



HISTORY OF HAYLEM

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(The following are In Game accounts of the history of the game world. Please keep in mind that these represent written accounts of history, and much like any other account of history, there are details that may differ from what actually happened.)

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Hail and well met!

My name is Sage Thoran Ironrune, Wizard of the Immutable Word. His Royal Highness has set me to the task of poring over the myriad tomes and texts that lie within the walls of the Towers, to collect all the documents I can find, including old copies of our Kingdom's illustrious newspaper, the Haylem Herald. To sift through the articles, stories, rumours and tales to determine the truth of things, to record and set out the history of our fair Kingdom.

Well, if you are going to talk history, best start at the beginning. I'm not one for myths and legends, but it is said that in ancient times, nine Dragon Mages came out of the West, from across the sea. It was apparently they who brought order and stability to the land; the doors to the planes lay open, and the creatures that lay beyond entered our realm freely to cause havoc. The Nine destroyed and subdued the worst of these beasts, locked tight the gateways to these realms, and taught those who were willing to learn the mystical arts. With this new found stability, cities and nations formed, with the first kings of old forming close ties between themselves and the Wizards in their mighty Towers.

But enough legend, on to historical fact! What is now known as the Age of Persephont is truly an important one; its events have echoed over the span a thousand years, and have affected people in these modern times. As much as I would enjoy relating this epic tale, I would be remiss to do so. This task, I leave to a truly great man and scholar; my mentor and master, Erudite Qua'Tall, with an excerpt from his life's work, '**The Ages Past**', volume 12. I have transcribed passages from the original copy of this seminal work for your perusal; I strongly recommend reading it, as it will give sense and context to a lot of the recent events that have taken place.

Now, those who know me can tell you, I love a well-told story, and hate to see it interrupted. There are so many excellent stories that need to be told here, but most of them occur concurrently, and often intertwine during critical events. My challenge is to ensure that every story is properly told, without jumping back and forth between them. To that end, rather than describing events in a purely chronological order, I will tell each story in turn, from start to finish, and hopefully along the way provide context for subsequent stories. I will include with this work, a timeline guide, which will contain summations of the events I describe, so you know what happened when. It will also provide the perfect place to list the names of the famous people who lived these stories, and helped make our fair Kingdom what it is today.

1.1 THE AGES PAST

In the year 1066 BU (Before Unification) the lands that we know today as the Kingdom of Haylem were divided and ruled by Twelve Kingdoms of petty Kings and Queens. War prevailed as greed and blood feuds drove kingdoms against its neighbours. The war-torn kingdoms were unaware that a darker and more sinister shadow was to sweep across their borders and into their very being; for in the North, evil stirred. The dreaded Necromancers – fugitives of the Twelve Kingdoms – gathered on the desolate Plain of Skulls, where they summoned elemental beings into this realm and delved deep into the very mysteries of the universe. The Twelve Kingdoms dwindled in strength as wars took their toll, while the Necromancers gained in power and followers. This was not only the bloodiest time in known history, but also the time of the birth of our greatest hero; Virro Persephont.

As the Necromancers' power grew, word of this threat spread throughout the Twelve Kingdoms. Most considered these fugitives to be little threat, and for many years, the petty wars and conflicts continued throughout the lands. It was in the year 1038 BU that the Twelve Kingdoms finally were forced to recognize the true threat of the Necromancers. The Northern-most Kingdom of Taboria was attacked and razed by the Undead armies of the Necromancers. Taboria was occupied, and its people enslaved by the Necromancers and their allies. No single kingdom dared to oppose the Necromancers; for the fear of the Undead kept all at bay. A new city rose up from the ashes of Taboria, built upon the ruins of the former capital, with the blood of those subjugated in the invasion. It was known as Loctus Urbs, The City of Woe, and it loomed over the landscape like the shadow of death. At the centre of the macabre city stood Arx Acerbissimus, the Citadel of Pain. Within these black walls the Necromancer Kings continued their search for power and forbidden knowledge. Taboria was now the centre of the new Kingdom of Sherikand, and its new lords, Necromancer Kings. None of the Twelve Kingdoms dared raise a voice in opposition, for fear of reprisal, and all watched the horrors and obscenities performed within the borders of Sherikand, hoping that they would not be the next victim.

Fear quickly spread across the Twelve Kingdoms and the Army of Sherikand began to invade its neighbours. In six short years, the Army of Sherikand conquered four kingdoms – leaving the others weakened and struggling to maintain their borders. The ancient hatreds and feuds were not quenched by the threat of Sherikand, and as kingdoms fell, their old adversaries simply watched.

As the war raged on, a great general appeared from among the armies of the Kingdom of Paellon. Even though the Army of Sherikand had never lost a battle, this new general managed to keep the Army of Sherikand from winning completely. His name was Virro Persephont, and he rallied whole cities and kingdoms to his side. A great and charismatic man, he urged everyone to set aside their differences and face their common foe. Within the span of six months, General Persephont had managed to rally the people of the remaining Twelve Kingdoms to stand against the Army of Sherikand. The two great armies met on what is known today as Thunder Plain, named after the sound that was heard for miles as both armies charged into battle. Under the leadership of General Persephont, the Army of Sherikand was routed, and forced to flee. Upon a hilltop, later named Persephont Bluff, Virro Persephont slew the Supreme Commander of the Army of Sherikand, known only as the Black General; a terrible foe who wielded the legendary Sword of the Damned. The fate of the Sword of the Damned is unknown – presumably carried off by someone, or something – as it disappeared after the battle.

The remnants of the Army of Sherikand retreated to Loctus Urbs, and were not seen for three years. The people of the Twelve Kingdoms celebrated and Virro Persephont was chosen by all the peoples to be their sole King. Thus the Kingdom of Persephont was born. The new calendar, the Persephont Calendar, began to be used in documents and histories in the year 1032 BU. But the war was not over and the Necromancer Kings were not vanquished. During the short time of unsteady quiet, King Persephont built a great army, intent on destroying the threat forever. His goal: to slay the Necromancer Kings and raze the City of Woe once and for all.

During this time, the super-saturation of Chaos magic caused great upheavals in the land. Strange phenomena began to occur throughout the known lands; although, mainly the western lands were afflicted. The Dividian

Mountains - a natural barrier which divided the noble Kingdom of Dividia and the Astreal Empire (the home of the insidious Snow Elves) – began to belch smoke and ash into the heavens. A strange light appeared within the Astreal Empire. Its brightness was of such magnitude, that it was seen for hundreds of miles. Overnight, the Astreal Empire was thrown into a perpetual freeze, sealing the empire, and all of its inhabitants, in a coffin of eternal ice. The Kingdom of Dividia also fell within a few short years, as it suffered under the perpetual darkness, caused by clouds of ash that hung overhead.

Sherikand's new general took this as an opportunity to invade, with the ability to wage war even in the hours of daylight, the once mighty cities of Dividia crumbled to dust before the unending onslaught. Many supernatural creatures were attracted by the eternal night. Vampires, werewolves and other creatures of the night flocked to the land, and made it their own. Thus, the Dividian Darklands came to be a land shrouded in mystery and superstition, as they remain to this very day.

With the fall of Dividia, the strongest of the Twelve Kingdoms of that time, the Army of Sherikand proceeded to invade other lands. In the path of the Undead Host stood the Barbarian Clans; The Wolf, Rock and Hawk clans opposed the invaders, whilst the Deer Clan betrayed its kin and joined the side of the Undead. In return for this treachery, they gained many secrets of Necromancy. The tribes fell to the sword one by one; those who survived either fled, or were enslaved to be turned into Undead for service in the ever growing armies. By 1030 BU, the Barbarian Clans were decimated and offered no further opposition to the Necromancers.

The following year, a tragedy occurred that would seal the fate of the Necromancers forever. A Sherikand assassin slipped into the castle and murdered King Persephont's family and council. The assassin, Mishka the Dripper was found lurking in the cellars after being cornered by the King's guards. Mishka was a greater vampire, whose name stemmed from the way he killed his victims, by hanging them upside-down and cutting them slowly, so he could enjoy watching them bleed to death. Despite being cornered, Mishka managed to elude pursuit by changing into a wolf and then mist to disappear into the night. The Kingdom was left without an heir, and the King was driven to seek revenge for his losses. In response, King Persephont launched a major offensive against the Necromancers of Sherikand. The Army of Sherikand was recalled to defend the conquered lands, and stand against the Army of Persephont, which marched straight against Arx Acerbissimus.

For eight long years of bloody warring, the Army of Persephont slowly pushed the Undead Host back, until they reached the Wyvern's Gate, a pass in the Windsheer Mountains. There King Persephont ordered that his army be split into two groups; one would take the pass, the other would march to the distant Shod Pass. Grand Duke Yamak was given command of the group that took the pass to Wyvern's Gate, while King Persephont would march to Shod Pass and besiege the Sherikand fortress there.

After four months of siege, Wyvern's Gate fell and the Army of Persephont poured through the pass and onto Yamothe Plain. Grand Duke Yamak circled behind the fortress at Shod Pass and smashed its defenses from the rear. Once more the unified Army of Persephont marched on the Citadel of Pain. The remnants of the Undead Host fled before their enemies to make their last stand at the walls of Loctus Urbs. As Persephont marched relentlessly forward, the Necromancer Kings – fearing their own demise – constructed the Dagger of Thorns. The Dagger's purpose was to act as a key to free the Necromancer Kings from a self created impervious prison, and ensure their survival. Once freed, they could resurrect the Army of Sherikand and resume their conquest.

After a two year siege, the walls of the City of Woe finally fell. Before the prison could be completed, the forces led by King Persephont burst through to the inner sanctum of the Citadel of Pain. A terrible battle ensued, and the Necromancer Kings were vanquished. Some of the Sherikand Generals managed to flee, using the powers of the Undead to aid their escape. During the chaos, the Dagger of Thorns was stolen away by Mishka the Dripper who faded into the shadows of history. The surviving Generals fled West and then North towards the frozen wastes of the Astreal Empire. King Persephont pursued them through the Darklands and the Astreal Wastes. Finally, he was able to corner the exhausted and badly injured Sherikand Generals on a peninsula. The Generals' minions stalled the King while the Generals used the stolen formal scrolls to enact the ritual that would create the Prison of the Necromancer Kings. The ritual was completed before King Persephont's forces were able to break through and disrupt the ritual. Upon completion, the Generals were encased in large pillars of stone which could be neither

marked nor destroyed. Thinking the Necromancers finally defeated, the men named the prison Persephont Henge in honor of the hero who had brought Sherikand to its knees.

Arx Acerbissimus was razed to the ground, and every stone scattered across Yamothe Plain. With the destruction of the Citadel of Pain, many secrets of magic were lost; including ritual magics that no longer exist today. Many items of magic were also lost, but some were recovered by those wishing to possess such things of evil. It was around this time that a man, known only as Gaveston, realized the long term threat of the Dagger of Thorns and founded the Order of the Blood Red Rose. This Order was dedicated to the destruction of the Dagger, and ensuring that the Army of Sherikand never walked the face of Tyrra again. The Order forged thirty Earthen Blades. Individually they could not defeat the Dagger, but when two or more were brought together, they could prevail. The Earthen Blades however, were destroyed by the Dagger of Thorns over the centuries, or lost. The Order was not well known at the time, as they went about their task of seeking out the Dagger. It was not until much later in history that the Order became famous.

By 1007 BU, King Persephont had managed to rebuild his Kingdom which spanned much of the known lands today. In the process of expansion many Barbarian and humanoid tribes were displaced, and over the years their hatred grew. Prosperity and peace prevailed throughout the Kingdom. The next thirteen years were some of the most peaceful time in history, there was no conflict and the people were happy and well fed. The peace was not to last long, for in the third month, in the year 994 BU, King Virro Persephont was assassinated by Gaveston of the Order of the Blood Red Rose. No reason was given as Gaveston vanished soon after and the Order went underground. Some have speculated that King Persephont came into possession of the Dagger of Thorns, and that its power took hold of the King. My personal opinion is that the Order of the Blood Red Rose was divided; some wanted the Dagger for their own purposes, while others wanted to destroy it. The matter is unclear, even to the present day.

With no unifying ruler, the Kingdom of Persephont became fractured, and many factions fought for the Crown. Within a year, the Kingdom had entered a full civil war. Out of the chaos of the war, City States emerged and waged war against each other. For over six hundred years the feuds and wars continued leaving nothing but devastation across the known lands. By 342 BU only five City states survived, spread far and wide, with huge tracts of land in-between. Hostilities ceased for a time, but the five City States – Aieland, Ellisel, Cambria, Ontarius and Taleria – remained at battle ready. The lands in-between became occupied by Barbarians and Humanoids, cutting off the City States.

1.2 TIMELINE OF THE MODERN WORLD

Unification

At this point, we have the five City States – Aieland, Ellisel, Cambria, Ontarius and Taleria – all more or less isolated from each other by vast tracts of wild lands inhabited by various humanoids and the Barbarian clans, and no major conflicts between them. In 42 BU, the Barbarians began to stir, under the banner of Rides the Storm. Rides the Storm was believed to be a reincarnated hero from the time of Persephont, who sought retribution for the wrongs of the past. After bringing the clans many victories against the humanoid races, he gathered the tribes together to exact revenge against those who had killed their ancestors. Even after a thousand years, the Barbarians had not forgotten those who had taken their lands from them, and they began preparations for war.

The attacks on the City States began in the harsh winter of 5 BU. Hopelessly outnumbered and already low on resources, the City States fought as well as could be expected, but invariably began to lose ground to the Barbarians. Over the course of five years, the borders of the five City States came together, as the respective peoples were forced ever farther back by the Barbarians. Many came to Ontarius for protection, and with the Barbarian armies at all sides, the City States saw no alternative but discuss terms of Unification.

The obvious choice at the time to lead the Unified City States was the Emperor of Ontarius, as his realm was the strongest of the City States at that time. Before he could proclaim his leadership, however, he was assassinated by Rides the Storm himself, a feat that no one at the time thought possible. Rides the Storm would have had to slip past the defenses of both the capital of Ontarius and the Emperor's citadel to come within reach of the Emperor. It is at this time that his trusted advisor, Sheris von Haylem, proclaimed herself Empress of the City States, and declared martial law. This was an incredibly bold move that none the other leaders of the City States opposed, given the imminent threat of the Barbarians.

With a Unified Army and leadership, the City States were finally able to slow, and within a year, stop the advance of the Barbarian armies. With the Barbarians caught off guard, the Unified Army was able to push the Barbarians back into the Darklands, all the way back to Mars Pentencia

With the Barbarian threat temporarily contained, focus shifted to the leadership of the City States. While the self-proclamation of Sheris von Haylem was certainly needed at the time, there were some rumblings of who would be better suited to rule during peacetime. The most popular choice seemed to be King Roderick Totemkompf of Taleria, who, through old bloodlines, held a strong, legitimate claim to a Unified throne. Bolstered by a groundswell of support, King Roderick stepped forward to openly challenge Sheris von Haylem for the throne.

