So as we discussed over FB, I'll be writing a low-fantasy late medieval/early Renaissance (1450-1550) setting for the game. I've given this world the working title of 'the Shadowed Realm' (very much subject to change later, I just couldn't think of anything better as of today): a world that's been dominated by mostly-mundane humans with only a few shades of magic for millennia, but which is now in danger of being overrun by the ghosts of its more magical past - a danger that all of today's factions are so far ignoring in favor of their petty (at least in comparison to what's coming) conflicts with one another.

(another note before we continue: the names of basically EVERYTHING are provisional works-in-progress. If you think you've got a better name for anything or anyone please, by all means, give it to me. I've never been good at naming things or coming up with fantastic new names for folks myself)

The world itself is divided into five known continents: 'Tihr' to the north, 'Azol' to the west, 'Esdath' to the east, 'Morgal' to the south and 'Eldath' in the center. Eldath is where the game will take place: it is an hourglass-shaped continent about the size of North America and Europe put together. As you might expect, the further north you go the colder it gets, and the further south you go the hotter it becomes. Extreme northern Eldath is pretty much all barely-hospitable tundra and mountains, further south you've got steppes with short & cool summers + long winters or evergreen forests, and the regions closest to the dead center of the continent are mostly temperate riverlands or forests with some more mountains. The 'neck' of the continental 'hourglass' is where the story will be set. South of this 'neck' you've got temperate grasslands that become drier and drier the further south you go (picture a transition from the Great Plains to an African savanna), followed by rocky shrubland (think the Californian chaparral) and mountains, and finally a true desert. There's also an archipelago of volcanic islands off the west coast of the continent, another archipelago of Arctic isles off its northern coast, and a large island wasteland far off the southern coast that was once part of the mainland. I'll try to make a map, though I must warn you that I'm a terrible artist and an even worse cartographer: reading a historical map is easy enough for me, making one…not so much.

As of the start of the game, it is divided up into multiple feuding factions that I will be mostly basing on actual medieval/Renaissance European nations from Hundred Years' War France/England all the way to Muscovy (and naturally including everything in between). I will of course do my best to avoid making any faction too much of a blatant stand-in for their historical base since if we reach that point we might as well drop the 'fantasy' element, but you can at least expect most of them to be feudal monarchies. One of several exceptions will be the faction the game centers on, the 'Ellisian Empire', which (being based on the Byzantines, as we discussed) retains a large bureaucracy even in its twilight years. More on the nations below.

Magic exists but isn't commonplace and it's also strictly hereditary (if you aren't born a mage you can never become one), although mages are still quite powerful (so instead of magic being restricted to lighting up small areas or something similarly not awe-inspiring, fully trained mages can still hurl fireballs or control streams depending on their element of choice). Those who are born mages can expect highly variable treatment based on exactly where they live: some factions will be fairly friendly to mages or even offer them positions of considerable power & privilege, others ghettoize them or outright try to kill any mage they find. In Ellis, all mages are required to be educated and licensed by + obey the rules & dictates of the 'Magical Association', a partially self-governing cabal of the most powerful and favored mages in the land whose leader is a Grand Arcanist elected by his or her peers.

Speaking of magical stuff: most of Eldath will recognize only one God, Errai. Although the religion centered around Him, the 'Church of the One', will structurally & ritually closely resemble the medieval Catholic and Orthodox Churches (so among other things you can expect a clearly delineated religious hierarchy, clerics not only enjoying tax exemptions but straight up owning lands & bossing serfs around like feudal lords, lots of religious meddling in secular politics, and an analogue of the East-West Schism), for Errai Himself I had the Old Testament Yahweh in mind as a base rather than the New Testament God. So He's not a very nice God to put it mildly, and the Churches will reflect that (the medieval Catholics & Orthodox weren't particularly nice guys either). Both branches of the Church of the One will face their fair share of heresies like actual medieval Christendom, but I haven't put much thought into those heresies yet. Finally, there are two surviving pagan faiths: in the north the 'Thiareike' people (an analogue of the Norse) will follow a henotheistic religion that places their war god above all other deities, and on a note that's much more relevant to the story the 'Umari' people (an analogue of the Arabs and Turks) who are the biggest immediate threat to the setting will have a religion based on pre-Islamic Arab paganism with some solar worship thrown in there. When enough people come to believe in a religion, they can quite literally will their deities into existence through their sheer faith, or if their deity already exists (Errai) then they'll further empower him/her/it instead.

Aside from the above bit about magic, I'm aiming for this world to lean heavily towards 'realism' on a scale between reality and fantasy since this is after all a low fantasy setting. As mentioned above, humans are the dominant race on this Earth, and the story won't feature many (if any) non-human characters. There are four seasons in this world's northern hemisphere (spring, summer, autumn, winter) and two (dry & rainy) in the southern hemisphere. Exotic fauna and flora that don't exist in reality, such as dragons or man-eating plants, do exist but in fairly small numbers, and on Eldath in particular many such species have been hunted to extinction or at least serious endangerment by humans (most of whom quite reasonably don't want to get BBQ'd by a passing dragon, have to deal with man-eating weeds in their garden, have their ships wrecked by sea serpents etc). Some royal families will keep tamed specimens of such species as deadly and/or exotic pets, though.

Since mages do not form the majority of any faction's population (though they are a privileged minority in some), all armies are still mostly composed of mundane humans equipped with the gear you'd expect to see on late medieval/early Renaissance troops - ranging from the cudgels, war scythes and hunting bows of peasant levies to the castle-forged swords, hammers and poleaxes of plate-armored knights and nobles. Two weapons, one old and one new, are beginning to transform the battlefield: the pike, increasingly used not as a defensive weapon but rather as an offensive one by heavily armored infantry moving in assault columns ala the real-life Swiss, and firearms, which are highly inaccurate but can easily penetrate thick plate armor and even more importantly, are easy to mass-produce and train with. Paralleling the development of firearms in real history, every faction that can afford it is now fielding larger & larger numbers of arquebusiers to counter their rivals' knights/heavy troops, and of course non-magically-inclined factions are also using them to seriously challenge enemy mages from a distance.

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As for the protagonist of the story, I was thinking of having it be a convicted criminal, some kind of thief or gang leader. But this isn't a remake of Robin Hood, so what I propose is to have this guy or girl (ideally a guy, if only because I'm better at writing guys on account of actually being one) already be behind bars due to the treachery of their ambitious underlings. The criminal is a few hours away from execution, but in this dark hour where it seems they're fated to just be one of countless nameless executed criminals they're approached by an unlikely savior: the newly-appointed commander of the city watch, who - far from being a corrupt thug on the payroll of someone powerful like so many of his predecessors - is a firebrand with genuine interest in meting out justice, though he's no saint himself and is prepared to use harsh and/or unorthodox methods to get the job done. This captain has a proposition for the criminal: be the crook that he uses to catch other crooks, or die.

The first act of the game's plot would then have the player run around purging criminals (whether by killing them or catching them alive & sending them to jail, the city watch will rarely care too much) for the city watch, starting with their old gang. The second act would begin when they find that some of the bigger criminal organizations they're tackling are connected to people in power, from nobles to imperial courtiers, and bringing them down necessitates getting involved in the cutthroat intrigues of the imperial court. The third act, beginning after busting all major criminal enterprises & getting the attention of the imperial court, would center on finding some way to save Ellis from an oncoming invasion launched by one of the empire's oldest surviving foes, the Umari to the south, which may require becoming a vassal to one of the 'upstart' northern kingdoms or cutting a deal with the less than trustworthy Grand Arcanist, who might have his own plot to reduce all of Eos to an authoritarian magocracy with the Ellisian monarchs as figureheads.

**Draft of the history of the world:**

In the beginning, there was nothing but an empty void and the one God, Errai. And He was lonely.

So Errai created the heavens and the stars, but found that no matter how bright they shone they could not give Him what He wanted: company. Thus He moved on to creating life, starting with the Tel-mera'i (singl. Tel-mera): ethereal, undying spirits that were bound completely to His will and would sing Him praises for all time. But in time He found this choir of mindless worshipers - ahem, all-loving servants unsatisfactory, so He resolved to create new forms of life that would have the choice to worship Him or not: he was certain that if getting them to follow Him out of their own volition would be infinitely more fulfilling. To house His future creations, Errai first created the planet Eos.

Errai's first sentient creations to bear His gift of free will were the 'Sidhe': elfin humanoids whose almost-unearthly beauty was a reflection of the Tel-mera'i, and who were further blessed with immortality and an affinity for magics tied to the fundamental elements of the universe - fire, water, earth, and air. Next came the 'Talothi', long-lived humanoids who were blessed with unmatched skill at working with the bounty of the earth, from simple wood to copper and iron to all sorts of precious stones. Errai's third-born were the 'Xaxerns', avian humanoids who He blessed with a small taste of His power over life and death: even if they could not truly bring back the dead, at the least they could reanimate dead bodies and briefly commune with spirits. And finally He created humanity, who were not blessed with the supernatural powers of the other races but made up for it by being extra 'fruitful'. All of these races were planted on the central continent of Eldath, where Errai expected them to not only be good neighbours who'd get along but actively work together to create the best possible world, and He also created a host of creatures ranging from mundane fish, deer and bears to great winged dragons, fire-breathing salamanders and sea serpents to accompany them.

Once this was done, Errai opted to essentially become the Deist God and retire to His Heaven, where He would slumber for two thousand years and then awaken to (hopefully) a paradise on Eos, fully confident that He had taught His children properly. This attempt at a hands-off Sims game didn't turn out too well, to put it mildly.

As of the year 2000 of the First Era, Eos has gone to pot. Listing all the ways everyone has gone horribly wrong:

-The Sidhe had politically fractured into three warring factions, none of which venerate Errai:

* The Vyn-Sidhe or 'high elves', a tyrannical empire that separated their own people into castes (nobles/clerics/merchants/farmers/warriors, in that order: the top two castes have retained the greatest magical prowess among their people through extensive inbreeding, and farmers are considered superior to merchants since they actually grow products whereas merchants 'merely' trade what others have created). That's for Vyn-Sidhe only by the way, they don't consider anyone else worthy of anything but slavery or death. The ruling dynasty of this empire, House Aidai, regularly married brothers and sisters to keep their blood pure & magically powerful, which has resulted in many of its members being maniacs who nevertheless must be pandered to lest they conjure up firestorms, floods, quakes and tornados when upset. They have forsaken Errai in favor of their own self-made pantheon (in fact, as of 1A 2000 many Vyn-Sidhe don't believe Errai even exists), jointly headed by the seven-headed golden god Vynamar and his two-faced consort Maredene., and their belief in these deities is so powerful (and sufficiently reinforced with their innate magic) that they managed to quite literally will them into existence. As of 1A 2000 they rule most of the continent from their glittering capital of Tal-Marnoth, a crystalline city in central Eldath. Their ruler at that time was the Empress Arlindil, their third monarch who won the Throne of Many Colours in a civil war and an uncompromising stateswoman, reactionary and racist.
* The Fen-Sidhe or 'wood elves', whose ancestors shockingly didn't like the idea of living under an inbred magocratic tyranny & thus left the Vyn-Sidhe Empire around 1A 1000 to settle in the vast Evennan Forest in eastern Eldath. Their society was significantly simpler than the Empire's: the Fen-Sidhe were organized into eleven tribes, each of which was made up of a dozen clans. Like their ancestors, they specialized in earth magic and had developed an ability to communicate with the animals of the Evennan Forest, two advantages which they used to keep Vyn-Sidhe armies at bay throughout their thousand years of bitter warfare. The Fen-Sidhe are governed by a council composed of the kings of each of the eleven tribes, and each king is in turn elected by the (hereditary) chiefs of their tribe's constituent clans. They were animists who believe all living things have immortal spirits within them, and followed shamans capable of connecting with these nameless nature spirits.
* The Syn-Sidhe or 'dark elves', Vyn-Sidhe who rallied under court archmage Aetheldarian Aidai when he tried to seize the Throne of Many Colours from his older brother Faergrandur (the second Emperor of the Vyn-Sidhe) in 1A 800 upon the death of their father. Their war lasted some three hundred years, and although Aetheldarian was able to defeat and kill Faergrandur he was eventually defeated by Faergrandur's daughter Arlindil. Still, he and his remaining followers were able to carve out a new kingdom in what used to be the southern reaches of the Empire thanks to a timely alliance with the Xaxerns. Already more than a bit batty due to being a product of incest & now driven further into insanity by his defeat, Aetheldarian proceeded to spend the next thousand years trying to attain the power to reshape the universe so he could write his rivals out of existence and take over all of Eldath (starting with his 'rightful' inheritance, the Vyn-Sidhe Empire of course), and to that end he has been sacrificing hundreds of his subjects and slaves yearly. The Syn-Sidhe worshipped Aetheldarian as a living god, and believed that when he finally reaches his goal they will be permitted to rule the new world at his side.

The Talothi too had forsaken Errai, in their case for ancestor worship, but it matters not by 1A 2000 - they've already gone extinct. Their downfall had its roots in 1A 1200, when the dragons were united by the intelligent and especially formidable alpha-male Thalutheiron, who intended on seizing control of Eos from the humanoid races and resolved to start by burning the Talothi in their underground holdfasts, one by one. As even their greatest and best-armed warriors melted away (often quite literally) before the dragons, the Talothi decided to create a race of fearless slave-warriors to do their fighting for them out of their own garbage and corpses: and so were the 'Ovlathi', lumbering grey and green-skinned brutes who largely operated on instinct, born. For four hundred years the Ovlathi managed to keep the dragons and drakes at bay, but around 1A 1600 they rebelled against their creators: the Talothi decided to start breeding Ovlathi for greater intelligence so they wouldn't simply shut down in battle without Talothi overseers barking orders at them every second, but this resulted in enough Ovlathi gaining enough brains to realize that they were never meant to be anything more than dragon fodder and promptly trying to escape their masters. The Talothi were promptly smashed to bits between the Ovlathi and dragons, and wiped out in a few centuries.

The Xaxerns had forged their own empire in the mountains and deserts of the south, fiercely opposed to the Vyn-Sidhe but ultimately similar at heart: they too were extremely xenophobic, considered other races worthless except as chattel or test subjects for their warped experiments, and believed they had a special right to rule Eldath. The Xaxerns had the delightful habit of murdering their slaves by the thousands at the start of any war so they could reanimate the corpses as cannon fodder, and also experimented on any Sidhe prisoners on the orders of their emperors to try and uncover the secret to immortality. As of 1A 2000, the Xaxerns had turned to worshiping their emperors as dark gods and would conduct ritual sacrifices of enemy prisoners and slaves every full moon in the reigning monarch's name.

As for the humans, well. By 1A 2000 some two-thirds of the human race lived as slaves to either the Vyn-Sidhe or the Xaxerns, who (as I just elaborated on above) were not particularly gentle masters. Of the remaining third, a quarter had dispersed to the other continents centuries ago, where they became the dominant race due to a lack of meddling from the other races; an eighth fled the Vyn-Sidhe to live among the Fen-Sidhe, who treated them as second-class citizens (in particular, humans were banned from procreating with Fen-Sidhe under pain of death) and confined them to shantytowns on the outskirts of the Evennan Forest but at least did not treat them as poorly as their former masters had; and the remaining Eldathi humans lived free but troubled lives in the grim Ansel Mountains of the northwest, divided into multiple barbaric tribes that frequently warred with dragons, Ovlathi warbands and each other. Aside from the 'Anselmen', the Eldathi humans had gained some magical abilities due to extensive inbreeding and experimentation at the hands of their Vyn-Sidhe & Xaxern masters. The only good thing Errai found about these humans was that most of them still clung to Him, whether secretly (as the slaves did) or openly (as the men of the Ansel Mountains did).

Errai quickly reached the conclusion that all the non-human 'Elder Races' had become abominations who'd wrecked His world and could atone for their sins only through death, while the humans had proven themselves worthy to inherit Eos by their mostly-unshaken faith in Him even after 2000 years of massacres, subjugation and persecution. He would shape humanity into a weapon with which to get rid of His 'failed' projects, starting with the 'Anselmen'. That said, while He aided them, He would not simply abandon the enslaved humans to endure a few more decades of torment until He had finished with the Ansel Mountains: on a cold winter night in late 2A 1980 He sent the Tel-mera Hes'yot to inform the human slave Ilmariel, a concubine to a particularly brutal Vyn-Sidhe lord, that she had been marked by Him to bear His child, who would be fated to deliver the world from its current rulers and avenge humanity's suffering at their hands in rivers of their blood. Ilmariel, who at that time had just been beaten black and blue by her master purely as a means of venting his frustration at being one-upped by a rival earlier that day, was all too happy to assist in Errai's scheme. A week later, she was impregnated with Errai's only child Yahrel, who would grow up to deliver humanity from the Elder Races (by smiting them, of course) as his Father willed.

On the first day of the first month of the year 1A 2000, Errai reached out to Golgachos son of Artalloch, 119th chief of the Skenes - the largest of the human tribes in those mountains. Through the Tel-mera Reu'yot, His appointed Voice, He informed Golgachos that he had been chosen as the first of twelve human champions who were destined to liberate Eos from its non-human masters by killing them all and would get to enjoy divine backing so long as he obeyed Heaven's dictates without question. Golgachos happily agreed, and Errai proceeded to bless him with freezing-related powers beyond even the mightiest ice-specializing Sidhe's wildest dreams: beyond being able to freeze any liquid, even newly-molten metal, and dropping avalanches on his opponents at will, Golgachos could even slow down or outright freeze time itself for as long as he has the strength to do so (in other words, for a few minutes every day at maximum if he doesn't mind shaving a few years off his life expectancy).

With his newfound powers, Golgachos easily united the Anselmen beneath his banner. His next task was to deal with Thaluteiron and his dragons, who were still rampaging across the Ansel Mountains. Errai did not believe the dragons were worthy of genocide, for they hadn't committed any especially egregious atrocities and their lack of faith in Him was found to be forgivable since He never bothered reaching out to them in the first place, so instead of demanding their annihilation He advised Golgachos to win their allegiance by besting Thalutheiron in battle. Golgachos did as he was told, challenging the great dragon to a duel only to freeze time & hack him to pieces with his greatsword. Thalutheiron's lieutenant Jal'darr, having just witnessed his seemingly-invincible boss wiped out with almost no effort by a human with obviously game-breaking powers, surrendered at once along with the rest of dragonkind & served as mounts for Golgachos + his mightiest warriors and vassal chiefs in exchange for not being hunted to extinction.

After dealing with the dragons, Errai & Golgachos turned their sights to the Ovlathi. By this time, the 'garbage spawn' had united under their own great chief: Bagor 'Ironhand', an ambitious and especially ruthless warlord who challenged & killed his father for leadership of their tribe, and who now had his own plan to defeat the Elder Races by forcibly breeding human captives with his warriors to create a new race of half-orcs who'd have the brains & brawn necessary to successfully bring down the Sidhe & Xaxerns. The dragons & Anselmen worked together to annihilate every Ovlathi army thrown at them, and Golgachos himself proceeded to kill Bagor in another duel by freezing him & smashing him to pieces with the pommel of his sword. Errai for His part considered the Ovlathi even more abominable than the Elder Races, since after all He had not given them the gift of life Himself, and commanded that the Anselmen exterminate them utterly; thus, Golgachos & company did not let up their offensive even after defeating Bagor and continued to kill every Ovlath male, female and child they encountered, until the few shattered survivors of this race had been driven deep underground. Despite the best efforts of mankind, the Ovlathi would survive to the modern day…as small, primitive underground communities that attack even other Ovlathi they don't recognize. In any case, Errai believed them to no longer be a threat worth His attention by 1A 2005, and directed the Anselmen to prepare to advance out of their mountains that year.

