

An explorer in Taleria's far south once returned with tales of a lost city that held many secrets. The city was guarded by the Sphinx, the explorer said, who held a great secret, but could also see the shape of things to come. There was a room with ten plinths and twenty-two statues, and depending on what questions you asked, the figures would change their position, vanish, or reappear. The explorer was mad, alas, and could not tell anyone where the city was, and most believed she had never seen it at all.

The Kingdom in Winter



The assassination of the Duke of Taleria came like lightning out of a clear blue sky. An uneasy balance had existed in Haylem since the appointment of the Regent, as factions advocating for this contender to the throne or that one had lobbied discreetly in Haylem City for their choice of monarch. The Black Waste shrank. Aieland recovered from its civil strife. Treshelling maintained a polite distance, and securing the perpetually dangerous northern border appeared to finally be within the Kingdom's grasp.

In one evening, with the murder of a single man, everything changed.

By morning, all non-Drae inhabitants of the Ryu Chen had been given one day to leave the city. Ambassadors, merchants, members of the Talerian bureaucracy – no exceptions were made. The Drae's grief belonged to themselves alone, but their suspicions they spread wide. Not even representatives of the Crown, circle-walking directly from the capital, were permitted entry, a breach of Kingdom protocol that signalled difficulties to come throughout the investigation in to the Duke's murder.

Far to the north, the new Duchess of Taleria received news of her brother's death and the immediate recall of herself and her forces to her Duchy. Rumours abounded of a similar attempt on her life, but rumours of every sort were prevalent in those first chaotic days. What is undeniable is that there was an immediate break between the new Duchess and the traditional Drae of Taleria, when she refused to conduct the Duchy's business from the secluded Ryu Chen, and instead based her court on the surface in cosmopolitan Konnigratz. In the midst of this fracturing along cultural lines, the Sarr in Gonbricht emerged as the strongest voice in the Duchy for continued stability, and were vital in supporting the Duchess to maintain Kingdom law amidst the tumult.



Duke of Taleria was not the slain Drae's only title; by right of combat, he also commanded the Horde, the massive mercenary company of Half-Orcs whose size rivalled any other Kingdom force. In the first few hours after the assassination, as the area was secured and the dire political ramifications became clear, no one thought to send word to the Horde camped above in the plains surrounding the Ryu-Chen.

A few hours before dawn, with the arrival of the new Duchess, the proper measures were taken. But by the time the white-garbed messenger arrived, it was clear the news had preceded him. The fighting for the leadership of the Horde had already begun, and the encampment was a scene

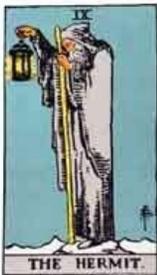
of violence and chaos, with some Half-Orcs challenging immediately while others packed up to head south to their homeland peninsula and gather support.

By the end of the first two weeks of challenges, the Half-Orcs of Taleria had descended into full scale Civil War. Although fighting was spread throughout the Duchy, the vast majority of the Half-Orcs and the Horde were found on the narrow southern peninsula. Attempts by the Duchess to restore order were ignored, and with no clear challengers for leadership emerging, the situation continued to worsen and threatened to engulf the entire Duchy.

On a night three weeks after the Duke's death, farmers and travellers of the Talerian south east were awoken by a terrible noise, a thunderous cacophony that had them running to their windows and looking to the skies for the source of the cataclysm. In the darkness of the early winter night, there was nothing to be seen. After a few minutes, the sound stopped as abruptly as it had begun. It wasn't until morning that the truth revealed itself: all along the border of the Half-Orc peninsula stood a massive stone wall, cutting off the Horde from the rest of Taleria, and by midmorning it was manned by troops in Kingdom colours.

Depending on how you felt about Half-Orcs, the truth was reassuring or horrifying: the kingdom had been ready all along for the Half-Orcs to descend into savagery. The wall looked like a construction of Dwarven engineering and elemental magic, as sturdy and impenetrable as though it had stood for decades. To arise in a single night implied there had always been a worry such a thing might happen to the Horde. It is still not known if the order to cut the Half-Orcs off was given by the Talerians or by the Regent in Haylem City.

Within days a series of encampments sprung up in the wall's shadow, as those trapped outside their homeland found themselves with nowhere to go, and those few who had managed to cross the wall or otherwise make their way out of the peninsula tried to decide what to do next. There were also significant numbers of Half-Orcs trying to make their way *south* over the wall as well, either to join in the fight or rescue those within.



Duke Paul of recently reclaimed Ontarius observed the situation in Taleria with alarm. Ontarius looked ever east for danger, into the Black Waste and the reclaimed lands. To have this turmoil at their back put the newly resettled Duchy into a precarious situation, and the Duke refused to fail his people twice. Taking swift action, he recalled the members of the Watch sent north to Kyrinen and pulled the majority of troops from their stations along the Black Waste. They were sent to patrol the Talerian border, and a series of encampments and border crossings soon surrounded every trade route into Ontarius.