It is at that time that this story takes a darker turn. Details are sketchy, but it is known that King Roderick was invited to meet with Sheris von Haylem in a private meeting, presumably to sort out a peaceful solution to the coming power struggle. Imagine the shock of all the noble courts when Sheris von Haylem declares herself the Supreme Leader of all the City States, and that King Roderick is dead! Her claim was that King Roderick was not even human, but was long suspected of being some sort of doppelganger, and that the meeting was a pretext to reveal the truth and slay the creature before its agenda could be carried out. There was little opportunity to verify this claim, however, as the body vanished soon after; little effort was made by the von Haylem court to locate the missing remains. Upon hearing what happened, King Roderick's son, Prince Jean-Guerre, fled Taleria and went into hiding, believing his life to be in danger. With no one left able to oppose her, the offensive against the Barbarians continued, with many of the lost lands regained. It is at this time that the City States are considered to be officially Unified, with the start of the Haylem Calendar and the City States being made to adopt the Ontarius system of government. By Year 3 of the Haylem calendar, the borders of the City States were re-established, with Sheris von Haylem claiming much of the unsettled lands as her own, under the banner of Cambria. The Unified City States officially became the Kingdom of Haylem.

During the years of rebuilding, rumours persisted that the Dagger of Thorns, the artefact used by the Generals of Sherikand during the Necromantic War, had resurfaced, and was somewhere in Taleria. Whether anyone saw fit to follow up on these rumours is unknown, but by Year 4, a new threat sought to ruin the fragile peace of the

Kingdom. The Barbarians of the Deer Clan had been stirring on the western border of Ellisel for years, and with the rise of a Shamooka named Calls the Ancestors, an army of Barbarians and Undead were assembled on the western front (a common tactic of the Deer Clan was to raise the fallen as Undead, making them the strongest of all the Barbarian Clans). Led by Ghenoa von Haylem, the Royal Army set up camp opposite the Barbarian Armies; confident that they would not dare attack a force of such magnitude. A night-time raid proved Ghenoa wrong, and his retaliation restarted the war with the Barbarians, with other Clans quickly joining the Deer Clan in the fighting.

It is the fifth year of the Haylem Calendar that sees another watershed moment in Haylem history. The fighting on the western front was taking its toll, and Sheris von Haylem called an emergency meeting to try and make new a plan to turn the war effort around. Less than an hour into the meeting, a host of Death Knights burst into the main hall, having overwhelmed the castle guards, and slaughtered the entire Royal Court to final death. What made this tragedy so unusual was the fact that such a host could slip in undetected, wield powerful magics (the great wizard and Guildmaster Jarrod Sagen was purportedly affected by some manner of illusory magic, causing him to cast spells into empty air and not even notice the Death Knight's charge), and escape again after their task was complete, not to mention how the Barbarian strike force was able to create so many Death Knights in such short order. Most historians agree, an unseen ally aided the Barbarians in the attack.

With the leadership of Haylem now dead, control of the throne went to Sheris' sole surviving son, Garron Mouric von Haylem. Taking the position of Proconsul, he launched a new offensive on the Barbarian armies, pushing deep into the Darklands. Meanwhile, the great wizard Jarrod Sagen began to pursue his own battle; the magicks arrayed against him during the attack on the Royal court were too powerful to be of Barbarian source. His investigations led him to a startling revelation. The entire Barbarian war was the work of a mighty drake known as Khaosor the Destroyer, a nightmarish creature that has apparently fed upon the suffering created by conflict for untold centuries. This fell beast had taken the form of both Rides the Storm and Calls the Ancestors, using his power to influence the leadership of the Barbarian Clans and incite them to war. Armed with this new information, Jarrod Sagen began to pursue the horrible beast, along the way arming himself with the means to slay the creature, including a shield forged out of the drake's own cast off scales! The final confrontation, deep in the Cragged Mountains, was seen for miles around as a mighty storm of darkness, strong enough to interrupt the fighting on the western front. When it was over, the Haylem Army found the Barbarians, whom they had previously been barely holding their own against, oddly in disarray. The Haylem Army quickly took advantage of the situation and pressed the attack. The war in the western front would last a few more years, but that moment marked the turning point for the conflict.

Investigation of the area where the storm occurred found Jarrod Sagen, alive but weakened, in a massive crater, lying upon his drake-scale shield. Currently the only way through the Cragged Mountains is a fissure several miles long running through the mountain range; it is said that it was created during that titanic battle, hence its name, Sagen's Pass.

Ascension

The story of Unification was a complex and often odd one, but the story of the Ascension of Haylem's King to the throne proves even stranger. Interestingly enough, it starts in Year 6, in which there is no Kingdom of Haylem at all.

Garron Mouric von Haylem, rather than assume the throne of Haylem, actually dissolved the Kingdom entirely, reverting back to a group of Unified City States. This decision was a rather sound one, considering the political manoeuvring that put Sheris von Haylem on the throne in the first place. Proconsul Garron was Sheris von Haylem's youngest son, and her oldest, Roland von Haylem, was still missing, having fled after surviving the massacre of his mother and the entire Royal Court (it should be noted that some documents state that he was killed, but I have it on good authority that the timely intervention of Jarrod Sagen's son, Vanyel Sagen, got Prince Roland out of harm's way, where it is said he was forced to stand by helplessly, listening to the slaughter occurring just down the hall). Under those circumstances, Proconsul Garron claimed it best to dissolve the Kingdom out of respect for his mother's memory, and instead leave things as they were before Unification, until such time as a rightful heir presented himself.

And so, the Unified City States began the arduous process of rebuilding, with the following individuals in command:

- Ellisel: Illian Whiteoak
- Aieland: Tira-Xan
- Ontarius: Icarusa Sunkin
- Taleria: Gorge Undergulch
- Cambria: Garron Mouric von Haylem
- Earthen Guildmaster: Morgaine
- Celestial Guildmaster: Vanyel Sagen

It is interesting to note that at this point, the Towers were not the Kingdom-wide organization that we know today. The City States had no real Guild organizations to speak of, and representation from the Towers came solely in the form of Morgaine and Vanyel Sagen, who acted as Guildmasters for the above council. This was an active council, which operated out of Cambria to personally deal with matters that affected the City States as a whole, not unlike the famous adventurers of Thrush Peake.

To put into context the next two years and the troubles experienced by the burgeoning government, I need to broach the rather touchy subject of the von Haylem Curse. This legend grew out of rumours that began circulating shortly after the death of Sheris von Haylem and her court. With each subsequent tragedy, rumour grew into tale, and tale into legend, with every happenstance even remotely associated with the von Haylems being attributed to the Curse. Some claim that the entire family was cursed by the Barbarians during the course of the pre-Unification fighting, as the ultimate weapon to disrupt the City State leadership. Others have suggested that it is a matter of hubris, a punishment sent down by the powers that be against Sheris von Haylem for the death of King Roderick Totemkompf. Either way, any von Haylem who tried to claim the throne of the Kingdom of Haylem was doomed to suffer a gruesome end.

I don't put much stock in these claims, though I certainly agree that misfortune has followed that family right to the end of their line. Many take the Curse quite seriously; at one time, the Staff of the Haylem Herald, for example, had a standing policy to never publish an announcement of the final death of a von Haylem, for fear that the Curse will exert its will on those who write the article (though one can circumvent this by making an oblique reference to the individual's death in an unrelated article at least two months after the fact). Check for yourself, if you don't believe me; in the Haylem Herald archives, only one article has ever been published announcing the death of a von Haylem. That there is even one is the result of a new Editor on the Herald Staff, who ignored the warnings of the other Staff members and personally wrote the article. I have learned that this poor individual ended his days destitute in the streets, having lost everything in a series of seemingly random accidents and unfortunate events. Maybe there is something to this....

At any rate, I will brave the Curse and describe to you the players in this tragic story. You already know of Sheris von Haylem, self-proclaimed leader of the initial Kingdom of Haylem, whose reign ended suddenly and violently after only five years. Her three children, Roland Michael, Garron Mouric and Adrianna Celeste, would each take up the mantle of leadership, only to suffer fates as gruesome as her mother. Only Sheris' brother, Kyrinen Ghenoa von Haylem and their younger sister Camile, seemed to escape the Curse's wrath, perhaps due to the fact that they were the only member of the family who at no time attempted to claim the throne for themselves.

As if these matters were not bad enough, the government seemed to be in a perpetual state of flux, with individuals taking positions of authority, only to have their titles switched about, stripped from them, and sometimes given back! Consul Tira-Xan of Aieland barely lasted three months, his title stripped from him after he publicly assaulted the Earthen Guildmaster; Vanyel Sagen was elevated to the title in his place.

No time for stability, though. On the tenth month of Year 6, Roland von Haylem came out of hiding, with the intention of claiming leadership from his brother and unifying the City States, not as a Kingdom, but a Duchy. Why the Kingdom was not restored outright is subject to speculation; some believe that rumour of the von Haylem Curse was starting to gather strength, and assuming leadership of Haylem as a Duke was his way of seeking a loophole in the von Haylem Curse. Each City State was made into a Barony, with its respective Consul promoted to Baron:

- Roland von Haylem: Duke of Haylem, Baron of Cambria
- Garron Mouric von Haylem: Baron of Aieland, Lord Magistrate
- Vanyel Sagen: Court Mage, deputy Guildmaster of Cambria
- Sir Ganelon: Lord Seneschal
- Illian Whiteoak: Warlord of Royal Army
- Icarusa Sunkin: Baroness of Ontarius
- Gorge Undergulch: Baron of Taleria

Two points of note: with the formation of the Duchy of Haylem, we see the beginnings of the Celestial and Earthen Guilds we know today, with active Guildhouses in each Barony. Also, the Barony of Ellisel went leaderless for some time, as Illian Whiteoak was made the Warlord of the Royal Army. This apparent oversight was made with good reason, for the Deer Clan Barbarians were stirring again, and the Western Front needed a strong military leader to hold off the hordes. The Baronial seat would remain empty until the spring of Year 7, until taken by the first Baron of Ellisel, Hearne D'Arnoul.

But what of Ghenoa von Haylem, who led the armies before the first Unification? He had his hands full within the Duchy. In Aieland, a dangerous organization began to make itself felt. Called the Unjay Sharin, it was a Biata-led terrorist organization that sought to depose the current Baron of Aieland, as well as remove all non-Biata nobles from office. Their belief was only Biata had the wisdom to lead, owing to their long lifespans. Violence in Aieland, both initiated by and in retaliation to the Unjay Sharin, quickly escalated, with the terrorists claiming some victories in their cause, including the successful capture and torture of Vanyel Sagen, who was ultimately stripped of his noble title for his erratic behaviour after being rescued by Count Ghenoa (his title at the time). The Unjay Sharin would be a thorn in the side of Haylem for years after.

Totemkompf Keep, the former seat of power in Taleria, had gone into disuse after the death of King Roderick, and had even been nicknamed 'Death Head's Keep' by the ruling nobility, probably as a means of discrediting it as a symbol of Taleria's original authority; this would back come to haunt the Duchy soon enough. Death's Head Keep quickly earned its reputation, with suspicious activity being observed in and around the citadel, not limited to grave-robbing, raids on surrounding farmland, and numerous kidnappings. Attempts by Baron Gorge to put a stop to the activity had to that point met with failure, prompting the Duke to send Baroness Icarusa and her court as a strike force to crush those operating out of Death's Head Keep. Sadly, she was never heard from again, her entire court presumed dead.

Things would only get worse in Year 7. In the early months of that year, Duke Roland and Baron Garron went on one of their hunting trips in Cambria, retiring to the family hunting lodge, to rest and recharge before dealing with matters of state in the spring. By the time they were due back, no sign of them was found. A search party found

the hunting lodge burned to the ground, and no sign of the brothers, either in a resurrection circle or as finally dead remains. The von Haylem Curse had finally caught up with them; or had it?

Count Illian, was at a loss of what to do now that the Duchy was truly leaderless. Once the Spring arrived and fighting on the Western Front had resumed, he took it upon himself to keep order. Claiming a state of emergency, he proclaimed himself Duke of Haylem, on a provisional basis, until a suitable heir could be found. Strangely enough, an heir was found not a month later, or more appropriately, found the Duchy. Adrianna Celeste von Haylem made her arrival in the third month of Year 7, proclaiming her right to the Ducal seat, being the daughter of Sheris von Haylem and sole remaining heir. Having never known that Sheris von Haylem even had a daughter (indeed, Adrianna had always been kept out of the public eye, in favour of her brothers), Whiteoak was understandably sceptical, but a long discussion on the matter allowed her to prove her legitimacy.

With that, the leadership of the Duchy was restored, though it would quickly be tested. Soon after her ascension to the Ducal seat, who should make his appearance out of Death Head's Keep, but King Roderick himself, as a horrific Death Knight! This was the apparent source of the suspicious activity in Taleria, and most likely the cause of the deaths of Duke Roland and Baron Garron. The self-proclaimed 'King' had the audacity to storm the meeting hall of the Duchess during one of her meetings, demanding everyone take a knee in his honour, and taunting the poor young Duchess by accusing her of being the daughter of a murderer (evidently referring to Sheris von Haylem). The Duchess wisely chose to humour the Undead creature, by ordering everyone to kneel. Having accomplished his task, King Roderick left with his guards in tow, and began a campaign of terror against the nobles and common folk of Haylem that would last nearly a year, claiming the lives Baron Hearne D'Arnoul (the warrior H'UrrWhaw is quickly appointed his replacement, and the Gypsy Yatar, Konrad Jorska. In a desperate bid to keep order, the Duchess completely reorganizes the Nobility:

- Illian Whiteoak: Baron of Ellisel
- H'UrrWhaw: Baron of Aieland
- Vanyel Sagen: Baron of Taleria (his crimes under the leadership of Duke Roland pardoned)
- Gorge Undergulch: Count of Taleria

To add insult to injury to the von Haylem family's problems, who should make an appearance but Baron Garron, apparently back from the dead as well! It becomes readily apparent that this is another ploy by King Roderick, as the former Baron immediately begins a campaign of sedition, openly refusing to acknowledge the Duchess' legitimacy, or that Duke Roland was even dead. A confrontation with his uncle, Count Ghenoa, reveals Garron to be Undead himself, forcing the Count to slay his nephew, to put his spirit to rest.

In an attempt to try and mitigate the strife within the Duchy, Duchess Adrianna tries to broker peace with the Unjay Sharin, inviting one of its members to Cambria. These peace talks quickly crumble when members of a rival faction of the Unjay Sharin storm the talks and murder the representative, proclaiming him a traitor to the cause (luckily, the Duchess escaped unharmed). Rampant speculation began on how a strike force was able to get so close to the Duchess; the shocking answer became apparent when it was discovered that Baron H'UrrWhaw was in fact a high-ranking member of the Unjay Sharin! H'UrrWhaw flees the capital as an outlaw, and is quickly stripped of his title.

