

Late last winter, all of Tyrra was ravaged by an ominous and inexplicable cataclysm. Great chasms appeared in the earth, the very stars fell from the sky, and we shared troubled and ominous dreams. In the days and weeks that followed, travel and communication throughout the Kingdom were disrupted. Once reliable trade routes were now broken by impassable canyons, messengers were unable to reach outlying areas of the Kingdom, and communities had to look to themselves to recover from the disaster.

In this atmosphere of uncertainty, troubling rumours began to be spread throughout Haylem. Kingdom soldiers were reported to be increasingly brutal in enforcing the law, and relations between nobility and the populace grew strained where before there had been peace. Some speculated that the disaster of the winter was to blame for the rumours, while others began to look to the King and wonder when he would intervene. Since the Second Necromancer War, the King has been viewed as the greatest of Haylem's protectors – where was he now?

Tensions rose. In Taleria, there were tales of Kingdom soldiers massacring a village of Half-Orcs who couldn't afford to pay their taxes, and elsewhere of nobles putting down peasant protests with great violence. It seemed every trader or local Herald brought new rumours of oppression and danger. Voices began to be raised in defiance of a crown that seemed to no longer care about its people. Stories spread of violent riots and their suppression in Aieland, where the Duchess strove to maintain order amid increasing chaos. Even the Towers were not immune – rumours of an internal division spread rapidly during the latter part of the summer, and many local Guilds closed their doors.

Banditry increased throughout the Kingdom. Displaced people, traders and farmers ruined by the cataclysm, and those with an eye towards easy money took to the woods and the roadways, preying on travellers and merchants. Travel, already difficult, grew ever more dangerous. Although efforts were made to restore trade routes, renewed security and calm did not follow. The Barbarians, under pressure to open alternative routes through their lands, proved reluctant to allow free passage, and it took long negotiations to arrange the construction of a new road to the south of Kyrinen. Even afterwards, tension remained between the Barbarians and the Wild Elven Akanazi tribe that claimed the southern woods of Kyrinen as their homeland.

Suspicious and grudges that had been dormant during more peaceable times came to the forefront once more. People whispered that the Nightmare Legion was active again, taking advantage of an unsettled Kingdom. Tales circulated of people vanishing in the night, of illegal poisons and assassinations, always in the next County over, or heard from a friend who heard it from a merchant. While many of these stories could be put down to rising paranoia, enough bore the unmistakable stamp of the Nightmare Legion to suggest that the organization was seizing this opportunity to make things worse for the Kingdom and its citizens.

In the autumn, the months of rumour, civil unrest and sporadic violence erupted into a full scale civil conflict. Rallying his forces with cries for justice and an end to tyranny, the Duchess of Aieland spearheaded all out rebellion against the King. Forces from Aieland crossed over into the Kingdom-loyal Ellisel, laying siege to the city of Tiefanu. In Kyrinen, a rebel knight, Sir Silfair, claimed the

northern reaches of the County as a region free from the tyranny of the Kingdom, promising protection to those who no longer wished to be citizens of Haylem. Many of those who took part in the uprising did so out of similar beliefs to those of Silfair – that the King had truly forgotten his people in their time of greatest need.

But all was not as it seemed. Even as rebel forces battled the armies of the Kingdom, worrying truths emerged. The massacre of the Half-Orc village in Taleria, the event that turned many Kingdom loyalists towards rebellion, proved to have been the work of mercenaries in stolen Kingdom tabards. Suddenly, the chaos and rumours of the past months took on a different cast – not the actions of a King ruling with a heartless iron fist, but a long-term and cunningly wrought plan to sow dissent and misinformation at the Kingdom's most vulnerable time.

The sad fate of Sir Silfair shows us how even the most honourable of men were deceived. The noble High Elf believed the King guilty of the worst crime a member of the nobility can commit – oppressing and neglecting his people. When word reached him in his rebel encampment north of Kyrinen that he had been deceived, the Knight realized he had broken his oaths and his faith, tricked by those he trusted into betraying the King he was sworn to serve. The devastated Knight could see no honourable recourse but to end his life – breaking the greatest taboo among the High Elven people in order to salvage some fragment of his family's name.