To the Duke's surprise, he faced resistance from some of the troops stationed with the Northern Expansion. A contingent of veteran Black Watch members, led by a Captain of the former Ontarian legions, requested permission to remain in the North and continue to support the settlers and allies the Kingdom had made in those regions. The Duke allowed the small group to remain, albeit with great reluctance, and the rumour persists it has strained the relationship of Ontarius and Kyrinen.

The coastal road to Culloden and naval trade across Lake Persephont assumed greater trade importance with the militarization of the Talerian-Ontarian border, now becoming the primary safe route between the southern Duchies and the centre of the Kingdom.



Away from the direct danger unleashed in the south by the Duke's death, the courtiers, politicians, and opportunists in Haylem City faced a maelstrom of a more political nature. The stability of Taleria and the support of the Duke for the rule of law had been the lynchpin that kept the succession from spinning into civil strife, and in the wake of his death came opportunity. The Royal Court in Haylem City became a hotbed of paranoia and intrigue the likes of which had not been seen in recent memory, as everyone sought to gain from the instability.

Guards and Watch members whose job it was to guard the estates and domains of the Cambrian nobles were instead called in to the capital to protect their manor houses from the threat of the assassin's blade, leaving the rural regions of Cambria undefended and unprotected. The safest Duchy in Haylem was no longer safe for the common folk as winter arrived, and rumours of bandits and thievery abounded as the winter continued. Soon after, the familiar placards and broadsheets of the Nightmare Legion followed, denouncing the corrupt nobles who had abandoned their people and rallying the common folk to rise up against them.

The first estate was burned by a mob at midwinter, and although the noble was safe in the capital, their family was not so lucky.

At the centre of the machinations in Haylem City, the Regent struggled to keep the factions in balance. Remi was already a High Elf of venerable years, and he appeared to age overnight with the death of his friend and ally in preserving the stability of the Kingdom. Beset from all sides with increased calls to resolve the succession crisis, bring the assassins to justice, restore peace to Taleria and save the Half-Orcs from themselves, it took all the Regent's efforts to simply prevent the situation from collapsing.



In times of strife for the Kingdom, nervous eyes inevitably turn to the Dividian Wastes and the Barbarian lands. Old suspicions die hard, and many expected the winter to be marked by raiding and unrest from the Clans. But the unofficial sixth Duchy surprised everyone by not only remaining peaceful, but rallying to their Grand Shamooka, Eagle Song, calling for a return to reason and the need to resolve the succession in the wake of such destabilizing events. The Kingdom had gone too long without a true leader.

The two northern Duchies remained aloof from the disturbances to the south. In Ellisel, the High Elves seemed to ignore the political upheaval in the rest of the Kingdom, seemingly focused inward on their own interests- interests that they did see fit to share with anyone else. Voices that urged a greater involvement, like that of Lacroix Du Larnelles of the city of Ardales, were few and far between, and seemed to not move the Duke of Ellisel to action.

Aieland, which had been the heart of the most recent civil strife for Haylem, continued its own slow movement towards stability and recovery from those dark times. No-one in Aieland, it seemed, had the will to involve their lands in the issues of the wider Kingdom, or to see those troubles cross their borders. If their winter saw an increase in traffic between the seceded territories of Sharin and the Kingdom lands, there were certainly no outsiders to report it, or to worry about the return of that ideology to common conversation in the northeast.



One of the first official missives of condolences for the death of the Duke arrived from the Treshelling Ambassador on the morning following his death. The Empress of Treshelling, the Regent was informed, was aghast that such a terrible act could have been committed, and was personally grieved at the death of the most honourable person in the ancestral Kingdom of her family. Sheris Von Haylem vowed whatever aid that Treshelling could provide in bringing the assassins to justice.

With the southern wall erected and the Half-Orcs seemingly enmeshed in a spiral of violence, the Treshelling navy began to patrol closer and closer to the waters of Haylem. When confronted with this breach of territory, the Treshelling ambassador in Haylem City hastened to reassure the nobles of Haylem that Treshelling was only concerned with the safety of Haylem's citizens and committed to protecting them as Sheris Von Haylem had always promised to do.

This was why, the ambassador continued, the forces sent north to the Northern Expedition on behalf of Grigorio, rightful heir to the Kingdom of Haylem, would not be recalled as so many other Kingdom forces had been. Treshelling would fulfill all of its promises, despite the current unrest, and had no intentions of abandoning the northern border after the unfortunate retreat of so many other promised forces to Kyrinen and their new northern allies.