The campaign of King Roderick of course continued unabated; Baron Illian is once again put in charge of the Army, where he is needed, and Sir Laric Kyrakin is appointed Baron in his place. The fighting grows ever more desperate, as King Roderick, seconded by his long time general, Lord Galik, seems utterly invincible. Even when killed, the master of Death's Head Keep would be seen back on the battlefield again, stronger than ever. There is no doubt powerful Necromancers were responsible for King Roderick's creation as Undead (many suspect the ancient Undead generals of Sherikand, freed from their stony prisons years before, but that will be explained in a different tale), but a creature this durable was thought impossible, short of being a creation of the Necromancer Kings of old! Even the defeat of Lord Galik, while a great victory in its own right, seemed to do little to weaken his forces.

It is at this point that this tale takes a turn for the strange, and anyone who is willing to the research will know why. Officially, Haylem became a Kingdom once again in the second month of Year 8, with the following appointments:

- Ellisel: Duke Kyrinen Ghenoa
- Cambria: Duchess Adrianna Celeste Von Haylem
- Aieland: Duchess Joan'Anna Tor'djin
- Taleria: Duke Alphonse Du Soirée
- Ontarius: Duke Paul Avin'Dar
- Lord Magistrate: Sir Necrosius for Cambria

But, many questions arise from the announcement. King Roderick is said to have died honourably in battle, fighting 'the forces of evil', and is depicted in other documents as a just and noble ruler. The Duchess Adrianna is appointed Duchess of Cambria, effectively deposed as leader, without so much as a word of protest. And where was Prince Jean-Guerre Totemkompf all this time, only to seemingly appear on the throne of Haylem as if by magic?

Clearly the rest of us were only getting part of the real story. And to learn the truth once and for all, it was my great honour to gain an audience with His Royal Highness, King Jean-Guerre Totemkompf, who graciously agreed to answer my questions about this fantastic (and confusing) moment in history. Our conversation was long, and covered a variety of topics; for the sake brevity, I have paraphrased what I was told.

After my father's death, I fled East, away from the worst of the fighting. The last thing I needed was to be recognized by a high-ranking officer in the Unified Army. Having been raised in a noble court, I was no stranger to martial disciplines, as all men of my family were trained for military service. But if I wanted to disappear, I had to learn to fight like a mercenary, rather than a Prince. To that end, I sought out those who made their living by the sword, albeit a honest one. I sought out adventurers, and in doing so, met Rezlas. For the next two years, we helped others where we could, all too often protecting farms and small villages from humanoid attackers, and quickly moving on when the Army drew near. Rezlas never questioned my desire to steer clear of the authorities; he must have pegged me for a bandit made good!

It became harder to avoid the Army when the hostilities ensued. Now instead of Orcs and Goblins, we had to fight off Barbarian raiders. We joined up with other like-minded adventurers, forming a mercenary group; you may have heard of them, as they are now my Circle of Companions. I don't know if they ever suspected who I was, but each one of them was a good and decent man, each had felt the pain of hardship, and each devoted themselves to ensuring that no-one felt such hardship themselves, especially the defenceless and the meek. I guess it was during those years that the precepts of the Order of Chivalry began.

I'm ashamed to admit I took some pleasure in hearing the news of Sheris von Haylem's death. I was still bitter over what she had done to my father, my family name. Once peace had been obtained, and the City States began the work of rebuilding, I revealed my true identity to my companions, and told them my story. I am honoured to say that every one of them swore to me that they would help me see justice done and my family's honour restored.

My plan was simple. Rezlas would travel to Cambria, and insert himself into the growing group of adventurers that were working for the Unified Council, and send me any news of what was going on. My companions and I would set about finding and training more like-minded individuals, and raise an army of our own. We had to work in secret to ensure that we were not found out, so the process was painfully slow.

Only after a year or so of this, I got the letter from Rezlas. I still remember that day so clearly. It told me of Death's Head Keep, the army of Death Knights that inhabited, and the twisted mockery of life that wore my father's face. At that moment, I almost gave up. What was the point? How could I restore my family honour now? If not for the support of my Companions, I likely would have given up. The plan changed. We were no longer building an army to overthrow the Duchy; we were going to bring down Death's Head Keep.

We made our back to Taleria, a land much different from when I left. King Roderick's forces had done much damage to the land. And no, I will no longer speak of him as 'father' in this tale, for my father was dead. We worked carefully and decisively, taking our opportunities where we could. It became clear, however, that this would prove to be a far greater endeavour than we could handle. As much as it pained me to do so, I saw no recourse but to approach those I was ready to call enemy only a few months before, and obtain their aid.

I decided that my best option was to approach Count Ghenoa. I remember him as a decent honourable man, with no stomach for political intrigue. We approached the Royal Army under the pretence of a mercenary group; they were all too happy to have us, so desperate were they for fresh sword arms. It didn't take me long to endear myself to the Count, at which point, during a private meeting, I revealed who I was.

To say he was shocked was an understatement. My gambit almost failed, as it took a lot of fast talking to convince him not to call the guards on me. I had to convince him that I was not there to kill him and that I was not there for revenge against his family; for truly, I was not anymore. Working with the Royal Army, with Count Ghenoa, I came to realize that what Sheris von Haylem had created was ultimately good, even if it had been created from the blood of my father. I realized that, if I didn't let go of anger and bitterness, I would not be worthy of inheriting my birthright.

And then it was my turn to be shocked. Instead of mistrust, I saw on his face, relief. Count Ghenoa was a man made weary by grief. To lose a beloved sister, then two nephews at once, it was almost too much for him. It was the thought of obtaining justice for his fallen family that kept him going, and in him, I saw a kindred spirit. The problem was how to accomplish the task. The Death Knights in question were smarter, stronger, and better organized than normal. Experts from the Towers had conjectured that their strength was coming from King Roderick himself, and that he in turn was no ordinary creation of Necromancy. They spoke of a 'trueform' Undead, a creature resulting from someone killed violently before their work on this world was complete. A thousand sword blows cannot fell such a creature; only by aiding the Undead in completing its work in the living world, can it pass on. They felt that King Roderick, in the process of his creation as a Death Knight, gained those very qualities. It was up to us to figure out what King Roderick's unfinished business was, and how to exploit it to end him.

Count Ghenoa and I fashioned a plan; it was risky, and could easily fail, but we saw little other option. The first step was to remove Lord Galik from the picture, as he was never far from King Roderick. The adventurers working for the Duchy made sure of that. As expected, King Roderick retreated to the Keep, my childhood home, confident that the Royal Army could not reach him. What he didn't know was that I was there, and knew every brick of that citadel by heart. While Duke Ghenoa and the Royal Army kept the host of Death Knights occupied, I slipped in with my Companions, Rezlas, and some adventuring friends he brought with him. We tried our best to make our way to the throne room undetected, and dispatch any guards that spotted us.

Finally, we confronted King Roderick and his personal guard. It was a ferocious battle, but my friends were skilled, and did what I needed them to do; give me an open path to King Roderick. I remember how huge he was, how he seemed to recognize me for a brief moment, before letting the hatred of his nature wash over him. He strode forward, ready to cut me down. And that was when I unleashed the one thing we hoped would defeat him.

A scroll.

Not a scroll of magic, but a simple written proclamation. I threw it to the ground at his feet, swore to him that I would not so much as unsheathe my sword, and challenged him to open and read it. Perhaps a small sliver of my father pushed through; perhaps he was simply confident that I was no match for him. But pick it up he did, and read it he did.

What happened next truly remarkable; it was as if time stood still. King Roderick read the proclamation, penned in the hand of Duchess Adrianna von Haylem, and signed by her and each Baron. It took the Count a lot of work to convince her to do it, but I think she came to realize that it was better than the alternative. For Ghenoa and I had reached an agreement; the Kingdom's name would remain 'Haylem' forevermore, and Duchess Adrianna would be granted a Ducal seat within that Kingdom. And in return, she would willingly give up the throne to me, and recognize my legitimacy as King; no member of the von Haylem would ever come forward to try and claim the throne again. A look of peace came over his face as he read this, and I know I saw the eyes of the father I once knew. I think he said something to me before fading away, scroll and all, but I didn't catch it. As a symbol of their commitment to the agreement, Ghenoa and his remaining sister Camile, gave up the von Haylem name and took Ghenoa as their family name

Not that we had much time to ponder what happened. Outside, all hell had broken loose. Just as the Tower sages had predicted, once King Roderick was no more, the Death Knight host was greatly weakened, and what was a feint manoeuvre turned into a rout. We fought our way back out (thankfully there was far less resistance now), and

helped dispatch the remaining forces. Before the Royal Army set to the task of destroying the Keep (it was not my home anymore, and I did not want the memory of Totemkompf Keep marred by that eyesore), Count Ghenoa gathered his forces about us, took a knee, and announced to all present that they stood in the presence of the one true King of Haylem.

The Herald article? Well, call it a bit of paranoia on the part of the Towers. They were worried that some evil Necromancer may try his hand at raising my father to Undeath again. Apparently the will of the caster is very important in such matters, and by announcing to the world that my father was a good and just King who died a noble, FINAL death, it would make a second attempt at creating another Undead monster that much harder.

As told by His Royal Highness, King Jean-Geurre Totemkompf, and edited for brevity by Sage Thoran Ironrune, Wizard of the Immutable Word.

And so, with the forces of Death's Head Keep defeated, and the now infamous citadel razed, the Kingdom of Haylem begins a fresh, strong start. It is a somewhat bittersweet time for some, as Baron Laric Kyrakin was lost in the campaign against Death's Head Keep, to be replaced with Count Kyrinen Ghenoa. For others, it was a time of great pride and joy, for the first act of the new Baron of Ellisel was to proclaim those who had aided the new King in the final assault of Death's Head Keep, as Heroes of Haylem:

- Shaatraach Darkforge (given the honorary title of Lord).
- Rezlas the Innkeeper.
- Jasmine, the Innkeeper's wife.
- Tesla, known as the Scout.
- Eldaron Blackstone the Fighter.

Part of Rezlas' reward for his role in that assault was the right to place franchises of his famous Green Dragon Tavern anywhere in the Kingdom that he wishes. Anyone who passes through the town of Thrush Peake must stop by this establishment, if only to see the Hero of Haylem himself, still working the kitchen of the inn he built nearly 20 years ago.

And what of the von Haylem Curse? Was the ascension of Jean-Guerre Totemkompf to the throne enough to put an end to this family tragedy? Sadly, no. Scarcely one month after her appointment as Duchess of Cambria, Duchess Adrianna was brutally murdered, by surviving forces from Death's Head Keep. The creature responsible, was alleged to be the illegitimate child of the former Duke Roland, held the Duchess somehow responsible for the death of his mother (the villainess known as Mistress Falin). He then kidnapped, tortured and finally murdered Duchess Adrianna, then dared members of her court to come and get him, promising to allow whoever came to kill him once his grisly task was complete, as he claimed to have nothing left to live for. It was truly, a horrible, pointless tragedy.

By the end, the Curse seemed to claim some not of the von Haylem family. With the death of the Duchess, the house of McCondria was placed on the Ducal seat of Cambria. Duke Helix's rule had a rather bumpy and violent start, however, as numerous Ducal guards, left over from Duchess Adrianna's reign, launched a number of violent assaults on members of House McCondria, all in the name of the last Duchess von Haylem.

Even Count Illian Whiteoak, who briefly held the Ducal seat of Haylem as a provisional measure, fell victim to the Curse. The former Baron H'UrrWhaw, found to be a member of the Unjay Sharin, reappeared shortly after the King's coronation, attacking caravans and slaughtering all who travelled with them. Count Illian, determined to put a stop to the man who dishonoured the names of Ellisel and Aieland, gave chase, pursuing H'UrrWhaw into the still partly untamed lands around Aieland. Sadly, he was never seen again; even pleas from friends and family to the Unjay Sharin fell on deaf ears, with some believing that H'UrrWhaw had gone rogue, working independently of the organization he once helped.

In the end, only those that gave up the family name survived the curse. Duke Ghenoa survived the von Haylem curse, remaining Duke of Ellisel until his honourable death in the last months of Year 19 of the Haylem Calendar, leaving his mostly unknown sister Camile as the last of the von Haylem line.

Thrush Peake: The Centre of the World

The title of this story makes a rather bold claim, considering that these are supposed to be stories about the history of Haylem. However, many would agree with this assessment, considering the history of the area, both ancient and recent. If you read the excerpt provided from 'The Ages Past', you would know that the Dividian Darklands have been a hotbed of mundane and supernatural activity, for over a thousand years. Certainly not a place one would consider settling down in, yet one visionary decided to do just that.

Six months after the coronation of King Jean-Guerre, Gaston Creole, with the blessings of Duke Ghenoa, started a project to push forward the borders of the Duchy of Ellisel. He commissioned the construction of a town, named Thrush Peake, and was appointed the rank of Baron as a result. This small town sitting in the heart of the Dividian Darklands attracted all manner of people eager to start a new life. More importantly, it attracted many adventurers who sought to make their fortune from the ancient ruins rumoured to litter the area.

Things did not start out easy for the small town. Only months after its inception, the adventurers of Thrush Peake had to fend off attacks from Gnoll Slavers, hostile Fae, Ogres from of the mountain of Mors Drakkor, and a great deal of Undead. Among these Undead were the dreaded generals of ancient Sherikand, otherwise known as the Doths! Led by the insidious Guerre Doth, these monsters from the First Necromantic War caused the town of Thrush Peake strife for years, under the banner of the Cabal Malefic (I could go into more detail about them here, but their story is the beginning of a much grander tale that deserves its own chapter).

The Fae have always been attracted to wild untamed lands, so it seems a foregone conclusion that they would clash with the adventurers of Thrush Peake. The first appearance of the Fae began innocently enough; a farmer clearing his assigned land for planting cut down an ancient tree. Unfortunately, that specific tree turned out to be the legendary Century Tree which the Fae revered. In an attempt to mollify the outraged Fae, adventurers sought to restore the Tree using ancient magics. They succeeded, though not quickly enough for the Fae, who summoned a Drake to destroy the town in retribution for this slight. Luckily, the adventurers were able to drive the Drake off, an early example of the incredible feats the people of this town would accomplish.

Relations with the Fae remained dicey ever since, with the town alternately aiding and hindering the Fae. These interactions ranged from such acts as guarding the Century Tree, to preventing the Dark Fae from performing a foul ritual on the land, depending on the situation. For those who are unfamiliar with the Fae, a quick summary. The Fae are capricious creatures from another realm, who wield vast magic, but possess an oddly alien mindset. A Fae can be your best friend or your worst enemy on a whim and it is often impossible to comprehend their motivations. They can be grouped into two opposing factions, the Seelie (or Light Fae) and the Unseelie (Dark Fae). Simply because we name them Light and Dark, do not confuse this with Good and Evil. All Fae are devious by nature, and they do not conform to the same concepts of Good and Evil as do the mortal races. They will often make decisions and settle their differences by choosing champions from the mortal realm to compete in feats of skill. The chosen will engage in contests that can be alternatively fun or deadly, depending on their whim. As champions are usually selected from mortal stock, preferably those with great adventuring skills (you can guess whom the Fae turn to more often than not).

