

BLACK LANTERN REPORT: ORIGINS OF THE SOCIETY

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version 160908

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INTRODUCTION

"Novice, you show potential, you have served with distinction on several Rim affairs and have been recommended by two senior Brothers. We know your faults, your dreams, and have looked into your heart. But know this: once you speak the vows, your life will change forever. You will be called on to succeed at tasks you will not fully understand, often with no more resources than your wits and your training and those you can convince to go in the direction you point. The Secret War was being waged long before you were born and it will continue long after your bones have turned to dust. You are but a single tile in the grand mosaic, and even with the other tiles of which you are aware, you do not, and cannot, know the full sweep of the work. Can you accept this?"

You will lie to your family and friends, but never to a Brother. You will die before you reveal the mysteries you will be entrusted with, not only to protect the order, but all those you hold dear. In secret, we build heroes, because heroes bring hope to the people. And hope is the true enemy of evil. When good men are without hope, they do not act, or worse, succumb to the Darkness and the Flame.

So, your best work will be attributed to others. Your failures may leave you bleeding in a ditch far from home. It is thankless work that we do, Novice... But it is the only work that is truly worth doing. The Brotherhood stands in the shadows to battle the Darkness, so unmarked, we do not wither before the Flame. Do you choose to stand with us? Then speak the vow together with me:

I am now and forever a Brother of the Order of the Black Lantern. Its mysteries and secrets I hold with my life. I speak only truth to the King of the East..."

~ By Brother Iron Quill, Beginning of the Initiation Ritual of the of the First Spoke, 3114

"The Benevolent Society of the Bearer of the Black Lantern is a members-only social club that is dedicated to philanthropic works throughout the Southern Kingdoms. Its core pillars of belief are Fellowship, Relief, and Truth. We have chapter houses in most cities throughout the Southern Kingdoms and a few beyond; we helped establish the Royal Mail service and to this day, we continue to hold a Royal contract to maintain many of the relay stations. The work we are proudest of are the orphanages; the

vocational retraining for war refugees (this designed to keep them off a path of poverty and crime); the sponsorships of public works; and a patron of arts, arranging displays and plays that travel the Southern Kingdoms for the enrichment of the populace.

Yes, we have secret handshakes and pass phrases. Yes, the initiation rituals are secret. But for a venerable body nearly as old as Shaintar itself, it is one of the most forward thinking. Class, guild affiliation, race, and sex are no barrier to entry. Only: you must have a good heart, an honest job, and the sponsorship of three existing members. True, members do business with one another preferentially. True, we each pay dues commensurate with our occupation to support the good works our society does. True, we cannot speak about what is discussed in chambers to non-members. But the preposterous rumors that the Society has far reaching political ambitions, and somehow secretly influences events in the Kingdom and beyond... this is patently absurd. Just last week there was a puppet show in the town square about a group of 'well known heroes' led by 'a mysterious Black Lantern' battling the 'evil' Red Store villains and saving the kingdom. If only membership in the Society were half so interesting."

~ By Ondra Steadyhand, Guild of Paper Makers, Member of the Society in good standing, City of Gryphon, Galea

THE LANTERN SOCIETY - AN OVERVIEW

Over the centuries the Order of the Black Lantern has had many names: The Raven's Meddlers; The Kings Shadow; The Southern Sword of Truth, and a host of many less pleasant appellations. But in the forest of truth, you are likely to lose your way because the trees look very different depending on where you stand.

How can you have a secret society when so many would want to be members? This is the core of the deception that would make the Black Lantern so useful to the various Crowns - if they knew it existed. The Society members, like thousands of others, work to the ends of the Order, not realizing that they are helping in ways both large and small to protect the Southern Kingdoms. Hiding in plain sight, adding

scores of eyes and ears to their ranks, while having excuses to move about the countryside and select new members with a burning hatred of the enemies of the kingdoms or looking for a path to redemption after committing atrocities in the endless border wars. Not to diminish any good work that the Society does, but in the end, it is all an elaborate cover for the Order's real work: Fighting the Secret War of espionage and intelligence that keeps the Southern Kingdoms safe. And in truth, doing so out of the sight of men of power, who might be affronted that commoners wield power outside of the law.

