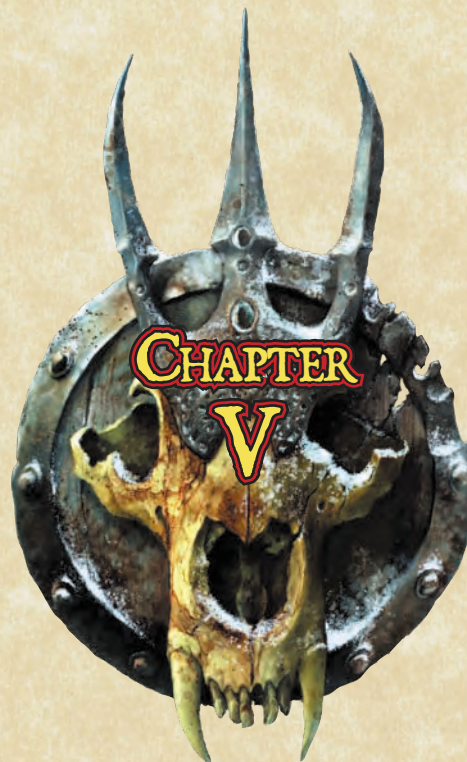


RELIGION AND CUSTOM

“The Gods are great, but only a fool would trust them with his life.”

—BORYA BEARFINDER,
PRIEST OF URSUN



A Sigmarite scholar once described Kislev as a land with too little faith and too much superstition. Behind the Empire prejudice, there is truth in this. There are many agents of the forest and the sky, and all of them must be respected, whether God or spirit. Respect is the heart of Kislevite religion. Their Gods are much like their winters: indifferent and often arbitrary, but if they are respected, they may spare your life—if only for another day.

URSUN

God of Bears

Ursun is the God of Bears, also known as Father of Bears, or Father Bear. His worship was first introduced by the Gospodars, but bears are such a major part of Kislevite life that the religion was absorbed almost instantly. Bears continue to be a vital part of society to this day, and the religion is now inseparable from the Kislevite culture. Worship of Ursun is not a state religion as the worship of Sigmar in the Empire is, but the fate of Kislev is linked in many minds to the fortunes and favour of Father Bear.

Ursun is usually depicted as a giant, brown, cave bear, sometimes wearing a gold crown. He also often has golden teeth or golden claws, which indicate not only that Ursun is king of the beasts but the value of bears as well. On the oblast, a killed bear will provide great wealth to an entire stanitsa.

Occasionally, Ursun is depicted as a large, burly man with grey streaks in his wild hair. He wears a loincloth and carries nothing but a spear. As a wild God, Ursun is not worshipped in temples but in outdoor shrines or disused bear caves. In the cities, great

gardens of pine trees, bushes, and rocks serve as a place of worship, the shrine hidden in a cave or cleft in the centre. The greatest of these gardens sits near the Bokhar Palace in Kislev.

SYMBOL

Besides a depiction of a bear, Ursun is symbolised by a bear claw, worn around the neck. The truly devout will wear a gold-plated claw. It is also reverent to dress in a bearskin but only if the wearer kills the bear. Similarly, some wear an entire bear paw or fix a skull to their helmet or belt but, again, only if they killed the bear in question. It is not disrespectful to wear a bearskin that was killed by another, as long as it is not done ostentatiously or ceremonially. Many keep warm through the long winters thanks to a bearskin shirt, without any insult to the God.

AREA OF WORSHIP

Despite his wild nature, Ursun is as popular in the cities as he is in the oblast. This status is mostly because the previous Tzar was also the high priest of the Cult of Ursun, the first to claim that title in over four hundred years. During the Great War against Chaos, the Cult of Ursun was scattered to the winds. The Bear God was still revered, but with so many cities and towns devastated, the central cult vanished. When Tzar Boris had his encounter with Urskin the Great Bear, he knew he was chosen by Ursun, took the God's name as his, and brought the faith back to Kislev.

His daughter, Katarin, did not follow in the role of high priest but is no less dutiful to Father Bear. Thanks to the interest of the royal family, worship of Ursun has been taken up feverishly by the druzhinas and wealthy folk of the cities, and there is

hardly a street in Erengard or Kislev that lacks some reminder of the bear God.