These contests can earn those who are willing to compete for the Fae great powers and riches, or earn nothing but hardship for all. In the Spring of Year 10, a portal associated with the Unseelie Fae opened, causing discontent amongst the Seelie Fae, who deem the spring and summer months their 'season'. Once again, the Fae chose Champions to settle the matter, and by the end of the year, the matter was concluded, though not to the Unseelie's satisfaction. The Dark portal was closed, but the Unseelie Fae, convinced that the mortal champions of the Seelie had cheated to get their win, had the last laugh. Their final act before leaving the realm was to twist the nature of Tyrra itself in the Thrush Peake region, such that five times the number of Undead normally seen would be attracted to the area. What became known as the Five-Fold Curse of the Undead would plague the town for no less than three years, during which a horrific vampire known as Lord Fayde plagued the town (some think he was in fact a physical manifestation of the Curse, as he appeared shortly after the Curse was placed, and it was only lifted after his death). Even then, Fae magic is not easily dispelled. As the Fae have a propensity to take phrases literally, the Town had to deal with the Curse again, since it had merely been 'broken'. Once it was clear that, like a

vase dropped on the floor, the shards of the broken Curse lay strewn about the area, the town had to literally retrieve the shattered 'pieces' of the Curse on a later All Hallows Eve, which had manifested as scary stories from childhood. Only after reassembling the pieces could the town 'end' the Curse, finishing the matter once and for all. These days, the Fae come and go as their whims take them, and make an appearance every few years to choose new champions and issue new contests, presumably to decide which Fae Courts will rule over the others.

Along with supernatural issues, it should be remembered that the Darklands are also home to many humanoid races, as well as the Barbarians. With the ascension of King Jean-Guerre to the throne, hostilities on the Western Front became almost non-existent, the Clans having no desire to face the King's Army again. To put an end to the fighting once and for all, King Jean-Guerre challenged the High Chieftain of the Barbarians to a duel of honour, and won. The Barbarians were then obligated to follow the rule of King Jean-Guerre, as he became a force superior to the High Chieftain. Soon after, the Barbarians were recognized as full Citizens of Haylem. Not all were thrilled by this turn of events, and attempts were made to renew the fighting. On two separate occasions, nefarious forces have tried to pit the Deer Clan against Thrush Peake. Luckily, cooler heads have prevailed, and a lasting peace has remained, with the Barbarians even receiving a measure of autonomy, when the King awarded the Barbarians their own lands for their aid during the Second Necromantic War.

In addition to Barbarians, the lands are notable for the humanoid races of Trolls, Minotaurs and Lizardmen, and the unique relations between them and Thrush Peake. The relationship with the Trolls is a story that deserves its own chapter, but the matters of Minotaurs can be told here. Initially staunch enemies of Thrush Peake, the Minotaur known as Hardek proved a dangerous foe, until his defeat at the hands of Thrush Peake. With the Minotaur community being led by more peaceful leaders, a relationship between them and Thrush Peake formed. During the Second Necromantic War, the Minotaurs played a major role in defending the region. And although factional infighting decreased their numbers over the past few years, the peaceful creatures are beginning to form a presence once again.

The Lizardmen are an even more interesting story. Initially a rag-tag tribe numbering less than a hundred, the Lizardmen found unusual allies in the area, namely the Celestial Guild, and Guildmaster Melisandre. She seemed to see in them a potentially useful ally, and with the help of Thrush Peake, was able to not only secure them a permanent home, but help teach them the skills they would need to defend themselves from attack. No longer having to lead a nomadic existence, this tribe exploded to significant numbers, some rumours say that there are nearly two thousand in the community today. The real secret to their long term success came from the Celestial Guild, but not from Guildmaster Melisandre. Another member of the Guild found kinship with these strange creatures, and gained the trust and friendship of their leader, the Komodan Todephar. This man's influence and advice helped to make the Lizardmen even stronger. After a strange incident involving the destruction of a Creation Node, in the spring of Year 16; this individual, now known as Master Sage Starseer, became a reptilian creature unlike any ever seen in our recorded history. More of these 'Xantusa' have appeared since, and while their origins and very nature are unclear, the Master Sage assures us that they are quickly developing their own fascinating culture.

With this strange combination of allies and enemies, Thrush Peake grew quickly. The Darklands were themselves a treasure trove of resources; lumber, minerals, and some of the most arable land in Haylem. The region became so prosperous, that rumblings of dissent emerged from the other Duchies. While the town of Thrush Peake was initially part of Ellisel, the other Duchies felt that they had contributed much of their resources to the region, and should see some benefit from the new prosperity. As a result of this discontent, in the fifth month of AU 14, to mollify the remaining Dukes, King Jean-Guerre decreed that Thrush Peake be a full Barony, to be ruled by all five Duchies equally. This meant that Thrush Peake was to have five Baronial knights, all with a say on how things should be run. The initial records are somewhat vague; we know for certain only two of the knights who were initially chosen for this honour:

- Ellisel: Sir Felthantus
- Cambria: Unconfirmed
- Aieland: Sir Landrellthis
- Taleria: Unconfirmed
- Ontarius: Unconfirmed

Sir Felthantus was promoted to Viscount two years later, in recognition for his years of service to the Crown, in particular the destruction of the vile city of Serrenga. His final fate will be told in another tale. At the same time, Sir Landrellthis was promoted to Knight Protector for Aieland, Ciraband knighted for Cambria, and Valadwena knighted for Ellisel, ensuring representation from the five Duchies.

There was little time for celebration, after these appointments, as sinister forces were at work, with the presence of old enemies making themselves felt, while new enemies caused considerable grief to the Barony and the Kingdom. Even in the same issue of the lauded Haylem Herald that the King announced the appointment of the Baronial Knights, there was a declaration of war against Thrush Peake, by the Troll General Ugluch himself. By the end of Year 16, the unthinkable happened; seemingly disparate enemies of the Kingdom combined forces with the Cabal Malefic and the Nightmare Legion to oppose the Kingdom on a more direct level. The result was that the Kingdom was plunged into what would become known as the Second Necromantic War. It would take over a year for the forces of Haylem to finally beat the Armies of the Doths to the former Duchy of Ontarius, now a broken wasteland known as the Black Waste. As tragic as the loss of an entire Duchy was to the Kingdom, there was cause for celebration in Thrush Peake. In recognition for their vital role in the defeat of the Necromantic Army, in the final months of Year 17, the Barony of Thrush Peake was made into a County, with Squire Dalnya Laire'elen given the title of Countess. In keeping with the tradition of representation by all Duchies, the County was divided into five domains, with a Knight Bannerette in its charge:

- Ellisel: Dame Valadwena
- Cambria: Sir Ciraband
- Aieland: Sir Landrellthis
- Taleria: Dame Isobel
- Ontarius: Sir Akani

The Ogre Wars

The trials Thrush Peake has faced over the years are not just supernatural in nature. The mountain of Mors Drakkor is an active volcano just to the north of Thrush Peake. Within its bowels dwells the infamous Ash Ogres. Led by a wicked Overlord, they have long resented the presence of Thrush Peake in the region, and since its inception, they have mounted numerous raids against the town. What makes these Ogres so dangerous is their apparent mastery of elemental magic. The summoning of Elementals is a tricky and dangerous business that even a seasoned Wizard rarely attempts. The strange horned Ogre Magi of Mors Drakkor, however make it look easy. They are able to summon small armies of Flame Elementals and Nightmares, horses composed of flame, to do their bidding. The Ogre Wars have continued on and off for years, and have claimed more than its fair share of fatalities. Baron Creole, the founder of Thrush Peake, was lost to the Ogres in the last months of Year 10; his death was a boon for the foul humanoids, who exploited the grief of the tragedy to launch more offensives in the following year and gain more ground. Baron Creole's successor, Rael DuSilva, attempted a different tactic, by trying to broker peace. This seemingly worked for a year or so, but the Ogres were merely regrouping to begin fresh assaults. By midyear of Year 12, the Kingdom had reached its limit. Under the leadership of the new Baron, Armande Du Larnelle, (Real DuSilva having been deemed unfit for the rank of Baron and removed from the position a few months before), a plan was forged to crush the Ogre menace once and for all. A great road was constructed, connecting Ellisel and Cambria, with Thrush Peake one of its stop points. The South Road is to this day an engineering marvel, with regularly placed forts for security. *(Note: since this document was prepared, the South Road has been split by the forming of the Great Chasm).* The plan was to leak news of this road and the Armies marching towards Mors Drakkor, to the Ogres. With the bulk of the Ogre army distracted, the Thrush Peake adventurers would strike at the heart of Mors Drakkor itself, destroying the supply lines that kept the Ogres moving forward.

Sadly, the strike force met considerable resistance. Led by Lord Seneschal Felthantus, the adventurers made some headway, only to face a much greater force than expected, led by the Ogre Overlord himself. Apparently the Ogre Overlord had been alerted to the attack and had magically transported back to his base of operations. There were many losses on the side of Thrush Peake during that battle, as powerful elemental lords and a well organized Ogre defense resulted in the adventurers being routed. But, all was not lost, for the King's Army made good headway

against the bulk of the forces, which were without their Overlord to lead them. Over the course of four days, the Ogre armies were worn down, until their morale was finally broken and they fled back into the mountains. The damage that Thrush Peake was able to do to the Ogre supply lines did much to ensure the rout.

For the next eight years, the Ogres of Mors Drakkor would prove to be more of a nuisance than the massive threat they had been in the past. They conducted smaller raids and attacks of opportunity, but did not seek to expand their territory beyond the existing borders. During the Second Necromantic War, the Ogres were even our allies for a time, seeing the wisdom of uniting against a common threat. In the summer of Year 20, the Ogres of Mors Drakkor seemingly turned over a new leaf; having grown weary of the fighting and continuous blockades, the Ogres agreed to release their slaves in exchange for the opportunity to trade and a cessation of hostility. The Countess Dalnya agreed to this, and penned a peace treaty, which seemed to be honored by the Ogres.

Unbeknownst to the majority of the Kingdom, and to all of the Ogres, there were forces at work behind the scenes which would prove invaluable to the resolution of this confrontation for good. The peace treaty did indeed appear to be holding, with many slaves released by the Ogres. They were even seen in Thrush Peake, not as invaders, but friends and fellow revelers. But appearances were deceiving. For while the Ogres showed the appearance of being 'good neighbors', they were in fact gearing for war, taking advantage of the trade agreements to restock their war machine. Slaves were still taken, only in secret, and it was only Thrush Peake's Nobility that raised any concern that something was awry. Previously unknown caverns and tunnels leading to the Ogre homelands allowed the Nobility to discover the truth, and a secret plan was hatched to put an end to the Ogre's treachery. Taking advantage of these ancient lost tunnels, a team of Nobles, mercenaries and Tower wizards set up camp in a secret location, almost in the Ogre's backyard. From there, strategic strikes were made against key resources and weak points. A brilliant assault on the Ogre's resurrection circle allowed attacks against Ogres directly, for the circle had been altered so that anyone who resurrected there would believe they had been killed by Fire Elementals. With the Ogre forces growing in ever greater disarray, and hostilities between the Ogres and their elemental allies reaching a boiling point, the forces of Thrush Peake were close to causing the collapse of the entire Ogre infrastructure due to infighting.

In the tenth month of Year 23, however, things came to a head sooner than expected. The infighting forced the Ogre Overlord's hand, and rather than waiting until the Spring to attack, the assault was to be within a few days. Once this news reached the adventurers, the schedule of the Thrush Peake forces was pushed into overdrive. Certain key points in the Ogre war machine still had to be dealt with if there was any chance of resisting the inevitable attack. The Thrush Peake adventurers worked tirelessly to sabotage the supply sources of Mors Drakkor and slow the advancing juggernaut. Midway through these efforts, a remarkable secret was discovered. The reason that the Ogres had such a ready supply of elementals was due to the fact that heart of the volcano was in fact a massive portal to the realm of Flame. What was most difficult to understand was how the Ogres were able to control so many elementals at the same time. The secret to this turned out to be brilliant in its simplicity; the Ogre Mages had captured three powerful Fire Lords, many years ago, and bound them to the mountain itself. Magically bound to the mountain, the Ogre Magi could use their ability to command other elementals for their own purposes. The final plan to thwart the Ogres was two-fold. First, release the imprisoned Fire Lords, thus breaking the Ogre's control over them, and second, cast a ritual that would cause a massive chain reaction within the volcano, releasing massive amounts of elemental flame in the Ogre's own home.

These missions were entirely successful, and on the day of the invasion, Thrush Peake could do nothing else but bear down and prepare to repel the attack. The attack did indeed come, with waves of Ogres crashing against the hastily built defenses built by the combined forces of the King's Army, Thrush Peake, and the local Minotaur clans, who were sympathetic to the cause. Just as it seemed that the final plans of sabotage had been for naught and the Ogres would have their way, the battlefield was shaken by a massive explosion which emanated from the volcano of Mors Drakkor. It seemed that the ritual, though slow to take, did indeed result in the desired effect. As if on cue, waves of Fire elementals streamed out of the mountain, attacking their former Ogre masters. With the assault shattered against the defenses of Thrush Peake, the tide had turned, and the Kingdom forces began driving the Ogres back towards the mountain, where more elementals were waiting. With their forces crushed, and their home now in the clutches of hostile elementals, it is hoped that this spelled the final end of the Ogre threat in the Thrush Peake region.

The Troll Wars

The right sort of circumstances can make enemies out of friends, or friends out of enemies. The latter is true when Thrush Peake saw the first appearance of General Ugluch of the Deep Trolls. With the defeat of Hardek the Minotaur, a careful balance amongst the humanoid races was disrupted. Without Hardek's forces keeping them at bay, the Deep Trolls were free to travel up to the surface at will, and in the early Spring of Year 13, waves of Trolls came to surface, seeking to conquer the lands above as they had the lands below. This would be the first of several attacks against Thrush Peake.

In the Spring of Year 14, the raids turned into outright war. Led by the formidable General Ugluch, the Trolls sought revenge against the town for the Trolls whom had ranged to the surface, never to return. The ferocity of the first assault nearly overwhelmed the adventurers, yet it was ultimately only a distraction for their true plan. A group of Stone Trolls, adept at burrowing through soil and rock, were able to build a permanent tunnel behind the town, which would allow them to easily flank the adventurers whenever they wished. A series of strikes by both sides continued throughout the Summer, until the matter came to a head in the late Summer. Wishing to put an end to Thrush Peake once and for all, General Ugluch amassed a huge force of Trolls, and launched wave after wave against the town. The mighty adventurers of Thrush Peake were able to hold off well over 20 waves of Troll soldiers, but a final wave of troops, led by the General himself, led to the collapse of the defences. Thrush Peake was defeated. This battle could have ended in far more casualties than it did, but perhaps Ugluch was impressed by the determination of the adventurers. Rather than simply allow the fallen to resurrect, and slaughter the rest of the town, the Troll General negotiated terms of surrender with Sir Felthantus, gaining unrestricted access to the town in exchange for aiding the injured.

