

DUNGEONS & LAIRS 89

CULTIST HIDEOUT

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CULTIST HIDEOUT

Cultist Hideout is a Fifth Edition plug-in adventure for **four characters with an average party level (APL) of 1, 3, 5, or 8**. This document offers a general guideline on scaling the adventure for each level. The characters must track down the source of a dangerous cult and put an end to their dark idol, an ancient demon called Golmuth.

For the Gamemaster

The town of Queen's Ford is suffering from a rash of missing persons, senseless murders, and profane desecrations. Tensions are rising, as whispers of a demonic cult are spreading like wildfire through the town—the people want answers, and the nobility of Queen's Ford are struggling to keep the peace. It won't be long before impatience gives way to open rebellion.

One such aristocrat, Eben Bhalar, recently had his son and sole heir, Voner Bhalar, kidnapped, and is rallying adventurers to find him. At the same time, an old cleric called Hastra Grandbeard is telling anybody who will listen that the source of the cult is a demon called Golmuth, and that the cult has likely rallied to a ruined cathedral in the swamp, where Golmuth's prison was buried over a century ago.

Adventurers who heed the call must journey into the swamps of Blightwater surrounding Queen's Ford, locate the sunken cathedral, and silence the demon's whispers.

Backstory

Over a century ago, a demon called Golmuth stalked the swamplands surrounding Queen's Ford, drawing a cult of mortals to his banner and bidding them to commit acts of violence and depravity. A band of brave adventurers, led by a dwarf cleric called Hastra Grandbeard, managed to defeat the cult in the Battle of Blightwater, though the victory would come at great cost, as several of Hastra's companions fell in the struggle. To make matters worse, Golmuth himself proved too formidable for the battleworn adventurers, as neither steel nor magic seemed to have any effect.

As Golmuth gloated over the heroes' broken bodies, Hastra, in an act of desperation, prayed for a miracle—and received it. A solar angel, a harbinger of Hastra's goddess, descended from the heavens and delivered unto her a consecrated artifact, a soul cage, with which Hastra was able to trap and contain Golmuth.

SCALING THE ADVENTURE

APL	Recommended Adventure Version	Relative Difficulty
1	1st-Level	Hard
2	1st-Level	Medium
3	3rd-Level	Hard
4	3rd-Level	Medium
5	5th-Level	Hard
6	5th-Level	Medium
7	5th-Level	Easy
8	8th-Level	Hard
9	8th-Level	Medium
10	8th-Level	Easy

With the demon imprisoned, the only task remaining was to ensure the soul cage's protection. To that end, Hastra erected a cathedral in the swamp where her companions fell, and stored in its stone flooring Golmuth's prison. Secured by consecrated earth and holy magic, the demon would never see the light of day.

But as time passed, Hastra was called away to distant lands, and the cathedral was abandoned. Darkness crept back into the swamp. In Hastra's absence, Golmuth learned to whisper through the cracks of his prison. Now, a new cult of mortals has rallied to the demon's banner, desecrating the very stronghold that was built to prevent his reemergence.

Golmuth's plan is simple: command the cult to kidnap children of royal blood, and perform a profane ritual that will shatter the soul cage. Hastra is much too old to battle the cult on her own—brave heroes are needed to venture into the swamp and stop Golmuth before he can reemerge and begin anew his campaign of fire and death.

Adventure Hook

As the adventurers arrive in Queen's Ford, the townspeople are gathered in Central Square, shouting angrily at Mayor Ostord (NG COMMONER) and demanding that the nobility of Queen's Ford come out of their homes and answer their questions. The mayor is clearly out of his depth, fumbling over his words and utterly failing to quell the crowd's disquiet.

Just as tempers begin to boil over, Hastra Grandbeard (LG dwarf PRIEST), clambors onto the raised platform and uses thaumaturgy to declare in a booming voice:

“Silence! These people have suffered as you have—Eben Bhalar's son has been taken, and you would put a knife to his throat! I know you're scared, but violence will only embolden the cultists that are perpetrating these crimes. Now, unless ye be brave enough to crusade against the cult of Golmuth—begone!”