The week after Yule, sealed summons arrived to the senior leadership of both the Earthen and Celestial Towers. All Masters and Grandmasters were summoned to locked conclave, in an unknown location, and most of them remained absent for the rest of the winter. The day to day business of the Guilds continued as normal, and many common folk were unaware that such an august meeting was even occurring. However, the only Masters officially remaining available were an Earthen and Celestial

Master in Haylem City, and the Masters of Ontarius, although there were sightings of the Earthen Grandmaster of Ellisel in Tiefanu, as well.

However, the few reports available from Kyrinen during the winter did mention that Grandmaster Melisandre, although absent for a few days, returned abruptly and in a state of great irritation and refused to comment on where she'd been. Similarly, a Celestial Master Sage specializing in ley lines and positioned at the Northern Encampment remained in situ, refusing to comment on why she had not left to attend the Conclave, or if indeed there was a conclave at all.

A few months past midwinter, a new directive arrived from the Towers, announcing that travel by Celestial Circle was now restricted, and is no longer available for day-to-day use or as a paid service by local Guilds. With roads already risky due to the winter weather, the loss of the Circles for couriers and messages slowed the spread of news throughout the Kingdom at a time when rumours still seemed to fly fast. Less widely reported was that Tower of Magic in Treshelling instituted similar restrictions at the same time as Haylem.



As news lessened and snows deepened, many in Haylem turned their thoughts away from the worries of Dukes and Regents, and more to the necessities of day to day, of fuel for the winter fire and food for the table. If the denizens of the Ryu Chen spoke in quiet voices of the lack of success in the investigations into the Duke's murder, or the farmers of Ontarius wondered if they should fear the undead to the west or the warring Half-Orcs to the East, for many more the question of whether the roads would stay open for trade, or the Watch be patrolling, were far more pressing. By necessity, the world grows smaller during the longest nights.

Still, some events caused more ripples than others. The news that Treshelling had built a settlement in the uninhabited lands of the Dunes south and west of Eschenbech, brought into stark relief how precarious the desert border was should the southern Empire find a way to bridge the sands. On this occasion, the Treshelling ambassador had no comment to provide on the matter, and invited the Regent to take it up with the Emperor himself.

Making a journey through the worst of the winter, the unexpected arrival of Dame Camile Rendal Von Haylem and her household in Ontarius was also the source of many stories. The noblewoman and her household arrived in full formal regalia, flying the banners of both the Von Haylem and the Totenkompf family, officially to visit with Duke Paul. The stories told in taverns, however, had more to say about a rumoured meeting with Prince Adrian at the Wall.



Amidst all this southern tumult, the north was covered in the ominous silence of deep winter. The Northern Encampment, so recently a source of hubbub and activity, shrank as the snows fell. First the Talerians left, following their new Duchess homeward to the Ryu Chen. Then came the recall of the Black Watch, although a small group of their soldiers remained under the command of a veteran captain. Master Sage Marjorie Blossom continued her mapping and research, but the number of Celestial Tower staff stationed with her reduced drastically after the Towers Conclave was announced, and the Earthen Towers presence was diminished to a few healers. Only the Treshelling forces were undiminished.

With such a drastic reduction of resources, many plans were delayed. A small combined force of Terasel and Encampment personnel stationed themselves in Adraxis for the winter, but the full settlement of the city looked to be a wish for the spring. The Lighthouse on the western shore and the land around it

remained in Kingdom hands, and thanks the efforts of several Dwarven companies who travelled up from Cambria, two further bridges across the chasm were completed on schedule, so the winter was not without its moments of clear progress.

That was probably as much as the rest of Haylem heard about the North, and Kyrinen, with all eyes looking anxiously to the south of the Kingdom. So no one heard how, when there weren't enough Kingdom soldiers left to guard the Lighthouse, that minotaurs began to be seen patrolling the area instead. That when there were rumours that a few of the early settlers in the North were low on food and fuel, volunteers from Foresthold took firewood, and food donated from Wolfhaven, on a journey to each homestead to make sure they were well. That a joint group of adventurers and Treshelling soldiers set out through a blizzard to warn Terasel after a scout reported Ogres massing near one of their outposts.

"There's people up there we promised things to," said one of the Foresthold volunteers. "And Thrush Peake keeps its promises. So we do too."



It is easier to see patterns from above, or across the distance that time gives us. Looking back, it is a simple thing to say a kingdom fell because a good man was killed. You can look at a series of events, and wonder how it was that the ugliest outcome happened at each turning point, how each reaction spoke to someone's worst self, their most visceral fear, or their most selfish desire. It is easy, in a story, to ask a question of a Sphinx in a lost city, and receive an answer that points you to the greater truth.

Harder to ask that of people in the moment, when the snows are falling and the carrion birds are circling the field, and they must look to their own hearth first.

*Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.*

- Robert Frost