Loyal forces rallied throughout the Kingdom. In Kyrinen, the adventurers of Thrush Peake worked with the Watch to launch an assault on the rebel stronghold. After routing the guards and soldiers in the camp, they discovered a concealed portal. With their usual disregard for personal safety, they followed the rebels through. Beyond, the forces of the northern rebels streamed down a hill towards a vast battle taking place before the gates of Haylem City itself.

Here, the Kingdom rebels were revealed. The banners of Aieland – including the personal standard of the Duches – were most in evidence, but nobles from throughout the Duchies flew their colours proudly. Before the walls of the city, the King's standard streamed, as did the proud banner of such loyalists as Prince Remy of the High Elves. But to those who watched, the greatest surprise – and the greatest sorrow – was the sight of the Crown Prince's colours aligned with the banners of Aieland. The King's only son appeared to have joined in the rebellion.

The battle was well underway, and from their vantage point in front of the portal, the forces of Thrush Peake could see the rebels they had pursued were well placed to flank the side of the Kingdom armies. They could also see that their pursuit had not yet been noticed, and ambushed the would-be ambushers with deadly violence before they could join their treasonous allies. This achieved, the bulk of Thrush Peake's adventurers returned to Kyrinen through the portal. Lord Seneschal Velso, Squire Solis Urak, the Hobling Buxton and the Half-Orc Vandrad, however, remained, scarcely pausing to clean their blades before moving to join in the defense of Haylem City.

There are varying reports of their exploits during the battle. It is clear that at one point Lord Velso and Squire Solis Urak were at the side of Prince Remy, clearing a path for him where he had been cut off by the enemy. The capture of the standard of Aieland is also attributed to the group –

multiple witnesses recall seeing it in the hands of a Half-Orc and a Hobling. When it became evident that the tide had turned in favour of the Kingdom, the rebel forces moved to retreat. Spying the Crown Prince's colours, the four adventurers joined the sortie that brought the young man into custody. The Crown Prince had a father to answer to.

While their initial assault had ended in defeat, rebel skirmishes continued as winter approached. In Kyrinen, some rebels attempted to retreat north, across the Plains of Ash once home to the Ogres of Mors Drakkor. They were turned back, entirely unexpectedly, by a nomadic tribe who called themselves the Ashvadi. Apparently trapped on the Haylem side of the Glaswellt Plains by the cataclysm, this fierce group laid claim to the newly open region, and allowed the rebels no further. The Ashvadi, it seems, hold disloyalty in very low regard.

In Taleria, a coastal invasion was narrowly averted. Mercenary ships massed to the south, and were it not for a timely warning from the Guilds of Thrush Peake, the Kingdom's army might have been flanked. As it was, the Horde swept down to the coast as the ships attempted to land their troops, and routed the potential invaders from the shore. Not content with fighting on the beaches, some members of the Horde took the fight to the ships themselves. One Half-Orc hero, Grog by name, single-handedly took over a ship – by the time he was done, the mercenaries were leaping over the side to escape him, and he claimed the ship in the name of the Horde.

Throughout the conflict, the Towers attempted to remain apart from the political fray. The Earth Guild were to be found at every battle, providing medical aid to any who needed it regardless of which side they fought for. While some decried this as disloyalty to the Crown, others maintained such actions were exactly how the Earth Guild should behave in times of war. The Celestial Tower remained more aloof, and although there were whispers that many of their members had supported the Duches of Aieland, by winter the internal schism seemed mended, and the Towers were firmly aligned with the Kingdom once more.

By midwinter, the only pockets of rebellion remaining centred in Aieland. Fighting was fierce, and made brutal by the onset of the snows. Finally, the Duchess of Aieland retreated into the mountains, making a bastion of his forces and loyal followers in the highly defensible peaks the Biata know so well. From there, he issued a proclamation of secession from the Kingdom of Haylem, claiming an independent land that effectively splits the Duchy of Aieland in two. The winter snows ended the fighting in the mountains, and further action on either side must wait for spring.

The Crown Prince came before his father to face the justice of the Kingdom shortly after the new year. There are those who say he maintained his innocence, while others claim he defied his heartbroken father with open derision. Whatever the truth, his punishment was announced Kingdom-wide – King Jean-Guerre's only son is exiled from Haylem on pain of final death. To many, especially those in Taleria where the massacres took place, the punishment is considered far too light. Only death can pay for treason. The Crown Prince was given the turn of one moon to leave Haylem forever. His current whereabouts are unknown, although the common belief is that he has made his way to join the Duchess of Aieland in the mountains.