The Order has the remarkable knack for being on the scene just a tiny bit before it's needed and while normally under-manned and under-resourced, the Brotherhood are skilled in using their training to appeal to and direct others to fight evil in its many forms. The Three Pillars that every member of the Order adheres to are Autonomy, Purpose, and Mastery. There may be only a single Brother on the scene to execute the orders of the Directorate. As a rule, the mission goal will be clear, but the reasons may well not be. A Lantern has wide flexibility on how to achieve the goal set before him, and he quickly learns to make use of the resources he has and not the resources he wished he had. A successful agent also learns how to bargain for what is needed, while keeping his identity a secret. A Black Lantern with a "torn cover" is in grave danger, because the Order has made many powerful enemies while in service to the Crown of Galea.

"I speak only truth to the King of the East." This is the traditional first line of each Black Lantern Oath. In practice, you would think this makes them solid functionaries of the King of Galea. And while they do work to protect the Southern Kingdoms and sow confusion to their enemies, the Society acts in many ways that cannot be connected to the Crown at all. And so, while they serve the Kings and the Lords of the South, they are loyal only to the Lantern. Kings may come and kings may go, but the Secret War is eternal and so, therefore, must be the Order. It is often said when working in the field "The sky is high and the King is far away".

People take up the Lantern for many reasons. Redemption, revenge, to repay a kindness, or to do good deeds in a dark world even when your eyes aren't keen or your arm is not mighty. In the Order, each has a role to play.

THE FOUNDER'S TALE

Every Brother hears the same story about the founding of the Black Lantern Society. And as one of the Founders is still alive today, his version is usually accepted as the unvarnished truth. The Iron Eight were simple people from widely varied walks of life, not one of them a hero. Each was taken by a vivid dream sent by the Patron, who, for want of a better name, has come to be called "Our Lady of Inspiration". This dream so took each of them that they left their lives behind and began going east. When in ones and twos, they encountered each other along the byways, they were unsurprised, as these were the folk they expected. The reasoning was unclear but they all knew it was vitally important.

They passed directly through the small Kalinesh army of the Warlord Volg the Bear who had pinned an upstart youth playing at being a warlord up against Fallor Peaks. The non-threatening travelers were given leave to pass after drinking to the Great Bear's success on the morning to come. This battle would be no more than a lark for the men of the Great Bear. Walking through the less-drunk opposite lines was harder, but guided by their dream, the Iron Eight approached the leader's camp table, bold as brass.

The table was surrounded by shouting veterans, a well formed youth bearing a silver unicorn badge, and the famous mage Cyria Eridor, all bent over and alternately swearing or pointing at a map by the light of a single black camp lantern. Brother Sly, as the men had realized they were brothers on their strange journey, procured a cloak and draped it over Brother Jingle's shoulders, as he approached the group to refill the young warlord's wine cup. "May we be of assistance?" was all Brother Jingles had time to say before several of the men had drawn steel in surprise. The warlord had both a cooler head and bigger problems, so he calmly asked why the band of brothers had joined his war council, on this of all nights.

Brother Quill spoke up, "Because you asked for help with your true heart and your plea was heard, O King of the East."

This sent a ripple through the gruff fighting men and left the young warlord puzzled. Quickly whispered words from Cyria Eridor brought him

around, as the Raven had used that exact title for the young Vol Al'Daya. Recovering quickly and in a voice of command, the warlord demanded the size of the army they had brought. Brother Chitty countered with "It is victory Your Majesty has ordered and we are here to deliver it."

The swords were put aside and the eight were bade forward, and as they did, tiny drops of lamp oil leaked across the map. "Well", demanded a grizzled captain named Harlow, "we are trapped against the mountains and out manned two to one. It will be a slaughter by midday."

"Then", said Brother Quill, "We shall meet them at dawn. What say you, Brother Oxhide?"

Brother Oxhide pointed at the map. "The trail is marked on the map as clear as day, Brother Quill."

Captain Harlow snorted, "Are you blind boy? That is nothing but lamp oil!"

"Kind sir", said Brother Oxhide, "I was raised in these mountains and that which you see marks a game trail I can go over in my sleep. If we could have but one hundred men..." Brother Crutch coughed and held up two fingers "Errr... two hundred men." Brother Oxhide amended. "We could be in position before dawn and strike at the drunken sots from behind."

"There will be guards posted...", Harlow pointed out in a restrained tone.

"To protect them from who, exactly?", said Brother Blade. "We are penned in here like netted fish and from what I saw as we came through the camp, they may well sleep past sun up!"

Vol Al'Daya, being no fool, knew nothing comes for free. "What is the price for this victory?", he asked.

