

Report on the Maw

Prepared for the Council of Nine by Ruth of Basilisks Reach

This report has been prepared for the eyes of the Council of Nine, as requested during the Spring Equinox 382YE by Irada von Temeschwar. The Silent Bell were instructed to investigate the activities of the Maw. We have now done so, and can present our findings here.

Firstly, I thank the honoured Cardinals for setting the Silent Bell upon this task. Our purpose is to protect the Empire through rooting out the cults, sects, and other such conspiracies that threaten its fabric and its destiny. Not every task which we have been given of late has sat well with my fellows, and so this has been a refreshing return to the fundamentals.

The last time I, personally, drafted a report for the Council of Nine, it was on the matter of the Hand of Glory, a frankly delusional conspiracy. I must warn that the report on the Maw is much more brief. This is not because we have spent less time delving into the Maw and its activities, but because its adherents are far more concerned with and talented in matters of secrecy.

Significantly, however, we have managed to track down a Maw shrine. As will be explained in more detail below, we believe there will be a conjunction of the Sentinel Gate leading to **Red-Sand Cave, Fontargenta, Feroz** that will take place at **8pm, Friday of the Summer Solstice**. We believe no more than **two or three individuals** will be able to pass through the Gate at this time. This will be an opportunity to secure the information needed to suppress the remainder of the cult.

Summary of the Maw and their Purpose

The Maw is a cult that believes the world is a crucible, within which the soul is tested and strengthened between each passage through the Labyrinth. They believe in a fundamentally adversarial relationship with the world, where peace and stability are to be abhorred as they do not challenge the individual to achieve greater Virtue. Storms, chaos, calamity, war, and destruction all offer opportunities to face a test and either overcome – and thus be strengthened – or fail – and thus learn from the weaknesses that are revealed.

The Maw is made up of Imperial citizens, and is pro-Imperial. They desire the Empire exists as a structure within Virtue can be fostered – but they also desire it face threats and dangers, because such are tests of Virtue. Were the Empire at peace, the Maw believe citizens would become docile, placid, and mired in apathy. Ultimately, they believe the Empire will inevitably fall as all things do, but do not see this as something to mourn; from the ruins something new and stronger will rise.

The Maw favour the destructive Spring Eternal Siakha, though we have not been able to discern if they outright worship it. They see it as a personification of wild chaos and devastation in the world, and thus an avatar for their creed of the world as a trial through which the soul must struggle. We have seen little evidence they receive any boons or aid from the Eternal, or indeed that they successfully make any contact at all – unsurprising given what we learned from the results of the recent attempt by an Archmage at a parlay with that wild and dangerous Eternal.

The Maw have no wider bonds of loyalty to other Siakha cults. Indeed, they are actively hostile to the Grendel worshippers of the Eternal, and we have evidence they have tried to turn the Eternal's wrath against such.

The Maw have a strange reverence for the dread krakens of the deep. The cult seems to consider the monstrosities as intelligent beings with personalities and purpose. They see them as 'warrior-saints' of the sea, representing the same chaos and challenge that the cult witnesses in Siakha, bonded with a fundamentally colossal strength manifested in the form of this world rather than emanating from the Realm of Spring. Indeed, they seem to hold kraken in higher regard than the Eternal. It remains unclear as to why the Maw believe this; I suspect we are still missing some key piece of the puzzle as relates to the cult's founding or history and, without it, many of their tenets will seem indecipherable.

Maw Activities

The Maw follow a rigorous and secretive code, but we do know that they are mostly scattered through Feroz, and seem to have little presence outside of that territory.

The cult's internal structure seems to be extremely resilient. As Freeborn, the Maw have twisted themselves in knots to avoid being outright dishonest to their fellow citizens; among other things, they ensure that each member has only very limited knowledge of the identities of the rest, so they cannot *lie* because they simply do not *know* in the first place. It's all masks and robes and mutual transgressions – a mystery cult, and just as hard to penetrate as others of its ilk.

The cult is largely quiescent at this time. They have gone to ground, apparently due to investigations or events that occurred before the Silent Bell were brought in to resolve this matter. As a result, the cells of the cult are doing their best to cover their tracks and avoiding drawing attention.

There is some evidence that, previously, the Maw would try and place members among corsair crews, but that practice has been halted at some point in the past.

Maw Resources

The Maw has whatever collected resources its members possess. It also held several secret locations on the coast – shrines in caves and the like – most of which are now

abandoned, although some are still guarded by dangerous aquatic creatures.

Beyond that, Maw resources seem to be very limited, although we have some evidence they were trying to gather magical assets during the past year or two – crystal mana, and the like.

Origin of the Maw

We have not been able to uncover the origins or history of the Maw, although we believe they have existed in one form or another for well over a century.

If I had to make a best guess, I suspect that the Maw stem from the spiritual frailties of Freeborn sailors and corsairs exposed to the terrible wrath of storms and similar dangers at sea – great calamities that can leave a person feeling small and inconsequential before the vast wrath of nature made real in wind and thunder. I would not at all be surprised to discover that the Maw's founding came from such exposure to ill weather, and the attempt by simple sailors to fold their impressions of such with the teachings of the Way.

The Red-Sand Cave

While most of the cult's old meeting spots are abandoned, we have discovered one shrine that is still being tended. We believe it is a fall-back spot – a place for cultists to meet up to receive new instructions. Once all remaining cultists have visited the shrine, we expect it will be abandoned as well and the cult will become completely inactive until such a time as they feel our attention has moved on – which could mean years, or even decades, before we get another chance to root the Maw out.

Moving on the shrine with force will be pointless; we have cornered two cult members in the past season and they both showed little hesitation in ending their own lives. As such, storming the Red-Sand Cave will do little but leave us with one or two dead bodies and no knowledge of the cult's remaining membership or plans.

As such, we advise you send reliable, level-headed individuals through the Sentinel Gate, **disguised as Maw members**. If they are able to pass themselves off as Maw members successfully, we expect that they will be **given information about the cult's new meeting spots and protocols for communication** during the time it plans to lay low. This will let us then tear the whole cult out, root and branch.

For such a disguise, we advise that the Maw are largely Freeborn, but that they certainly use masks or veils for their meetings. The infiltrators will need to maintain their cover for the full duration as well – if the Maw catch wind of the attempt, or the cultists at the shrine end up dead, they will know someone is trying to dig them out and will likely change their plans for meeting and communicating, meaning any information gleaned will be useless.

However, gaining such information is not, by itself, enough to bring the cult down. Even if we eventually manage to gather the names of the members, performing appropriate condemnations through the Synod will be time-consuming and troublesome, especially as we cannot hold keep suspects imprisoned and they will flee at the first opportunity.

We therefore suggest that **a Senate motion be made** declaring membership of the Maw to be **illegal**. This will give Magistrates and militia on the ground the opportunity to round up and act against Maw members directly.

Combining the Senate motion with successfully recovering the cult's protocols from the Red-Sand Cave will allow the Empire to fully stamp out the Maw for good. Performing only one of these will give some progress in eradicating the cult, but only both together, **at this summit**, will give us the best chance of putting an end to them. Staggering these actions between summits will be unwise; it will only give the cult further warning by which they may evade capture.