While Golgachos laid down the foundations of a proper nation by having himself crowned the first-ever King of 'Morcarragh' (as the Anselmen were beginning to call their united nation), Errai mapped out the next stages of His plan to liberate the other Eldathi humans & cleanse the continent of the Elder Races. He sent His Tel-mera'i to incite human slaves to revolt against their masters across Eldath, blessed their leaders with yet more hax powers to make sure they couldn't fail and informed Yahrel that the time to carry out the purpose for which he was born had come. While Yahrel's powers were awakened - Errai blessed him with photokinesis, making him capable of generating light at will, focusing light into deadly laser beams, and bending or shifting light particles to create illusions or render himself (or anyone else) invisible - and he would become the official leader of the rebellion, these other human champions were:

* Falon, a miner-slave from the volcanic Ruby Isles off the west coast of Eldath, who was entrusted with macro-pyrokinesis and control over heat in general. He could fling searing fireballs, conjure up firestorms, force volcanoes to erupt and even cloak himself in a 'fire aura' that would burn anyone nearby through convection at will. However, by far his most efficient method of killing folks was simply to sucking all the heat in their body out through their skin, causing them to spontaneously combust in the process.
* Merav, a fisher-slave from a great river delta on the western coast of Eldath south of the Ansel Mountains, who was given macro-hydrokinetic abilities. Whenever Errai wanted a torrential downpour, a tsunami, major riverine flooding or the plain sinking of entire settlements and islands beneath the waves, this was His guy.
* Benshai, a runaway living with the Fen-Sidhe, who was given power over 'half the earth's bounty': he could command plants at will, from having weeds and vines trip his enemies up to transforming trees into ent-like abominations that will unquestioningly obey his commands, and also had mastery over all non-sapient animals from squirrels to lions to crocodiles and elephants. However despite his plethora of choices in 'animals to master', he preferred insects and would direct locusts to destroy the crops of his foes. In battle, his preferred tactic was to order most bugs on the battlefield to swarm his enemies and choke or flay them to death, while others would make it impossible to sneak up on him by acting as his extra eyes & ears.
* Erendath, a slave from the rolling plains of central-northern Eldath, who was granted power over the other 'half of the earth's bounty'. He could conjure up earthquakes to level enemy walls, tear open fissures in the ground to swallow up their armies, and pull up spikes to impale them. More importantly, he also had power over minerals in general, though his most efficient methods of killing with this ability were to either turn clouds of sand/dust into glass right in his foes' faces or implode soldiers' helmets around their heads.
* Kelloth, a sailor-slave from the southeast coast of Eldath, who was granted power over the winds and electricity. Dropping tornados, on enemy armies & hurricanes on their fleets or smiting their cities and farms with gale-force winds is par for the course with him.
* Evendur, a slave to the Xaxerns in the Dusken Mountains to the southwest of Eldath, who was gifted with macro-umbrakinesis. He could will people's shadows to spring up & kill them, blanket areas in an artificial impenetrable darkness that only went away when he commanded it to, create shadow twins of himself and any other willing ally to relentlessly hunt down specific targets, and even blot out the sun for a few minutes a day. One could be forgiven for thinking they'd be safer from him in well-lit areas, but the truth is precisely the opposite - ever notice that shadows are stronger & clearer in the light while becoming less distinct in darkness?
* Finally, there's the only female Magus among the bunch: Marae, a swamp-dwelling slave hailing from the heartlands of the Vyn-Sidhe Empire. Errai blessed her with psychic powers, chief among them telekinesis (she was powerful enough to uproot & fling around entire castles), precognition (to a degree approaching omniscience: she can tell what someone halfway across the continent is thinking right down to the minute details as long as she knows their name & to instantly predict every possible action anyone near her may or may not take).

With these nine (including Yahrel & Golgachos) extremely powerful Magi at their head and a numerical advantage over both the Vyn-Sidhe & the Xaxerns, the humans slowly but surely gained the upper hand against their oppressors over fifteen years of brutal warfare. The humans killed every non-human they found without mercy, and their hatred for their former masters was so great that they likely would've done this even if Errai hadn't explicitly commanded them to. For their part, the Sidhe initially dismissed the war as nothing but another slave revolt, something which they had plenty of experience in suppressing: but as their armies were crushed time and time again, even when they held all the battlefield advantages and were instead undone by seemingly random changes in the weather or terrain, they came to realize that this was much worse than an ordinary slave rebellion. They consulted their gods for advice, tirelessly experimented on their human slaves to formulate new and increasingly powerful spells, and initiated a policy to massacre all of their slaves in cities & castles that were on the verge of falling to the human armies lest those slaves join their liberators: but their best efforts merely slowed down the rebel advances, never fully stopping them, and it wasn't long before their gods began to go silent as Errai went after them in the world beyond the material plane as well.

In the fifth year of the war, Benshai was able to negotiate an alliance with the Fen-Sidhe he once lived with while his fellow Magi talked Errai into taking them off His genocide list, on account of their sins not being quite as bad as that of their other enemies. In the tenth year of the 'Holy War of Liberation', Empress Arlindil invited the Magi to parley, placing the withdrawal of her entire race from the Eldathi mainland to some artificial islands she was planning on raising to the east as the start of her offer; however, when the Magi (sans Marae) actually did show up to the negotiating table despite Errai's warnings, Arlindil had them ambushed by her elite guard. Though they managed to fight their way out, Erendath was slain, Merav was mortally injured and Yahrel was captured: he was soon executed in Tal-Marnoth by being tied down to a wooden hexagram, after which the executioner smashed each of his limbs with a mallet before finally bringing the weapon down on his head. It was reported by both human and Sidhe onlookers that Yahrel remained defiant to his last breath: according to the Church's teachings, he and Errai agreed that he needed to die to show his fellow Magi that the Sidhe are truly, irredeemably corrupt & innately treacherous now, and to inspire their followers to fully finish the bloody work that their Maker had handed unto them.

If that was truly Errai and Yahrel's plan, then it worked swimmingly: this bit of Sidhe treachery further amplified mankind's genocidal hatred for the Sidhe, culminating in the complete obliteration of Tal-Marnoth and the annihilation of its inhabitants. Arlindil herself committed suicide, throwing herself from the roof of her own crystal tower after Errai rebuffed her plea for mercy, rather than face the swords and magics of her former slaves. The heads of nine of the greatest Sidhe noble houses threw themselves at the feet of Yahrel's widow Manae and begged for her mercy, but the vengeful Manae had them captured and executed in the exact same way they had killed her husband after first being made to watch their city burn.

With the Vyn-Sidhe wiped out and the Fen-Sidhe turned into allies, the humans could bring their full might to bear against the Xaxerns, who had been busy preparing their defenses in the gloomy mountains & harsh deserts they called home and who welcomed the first human army to reach their border with a 'forest' of 15,000 impaled human slaves. The humans had to dig them out of their mountain fortresses one by one, which was a very time-consuming and bloody process - in other words, very bad news considering that the Xaxerns were accomplished necromancers who can raise their own + your dead at a moment's notice. Still, with Evendur at their head the armies of men managed to reduce the Xaxerns to just their capital of Peldar in another fifteen years. Not even Evendur believed they could actually breach its magically reinforced gates (and he was right, every attempt by the human army to directly break through failed miserably), so he settled on another route to victory: on a full moon he & 99 of his top acolytes committed suicide before those gates in an eldritch ritual, copied from stolen Xaxern notes but now also reinforced by Errai, resulting in the creation of a dimension of impenetrable darkness…with the entirety of Peldar as its first gate. When Evendur, the last survivor of these 100 'black martyrs', finally died of exsanguination his soldiers dared to open the now-depowered gates of Peldar, and found the fortress to be entirely devoid of life.

So yeah, humanity pretty much created Hell and finished the Xaxern genocide by sucking every last surviving Xaxern there. Errai chose not to punish humanity for literally inventing Hell (something which He did not even think possible) but to take advantage of it by throwing all of the Vyn-Sidhe's gods, who had been heavily weakened by the loss of their followers fifteen years earlier, in there as well.

The last hostile Elder Race left for Errai & the humans to deal with now were the Syn-Sidhe. Aetheldarian had not been idle as humans prevailed over the other Elder Races, and broke his kingdom away from the rest of Eldath with yet more blood-sacrifice-fueled magic in hopes that the humans wouldn't dare pursue him over an ocean. Errai decided to give His people a break and handle this Himself for a change - by stripping the Syn-Sidhe of their immortality & limiting their natural lifespan to 1000 years, as well as slapping every single Syn-Sidhe with a 'Brand of Shame' that would compel any non-Syn-Sidhe being (even lowly bugs and worms) to attack them upon seeing it. He did let Aetheldarian live, purely because He knew that he was a psychotic tyrant (who is now likely to become even crazier after his punishment) whose continued rule would be a severe punishment for all Syn-Sidhe in the present and future. Aetheldarian didn't disappoint on that front, as his first post-Marking decree was to demand a blood sacrifice of 100 of the youngest Syn-Sidhe every 10 years to extend his lifespan by another 1000 years. This is more or less the equivalent to allowing a mostly-immortal, blood-magic-slinging Kim Jong Il to remain in power simply because his continued existence is the worst punishment imaginable for his subjects: a punishment that Errai believed fit their crime of trying to overthrow Him and assume control of the universe.

And so Eldath was freed from the yoke of the Elder Races…through the divinely-sanctioned genocide or banishment of said Elder Races, but hey. As far as the humans who just freed themselves (with some divine aid) from two millennia of brutal chattel slavery, routine massacres and experimentation are concerned, it was totally deserved. Certainly the Church of Errai will argue that the Holy War of Liberation was nothing short of righteous vengeance. Whatever one's view on the Holy War of Liberation - from well-deserved justice, to horrible genocide, to just one especially brutal war in the unpleasant history of warfare or anything in between - none can deny that it changed the social, political, cultural and (obviously) racial scene in all of Eldath, ending the 'First Age' and inaugurating the 'Second Age'…

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…or at least, that's what the Church of Errai teaches today. It's equally likely (and in fact Demons who manage to break into Earth always argue for this exact viewpoint) that Errai was not the original capital-G God but rather a spirit conjured up by humanity's wishes for someone to liberate them from the cruel tyranny of the Elder Races, and that it was the Sidhe gods who were the original deities of the setting. Although Errai was probably a pretty cool god at first, the humans' (admittedly not entirely baseless) hatred for their masters corrupted him into the genocidal deity seen above, and having grown aware of His nature as a being shaped & empowered by human belief He was driven to secure the future of mankind by answering their prayers to wipe out all of their enemies: this would not only benefit humanity, but also Errai himself, since a lack of followers would weaken the rival Elder Gods and thus make it much easier for him to eliminate his competition. When the Elder Races were eventually destroyed or thrown into Hell, just as Errai predicted their gods too were fatally weakened, allowing him to get rid of them one way or another & set himself up as the one true God by virtue of being the last deity standing.

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At the dawn of the Second Age, each of the Magi (or their kids, in the event that they died before their victory) established their own great kingdoms:

* In the northwest, Golgachos' heirs from Clan Skene continued to reign over the wintry mountains of Morcarragh as the 'Ice Kings'.
* Falon claimed the western isles for his kingdom of Lorval, named the largest island in that volcanic archipelago after himself, and built his capital into the newly-christened Falon Island's volcano. His heirs, House Fin Falon, would reign as 'Fire Kings' after him.
* Merav's descendants founded the kingdom of Meravia in west-central Eldath, centered around the city of Monclaris in the river delta where Merav himself was born. There they reigned as the 'Fisher Kings' of House Meravix.
* Benshai had married a daughter of the Fen-Sidhe chief in the late stages of the HWoL and now founded the kingdom of Sylve on the fringes of the Evennan Forest in eastern Eldath. The 'Leaf Kings' of House Shaylve remained on good terms with the Fen-Sidhe for most of the Second Age and rarely trespassed into the deep woods where these last of the Sidhe continued to dwell, though curious Fen-Sidhe did move into Sylve territory in increasing numbers over the years and would often marry Sylvein men & women. Fortunately for mankind, the products of such unions were always human.
* Erendath claimed central and northern Eldath for his kingdom of Klevir, and his heirs in House Aldendath would continue to rule as 'Stone Kings' from their seat at Erenvir near its southern border. Though the largest kingdom on paper, Klevir was sparsely populated outside of its more fertile & temperate southern reaches.
* Kelloth founded a nation bearing his name on the eastern shores of Eldath, south of Sylve & Klevir but northeast of the 'Neck' of Eldath, and crowned himself its first 'King of the Seas and Storms'. The Kellothi would in time become renowned as intrepid mariners and traders among the Eldathi humans.
* Evendur's daughter Evaleen founded the kingdom of Duskenfall in the Dusken Mountains where the Xaxerns once dwelled, southwest of the 'Neck', and even claimed the old Xaxern capital of Peldar as her own seat (renamed 'Palador'). Shockingly, turning the biggest tomb of your enemies & the site of the first hellgate ever into your capital was not a great idea, and her descendants in House Evendim were plagued by nightmares or outright insanity…though they also refused to leave Palador out of sheer stubbornness.
* Yahrel's widow Manae founded the Church of Errai itself, and their son Yahnol was named its first Holy Father. Together with his twelve closest disciples they wrote its scriptures and came up with its hierarchy, and Manae also oversaw the construction of Church's capital at Aldurias on the northern end of the 'Neck of Eldath' (though its central Basilica would not be completed until after her death). After Yahnol's death, House Yahrellis continued to lead the Church as its Holy Fathers and Mothers, operating by the law of cognatic primogeniture (the eldest child of the reigning Holy Father or Mother inherits regardless of gender) and serving as the supreme spiritual leaders of Eldath. In the 'Founders' Compact', Manae also agreed that his family would never marry outside of the other Magi-founded dynasties or its own cadet branches (descendants of younger Yahrellis sons & daughters who were made into secular lords of smaller estates under the Church's control) to keep their blood 'pure', and began implementing the Compact by arranging Yahnol's marriage to Marae's eldest daughter when they came of age.
* Marae founded the city of Ellis on & around a great hill at the southern end of the Neck, directly opposite of Aldurias, and claimed all lands to the south. As she was the only Magus to heed Errai's warnings and avoid the ill-fated 'negotiation' with Arlindil (besides Yahrel, who went there anyway), Errai declared that she had His approval to rule over the other Magi and that her line would be share the responsibility of keeping theirs from falling off the righteous path alongside the Yahrellisi: while they served Errai as spiritual leaders for the continent's peoples, Marae and her descendants would serve as the supreme temporal sovereigns of Eldath. Thus the Ellisian Empire of House Mareth was born.

Confident that humanity wouldn't turn their backs on Him after He just delivered them from slavery and helped them attain genocidal revenge on their former tormentors, Errai thanked the Magi for their loyalty and bade adieu to Eos once again after laying down His final commandments (most importantly, that divine mandate for the Ellisian Empire I mentioned above), returning to torpor in His Heaven with the Tel-mera'i. He did, however, warn that He would return in 3000 years (the 2000 years He gave the Elder Races + an extra 1000 on top) to check up on them and that He'd better like what He sees or yet more bad things will happen.

The Second Age was a golden age for humanity, both those on Eldath and on the other continents. On Eldath, people enjoyed 1500 years of peace and (Iron Age levels of) prosperity under the Ellisian Empire, which at this time still spanned across the entire continent. In 2A 90 Marae's grandson, the Emperor Elloros founded the 'Magical Association' as the supreme governing body for all Eldathi mages, charged with regulating mages & making sure they follow imperial laws while at the same time protecting them from the less enlightened imperial subjects who may be tempted to lynch them for any and all misfortunes, providing them with fortified safehouses and assigning especially promising mages to the courts of kings & nobles. Elsewhere on Eos, although humans lived much more turbulent lives in their own eternally-warring tribes, kingdoms and empires, they were still free of any overbearing inhuman masters and could forge their own destinies with blood and iron.

But on Eldath at least, the Second Age was also an age of stagnation. Technology hardly advanced past mid-Iron Age levels (so think of the Roman Empire of the 1st-early 3rd centuries). Arguably it didn't have to thanks to a combination of internal stability & harmony, a lack of outside pressure and of course the presence of magic: you don't need fancy technological developments when aqueducts, paved roads, public baths and magical healing or herbal solutions were good enough to get by from day to day. Due to a lack of outside pressure or even internal challenges, the Marethi Emperors and Empresses became complacent and increasingly corrupt over the ages, as did their underlings - from the other Magi-blooded monarchs down to petty bureaucrats & officers. Lavish feasts and displays of opulence became more and more common at royal & imperial courts as the Houses sought to flaunt their growing wealth for the sake of prestige, courtly intrigues became much more pronounced and their players grew more ruthless as fear of Errai's judgment waned, and laws & taxes on society's lesser classes grew more draconian to support the increasingly ostentatious lifestyles of those at the top. The city of Ellis itself was the most obvious symptom of this degeneration: walls were built to separate districts from each other, and by the end of the Second Age the raucous partying of nobles in the 'Golden District' at the city's peak could be heard all the way down in the slums of the 'Brown Quarter' at its bottom.

Eldath would be shaken out of its complacency by three disasters towards the end of the Second Age. First, in 2A 1450, Syn-Sidhe agents were able to infiltrate several port cities on the southern coast and release deadly airborne pathogens that caused the 'Red Death': a plague that counted scarlet tumors, hemoptysis (coughing up blood) and severe necrosis as its symptoms, and which could not be treated even by the conventional healing magics of the day. The plague spread across Eldath and killed about 30 million out of the empire's 75 million citizens in the span of five years before the Magical Association was able to come up with a cure; before that, the Eldathi people had to employ other measures to combat the disease such as mass cremations of the dead, quarantines, closing of public baths and the like, culminating in the authorities burning down the three lower districts of Ellis with the dead & dying piled up there (an act that didn't exactly endear the Marethis to their subjects).

As the plague didn't discriminate between the poor and the rich, it also notably killed four Emperors and an Empress, one for each year it ran unabated. The last Emperor to die to this plague, Khessos XI, had no surviving children or siblings, so the succession was contested between his niece Seledain and the two Marethi cousins closest to him in blood, Menes & Tarudo. They promptly waged a three-way war against each other with the backing of the royal & noble houses of the Empire, plunging Ellis into an entire generation of bloody anarchy.

While this civil war was raging, a new threat arrived from across the ocean: the Thiarnari tribes, originally inhabitants of the western coast of Esdath (the eastern continent). Long united by a common language family but little else, these tribes were currently under pressure from the expansionist Antae Empire to the east (a better-organized tribal empire forged by the warlord Antebog around 2A 1300) and smelled opportunity in the bleeding half-dead empire across the water. By 2A 1470, they had begun to set aside their long-running small-scale wars with one another to raid the eastern shores of Eldath. Though (like most non-Eldathi humans) they were not half as magically gifted as the peoples of Eldath, indeed most Thiarnari viewed magic & mages with suspicion or outright hatred, the Thiarnari made up for it by being far more proficient conventional warriors - it was they who brought the longbow, mass-produced steel (superior to the iron weapons of the Ellisian armies) and stirrups (which greatly increased the effectiveness of their cavalry, as galloping during a charge is easier for both horse and rider if the latter stood in his stirrups with lance braced) - and enjoyed even higher reproductive rates than the Eldathi, with the average Thiarnari family having five or six children compared to the two or three of the average Eldathi family.

In 2A 1475, the warlord Taubert became the first great Thiarnari chief to lead his people across the sea not to plunder & take slaves, but to conquer: he proceeded to carve out a petty kingdom for himself in Kelloth, and to kill the imperial claimant Tarudo in a major battle when Tarudo attempted to drive him away. By 2A 1490, the First Ellisian Civil War finally ended with a peace treaty & the marriage of Seledain's son Mavos (who would also be the one to sit the imperial throne) to Menes' daughter Alecra, but by the Thiarnari had already completely overrun Kelloth and could not be contained by the badly-bloodied Empire. Making things even worse, the Ellisian vassal kingdoms of Morcarragh, Lorval and Klevir had fallen into destructive civil wars of their own, and their internal conflicts did not abate in 2A 1490; imperial forces thus had to contend with rebel armies backing claimants against the imperially-sanctioned legitimate monarchs of those realms and at the same time handle the Thiarnari, who were now migrating to Eldath more frantically & in larger numbers as their Antae rivals continued to push west. This general collapse of imperial authority in most places north of the Neck also meant a surge in criminal activity, with the most powerful brigand chiefs carving out petty-kingdoms for themselves in the countryside while northern cities were infested by thieves' guilds & gangs and the roads were plagued by robber bands, making life even harder for the average citizen.

Still, despite all of these problems the deathblow to the unified Ellisian Empire did not come until 2A 1500. In that year, the young Holy Father Cadmus III broke his betrothal to the Princess Thalusia, eldest daughter of Emperor Mavos, within months of his anointing so he could marry his true love, the peasant girl Leva. Thalusia's outraged father decried this breach of the Founders' Compact and denounced Cadmus as a false prophet, leading to Cadmus anathematizing Mavos (that's to say, completely excommunicating him from the Church). Mavos retaliated not only by leading an army to sack Aldurias (in which he failed) but by naming Cadmus' cousin Hikharios (also his own third cousin) the 'legitimate' Holy Father in Ellis' basilica, solidifying the collapse of the Founders' Compact. Those who continued to recognize Cadmus as the true leader of the Church of Errai, mostly those living north of the Neck, came to be known as the 'Northern Rite'; while those who recognized the leadership of Hikharios as legitimate, mostly those living south of the Neck, organized the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai.