And as one, the Iron Eight took a knee and said, "To serve. We may only speak truth to the King of the East."

Sex and the Black Lantern

Please note, it is believed that current Brotherhood membership runs nearly 40% female. By long-standing tradition, all members are referred to as Brothers and use the male pronouns. Over time, this has engendered a number of truly awful jokes.

"Well," said Brother Jingles, "there is one small thing..."

"Name it.", the young war lord said flatly.

Jingles pointed at the leaking camp lantern. "We will be taking your lantern. We were brought to your side, but it provided the answer we needed."

Vol Al'Daya looked flummoxed. "This, this is your reward?" The brothers smiled beatifically back at him. "Then rise. And if we see live to see tomorrow's sunset together, then you shall be, now and forever, my Brothers of the Black Lantern."

ACCEPTANCE INTO THE ORDER

"The unlikely Brothers who stand against Flame and Darkness, the invisible hand of justice, the heroes without faces, the Black Lanterns."

Brother Sable, Second Company of the Silver Unicorn

There is a tradition to testing for membership in the Brotherhood and then going on to learn the mysteries of the Order. First you must have skills or knowledge the Brotherhood values and show an aptitude for at least two of three pillars all Black Lanterns value. Second, you must impress a Brother enough to put you forth for testing. Third, you must convince two different Brothers (often, but not always, from different spokes) that you are worthy of testing and have potential as great as your sponsor reported.

There are three primary points of entry into the Black Lantern. The most common experience for people is that of a "Rim Agent". Whether you know it or not, you and your group are being aimed towards the Lantern's goals. If you have learned that someone you know or work for serves the Brotherhood, then the tests have begun. Sometimes it's by accident, other times it's by design or desperation. A Brother's cover is his life and he will not give it up without a compelling reason. Being a Rim Agent means you have friends in interesting places. There can be great benefit in keeping the Brotherhood's secrets and working for the common good. Often this comes in

the form of more detailed information than the hero can find out on his own. Or having the path smoothed for him in ways he didn't expect.

The first test as a Rim Agent is what you do with that knowledge. The second is how you profit by it. If the hero proves trustworthy and is found of value, then he may one day be tested. Once accepted, an abbreviated form of training takes place to fill in any gaps in the Brother's skill set to his new Spoke.

The second method is a scaled down version used in the Malakar Dominion. Under a number of different Guild and trade house names, the Brotherhood sponsors vocational schools for orphans near the war zone borders. The young and desperate, when given a chance to better themselves, often prove to be very loyal to the Southern Kingdoms and most are rescued from grinding poverty and prevented from falling directly into the criminal element. Besides trade skills and uplifting life skills, quiet tests of aptitude and problem solving are given during the course of study, and the best are funneled off for close mentoring. Here they are taught the skills the Brotherhood feels it will need in the future to see if they excel. Much like the Schozim, a handful of young men and women from across the length and breadth of Shaintar are tested and a smaller number become junior Brothers. Unlike the Schozim, students who fail the testing are not killed but are pointed towards becoming Rim Agents. The Black Lantern cannot afford to waste any assets. The stakes of the Secret War are simply too high.

The last and rarest method is through legacy. Within certain families, taking up the mantle of a Brother is expected as a matter of family honor. Some Brothers let their covers slip with their loved ones and treat them as Rim Agents or see great promise in their child and mentor them directly while not revealing the mysteries of their spoke. Normally, a Brother not related by blood or marriage must view and test the Legacy to nominate him for a test for membership. Often a Legacy will have certain advantages in facing some of the traditional tests, so "Legacy Testing" should be more difficult.

Author's Note on Play

While a very few groups of players will try out an "All Black Lantern" cloak and dagger campaign (a fantasy pastiche of the TV shows Mission Impossible or Leverage, or any of the Bond movies), the vast majority of groups will either have Lantern Society members as NPC contacts, quest-givers, or one player in the group may be a prospective or full member. To that end, instead of focusing solely on the daring swashbuckling end of skullduggery, a good portion of this book is given over to how the Society supports groups of heroes across the length and breadth of Shaintar. Consider the Brotherhood to be a small, wealthy independent kingdom that is considerably over extended. They are well informed, but locally understaffed and under-resourced with an organization spread over too large an area. This puts the heroes out front in the thick of the plot by design. The Brotherhood is a very good group to be on the correct side of, and will reward heroes by indirectly smoothing their path to things their fighting prowess may not be able to win them. The hardest thing in play as a Black Lantern character is keeping secrets from your fellow players while trying to convince them to do the right thing. Bend the truth, because admitting you are in the Brotherhood to people you do not trust and your very life is extremely dangerous for you, them, and the Order.