Ursun is no less ubiquitous in the oblast. That the bear is both a popular folk figure and a co-habiting species means every stanitsa includes someone who reveres Father Bear first and foremost. Meanwhile, anyone who benefits from a bear kill or just leaves the forest without becoming food for bears will thank Ursun for it. In the wild north, bears can be a constant threat, and every man is aware he owes his life to the forbearance of Ursun, as much as to his own strength and luck.

TEMPERAMENT

Father Bear is a fierce, patriarchal figure. He is unyielding and unforgiving when it comes to his strictures but also demands his followers fend for themselves. Ursun is a God of bears first, then men. He permits the hunting of his children out of compassion for humanity, under the strict condition it is done respectfully and with the awareness that it is a privilege, not a right.

Ursun is aloof but not unfeeling—he grants prayers to the faithful, and common folk and priests alike may attract his attention by nailing a fish to their door. Ursun highly favours those who demonstrate the strength and courage of his bear-kin, however. A warrior fighting furiously in battle will win Ursun's favour over a priest praying fervently at a shrine. Those who are cowardly, weak, or who hunt in a disrespectful fashion receive no blessings and may be punished. Such rebuke might mean the stanitsa has no successful bear hunts that year, or it may involve a great bear charging into town and rending the transgressors limb from limb. Ursun is a wild God: inconsistent in his justice and brutal in his anger.



In his favour of deeds over words, Ursun is akin to Ulric. The followers of both religions get along well, though there is rivalry between them. Each is keen to prove their God is the strongest, and they are more blessed as a result. This rivalry is mostly friendly, contested with things such as wrestling matches or competitive hunts. Sometimes—particularly when a lot of drinking has been involved—the rivalry can become violent but is rarely more serious than a bar brawl.

Ursun's relative indifference to Humans and veneration of nature also makes him much like Taal, and the two religions share more than just a border at the Talabec. Followers of Taal wonder why the Ursunites choose one animal over all the others, while the servants of Father Bear wonder how anyone could fail to see the bear's obvious superiority, though in other respects, their cults have little difference and blend together easily. Taal worship is often found side by side with that of Ursun, particularly in the west.

STRICTURES

- Never hunt a bear in winter—let him sleep as he lets you sleep.
- Wake the bear in the spring, and feed him well before his winter rest.
- Bears must only be killed by the strength of your hand or the flight of an arrow.
- Only display the hide, claw, tooth, or skull of a bear you have killed yourself.
- Shun the comforts of indoor life whenever possible. In particular, all ablutions and bathing must be done outdoors.
- Eat fish at least once a week, as the bear does. Never eat fish and another meat on the same day, as this is wasteful.

URSun's CULT

The Cult of Ursun is strong but far less organised than the cults of the Empire Gods. Each town and stanitsa with more than one follower of Ursun will have a chief priest (sometimes called a speaker), typically the strongest or largest among them. The chief priest speaks for all his followers and for the will of Ursun, letting his village and fellow worshippers know what the bear God wishes. He is also responsible for leading hunts, punishing those who break the strictures, and overseeing the initiation of new members and new priests. Those wishing to take the role of priest must go into the wilderness alone with only bow and knife and bring back a tamed bear. While rarely fatal, it can take years for an aspirant to find a suitable animal.

The role of chief priest is held until death, and it is considered bad luck for a chief priest to die outside of a battle or a hunt. "The bear does not die sleeping," is the adage used. Upon the death of a chief priest, the honour passes to the strongest warrior amongst the remaining priests.

At times, Ursun is known to choose a great high priest, who is the chief priest of all of Kislev. Ursun speaks to him about

the fate of the whole land and the path of its people. High priests are found through signs and portents—perhaps a child born with a bear-shaped birthmark may be destined for such a role; a chief priest who slays a terrible ice bear may be called by Ursun to be his voice. The high priest before Boris Ursus, the shaman Hagrim Bear-Brother, was lost in the snow as a youngling and found alive the next spring in the care of a mother bear. And the tale of the choosing of Tzar Bokhar is well known.