Though bards might sing of how the power of love moved Cadmus to break his unwanted betrothal in northern lands while southern minstrels mock him his youthful foolishness, scholars on both sides of the Neck argue that politics was at play here just as much as Cadmus' affections for Leva and stubbornness: since the Red Death the Yahrellis and Mareth families had increasingly clashed over who should become the supreme temporal *and* spiritual leader of all Eldath, with the former insisting that the latter's callous methods of dealing with the Red Death and utter failure to hold back the Thiarnari invaders meant that they had failed in their duties and that it should now fall to Yahrel's descendants to guide the people of Eldath through these times, while the Marethis of course argued that the Yahrellises should know their place. While the Marethis had confiscated church lands and increased taxes on the clergy within their lands, the Yahrellis Holy Fathers & Mothers had denied some monarchs their coronation, threatened others with anathema, harassed yet more until they paid their loans from the Church and even seized control of entire governorates while the Imperial Civil War was still raging 'in the interests of enforcing Errai's order upon anarchy'. Mavos himself had not been crowned by Cadmus' father Laentus II, and instead had to settle for a local High Confessor: in retaliation he had made increasingly harsh demands of Laentus, taking out loans from the church treasury & then refusing to pay them, and tripling taxes on ecclesiastical property, and had not once let up even after Laentus died and was succeeded by an underage Cadmus III. In light of such history, the 'Great Schism' seemed inevitable: if it had not happened under Cadmus & Mavos, it would almost certainly have occurred at some other point in the future (perhaps a minor theological dispute, a refusal to pay taxes, another denied coronation, etc.), except in the unlikely circumstance that one side was able to fully enforce its will on the other.

As if this 'Great Schism' between the Northern and Southern Rites of the Church wasn't enough, this year also saw the Syn-Sidhe launch their own invasion of southern Eldath, sacking many lightly-defended cities (due to both the Red Plague & the fact that the empire's strength was still focused on holding the areas north of the Neck) and killing or enslaving hundreds of thousands of citizens. After Mavos failed in taking Aldurias, he ordered all of his legions north of the Neck to head south to repel the Syn-Sidhe, essentially leaving the northern kingdoms to fend for themselves: in response Morcarragh, Lorval, Meravia, Klevir and Sylve all renounced their oaths of fealty to Ellis and declared their support for the Northern Rite based out of Aldurias under Cadmus. Thus did the Second Age end: with Ellis losing all territories north of the Neck and stuck in a war to the knife against the Syn-Sidhe, while the Thiarnari continued to migrate into & overwhelm the newly-independent northern kingdoms.

The early Third Age saw continued radical changes to the map of northern Eldath as the Thiarnari continued their march, destroying several kingdoms entirely and assimilating others through marriage & settlement:

* Klevir and Lorval were completely destroyed by the Thiarnari, who raised up two new kingdoms of their own atop the broken bones of these old nations: Thurin was founded by the largest Thiarnari tribes on the mainland, and Brel was founded by tribes that went to the isles that once made up Lorval. The good news is that the Thiarnari were influenced by & intermarried with their native subjects quite a bit, resulting in the new Thiarnari-founded kingdoms adopting the Church of the One and mixing elements of old Ellisian/regional laws with their own tribal customs to create new legal codes.
* Meravia and Sylve absorbed the Thiarnari who entered their borders by giving those Thiarnari tribes land & gold in exchange for protection from other Thiarnari, but over time intermarriage & cultural exchange between the Eldathi natives and the new arrivals, including increasingly frequent matches between the old royal houses of Meravix and Shaylve, resulted in the former being absorbed into the latter. These new part-Thiarnari kingdoms continued to follow the Church.
* Morcarragh managed to remain free of not just Thiarnari occupation but also Thiarnari influences due to its isolation, an ideal defensive position in the Ansel Mountains and the courage & skill of its kings whenever a Thiarnari warlord did come a-knocking.

For its part, Ellis continued to lose ground against the Syn-Sidhe for an entire century after the dawn of the Third Age. Though the Empire's soldiers fought as bravely as any other nation's, their ranks had been badly depleted by the civil war, the Red Death and the (now completely pointless) northern wars. To make up for this manpower deficit, they began to import mercenaries from across the ocean, promising Esdathi tribes land & gold in exchange for assistance against the Syn-Sidhe. The most important people to answer this call were the Umari, a confederacy of sixteen tribes from southwestern Esdath whose chiefs accepted the Ellisians' offer of settlement in the deserts of far southern Eldath, the freedom to follow their own religious pantheon & generous pay in 3A 100. Being skilled archers and lancers who fought expertly from horseback and camel-back alike, and armed with both the element of surprise and their own magical tradition centering around the priestesses of their faith, they succeeded in turning the tide and driving the Syn-Sidhe from Eldath by 3A 150. Ellis rewarded them by breaking every promise they had made and blockading them in the desert cities & estates they had already been given, resulting in the outbreak of a chain of wars that Ellis has started to lose decisively by 3A 1000.

Sylve also fell into open war with the Fen-Sidhe at the start of the Third Age, as the Fen-Sidhe had slowly begun to realize that their race was dying out due to excessive intermarriage with the humans of Sylve. Making things worse, the Sylveins had begun to push into the inner Evennan Forest in search of lumber and living space, directly breaching Benshai's Pact with the Fen-Sidhe from 1500 years earlier. The revelation that the Sidhe were losing their prized immortality from extended contact with humans, as evidenced by the sudden death of Fen-Sidhe chief Ethilomor from natural causes, provided the anti-human Fen-Sidhe chief Chireadan with the perfect argument with which to convince his peers that humans were a threat, a virus, that must be squashed before they completely absorbed the Fen-Sidhe race: thus under his leadership the Fen-Sidhe began to purge themselves of pro-human elements and to emerge from the Evennan deepwoods to attack Sylve, killing humans regardless of how much or how little Sidhe blood they had & also targeting the Sidhe spouses of humans. The Sylveins and pro-human Sidhe were forced to ally themselves with the Thiarnari invaders knocking on their borders, and after a hundred years of hard fighting they succeeded in defeating the anti-human Fen-Sidhe - at the cost of dooming the Fen-Sidhe to extinction, as they (but especially the more brutal Thiarnari barbarians) had killed too many Sidhe for the survivors to replace via pure Sidhe-Sidhe reproduction, and in any case most of the survivors were those Fen-Sidhe who already had human spouses and children. By 3A 1480, the Fen-Sidhe had been completely absorbed into mankind: the ancestry of modern Sylveins can be seen in their shorter-than-average, more delicate frames and slightly pointed ears, but they are still firmly human and nothing else remains of the 'Wood Elves' but ruins in the Evennan deepwoods.

Two more waves of invading Esdathi humans plagued Eldath in the mid-Third Age. First came the Antae in the sixth century; you might remember them as the guys who put such pressure on the Thiarnari that they were forced to head west into Eldath, well now the same fate has befallen them. By 3A 500 the Antae had lost a major war to the even larger & more organized Jin Empire in eastern Esdath, and their last Paramount King Tvarich (a descendant of the empire's founder, Antebog) was killed in battle that year while leading a desperate counterattack that ultimately floundered against the steel-clad legions of the Jin. Tvarich's five sons Rod, Varod, Antetad, Berich and Perich led their people across the sea to northern Eldath, where they first seized control of the massive but sparsely populated far north from the Thiarnari in 3A 515. When Rod claimed this vast wintry land for himself and demanded his brothers recognize him as the Paramount King of the Antae like their father before them, his younger brothers all marched south in search of greener pastures & an escape from his overbearing arrogance. Varod and Antetad carved out smaller kingdoms for themselves in what used to be the northern half of Klevir, displacing or assimilating the Thiarnari and native Eldathi still living there, while Berich and Perich were hired by the Ellisian Emperor as mercenaries on the same terms that the Umari got: Perich's people settled the vast rolling plains south of Ellis while Berich and his followers took the drier savanna even further south, and both were charged with halting the advance of the Umari. The Ellisians actually didn't break their promise & try to backstab their foederati this time around, but that didn't stop the Southern Antae from renouncing their allegiance & declaring their kingdoms independent in the mid-700s anyway, causing the situation south of the Neck to degenerate into a perpetual four-way struggle between Ellis, Duskenfall, the Antae kingdoms (unless they fought each other, in which case this becomes a five-way struggle & which became more frequent in later years) and the Umari.

After the Antae came the Thiareike from the far north, starting around 3A 800. Remember when I said the Xaxerns and the old Vyn-Sidhe gods had been tossed into Hell at the end of the First Age? Well over the next 2300 years they struck an alliance of convenience against Errai and His most prized creation even as Hell warped them into (even more) monstrous Demons, and now they began to make their move against humanity. Now, since the 600s the continent of Tihr (an even colder and more desolate place than the northern shores of Eldath) had been united by the Thiareike, a tribe of hardy warriors from its southern coast who worshipped the warrior god Thiareiks, and for a time they were content - but that changed in 3A 775 when Prince Thiunir, the youngest son of High King Tihr III 'Thunder-Voice', began to have his dreams haunted by Demons at the age of 3. Tihr tried to hide Thiunir's fits from his subjects and to beat the Demons out of him with his other sons, but could not do so after Thiunir finally flipped his gourd & was briefly possessed by the Azeal Buikon (formerly a Xaxern priest-king) at age 8 after enduring too much bullying from two of his brothers. By the time Thiunir regained control of himself, he had already killed both brothers and was walking around covered in their blood at high noon, so even if Tihr wasn't angry enough at the boy to want him dead (which he was) he couldn't just let this go unpunished. Finally Tihr decided not to kill the boy, but he did banish him to the furthest northern reaches of the continent, beyond the borders of his kingdom.

As it turned out, exiling a scared and desperate kid who also involuntarily communed with Demons and was in danger of falling under permanent possession wasn't a great idea. 12 years later, Thiunir returned to his father's kingdom…as the willing host of Buikon, who preyed on & aggravated his insecurities + anger and resentment at his family for banishing him until he went completely insane and allowed Buikon free reign over his body and soul. Thiunir moved from town to town, killing everyone he saw and then raising them as zombie thralls bound to his will with Buikon's power. The Thiareike tried, and failed horrendously, at combating Thiunir's zombies with conventional means: by 3A 798 the situation had gotten so bad that Tihr decided the only way to save his people was to have them flee across the sea. While he, his shamans and 3,000 of his best warriors fought a hopeless battle against Thiunir's seemingly endless horde of zombies, his remaining seven sons boarded their ships & led the rest of the Thiareike into Eldath. Thiareike legend holds that Tihr fatally wounded Thiunir with the last of his strength, and as he cradled his dying son Thiunir was able to break free of Buikon's control long enough to express remorse for his crimes; of course, once Thiunir actually died, Buikon immediately seized control of his corpse and bit Tihr's face off, killing him.

Tihr's other sons made landfall on the bitterly cold isles off of Eldath's northern coast in 799, and the year after began invading the Antae realms of northern Eldath. By this point in time the far north (claimed by the oldest Antebogite brother, Rod for his own) had become a patchwork of petty Antae principalities ruled by the thousand descendants of Rod (the 'Rodichi'), loosely united under the 'Paramount Kings' descended from Rod's eldest son Bel (in practice, the Belovichi Paramount Kings only had authority wherever they had a garrison of loyal men, otherwise the princes just did whatever they felt like doing). Tihr's two oldest sons, Velgir and Thurgir, permanently conquered the northernmost Rodichi principalities, wiped out a full half of the Rodichi bloodlines and sacked the Rodichi capital of Iskorosten, but were eventually driven out of half their gains when the Rodichi rallied around the Belovich prince Mal and spent the next three generations counterattacking northward. Still, the Thiareike managed to secure a significant amount of land along northern Eldath's shores, certainly enough to sustain themselves (with the addition of plunder from their frequent raids on anyone living in coastal areas north of the Neck).

The Thiareike also targeted other kingdoms further south. Velgir and Thurgir's younger brothers pillaged the Ruby Isles, the Meravian coast and even once dared strike at the ports of Aldurias & Ellis, while their cousins went east to strike along the coasts of Sylve and Thurin. The third Tihrson brother, Fjorrod Frost-Beard led a band of adventurers to conquer Morcarragh, which he and his heirs ruled for almost 300 years until their expulsion by the Morcarraghim hero Somairle 'the Seer' in 3A 1150. The fourth Tihrson brother, Horik Hoarfrost invaded the divided Ruby Isles and subdued most of the warring Thiarnari & native Lorvali princes there, though those who survived his initial onslaught later united to found the kingdom of Brel and drive his people from the isles by 3A 900. The fifth and sixth brothers, twins Askein and Algot, besieged the Meravian capital Monclaris in 3A 815 but were killed trying to storm its walls. And the youngest of Tihr's sons to survive the loss of their homeland, Molgrom the Merchant, shocked both his kin and their enemies by taking up a life of peaceful trade, establishing a shipping business in the harbor district of Ellis and refusing to take up arms except in self-defense.

Since then, the continent's been wracked by constant warfare pitting virtually everyone against everyone else, though some have forged long-standing alliances akin to the real-life Anglo-Portuguese or Franco-Scottish alliances. Ellis had to contend with the Northern Rite Church, Meravia and Thurin to the north as well as the Umari and the Southern Antae kingdoms to the south, though sometimes said Southern Antae kingdoms have allied with Ellis to battle the Umari together. Ellis also has a more reliable ally in the Kingdom of Duskenfall, though even they have turned against the Empire at times.

Making things even worse, Demons have begun to force their way past Hell's barriers into the material universe, and sporadically possess people or animals as tools with which to carry out nefarious schemes (from ruining someone's love life, to plain ol' murder sprees, to engineering civil wars depending on the power & intelligence of the Demon involved). They have also invaded Eldath in force twice with one of the Azeal at their head, between 1137-1170 and again between 1254-1268, and although they were successfully repelled by an alliance of every human state on the continent they still did tremendous amounts of damage to the land and killed millions each time. Both times, the key to defeating the Demons was having the Yahrellis Holy Mother/Father of the time voluntarily give up their own lives in an excruciating blood sacrifice ritual, which resulted in their soul being transformed into that of an archangel powerful enough to defeat even the Azeal: normally this shouldn't have been necessary, since before His return to torpor Errai had taught both His Church and each of the nine Magi a ritual that would require significant but survivable amounts of blood to be taken from representatives of their royal bloodlines to create an artificial angel instead, but as many of said bloodlines were permanently destroyed during the Thiarnari and Antae invasions of the early Third Age this wasn't an option by the time those Demonic invasions rolled in.

Through the last 1500 years Ellis has had its good days and bad days, though I haven't fully mapped out a timeline for them yet. However, in the last 200 years or so it's been having a lot more bad days than good days, resulting in its territory shrinking to just its capital and some nearby noble estates thanks to rampant corruption within its bureaucracy, unrelenting attacks from all sides and a nobility that's more interested in bickering with each other (or launching into outright civil war) & defending their own interests instead of pulling together to face outside threats. All the while, Demonic attacks are mounting, the Syn-Sidhe are gearing up for another invasion of Eldath, and the world has 20 years left to go before Errai returns. Thus in the year 3A 1480 we enter the story of our protagonist: a criminal who had been betrayed by the rest of his gang and is now one night away from execution, but might just be saved by the timely intervention of the new captain of the City Watch & his radical ideas on how to fight crime…

**Factions on Eldath:**

**Ellisian Empire:**

**Capital:** Ellis

**Coat of arms:** A crowned black eagle with a smoking silver thurible in its beak & a silver sword in its claws, imposed on a golden sunburst on a purple background

The faction in which all the action happens. The Ellisian Empire once ruled all of Eldath, but over the last 1500 years it has waned under corrupt and incompetent administration, several civil wars and the pressure of external invasions until by 3E 1480, it consists of little more than the capital city of Ellis itself & its immediate environs. More recently, it has spent the last century fighting a losing war against the Umari Empire coming from the south. Virtually its entire society has decayed tremendously since its apex some 1600 years ago: the nobles are more concerned with petty political intrigues rather than outside threats, the bureaucrats regularly take bribes and fudge numbers or forge letters for their own benefit, the scholars & magi have essentially (in some magical cases, literally) fallen out of touch with the reality of those beneath their towers and/or have their own nefarious plots, and the Southern Rite Church is a hair away from completely giving up on the empire.

As of the start of this game, Ellis is nominally ruled by the nine-year-old Empress Erennia II due to the death of her father Harudion VIII in battle with the Umari, though in practice it is governed by a regency council headed by his mother the Dowager Empress-Regent Sevenna. A capricious and paranoid woman whose prime objective is the survival & empowerment of herself + her daughter, the Empress Regent has been busy packing her council and bureaucracy with corrupt thugs and lickspittles who are loyal to her but all too often have few other redeeming qualities, which isn't exactly doing wonders for the empire's chances of surviving this decade. The only thing they have going for them is a one-year truce with the Umari, which has bought them some time to negotiate new alliances with the northern kingdoms, but even so half of their time is now up and still they've got nothing done.

**Geography:** In its golden age Ellis was master of the entire continent, but those days are no more than a faded memory by now. Despite its pretensions to the contrary, the Ellis of today is essentially a city-state, comprised of its capital & namesake as well as a few miles of farmland within sight of the city's great walls. That said, even in its advanced state of decline Ellis is still the single largest city on the continent, home to over a million people - though admittedly, most of them are poorer citizens and over half of them are either the first-generation descendants of refugees from lost provinces or refugees themselves.

The city of Ellis (population as of 3A 1480: 1,100,000) was built on & around the towering hill known as Marae's Mount at the south end of the Neck, and was originally divided into three districts with a fourth being added towards the end of the Second Age: the Golden District, the Silver District, the Copper District and the Brown Quarter in that order.

* The Golden District, built around the top of Marae's Mount, is where the nobility and clergy live. Even in the empire's twilight years it remains a dazzling center of culture and wealth: gemstones are used to pave the streets and decorate the walls, lavishly garbed merchants peddle high-end goods such as silk and spices at the Diamond Market, and you can't turn your head without sighting a luxurious noble house's palace, a radiant church filled with beautiful icons or an ancient library, all perfectly maintained (sometimes for thousands of years) by magic. At the very peak of Marae's Mount stands the *Marenae*: a palatial complex that the House of Mareth has called home for thousands of years, complete with gilded rooftops, domed watchtowers, smaller palaces for more distant Marethi relations, sparkling fountains, a massive garden filled with exotic plants and almost every fruit-bearing tree known to man, hundreds of marble statues depicting past Ellisian monarchs and the 'House of Wisdom', a library housing over 3000 years' worth of knowledge (including even the crude paintings and stone tablets of human slaves while the Elder Races still reigned supreme). The Golden Basilica stands near the entrance to Marenae and besides being the spiritual heart of the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai, it's also where the remains of every past Ellisian monarch is buried.
* The Silver District was built around the middle part of Marae's Mount and is where the city's merchants and civil servants live. Not half as lavishly decorated as the Golden District but far from the filthy poverty of the Copper District & Brown Quarter, the Silver District's cobbled streets are lined with shops and offices of all kinds. The *Pendaitolon*, a massive tower magically constructed out of black stone, stands proudly near the entrance to the Golden District and has served as home to Ellis' Magical Association for about 2800 years, and towards the entrance to the Copper District one can find the 'Barbarians' Quarter' where foreign merchants, diplomats and travelers live. This district is especially crowded during the summer, when Ellis holds its annual summer fair and opens the Silver Gates to everyone (even those from the lower districts) for three months.
* The Copper District is the last of the original Ellisian districts, and was built around the foot of Marae's Mount as a home for artisans & other lower-class urban workers. Most of its inhabitants live communally in massive apartment blocks that are in constant danger of catching fire, though wealthier artisans (typically those close to a guild's leaders) can afford private homes. Despite their poverty compared to the denizens of the Silver & Golden Districts, at the very least the people of the Copper District can typically count on having a job, a roof over their heads, and three hot meals a day in addition to the benefits of paved roads, aqueducts and an underground sewage system (about the only things this district has in common with the two above it). Ellis' two great ports, *Carcharon* on its west coast and *Marmotheron* on its east coast, are also found in the Copper District, though they have merchants-only fenced express roads connecting them to the Silver District to expedite travel for Ellis' traders. The famous Hippodrome of Ellis, a massive chariot-racing complex capable of hosting over a hundred thousand spectators, is this district's main attraction for foreigners as well as any Ellisian on holiday.
* Near the end of the Second Age, so many refugees from the Red Death and the wars both north & south of the Neck flocked to the capital that Ellis was unable to house them all within its great white walls, resulting in the overwhelming majority of these unfortunates having to live in shantytowns just outside the city walls. Since 3A 400 these shantytowns had become so large, in many cases growing into and on top of each other, that the Ellisian Emperor Kasmatos III proclaimed them to be a fourth District and built a new wall of wood & stone to enclose them. Thus the Brown Quarter - a sprawling maze of flimsy shacks, rickety apartment blocks, seedy markets, dark alleys and open-air sewers - was born.