The next couple of years saw the Trolls making occasional appearances, and a delicate peace was maintained. In the winter of Year 16, the Second Necromantic War began, and former enemies would become allies.

The Necromantic War warrants its own tale, but one of the obstacles faced by Thrush Peake during that war was a massive ring of lethal fog that encircled the town and its surrounding lands. Clearly the leaders behind the Necromantic Army saw Thrush Peake as too great a threat to allow them to join forces with the King's Army. Breaching this fog was quite impossible on the surface, but surprisingly, the town's former enemies, the Trolls, had a way around it. Their Stone Trolls could easily build tunnels that passed under the fog, allowing people to pass in and out freely. The problem was getting the Trolls to allow such passage. Some heavy negotiating was required, to convince Ugluch that it was in the interest of his own people to help fight the Undead, who would not spare the Trolls once the surface lands were taken. Thus began the first agreements that led to the Metabolic Alliance, an unprecedented event that saw the adventurers of Thrush Peake join forces with Trolls, Lizardmen, Minotaurs, Goblins, some elementals and even the Fae, This alliance would show its true strength at the Battle of Thrush Peake.

I will not rewrite the events that took place that day, as an excellent depiction of those events have already been penned by the Countess Dalnya. However, in relation to this tale, the end of that battle saw the Trolls weary and triumphant, but missing their General.

It would be some months before the Trolls would be seen again, but when they emerged from the depths, it was with a new leader, who was apparently the son of Ugluch. It was explained that a rival faction had taken advantage of Ugluch's disappearance to seize control, and had eventually found and captured the General, holding him prisoner. The town agreed to aid the Trolls, in exchange for the promise of non-aggression. The Trolls agreed, and after many battles against the rival Troll faction, Thrush Peake succeeded in releasing the General, and breaking the rival faction's strength. Sadly, it was too late for Ugluch, having suffered horrible tortures at the hands of his captors, he soon suffered final death; leaving his son in charge. As promised, the Deep Trolls retreated back underground, and have not harassed Thrush Peake since.

The Second Necromantic War: Serrenga

Some would question my decision to start the tale of the Second Necromantic War here. The fact of the matter is, the events that took place during the war against Serrenga were instrumental in motivating our enemies from the North, so I stand by my decision. Our tale begins, not with the Undead, but with an Ice Drake, named Stayvah.

There is some dispute to Stayvah's origins. Some claim a relation between him and the Red Drake Drox, a mostly selfish creature that alternately attacked and aided the town depending on what he wanted. Others claim that Stayvah's mother, having tired of her own wickedness, laid an egg and imbued it with all her dark urges, with the intention of destroying it. However, she could not bring herself to kill her own flesh and blood, and thus Stayvah was born. This origin goes far to explain his motivations for what happens next, for Stayvah was a creature motivated only by personal power and sought ways to enhance it. He knew no bounds, and used methods that other Drakes would balk at, due to the incredible risks involved. The City of Serrenga was once such place, that few would risk tampering with.

Serrenga was an ancient city, from a time before Persephont and the First Necromantic War; a city where the living and Undead co-existed. Its might in the region was uncontested, until a group of Dragon Mages used powerful magics to sink the entire city beneath the ground, hoping to seal it away forever. Fate had other plans however, and the site of the city was first discovered in the Spring of Year 14, as part of a series of expeditions by the Drae to find a suitable homeland. The underground city was found to be populated by Trolls, who were of course careful not to disturb the Undead nearby. Word travelled quickly of this fell city sealed underground, and it eventually found its way to Stayvah. It did not take him long to arrive in Thrush Peake, seeking details of the city and how it was sealed away. Armed with a massive force of Orcs and blue Giants, Stayvah tried to use the town of Thrush Peake as a means of getting to Serrenga directly, but was denied his prize. Ultimately, Stayvah found a way in, not by brute force, but through the betrayal of its secrets by two Thrush Peake adventurers, who 'sold' the location of a secret entrance in exchange for wealth and magic items. The names of these two are Varr and Gouge Lamnda; the latter is a name worth noting, as it will come up again in this tale.

Thrush Peake gave chase to Stayvah, in the hopes of thwarting his plans. Unfortunately, the adventurers arrived too late. Stayvah broke the magic sealing the city, and at the end of the eighth month of Year 14, the foul city of Serrenga rose to the surface, its Undead citizens protected from the Sun by a permanent cloud of darkness.

It was quickly realized that the city of Serrenga would prove a very tough nut to crack; in addition to the cloud of darkness, the city hosted massive amounts of powerful Undead. Some of these were unlike anything seen before. Serrenga's walls and buildings were magically fortified, to the point where normal siege engines had no effect and then there was the matter of the master of this city. The Lord of Serrenga, was a powerful Superior Undead of incredible combat skill, who had a special weapon at his disposal: the Cup of the Master.

The Cup is an artefact that is ancient beyond measure, said to have been created by a Dragon known only as the Unraveller solely for the purposes of bringing Chaos and Necromancy to the world. Should even a drop of a victim's blood enter the evil chalice, they would be transformed into a powerful, unique Undead. Such was the fate of General Hoaken, who led a force to destroy the city. After the failure of the King's Army to best the city, a new plan was made.

The greatest strength of Serrenga was also its weakness, namely the cloud of darkness that shielded it from the Sun. If that could be removed, then not only would the Undead within be forced indoors during the day, it would likely weaken the structures of the city itself, due to their magical nature. With Drox's aid, a daring mission was undertaken. Using specially formed elemental objects, the town began special rituals to counteract the Void and Entropy that made up the cloud. It took a few weeks to fully take effect, but in the end, the city's greatest defence fell.

From here, the war on Serrenga turned into a series of guerrilla-style attacks, with the intent of destroying key points of infrastructure within the city, such as the Necromantic and Celestial Guilds, Barracks and the Armoury. Piece by piece, the city of Serrenga was torn down, until only its Lord's Mansion remained. Surprisingly, the Lord of Serrenga put up little resistance against the adventurers; with the city in ruins and its magic broken, the Lord of

Serrenge simply lost all will to carry on, and allowed itself to be finally killed. By the end of Year 15, the city of Serrenge was no more.

But what of Stayvah during all this? While having to deal with Serrenge, the adventurers of Thrush Peake had to deal with a rather angry and frustrated Stayvah. The Ice Drake, despite its best efforts, was unable to gain anything of value from the city, and invariably chose to take out his wrath on Thrush Peake. In the late Summer of Year 15, the final battle with Stayvah led to his apparent Final Death, only to have him attack the town yet again, this time as a spectral, phantom-like creature. The town was at a loss to explain this, until Serrenge itself fell, and the answer became apparent.

As it happened, the Lord of Serrenge was perfectly happy with his city sealed away underground, as its denizens were protected. When Stayvah brought the city to the surface, thus attracting many attacks, the Lord of Serrenge was more than ready to get revenge on the Drake. Upon its Final Death, the Lord of Serrenge did just that, by collecting some of the dead Drake's blood in the Cup of the Master, and creating a skeletal form of Stayvah in the city's underground crypts. And there Stayvah was doomed to spend eternity, bound to that place, protecting the crypts of the Lord's family. But such was Undead Stayvah's power, that it found a way out, by projecting its spirit out of the city, taking on a spectral form to attack Thrush Peake. Once the town learned the full story, it marched onto the ruins of Serrenge, found their way into the crypts, and engaged Stayvah in a brutal battle that finally saw the Drake's end.

The Second Necromantic War: Death's Head

With the destruction of Serrenge, most assumed that there would be a measure of peace in the Thrush Peake region; a respite after the war. But no one anywhere in Haylem anticipated the sinister forces gathering within and without the Kingdom, or the storm that would be unleashed.

To this day, many still question how such a force was successfully gathered in secret, or who was ultimately responsible. To ensure that such a thing never happens again, many within the Towers have tried to piece together the events that led to what is considered the official start to the Second Necromantic War, in the Winter of Year 16. The appearance of Serrenge and the securing of the Cup of the Master, were no doubt great motivators to the Cabal Malefic, who desired the return of the fell Kingdom of Sherikand, and the Nightmare Legion, who sought to overthrow the Kingdom and claim it for themselves. That they would be willing to conspire with each other towards a common goal is itself an indication of the importance of this foul artefact to their respective causes.

Careful planning would be needed for the war to succeed; a massive army would have to be built in secret, in order to overwhelm the King's Army as quickly as possible. The Cabal Malefic had been slowly working to rebuild the vile city of Loctus Urbs, sifting through its ruins for some of the ancient artefacts they knew existed. One that they found was a powerful crystal, which its user to communicate with the Spirits of the Finally Dead. The Nightmare Legion contributed powerful summoning rituals collected from the ruins of Death's Head Keep, as well as tomes that were once housed in the town of Crestland. With some effort, they discovered that between the summoning rituals and the crystal, they could bring back the most powerful beings in history, to use in their growing army. The tomes proved equally useful, as they contained instructions to summon and control the Mirror Man, a being that had been seen in Haylem before. With a creature literally composed of divination mirrors, they would be able to coordinate their attacks with maximum effectiveness.

With the core of their army in place, they next needed troops to form its bulk. Using the Mirror Man to search for any and all Undead that existed, they were able to draw together a massive force, with some surprising additions. Blenryath, a former adventurer turned Lich, joined the Necromantic Army, if for no other reason than to see Thrush Peake burn. Gouge Lambda, another adventurer, who only a year ago had betrayed Thrush Peake for personal gain, was happy to accept membership into the Nightmare Legion, and be made into a powerful Undead. Clawdious, an infamous adventurer turned vampire, who, in the early years of Thrush Peake's inception, caused all manner of problems for the town, to the point that the Duke of Ellisel proclaimed a reward of Knighthood to whoever could produce proof of his Final Death, a reward that still stands to this day. The Cabal also discovered alternate sources for their army; deep in the Cambrian sea, a race of fish-like humanoids existed, their buried dead

an ideal source for a surprise strike force, and a charismatic young woman bent on revenge, with an almost unnatural ability to gather the criminally insane elements of Haylem under her command.

The final preparations would be to weaken the infrastructure of Haylem, to further guarantee the success of the war. During the Spring and Summer months of Year 16 a group of insane criminals, calling themselves the Hatters after their signature headgear, began to harass various towns, including Thrush Peake. The Hatters proved especially troublesome, as they possessed an artefact called the Krau'en Heart, which could disable all Ward effects within a one mile radius. Yet this was all a distraction, as the real forces of the Necromantic Army moved into place, and sabotaged key elements that would be needed to fight the Undead, such as tainting the Kingdom's silver supplies. Then without warning, the first blow was struck. Representatives from each seemingly independent group, including Blenryath and Clawdious, launched an assault against the Baronial Keep, killing all within. With everything proceeding according to their plan, summoning rituals were cast, and the Baronial Keep vanished, only to be replaced with a spectral form the infamous Death's Head Keep, an inaccessible structure that would form the main base of operations for the invasion of Haylem.

The initial assaults were swift and brutal. Hordes of Undead fishmen rose out of the Sea of Cambria, making a slow march for Aieland's capital. A host of Cabal Undead marched on Cambria proper, led by Clawdious himself. Nightmare Legion forces, led by Gouge, marched on Ellisel, their initial attack wiping out the town of Watchwood. Children disappeared in the night, taken by Hatters, for the Krau'en Heart needed the Spirits of children to function. Celestial Guilds were assaulted by Ice creatures, who literally froze the structures solid, occupants and all. In all this, Thrush Peake sat helplessly by, as the creation of the spectral Death's Head Keep on their doorstep also brought with it a strange and deadly Necromantic trap to keep the adventurers from giving aid to the Kingdom. This came in the form of a wall of fog, lethal to anything which dared enter it, that surrounded the town and adjacent countryside. The motivations for this seem clear enough; the adventurers of Thrush Peake arguably form the mightiest combat force in the Kingdom, something the Necromantic Army would rather deal with on their terms. Rumors did circulate, however, that Blenryath himself pushed for this action, as a means of toying and ultimately destroying his former compatriots, whom he now despised. In hindsight, however, it seemed a poor decision to use the fog as both a trap for Thrush Peake and protective measure for Death's Head Keep, for the head of the Necromantic Army was locking himself in the cage with the proverbial tiger.

For the rest of the Kingdom, things looked most grim. Try as they might to get on the offensive against the Necromantic Army, the King's forces were stymied. The divination abilities of Death's Head Keep enabled the Necromantic Army to know what the Royal Army would do before they did it. It reached a point where the successful evacuation of a town before it was overrun was considered a victory. In all this, the Kingdom had no way of contacting Thrush Peake, to know if they were alive or dead.

But Thrush Peake was alive, and hard at work. The top priorities were to find a way into the spectral keep, and a way out of the ring of fog. As mentioned in an earlier story, the Trolls were able to provide a solution, by tunnelling underneath the fog. Guildmaster Melisandre and Squire Solis Tossak took a more direct approach with the help of the Red Drake Drox, by augmenting themselves in such a way as to render themselves immune to the fog's lethal effects, and one-by-one destroying the Undead that generated the lethal smoke. Numerous attempts were made to thwart the town's efforts, often by the master of Death's Head Keep itself. Known only as Death's Head, it was a horrific floating skull with myriad powers. While seemingly insane, it was a master tactician, able to coordinate the myriad forces of the Necromantic Army with ease.

It was almost inevitable that the efforts of the Thrush Peake adventurers would become less of an annoyance and more of a credible threat against the Necromantic Army. In the seventh month of Year 17, the Necromantic Army gathered outside the fog, with the intent of crushing the town of Thrush Peake once and for all. But thanks to critical intelligence that managed to reach the town from outside, the adventurers prepared for the coming attack, backed by combined might of the humanoid races that had also been trapped in the fog. The Metabolic Alliance would prove a shining example of unity under duress, when it faced down the forces of the Cabal, Legion, and its allies. I would be remiss if I described the details of this historic battle, as a fantastic description of the event has been penned, by Countess Dalnya Laire'elen, who was a Squire at the time, and witnessed the battle first-hand. I encourage you to read this famous document for the full details of sacrifice that won the day and ultimately turned the tide of the war. (See document titled – The War's End)

With this victory, the King's Army was able to rally behind a concept that seemed lacking in prior months: hope. The fog ring around Thrush Peake was all but destroyed. The armies of Fishmen were wiped out before they could cause lasting damage, thanks to the efforts of Thrush Peake's finest. The Cabal Malefic's base of operations, a horrible black ziggurat, was destroyed, putting a final end to the Cabal and depriving the Necromantic Army of a critical supply of Undead. The Celestial Guilds were recovered, their Guildmasters safe and sound, thanks to Lord Tyr, who travelled into the Plane of Ice itself to defeat the Necromantic creature that had bound key Ice Lords to its will. In the meantime, the outlying communities surrounding Thrush Peake were kept safe by the same humanoid allies that the farmer folk once lived in fear of, allowing the adventurers to focus all their attention on the enemy. But if any progress was to be made, the device which allowed the Necromantic Army to coordinate its forces and spy on the King's Army had to be removed.

