

BLACK LANTERN REPORT: THE DRAGON CULT

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CONTENTS

The Dragon Cult	2	Movers & Shakers of the Cult	9
A Very Brief History	2	Gear of the Cult	11
The Cult Itself	4	Cult Edges	13
The Goals of the Cult	7	Dragon Cult Magic	14
Secrets of the Cult	7	Cult Intel Reports	15
The City of Drak Tor	7	The Hunt for Dragonkeys	16

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THE DRAGON CULT

"I write this under the light of a single candle, burning away in my dark room festooned with images of these mythical, powerful creatures of legend. I write it using the secrets of our Order, the tricks of the trade, and the alchemical nuances taught to me by the masters. My name is Shen - I'm Korindian by birth, and I've been deep within the Cult for years, working my way through the ranks, and reporting upon the dangers that the Cult presents. It's fortunate that no written reports exist where they could be found by the Cult.

I am worried that my deception may have been discovered, and I've penned this possibly-final missive to my superiors in the hope that all my accumulated knowledge isn't lost. What I'm about to reveal to you, my Brothers, is no less than everything we can discern about the Cult from the past to the very present, her major movers and shakers, and the truth behind her power.

Indeed, the Cultists refer to the organization as "she", as if it were alive. How much truth there is to that, you'll decide.

I've managed to speak at length with some Cult members as well, as they instructed me in the Cult's rituals, goals, and more.

I hope my dream finds you in time, and that when you see it, I still live.

If not, it has been my duty and honor to serve faithfully.

Shen.

A VERY BRIEF HISTORY

One must turn back the clock if one is to examine the origins of the Cult, to the lost time before much of our early history had yet begun. 4300 B.C. was the time of a great war between the Dregordians and the mythical "Serpent Riders" - those we'd come to know as draykin. Many of the Cult leaders note that the draykin were the first members of the Dragon Cult, and the Cult as it is today has her roots in their understanding, teaching, and leadership. In spite of the enmity between the races, and that the Dregordians destroyed their winged cousins, rumors persist that they were merely expelled, not destroyed.

Not much is known of the draykin beyond a mysterious, shrouded past and a very few tattered drawings hidden away in musty tomes. Many of the teachings of the time are feared lost, or destroyed by Dregordians who set out to wipe this Dragon Cult from existence during the time - this sparked the Thousand Year Conflict, which as you know resulted in warfare, savagery, and death amongst almost all of the Dregordian families.

Our leaders here believe it was a curse brought about by the dragons, but no information can be found to substantiate this.

2216 A.C. is our next recorded date that speaks of a resurgence of the Cult; she rose once again in Dregordia, perhaps from the ashes of the old Cult. A vocal group of worshippers led by an enigmatic master appeared, claiming that the Dragonlords were the first true gods of Shaintar long before the usurpers Shanais and Targon came to be. They began to wage war against all followers of the Ascended, killing many and capturing others.

During the "Night of Blood and Fire" they sacrificed a thousand strong followers of the various Ascended; the energy released was enough to tear open a passage to the Realm of Dragons and, according to the Cult's historic writings, hundreds of the great beasts entered Shaintar. They immediately began to wreak havoc and destruction.

As if this wasn't enough, the tomes also speak of the Childer of Norcan Darr, and that the Cauldrons were opened at the same time. Many Childer came through, and it was clear to the Cult masters that this wasn't an accident - they were allies of the Dragonlords.

The Dragon War raged until 2234 A.C. It's here that the various documents are full of ranting, raving, and angry missives. How I managed to sneak a look at these written accounts is a secret I'll carry with me to the grave, but I had to do things I'm not proud of. Regardless, all for the greater good, eh?

The documents speak of the alliance of factions, the gathering at Og m'Drakar, and the ritual which cast all but very few of the Dragons into Norcan Darr. This is what the documents state, though I understand reports from some of our Builder connections who came here from that dismal place that this may not

actually be the case after all. Be that as it may, this marks the first, and perhaps the last, that the Empire, Shaya'Nor, and the Free Peoples of Shaintar have ever worked for a common cause, proving to the Cult that they are truly a power to be feared - or is it the fear of Dragons?