Like the chief priests, the high priest is responsible for ensuring all the people of the land show proper respect to Father Bear. When the high priest is close to death, he is often given a vision of the next high priest, allowing the title to be passed on. Other times, the position lays vacant until Ursun needs such a servant again. Many believe a high priest rises when Kislev is in great need, and Ursun must prepare his followers against invasion or other great trial. Yet Tzar Boris died before the Storm of Chaos broke. Some wonder if his early death means Ursun's favour has abandoned them. Others wonder if the Storm will all-too-soon blow back again and if they'll have time to scan the portents for the next high priest.

Holy Orders

With its new prominence under Tzar Boris, the cult gained two new orders. The first is a warrior group known as the Circle of the Bear. Membership in its prestigious ranks is reserved only for winged lancers who demonstrate great courage and great devotion to Ursun. The Circle swears total obedience to Father Bear, but when lacking such divine guidance, they take orders directly from the Tzarina.

Boris also ordained a group known as the Keepers of the Hunt. This loose connection of warriors and woodsmen ensure all bear hunts around the capital are performed according to Ursun's strictures. However, their authority is limited, and with the Tzar gone, their numbers are dwindling.

Within the Keepers of the Hunt is a sub-cult called the True Keepers, and with the death of the Tzar, their zeal for their holy mission has only increased. They see noblemen and druzhinas using dogs, traps, and guns, sleeping bears being killed, whole carcasses left to rot in the snow, and nobody stopping it. They believe the only way to end such atrocities is with blood and have begun hunting down and murdering the perpetrators, using the same techniques the offenders used to hunt bears. So far, only a few nobles have failed to return from their hunts, but very soon, this trouble will boil over.

Cult Skills and Talents

Initiates of Ursun begin with the Animal Training Skill in addition to their normal career skills. Priests of Father Bear may, at their option, learn the following skills and talents as part of their careers: Follow Trail, Outdoor Survival, and Very Strong.

Prominent Figures

The most important figure in the cult is of course Tzar Boris. He is seen as a saviour of the faith, restoring it in the hearts

RELIGIOUS SAYINGS

"If the bear awakes": Added to a sentence to mean *"assuming everything goes as we wish."*

"Off chatting with Ursun": Answering a call of nature.

"Looking at Dazh": Not watching where you are going or being caught unawares.

"Since Dazh's first ride": Something very old, or which has been around seemingly forever. Also *"Until Dazh's last ride,"* which means *"until the end of the world."*

"Tor's Bolt!": A battle cry to unleash fury and death upon an opponent.

"Tor's helper": Alcohol, for those who wish to aid Tor in his provision of courage.

and minds of the decadent southerners. His daughter, too, is venerated for sharing the blood of Boris Ursus. Beyond her, the cult has no figures of authority other than the chief priest in each town. Instead, the cult venerates historical high priests and the legends told about them. These legends include such greats as Hagrim Tooth-talker, who could speak the language of the beasts; Pavel the Bear-Thrower, a man so strong he could throw a bear over his head; and Aged Aelfen, who is said to have sat on a mountain-top so long the stones complained.

Although they have little religious authority, the chief priests of the cities do have some political power. In Erengard, the chief priest is an elderly, affable character called Uika Boyozi. Although he disapproves of foreigners joining in without understanding the holiday, he has been a driving force in organising holy celebrations and can be found dancing a jig in the main square on Waking Day (see the next section: **Holy Days**). Both he and his counterpart in Kislev, Ilori Kleizowski, were old friends of the Tzar, and they miss him and the strong faith he propagated. Kleizowski is known for his dark mutterings about the "good old days" and secretly approves of the True Keepers and their actions.

The chief priest of Praag, Egor Urosh, has neither religious nor temporal power because nobody has seen him in years. For more on Urosh, see **The Temple of Ursun** on page 77.

Holy Days

Ursun has only two holy days, but they are celebrated with great vigour and without fail. The first is Waking Day, which occurs in early spring. In the north, it is typically done when the ice breaks or when the first birds of summer return. In the south, it is observed at the spring equinox. The purpose of the ceremony is to wake the bears from their hibernation. To do so, large groups—sometimes the entire stanitsa—gather in the forests at midday and make as much noise as possible. Pots and shields are banged, drums beaten, instruments played, and children yell; some participants even let off small charges of gunpowder. In the cities, there are fireworks and street