To that end, a desperate mission was planned, one that the participants may well not survive. First, the adventurers began activities that appeared to be a planned offensive against the spectral keep, but were in fact a diversion meant to draw Death's Head out of the keep. With no one watching through the scrying device, a strike team of Thrush Peake's mightiest slipped into the keep while it was still tangible. There, they battled foes drawn from the First Necromantic War, until they were able to battle the Mirror Man himself; upon his destruction, the pocket realm he existed in collapsed, and the adventurers that defeated him were trapped inside. Happily, all resurrected or had the means to magically escape, and more importantly, the Necromantic Army's greatest tactical advantage was lost.

With the eyes of the Necromantic Army blinded, the next priority was destroying Death's Head Keep, an act that would throw the Undead forces into disarray. The solution came from His Majesty, who called upon the Barbarian Clans for aid. They responded, by initiating an ancient ritual that would be counter to the vile crystal the Undead were using. They would summon the Spirits of long dead heroes, the counterparts to the Undead abominations the crystal summoned, in the hope that their advice would help bring an end to the war.

Three heroic figures of an ancient time came forward: Adwynne Mornae, a circus ringmaster, Kiyonaga, the first Knight Solis, and King Albrecht, the brother of the individual that would become Death's Head. Their combined efforts allowed the town to find the cave where the crystal was hidden, locate the means of destroying it, and breach the myriad defences that kept it safe. Once in the presence of the crystal, the cave roof was collapsed, and a legendary bell rung, whose note shattered the crystal. Out of the remains came a host of legendary abominations, including Death's Head itself. Though the creature escaped the battle, its true nature was revealed by Albrecht, and without the crystal to strengthen its ties to this time, was successfully banished from the world by Albrecht himself.

With that, the spectral keep vanished, along with the heroic spirits that had helped make the victory possible. Without a guiding force to coordinate them, the Necromantic Armies fell into disarray, routed by the reinvigorated King's Army. Pushed back again and again, the Armies finally made their stand in Ontarius, a land already ravaged by the fighting. With the Undead dug in too deep to be eliminated, the King's Army took what victory they could, and set up defences to keep the Undead contained, in what is now known as the Black Waste.

The Second Necromantic War: Seurot

It would be too much to ask that the War had ended then and there, leaving only the work of flushing out the pockets of Undead resistance that remained. But an ancient threat still slumbered, and with the end of Death's Head, that threat awoke, and set in motion its own plans. To properly tell the story of Seurot, we will have to go back to the very beginning, beyond Haylem, and even the age of Persephont, to a time of legend.

It is said that at the dawn of time, Dragons existed in the world. These are not to be confused with Drakes, who, while powerful in their own right, are as comparable to Dragons in terms of might as an ant would be to you. One such Dragon was the Unraveller, a Dragon of Void. The Unraveller is said to have created Chaos and Necromancy, to 'unmake' the living realms derived from Creation and Earth. To further its will in the living realms, The Unraveller chose a Drake to be its champion, and transformed it into a Dracolich. Though we have no reliable records from before the age of Persephont, it can be assumed that whenever the forces of Necromancy and Chaos came into dominance, the Dracolich was ultimately responsible.

The Necromancers that had been gathering in the North around Persephont's time are said to have gained much power very quickly. This does in fact make sense, as they had apparently found leadership and a vast source of dark knowledge in the Dracolich. Taking the name Seurot of the Twisted Fetish, the Dracolich helped create the city of Loctus Urbs, and the Kingdom of Sherikand, making himself the first and mightiest of the Necromancer Kings. His power cemented, Seurot began to conquer the Twelve Kingdoms in 1038 BU.

The record of that war is well-known, but new evidence has emerged of actions taken during the First Necromantic War, actions that helped to ensure Persephont's victory. During his push toward Loctus Urbs, a group of Dragon Mages known as the Hollowers stole Seurot's crown, an artefact of great power, and broke it several shards. To ensure that the shards could not be collected and the crown made whole, each Dragon Mage bound a shard to his spirit, an act that resulted in their Final Deaths, but would ensure that the shard could not be retrieved. With the fall of Loctus Urbs, it was thought that all of the Necromancer Kings were destroyed; the Doth's imprisoned in stone, and the Dagger of Thorns secreted away by Mishka the Dripper. In fact, Seurot used the Dagger on himself before handing it off to the Generals as they escaped; the Dagger would allow him to mask his power and walk among Persephont's Army as one of their own, leaving the other Necromancer Kings to their fate. Without the time to conduct the ritual properly, however, Seurot had to settle with transforming himself into a Stone Elf with but a vestige of his former power. Joining the forces of Persephont, he later sought out the Dagger in order to reverse the effects, using his remaining power to influence the creation of the Order of the Blood Red Rose. For the leader of the Order, Gaveston, was Seurot in disguise, and it was Seurot who assassinated Persephont when he thought that the great King had in fact obtained the Dagger.

His efforts to find the Dagger leaving him exhausted, Seurot was forced to go into hibernation to try and regain some of his strength. The massive Necromantic energies unleashed during the Second Necromantic War gave him the energy he needed to awaken, and Seurot once again began to look for the Dagger. Seeing the state of things at the end of the War, Seurot was determined to use the opportunity to regain his position as the Necromancer King, and rebuild his lost kingdom. To do so, he would need four things.

First, Seurot needed the Dagger of Thorns. This would prove an easy thing, as the Dagger was in the collection of a retired adventurer, easily stolen and replaced with a fake. Second, he needed an army. Not having the power to command the Undead yet, he took on the identity of Ti'Hakiv, and formed a group called the Crimson Order. The fanatical members he collected into this group would be easily bent to his will, even to the point of accepting Undeath. In addition, he gained control over a powerful band of Orcs known as the Order of the Fist; they proved useful in conducting the secret missions he required, and would eventually fill the ranks of his elite forces. Finally, he set up an agent of his own within the Towers, and used the Celestial Solstice to create special Mark Ritual scrolls, scrolls that would change into Create Undead Rituals during All Hallows Eve. Once the Towers collected these illegal scrolls for disposal, Seurot's agent stole them, ensuring the ability to create thousands of Undead.

Third, he needed his Crown. Using connections within the Towers, he had special Golems created, which were unleashed during the Celestial Solstice. The energies of the Solstice pulled back the spirits of the Hollowers from the hereafter, and bound them, and their crown shards, to the Golems. When the adventurers of Thrush Peake destroyed the Golems, they inadvertently destroyed the Dragon Mage spirits, allowing Seurot to collect the shards and reform the crown. Finally, Seurot needed the Cup of the Master. To this end, he kidnapped the Wild Elf chiefs, tapping into the power of their Totems to fortify his spirit. With their powers at his command, Seurot was able to steal the Cup right out of the Royal Treasury.

His allies and components in place, he took his followers to Loctus Urbs, and on November of Year 19, Seurot transformed himself back into a Drake, used the Ritual Scrolls he had acquired to turn his followers into Undead, and finally used the Cap of the Master restore himself to his full power, as the Dracolich. With his Army at the ready, Seurot prepared to travel to the Black Waste, so that he could take command of the splintered forces holed up there, rebuild the Kingdom of Sherikand, and conquer the surrounding Duchies. His plan was to use an ancient portal system that allowed anyone who knows the passwords to travel to many different locations on Tyrra, in an instant. His only problem was that only beings with Spirits can use it, which left out the Lesser Undead that formed the bulk of his Army. To counteract this, Seurot began constructing special Obelisks to allow the Lesser Undead to enter, and if not for the timely intervention of the adventurers of Thrush Peake, he would have succeeded. Thanks to their sacrifice, including the Final Death of the hero Valaric Breen Akanazi, Seurot had to abandon the bulk of his

force, leaving them to march to the Black Waste while he used the portal system. This host, though 20,000 strong, were no match for the King's Army, who made short work of them.

With the Dracolich in the Black Waste, keeping its borders safe became the top priority for the Kingdom, particularly as Seurot cemented his position within the Black Waste. This time period represented an important opportunity for the Black Watch, the former Ducal Guard of Ontarius, now charged with ensuring that the foul contents of the Black Waste stay inside. It would take several months for Seurot to gather together the remnants of the Necromantic Army and bring them under his control, and The King's Army, now experts in battling Undead, were still recovering from the losses incurred during the fighting only two years before. It would be some time before Haylem could go on the offensive again, and time to rebuild was badly needed.

Year 22 was when the situation in the Black Waste began to come to a head. People outside the Black Waste were suffering from nightmares, with no discernable reason behind it. It was discovered that Seurot had another ally; Sorcha, Half-Human, Half-Fae, who had the power to enter and influence people's dreams. Seurot had managed to assert his influence over her, corrupting her Spirit with Chaos, so that she could enter the dreams of the Undead. How Undead are able to dream, I couldn't tell you, but the end result was much like the advantage Death's Head had during the War, as Seurot was able to communicate and gather information from every greater Undead in Tyrra. More to the point, Sorcha was Seurot's main weapon against the adventurers of Thrush Peake, using her and the hound-like minions she created to harry the town.

By the summer of Year 22, plans started to form to deal with Seurot once and for all. A location of key importance was the Black Tower, the main citadel of the Towers when the land was still Ontarius. The Black Tower was clearly important to Seurot, as the Chaos-based defences around it made it nigh impenetrable. Special items had to be forged to combat the magical darkness that shielded the structure, and once the Undead garrisons were cleared away, the true purpose of the Tower was revealed. Apparently Seurot enjoyed collecting trophies from his various conquests, and used the Black Tower to hold them. More disturbing, however, was the rip in the very fabric of reality that was found within the trophy room; a rip that seemed to lead to the realm of The Unraveller himself.

This rip, along with others discovered throughout the Black Waste, was a direct conduit of energy between The Unraveller and Seurot, as well as the means to eventually unmake the entire realm. The next mission to the Black Tower required Kyrinen's Finest to defend a group of Sages as they conducted a difficult ritual that would seal the rip. Despite several attempts to disrupt it, including an appearance from Sorcha herself, the ritual was successfully completed and the tear in the very fabric of reality closed, for now.

Sorcha's continual interference with Haylem's efforts to rid the land of Seurot was becoming more and more aggressive, and it was becoming clear that dealing with her needed to be moved up the priority list. There were doubts among some as to whether she was irredeemably evil, or whether she could be turned from Seurot's cause. Squire Solis Urak was chief amongst those who believed she could be redeemed. Risking his rank and title in the Order, he developed a close relationship with Sorcha, in the hopes of loosening Seurot's influence on her. Meanwhile, the Fae themselves were contacted for a possible solution. The Fae believed that a special item could cleanse the Chaos from Sorcha, and thus break Seurot's hold. A plan was implemented with all due haste, when it was discovered that Sorcha intended to invade the Fae Realm directly, and turn it's power over to Suerot. After a long and wearying battle, where Thrush Peake needed to battle both Urak and Sorcha, the adventurers won out, and managed to strip Seurot of his tactical advantage.

Even with these victories, Seurot was still too powerful to take on directly. Measures had to be taken to further weaken his Spirit, and to this end, the Barbarian Clans joined in the effort. They knew Seurot from stories told from after the First Necromantic War, and using their ties to the Spirit Realm, allowed the adventurers of Thrush Peake break the bond between Seurot and the Black Waste, and strip him of his Power-based augmentations. From there, it became a matter of clearing away his various minions, leaving him vulnerable to attack directly.

The final battle occurred in the early Spring of Year 23. Seurot, having evidently grown tired of the constant harassment from Thrush Peake, saw fit to deal with them once and for all, by literally stealing away the entire town and all the adventurers within. The adventurers of Thrush Peake were more than willing to answer this challenge, and launched an assault on Chastel Rouge, the former seat of power in Ontarius, now Seurot's lair. Having blasted their way into the structure via the basement levels, the adventurers first had to deal with an old

foe; Blenryath, who had been a major force in the Second Necromantic War, stood between them and the final protections on Seurot's spirit. After a vicious battle, one of Thrush Peake's oldest foes was finally put down, leaving the town free to destroy the final defences between themselves and Seurot.

The battle, by Lord Seneschal Velso's telling, lasted eight hours, and required the town to literally wear the beast down piece by piece; it is said that even after its body was broken, the head continued to savagely attack anyone it could reach. At long last, the creature was destroyed, by an arrow launched by Countess Dalnya Laire'elen herself. There were no cheers, no exultations. Just the weary silence and shock that such a formidable and seemingly invincible foe was indeed dead. Even with the crumbled remains as evidence, the adventurers made their way back to the Towers to get confirmation; I myself was a member of the crowd that pressed into the lab while the divinations were conducted, and was thus one of the first to get the official word. And while the Undead still hold sway over the Black Waste, there was this inarguable truth to bring hope to everyone.

Seurot was dead. The last of the Necromancer Kings, master of Loctus Urbs, murderer of Virro Persephont, and instigator of the First Necromantic War, was no more.

Tash: Fall of an Empire

Recent post-War events have tested the abilities of the heroes of County Kyrinen. To better relate the strange goings on Year 23, I have gone to the person who remained at the center of things for a large portion of it, Master Sage Starseer. Here is his account of the events:

The events involving the City of Tash actually started in late Summer, Year 22. Master Lorraine Mercy of the Towers contacted me regarding some interesting documents she had discovered. These were pages from a journal, and tests confirmed them to be well over a thousand years old. The journal's author was apparently a treasure hunter, and he had spent most of his life searching for a treasure that was ancient by his standards, known simply as 'Tash'. The problem was, being such an old document, it was difficult to glean any details on Tash's location, though evidence suggested that it was somewhere in the Dividian Darklands. In order to determine more specific details, I needed someone who could translate ancient dialects, and knew their historical relevance. The Towers provided the names of two people who could help; the Hobling historian, Tybalt Threefoot, and the Barbarian linguist, Basalt.

Getting Tybalt's help was easy enough, and I secured his aid after running some 'errands' for him. Basalt proved more difficult, and not because he was unwilling. After locating his home, I discovered he had been kidnapped! With some help from the local Watch, I was able to track down his attackers. They turned out to be members of the Order of the Open Book (some may recall that they were involved in the extra-planar disturbances during the Celestial Solstice of Year 22), and were forcing poor Basalt to translate some old books that had been though lost during the War. The Watch and I made short work of them, and I was able to get Basalt's help in the translations I needed.

Of course, there was still a War going on, and putting an end to the threat of the Dracolich took priority, so it wasn't until the Spring that the matter of Tash came up again. The help I gained from Tybalt and Basalt had allowed the Towers to make great progress on the documents, and specific details on Tash came to light as a result. The texts suggested that Tash might be a powerful magic item or weapon, and that it was very thoroughly sealed away using crystal 'keys'. The Towers also learned that the Order of the Open Book had not given up on Tash, and were searching for these very 'keys' themselves. The command of the Towers was quite clear; secure the 'keys' at all costs, and do not let Tash fall into the Order's hands.