The first three districts of Ellis are enclosed by towering white walls, each well over 200 meters in height. These walls were built with the aid of the other Magi in the time of Marae herself and to this day are reinforced by countless enchantments, runes & magical traps: many who have tried storming them, from Thiarnari warriors to Umari riders to Vyn-Sidhe mages and even Demons have found their ladders disintegrating upon touching the battlements, their battering rams breaking before even denting the city's engraved gates, their siege engines' projectiles halting & falling harmlessly or even flying back at them before reaching the walls, and their bravest soldiers slaughtered by gouts of magical flame or flesh-devouring poisons from its towers. These walls have never been breached in all the time that they've stood, and so none of the inner districts have ever borne the shame of witnessing a hostile force marching through their streets. The Brown Quarter however has only one 100-meter-tall wall of ordinary wood and stone to protect them and while it is strong enough to ward off anything short of a determined army, it is most definitely penetrable as evidenced by its fall to and the ensuing sack of the Brown Quarter by many enemy hosts throughout history (most recently the Umari in 3A 1350).

Immediately outside the Brown Quarter's walls are a few miles of farmland, owned by nobles who'd much prefer to spend their time in the safety of the Golden District and worked by perhaps 20,000 peasants total - all that's left of Ellis' holdings outside of its capital. These lands provide the overpopulated capital with less than half of its food, the rest being imported from the northern kingdoms by necessity, and due to their lack of protection are an obvious target for the Umari. Many times, small parties of mounted Umari raiders have been able to pillage a few farms, slaughter the peasants and burn the crops before fleeing well ahead of the imperial army's lethargic response. Nobles wishing to rebuild their devastated estate will find no shortage of workers & farmers among the desperate underclass of the Brown Quarter, who will gladly work for chump change to get out of their situation in the slums.

**Government:** Ellis, unlike the feudal kingdoms north of the Neck, retained the bureaucratic and legislative structures of its golden age. The first and largest arm of the Ellisian bureaucracy or '*Maistorion*' is the *Vestetorion* (better known simply as the 'Gray Robes'), an army of dedicated scribes and magistrates headed by the Vestarch from his seat in the Gray Tower, which is responsible for recording the annual census, managing the Ellisian postal service and prosecuting anyone - from the lowest peasant or slum-dweller to the highest noble - who has been arrested for breaching imperial law. Another branch of the imperial bureaucracy, the *Sakellion* or Grand Treasury (the 'Yellow Robes'), is responsible for the minting of coins, the collection of taxes and of course physically handling the state treasury: its leader, the Sakellarios, is the supreme financial comptroller of the empire. Finally, the third official bureaucratic department is the *Logotherion* or 'Red Robes', which handles the imperial military's logistics: the Grand Logothete and his underlings are responsible for the procurement of weapons, armor, mounts, rations, ships, oars - essentially anything and everything that the Ellisian army and navy might need to fight. Finally there are the *Sistiarion* or 'Emperor's Hands', a department composed exclusively of eunuchs which isn't technically part of the *Maistorion* but exists above it and all other imperial institutions: these 'Black Robes' are the not-so-secret police of the Empire and are charged with monitoring the rest of the *Maistorion* & the nobility for disloyalty or incompetence, then weeding out these undesirable elements by any means necessary, in addition to screening anyone who has been granted an audience with their monarch and testing their food.

Unfortunately, by 3A 1480 the *Maistorion* and the *Sistiarion*, much like the rest of the Empire, are pale shadows of their former selves. The former's departments have all become bloated and indolent, with the bureaucrats who actually do anything far outnumbered by sinecures that exist for no reason beyond giving the friends & relatives of imperial officials (from the lowest supervisor to the heads of each department) cushy, well-paying jobs with fancy titles. Corruption has become a fact of the empire's bureaucratic 'culture' as well: far too many people both within and outside of the *Maistorion* expect to have a fat bribe handy for whichever official they're supposed to be addressing when they need a house built, a sewer cleaned or a fire put out. As for the eunuchs, they too have become far too willing to let bureaucratic 'indiscretions' slide in exchange for the right favors or piles of gold, and may or may not have had a hand in ensuring that several past Emperors who tried to change the situation met with fatal hunting accidents or inexplicably found poisonous mushrooms in their food.

The imperial legislature, the *Sygkletos* or Imperial Senate, fares little better. Since its founding in the early Second Age the *Sygkletos* has been divided into two houses:

* An upper house, the 300-strong *Gerousia*, two-thirds of which is composed of members of the empire's landed noble families, the *Altai* (singl. *Altaios*), who were elected by their kin to represent their family's interests in the chamber until they either die or are recalled by the rest of their family. Each noble house (defined as a family whose male line has at least one member who bears a hereditary title of nobility, even the lowest rank of *kometopoule* will do) is entitled to one representative. The remaining third of the *Gerousia*'s seats belong to the Imperial Church of Errai: the Holy Father or Mother in charge of the Church alone bears the privilege of appointing clerics to fill those seats, though in practice they virtually never do so without first consulting the Confessors and High Confessors beneath them. Together, the *gerontes* (singl. *geron*) have the right to vote on whether or not to appoint individuals nominated by the Emperor or the *Ecclesia* (lower house) to leadership positions within the *Maistorion*, to approve or shoot down any legislation drafted by the *Ecclesia*, whether to raise/lower/keep the annual tax rates, and how much money should be allotted to the Emperor's wars (although they do not have the power to outright nullify a declaration of war drafted & signed by the monarch). They also have the right to vote on whether to raise or lower the senatorial pensions (payments made to both sitting and retired senators) together with the *Ecclesia* once a year.
* A lower house, the *Ecclesia*, which is comprised of 1,000 representatives elected for four-year terms by the enfranchised citizens of the empire (defined as 30+ year old men and women who were either born to citizen parents or had Ellisian citizenship conferred upon them for services to the Empire, whether it be performing heroic deeds on the battlefield or making a sufficiently generous donation to the empire's coffers). The ecclesians have the right to draft domestic legislation, to nominate candidates for leadership positions in the *Maistorion*'s departments and to create new offices within the *Maistorion*, and to propose & fund domestic infrastructure developments. However, they must submit all of their proposals to the *Gerousia* which would then vote on whether or not to actually implement them, making the *Ecclesia* the weaker half of the *Sygkletos*. They also have the right to vote on whether to raise or lower the senatorial pensions (payments made to both sitting and retired senators) together with the *Gerousia* once a year.

The Emperors and Empresses of Ellis traditionally wielded (and technically still do wield) the power of veto over both chambers' votes and proposals, which cannot be overridden in any way by any *Sygkletoi*: only retracted by the monarch who issued it. It was thought that with enough checks and balances between the executive & legislative arms of the imperial government, the Emperor and his Senate would maximize each other's strengths while being able to cancel out the other's worse decisions, benefiting the Empire as a whole. In practice during the twilight years of Ellis (so for the latter half of the 3rd Age), this has resulted in stronger-willed monarchs wasting time in legislative deadlocks with an overmighty and unruly aristocracy while weaker ones simply approved anything the *gerontes* set before them, even pieces of legislation that clearly benefited nobody but the *gerontes*, such as increases in senatorial pensions (which are paid to both sitting and retired senators). Speaking of which, that is perhaps the single greatest problem with the *Sygkletos* of today: their pensions have grown by 200-fold in the past 200 years even as the empire steadily lost territory and thus sources of revenue, and for many noble houses that have lost their estates to the advancing Umari their senatorial pension is their main source of revenue. A second large problem is the creation of sinecures: useless but overpaid positions within the *Maistorion*, such as redundant departments of scribes whose assigned duties are already being handled by a pre-existing department or multiple seal-bearers for important officials where one would have sufficed, that exist solely so senators can give their likely-underqualified friends and relatives official positions within the government that come with a regular salary but few to no real responsibilities. As of 3A 1480, even with the Umari at Ellis' gates the *Sygkletos* is still riven by factionalism, rampant corruption and tons of dead wood (the aforementioned sinecures and especially the landless nobility, who can contribute nothing due to having no resources of their own yet can still elect representatives to the *Gerousia* & collect senatorial pensions due simply to their titles).

**Society:** Ellisian society, like most medieval societies, is divided into several classes: the nobility and clergy at the top, a majority of peasants at the bottom, and a middle class of merchants and urban laborers in-between.

The Ellisian aristocracy have traditionally dominated the state institutions: besides their seats in the *Gerousia*, they also supply the higher-ranking officials of the *Maistorion* (after all, they were the class most able to afford an education for their children) and of course, they own - or rather, owned - most of the land in the empire. In recent centuries, as more and more of Ellis fell to the Umari most of the nobility lost their estates but **not** their power: they derived their authority from hereditary titles, which they held even after being driven from their lands, and which exempt them from many taxes while also entitling them to seats in the *Gerousia*, certain protections under the law (particularly the right to be judged either by the monarch or a jury of fellow nobles) and to commanding positions within the military. Even without taxes from their now Umari-held estates, the landless nobility can count on grossly enlarged senatorial pensions to fund their lavish lifestyles. The first thing many landless aristocrats do with their money is to demolish homes & apartments in other districts to make way for their new urban palaces (paid for with their senatorial pensions), which has left countless thousands of poorer Ellisians homeless and contributed to an explosion in social unrest in the past few hundred years.

The last few centuries have proven to be the best and worst for the Ellisian middle class. Due to the loss of almost all imperial territories outside of Ellis itself, many peasants have fled into the capital, resulting in both an overabundance of urban poor dwelling in its slums and a significant increase in the numbers of its middle class; the luckier ex-peasants were able to take up work with the city's guilds to become blacksmiths, carpenters, dyers, spinners and so on. Meanwhile, the merchants have grown richer from supplying the new swarms of urban poor with basic goods and (thanks to a recent cooling of tensions between the Northern & Southern Rites in the face of Umari aggression) increased trade with the northern kingdoms, even as the rest of the empire becomes poorer. With their greater numbers, the Ellisian guilds & traders are able to increasingly challenge both the traditional authority of the nobility and the foreign merchants who had previously dominated the city's mercantile 'Jeweled District'. This has of course resulted in increased tension between the middle and upper classes, which has even spilled over into the *Maistorion* where the lower-ranking bureaucrats typically come from the former's ranks: aristocratic officials who piss their underlings off can expect to start 'mysteriously' losing documents or entering into unfavorable contracts, even if it's to the detriment of the Empire as a whole.

Finally, the Ellisian underclass lives much as the underclasses in the northern kingdoms do: short, brutish lives mired in poverty and squalor. Although Ellis is the largest city on the continent, the overwhelming majority of its citizens are the slum-dwellers of the Brown Quarter, refugees or descendants of refugees driven out of their homes by the Umari advance and stranded in the capital with no prospects for the future - their presence in such overwhelming numbers has created a massive glut in labor, to the point where many 'Brown Men' work in conditions matching or even worse than that of Umari slaves for their betters and are paid a pittance yet as many as 60% of the Brown Quarter's denizens are still unemployed. Needless to say, this has made the Brown Quarter a breeding ground for all sorts of criminal enterprises from simple street gangs that extort local businesses/passers-by & kill and are killed by the dozen or hundred in their skirmishes to organized crime rings with a thumb in every racket, from gambling to prostitution to dogfighting to assassinations. The larger criminal organizations provide the Brown Quarter's people with homes (typically cheap, hastily built structures of timber & mud-brick where up to six families may have to share a single cramped room) and food to secure their loyalty or at least their compliance with criminal activities, making it virtually impossible for law enforcement to break their hold on the district…when said enforcers aren't already taking bribes from the crime lords, anyway. Thanks to the seemingly unstoppable Umari threat, the empire's leaders have neither the time nor the resources to tend to these unfortunate souls - and half the time they don't even have the will either, due to their own intrigues with & against each other.

Mages in Ellis are treated well, as is the case in other kingdoms where the native Eldathi still dominate (Morcarragh, Sylve, Duskenfall and until its fall to Brel, Meravia). Magic is considered a gift from Errai, and mages can expect to be treated just like anyone else from their social class (which does still mean that, for example, a mage born to Brown Quarter dwellers should not dare to insult a mundane noble). The Magical Association of Ellis is the oldest mages' guild on the continent and is fiercely proud of its ~3000 years' worth of traditions: it has always been organized into twelve Colleges ('*Collegion*') led by 'Oracles', one for each of the Association's great Spires throughout the empire, which were in turn further divided into smaller associations of a few dozen to a hundred mages ('*sodales*'), and all of which answer to a Grand Arcanist elected for a life term by the Oracles. This structure has persisted to the present day, even though eleven of the Spires have already fallen to the Umari advance long ago (the latest to fall, the *Vedatholon* of Ellahun, was lost in 3A 1357) - the Colleges of those lost towers simply moved to the *Pendaitholon*, where they at first (aside from a few extreme optimists today) expected to return to their homes in short order and as of today have resigned themselves to just trying to hold Ellis and with it, their last refuge. As of 3A 1480, the Magical Association counts approximately 6,000 mages in its ranks, about 1,000 of whom are trained for war.

Though membership in the Association is compulsory for all mages (even members of the House of Mareth who display magical talent are required to join, train & study under the Association), they are not formally inducted into the order until the age of ten, live and study in comfort at the *Pendaitolon* (and in the past, at other Association towers all over the empire, though these have all fallen to the Umari now), and are allowed to visit their family for three months a year (two in summer, one in winter) & to communicate via letters or magic at all times. That said, after undergoing their mandatory eight years of training & studies Ellisian mages are expected to do their duty to the empire, whether it be by fighting alongside the mundane soldiers of the imperial armies, as scholars and teachers for the next generation of mages or simply as bureaucrats within the *Maistorion*. Most mages are allowed to choose their own career path by the Association, though those who display special talent in certain schools of magic (for example, a mage who has proven to be a poor telepath but a budding master of elemental magics) may be drafted into one particular career path by order of the monarch or the Grand Arcanist (in our example's case, the elementalist would be drafted into the army where his fireballs or whatever would be more useful than say, disposing of the bureaucracy's garbage). As Ellisian mages traditionally specialize in telepathy, those among them who are slated for jobs in the military are trusted to remotely determine the movements & plans of the empire's enemies and to devise appropriate countermeasures ahead of time, while those who head into less martial careers are valued as living lie-detectors and spies or counterspies.

Between the endless tide of defeats at the hands of the Umari, the corruption and intrigue choking the imperial court & bureaucracy, and the ever-worsening squalor afflicting the city's poorest as refugees continued to flood into the Brown Quarter, Ellisian culture in the past 300 or so years has become extremely pessimistic.

* Sad songs are heard frequently in the city's taverns while uplifting or even baudy songs are rare, while the city's art is typically quite dark these days: paintings of glorious victories, statues of past conquerors and comedic or heroic plays are far outnumbered by artwork depicting tragic defeat or a bitter acceptance of the city's seemingly inevitable fall while hundreds of tragedies have been written by the city's playwrights over the years with hardly any comedies to accompany them.
* Many younger nobles have taken to holding lavish parties, intending to indulge themselves in earthly pleasures & make merry with their friends before the seemingly-inevitable fall of their city, while older and/or more responsible nobles have made plans to move to the northern kingdoms (with as much gold & valuables as they can carry, of course) in the event that Ellis falls, neither of which exactly endears them to those beneath them: the optimists who believe Ellis will never fall to the Umari tide for some reason or another are few and far between.
* More than a few merchants too have begun to surreptitiously move their assets abroad, while foreigners have been leaving the city in droves and the northern kingdoms' ambassadors relay their fears of the city's fall almost weekly.
* The downtrodden residents of the Brown Quarter, particularly the first-generation refugees, speak of the probable fall of their city with fear and have at times rioted out of panic against their overlords when they felt that not enough attention was being paid to Ellis' outer walls - they know that, as bad as their lot might be right now, an enemy army sacking their homes is one of the few ways their lives could get worse.
* Even Ellisian mages have found reason to sink into despair - though many are skilled telepaths who can accurately predict the Umari forces' next moves, actually coming up with realistic countermeasures to said enemy maneuvers is easier said than done, especially considering Ellis' relative poverty and lack of skilled soldiers compared to past centuries. How are they supposed to (for example) stop the movement of 20,000 Umari by boat to outflank a defending force of 5,000 Ellisians that's already busy holding off another 20,000 foes on a flat plain at the coast with no reinforcements on the table & not enough power/training to whip up a whirlpool or tsunami, after all? That scenario, and worse, are what these mages face on a regular basis these days. They know better than most that the city will almost certainly fall…and they also know full well that there is nothing, or at best next to nothing, that they can do about it.

So all in all, it's not a great time to be an Ellisian. About the only people happy with the current state of affairs are crime bosses who believe their organizations can survive the fall of the city, and pro-Umari traitors. Among the upper classes, there are rumors that the Empress-Regent Efna, Grand Arcanist Elaudos Ralethannos and *Ypertatos* (supreme military commander) Galenos Mouzalon have all drawn up their emergency plans to save Ellis, but none of them don't involve tremendous sacrifice - high-ranking imperial diplomats & bureaucrats whisper of the Empress-Regent's increasingly desperate overtures to the northern kingdoms for salvation 'at any cost, no matter how humiliating', while the Sages and higher-ranking officers loyal to the crown have found more and more reason to worry about their leaders plotting some kind of coup against their sovereign. No matter who prevails in the end, they must do so with as little bloodshed as possible, for Ellis absolutely cannot afford a civil war now of all times. Then again, the schemes of the city's finest probably won't matter to our lowborn criminal protagonist, at least not in the timespan I'm thinking of for the game.

**Religion:** The state religion of the Ellisian Empire is the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai. Theologically (and to a lesser extent artistically), it shares many similarities with its Northern Rite counterpart:

* **Symbols:** The Church's holiest numbers are 3 and its multiples, particularly 6/9/12. More specifically, a hexagram enclosing the Sacred Heart of Yahrel is the chief symbol of the Church. The Southern Rite's coat of arms is a golden hexagram on a dark purple background.