Cowed, the crowd disperses, leaving Hastra, Mayor Ostord, and the adventurers alone. Eben Bhalar (NE NOBLE) comes out of hiding to thank the old cleric for her timely arrival; Hastra ignores pleasantries and launches into the story of Golmuth and his foul cult. From here, the adventurers can introduce themselves.

Should the adventurers choose to get involved, Hastra tells them of Golmuth's soul cage and how to reinforce it (see area 7), and Eben begs them to hurry, before his son is sacrificed (see area 2). Eben lends them

the aid of their personal bodyguard, Rodgal (NE GUARD). Rodgal is secretly a member of the cult—he organized the kidnapping of Voner—and will betray the characters at the first opportune moment. From there, the quest is straightforward: find the cathedral, reinforce the soul cage, and bring it back to Hastra Grandbeard for safekeeping.

Traveling Through Blightwater

Before traveling through the swamps of Blightwater, the characters must designate a guide. At morning, midday, and evening, have the guide make a DC 15 Wisdom (Survival) check. Record the number of successful checks. After three successful checks, the characters reach the sunken minster.

Whenever the guide fails a check, roll a d20. On a result of 10-20, a random encounter occurs: consult the Travel Encounters table to see what the characters run into, ignoring repeat results. Then, go to the appropriate section to run the encounter.

TRAVEL ENCOUNTERS

d4	Encounter
1	The Highwaymen
2	Crocodile Ambush
3	Playful Fey
4	Quirky Bones

Encounter: The Highwaymen

The characters come across the site of an ambushed caravan. The bandits are slightly drunk, celebrating as they pick through the remains of several slain merchants and guards: they have disadvantage on Perception checks. Should they discover the characters' presence, they demand payment to pass, "unless you want to end up like this lot." The nature of the encounter depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Highwaymen Encounter table.

Should the characters defeat the highwaymen, they can claim the caravan's spoils for themselves. The nature of the treasure depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Highwaymen Treasure table.

HIGHWAYMEN ENCOUNTER

Adventure Level	Encounter	Gold to Pass (per Character)
1st	4 BANDITS	5 gp
3rd	4 BANDITS and 1 SPY	25 gp
5th	4 BANDITS and 2 BANDIT CAPTAINS	75 gp
8th	4 BANDITS, 1 SPY, and 1 GLADIATOR	175 gp

HIGHWAYMEN TREASURE

Adventure Level	Treasure
1st	23 gp, 15 sp, 20 cp, 4 small art objects (25 gp each), 1 potion of healing, 25 lbs of raw leather (25 sp), 1 injured draft horse with 3 hit points remaining
3rd	35 gp, 22 sp, 30 cp, 6 small art objects (25 gp each), 1 potion of healing, 50 lbs of fine clothing (10 gp), 1 injured draft horse with 3 hit points remaining
5th	52 gp, 33 sp, 45 cp, 6 small art objects (25 gp each), 1 potion of greater healing, 25 lbs of noble's clothing (25 gp), 1 injured riding horse with 3 hit points remaining
8th	78 gp, 49 sp, 67 cp, 6 medium art objects (50 gp each), 1 potion of greater healing, 50 lbs of noble's clothing (10 gp), 1 injured riding horse with 3 hit points remaining

Encounter: Crocodile Ambush

As the characters make their way through the swamp, they unwittingly cross paths with a nest of crocodiles. Have the character's guide make a Wisdom (Perception) check. On a success, they see the crocodiles before they can strike. On a failure, the characters are surprised. The nature of the encounter depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Crocodile Encounter table.

CROCODILE ENCOUNTER

Adventure Level	Encounter	Wisdom (Perception) DC
1st	2 CROCODILES	8
3rd	3 CROCODILES	10
5th	1 CROCODILE and 1 GIANT CROCODILE	12
8th	2 GIANT CROCODILES	14

Encounter: Playful Fey

The characters are accosted by four invisible sprites, who ask them to solve the following riddle:

”If you drop me, I’m sure to crack, but if you smile, I’ll surely smile back. What am I?”