In the Spring of Year 23, I led a mission to locate the 'keys'. Needless to say, it was not easy task, and took a great deal of sacrifice from many Thrush Peake adventurers to accomplish this. Whatever Tash was, it was well secured; we had to locate an object that hid the 'keys' themselves, activate it, retrieve the 'keys' from the pocket dimensions they were stored in, travel to a special altar that the 'keys' were drawn to, and then set the 'keys' into the altar while battling strange crystalline monsters and an Order Drake covered in cryptic runes. Sure, easy enough.

It turns out Tash wasn't the 'treasure' we thought it was, but rather it was a city encased in a crystalline bubble! The entire city was frozen in time, and up until that moment put out of phase with the rest of the world, to make it completely undetectable. The city also appeared to be embroiled in a siege, with invading forces breaching the walls and fighting strange humanoids, presumably the city's citizens. The Kingdom military quickly took over the situation, posting guards around the bubble to keep contained the crystalline animals that would occasionally exit the bubble. Some merely attacked the Kingdom soldiers, others headed straight for Thrush Peake; where the 'compass' used to find the 'keys' was now permanently rooted to the ground, surging with strange energy. It was this energy that the animals sought, as they would absorb it and become fortified by it.

This was the calm before the storm. After a few days of this, the entire bubble suddenly and violently burst, scattering crystalline shards in all directions. The damage was horrific, and it was all the King's forces could do to regroup, pull out the casualties, and keep the situation contained. Soon, a stream of spirits started to arrive at the resurrection circles, but only some were soldiers of Haylem. The races invading the city, Human, Hobling and Dwarf, were being slaughtered by the forces of Tash, and after some difficulties, these resurrected individuals explained the events that led to this situation.

Tash was an ancient city, thousands of years old by our estimates, which was populated by three races. Some people believe these races may be the precursors to the Elven, Ogre and Goblin races. It was considered by those of the era a beacon of peace and tranquility, its three peoples holding to tenets of personal discipline and enlightenment, as exemplified by their affiliation with the elements of Order and Ice. Fire and Entropy were deemed 'evil' influences to them, and considered forbidden magics. The influences of these forbidden elements did begin to seep into their society, through a cult that dabbled in the magic of Flame and Necromancy, led by a powerful individual. His involvement with Flame worship was unknown at the time, for he was also the respected Vizier of Tolovin, the King of Tash. It is not certain how, but the Vizier, Vinaeus, began to twist the mind and spirit of Tolovin, causing him to adhere to the ways of Flame as well. Though some questioned the change that came over their once noble King, most dared not voice any concern they had; their beliefs in loyalty and discipline keeping them in line. Other high ranking persons, such as the Supreme Commander of the Tash army, fell to the influence of Flame, and any who openly questioned what was happening, soon disappeared, taken in the night by a 'secret police' force loyal to Flame.

Not satisfied with controlling the city, this cult soon used its influence to annex the lands of neighbouring Kingdoms, quickly replacing their peaceful reputation with one of cruelty and violence. The neighbouring Kingdoms began to rally, putting up a united front against the forces of Tash, taking back their lands and eventually forcing the army back to the very walls of Tash. It is believed that the bubble was a final defense against the siege, and that someone from Tash would release the city once the invading armies gave up and left. It has been determined that members of the cult were outside the city when the bubble went up, but no one knows what became of them, since they clearly did not release the city, leaving it hidden from history until Year 23 AU.

Once the siege on the city had been broken, the forces of Tash began a campaign of aggression, looting nearby farms and towns for supplies, and kidnapping anyone who looked important to question them on the current situation outside the city. Only the combined efforts of Thrush Peake and the King's Army were able to put a halt to the looting, and push the Tash raiders back into their city. It was clear, however, that should the Tash Army march in force, the King's Army in Ellisel, would be overwhelmed.

Fortunately, some resistance to Tolovin's depredations still existed. Led Usus, an advisor to the Tash royalty, these resistance fighters got into contact with Thrush Peake, with the intention of seeking aid to put an end to Tolovin's tyranny. This plan came with several parts, meant to weaken the infrastructure of Tash to the point where it could be retaken. First, the adventurers had to conduct a series of night-time raids, slipping past Tash guards to accomplish their goals. These goals included releasing a group of individuals loyal to the resistance from magical prisons, sabotaging the magical circles that summoned the many Flame elementals that supplemented the Tash army and then delving into the Tash's underground, searching through ancient crypts for a legendary sword that has been held by the ancient kings of Tash. Finally, they had to find the Spirit of the one of these ancient kings, so that he could empower the sword; with this sword in hand, it could be used to drive out the evil influences that were controlling King Tolovin.

The biggest issue in dealing with Tash was its powerful army. The Supreme Commanders control over his soldiers was absolute, their loyalty to the command structure of Tash unwavering. The only way to thwart this army would be to remove the Supreme Commander, allowing a secondary commander loyal to the resistance to take over and command the army to surrender to Haylem. But, this would be impossible as long as the Supreme Commander remained ensconced in his citadel. To lure him out, a bold plan was made. The Duke's forces would march on Tash, but remain on the defensive, forcing the Tash army to come out, and their Commander with them. Meanwhile the adventurers of Thrush Peake would slip past the Tash patrols and attack the encampment of the Supreme Commander directly, incapacitating him long enough for his second-in-command to give the surrender order. At that point, the top priority was to get the Army of Tash as far away from the city as possible, to ensure that Tolovin himself would not step in and assume command. Once the Tash Army was safely away, they were relocated and housed within the confines of New Serrenga.

The last major obstacle to defeating the King was an Order Drake. This creature was once the guardian of the Kings of Tash, but when Tolovin's mind was twisted by Vinaeus, powerful magics were used to empower and control the Drake, ensuring that it would never question the new order. Armed with ancient ritual magics provided by Usus, the Drake was lured into a trap, one that would disrupt the magics controlling the Drake in such a way as to destroy them. With the Drake free of Vinaeus' influence, it departed for the plane of Order, where it couldn't be bound a second time.

The tide was quickly turning against Tash. The army and the citizens of Tash evacuated, the city proper reduced to rubble, and the Royal palace under Haylem control, all that remained was Tolovin and his Royal guard, pinned within his throne room. In the eleventh month of Year 23, the final assault was launched. Armed with the fabled sword of his ancestors, the adventurers of Thrush Peake stormed the throne room and battled the remaining forces guarding King Tolovin, and struck down the fell King with the ancient sword. Once its magic had driven out the evil spirit of Flame that controlled him, Tolovin surrendered to the armies of Haylem, and joined his people. They have since been relocated so they can make a fresh start. The last remnants of the city of Tash crumbled to dust, their magical energies expended.

As told by Master Sage Starseer ang Arawan, with minor editorial corrections.

1.3 THE WAR'S END

In the weeks following the Battle of Thrush Peake and the defeat of the Cabal Malefic, the armies continued to clash. After the fall of Salais and Tiefanu, and the tragic loss of so many Masters of the Earthen Towers, it seemed the momentum begun by the adventurers of Thrush Peake might be impossible to maintain. Desperate evacuations of towns in the way of the Undead met with only moderate success, and only in the smaller settlements. Refugees poured into the Dividian Darklands, drawn to a place where at least some victory had been achieved.

The King, under siege in the capital, had stationed each of his Companions with the Duchies they were bound to. Sir Antrewald Dumair in Ellisel, Sir Bergan Kilmoun in Ontarius, Sir Quinnar Fennil in Cambria, Sir Adrastam Ethulwar in Taleria and Sir Orthak Brightaxe in Aieland were his eyes and ears in the field and their mysterious ability to communicate with their liege kept the King advised and ready.

Those who saw the King during this time whispered that he seemed to suffer with the land itself.

Death's Head

Nevertheless, the demi-liche Death's Head continued to scry every troop movement, every messenger, and every supply train which attempted to elude the Undead Armies. Two of the Undead Armies continued to march across Ellisel, salting the very earth of the North as they crossed, while another Army of at least one hundred thousand wreaked havoc in Taleria. The greatest threat was massed along the border of Cambria and Ontarius, threatening

the already-besieged capital. Ontarius itself was in desperate straits, the remaining troops fighting a doomed battle against a much greater foe. If there was any hope for the Duchy, a way had to be found to reinforce the forces there.

The King's next course of action depended on how the threat of Death's Head and his scrying device could be met. With great secrecy, he sent four scouts to Thrush Peake, to watch what occurred without falling under Death's Head gaze, and to bring him word the instant any attempt against the demi-liche was successful.

On the night of September 19, AU 17, a small but elite group launched an assault on Death's Head keep, while the rest of Thrush Peake's forces engaged in a desperate battle to draw the enemy's attention away. Three hours later, five of the ten who entered the Keep returned. The others were captured, turned into Undead, and set upon the town.

What occurred within the Keep is the stuff of legend, but the results were immediate and tangible. The mirror of Death's Head was destroyed, and Death's Head himself, the disembodied head of a ten thousand year old general of legend, was rendered impotent, unable to communicate with his armies or scry the positions of the King's forces.

Plans Enacted

When they learned of the destruction of the mirror, the four scouts immediately used a Spirit Recall, to return to the side of the King. Although the enemy still possessed far greater numbers, the forces of the Undead were losing cohesion. The scattered Generals, who were far inferior to the demi-liche that had led them, were now isolated, their arcane communications gone. Seizing the advantage, the King put his plans to immediate action. He contacted his Knight Companions to let them know it was time to act, and act now.

The situation in Aieland was soon to meet with an astonishing reversal. In a single moment, for no reason that the Ducal forces could fathom, fifty thousand enemy troops turned to dust. Where battle had raged there was a sudden silence, as the enemy crumbled before the soldier's unbelieving eyes. It was a moment as terrifying as it was invaluable.

It was only in the days after the war that the full story was revealed – a group of warriors from Thrush Peake, led by several of the Knights and the Guilds, had travelled by magical means to the location of an underwater Chaos node, and fought there, aided by elemental power, until the node, and the powers animating the sea-based army, were utterly destroyed.

The Aieland army was now free to move troops west towards Ellisel and the rest of the Kingdom to reinforce more desperate situations.

Ellisel Reclaimed

Ellisel was burning. Two Armies of the Undead had made their way North and South across the Duchy, destroying as they went, in an inexorable pincer movement that left refugees flooding West towards Thrush Peake and the Dividian Darklands. Salais and Tiefanu had fallen, along with countless smaller cities and villages. Ardales to the Southeast was under threat. When Sir Antrewald Dumair brought news to Duke Ghenoa of Death Head's fall, he knew they had to act swiftly to save any part of their homeland.

The Army of the Duchy was split, with one group moving North, under the leadership of Sir Count Sevainyain Myanthyn Samanar`Amanurya, the Elven count of Cordoveaux. They were to reclaim the lands surrounding Salais, and find a way to meet up with the expected reinforcements from Aieland. Under the Count's able leadership, they fought their way through to the North, encountering the Aielanders who had approached with equal vigour from the East.

It was a bitter victory. The two Armies met outside the ruins of Salais, on land burned and salted beyond recognition. It would be generations before the land was habitable again, and the broken towers of the once great city stood as bleak reminder of all that had been lost.

Meanwhile, the second half of the Army, under the leadership of Duke Ghenoa, fought their way to the Southern woodlands. After continual skirmishing, and heavy losses, they reached the cover of the trees and melted into the forest. While Dumair moved the bulk of the Army to stand against the Undead threatening Ardales, the Duke and his court, with a small group of elite troops, moved deeper into the forests to reconnoitre with the Mystic Wood Elves, drawn into the battle as the Undead moved ever closer to the Mystic Woods themselves.

The forest itself was their greatest ally – with the aid of the Mystic Wood Elves, their own magic, and the natural advantage of their woodland heritage, this small group was able to inflict devastating damage on the Undead Armies remaining in the area. When word reached them of a squadron of powerful Undead moving to bolster the enemy around Ardales, Duke Ghenoa and his forces moved quickly to intercept them.

A Duke Falls

The enemy was greater in number and led by several greater Undead. The Duke and his force ghosted through the trees beside them, preparing to ambush. Upon the Duke's command, they engaged. It was a short, brutal fight. Aided by the confusion of the trees and the archers and scouts with them, the Ducal Court was able to inflict a great deal of damage. It was not without cost. One by one, the Court began to fall. At the death of Cadon Eirinalestrajam, the Court Healer, the fight grew more desperate. When the Duke at last felled the leader of the Undead, the only member of his court remaining at his side was his scout, Rareveiel Lothil du Sethlet. The Duke succumbed to his own wounds moments later; a last stray blow from a remaining Undead bringing him to his knees. Rareveiel was unable to reach him in time.

Duke Kyrinen Ghenoa was Finally Dead.

The Ducal Court, as used as they might have become to the political life before the war, proved in their sacrifice and strength that they remained a potent force on the field. Rareveiel herself proved how far their honour extended. Rather than allow the Undead to dishonour the Duke's body, the Wild Elven scout pulled his body into the cover of the trees, and vanished into the forest.

Three days later, a griffin flew into Sir Dumair's encampment. On its back were Rareveiel and the body of her Duke. She was badly wounded, and the griffin exhausted almost beyond its endurance, collapsing onto the ground before Sir Dumair's pavilion. Rareveiel would not speak of what she had endured, of how she had managed to cross such a distance with such a burden, or how she had gained such an ally as the griffin and she would not rest until the Duke's body was committed to the flames, and kept safe from any indignity.

With the reinforcements kept from reaching Ardales, the Ellisel army was able to turn back the Undead forces from the capitol. This victory achieved, they swept back through the Southern forests, rooting the remaining Undead from the land, and then turned their armies South, towards Cambria and Ontarius, where the final battles of the war awaited them.

In the Midst of War

While the battles raged on, the Knight Companion and the surviving nobles of Ellisel knew that something had to be done to maintain any sense of stability in the decimated Duchy. The King concurred, and, in light of his victories in Northern Ellisel and the continued strength of his leadership, Count Sevainyain of Cordoveaux was chosen to be made the new Duke of Ellisel. The Counties of Cordoveaux and Benwillow were merged under the leadership of Benwillow's Count, Sir Count Jeisic Melayne Lomincirith.

The King also granted the lands around Thrush Peake to Ellisel. The influx of refugees had swollen the population of the once-frontier area dramatically, and the steadfast courage of its inhabitants had brought it much to the attention of the rest of the Kingdom. A new County was created in honour of the fallen Duke Ghenoa. There were great hopes for the County of Kyrinen, where so many of the first victories had taken place, after the war.

A young Elven Squire of one of the High Elven lineages, Dalnya Laire'elen, was made the new Countess of Kyrinen. The Circle of Chivalry in Thrush Peake, Sir Landrellthis, Dame Isobel, Dame Valadwena, Sir Ciraband, and Sir Akani,

were each awarded the title of Knight Bannerette, and extensive domains within the County were granted to them. Guildmaster Shray was promoted to the responsibilities of an Earthen Master, while Master Melisandre was made a new Grandmaster of the Celestial Towers.