The six central, non-negotiable 'Pillars of the Faith' as repeatedly emphasized in the Church's holy book, the 'Scriptures of the Old Sages' compiled from the writings of Yahrel & humanity's eight other champions during & immediately after the late First Age, and determined by the Council of Haddon which formalized the North-South Schism in 3A 10 are:

* **Monotheism:** The belief that Errai is the one and only true God, a benevolent and universal deity who represents & is the source of all goodness and who is also humanity's creator & #1 champion. No other entity may be worshiped: those who do just that are considered heretics (if they claim to believe in Errai as well) or outright heathens (if they don't). It is possible to worship Errai through His son Yahrel, but only due to his proximity to Errai (both within the Celestial Hierarchy and, more obviously, by blood) and because he is the 'gate' through which all humans are saved; in any case, you aren't supposed to actually worship Yahrel/Reu'yot himself. According to the Southern Rite, Errai has gone into torpor once again and thus cannot even directly hear the prayers of mortals, necessitating the intercession of saints & angels on behalf of any mortal petitioners. The angels ('Tel-mera'i') and saints can be venerated or prayed to for intercession, but never actually worshiped. The gods of other religions are considered nothing more than the myriad earthly guises of the **Azeal**, the twisted and malevolent false gods of the Elder Races who survived Errai's wrath at the end of the First Age but were cast into Hell and literally demonized.
* **Reincarnation:** The belief that all human souls, though immortal and once existing in perfect harmony with their maker, have been tainted by the atrocities levied upon them by the Elder Races in the First Age and thus are trapped in a perpetual cycle of reincarnation on this earth. The Southern Rite believes that all souls are doomed to this unending cycle of death & rebirth until Errai awakens for a third time, brings about the End of Days and remakes the world in His perfect image once again without all the mistakes and impurities of the past, breaking the cycle of reincarnation in the process. Which brings us to…
* **The End of Days:** The inevitable end of this world. One day, Errai will awaken from His self-imposed slumber a third time to lead His faithful in holy war against the Azeal and their followers, and though their battle will destroy the material universe He will remake it following His inevitable triumph, free of all the mistakes and impurities of the past. Like say, the Elder Races, who He will consign to utter nonexistence and whose gifts He will hand to humanity. The resulting paradise, known as the 'Kingdom of Saints' in both the Northern and Southern Rites, is a new world where humanity will live forever in unending peace & prosperity under the firm but gentle gaze of Errai and His angels. The Southern Rite has determined the 'Revat' will occur on the first day of the 3000th year after Errai went back into torpor at the end of the First Age, or 3A 1500 - 20 years from the game's date of 3A 1480.
* **The Hierarchies:** The belief that the universe is organized into three 'spheres' or hierarchies, and that everyone has been divinely mandated a place in these hierarchies. These spheres are: the Celestial Sphere or simply Heaven, the Mortal Sphere (that's to say, the physical world) and the Infernal Sphere or simply Hell. As Errai is master of the angels in Heaven & the Azeal are the masters of their demonic followers in Hell, so too is there a clear hierarchy on earth: with the sovereign monarchs who rule at Errai's pleasure at the top, the clerics who speak in Errai's name beneath them, followed by the nobility who serve the monarch as the angels serve Errai, and finally everyone else. This earthly hierarchy, as a reflection of the heavenly hierarchy, is considered to be the 'natural order of things' and the Church really doesn't like anyone trying to challenge it.
* **Saints & prophets:** The belief in the existence of saints and prophets, humans who have been specially blessed by Heaven and/or had divine truths revealed to them by Reu'yot or some other angel. The Southern Rite believes that upon their death, the immortal souls of these saints & prophets will be lifted out of the cycle of reincarnation and transformed into new angels, as Yahrel was. They also believe that saints can be venerated (that's to say, honored but not worshiped) & prayed to for intercession (essentially requesting them to pray on your behalf, for the Southern Rite believes Errai will stir briefly from His slumber to answer requests made on your behalf by one of the beings closer to Him), and that they can leave a spiritual imprint on their most prized personal possessions, which following their death & ascension to angelhood will become relics that the faithful could use to directly communicate with them.
* **Good deeds:** The belief that even the strongest, most fanatical devotion to Errai is functionally dead & hollow if one does not perform good deeds to express it. Said good deeds are naturally defined by the Church and can vary from charitable alms-giving or forgiving others of sins they committed against you to killing every Orc you can find, killing heretics on sight or killing anyone who opposes the legal Emperor/Empress of Ellis (after all, their line was divinely ordained by Errai to serve as the temporal rulers of all Eldath way back at the end of the First Age).

The Southern Rite shares all of these Pillars with the Northern Rite, and though their interpretations & beliefs on some of the Pillars may differ they do believe that anybody who doesn't believe in these six fundamentals of the faith can be called a true believer in Errai. The Southern Rite also considers some parts of the Scriptures to be strictly allegorical rather than entirely literal, for example passages concerning the Old Sages' failed attempts to capture a giant eagle where only Yahrel succeeded by luring the beast with his own rations (considered by both Rites to be symbolic foreshadowing of his future self-sacrifice to destroy any chance of a peaceful solution to the war against the Vyn-Sidhe). That said, over the years of separation they have come to disagree much more severely on a number of other theological points:

* The Southern Rite believes that the souls of anyone who sides with the Azeal at the 'Revat', human or otherwise, will be utterly destroyed by Errai as punishment for their sins: thus they will simply, completely cease to exist. Hell, being nothing more than a prison to hold the souls of the irredeemable, will also be erased from existence, as the destruction of the damned means its purpose will be complete.
* The Southern Rite believes that access to the seat of the Holy Father/Mother is **not** restricted by blood ties to Yahrel's bloodline. They believe that anyone who has exhibited virtue and piety can be elected to this rank by the Confessors (essentially the archbishops and bishops of the Church). However, said Confessors must always come from families that can accurately trace their ancestry to Yahrel **and** have exclusively married with either other Confessorial families and/or the Ellisian nobility.
* The Southern Rite believes that its clerics were mandated with spiritual, not temporal, authority over their flock. Southern Rite clergy are expected to entirely leave matters of earthly politics to secular rulers, and to always defer to said rulers when temporal and ecclesiastical jurisprudences clash (ex. if there's a land dispute between a Confessor and a noble, they are expected to raise the issue to the Emperor/Empress for judgment, not the Holy Father/Mother). In practice, this means the Southern Rite has been subordinated to the secular Ellisian government, in direct contrast to the Northern Rite (which is essentially a state unto itself).

The Southern Rite's clerical hierarchy is nearly identical to the Northern Rite's, with the obvious exception that its leaders are elected by their peers and may have their election vetoed:

* At the top there is the **Holy Father or Mother**, the supreme head of the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai. He or she is elected for a life term by the Sages, though the monarchs of Ellis have the right to veto the election of a Holy Father/Mother they deem unsatisfactory. In case of an imperial veto, the Confessors must elect someone else.
* The **Council of Sages** sits below the Holy Father/Mother. The nine Sages are elected by and from the ranks of the Confessoriate, and are responsible for leading the clergy of entire kingdoms. Originally there were nine Sages, one to represent each of the kingdoms established at the dawn of the Second Age + the unified Church of Errai + Ellis itself, though since the conversion of the southern Antae in the 11th century two more were added to represent the kingdoms of Buzhe & Sklava. Of course, since the Schism the Southern Rite Sages claiming to represent the northern kingdoms exercise no real authority, and their seats have been little more than symbolic sinecures for over a thousand years by now. The only Sages who actually matter are those representing Ellis and Duskenfall, as well as those representing Buzhe & Sklava until the destruction of their kingdoms.
* The **Confessors** and **High Confessors** sit below the Council of Sages. They are a collective of one hundred families descended from both Yahrel and Marae, and are the hereditary 'bishops' and 'archbishops' of the Southern Rite. This episcopal caste administers dioceses, typically the size of one or two provinces within a kingdom, and its members pass their vestments according to the law of equal primogeniture: that is to say, when a Confessor dies, their eldest child inherits their seat regardless of gender. For this reason, the Confessorial families are forbidden from marrying anyone not from other Confessorial families or the titled nobility. High Confessors are appointed by the Holy Father/Mother for lifetime terms to oversee groups of Confessors, and in the past the ten largest cities of the empire would also be assigned their own 'Metropolitan Confessors' (though this practice has faded away around 1250). Even today, although all dioceses outside of Ellis itself have fallen to the Umari, the surviving Confessorial families still claim to be masters of their former dioceses from the safety of the Golden District.
* The **priests and priestesses** of the Church of Errai occupy the lowest rung of the ecclesiastical hierarchy together, and are merely ordained ministers who administer parishes under the eyes of their local Confessor. They do not need to be part of a Confessorial bloodline to be ordained: simply being graduating from a seminary and proving their loyalty to the Ellisian crown & Errai (too often in that order these days) is enough. Priesthood is not hereditary, though priests/priestesses are also free to marry and have children, and priests & priestesses do serve for life unless they are defrocked for offenses against the Church.
* The monastic hierarchy of the Church is independent from the Confessoriate, although it still ultimately answers to the Sages and the Holy Father/Mother. Monks and nuns are required to be celibate, live in cloistered monasteries far from civilization, and typically answer to a local *hegumenos*/*hegumenia* (abbot/abbess). Individual monks/nuns can temporarily take on the role of a priest or Confessor if necessary due to the death or incapacitation of the actual local ordained cleric, in which case they are referred to as 'hieromonks/nuns' and 'archimandrites' respectively, though they are still forbidden from marrying and having children & are expected to return to their monastery after a proper replacement priest/Confessor has been ordained.

**Military:** The Ellisian military is a pale shadow of its former self. At its height some 1500 years ago, it was a professional standing force comprised of thirty-three legions of 6,000 men each that were further divided into mutually supporting infantry, cavalry, missile and mage companies; nowadays it comprises of the Ellis city watch, the 2500-strong Imperial Guard, the Magical Association and (if they can be mustered in a timely fashion) levies from the nearby countryside, barely 10,000 men on a good day. Most of the regular soldiers are poorly trained and shoddily equipped, though they at least do not lack for experience due to the constant and unrelenting Umari assaults on Ellis & its environs. Ellisian tactics as of 3A 1480 are firmly defensive due to a lack of numbers for successful offensives: commanders are expected to draw the enemy to a fixed defensive position, and to use the terrain & weather (plus magic where possible) to balance out Ellis' numerical inferiority against the Umari. Ellisian mages specialize in telepathy like the empire's founder Marae, and so whenever possible they are employed to predict the enemy's moves & help devise effective defensive measures.

The average regular Ellisian infantryman of today (so *not* the urban militiamen who fight with basically whatever they can scrap together/afford, but a trained soldier on the government's payroll) is a spearman equipped with a brimmed conical helmet, a lamellar cuirass of iron or steel-studded leather plates over padded clothes or maybe a chainmail hauberk if they could afford it, simple leather demi-gauntlets (which protect only the backs of their hands & wrists), a two-to-three meter spear and an oval leather-covered shield - a rather archaic getup compared to the armies of the north and to a lesser extent the Umari, who have largely forgone mail armor. In battle, they typically form a rigid phalanx, presenting a wall of shields & spears to keep both enemy infantry and cavalry at bay: this formation works wonders in holding off enemies attacking from the front, but is in serious danger of being flanked by faster troops. Wealthier infantrymen (typically from the middle classes) who can afford swords and northern-style plate cuirasses are assigned to a mobile reserve to act in case of hostile flanking maneuvers, or simply to bolster the phalanx if it's in danger of being crushed by a frontal assault. Ellisian foot archers, who usually wear no armor aside from helmets (if not just hardened leather coifs) and padded clothes, are deployed in skirmish lines ahead of the main infantry formation and are tasked with disrupting an enemy advance prior to the melee in addition to engaging hostile missile troops: gone are the well-armored archers of the past who could be expected to fight in melee when necessary, thanks to a lack of imperial resources.

The Ellisian cavalry of today are similarly a far cry from the glittering legions of fully-armored *Klibanophoroi* of Ellis' heyday. Aside from conscripted peasants who fight with pitchforks from atop their draft horses, the regular Ellisian horseman of 3A 1480 comes in two varieties: a mounted archer or 'Numeros' (pl. *Numeroi*) wearing no armor aside from perhaps a lamellar cuirass over padded clothes, and a lancer or 'Kontaratos' (pl. *Kontaratoi*) who looks much like a better-equipped infantryman with a brimmed helmet, a mail shirt and lamellar cuirass, leather demi-gauntlets and greaves. The former fight with composite bows and long knives or hatchets (as emergency melee weapons) while the latter wielded lances (for the charge) and swords (for prolonged melee combat) in addition to kite- or square-shaped shields. These horsemen mutually support each other's roles on the battlefield: while the *numeroi* attempt to draw the enemy out of formation with arrow fire & feigned retreats, the *kontaratoi* would charge at any opponent foolish enough to fall for the bait, or else charge into a formation that has been thrown into disarray by the *numeroi*'s fire. Many other types of Ellisian cavalry, such as the javelin-slinging *Psiloi*, no longer exist as their roles were folded into the *numeroi* and *kontaratoi* in the face of manpower & resource shortages.

The elite of the army are the 2,500-strong imperial guard, the *Exkoubitoron* or 'Excubitors'. They are divided into a 1,250-strong regiment of infantry and another one of cavalry, with each regiment being further divided in half between melee and missile troops. They most closely resemble the Ellisian soldiers of old, as expected from the empire's best. The heavy infantry of the Excubitors are clad in full suits of mail armor (supplemented with northern-style partial plate armor as of the last 80 years), plumed brimmed helmets, and steel gauntlets and greaves, and fight with spears, swords or axes and tower shields. Foot archers are almost as heavily armored, wield their composite bows with deadly accuracy and carry axes or hammers for melee combat. And finally, the *Klibanophoroi* of the household cavalry are clad from head to toe in not just mail but almost-complete suits of plate armor, missing only the pauldrons, rerebraces and cuisses (for the shoulders, upper arms and thighs respectively), and including even northern-style visors attached to their plumed brimmed helms. Like the *klibanophoroi* of old, they are equipped with bows and melee weapons: typically, the first line of a cavalry formation or *tourma* will fire arrows at their opponents before breaking apart & falling back to the rear of the *tourma*, allowing the lancers behind them to charge home while switching to their own lances.

In terms of gunpowder weapons, Ellis fields nothing beyond two massive bombards bought from Thurin, the so-called 'Twin Titans'. Although visually impressive and quite capable of punching holes in enemy walls with 63-cm iron or stone ammunition, they aren't well-suited to *defending* a fortress (a large number of smaller cannons would have been a much wiser investment for defense).

**Umari Empire:**

**Capital:** 'Uzzat

**Coat of arms:** The names of the Umari deities Bahamut, Dushara and Halasa written in black Old Umari, on a dark gold background

The overarching antagonist of the story, and certainly a much larger-scale threat than the crime bosses & corrupt nobles or officials the player will have to deal with in the earlier parts of the plot. The Umari first migrated from Esdath 1400 years ago, when the ancient Ellisians hired them as mercenaries and granted them land in the deserts & mountains of southern Eldath. However, Ellis wound up blockading the Umari mercenaries in hopes of starving them to death so they wouldn't have to be paid a single penny, resulting in a Umari revolt that expelled them from the southern reaches of Eldath. Since then the Umari have been warring with Ellis, driving northward with the ultimate objective of securing the fertile and temperate Ellisian heartlands for themselves, and they've been getting the better of the fighting for the past 500 years.

Under their formidable 'Khet-Khetanu' ('king of kings') Jahanvir III, the Umari defeated Ellis' last field army and killed their Emperor Harudion VIII in the Battle of Karthin Pass in 3A 1479, though they did sustain such heavy losses that Jahanvir agreed to a one-year truce with Ellis. Still, Jahanvir is alive & well today, and he waits with baited breath for the truce to expire (or for the Ellisians to give him any excuse to break it) so that he may finally complete his ancestors' work and sweep Ellis into the dustbin of history.

**Geography:** The Umari powerbase lies in the deserts of far southern Eldath, where the majority of the actual Umari people live as part of semi-nomadic clan-based tribes. The only permanent settlements in the desert are a few oasis towns with populations in the low to mid-thousands & shantytowns built around salt mines for the miners, as most desert-dwelling Umari simply pitch their tents wherever they feel they can best tend to their herds of goats & camels and leave when their elders command it. Along the southern coast, more settled Umari live in cities that thrive on trade with Esdath. The Umari capital of 'Uzzat can be found on the extreme southeastern coast of Eldath, built around a cove that now serves as its primary harbor: it is famous for the gilded towers & black pillars of the Palace of Jobar where the Umari royal family lives, the great ziggurats dedicated to their deities and the *Evlat e-Kahinlerin* or 'House of Seers', a mages' tower and public library combined into one building that is said to rival the *Pendaitolon* in size & majesty.

North of the Umari desert lies the great savanna and rolling plains conquered by the empire in the 13th, 14th and early 15th centuries of the 3rd Age. Once these lands belonged to the kingdoms of Buzhe and Sklava, founded by the Antae princes Berich and Perich respectively, but both were crushed by the Umari between 1280 and 1380. By 1480 the native Antae and Ellisian nobility has largely been exterminated or driven away, the only survivors being those families which converted to the Circle of Bahamut and adopted Umari names in exchange for their lives & the right to continue ruling their fiefs, though the majority of the common people here are still Antae herders and ranchers who remain faithful to the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai.

The extreme northern reaches of the empire are comprised of valuable farmland, still manned by Ellisian farmers with the only change being that they now answer to Umari overlords instead of Ellisian nobles. However, the destruction of the millennia-old canal system that has watered these lands for generations by both the advancing Umari forces (who sought to weaken their enemy's ability to produce food) and the retreating Ellisians (who sought to deny any advantage to their rivals) has badly impacted the region's productivity, and combined with excessive soil salination this breakdown threatens to turn the once-lush farmland into another desert in a few generations' time.

**Society:** Umari society is divided into eleven tribes descended from a great cultural hero who lived when they were still in Esdath: the uc-Jobari from King Jobar (the first unifier of the Umari peoples & founder of their royal line), the uc-Ghami from his brother Gham, the uc-Baymuti from his sister and first High Priestess Baymut and the Majileen, Maqileen, Hesaeen, Tamureen, Tsubayeen, Teyrabineen, Haleleen and Dulaimeen from the champions & companions of the above three. Each tribe is further divided into many clans bound by patrilineal ties of kinship, ranging from 20 clans (among the Dulaimeen, the smallest tribe) to 64 (the uc-Jobari, largest and most powerful of the tribes).

The *Khet-Khetanu*, or King of Kings, sits at the very top of Umari society. He (and it's always a he) is elected by the nobility from the uc-Jobari, uc-Ghami and uc-Baymuti royal clans upon the death of his predecessor. In turn, said Umari nobility is made up of the leaders of each tribe and their close kin. Among the settled tribes of the southern coast and the northern reaches of the empire, these chiefs and their kin are collectively known as the *Qapulu*: titled nobility who serve their Khet-Khetanu as educated court bureaucrats and provincial governors. The heads of the semi-nomadic tribes that live further north, in the Great Southern Waste, are known as the *Asafi*, are much more likely to serve their ruler on the front lines as battlefield commanders, and indeed form the majority of the Umari army's higher-ranking officers in times of war.

Below the Umari aristocracy are the rank-and-file members of the eleven Umari tribes. The settled tribes form the backbone of the empire's budding bureaucracy: they alone are sufficiently educated to serve in the small army of clerks, postmasters and accountants (directly inspired by the more complex *maistorion* of the Umari's Ellisian rivals) who keep the Khet-Khetanu's court, the postal system based around fifty courier posts along the Red Road from 'Uzzat to the northern border, and both the central treasury & lesser provincial treasuries running. The nomadic tribes have the exclusive right to settle & let their flock graze wherever they wish for six to nine months so long as they get imperial permission to do so first: any of the original inhabitants of the land they're settling on must move aside for them.

Near the bottom of Umari society stand the Antae and Ellisian peasants in the subjugated northern half of the empire. They are strictly bound to their land and ruled by Umari nobles & administrators. For the most part, they still follow the Church of Errai's Southern Rite, which is tolerated by the Umari ruling class - so long as they pay a special tax called the *Khawja*, an equivalent to 60 silver Umari *dinars* (which can be paid in agricultural or mining products). Families which cannot pay the khawja are required to give up a male relative (ideally under 12 years of age) to serve in the elite *Mubarizun* corps of slave-soldiers. If they are unable or unwilling to fill this demand, the family is enslaved instead.

Finally, there are slaves at the bottom of the Umari social hierarchy. Unlike the other Eldathi nations, the Umari have no taboo on slavery (they didn't have to fight a genocidal war-to-the-knife against literally inhuman masters in the past after all, nor did they adopt the fiercely anti-slavery teachings of the Church of Errai) and practice slavery on a mass scale. Technically there are two classes of slaves: *gami*, who have sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt, and *zenji*, slaves taken in war or purchased abroad. The former must be released upon paying off their debts (and an imperial official will be tasked with keeping track of how much of said debt they've paid off every month), or else the owner will have to face the death penalty, and they are also exempt from corporal punishment. Educated *gami* could even eke out a comfortable life as a tutor or clerk for wealthy families. However, with the *zenji¸* anything goes from being worked to death in mines, to being drafted as cannon fodder on the front lines in the empire's war with Ellis, to sexual slavery. *Zenji* cannot buy their freedom, but must instead be manumitted by their masters. The Umari government also buys slaves: young males (under 12 years) are trained to serve in the elite *Mubarizun* corps of the army, while females are bought to staff the imperial harem where they will be cared for (and watched 24/7) by eunuchs. Both the *mubarizun* and the harem slaves are in slightly better straits than other *zenji*: *mubarizun* troops are among the empire's best-fed & equipped soldiers and have the right to take command of regular units in an emergency, while harem-slaves can be freed and formally married by the *Khet-Khetanu* or (even if they weren't formally freed) have their children succeed him, since any child of the *Khet-Khetanu* is born a free prince/princess no matter whether their mother is a slave or not.