2523 A.C. A side annotation calls forth the time when the House of Dristak launched a successful rebellion against the House of Brssak in Dregordia. The Cult then confirmed our Order's suspicions - members of the previous ruling house, that of Brssak, were responsible for aiding Ceynara and contributing to the rise of the Dragon Cult in Dregordia during the War of Fire. Another note mentions that the conspirators were killed not long after to ensure secrecy, though it doesn't mention how, or by whom.

I can tell you that it was House vo Drrshess that were involved with the summoning of Dragons into Shaintar, the houses' name which meant: the Dragon Blooded boasted at one time, as is mentioned in the thirty second tome of the Dragonflame Verse, that they held the strongest blood claim to the Dragonlords of old.

Ssrathikak, and Kryssnak vo Drrshess were the Cultists who led the terrible ritual that opened up the portal to allow Dragons into Shaintar.

These are the most pertinent points of history that I could discern. There's an awful lot of information to sift through and I fear I'd need several lifetimes to collate it all - time I don't have....

ON THE EVENTS OF THE BURNING HEART

I found reference to numerous events during the War of Flame that directly involve, once again, an alliance between Ceynara and the Dragon Cult. It speaks of the Cult's role in some horrible plan. There were some heroes involved who thwarted plans and ultimately caused the entire campaign fail for Ceynara, the Cult, and their allies.

In 3121 A.C. during the War of Flame, a plan was hatched by Ceynara and the Cult to bring a single Dragon to Shaintar, the Cult thought that the Dragon would be hers to manipulate and control. I find this an extremely egotistical and, dare I say it, foolish mindset to employ in regards to the beasts. Ceynara had other plans; she tricked the Cult, and hoped that

the Dragon's death at the hands of powerful heroes would open a portal and allow her to enter Shaintar once again.

After reading further I am glad that the plan failed, and the heroes were able to do something which is not recorded elsewhere in history. They stood side by side with the Dragon and fought an avatar of Ceynara, battling for the very fate of the world.

I find it hard to believe, and apparently the scholar who penned the missive did as well. But it's there before me - signed, sealed, and in the Cult histories in pen and ink.

There's also a reference to the Dragon, and the Faelakar, a tragic tale of two star-crossed lovers.

I presume this is the very Dragon mentioned in the account of the Burning Heart.

I've enclosed the following for your perusal.

"A day came, however, when the ages-old tale of these two-who-were-one came to a tragic and shocking end. For when the Dragonlords were summoned from their distant realm, and their children poured through the Cauldrons and made war upon our world, Vandara's blood did churn.

It churned not for fear for Shaintar alone (though it must be true that she did love this land with all she had); it churned in her due to the calling... the calling of her people.

For Vandara was not as she had seemed for so many long centuries. Nay! Using the greatness of her own magics, Vandara had long been able to show purely the Fae essence of herself, forever hiding the Demonic aspects that, combined with Fae, made her what she truly was -

A Dragon!

It is thanks to the story of Aradius and Vandara that we know something more of the true nature of the Dragons; that they are the long-ago spawned offspring of the first meeting between Fae and Demons within the Aether.

When Vandara could not hide her nature any longer, she presented the truth to her mate, begging his forgiveness. She pledged to use all her great and terrible powers to fight the Dragonlords, standing at his side to lead the way against her own people.

After almost 2000 years, bonded at their very souls, Aradius' shattered heart could not reconcile with the horrible sense of betrayal. He denied her, and cast her from his sight and his life. Instead of their combined skills and greatness serving Shaintar in this devastating war, the two of them disappeared, going their separate ways.

Nothing is known of what happened to Aradius, so complete was his descent into obscurity. It may be that he simply died afterwards. Vandara's tale only goes on to say that she did refuse her people, and has found her way beyond the Veil, never to be seen in Shaintar again."

As you can see, it seems that Vandara and Aradius were caught in the machinations of Ceynara, and used as part of the Burning Heart Ritual. If this ritual had succeeded, Shaintar would have been thrown into utter turmoil as the Queen of Hell rose once more.

