

Duchy of Ontarius

The Duchy of Ontarius – homeland of the humans, southeast bastion of the Kingdom of Haylem, and once the breadbasket of the five duchies – fell at the end of the Second Necromancer War, corrupted down to its very soil by the retreat of the undead armies and the terrible Chaotic powers that scorched the earth in their wake. The deadened landscape that remained became known as the Black Waste, and those Ontarians who had managed to escape its fate became the backbone of the forces of the Black Watch.

Under the leadership of Duke Paul of Ontarius, the Watch, through a grim line of keeps and fortresses along the border, protected the rest of Haylem from the Undead armies beyond. After the fall of the Dracolich several years ago, inroads began to be made into the Waste, small territories retaken and outposts built. A significant victory came to fruition only recently, when a wash of Creation and Earthen magical energy exploded outwards from a reactivated Creation Node inside the Waste. This land, apparently cleansed of necromantic taint, is coming to be known as “reclaimed Ontarius,” and is a beacon of hope for all who yearn to return to their lost home. Many still speak of the Duchy of Ontarius in the past tense but none would dare do so in front of His Grace, Duke Paul.

The Reclaimed Lands and the Wall

The Black Wall is not, as is sometimes believed, a single edifice stretching along the entirety of the western border of Ontarius. Rather, it is a series of keeps, walls, guardhouses, and patrolled crossings that aim to prevent any unauthorized incursions from (or excursions into) the Black Waste. The Watch itself is comprised of long-term soldiers (who often hail from Ontarius), volunteers taking a ‘season on the Wall’ and criminals who have chosen to serve along the border rather than face execution or exile. Providing services, goods, and gold to the Watch are charitable and taxation endeavours Kingdom-wide.

The main garrisons are numbered, one to fifteen, although they often possess local names as well, such as Garrison Twelve’s “Vigil’s Keep” moniker. Some were originally keeps of the border Lords of Ontarius, while others were built in a flurry of activity just after the war, when most of the Kingdom’s army remained stationed along the Ontarian front to keep the undead at bay. Along with the soldiers of the Black Watch, there is a strong presence of both the Earthen and Celestial Towers. Each Garrison has a Guildhouse, and there are special forces of both Towers deployed into the field on a regular basis.

The recent pushing back of the Waste’s borders has caused a reconfiguration of Garrisons Twelve through Fifteen. Clans of Dwarves travelled down from Cambria to assist in building new stone fortifications further inland, while the Earthen Towers has a massive presence in the area, trying to understand and guide the magical energies that arc out from the Creation Node and keep the taint of the Wastes at bay. The area is best described as being irrigated by Earthen and Creation magical energy, a constant flow of magical power that works against the corruption of the Waste.

Once word of the Reclaimed Lands spread, a steady flow of former Ontarians begin to arrive, their goods on wagons or carried on their backs. The first intrepid settlers – all from old Ontarian families – presented themselves at Vigil’s Keep before the snows had even melted, ready to return to their home whatever the danger. Guarding their small farms is now part of the Black Watch’s purview. Rumour has it that a wandering magical figure connected to the Creation Node guards them too.

The Black Waste

Beyond reclaimed Ontarius, however, the Black Waste still lurks. True sunlight is hidden by strange and sickly clouds, so undead walk freely throughout the day. The few who die in the Waste and safely resurrect claim their spirits are harried from the moment their bodies dissipate, by disembodied voices wailing in despair and hopelessness, and that the way to the Earth Circle is hard to find. That something is deeply amiss in the spirit world has been confirmed by Listani in the Black Watch.

The land is tainted, and what little grows is corrupted and infused with chaotic energies. Greater and Superior Undead arose there after the War, carving kingdoms out for themselves and warring between each other. Some of the Legions of Ontarius who were lost in the Duchy's fall managed to survive, but were slowly tainted and corrupted by their surroundings. Although the Traitor Legion's gambit to assault the Kingdom failed, remnants of the Carrion Crows, Corpse Hounds and Night Eyes are still believed to remain deep inside the Wastes.

There have long been rumours that the main Celestial Tower was also lost in the fall of Ontarius, and that frequent deployments from the Towers aim to regain its treasures and root out any evil that may be lurking in its halls. This has never been officially confirmed, but such is often the way of the secretive Tower. It is one of several locations in the Wastes that are rumoured to be the focus of attempts to further reclaim the lost Duchy, from forests infested with banshees to the fallen cities of once mighty Ontarius.

The Hopeful Shore

There are various stories about where the Hopeful Shore came from. The one safe landing for ships on the entire southern coast of the Wastes, it is a natural bay with a sandy beach. The water is clear and blue, with none of the drowned corpses haunting the rest of the Waste's waters. The sand is soft and golden, and sometimes seems to shimmer with light. At the edge of the beach is a young oak tree, with leaves of green in summer and gold in autumn. It seems to mark some sort of boundary: beyond it the Waste is its usual vile self, but beyond it the way is clear and safe, and the undead do not tread there.