It's said that when you enter the Order you leave your old life behind. What is more often true is that you learn to lead a double life. After your vows, you are given a new name by which you will be known inside the Order, a so-called "shadow name". This shadow name protects your old life and adds a layer of protection for the men and women you work with. While you may earn honors and nicknames from your Brothers, and adopt different identities in the course of your work, the shadow name the order gives you is unique, attached to all reports and mission briefings and will not be reassigned as long as you are alive to bear it. It is a sign of great promise if the Order gives you a reclaimed name. Only the names of heroes are reused so they are not forgotten and continue to accrue honor. It is rumored that the only exception to this rule is ascendancy to the Directorate. Such a Brother abandons his shadow name and takes the name of the original "Iron Eight" that he is replacing. The Founder's names will live as long as the Order.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE ORDER

"It is all on the wheel. It spins from the center out. It turns eternally."

~ **Brother Hightower, Keeper of the King's Keys, Galea**

Power radiates from the center out. Each Spoke has its own separate mission, service to the order, training methods, traditions and practices. Only the Hub, home of the Directorate, truly knows the extent of the organization. The rest must rely on signs, message drops, assigned contacts, 3-5 man cells and their own contacts to do their work. Beyond a Brother's own cell, he is only introduced to new contacts when they need-to-know or during cross-training. It means if a Brother is captured and broken, he can only give up his own cell. Shadow names are all; double lives are standard. Most Brothers live normal lives in positions of opportunity, filing mundane reports and serving the operations of their Spoke. When a call comes, they "go on pilgrimage", "travel to recover their failing health", or "go to claim a legacy from a distant relation". They go on the assigned mission, whatever means necessary, pass off what they have learned so it will return to the Hub and then return to their normal lives if possible until it is time to take up the light again.

THE RIM

There is never enough help to do all the work that needs doing across the face of Shaintar. Like the vast majority of the membership of the Society of the Black Lantern, most people who help the Order, are completely unaware they have been a part of the Secret War. Fundamentally, they can't reveal secrets they don't know. While most toil in ignorance or misplaced belief, to officially be part of The Rim, you need to have a reliable method to contact one member of the Order. This may be a player contact, a message drop revealed during play; you may have had a member of your group reveal himself during a game (openly, which is an enormous sign of trust, or by accident by not covering his tracks enough or not wishing to lie to his sword brothers). It is often said that it is better to know a Black Lantern than to

be one. You will be asked to do tasks without fully understanding the why of it. You may be troubled that your contact may have little more information than you do, or chooses not to share it. But as a member of The Rim, you have a high level of trust for someone that has not sworn to the Order and find advantages in your career as a result of your service. Good things come the way of The Rim. Often not what you might want, but generally what you need.

THE SPOKES

The grand structure of the Brotherhood is a mystery to most agents. Each Spoke uses different training methods, demands the use of shadow names to protect the cover identities of the agents in the field and keeps the number of agents known to any member small. To say a Brother is "worth his ink" means he is deserving of his membership tattoo.

(FIRST SPOKE) THE SCRIBBLERS: THE MARKED SPOKE

Based from ancient times out of their hidden library, the Scriptorium, in the capital of Galadrea. The First Spoke are the heart and soul of the Brotherhood and have the largest concentration of Brothers and Rim Agents in all of Shaintar. This is the bureaucratic center of the Order, where messages are decoded, field reports are assessed and analysis is done for the Directorate. The Scribblers are the keepers of the Order's budgets, paymasters, librarians, and caretakers for centuries of records, reports, position papers, royal proclamations, maps, and blackmail material. Parts of the papers and the actual complex are under "Garnet Tower Seal" and are only accessible with the explicit permission of the Directorate. Working at the capital is as close to a normal life as a Brother is as likely to get and the hardest part of the job is making scrupulous use of his double life by keeping his clerk's job on Paper Street as bland and uninteresting as possible to friends and family. Traditionally, field agents are surveyors or observers sent to file firsthand accounts of events due to their training, precision, and general knowledge of detail. The embarrassing Brother Mantlet has brought recent attention to the First Spoke's field work and as a "reward" has been permanently assigned to field work and cross training with other Spokes. Senior Brother Quill is the head of The Scribblers.