The answer is “a mirror.” Each character gets one guess. Characters that give the wrong answer have a trick played on them: roll a d6 and consult the Fey Trick table. Whenever a character that’s afflicted by a fey trick takes a long rest, they may attempt a DC 14 Wisdom saving throw, ending the effect on themselves with a success.

FEY TRICK

d6 Trick Played

- 1 A character loses the ability to speak and understand their normal languages, but gains the ability to speak and understand Sylvan.
- 2 A character begins uncontrollably sneezing rainbow-colored faerie dust: they gain disadvantage on all Stealth checks.
- 3 For 48 hours, a small item in the character’s possession (a flask, music box, small art object, etc.) becomes awakened. The item can speak and understand Common and heckles the characters mercilessly.
- 4 A character is afflicted with a skin disease that covers them head-to-toe in oozing—but oddly delicious—mushrooms: they gain disadvantage on all Charisma checks.
- 5 A character begins coughing up copper pieces whenever they suffer damage (1 cp per 1 point of damage).
- 6 A character becomes “light as a feather”—any impact, no matter how minor, sends them sprawling 5 feet away and knocks them prone. If thrown by another creature, the character is thrown 5 feet per 3 points of Strength that the creature possesses, rounded up.

Encounter: Quirky Bones

The characters encounter Sir Garwin, a sentient skeleton dressed in noble clothing who carries his skull in his arms. He is a polite and foppish man who wishes to be returned to his tomb at the ruined cathedral (see area 7); Garwin was one of Hastra Grandbeard's companions who died fighting Golmuth, and was interred there—until Golmuth awakened him from his slumber. He offers to accompany the characters, “to put that dastardly do-badder Golmuth in his rightful place!” Sir Garwin is a SKELETON with 30 hit points and AC 14.

The Sunken Minster

When the characters arrive at the ruined cathedral, read or paraphrase the following:

The ruins of the abandoned abbey jut out of the swamp like moldering bones. The stained glass appears scratched white by feverish strokes of a blade—or claw. There is a distinct smell of sulfur here, and an otherworldly chill in the air. From inside the abbey, you hear a maddening chorus of voices that seem pitched on the edge of mania.

General Features

Unless stated otherwise, the Sunken Minster has the following features.

Size and Dimensions. The ceilings within each area of the Sunken Minster are roughly 35 feet high.

Illumination. Treat each area as being dimly lit (torchlight at night, daylight filtering in through cracks during the day).

Surface Detail. This once stately cathedral has since been desecrated with the profane images of Golmuth and his foul cult: blood symbols are smeared on the walls, the stone eyes of the saints have been scratched white by knives, and stick fetishes hang from the ceilings. The cathedral has partially sunk into the swamp; the floor is covered in a thin layer of filthy, stagnant water, and insects buzz incessantly over its surface.

Barriers. Several doors and strongboxes throughout the Sunken Minster are locked or boarded up. All of the barriers are made of wood and have AC 12, 15 hit points, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A lock can be picked with a successful DC 12 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or any barrier can be forced open with a successful DC 15 Strength check.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. Certain symbols of the cult plant profane images in the minds of those who look upon them: creatures must succeed on a DC 12 Wisdom saving throw or become afflicted with a form of short-term madness. A creature that succeeds on this saving throw is immune to the cult symbology for 24 hours. Creatures in the cult are inoculated to this effect.

Hazard: Diseased Weapons. Whenever a creature is struck by a weapon wielded by a cultist, they must succeed on a DC 10 Constitution saving throw or contract sewer plague.

Keyed Locations

The following locations are keyed to the map of the Sunken Minster.

1 – Nave

A foul congregation has gathered in the shadows of this place, chanting infernal words in exaltation of the demon Golmuth and erecting idols of blood and bone. Fire pits smolder and burn—within them, a demonic visage appears to flicker.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. The area is filled with the profane idols of the demon's cult (see General Features).