In the aftermath of rebellion and treason, the King issued a great proclamation, to reassure the people, reassert the authority of the Crown, and bind the nobility and the chivalry to him. It read:

*Over the past year there have been events across Haylem that have threatened the stability of our Kingdom and put all of our futures at risk. Disloyalty is not a trait that can be tolerated within the ranks of the nobility.*

*The former Duchess of Aieland and members of her court have retreated into the mountainous region of Aieland and have claimed the land as their own. To ensure continued piece in the realm, we have agreed to allow them to reside in this area, henceforth known as Sharin, peacefully provided they never again cross into the Kingdom of Haylem. To this end, we will be offering that all citizens loyal to the Kingdom currently in this region will have until the first day of summer to return to the Kingdom without fear of reprisal.*

*The following individuals are not welcome and will from this day forward be considered traitors to the Kingdom:*

- *Duchess Joan'Anna Tor'djin (Biata)*
- *Lord Tamati (Biata)*
- *Lady Olassi D'Kordin (Biata)*
- *Derous Manga (Human -M)*
- *Gwiclya Trinerva (Biata -F)*
- *Serack Stoutaxe Holderhek (Dwarf -M)*
- *Trelm Wuband Strakeln (Dwarf -M)*

*It is with great sadness that we add one last name to this list; my son, the crown prince was key in the planning of this uprising and has not only betrayed us personally but also the trust of all of the people of Haylem. We proclaim that henceforth he shall be banished from the kingdom to live his life away from his birthright. The details of succession are being discussed as this message is being delivered.*

*I wish to confer the honour and title of Duke of Aieland on Sir Amoon Het'Heru. May the wisdom he brought to ruling the people of the County Wellfield continue to guide him.*

*As time passes, things change and we always believe we know better than those who came before us but that is not always the case. The Chivalry once stood as the right hand of the Kingdom, maintaining its peace and serving its will. Over time it evolved into a structure of politics and the line between Knight and landed noble blurred. From this day forward all Knights of the realm will swear fealty directly to the King and owe a debt of service to us directly. The task of administering the land and ruling the people will sit solely with those of court rank. Individuals who are both landed nobles and Knights will have to find a balance within themselves as the expectations or both roles will not be any lower.*

*Each County will have a Watch that will be led by a member or members of the Chivalry. Should a threat to the Kingdom arise, these Watch groups will form a standing army. It is the responsibility of the landed nobles in the area to ensure that the Watch has the resources it*

*requires.*

*Lastly, we have been meeting with representatives of the Earthen Towers, Celestial Towers and the Ordo Solis to ensure that the lines of communication are clear and that responsibilities are clearly defined. All three organizations have been very supportive of a renewed order and we encourage you all to support them in their endeavours. If you represent one of these organizations you should have more clarity on what this means soon.*

*It is never easy to heal and this will be no exception. Many have suffered and are still suffering. We ask that you offer your support to those in need and help us work towards the stability we all desire.*

***His Royal Majesty, Jean-Guerre Totenkampf, King of Haylem***

While open war has been averted, the Kingdom of Haylem remains an unsettled place. In Ellisel, the High Elves continue to seek for a new Queen, their previous (non-political) leader having perished shortly after the Cataclysm. Off the west coast of Kyrinen, there are rumours of pirates across the water on Ilsa Shemizad, and concerns that the former dissidents and criminals now settling the shire of Chodladh Go Maith may not be safe in their newly-claimed corner of the Kingdom. Although the Barbarians continued their staunch support of the Kingdom during the conflict, after the fighting their Grand Shamooka retreated into a hermitage. No one knows what personal sorrow caused this disappearance from public life, or when she might return.

Questions about the conflict remain. Who was truly behind the Taleria massacre? What were the true motivations of the Duches of Aieland and the Crown Prince? And what of the mercenary ships that attempted to land in the south of Taleria? Were they bought with the gold of the Duchess of Aieland, or one of his rebel allies? Some speculate about the involvement of Kingdom of Treshelling to the south. Could this little-known neighbour have been a silent partner in the rebellion, providing ships and supplies? While their faith in the King may have been restored, the people of Haylem have much to trouble them, and few answers to the questions asked at the fireside throughout the long months of winter. Hopefully now, with the rebirth of Spring, there will be answers.