

The Kingdom in Winter

Farewell to the King

Some people say they dreamed of it. Before the Regent announced that the King was both rescued and lost, there are those who say they dreamed of his return. *The King, glowing with light, before a flowering tree. The King, eyes full of sorrow and purpose, healing the corrupted land around him.* That something of great magic happened in Haylem at the cusp of wintertide is without doubt, whether or not you believe in the prophecies of dreams. And whether or not you believe it, there is something comforting about the story.

Little is announced of the specifics. The Regent of Haylem, Viscount Remy, lauds the bravery and valiant efforts of the adventurers of Thrush Peake in rescuing the King from his captivity, but confirms what many have long-feared: King Jean-Guerre will not return to the throne. While the King's spirit has been freed, he now protects the Kingdom in a manner far different from the mortal world of politics and governance. In practical terms, the throne is empty.



With the King's return – and the strange magic of what follows – Death's Head Keep vanishes without a trace. The armies of King Roderick return to their rest, as does the shade of that once-great ruler, content that the Kingdom is once again under the protection of his family. The spectral trees remain, but overnight become flush with life and the promise of the spring to come after the sleep of winter.

And while many mourn the loss of the man Jean-Guerre, many more are heartened by the belief that the King is now one with the land, and the land shall prosper under his protection.

She Who Walks No More

The creature known as She Who Walks as Death, and her undead army, are gone. Defeated and bound away by the adventurers of Thrush Peake, the ancient evil no longer threatens the Kingdom. The areas of Ellisel and the Barbarian lands she occupied rally to rebuild and to prepare themselves for the rapidly approaching winter now that the threat of destruction at the hands of the undead is gone.

There are changes in the Barbarian lands. Scattered from their Gathering after a devastating attack by



She Who Walks as Death, the Clans do not come together once again. Instead, they remain in their traditional Clan lands as they used to do. The site of the Gathering is empty, save for a few traders and small Clan groups making camp as they pass through.

Grand Shamooka Eagle Song, long absent from public life, arrives in Haylem City with firm words for the Regent. The Barbarian people serve the Kingdom still, but there is much work to be done to ensure their greater equality and recognition of their ways.

A Victory in the Waste

People as far away as Haylem City claim to have seen the explosion of Creation and Earthen energy that ignited in the Black Wastes at the end of the autumn. The conflagration, said to be the work of the Earthen Towers, the adventurers of Thrush Peake, and unknown magical forces, scoured away the corruption of the Black Waste nearly to the horizon, cleansing tainted soil and boiling away the grim clouds that had hid the sun for so many years. By the time the magic stabilizes, much of the northern coast of the Black Waste is no more.



Coming on the heels of the defeat of the Traitor Legions, the reclamation of nearly a third of the lands of Ontarius is a heady victory for the Kingdom. The area is inundated with scholars of the Earthen Towers, working to guide and understand the flow of Earthen magic keeping the corruption of the Wastes at bay. The Black Watch, meanwhile, move inland to secure the new borders. Even as they erect new fortifications, many wonder - who would wish to live in such a dangerous place as this?

But within days, the first settlers are arriving at the Wall, waiting patiently to be permitted to pass. People who have spent a decade believing their homeland was lost forever are not willing to wait for the snows to melt to return; they will spend the winter staking out their farms, helping the Watch build fortifications, and readying to plant Ontarius' first crops in ten years.

A Duchy Reborn

There is another return to Ontarius as well. Duke Paul, who founded the Black Watch a decade ago with the fall of his Duchy, formally retakes the Ducal Seat of Ontarius. While his focus remains much the same – the security of the reclaimed lands and maintenance of the Wall – the symbolic act is a sign of the renewed hopefulness of Haylem's fifth Duchy, and the determination that the process of reclamation will continue.

Alongside the Duke, a member of the Chivalry also emerges as a candidate for the new Knight Companion of Ontarius. While only a monarch can make a Knight Companion, Dame Portia takes on the duties of

the post until such time as the succession is resolved. A veteran of the Second Necromancer War and the Black Watch, Dame Portia spends most of the winter in the reclaimed lands, determining their extent and securing their borders with the forces of the Watch.

The Towers announce their own changes. Earthen Grandmaster Aire'namanse is reassigned to reclaimed Ontarius, leaving the position of Earthen Grandmaster for Ellisel to be filled at the Tower's discretion. The Celestial Towers shuffles around a number of people moving Grandmaster Melisandre of Ontarius to the position of Grandmaster of the Unclaimed Lands – the borders of the Kingdom, the Barbarian lands, and the nebulous places in between. They have yet to proclaim a new Celestial Grandmaster for Ontarius.

The Kingdom Looks Forward

Elsewhere in the Kingdom, the wheel of life turns in the natural way. The elderly Duke of Cambria dies peacefully, and is succeeded by his granddaughter, the new Duchess Bronwyn McCondria. The Duke's life is celebrated with a wake for the ages, full of drinking, music and stories. Nobility from across Haylem brave the snows to attend, and the Duchess, young and unmarried, is formally invested after the time of mourning has passed.

The depredations of the undead were not without cost, and the harvest is scarce in many areas of the Kingdom. Help comes from an unexpected place: the Ambassador of Treshelling announces that, with the assistance of Pook of Wolfhaven, young Prince Gregorio is making a generous donation of goods and food to the people. The son of Sheris Von Haylem and the heir to Treshelling, Gregorio is one of the claimants to Haylem's throne as well. It brings his name to many for the first time, as does the tale of how Haylem came to Treshelling's aid earlier in the year, when Catania was under attack by King Roderick's forces. Perhaps a new era of reciprocity has begun.



Midwinter Court in the capital is momentous. After several days march from Taleria, a glittering procession arrives at the gates of Haylem City. At its head, a figure many thought never to see in the Kingdom again: Sheris Von Haylem. She and her son Gregorio are met at the gate by the Regent, who greets them with all courtesy, but the rumblings of the crowd are not all friendly, and there are rumours at least one hidden archer is discovered readying their bow along the route to the castle. That she has passed through the gates of the city is a story that travels fast as words can tell it through the Kingdom.

Arriving with less pomp and ceremony are the other claimants to the throne. Dame Rendal arrives to speak on behalf of her infant daughter Persephone, and Prince Adrian is quietly granted permission to enter the Kingdom for the duration of the succession talks. The banished Prince is now widely known to be serving with the Black Watch on border of the Wastes. Tales at first tell of how often he had to be rescued by his bodyguard Squire LostHawk, but soon the stories reveal him to be brave and true, and devoted to working in the reclaimed lands.

The Succession Talks are not conclusive. In the end, all parties agree to another year of Viscount Remi's Regency, but with Gregorio approaching his majority, it is clear the Treshelling contingent will not be patient with an interim solution forever.

News grows scarcer after Midwinter. The Kingdom settles in to wait for spring, and there is little traffic on the highways and byways of the Duchies. Still, there is food enough for all, stout walls and warm fires, and better days can surely not be too far away.