Encounter: The Dark Congregation. The Cult of Golmuth uses this area as their primary meeting ground. Should the characters approach peaceably, Goregaz the One-Eyed (CE orc CULT FANATIC) greets them and bids them “to drink deep from the cup of blood.” Any character that drinks from the cup enters into a pact with Golmuth (see Aftermath). Any character that refuses to drink is attacked. The nature of the encounter depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 1 Encounter table.

Development: Shadow Spawning. In the 8th-level version of this adventure, creatures loyal to Golmuth who die during this encounter spawn a SHADOW.

Treasure: Cult Spoils and Hostage Key. Once the cultists in this area are defeated, the characters can claim everything they've taken. Additionally, they find on Goregaz's body the key to Voner Bhalar's chains (see area 2). The nature of the treasure depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 1 Treasure table.

AREA 1 ENCOUNTER

Adventure Level	Encounter
1st	Goregaz and 8 COMMONERS wielding daggers and sickles
3rd	Goregaz and 8 CULTISTS wielding daggers and sickles
5th	Goregaz, 2 CULT FANATICS, and 5 CULTISTS wielding daggers and sickles
8th	Goregaz, 3 CULT FANATICS, and 5 CULTISTS wielding daggers and sickles

AREA 1 TREASURE

Adventure Level	Encounter
1st	6 gp, 11 sp, 25 cp, 3 small art objects (25 gp each), and a bloodied dagger +1
3rd	9 gp, 15 sp, 37 cp, 5 small art objects (25 gp each), and a bloodied dagger +
5th	13 gp, 22 sp, 54 cp, 7 small art objects (25 gp each), and a cursed shortsword +1 that reduces the wielder's maximum hit points by 1d8 (this affliction can only be cured through divine intervention, a <i>wish</i> spell, or a <i>greater restoration</i> spell or similar effect)
8th	19 gp, 33 sp, 81 cp, 9 small art objects (25 gp each), and a cursed longsword +2 that reduces the wielder's maximum hit points by 1d12 (this affliction can only be cured through divine intervention, a <i>wish</i> spell, or a <i>greater restoration</i> spell or similar effect)

2 – Desecrated Altar

Above the altar, a young man is suspended and splayed by rusted chains. A demonic creature slashes at his flesh, muttering to itself a gleeful, sing-song tune; blood drips into several chalices carefully placed around the ritual site. The man appears to be unconscious.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. The area is filled with the profane idols of the demon's cult (see General Features).

Development: Voner Bhalar. The victim of this blood sacrifice is Voner Bhalar, the kidnapped heir. If the characters discovered the cathedral in less than two days of travel, the boy is unconscious, but alive with 1 hit point remaining. Otherwise, the ritual was completed: he's dead. Voner's chains can be shattered with a successful DC 20 Strength (Athletics) check, picked open with a successful DC 15 Dexterity check using thieves' tools, or opened with Goregaz's key. Alternatively, the chains have 20 hit points, AC 19, and immunity to psychic and poison damage.

Encounter: The Fleshmonger. As the characters arrive, a minor devil called The Fleshmonger is raking Voner's body with its weapon. Like Goregaz, he tests the characters to see if they're loyal to Golmuth before attacking. The nature of the encounter depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 2 Encounter table.

AREA 2 ENCOUNTER

Adventure Level	Encounter
1st	1 IMP
3rd	1 BEARDED DEVIL
5th	1 CHAIN DEVIL
8th	1 CHAIN DEVIL

3 – Cloister

Nature has reclaimed the open air cloister of this once-stately cathedral: filthy water sloshes with each step, and vines choke the very stone. At the center of the quad lies a stone fountain covered in ivy and mildew.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. The area is filled with the profane idols of the demon's cult (see General Features).

Encounter: Cursed Fountain. As the characters explore the area, they hear a telepathic voice call out to them from the fountain; it is the voice of a cursed monk named Chardayne, who was murdered and hidden at the base of the fountain about five decades ago. If the characters investigate, Chardayne's spirit surprises them and attacks.