THE CULT ITSELF

This is the part of my report where I've been able to get down as much information about the inner workings of the Cult as I'm able. What you'll find here as well is a description of many of the key places found in the Dragon Cult's largest headquarters, a place that I have come to know as Drak Tor.

THE CULT OF TODAY

The Order has requested as much information as possible on the Cult, and I've been diligently compiling all I can, including the various roles assigned within the Cult, which I'll discuss momentarily. What I found quite interesting is that while the Cult itself is no more than a shadow of her former self, the Cult I belong to is a highly organized branch operating in the lands of the Malakar Dominion. I was led to believe before I took on this assignment that the Cult was made up of very small pockets, and whilst this might be true of many of the lands outside of the Dominion, this Wing of the Cult is somewhat more impressive. The Cult must be stopped and taken down to the bedrock. After what I've learned, dragons should never EVER be allowed to come back and if they do, the world must unite in opposition.

The Cult's headquarters is situated somewhere in a valley just south of Ssarak, deep within a secluded swamp and hidden by aquatic trees. It is surrounded by the ruins of an ancient city. Perhaps this city once held the mysterious draykin, or was the site of the very first Dragon Cult. I find it fascinating that I might have walked the halls where powerful movers and shakers once trod, regardless of their allegiances.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE CULT

The Cult is ruled by the Elder, but the Cult herself is sub-divided into smaller cells, or in the case of the Dragon Cult, Wings. The largest Wing is found in the city of Drak Tor in the Malakar Dominion, and it's where I'm based. This is what I've been able to discern of the Cult's internal power structure; there might be more secrets, but sadly I am not yet privy to them.



I can tell you that many of the higher positions are held by women, and that the role of women in the Cult is much deeper and more important than we originally thought.

THE ELDER DRAKE

She who leads the Cult in all things - every decision is made by the Elder Drake and her word is final. There's not so much a democracy, as an understanding when it comes to the day to day running of the Cult. She delegates to those below her, the Breath and the Scales, and makes sure they understand and know exactly what's required of them.

The position has traditionally been held by a female, and always one of Dregordian birth, since the draykin left Shaintar. Of course before that departure, rumor abounds that a draykin ruled the roost, so to speak.

The Elder Drake often leads the Cult in rituals, and it was the Elder Drake of the vo Drrshess House who originally found the scroll with the ritual to open the door for Dragons into Shaintar.

THE BREATH

This position is considered the right hand of the Elder Drake, responsible, as far as I can tell, for the tasks that the Elder considers beneath her. In the case of the current setup, the Elder Drake trusts as implicitly as she can. The Breath can command as much respect as the Elder Drake, lead rituals, look after day to day Cult business, and liaise with those of lower rank. Often this takes the form of delegation, entrusting the lower ranks with the tasks that the Breath feels are more suited to them.

The Breath is often the mate of the Elder Drake, or at least a close friend, confidant, lover, and someone who the other trusts implicitly to speak the truth.

THE DRAGON CHOSEN

This is the name given to those of the order who have impressed the Elder Drake enough to be counted as her personal honor guard. These are the soldiers, mages, and other followers who guard the Elder Drake from harm, they form a ritual guard during rituals, and escort the Elder Drake as she goes about her duties within the city.

Liner Notes: Good and Evil

The cosmology of Shaintar has grown much over the course of history with traditional forces gaining interesting variants and new enemies appearing at an alarming rate. At its heart, Shaintar is the story of heroes holding the line against evil for the sake of the world. While Flame and Darkness are demonstratively "evil," organization such as the Dragon Cult may seem, on the surface, more like a scholarly or monastic order and not a real threat. They have certainly played that part for the sake of recruitment. However, it is important to understand that the end goals of the Dragon Cult are just as horrendous as any of Flame or Darkness, perhaps worse...

They are ruthless in combat. I've seen them take on greater foes, and they are stationed around the Elder Drake's lair in Drakan Halla.

They're led by Midnight, a ruthless, and effective female Brinchie with a hair-trigger temper, highly skilled and cunning in battle. That one who is neither a Dregordian nor fae is the leader of this group is more than a little surprising, those being the two races who seem most drawn to the Dragon Cult.

