit more patience, she will have a way to escape the tome, exchanging her soul for his.

Until then, she waits as Lord Soulbright absorbs *The Dictum's* dark lore, guiding him in understanding the magic of the book and occasionally placing subtle suggestions to pave her way to freedom. *The Dictum* itself does the rest.

Lord Soulbright is wary of letting too many people gain access to *The Dictum*. Most members of the Order know of *The Dictum*, but few have seen it. They only know the sample texts that are quoted by Lord Soulbright.

Despite their limited access, those closest to Lord Soulbright have benefited. He has been able to use his newly acquired knowledge to imbue his allies with powers from the tome (see the Dictum Cultist and Dictum Adept templates [page 16]).

The only other person he has so far allowed to actually read selected parts of *The Dictum* is Lady Deanne Huyn-Veneer. He rationalizes that this is necessary as she is the only person he knows that has magical knowledge. In truth, Havra has influenced him, as she believes the lady will be a far superior vessel than the older Lord. Deanne, however, has so far resisted *The Dictum's* influence.

WHISPERS AND RUMOURS

PCs searching for information about recent events and the Order can make a Diplomacy check to gather such information. A successful check reveals all information revealed by lesser checks.

DC 10: Part of the Watch is corrupt – and many of the magistrates are no better. Until recent, crime ran rampant through the town, but the acts of shadowy vigilantes are slowly restoring order to the streets.

DC 15: The vigilantes belong to the Order of the Dictum; a group dedicated to stamping out lawlessness.

DC 20: The nobleman Lord Soulbright leads the order.

BELIEFS & VALUES

“My path has been long and I have met opposition at every step. Yet I will prevail. I have been called a tyrant, a blasphemer and a brigand, but I see my path clearly. My glorious destiny awaits, and none will stand in my way.”

The Dictum – Section 1: Introductions

The Order follows the principles laid out in *The Dictum*, as translated by Lord Soulbright. It has a twisted perspective preaching ultimate obedience to a higher power of law – more specifically, the law set by Havra Zhou.

Honour is less important to the Order than hierarchy. Leaders need to be obeyed, laws followed and crimes punished harshly. There is no room for discussion of good and evil in a lawful society. The laws – their laws – are always right.

The ruling magistrates are perceived as ineffective or corrupt. The established laws are inconsequential as they are not enforced. The Order instead enforces its own law. They punish those they brand criminals, root out corruption – at least when it suits them – and eliminate those who oppose them or question their philosophies.

While some may see the Order’s members as vigilantes or rebels, its members do not see themselves that way. They consider themselves justicars - the only ones capable of bringing order. For them, might makes right.

The Tome holds 154 “Dictates” – a codex of increasingly extreme laws set down by Havra Zhou “for a new order.”

Not all Order members know all the dictates. In fact, only the first dictate is commonly known.

GOALS

“My faith’s priests have buried themselves up to their necks in tradition. Mired in the old ways, they are predictable and doomed to failure. I will seek out new magic and techniques, and improve myself without casting aside any means on basis of pretentious motivations such as morality. Morality – hah! A weak excuse to hide fear of change, a feeling as obsolete as the church’s ancient hymns.

The Dictum – Section 5: How to Bring Change

The Order’s goal is to set society right and implement a strict code of law. It is not, at its base, an evil goal, but the laws the

DICTATE THE FIRST

To obey your superiors in all things, without question nor hesitation, and follow directions without fault. There is no greater satisfaction than your task done, in compliance with order, and in a timely manner. Do not be insubordinate, for my punishment will be harsh, with ten lashes for each sign of dissent.

Order has in mind are strict, designed to cull the weak and destroy all individual freedom. Most of the Order – especially their leaders – seek to rule.

For now, the Order’s members focus their ire on the more hardened and nefarious criminals. Their aim is to gather support from the populace and increase their influence. Once that is achieved they can place their own people in powerful positions, through subtle influence where these posts are elected or appointed, and through extortion and assassination where posts are assumed for life.

Once they control most of the magistrates, they will turn to subjugate the common people, and overthrow the ruling classes to make their Lord, Vederian Soulbright, the absolute ruler.

ORGANISATION

The Order is a strict hierarchy with Vederian Soulbright at its zenith. It uses an ancient system of military ranks. *The Dictum* lists numerous ranks, but as the cult is fairly small only a few of these are used.

The cult is led by three nobles: Vederian and Berevos Soulbright, and Deanne Huyn-Veneer. They are referred to as the *strategos*. Vederian Soulbright has the additional rank of *polemarch*, the head of the *strategos*, whose vote is a tie-breaker.

While it is known that nobles sponsor the Order, the common people – and most of the new recruits – are unaware that the nobles have such a stake in the cult. Instead, these people believe the Order’s leaders to be the five members who hold the rank of *taxiarch*.

The *taxiarchs* determine most actions of the cult. Each directs his own group and is responsible for the Order’s activities in a specific part of town (a *taxis*). They report to the *strategos* but only directly involve the nobles when they cannot deal with a problem among themselves. Berevos Soulbright occasionally involves himself directly with the harbour *taxis*.