The Duke and the Horde

Duke Alphonse du Soiree of Taleria was ready when word from the King reached him through the Knight Companion. The Drae, known throughout the land by the name he adopted on the surface, had worked throughout the war to keep the Undead Armies at bay. It was widely believed he was second only to the King in prowess and intelligence, and his honour was legendary. He came to power in Taleria as the result of a promise to the former Duke, and was honour-bound to do his best to make the Duchy a better place. Such conviction was not without cost – he slaughtered his entire court for being dishonourable.

The Duke, in his wisdom, had long prevented members of the Horde, the infamous Half-Orc mercenary band, from gathering in too large numbers. It was widely believed that if they were to mass themselves, they would rival the Ducal forces. But with the coming of the Undead, the Duke relaxed his grip and allowed the Horde to muster. When word reached him the tribes had gathered; he rode to meet them.

What occurred next is already the stuff of legend. The Duke challenged the leader of the Horde (that position having, apparently, been bloodily decided shortly after the Horde had gathered) to single combat for control of the Horde. Jaeger Bloodeye, a Half-Orc warrior who led one of the most feared tribes of the mercenaries, laughed in the Duke's face, and agreed.

Perhaps he should not have laughed.

It is no reflection on Jaeger Bloodeye's skill with an axe that the Duke bested him in the space of a few heartbeats. Nor is it a slight to the racial honour of the Half-Orcs that they accepted the victory over their strongest with so little qualm. It is, instead, a testament to the Duke. The Horde was his. By the next morning, the Drae led the Half-Orcs to join the other forces of the Duchy.

Taleria, Horde and Army, rode East to the King.

The King Besieged

Although the fall of Death's Head had enabled his Companions to rally the Duchies, the King himself could not join the field. Haylem City was under siege. Shortly after the King sent the fleet to try to bring aid to the desperate situation in Ontarius, Undead forces broke through into the centre of Cambria, and surrounded the capital.

Dangerous as a siege was, the King had great hopes that the flanking manoeuvre of sending troops by sea to aid Ontarius would draw attention away, while preventing a collapse of his forces in Ontarius. Duke Paul could not hold against the enemy much longer, and as the ranks of the Undead swelled with the troops retreating from defeat in Taleria, Ontarius began to despair.

But the relief by sea was not to be. The fleet was caught in a storm – whether by cruel luck or malignant magic none could say – and those ships that were not destroyed were hopelessly scattered, rendering the reinforcements nothing more than small bands of ragged survivors. It was a loss Ontarius – and, indeed, the entire Kingdom – could ill afford.

Spirits Awaken

As Ontarius trembled at the brink, and the siege beat down at the walls of his home, those close to the King began to fear for him. The plight of the land seemed to draw some force from the King, some strength, and although his energy was undiminished, it was apparent to his closest advisors that his health was failing him. The Armies of Ellisel and Taleria were advancing to assist, but their progress, fighting to reclaim each acre of land, was slow.

When news reached him of the loss of the fleet, the King secluded himself from his Court. He called for the representatives of both Towers, who looked worried after leaving their audience with the King. It is believed he communicated at length with the Companions, and afterwards was observed meditating alone at the top of his observation tower. Shortly afterwards, the two Grand Masters took vigil at the entrance to the tower. For three days, he would not emerge, took no food or drink, and entrusted the defense of the city to his commanders.

It was on the third day the Court Wizards began to look uneasy, casting glances at the tower and murmuring in hushed tones amongst themselves. Some great magic was being enacted, something drawing power from the very earth beneath the stone of the castle, from the sky, from the forests. They could feel it, but they could not explain it. It is said that by the evening of the third day, the air was so thick with power and strangeness that even the most hardened warrior could not but feel it.

And then it stopped.

A few minutes later the King staggered down the steps of the tower. When he reached the final stair, he collapsed to the ground. As they helped him to his bedchamber, his advisors asked him, in hushed voices, what had occurred.

He would say only "The land is waking."

Unexpected Aid

It was not until dawn, five days later, that the answer began to be known. The Undead Armies were encamped around the city walls, many of the forces being held in reserve while constant pressure was put on the defenders. It was known that Duchies were marching to aid, but their arrival was not imminent. What troops the King had were engaged to their utmost in holding the city; the chance of breaking the siege was slim. Which made what occurred next so unexpected, to attackers and defenders alike.

To the inhabitants of Haylem City, it sounded like thunder; a storm on the horizon, perhaps. It was not until the first Watchman began to shout, over and over, and the bells of the city began to toll, that the true source of the sound was revealed. It is said they crested the hills around the capitol without breaking stride, without pause, falling into the enemy like a flood.

The Barbarians had come to war.

Five days previously, the greatest of their Shamookas had awoken to a voice, then to several voices, clamoring for her ear, demanding her attention. The Animal Spirits of the Clans, long distant and spoken of only in tradition, were awake; awake and speaking. *"The King and the Land had woken them, they said, and in their voice the King and the Land were one"*. The King and the Land were calling the Spirits to war, awakening them from slumber. The Spirits of the Barbarian Clans demanded answer.

On the dawn of the day when the siege of Haylem City was broken, the Barbarians gave their answer, and bound themselves to the King as far more than just a conquered people. When they came to war, it was not only to fight the Undead. It was to save the King.

The King and his troops rallied quickly, leading sorties out of the gates of the Haylem City with devastating force. By nightfall the tide had turned, and the King met the Chiefs of the Barbarians outside of Haylem City. The Spirits of their Clans were with them on the field, and all knew who had awoken them. For this act, King Jean-Guerre, who had been already respected for his strength, became a figure to be revered and trusted, mightier than the Spirits of the Clans themselves. It was, in the midst of war, a new beginning.

Not all was victory. The Undead Armies, in disarray, fled eastward, towards the sea and escape to Ontarius. In their retreat, they scorched the earth, razing the Citadel of Roncesvalles and the city of Culloden. The protection of the capital had not come without cost.

All Roads Lead to Ontarius

It had taken far longer than anyone hoped to break through in Ellisel, in Taleria, and the siege in Cambria. The Undead moved towards Ontarius, in fighting retreat, ahead of the forces trying to reach Duke Paul and Sir Bergan Kilmoun. Valiantly as they had tried to hold on in Ontarius, the Duchy's Armies, were already in a perilous position and could not stand against the reinforcements arriving in the form of the retreating Undead. In those last desperate days as they waited for the King to reach them, the Duke and the Companion did all they could to get the last inhabitants out of the Duchy and towards safety. Despite their best efforts, many were left behind the lines of their retreat.

The forces of Ellisel, Taleria, and those who had lifted the siege in Cambria met under the King's banners, and all haste was made in the attempt to reach the mortally wounded Duchy. To those commoners who saw the host pass, it was a glimpse of legend in the making; the knights, the Dukes, the Barbarians and the Horde, marching together to a last defense of their homelands. And at their head, the King, radiant with power, never pausing, never resting, all thought bent on saving this last pillar of his Kingdom. Beside him, his Knight Companions gathered, all of their number together now excluding Bergan Kilmoun.

AS the army advanced towards Ontarius, the King's Army was joined by large forces of both the Celestial and Earth Guilds. As the procession of from the Towers approached the King's position, the Armies of the Guilds parted, and from within the ranks emerged the Ordo Solis. The soldiers of the Ordo Solis stood, facing the King as their Commander dismounted strode forward and dropped to a knee in front of King Totemkompf. It is not known what was said, but the Commander of the Ordo Solis spoke softly while kneeling before of the King, words that would only reach his Majesty's ears. But with a look of great sadness the King turned his back on the Commander, and the Ordo Solis, without acknowledging them. The Commander then rose from his knees, rejoined his troops and the armies of the Towers joined the assault.

A strange darkness was falling over Ontarius; its borders swarmed with the Undead, with Banners of Darkness and with Barracks of Bone. Those scouts who returned reported that the Undead were falling into disarray behind their lines, the army slowly falling into chaos, yet the forces that stood before the King still stood in formation, unyielding, fearless, and full of hate. If they could be broken, the rest of the Duchies were safe. Perhaps, if they were broken enough, some part of doomed Ontarius might be reclaimed as well.

The Circle is Complete

The last defenders of Ontarius rallied to the King's banner as they approached. It was a pitiful remnant. Duke Paul, the Knight Companion, and a handful of knights with what remained of their troops reported wearily, confirming the King's worst fears. The lines of retreat had been cut off, and thousands were still trapped behind the lines of the enemy. What was left of the Duke's Army had been routed and forced to abandon their evacuations. A single narrow pass was all that remained untainted and unoccupied by the enemy. Ontarius would soon irredeemably belong to the Undead.

There was yet hope. With the arrival of Kilmoun the Circle of Companions was complete, and as each of them drew strength from the lands to which they were bound, so did the King draw strength from each of them. Assembled, they fought together as one. The Dukes marshalled their forces; Aieland, Taleria, Ellisel and Cambria gathered together, the Barbarians restless beside them.

No trumpets pronounced this battle. No declarations from either side. The Armies of Haylem, exhausted, footsore, and battle-weary, threw themselves with grim determination at the Undead, who responded with the same tireless hatred with which they had fought the entire war. It is said every Duchy, every tribe of the Horde and Clan of the Barbarians, have their stories of that day. The stories hold one thing in common: all who were fighting knew, if this fight could be won, if this last of the organized Undead armies could be defeated, their homes might be safe. And they fought as they had never fought before.

But it was the King himself who held the day.

The King and the Land

As they advanced upon the enemy, the Companions formed around the King. Something passed between them; an agreement, a jest... whatever it was, a sudden fierce smile lit the King's face, and he drew his sword, and touched it once to the earth beneath him, and brandished it once to the sky above. Something about him was altered and grew, although no one could say exactly what it was. It was as though some power lit him from within. And when they met the enemy, it became clear to all that their King was more than they had ever imagined him to be.

His sword shone with the light of the sun, and under its brilliance the Undead fell back, some of them destroyed utterly, others brittle and blinded. Night itself seemed to flee from him, and with each step he took the Earth channelled through him and his blade. He was Tyrra's vengeance in Human form. Beside him, the Knight Companions fought as one, leaving ash and dust in their wake.

The King sought out the last Generals, one by one, slaughtering everything in his path to them. Any Undead they saw controlling others, he and his Companions advanced upon, systematically annihilating the remaining leadership of the Undead. They moved along the front lines of the fight, a glowing circle of brilliance under the clouds that covered Ontarius.

The Undead were being forced back, step by step, but as the land behind them became visible, it became apparent to all that the battle would not, in fact, save Ontarius. The land they had known was no more. The sky was black. The earth was scorched, its foulness visible even from a great distance. Smoke drifted dully through the air. The smell of death hung thick, and beyond the Army, groups of Undead could be seen moving across the land.

Loss and Victory

The pass that Duke Paul had managed to keep clear was being over-run by the Undead, pushed back into it by the fighting. Duke Paul screamed for the fighters to try and keep it open, to break through and hold the pass, but there was no time left. A retreating Banner of Darkness covered it in arcane night, and the last pass to Ontarius fell to shadow.

And as that last shadow fell, Kilmoun, Knight Companion to Ontarius, stumbled. A savage blow from a Death Knight's sword fell across his back, and before he could recover, his body was wracked with chaos from a lich nearby. He fell, and before the King could reach him he was gone, borne away by the flow of battle and the innumerable enemy. When his Finally Dead body was found, it lay at the edge of the pass, where the last passage to the lands to which he had been bound had closed.

In the midst of the battle, there was no time to mourn. The battle was turning in favour of the King's forces, and the advantage had to be pressed. If they could not all be killed, the Undead needed to be scattered and their leaders broken. An army could not be left behind to threaten the Kingdom again.

The Undead forces began to falter. Many of the remaining Greater Undead were destroyed or had fled back into Ontarius, and the unthinking corpses they left behind fell over and over again to the blades of the attackers. Duke Alphonse of Taleria led the Horde into their midst, and broke the remainder of the organized forces asunder with an onslaught of pure, unbridled aggression.

The combined Armies of the King had done their work. Exhausted, bloodied, and having taken grievous losses, they watched the Undead Army collapse into chaos, and fell upon those that remained. The Undead power was broken, their generals dead. They fell back into the darkness of Ontarius and came forward no more. It was victory. The living had drawn a line in the ground, and the dead would pass it no longer. The last battle of Ontarius gave Haylem back to its people, and ended a year of terror and bloodshed. The momentum begun with the defeat of Death's Head had brought the Kingdom to this point, and the war was almost done.

But the King saw none of it. He and the surviving Knight Companions knelt by the body of Sir Bergan Kilmoun and wept. Wept for him, and for lost Ontarius.

The Black Waste

Ontarius was no more. Where the Duchy once had been, there was now a wasteland, populated by thousands upon thousands of Undead; the earth itself lay scorched and dead. As the days following the end of the war became weeks, and months, stories began to emerge of the horrors of the once mighty Duchy. Life was anathema there now, and the fate of those caught behind enemy lines when the Duchy fell were grim. Thousands of its inhabitants remained unaccounted for, and the news of the discovery of a Finally Dead body was met with relief, rather than sorrow. It took little time for Ontarius to become a memory. The Black Waste was all that remained.

Most of the nobility of the Duchy was dead. Duke Paul himself survived, with the remnants of his Court, and they set themselves the grim task of guarding the borders of their former homeland, protecting the living from the wasteland of the dead. A series of watchtowers was built along the borders, and other knights of the lost Duchy gathered to join their Duke. Even Alphonse of Taleria was impressed by the honour of the Duke and his companions. Word spread further afield, and soon commoners and knights alike travelled to take up the call. The long vigil of the Black Watch had begun.

Aftermath

It was time to rebuild. The world was changed; parts of the land were scarred so badly it was unknown when, or if, they would be habitable again. Aieland proved the most resilient of the Duchies; its main cities largely untouched by conflict, it was back to its normal workings swiftly. The rest of the Kingdom was not so fortunate.

The nobility of the land had changed. Many Lords, and even commoners, had been knighted in the field during the battles. Many of the knights who had served so faithfully during the war had Finally Died before victory could be achieved. Some Barony's populations were decimated, while others had seen their numbers swollen with refugees. Many Baronies and lands were now held by regents or under the stewardship of Seneschals until new leaders were appointed.

Rebuilding of many fallen cities and towns began quickly. The damage made by the siege to the Capital was quickly repaired, and in Ellisel, Tiefanu was the first focus of rebuilding efforts. Citizens from throughout the Duchy sought to aid in the restoration of Tiefanu, in some ways to speed the healing of their home, and themselves. On a smaller scale, in the new County of Kyrinen, the town of Watchwood was rebuilt, and many of the refugees settled there, plying their trades in their newfound home.

With their Tribal Spirits awakened, and their faithfulness to the King proven beyond doubt, the end of the war brought good news to the Barbarian Clans. In honour of their service in lifting the siege on the capital, and with confirmation of their loyalty to him and the land, King Totemkompf granted the Barbarians their own lands – a long sweep of the wilderness below the new County of Kyrinen and to the North of Taleria. These homelands did not constitute a Duchy, nor did they have a Knight Companion tied to them but it gave them an autonomy and authority not afforded to any of the other Races of Man.