Word of it spread slowly, from Black Watch navy vessel to Treshelling trader, from poor fisherfolk to privateer, until most who navigated the southern waters knew of Ontarius' only safe harbour. It has saved untold numbers of sailor's lives over the years when storms knocked them off course, and provided the Watch with an ingress point to the Wastes past the Wall itself.

The most common tale told of how the Hopeful Shore came to be is that a great host of Fae and Heroes planted the seed of a Century Tree in the sand, where a secret gate to Arcadia stands unseen to all but the Fae themselves. It uncorrupted the lands around it, and keeps the corruption from spreading back, or into the nearby realm of the Fae. Whether this is true, who can say, but many are hoping to help bring the reclaimed lands south to meet the shore.

The Keening Woods

Once some of the loveliest old growth forest in Ontarius, home to Wild Elven groves and bountiful game, the Keening Woods was transformed utterly with the corruption of Wastes. Believed to be the dominion of the banshee Ashen Whisper, it has so far proved unpassable to scouts of the Watch, being too deep within the Waste for a full assault. However, the reclaimed lands have changed the old borders, and the Keening Woods may now be within reach.

From afar, it is a dense tangle of dead and dying trees, covered in lichen and moss that glows bone-white in the darkness. There are only a few passages that seem to lead within, named the corpse-roads by the Black Watch. Strange processions of flickering lights lead down them, and no matter the weather elsewhere, they are always shrouded in mist. No one who has followed the corpse-roads has ever returned, living or as a spirit. Some nights the woods are full of screams, but on other nights unearthly and beautiful music drifts across the Waste from somewhere deep within the trees.

Lost Ontarius

Within the Black Waste, the bones of Ontarius lay unburied under the grim sky. Fallen towers, empty cities, and long-abandoned farms decay and are overrun as the years go by. The names of these lost places loom large in the Kingdom's imagination, and rumours of lost treasures and hidden bastions only grew stronger when the traitorous lost Legions proved that much survived, however changed, deep within the borders of the Wastes.

Ontarius was once, very long ago, the centre of the human empire. The Legions of Ontarius were renowned fighting forces, with coveted commissions passed down from parent to child. From the administrative hub of Luceria, the imperial government controlled a wide territory of cities and provinces. With time, and the continual press of marauding monsters and the undead, the ever-expanding empire fragmented into various kingdoms and city states. They eventually united once again under King Persephont, and in more recent times the Von Haylems have claimed descent from those first imperial rulers.

This imperial past loomed large in Ontarius, from the stately architecture of the cities to the arrow-straight stone roads. The Duchy had one of the most efficient bureaucracies in Haylem, and a courier system that could only be outdone by magical means. Farmsteads owned by retired soldiers were well-maintained and orderly, and the Duchy was once the breadbasket for most of the Kingdom.

Ascalon and the Watch Towers

Ascalon is believed to be the last city in Ontarius to fall at the end of the war. Between the citadel of Arcoles and the citadel of Ascalon lay a series of watch towers, several miles apart but each visible to the naked eye from the next. After Arcoles fell, one by one the watch towers were overrun, but the soldiers remained at their posts to guide refugees in their retreat towards Ascalon, and beyond it the border of the Duchy. The story of Crossley's Tower – the last of the watch towers to fall between the two cities – is one of the most well-known folk tales of the war's end.

Antium

Located deep in the east of Ontarius, Antium was a city built around the great Military College of the Legions, where generations of officers trained in strategy, arms, and warfare. Home to the most skilled artificers, armourers and smiths in the Duchy, Antium was a proud and prosperous place. The Great Histories of each Legion were recorded in the Memorial Halls, and the precious Legion Standards were kept here when not on the field of battle. There is some speculation that the Traitor Legions based themselves in Antium, but there is no firsthand evidence to support the theory as the few scouting parties that have ventured that deep into the Waste have seen no sign of life in the vicinity of the city.

Luceria

While the fabled Imperial Palace of Luceria has not had an empress or emperor walk its halls for centuries, the city remained the central hub of Ontarius whatever its current political state might be. The home of a succession of rulers, nobles, administrators, and finally the Duke of Ontarius, the palace was both a residence and an administrative centre that even the Biata might have found impressive. Many of the records from its archives were transferred to Haylem City with the ascendancy of the Von Haylems and the unification of the Kingdom - a decision loudly decried at the time but fortuitous given what followed for the Duchy.

The few refugees who made it out of Ontarius from Luceria recounted grim stories of undead swarming the city and setting it aflame, and its current state is unknown.