**Religion:** The Umari follow their own faith, the *Bahamutalla* or 'Cult of Bahamut' as non-Umari Eldathis call it. It is a henotheistic religion: there are many gods and goddesses in the Umari pantheon, each reflecting a human emotion (ex. Lahmaniya, goddess of love, and Tarban the god of anger), but the creator-deity Bahamut is revered above them all. Bahamut is traditionally depicted as a monster the size of a mountain chain with a bull's horns, an elephant's tusks, a lizardlike frill & scales, a crocodile's maw, a lion's paws, a shark's tail and leathery batlike wings, and according to the Umari it gave its all to create the world: it created the earth by tearing off its own flesh, allowed itself to bleed out to create the seas and rivers, and made its last breath into the winds. Upon its death, its soul exploded into the gods & goddesses who proceeded to populate the world with animals fashioned from its remaining flesh and bones, including humans who were grown from its brain and heart & infused with souls by drinking a few drops of blood from each deity. The endgoal of the Bahamutalla is to bring Bahamut back to life by converting the entire world to the faith, after which humanity is to indulge their 'positive pleasures' to recreate Bahamut's soul without killing the gods who emerged from the original and finally ritually sacrifice every non-human being, from the plants and animals to sapient nonhumans like the Vyn-Sidhe, to recreate its flesh. Then Bahamut will walk the earth it created, and together with its 'first children' (the gods) usher in an earthly paradise as the rifghtful leader of its wisest and greatest creations.

The priesthood of the Bahamutalla is strictly females-only, making it the most obvious route for women's social advancement in an otherwise firmly patriarchal society. As the Bahamutalla is a hedonistic religion, its priestesses are divided into various classes that oversee the practice of various pleasures, marked by the colors of their robes: the Red Priestesses oversee fighting pits where animals, slaves and volunteering freemen battle each other to first blood or the death for the amusement of an onlooking crowd, Pink Priestesses run and serve in brothels owned by the Bahamutalla, Golden Priestesses run gambling operations, Orange Priestesses run the largest taverns in Umari lands and are also tasked with farming *harmala* (a psychedelic drug used in major religious ceremonies), Blue Priestesses run the public baths of the Umari cities and oasis towns, Green Priestesses are the foremost scholars and philosophers of the empire, and Purple Priestesses have a reputation as skilled artists and musicians & are the most likely clerics to be found at a noble or royal court. By indulging the whims of their flock, these priestesses hope to speed the recreation of Bahamut's soul.

The Bahamutalla recognize 64 holidays named after their major gods, in which the priestesses lead their flock in ceremonies celebrating that god's nature. Although most of these holidays are benign (for example, on the *Maduralla* - named after Madurah, the goddess of charity - alms are given to the poor and a potluck feast is held at town centers across the empire) the holidays best known to the northerly enemies of the Umari, specifically because they're the easiest to demonize, are the Lahmaniyalla ('the day of lust', according to the Ellisians), Tarbanalla ('day of wrath') and Heshmalla ('day of hatreds'). The central ceremony of the Lahmaniyalla is a ritual *harmala-*fueled orgy (which the Northerners believe involves children and animals), Tarbanalla's centers around the ritual sacrifice of each community's best young livestock while *harmala* is burned in braziers (in Ellisian propaganda, a child is sacrificed instead) and on Heshmalla the community writes down the name of the person they hate most on a bit of lambskin or flint, then tosses it into a fire as a way of achieving catharsis (according to Ellis, they are invoking dark gods to do harm to their enemies this way).

The overall leader of the Bahamutalla is the High Seeress (also known as the Pale Priestess outside of Umari lands due to her wearing a colorless robe as the badge of her office), a priestess elected by her peers to head the faith for life. To even qualify as a candidate for the Pale Throne, one must have proven prophetic abilities. Besides leading religious services and providing intelligence through clairvoyance in wartime, the High Seeress will be asked 'how many days are left until Bahamut's return' every morning, and are expected to answer 'I do not know': if they give a more concrete answer, anything from 'soon enough' to 'nowhere near our time', it is considered an occasion worth nationwide celebration.

**Military:** Umari forces typically comprise of large numbers of expendable footsoldiers levied from the empire's subject peoples, AKA the 'Azabs': Ellisians, Southern Antae and Dusklanders unfortunate enough to fall under their rule. These levies are pressed into battle with little or no training and are armed with whatever improvised weapons they can get their hands on, such as farming implements or miners' pickaxes. They are backed by better-equipped native Umari levies ('Bozuks'), uniformly armed with spears or machetes and tower shields & dressed in padded aketons. The best footsoldiers in the Umari army are the *Yaya*, tribal nobles who fight in full-body mail armor, and the *Qalba*, the infantry division of the Khet-Khetanu's three-part imperial guard.

The Umari are also renowned for their light cavalry, skillful archers and light lancers who are just as comfortable riding camels as they are riding horses (and may even prefer the former for desert warfare or cavalry-heavy battles, as the scent of camels frightens other horses). For heavy cavalry, they can count on the *Fursaniyya*, tribal nobles who fight on horse/camel-back with both bow and lance, and the elite *Mubarizun* or 'champions', slave-soldiers in full-body mail armor and fight with the lance, mace and scimitar from atop armored horses. The *Mubarizun*, as the cavalry component of the imperial guard, are typically held in reserve & tasked with guarding the Khet-Khetanu at all times, to be deployed only in times of great need (ex. to stem a rout, to follow their master into the thick of the fighting or to break through an especially well-defended enemy position).

Besides traditional archers, the Umari have also made much better use of gunpowder-equipped troops than their Ellisian opponents. Indeed, the Umari introduced gunpowder to the continent, having first bought cannons from the Jin Empire in the 13th century (which they proceeded to reverse-engineer and produce on their own by 3A 1280). In addition to their cannons, which vary in size from the light and mobile anti-personnel falconet to siege bombards almost as impressive as Ellis' 'Twin Titans', every fifth man in the *Harbiyya* (the missile component of the imperial guard, 4/5 of whom are armored archers) is armed with an arquebus: though wildly inaccurate outside of short range, the arquebus is extremely effective at penetrating armor and also produces loud noises that can scare horses away. It was a *Harbiyya* arquebusier who struck down the late Ellisian Emperor Harudion VIII in the last major Umari offensive.

**The (Northern Rite's) Estates of the Church of Errai:**

**Capital:** Aldurias

**Coat of arms:** A red heart within a white hexagram on a blue background, within a white border

The faction immediately north of Ellis, ruling over the Neck down to Ellis' northern gates, and Eldath's equivalent to the Papal States. The Estates of the Church, AKA the Holy See, are the temporal dominions of the Holy Fathers and Mothers descended from Yahrel, though said Holy Family only directly rules their capital city of Aldurias & its immediate environs: most of the Estates are actually Confessoriates (hereditary bishoprics, basically) ruled by various cadet branches of House Yahrellis, descended from the younger sons & daughters of past Holy Fathers/Mothers who received their fiefdoms from parents eager to delegate their authority, with a few Free Cities (autonomous city-states with their own elected communal governments that answer only to the sovereign, in this case the Holy Father/Mother) here and there.

As of 3A 1480, House Yahrellis has reached the peak of its Third Age power & relevance. A succession of skilled Holy Fathers and Mothers since the dawn of the century have brought the Northern Schism to a victorious conclusion by aiding Brel in bringing down Meravia and its false Holy Fathers by 1435, while also overseeing the Thurinian Empire's bloody triumph over the Vinculi heresy by 1445. The Northern Rite's primary martial arm, the Order of the Blue Sun, has regained its reputation as a brutally effective fighting force and is now being flooded with eager recruits from as far north as Dolya while the Most Holy Office of the Inquisition, its intelligence agency, has agents & safehouses as far as Grom and the Umari Empire. Today Holy Father Alectus IV rules the Estates with an iron hand as his father, grandfather and great-grandmother did before him, and besides having built up a reputation as a worldly man through his lavish patronage of scholars & artists while also ruthlessly repressing threats to his rule, he has turned his gaze south (what with the North having seemingly been purged of heretics and schismatics, for now) and is rumored to have entered private negotiations with the Empress-Regent Sevenna of Ellis to launch a holy war against the Umari in exchange for Ellis' conversion to the Northern Rite: a strategy that his father had already used to great success in bringing Duskenfall into the arms of the Northern Church.

**Geography:** The shape of the Holy Estates has often been compared to a chalice: a wide bowl in the north, and a narrow 'stand' down south in the form of the Neck of Eldath. The northern Estates are a pleasant land of gently rolling hills, small forests and crisscrossing rivers that irrigate its lush farms, making it into one of Eldath's breadbasket regions. The Neck on the other hand is a rocky and largely desolate land that bears the scars of hundreds of past battles between Ellis & the Holy Estates, with the most productive communities being the small towns that have cropped up around each of the ten great castles built to frustrate northward-bound Ellisian armies in the first five centuries of the Third Age.

Between the northern Estates and the Neck sits the holy city of Aldurias, the second-oldest settlement on Eldath after Ellis and longtime seat of the Holy Fathers and Mothers of House Yahrellis. As Ellis' sister-city, Aldurias too is a tiered city divided between its White, Gray, Black and Brown Quarters (in order from top to bottom) by magically-reinforced millennia-old walls, with each quarter being populated by the clergy, nobility and burghers, soldiers and artisans and everybody else respectively. However, as Aldurias has yet to deal with an influx of desperate refugees like Ellis it is less crowded & squalid than its Southern counterpart, and as his treasury is now filled with resources 'requisitioned' from various heresies and rebels from all over northern Eldath Holy Father Alectus has launched an ambitious project of urban renewal to transform his capital into a fitting seat for Errai's descendants once more.

**Society:** The Holy See is, as you might've guessed from the name, a theocracy. Specifically, a near-absolute theocratic monarchy. The Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church of Errai are the spiritual leaders of almost all Eldath north of the Neck, but they are also the temporal rulers of these Estates, and unlike many other monarchs who must compromise with & listen to their feudal vassals they've got a lot of spiritual authority to throw behind their mandates, making them a lot closer to the absolute monarchs of Early Modernity than the feudal monarchs of the Middle Ages. the elected and largely powerless Holy Fathers and Mothers of Ellis, the Holy Fathers and Mothers of Aldurias pass their White Throne to their eldest child upon their death, and as mentioned above rule a state that serves their religion instead of the other way around. Though they may be born with names in Low Church Eldathi (equivalent to medieval Italian), every Holy Father/Mother adopts a new name in High Eldathi (pretty much this world's Latin) upon their coronation.

Immediately below the Holy Father/Mother are the sixteen Lesser Holy Families, who rule over large fiefs as Confessors and High Confessors: essentially, hereditary bishops & archbishops. Eleven of these families are of the Confessorial rank, and in turn answer to the five High Confessorial ones. Each of the Lesser Holy Families are cadet branches of House Yahrellis, tracing their direct lineage back to the younger sons & daughters of past Holy Fathers and Mothers who were given chunks of their parents' dominion to govern in their own right in exchange for the continued assurance of their loyalty to the main branch of House Yahrellis.

Beneath the Lesser Holy Families, one can find the secular nobility living within the Holy See's borders. These counts, barons and knights govern smaller fiefs under each Confessor or High Confessor, and can be found on the front line whenever the Church goes to war.

Alongside the secular nobility sits the *Magisterium*, the sprawling clerical bureaucracy that keeps the Church running. The Magisterium is an army of clerks, tax officials, diplomats, archivists, scholars, accountants, teachers and lawyers who handle the mundane day-to-day administration of the Church, its contacts with foreign courts, its vast libraries, its seminaries and even any secular legal cases it sees fit to get involved with.

Finally, at the bottom of the Holy See's social ladder are the merchants, artisans and peasants. As of 3A 1480, the lot of the merchants has never been better: the strategic location of Aldurias and the Holy See's control over the Neck has always ensured a steady flow of trade through the Estates of the Church, and since the early 1300s some merchant families have also gone into banking, allowing them to further expand their treasuries by forming connections to other enterprises all over the continent from Brelassan glassmakers to Thurinian brewers to Sylvein weavers & Dolyan butchers. The best-connected houses have found themselves in the service of the northern kings, who are always in search of more money with which to fund their wars, and the Ardoinici family in particular has become famous (and fabulously rich) as the personal bankers of the Yahrellises. The Church's artisans and peasants on the other hand are stuck with a poor hand like their counterparts everywhere else on the continent, though the urban artisans at least have their guilds to give them some measure of protection against overly-greedy merchants and capricious aristocrats.

**Religion:** The Holy See is the epicenter of the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai, which shares many similarities to its Southern Rite counterpart. For the basics of the Church's theology, see the religion section under Ellis. Some of the points where the Northern Rite differs from the Southern Rite are thus:

* The Northern Rite recognizes only the bloodline of Yahrel as the Church's rightful leaders. The seat of the Holy Fathers and Mothers can only be passed down through cognatic primogeniture: that is, the eldest child of the previous Holy Father/Mother will succeed them upon their death, no/ifs ands or buts. The Northern Rite argues that by turning their backs on the bloodline of Errai Himself, the Southern Rite has committed one of the gravest possible acts of sacrilege.
* Tying into the above, unlike the Southern Rite the Northern Rite has absolutely no problem with spiritual leaders wielding temporal power and dictating to secular monarchs.
* The Northern Rite's Confessoriate are not prohibited from marrying outside of other Confessorial families, though the children of each family's heir (ideally the oldest surviving child) are required to keep their Confessorial parent's surname.
* A key dogma of the Northern Rite is that of sacral infallibility: it is impossible for the Holy Father/Mother to be wrong whenever s/he speaks on matters of theology, owing to their special bloodline link to Errai and their occasional ability to commune with His 'Voice' Reu'yot, who after all is the ascended soul of Yahrel himself, in their dreams.
* The Northern Rite is slightly less inclined to be genocidal towards non-humans, though that's mostly b/c they haven't had to deal with the brunt of the Syn-Sidhe (the only major nonhuman race left, remember) invasions in the past and thus have less reason to hate them than the Southern Rite. Accordingly, the Northern Rite teaches a doctrine of universal reconciliation: the idea that since they too were created by Errai, not even the nonhumans of the world are beyond redemption, and that when the End of Days comes their souls will be purified and ascend to live in eternal peace & prosperity with humans (even sinners most mortals would judge to be utterly irredeemable) in Errai's new Paradise. This of course contrasts with the annihilationism preached by the Southern Rite, though it doesn't stop the Northern Rite's adherents from continuing to massacre Ovlathi (orcs) on sight.
* The Northern Rite believes in the existence of *Paenitentia*, a purgatory in which the souls of sinners (which is to say, technically everyone except the saints) and Demons are sent to upon their deaths. These 'Penitents' are held within this intermediate spiritual realm until they have been properly purified of all sin and judged worthy to ascend to Heaven, and the length of their prison term is determined by the gravity of their sins.
* The Northern Rite does not believe the world is necessarily doomed to end in 3A 1500. It will end when Errai wishes it, but that could be 3A 1500 or off in the next Age. They do believe that in the years leading up to the end of the world, He will warn the reigning Holy Father/Mother at the time, who will then be expected to prepare their flock for the apocalypse in turn.
* The Northern Rite has its own Circle of Sages, with each Sage being elected by the Confessors and High Confessors of each northern kingdom that follows the Rite: Brel, Meravia (even after its conquest by Brel), Thurin, Sylve, Morcarragh, Slezan, Dulebya and Dolya, plus an additional Sage representing the Holy See itself. Each Sage has no real power within the Estates of the Church proper, since they are provided with no accommodation greater than a (luxurious, but still) house in Aldurias' topmost White District and are meant to do nothing more than represent the flock of their native kingdoms. Also, unlike the Southern Rite's more powerful Sages, the Northern Sages obviously don't get to elect their Holy Fathers & Mothers.

**Military:** The Northern Rite's main military forces are the officially-recognized military orders of northern Eldath, pseudo-monastic organizations of knights and common soldiers who voluntarily pledge their bodies and souls to defending the faithful and enforcing the will of Errai (as determined by the Holy Father/Mother, naturally) by blood and steel. The largest and most famous of these orders is the Order of the Blue Sun, founded in 3A 1258 to oppose the First Demonic Invasion, which besides maintaining over 25,000 men under arms around 107 chapterhouses across almost all of the northern kingdoms between Dolya and the Neck has also gotten involved in banking and the management of various business enterprises across the northern half of Eldath. The Blue Suns and all of the other military orders follow the same hierarchy: a Grandmaster at the top who answers only to the Holy Father/Mother, advised by a Council of Masters who in turn are elected by the knights of the order and include a Master Magus representing the order's mages, followed by the common soldiers and mages whose captains are appointed by the Masters.

Besides the professional soldiers of the military orders, the Northern Rite can count on the feudal levies of its estates. Starting with Alectus IV's grandfather Celsus IX, the more recent Holy Fathers have also begun to work on transforming their classic feudal levy into a professional army, hiring mercenaries and the militant faithful who couldn't join one of the military orders to serve as the core of this new holy host while also issuing ordinances mandating the secular nobility of the Estates to train & provision no less than five soldiers per family (two pikemen or swordsmen, a lancer, an archer and a gunner or mage). As of 3A 1480, this centralized & professionalized 'Host of Holy Wrath' numbers some 7,000 men, and can be further backed by thousands of feudal levies if needed.

When the Holy Father/Mother goes to war, they always bring the Reliquary of Yahrel with them on a gilded carriage with the flag of the Holy See flying over it. This seemingly simple & sparsely decorated acacia chest houses the heart of their ancestor Yahrel, and is known to inspire its defenders to fight to the bitter end to ensure no foe of Yahrel's bloodline can lay their hands on it. Indeed, the few times an enemy force (not just the Demons of the 1st & 2nd Invasions, but humans at times as well) have gotten anywhere near the Reliquary, the soldiers assigned to defend it reported not feeling any fear or pain in repelling the attackers, with some men fighting even after sustaining mortal injuries (in one extreme case in 1258, a knight continued to fight after losing his head) and only suddenly dropping dead after the danger had passed.

**Dual Monarchy of Brel & Meravia:**

**Capital:** Bryneburh (Brel), Aquilée (Meravia)

**Coat of arms:** A golden salamander imposed on a white water lily & wreathed in red and gold flames, on a dark blue background (an amalgam of the original Brelas and Meravian arms: an orange salamander wreathed in bright red & gold flames on crimson & a golden water lily on dark blue, respectively)

The second most powerful of the Northern Kingdoms and archenemy of the Thurin Empire. The Dual Monarchy is the unlikely personal union of the kingdoms of Brel and Meravia, former long-time bitter rivals who are as different as night and day:

* Brel was a more centralized and meritocratic maritime power. It had its roots in the late 5th century of the Third Age, when the Lorvali king Merach VI Fin Falon found himself on the losing end of a civil war with his ambitious cousin Beraig and requested the aid of the Thiarnari warlord Brel of Efte, offering him and his 'Forneen' tribe land within the island kingdom of Lorval in return. The Forneen warriors made quick work of Beraig, but they then proceeded to treacherously murder Merach, all but one of his sons and most of the Lorvali aristocracy at the victory feast in a bid to take over Lorval for themselves. Centuries of bitter fighting between the Thiarnari and the native Lorvali (rallying around Merach's sole surviving son Morvech) erupted, with the Forneen managing to conquer the four islands closest to the mainland but the Lorvali holding fast on the other three. Forneen efforts to finish the conquest were further hindered by conflicts between Brel's descendants: his sons divided his lands between themselves, and although they all nominally recognized the eldest son's line as their suzerain as per Thiarnari custom that didn't stop them from plotting or outright warring with each other from time to time. It was not until the early 800s 3A that the Forneen and the remaining Lorvali finally made common cause against Thiareike raiders and invaders from the far north, with the Forneen prince Seoric marrying the Lorvali princess Ceinwyn to seal the two kingdoms' union: thus Falon's bloodline was absorbed into House Efte, and what was left of Lorval into Brel. Over the centuries, regular intermarriage and cultural exchange between the Lorvali and Forneen resulted in a synthesis of the two peoples into the 'Brelassan' (singl. 'Brelas'), though of course Forneen influences remained stronger on the islands closer to the mainland and weaker on the outer isles.
* Meravia was a decentralized and firmly aristocratic power. When the Thiarnari came to its door, King Vercarix VIII welcomed their chiefs with lavish feasts, the hands of his many daughters in marriage, titles within the Meravian noble hierarchy and offers of settlement on land depopulated by the Red Plague in exchange for their fealty. The Meravians thus culturally and genetically absorbed the Thiarnari who came to their kingdom, and even turned them against other Thiarnari warlords who invaded Meravia later, although they too were influenced by the martial and tribal culture of the Thiarnari. By 3A 1000 a full half of the Meravian nobility was comprised of houses descended from Thiarnari chiefs & champions, and the other half (including House Meravé, as the post-Thiarnari Fisher Kings called themselves) had significant amounts of Thiarnari blood in their veins. The blend of the martial Thiarnari culture, the romantic ideals of the native Meravians and the virtues expounded by the Church of Errai also resulted in the first Eldathi code of chivalry being formulated in late 10th and early 11th-century Meravia, and Meravia's knights are widely known as the most formidable heavy cavalry on the continent. (their moral character on the other hand, may sometimes be less than peerless…)

The two kingdoms share a centuries-old animosity, starting when Meravia first invaded and conquered Brel on a weak dynastic pretext in 3A 1025. The Brelassan drove out their new overlords by 1068 (with some accidental help from an invading Thiareike army, which they later fought and destroyed), and for the next two hundred years the rival kingdoms frequently raided and occasionally outright invaded each other. An attempt to bury the hatchet was made in the mid-13th century with the marriage of the young Brelas king Derdyn II to the Meravian king's niece Beldame in 1250, inaugurating a 'Long Peace' that lasted a generation. The two kingdoms established extensive trade ties and cultural exchanges with each other, and even fought together against the Thurin Empire and Morcarragh in the 1290s.