When Chardayne falls below half hit points, he does his best to turn invisible, then performs hit and run attacks as the characters explore the rest of the cathedral. Chardayne is also hostile to members of the cult. If Chardayne's spirit is destroyed, he reforms at the base of the fountain after 24 hours. The only way to permanently destroy Chardayne's spirit is to dig up his bones and burn them. The nature of the encounter depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 3 Encounter table.

AREA 3 ENCOUNTER

Adventure Level	Encounter
1st	1 SHADOW
3rd	1 WILL-O'-WISP
5th	1 GHOST
8th	1 WRAITH

Treasure: Chardayne's Pack. If the characters discover Chardayne's resting place, they can claim his tattered and bloodstained leather pack for themselves. The nature of the treasure depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 3 Treasure table.

AREA 3 TREASURE

Adventure Level	Treasure
1st	6 cp, 1 <i>potion of healing</i> , and 1 <i>spell scroll of divine favor</i>
3rd	9 cp, 1 <i>potion of healing</i> , and 1 <i>spell scroll of spiritual weapon</i>
5th	13 cp, 1 <i>potion of greater healing</i> , and 1 <i>spell scroll of spirit guardians</i>
8th	19 cp, 1 <i>potion of superior healing</i> , and 1 <i>spell scroll of bellow</i>

4 – Chapel

This small chapel has been desecrated by the cultists: corpses of unfortunate travelers hang from the ceiling, and whatever holy iconography remains is heavily vandalized. It appears to be empty. Curiously, a patch of earth is covered in healthy, vibrantly colored flowers.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. The area is filled with the profane idols of the demon's cult (see General Features).

Development: Blessed Earth. A beam of radiant sunlight (or moonlight, at night) falls on a patch of consecrated earth, which has been blessed with healthy flowers that have defied the cultists' rampage. Any character that prays to a good-aligned deity while standing on the flower patch can make a DC 10 Wisdom (Religion) check. On a success, the character recovers 2d6 hit points and is cured of poisons and diseases. If a character succeeds by 10 or more, they also receive the benefits of a *sanctuary* spell. On a failure, nothing happens. If three characters fail in their prayers, the flower patch wastes away in an instant. Once a character has received a blessing, they can't receive another blessing until they finish a long rest.

A DC 10 Intelligence (Arcana) check recalls that consecrated earth harms evil trespassers. Using a bonus action, a character can throw a handful of consecrated earth at a target they can see up to 10 feet away, dealing 1d6 radiant damage to members of Golmuth's cult on a successful hit—however, there's only d6 handfuls available when the characters arrive.

C05 – Repository

Rotten wood floats on the surface of the water, along with sodden vellum pages that disintegrate with a mere touch. Whatever knowledge they held has long been lost to the ravages of time.

Hazard: Maddening Symbology. The area is filled with the profane idols of the demon’s cult (see General Features).

C06 – Graveyard

What was once the church’s graveyard has become a mire of filthy swamp water; the tombstones are barely visible over the water line.

Encounter: Quirky Bones. If the characters didn’t discover Sir Garwin earlier (see *Traveling Through Blightwater*), he calls out for “a spot of help, as it seems the mud’s gotten me.”

Treasure: Magic Ring. A careful search of the area reveals a magic ring glinting beneath the swamp water. If Sir Garwin is still alive, he demands the ring be put back; he must be persuaded, deceived, or destroyed in order to claim it. The nature of the treasure depends on the level of the adventure, as shown in the Area 2 Treasure table.

AREA 6 TREASURE

Adventure Level	Encounter
1st	<i>ring of warmth</i>
3rd	<i>ring of water walking</i>
5th	<i>ring of evasion</i>
8th	<i>ring of regeneration</i>

C07 – Heroes’ Memorial

Before you lies a stone sarcophagus; scratch marks across its surface indicate that whatever metals once adorned it were stripped away by untrained hands. The lid is ajar. At the head of the sarcophagus is a strange-looking device made of glowing steel.