THE SCALES

I've spent a lot of time here with the Scales. I find them fascinating, interesting, and most importantly they cleave to the ideas and concepts I tend to hold dear. I'm a man who is very much invested in the past, in the history of our world, and understanding it through investigation, especially ancient history. The Scales are the scholars of the Cult, the men and women who strive to answer the deeper questions, both mundane, and theological through careful examination of the facts and evidence and history before them.

Michael Aston is quite an outspoken Cult member I spent a lot of time with him, especially recently at the Old City Dig near the edge of Drak Tor. His broad accent and very Galean nature have provided me with days of insight into the history of the first settlement founded before Drak Tor itself.

Amongst the members of the Scales are also magic users, practitioners of the Way, and priests of the Cult herself.

THE FANGS

These shadowy individuals only come into play if the Cult needs some work done that's considered shady. They are rogues one and all, along with a high percentage of assassins too. The Fangs are the subtle and not so subtle enforcement arm of the Cult, one which operates in the shadows and prefers to leave no true trace of where they've been. They can also be used for overt assassination where the Cult wishes to send a message, perhaps to a member of the Cult who has lost their way, or an enemy they require liquidating publically.

A pair of fangs on a silver wire is their calling card; each fang is dipped in Dregordian blood.

The current leader of the Fangs is an enigmatic faelakar woman from Shaya'Nor who calls herself Sunset.

THE CLAWS

I've seen the Claws in action - they are mighty fine warriors, clever tacticians and excellent combatants. This is the Cult's martial arm and the city maintains quite a large army of these folks. They're versed in all sorts of melee combat, with some archers amongst them. They're the first line of defense before you encounter the Dragon Chosen.

The Claws are overseen by a hulking warrior Dregordian known as Sstanssil. Surprising as it is, given how important bloodlines are to Dregordians, amongst Cult members many of these folk do not use their family names. I haven't yet been able to figure out if this is due to the Cult being of greater importance or if it is a matter of trying to protect those unclaimed families from the retribution being found out could incur.

THE TAILS

These are the Cult's scouts and information gatherers; they are responsible for harrying the enemy in a fight with ranged weapons, or tracking enemies to their camps and lairs. They also serve as couriers and messengers, usually having access to swift horses and even certain spells to help them blend in and travel unnoticed through the various kingdoms.

Ssathraa leads the Tails, a Dregordian woman with no allegiance to any House. Her loyalties are to the Dragon Cult, nothing else.

THE TRUSTED

Then you have me, one of the Trusted. We are the few that the Cult relies upon to help oversee those below us. I enjoy a good position here, plenty of friendships, a lot of free meals, and for a Cult determined to bring Dragons back to Shaintar, these people are hard to paint as typical villains. The Trusted look after a whole slew of day to day tasks in the Cult, preparing the Initiates for their ascension rituals to Devotees, and overseeing some of the Devotees rise to the rank of Trusted.

In short, we have as much power as the Elder Drake lets us have, and as much freedom as we can personally get away with. Due to my connection with the Scales, I am allowed to roam the various libraries, lore centers, and archives in the city. I'm rarely challenged when I wish to depart to travel to the Old City Dig, and of course I use that route in my round about meetings with the Brother handling me. I prefer to dream my reports thank you very much. I put as little as possible on parchment this close to the Elder Drake.

The Trusted are culled from the ranks of the Devotees. There's no time scale upon this; it's just those who the higher ranked members feel have the best fit for the task.

THE DEVOTEES

To keep things simple, or so I'm told, the lower ranks of the Cult are split into two non-themed nomenclatures. The Devotees are those who have undergone four years of rigorous training as an Initiate in the various rituals, litanies, and tenets of the Cult. The Initiates are those who are just beginning to understand the mysteries that await them.

It's a Devotee's job to look after the Initiates, to help them, nurture them, and oversee their growth as a useful member of the Cult. They are ruled in many ways by the Trusted, and I've made several friends among this rank, as well as those just starting. They don't have much in the way of power, and those who do abuse what power they have are quickly reminded of their station.