Unfortunately (or fortunately for Brel, in the end) the Long Peace was sundered in 1328 when the Meravian King Arcady IX died without any legitimate sons: by rights the Brelas king Elric III, as the eldest son of Arcady's only legitimate child Colette, should have succeeded him, but Arcady's bastard son Pierraud of Sepharve claimed that the old king had legitimized him on his deathbed and was promptly crowned by the clergy & nobility of Meravia to avoid a Brelassan takeover of their kingdom. Brel raided Meravia's shores for the first time in 68 years in retaliation, and after eleven years of hostility and military buildup later Elric finally officially pressed his claim to the Meravian throne at the head of his new army: thus began the War of the Meravian Succession, also known as the Sixty Years' War. Though Brel's better-trained and disciplined soldiers scored many great triumphs on the battlefield, they could not replace their losses as easily as the more populous Meravians nor could they effectively occupy large swathes of Meravian territory due to their smaller numbers, resulting in their eventual defeat by sheer attrition & withdrawal from the continent at the conclusion of the first phase of the war (1339-1379). Nevertheless, the Brelassan never gave up their claims and in 1415 Elric's grandson King Elbert took advantage of a Meravian civil war to invade the mainland once more again, leading to the ultimate victory of Brel under Elbert's son Bedylas III & his formal coronation as King of Meravia twenty years later.

As of the present day, the Dual Monarchy is ruled by King Ceawry IV of Brel & I of Meravia, an extremely aggressive king known for his fiery temper, mastery of fire magic and skill at warfare who has to date married a commoner for love & killed or otherwise subdued any noble who disagreed; smashed multiple revolts in both Brel and Meravia; promoted more commoners into the nobility for their services than the past three generations of Brelassan monarchs combined (often by killing rebellious aristocrats & confiscating their assets for redistribution first); and reduced Morcarragh to a vassal state after ten years of bloody warfare, and is now trying to break a stalemate with the Thurinians. He's always on the lookout for opportunities to open new fronts against Thunir, and may in time offer a hand to the Ellisians…in exchange for generous concessions up to & including the marriage of Empress Erennia to his heir Prince Ciel, of course. But, given Ellis' desperate straits, can they afford to turn away one of the continent's foremost military geniuses and his highly experienced army?

**Geography:** As mentioned above, the Dual Monarchy is a personal union consisting of two kingdoms, Brel and Meravia. Brel is an archipelago of large volcanic islands off the western coast of Eldath, filled with rich iron and coal mines that provide the kingdom with most of its money & resources. The islands aren't known for their agriculture, but there do exist regions of relatively fertile farmland used to grow hardy crops such as barley and onions both near the volcanoes (where the volcanic soil contains high quantities of elements such as potassium and phosphorus) and away from them. There also exists a healthy fishing industry in the form of any peasants who live along its beaches, who will catch just about anything they can eat and/or sell for a tidy profit from lobsters & clams to haddock to sharks or whales, though the islands' typically stormy weather makes fishing around Brel more dangerous than most other parts of Eldath.

Brel's capital, the city of Bryneburh, is built at the foot of the kingdom's largest volcano and on its largest island: Mt. Forn, on the island of Greater Meon. Besides the whole 'built under a volcano' thing, it seems to be a normal enough medieval city, being a collection of five class-segregated districts (between the urban nobles, the Church, the merchants, foreigners and everyone else) enclosed within high walls of red bricks and a moat. What makes it really stand out is the Palace of Flames, the royal residence of the Efte Kings and Queens: it is located **within** the volcano itself, with its main entrance built at the end of a long and winding mountain path leading up from the back of Bryneburh, and it is covered in ancient Forneen and Lorvali cooling runes to suppress volcanic eruptions (so that the people of Bryneburh can live without fear of their mountain naturally blowing its top) and prevent everyone inside from burning up due to convection (close proximity to the lava streams and pools within the volcano, which the palace uses for heating and lighting), so that the palace is 'merely' uncomfortably warm (to any non-Brelas unused to the heat, anyway) all the time. However, when the castle is on the verge of falling to an enemy force, the Brelas monarch is expected to remove those runes to destroy the whole place and the invaders at the cost of their own life.

On the flipside, Meravia is a large kingdom in western Eldath. It is a rich, fertile and populous region crisscrossed by many rivers, the largest of which is the River Merave (the longest river in Eldath, which originates in a lush delta on the southwest coast of Meravia and spreads northeast into Thurinian and Slezan territory). Most Meravians live along those rivers and make their lives as farmers & fishermen, though communities of lumberjacks do exist at the edges of the few forests that haven't already been declared royal hunting preserves or fallen into the private ownership of a noble house. Southwest and central Meravia, the most fertile parts of the kingdom, are also famous for producing the best wine in all of Eldath.

The Meravian capital is Aquilée, a city built within & around a large lagoon on the central-western coast of the kingdom. The city is divided between walled slums on the mainland and over eighty small islands in the lagoon separated by canals, which have largely replaced conventional roads: if you want to get from point A to point B in Aquilée you call for a gondola, not a carriage or a horse. White walls, drawbridges, blue-roofed towers and steel gates not only separate the city from the world but also each district from each other, allowing the upper class to live in blissful ignorance of their social inferiors in the beautifully-decorated 'Pearl' District at the city's core while the merchants and artisans of the plainer 'Peat' District in turn don't have to deal with the floating slum town that is the 'Mud' District on the mainland.

The Meravian royal residence is 'L'Arceau', which on the outside appears to be a modest white-walled keep at the outer edge of the lagoon. In truth, most of the castle is underwater and almost matches the city above it in size, connected to the above keep by an elevator enclosed within a glass tube with runes painted on it by Meravix/Merave monarchs of ages past to prevent it from being shattered by the water pressure. This underwater palace is a sprawling labyrinth of more white and gray walls lined with elegant paintings, marble statues of heroes & saints from Meravia's past, nacre decorations and braziers that burn with blue flames (produced using copper chloride, not magic as the mages of the Ring of Golden Thorns would claim). More enchanted windows allow the inhabitants to get a good look at the ocean around them as though it were an aquarium without having to worry about the water pressure shattering the viewing glass, and there also exists an entire wing dedicated to housing a fruit garden for which the Meravian royalty imports freshwater from its riverine regions. In times of emergency the Meravians can remove some of the water-repelling runes to flood sections of L'Arceau, or at worst remove all of them to destroy the entire palace and kill any invaders within. Since Meravia was conquered by Brel, L'Arceau has become the official winter residence of the Dual Monarchy's rulers.

**Society:** Though their kingdoms may be in a personal union these days, Brelassan and Meravian societies remain very distinct from each other, and indeed both peoples have some measure of pride in not being one culture just yet: many Brelassan consider it a good thing that they haven't turned into the 'foppish wine-sipping crybabies' like the Meravians, while many Meravians still at least slightly resent Brel's rule and consider themselves more civilized than the 'humorless beer-swilling thugs' from the volcanic isles. Both Meravia and Brel also maintain two separate forms of government, although both ultimately answer to the King in Meon.

Brelassan society is much more austere, conservative and militaristic than Meravia's: they disdain ostentatious displays of wealth & luxury as unmanly while favoring plain & functional dress, emphasize martial might and honest loyalty over scholarship, the high arts and subterfuge, and frown on (or outright ban) 'controversial' entertainment, scholarly works and schools of magic. Chastity, diligence, stoic calm, obedience to lawful authority, austerity and a willingness to sacrifice one's everything for the good of the kingdom - all these qualities are demanded of every Brelas. The Vermilion Order, Brel's traditional magical association, is firmly shackled to its monarchs, emphasizes combat magic above all other schools, and is quite restrictive both in regards to its members (who are drafted into the order as soon as they manifest magical abilities, are constantly monitored by each other and mundane guards, are forbidden from seeing their families more than twice a year and are never allowed to leave their towers without a special royally-signed permit & no less than half a dozen guards) and the schools of magic they study (should they come across any information on the dark arts, such as necromancy, or any non-Church-approved magic they are to burn it immediately).

That said, although they might be more conservative than Meravia in some regards Brel is more liberal in others: serfdom is nearly non-existent in Brel, with the overwhelming majority of peasants being free yeomen who own the small lots of land they live on & only a few small serf communities existing on the eastern islands closest to mainland Eldath, while the majority of urban workers have organized into guilds to secure the exclusive right to produce certain goods and the merchants are encouraged to engage in free enterprise & politics, not looked down on by the merchants as was the case in Meravia. Since most of Brel's nobility don't have serfs to boss around, they make their living in the mining or fishing business, by renting out parts of their fiefdoms to poorer peasants who can't afford their own private lot, as professional soldiers in the royal army, or some combination of the above. Also note that although the people of Brel are expected to remain loyal to their lawful rulers, said rulers are only entitled to their loyalty so long as they follow their own laws - in Brel not even the monarchs have the luxury of being above the law, and it is not for no reason that the Confessor of Meon always declares that they are 'ordained by the wisdom of Errai **and** *raised high by the will of the people*' before placing the Fiery Crown on their head at their coronation. Further down the food chain, peasants can actually secure a royal pardon for killing nobles if they can prove that said noble abused their authority in a way that makes killing them a justifiable response in the King's eyes, for example by attacking the peasant for no reason, murdering another peasant on a whim or raping a peasant's bride.

Perhaps most importantly, the Brelassan Kings have traditionally been the only monarchs on all of Eldath to be even remotely legally accountable to their subjects. In times of war or some other great emergency they are required to heed their Parliament: a bicameral body divided into the 'Circle of Lords', an upper house whose representatives are elected by all peers of the realm from the lowest knights to the highest dukes, and the 'Folkmoot', a lower house whose members are elected by wealthier merchants & village elders with a basic requirement of an annual income of 200 guilders or ownership of two hectares of land to qualify for candidacy & half that to vote. The Brelassan Parliament grew out of a combination of the 'Round Table of the Lords', a tradition in Lorval where the native Eldathi lords would be seated in a perfect circle around their monarch while discussing matters of war to make it clear that s/he is willing to listen to the advice of even the lowest lord should their ideas prove sound, and the 'Moot' brought by the Forneen, a Thiarnari tradition where all the free men of the tribes gathered to vote on matters of great importance under the supervision of directly-elected 'lawspeakers'. Parliament can draft laws, though it is up to the monarch to approve them or not, and in times of war they can vote on how much money will be made available to the monarch for the war effort.

Meravia has none of the above. On the one hand, its cultural atmosphere is more permissive and less overtly militaristic: the pursuit of knowledge is a lauded activity instead of a subject of mockery, any Meravian monarch worth the name is expected to lavishly patronize the arts, and diplomacy and subterfuge are preferred over 'honest combat' as ways to resolve conflicts - better to bribe or kill a few folks over dinner than throw armies at one another, after all. Individual creativity is promoted, at least until you start attacking authority figures in your works. Nobles and commoners alike are expected to spare no expense in the race to become the most fashionable person in the kingdom, 'nothing succeeds like excess' is practically the country's second motto (and turns a tidy profit for the famed vinters and cooks of Meravia), and men and women who 'sleep around' are at least tolerated (if not applauded for their virility and charm in some especially liberal regions of the kingdom) instead of being spurned as is the case in Brel. Meravia's magical association, the Ring of Golden Thorns, is far less restrictive than the Vermilion Order in Brel and its towers are more comparable to luxurious universities than dungeons/combat training courses.

But on the other hand, its class system is much more rigid than Brel's. Most Meravian peasants are unfree serfs bound to serve their lord and work his lands until their death, and their children are doomed to the same fate. Merchants are looked down upon, for they technically don't create any goods of their own but rather buy & sell the works of others, and are locked out of political life. Nobles above the rank of knight, on the other hand, can get away with everything up to and including murdering their serfs: it's true that a peasant, even a serf, can demand justice, but nobles have the right to be tried by a jury of their peers and the testimony of one aristocrat is considered the equal of ten peasants' testimonies. The 'right of first night', that's to say the right of a feudal overlord to help himself to peasant brides the night before their wedding, was also actually legally codified in Meravia until it was abolished by the Brel after their final victory in the Sixty Years' War. All that stuff said above about how scholarship, the arts, (semi-)free love and the like? That's for nobles (and the occasional merchant who sucks up to the nobles enough to make 'em happy) to enjoy, peasants should just be happy that their overlords let them keep enough scraps to live another day.

The *Haute-Cour*, Meravia's own parliamentary assembly, is strictly nobles-only. Theoretically, the *Haute-Cour* is a strictly advisory panel with no powers, and the strongest Meravian monarchs have managed to realize this vision: under competent rulers like Kings Thierry III (reigned 1035-1060), Clotaire II (r. 1200-1221) and Bellovése X (r. 1365-1389), Meravia came closest to an absolute monarchy out of all the northern kingdoms, and enjoyed the benefits of a centralized administration buoyed by a proper bureaucracy staffed by the 'parvenus' ('new men', magistrates appointed on basis of merit instead of birth by these kings, who had the charisma and/or popular backing to pull it off without provoking major noble rebellions). But all too often their work would be squandered and forgotten under weak successors who allowed power to slide back to the traditional nobility and the parvenus to be ousted, and in the worst cases the Meravian monarch is little more than a ceremonial figurehead while the nobles under him/her are free to run rampant and indulge their whims on the state's dime.

Since the Brelassan victory in the Sixty Years' War, the Dual Monarchs have tried to bring tehir subject nations together to maximize their strengths and eliminate their weaknesses. To that end, since 1435 they have been bringing scholars from Meravia to Brel to combat their native kingdom's anti-intellectualism while enacting Brel-based laws to curb the worst excesses of the Meravian aristocracy and granting portions of the estates seized from rebellious nobles to their serfs & burghers in an effort to create a new class of yeomen loyal to them (the rest of those lands are reserved for loyal Meravian nobles & Brelassan aristocrats, naturally). Thus far, they've had mixed results in getting any changes through, and have had to grapple with consternation among the lords & commons alike in Brel + constant noble revolts in Meravia.

**Religion:** The Dual Monarchy follows the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai. Between 1285 and 1435, Meravia declared the Confessorial House de Chevron (close relatives of the ruling House Merave and female-line descendants of the Yahrellises) to be the legitimate Holy Fathers and Mothers of the Church in protest to the actual Holy Father's policies, instigating the 'Northern Schism' that pitted the loyalists of House Yahrellis (most notably Brel, whose war effort against the Meravians was partly funded by the Church with limitless low-interest loans and outright 'donations') against those of the De Chevrons. This Schism finally came to an end in 1435, when Brel defeated Meravia and the first act of the newly-crowned King Bedylas III/I was to arrest the entire De Chevron family & hand them to the Yahrellises for judgment.

**Military:** The Dual Monarchy's pride is its battle-tested army: an eclectic combination of knights & men-at-arms, yeoman longbowmen from Brel & yeoman lancers from Meravia, levy or mercenary billmen, guisarmiers and swordsmen, and arquebusiers & mages. Originally conceived as a merger of the infantry/archer-centered military tradition of Brel with the proud chivalry of Meravia as well as their (respectively) fire & water-based magical traditions in a way that would cancel out each side's weaknesses, the Dual Monarchy's forces quickly became masters of combined-arms warfare, equally effective at offense and defence - their archers would make pincushions of the enemy at long range while arquebusiers & battlemages break up their formations at medium range, the infantry either advances or waits for the skirmish lines to fall back to pin them down (with the billmen dealing with enemy cavalry & swordsmen taking on enemy infantry), and the cavalry finds a way around their flanks (or gets a way burned for them, courtesy of the Brelassan battlemages) to land the killer blow. According to the Royal Ordinance of 1449, every Dual Monarchy army is to be organized out of 'arrays', companies of 100 'lances' or squads consisting of a single knight or lesser gentleman-at-arms (the 'arrayer' or commander of this troop), two lesser lancers, a longbowman (in Brel) or crossbowman (in Meravia), a billman or swordsman, and an arquebusier, for a total of 600 men/array. In case this professional/semi-professional 'arrayed' army isn't enough, mercenaries can be hired and the traditional feudal levy called up to provide extra bodies on the front line.

The two magical associations in service to the Two Crowns, the Vermilion Order of Brel and Meravia's Ring of Golden Thorns, bring their own talents and fighting styles to the battlefield. The former prefers to fight as battlemages wielding bladed staves on foot, with even the novices of the Order wearing brigandines & steel skullcaps under their vermilion cloaks & hoods, while the latter fights unarmored save for their silver or gold-embroidered blue robes and ride from one strategic point to another on horseback as necessary (essentially making them horse archers whose 'arrows' are magic). Brelassan mages traditionally specialize in fire magic, which they can use for anything from hurling fireballs into enemy formations to impeding an enemy charge with walls of flame to creating smokescreens to cover the rest of the army's advance, while Meravian mages traditionally specialize in water magic and have been able to pull off stunts like parting rivers to allow their army to advance, drowning opponents who try to cross bodies of water and forcibly expelling their enemies' blood through all orifices and even the pores in their skin. Now that they have to fight together instead of against each other, they form the most effective magical fighting force north of the Neck and perhaps in all of Eldath, and can execute joint tactics like boiling rivers to create a wall of scalding steam or boiling the blood in their enemies' bodies.

**Thurin Empire:**

**Capital:** Murnau

**Coat of arms:** A black boar flanked by conifer trees, on a light brown background

The Thurin Empire is without doubt the single largest and most powerful of the Northern Kingdoms, though nowadays its position is being challenged by the upstart Dual Monarchy on its western border. According to tradition, the Empire has its roots in 3A 420 when the Thiarnari warlord Marcabod Haelvacodssunu led his tribal confederacy - the first of many waves of Thiarnari invaders to reach Eldath's shores - to the Kingdom of Klevir on Eldath's southeast coast and proceeded to destroy the Kleviri, kill their last King Kelloth XIV and all of his sons in battle, and forcibly marry his daughters. Marcabod's sons split his kingdom between themselves, per ancient Thiarnari custom: it would take until 3A 782 for one of his descendants, Elthabod 'the Iron Boar' of Murnau, to unite the Marcabodid petty-kings under one banner and another 20 years for him to unite the rest of the mainland Thiarnari. In 3A 814 Elthabod led a 100,000-strong army to save the Holy Father Shrykus I from the Ellisian Emperor Anthousios II, who had crossed the Neck and breached Aldurias's walls but was unable to break into the city's inner defenses around the Basilica of Yahrel: after the Thiarnari had routed the Ellisians, the grateful Shrykus crowned Elthabod Emperor of 'Thurin' (a High Eldathi translation of 'Thiarnar'), at a stroke legitimizing his overlordship of the Thiarnari peoples and giving him the stature to challenge the Ellisians for mastery of the continent. Elthabod went on to build the city of Murnau as his new capital, and his descendants have (with a few interruptions) ruled his empire from its Grey Palace ever since.

The Thurinians, as the 'purest' descendants of the Thiarnari, are not nearly as proficient with magic as the 'elder men' of Eldath or even the Brelassan. Indeed, they distrust magic and mages much more severely than most of the other Eldathi nations, and have not even had a Magical Association since they shut theirs (the 'Iron Chain') down in the 13th century after it was discovered that their Grand Arcanist was plotting to depose Emperor Murnecht IV. Local mages can expect to be blamed (and likely lynched) for any bad thing that occurs in their community, from crop failure to a series of murders, even if they had previously served said community as healers, apothecaries, scribes or some other variation of the upstanding magical citizen. Under some especially harsh monarchs, just being a mage was in itself a crime worthy of a summary execution. Meanwhile, foreign mages are not even allowed to cross the Thurinian border without special passes issued by the imperial government.