Development: The Soul Cage. As the characters examine the room, Golmuth speaks to them telepathically through the soul cage. Knowing that destroying the soul cage would only send him back to the infernal plane (thereby freeing him), Golmuth attempts to goad the characters into shattering the prison. If Sir Garwin is accompanying the characters, he insists on breaking the cage, and must be persuaded to step aside. The soul cage has 20 hit points, AC 10, and immunity to poison and psychic damage. A *detect magic* spell reveals the cage radiates divine magic. Alternatively, a character can reinforce the cage by succeeding on a DC 15 Intelligence (Arcana) check. If Hastra Grandbeard shared her knowledge of the prison, they make this check with advantage. On a success, they can choose to reinforce the soul cage and stop Golmuth from influencing the world around him—but not before hearing out the demon’s final plea (see Aftermath).

So long as the soul cage is destroyed or nullified, Sir Garwin steps back into his sarcophagus and returns to the afterlife.

Encounter: The Dark Congregation. If the characters succeed in reinforcing the soul cage, Golmuth calls out telepathically to all members of the dark congregation in area 1, demanding the adventurers be destroyed. If the characters flee at this point without the soul cage, the congregation destroys it, sending Golmuth back to the infernal plane.

Aftermath

Should the characters attempt to reinforce the soul cage, Golmuth responds by opening up negotiations, promising tokens of power. If the characters accept, they enter into a pact with Golmuth: in exchange for servitude, the characters each learn a 1st-level spell of the GM's choice, and form a permanent telepathic connection to Golmuth, no matter where they are.

At the beginning of each day, characters in a pact with Golmuth must succeed on a DC 8 Charisma saving throw or become dominated by the demon: their souls are lost, and they become permanent agents of the demon lord. The pact can be broken only by divine intervention or a *wish* spell. Once broken, dominated creatures regain their free will (though they'll have to reckon with the consequences of the things they did while under Golmuth's control).

Should the characters destroy the soul cage (or if the reinforced cage is left behind and subsequently destroyed by the cult), Golmuth returns to the infernal plane—and begins plotting his vengeance. A few months later, Hastra Grandbeard suffers a grisly death by method of dismemberment, but the town of Queen's Ford is spared. Without a leader, the cult eventually disbands.

If the characters fail to destroy the cult, they eventually break Golmuth from his soul cage, and he emerges into the world as a **BALOR**. His first target is Hastra Grandbeard and the town of Queen's Ford. Then, Golmuth sets about gathering his forces and conquering the rest of the region.

If the characters successfully saved Voner Bhalar, they are given Noblelight (+1 *longsword* that grants the wielder the ability to cast *light* as a bonus action) as thanks on top of whatever gold reward Eben Bhalar promised them.

Additional Quest Hooks

Here are some ways to expand on the encounters and themes of this adventure.

- A scholar has heard rumors of a demon cult, though it was supposedly defeated over a hundred years ago. They will pay handsomely for the soul cage.
- A **BARBED DEVIL** called Xaggoroth, magically disguised as an old human (DC 17 to detect), tasks the characters with rooting out the demon Golmuth and his foul cult. Golmuth and Xaggoroth are secretly old enemies. Once the deed is done, the characters may call upon Xaggoroth for a *wish* spell.
- Scouts and road wardens throughout the region are relaying an alarming number of missing persons reports, acts of violence, animal sacrifices, and appearances of profane idols (stone idols depicting a devil).
- Yirrel Vaditz (**NG COMMONER**) is begging for help in locating her missing brother, who was last seen heading toward Blightwater. Yirrel doesn't know about the cult, but knows her brother has been conspiring with unsavory folk lately.
- Mysterious orbs of light have been seen in the swamps of Blightwater; locals know them to be death omens.
- Roadside shrines throughout the region surrounding Queen's Ford have been systematically vandalized, preventing many from communing with their patrons. Ω