Each *taxiarch* has eight to twelve underlings. One of these is second in command, the *syntagmatarch*. The others hold various ranks, taken from *The Dictum*, though the small scale of the cult means that none of them command more than four others. Other ranks include *tagmatarch*, *lokhagos* and *tetrarch*. A group of mounted cultists are led by a *hipparch*.

Individual members without rank are referred to as *hoplites*.

The *taxiarchs* and most of the *syntagmatarchs* are loyal

DICTATE THE TWENTY AND SECOND

To deliver all arms to those who serve my way, so peace will reign the streets. And should you draw a knife, or club, or in other ways arms oneself, my guards will strike you down without hesitation. For there is no need for weaponry, no need for defence, in a state where we guard the walls.

followers of the Soulbright brothers. They include retainers, disgruntled nobles of minor or landless houses and dissatisfied law-enforcers. They are aware of Vederian's future plans. They support him either out of misguided idealism or in hopes of enriching themselves.

Members lower in the Order's hierarchy are less aware of the extent of the laws *The Dictum* desires to implement. Some of the newer recruits are still honestly concerned with fighting crime and establishing order. This may confuse matters should the PCs deal with Order members, especially if they make friends among them. Convincing these new members of their leaders' faults may be very difficult. Should PCs intervene too late, their own friends may become radicalized.

ALLIES & ENEMIES

"I will keep my allies close, and my enemies closer. And I will always have a knife ready."

The Dictum – Section 2: A Paladin's Hardships

Various groups have an interest in the Order. A group of vigilantes, operating outside the law, is bound to draw its own friends and foes.

The greatest allies the Order currently has are the guards that patrol the town's harbour at night. The harbour is not the worst part of town, but it is far from safe. The understaffed, underpaid guardsmen have had some aid from the Order when dealing with the frequent fights in the taverns near the docks, and a few violent and dangerous criminals have been found "dealt with." While the magistrates frown on the vigilantes' interference, the guards are more practical. They feel that, with the Order, crime has gone down and the streets are safer. Several guards have secretly joined the Order, or have friends who are members. Their open support for the Order – and their active involvement in several raids – has earned them a certain amount of respect from the people, rather than the scorn other guards get for having the Order do their work for them.

This is far different from the guards of the north gate. It is whispered that these guards accept coin from the crime lords that traffic illegal wares through the north gate. While not all guards are corrupt, a fair number are, and as a result crime is on

the rise in the northern district. The guards actively oppose the Order, claiming they are "unlawfully" interfering with their work. Some of them fear that the Order may know and expose the bribes they take. They seek to round up and lock up any Order members they find. Chief among these guards is Captain Berard Full (see Adventure Hooks [page 9]), a scraggly-bearded, heavily-built bully, who takes his money from one of the most powerful crime lords in town

Closer to home, Vederian Soulbright has to deal with the suspicions of his wife, Lady Aserra Soulbright-Veneer. While Aserra considers herself a good citizen, she does not understand the ferocity with which her once complacent husband has thrown himself into the cause of justice. She does not like the Order much and particularly resents how much it takes him away from his family. Moreover, she has started to suspect some of the rumors that circulate to be true – particularly the one about a dalliance between her husband and her sister, Lady Deanne Huyn-Veneer. Digging into her husband's business – and that of *The Dictum* – may well bring her own life in danger.

Chief ally of Lady Veneer is her father, the old merchant Hagbard Veneer. Hagbard is an old doting fool, who married his daughters into noble families on the promise of his daughters enjoying wealth and status. He has spent a considerable amount of money on Lord Soulbright's plans, trusting the tales told him. He does not believe his daughter's worries are based on truth. Still, he aids his daughter, providing her with means to run her own investigations.

Finally, Lord Reins is a noble who has his own misgivings over Lord Soulbright, and who is the Soulbrights' greatest rival when it comes to claims on surrounding lands. Lord Reins is a flamboyant man who yet appears to be a family man, but he has had a few "indiscrete" encounters with Lady Deanne. He is worried this will come to the ears of his wife, who he fears more than loves. Moreover, Lady Deanne seems to have become smitten with him, and while he loves her attentions and repays them in kind, he does not consider her a proper match for him. Still, she holds power over him through their affair, and it hampers him working against his true goal: exposing Lord Soulbright for the fraud that he obviously is.

DICTATE THE SIXTY AND SEVENTH

To order your underlings to bring forth that which you desire, and to bring to your superiors that which they desire, without qualm. For whether through gold, goods, cattle or your offspring, you honour your betters, and we have first rights to all within your household. And should goods be refused, then we feel righteous to take it all, and lash the thief of what should be ours for no less than thirty times.

DICTATE THE HUNDRED AND THIRTY AND FOURTH

That none of your desires shall conflict with my law. Hence let our state decide what bonds you make and what goods you take. For bonds of so called love, outside the wants of your ruler, are selfish and ferment rebellion, and we will punish it by incarceration and hard labour until we have determined your rebellious ways to be at an end.