

War's End

After Thrush Peake

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, of 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, every supply train attempting to elude the Undead Armies. Two of their 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 an 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 army 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 Recalled to the side of the King. Although the enemy still possessed far greater numbers, the forces of the Undead were losing cohesion. Scattered Generals, far the inferior of the demi-liche who 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, they knew they had to act swiftly to save any part of their homeland.

The armies of the Duchy were split, 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 constant 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 Wood itself.

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

Their 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. At 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.

-----First Teaser

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 dark elf, 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 capitol.

Dangerous as a siege was, the King had great hopes that the flanking maneuver 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 those 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. (*called the representatives of both towers, they looked worried etc.*) It is believed he communicated at length with the Companions, and afterwards was observed meditating alone at the top of his observation tower. Shortly after 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 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 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. 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 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 eastwards, 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 capitol 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, already in a perilous position, 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 towards 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 except Bergan Kilmoun.

- Celestial Guild and Earth Guild arrive in their armies
- The two Guilds part and the Ordo Solis marches through

- Their commander dismounts and walks forward to the king and drops to one knee and speaks softly to the king
- With a look of great sadness the king turns his back without even acknowledgement, the commander stands and goes back to his mount
- The armies join the assault

A darkness was falling over Ontarius. Its borders swarmed with the undead, with Banners of Darkness and barracks of bone. Those scouts who returned reported that the undead were falling into disarray behind their lines, the army slowly falling into chaos, but 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 unheld by the enemy. Ontarius would soon 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 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 altered, 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 Tyrre'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. 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 numberless 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 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 watch towers 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 Capitol was quickly repaired, and in Ellisel Tiefanu was the first focus of rebuilding efforts. *(Something to hint at speed of rebuilding)* On a smaller scale, in the new County of Kyrinen, the town of Watchwood was rebuilt, many of the refugees settling there and plying their trades in their newfound home.

Their tribal spirits awoken, 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 capitol, and with belief in their loyalty to himself and the land, 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.