In recent years, the main line of the House of Murnau has tried harder than ever before to recover its lost imperial prerogative under the unusually dynamic leadership of the sitting Emperor, Zagmund II. The younger son of Emperor Narnicho III, Zagmund was known for his stoic discipline (his detractors say 'emotionlessness'), preference for austere living and quiet stubbornness from a young age. He is widely known and feared across the continent as a firm and ruthless ruler who spent the first years of his reign suppressing the Vinculi heresy with great bloodshed (which he had already previously battled while still serving as his older brother & predecessor Murnecht VI's lieutenant), then spent yet more blood and treasure beating any noble who opposed him into the ground, and managed to fight the rising power of Brel-Meravia to a standstill over the past ~20 years. That said, his advanced age and penchant for warfare haven't diminished his razor wit nor his abilities as an administrator, as evidenced by his establishment of a centralized imperial bureaucracy for the first time in almost 400 years, his support of even controversial scholars (so long as they don't criticize HIM, anyway) which has already gotten him into hot water with the Church, and his active promotion of the newfangled printing press.

**Geography:** Thurin can be divided into three major geographic regions: the plains and rolling hills of the 'Storm Flats' in the southeast, the sprawling forests and mountains of the Oldwoods in the center, and the marshy, river-covered Borderlands in the west. The first, as the epicenter of Thiarnari presence on Eldath, is dominated by the thousands of castles and hill-forts that two-thirds of the Thurinian nobility call home, making it surprisingly difficult for any invader to fight through despite being a mostly flat land. Since most of the land is better for grazing than farming, the serfs bound to these lords primarily raise large herds of livestock, though there do exist large farms on the banks of the Targoth and Valgoth rivers in the northern reaches of the plains. Many peasants also fish along the southern and eastern shores of this region, although the frequent inclement weather (even worse than Brel's) makes fishing a dangerous endeavor outside of the rare sunny days.

The central woodlands of the empire are a haven of lumberjacks and hunters…as well as outlaws. Travelers making their way on the treacherously narrow and winding unpaved roads of this region are in danger of being attacked by gangs of bandits led by a *raubritter* (robber-knight) or two: black knights who have forsaken all of their oaths and turned to brigandage to make their living. Small isolated villages, too, are in danger of being attacked by these thugs, who will do what they wish to the villagers and then try to make off with as many valuables as they can carry before the local lord can marshal a proper response. Just about the only safe road in this region is the 'Bronze Highway', a long paved road connecting the Thurinian capital at Murnau to the great western city of Jever in the west that runs through the woods, which is constantly patrolled by imperial soldiersand is enclosed by wooden fences bearing the bronze-dipped skulls of bandits foolish enough to attack it.

The Borderlands were (and to some extent, still are) the economic heartland of the empire, growing fat off riverine trade with Meravia and a healthy agricultural sector based on peat from the marshes. Its cities, particularly Jever, are among the largest in Eldath (even the smallest border-city, the riverine settlement of Histboom, is larger than Murnau's castle town) and home to bustling guilds & mercantile associations. Many of these cities have been made 'imperial free cities' by past Emperors, allowing their wealthier residents to elect their own governing councils and freeing them from all feudal obligations to any lord save the emperors themselves, with the notable exception of Jever which is still technically part of an eponymous duchy - and even then, the Merchants' Board of Jever have reduced their Duke to little more than a puppet and rubberstamp for their decisions. However, after the Dual Monarchy began to retaliate against Thurin's support for Meravian and Morcarraghim rebels within its borders by invading across the empire's western frontier (initially under the pretext of backing what they considered to be the rightful claimant in a Jeverian succession crisis), the Borderlands have become a hellish warzone as the armies of both sides regularly despoil the place on their way to meet each other in battle, further worsened by semi-regular plague epidemics (turns out all those corpses rotting in the fields and swamps are bad for you, even if they don't get possessed by Demons). Nowadays the countryside has been heavily depopulated while the cities are positively swamped by refugees, and even during periods of ceasefire *routiers* (mercenary raiders) in service to the Dual Monarchy and Thurin alike wander the land on *chevauchées*, murdering any peasants they find that are bound to the other side's lords (or even their own side's, if they think they can get away with it), plundering what little those unfortunate souls have left and destroying anything they can't carry.

The empire's capital is Murnau, a town enclosed by forbidding dark-grey walls on the southern border between the Storm Flats and the Oldwoods. The imperial residence of the House of Murnau is a stout castle built on a hill at the center of Murnau, with three sets of dark walls and a second filled moat between the 1st & 2nd walls (there are dry moats filled with sharpened stakes between the 2nd and 3rd walls, and the 3rd wall & inner keep). With the advent of gunpowder, all the old towers of Murnau Castle were torn down and replaced with round ones that have better odds of surviving a cannonade, and Emperor Zagmund II has also added angled bastions on the outer wall (with plans to build additional such bastions on the inner walls) for both added protection against gunpowder artillery and to house defensive cannons of his own. Though it might not have the magical defenses of other royal castles across the north, it is easily one of the most formidable conventional fortresses on the continent.

**Society:** Since 3A 814 the Thunir Empire's political structure has remained largely the same: a decentralized morass of over a thousand feudal estates - kingdoms, principalities, duchies, counties and baronies, some of which are no larger than a castle on a hill and the town it overlooks - as well dozens of Confessoriates and free city-states spanning across most of central-eastern Eldath. Although the Empire's feudatories typically practice primogeniture (that's to say, the eldest son of the feudal lord inherits his estate & titles upon his death), the Iron Crown of the Emperors is passed through an elective gavelkind system in keeping with ancient Thiarnari custom: upon the death of an Emperor, his lands are divided among his immediate kin while the nobles, Confessors and Grand Mayors of the realm elect his successor from the House of Murnau, which by now has lands all over the empire and feuds with itself just as often as it battles external challengers.

The practice of dividing one's estate between one's children and/or siblings has gravely weakened the Murnaus, a great house whose legendary fecundity (Elthabod I himself had six sons, and each of those sons had no less than three sons of their own) has become its great weakness once again, and over the centuries the Emperor's powers have been steadily diluted by the schemes and demands of the nobility - including more distant Murnau relations. By 3A 1300, the Emperors had become little more than a ceremonial head-of-state with no power outside of wherever they were able to install a loyal garrison to collect taxes & enforce their dictates, and the greater Thurinian magnates could flout imperial law at will without having to fear more than a strongly worded letter from Murnau in retaliation, though the reigning Emperor Zagmund has spent his entire reign trying to reverse this.

Below the feudal nobility of Thurin, as is the case in the other northern kingdoms there are merchants, artisans and peasants. The merchants are especially important in the empire's western provinces on the Meravian border and near its other rivers, where they have profited tremendously from the riverine trade, and have been able to secure more and more rights (most importantly, the right to bring their grievances before the Emperor like any other noble) under progressive Emperors & Empresses like Zagmund II. The artisans, like many other urban workers in this day & age, have for the most part organized into guilds to monopolize the production of certain goods & services in their respective cities. And as for the peasants, as is the case in the other mainland northern kingdoms, most of them are serfs bound to their lords and land for life, with only a few insignificant pockets of free peasants in existence.

**Religion:** The Thurinians follow the Northern Rite of the Church of Errai. They've had to deal with more heresies than any other northern kingdom in the 15th century of the 3rd Age, the worst of whom were the 'Vinculi': they believed that all forms of life were irredeemably corrupted (except themselves of course), that everybody but them was not only going to Hell but should be sped along there so that Errai may end the world and inaugurate Paradise more quickly, and lived as one massive commune where in their words there were 'no masters and no servants'. The Vinculi proved to be the most durable of these new heresies, crushing even the empire's knights with massed firearm volleys and the construction of wagon forts, and it took until the 1440s for Zagmund to defeat them with their own tactics. Still, by 3A 1480 he has completed his bloody work, every single heresy in the Empire has been massacred or at least driven underground and the Church of Errai rules supreme…just in time to start clashing with him over his collection of esoteric and potentially blasphemous texts & his tolerance of controversial scholars calling for clerical reforms.

**Military:** Thanks to the heavy Thiarnari taboo against magic, the Thurinian military relies on sheer numbers and conventional might to prevail on the battlefields of Eldath. The army has undergone significant reforms under Zagmund II, moving away from a classic feudal military towards a massed conscript army with a professional core (typically supplied by mercenaries and knights) and a centralized command structure. It is centered on large numbers of mundane human pikemen fighting in massed formations, either columns for speedy assaults or broad and deep phalanxes for defense, backed by the largest arsenal of cannons and the largest arquebusier corps on Eldath. Since their poor performance in the Vinculi Wars, Thurin's knights do not play as prominent of a role in their military as their Meravian counterparts and instead (much like Brelassan knights) are typically assigned to guard the flanks of the army with lighter mercenary horsemen in support or fight on foot together with the common pikemen. All of the above take their orders from the first professional officer corps on the continent since the Second Age: although individual companies still answer to their own captains (local nobles or aldermen in the case of the levied Thurinians, elected commanders in the case of the mercenaries), since 3A 1450 these captains ultimately answer to a high command composed solely of veteran generals handpicked by the Emperor and who are paid a hefty regular salary by the Crown.

As mentioned above, the Thurinian military no longer (and pre-13th century, only rarely) fields mages due to strict cultural taboos on magic. The only mages likely to appear in a Thurinian army are merely hedge sorcerers who belong to one of the many 'free companies' (mercenary warbands) signed with the imperial army at any given time: native Thurinian mages have been explicitly banned from taking up arms under any circumstances since the Iron Chain's attempted coup in the 1200s. These hedge sorcerers can belong to any school of magic, follow any fighting style and serve on any part of the battlefield that their captains have directed them to - all the Emperors have ever cared about is that they do their job effectively and don't betray the Crown.

Other WIP (work in progress) factions:

**Republics of Zena and Brixia:**

**Basics:** Based on the republics of Genoa and Venice. Zena is located on the southwest coast of Eldath, specifically on the Holy See's western border with Meravia, and Brixia is on the southeast coast bordering Thurin. Both are city-states run by merchant oligarchies, with Zena having a 'first among equals' figure in the First Minister (a head of state elected by the Senate, a unicameral parliament elected by & from the ranks of the merchant houses) while Brixia is directly governed by a Council of Patricians. Zena gained its independence from Meravia in 3A 980 and Brixia from Thurin in 3A 775, both with help from the Holy See, though nowadays they hate each other and constantly butt heads with the Estates of the Church as well. As of 3A 1480, Zena & Brixia have monopolized trade along the western and eastern coastlines of Eldath north of the Neck respectively, and both are looking to sail away from the continent in search of greater glory and gold: Zena has its eyes set on whatever may lie beyond the Sunset Sea in the west, while Brixia is trying to establish seaborne trading lanes into the depths of Esdath in the east.

**Note 1:** Zena's coat of arms is a sperm whale surfacing from a light-blue sea to spout a stylized gust of air from its blowhole against a white sky. Brixia's coat of arms is a dark-gray shark opening its mouth, as if to attack something or someone, on a dark blue background.

**Kingdom of Duskenfall:**

**Basics:** Based on Christian Spain (esp. Asturias, Galicia: lots of mountains & forests, few farmers, lots of miners and mountain herders). Extremely militaristic, as can be expected from a kingdom whose borders are under constant attack by the Umari. Traditionally followed the Southern Rite of the Church of Errai and was the most loyal ally of Ellis, but the reigning king's father converted to the Northern Rite in 3A 1440 in an effort to secure support from the northern kingdoms in fighting the Umari, which worked at the cost of throwing the kingdom into religious upheaval that still affects it as of 3A 1480. The capital city of Palador is built into the side of a mountain & around the Ebon Palace, a maze of grimly decorated & poorly lit tunnels, chambers and catacombs within said mountain that the royal family calls home. Also, at the bottom of the Ebon Palace there's the small matter of a dormant hellgate (and not just any hellgate, but the oldest one in existence) behind a bunch of weakening magical locks to worry about.

**Note 1:** The royal Dusklander coat of arms is a raven with a violet in its beak, in flight on a starry dark-gray sky, enclosed in a black border.

**Note 2:** Like the other Native Eldathi kingdoms, pretty friendly to mages & magic. The local magical association, the 'Dusken Veil', is as liberal as the Ellisian Magical Association, and its members (including many members of the royal family) are held in esteem. Dusklander mages traditionally specialize in shadow magic, and the kingdom has produced (and been forced to put down) more necromancers than all of the northern kingdoms combined since the end of the 2nd Age.

**Note 3:** The royal house of Duskenfall, House Evendim, is infamous for producing lunatics. If you're lucky they're relatively harmless eccentrics, at worst you get demented necromancers who are a danger even (or especially, in the cases of the more ambitious madmen) to their own kin. Turns out building your castle on top of the first & greatest hellgate on Earth wasn't a great idea.

**Kingdom of Morcarragh:**

**Basics:** Based on the Scottish Highlands, its islands (the Orkneys, Hebrides & Shetland) and the Faroe Islands. During the 2nd Age its elite military force was the Order of the Silver Dragon, an army composed of the only dragonriders in the known world, although said order wound up getting outlawed & massacred at the start of the 3rd Age after taking the losing side in a civil war. Despite losing the dragonriders, Morcarragh's the only native Eldathi kingdom in the north to have survived the Thiarnari migrations in the early 3rd Age, and though it fell to Thiareike invaders from the north in the 9th century it eventually regained its independence ~200 years later after much bloodshed. Expect lots of kilts, claymores, pikes, smoked fish and Norse-Gaelic names or names based on real Norse-Gaelic names. Recently defeated by Brel-Meravia in a war, after which their King forcibly installed a puppet ruler on the Morcarraghim throne with one of his brothers as regent. A resistance movement led by Mormers (high nobles, essentially) & mages opposed to the occupation is still going strong with the aid of the Thurin Empire.

**Note 1:** The Morcarraghim royal coat of arms is a silver dragon flying over gray mountains on a blue background, enclosed in a silver border.

**Note 2:** Like the other Native Eldathi kingdoms, pretty friendly to mages & magic. The local magical association, the 'White Sea', is as liberal as the Ellisian Magical Association, and its members (including many members of the royal family) are held in esteem. However, since the White Sea's leaders refused to accept the Dual Monarchy's suzerainty over Morcarragh even after their defeat, their order has been outlawed since 1476: any White Sea mage who falls into the Dual Monarchy's hands will be given the simple choice of either joining the Vermilion Order or being burned/boiled alive. Morcarraghim mages traditionally specialize in ice magic, and the most powerful among them can even repeat their royal founder's feat of freezing time itself.

**Note 2:** House Skene, descended from Morcarragh's founder, still rules here - albeit with a puppet ruler who hasn't even hit puberty at their head.

**Kingdom of Sylve:**

**Basics:** Based on Romania: expect lots of forests, some mountains and some rivers, straw clop hats, and embroidered dresses. No impalement fetish though, these guys prefer to bury their opponents alive. Many Sylveins today still have traces of elven blood from their Fen-Sidhe ancestors, and royals or nobles may sometimes even be born with slightly pointed ears. Though it's one of the original Eldathi kingdoms, it has been greatly influenced by its new Antae and Thiarnari neighbors since the early 3rd Age, especially by their treatment of magic. Their current king is trying to resist an ongoing Thurinian invasion with help from the Dual Monarchy and brutal (well, more brutal than expected of late medieval rulers anyway) methods to intimidate both the Thurinians into retreat & his subjects into continuing to fight, with mass live burials as just the start of a long list of atrocities.

**Note 1:** The Sylvein royal coat of arms is a male human and a female elf, both dressed in clothes made of fig leaves, reaching out to each other on a dark green background enclosed by a border of many various flowers.

**Note 1:** Sylve was originally friendly to magic & mages like the other native Eldathi kingdoms, but since the 2nd century of the 3rd Age began to turn against magic under Thiarnari & later Antae influence. The local magical association, the 'Oaken Circle', is similar to the Vermilion Order in the Dual Monarchy: all Sylvein mages are inducted into its ranks as soon as they manifest magical abilities, rigorously trained to serve as soldiers for the crown, and widely feared & distrusted if not hated by the mundane population, though they do have some rights and privileges (like royally-funded pretty-good-by-medieval-standards lives in their towers & safehouses, the right to meet with their families every now and then, and the right to marry & have kids). Sylvein mages traditionally specialize in earth magic & the manipulation of living but non-sapient beings - that's to say, plants and non-human animals.

**Kingdom of Slezan:**

**Basics:** Based on Poland: mineral-rich mountains and rivers down on the southern border (similar to Silesia), vast open plains & farmland that's great for pasture/agriculture but terrible for defense everywhere else with only a few small forested regions. Slezan is the kingdom founded by Varod, Tvarich's second son and younger brother to Rod, who founded the larger High Kingdom of Dolya to the north. It's the Antae kingdom most heavily influenced by the Thiarnari of Thurin, and indeed maintains usually friendly relations with its southern neighbor if only because the mountains marking their border impedes conflict. Slezan's real beef is with its 'fraternal kingdoms' of Dolya and Dulebya to the north & northwest, who have constantly invaded and been invaded by the Slezanin since the sons of Tvarich turned against each other.

**Note 1:** The Slezanie royal coat of arms features a pair of crowned white horses addorsed (facing away from each other) on a scarlet background.

**Kingdom of Dulebya:**

**Basics:** Based on the principalities of Polotsk and Smolensk in modern-day Belarus, as well as the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. This kingdom of famed lumberjacks, woodworkers and beekeepers is the smallest of the Northern Antae states as of 3A 1480, and was founded by Tvarich's third son Antetad in the heavily forested land bordering southwest Dolya/northwest Slezan. The Dulebytsi have had to play a careful balancing game between their much more powerful neighbors since the 500s, though their 'Karoly' (kings) have sometimes dared to try and take over said neighbors - only to always fall short, regardless of their martial prowess or political acumen, due to their relative lack of manpower & resources. The present Karol of Dulebya, Yaўhіm III, is plotting yet another such run after successfully arranging his son & heir's marriage to the only daughter of the Slezanin king Stańczyk…all that stands in his way are her many, many brothers and male cousins.

**Note 1:** The Dulebytsi royal coat of arms features three golden horses rearing on a background of green pine trees under a blue sky.

**High Kingdom of Dolya:**

**Basics:** Based on Kievan Rus', Galicia-Volhynia and early modern Ukraine. Geographically it's the largest nation north of the Neck, a land of vast rolling plains, marshes & great forests crisscrossed by many rivers further south and frosty steppes further north, and the Dolyintsy who inhabit its borders are the closest to pure-blooded Antae around today. However it's not a centralized monarchy, but rather a federation of various autonomous princedoms that recognize the 'Velyky Korol'i' (Paramount Kings) descended from Rod (as the last Antae king Tvarich's eldest son) as their suzerain. In practice, said Paramount Kings don't have any authority outside of their own lands and wherever else they've got a garrison of loyal troops, and the annual Rada (pl. Porady) where the nobles gather in the capital of Iskorosten to discuss grievances before their overlord has been described as 'a herd of angry cats' by more than one Paramount King. Currently in a state of civil war with no less than three claimants from the royal house of Belovich trying to kill each other for the title of Velyky Korol' - just in time for the rival Kingdom of Grom to the north to launch another attempt to take over all of Dolya.

**Note 1:** The Dolyintsy royal coat of arms features a crowned black horse rearing on a white background, enclosed within a border of red lines & embroidered shapes.

**Note 1:** Like the other Antae kingdoms, the Dolyintsy aren't big fans of magic. Dolyintsy mages are inducted into their local magical association, the 'Circle of Tears', as soon as they manifest magical abilities whether they want to or not, subjected to rigorous training & the typical brutal Antaic discipline with the objective of shaping them into loyal servants of the Velyky Korol', and banned from seeing their families/non-mage friends more than once a year. Dolyintsy mages traditionally specialize in the manipulation of corpses: as in, mentally twisting & directing dead bodies like puppets, not raising them back to life or even just zombiehood - if the mage dies, any corpses they control immediately collapse as well.

**Note 2:** Further complicating its internal situation, although most peasants are serfs bound to their noble or princely master's land, there does exist a class of freedmen between the serfs & merchants in Dolya's social hierarchy: the 'Kessicks', semi-nomadic communities of ranchers and horsemen descended from runaway serfs who have been exempted from serfdom & granted permission to graze their herds wherever they wish in exchange for serving as the Velyky Korol's elite cavalry force whenever a war has broken out since 1320. These Kessicks have become (in)famous north of the Neck as skilled scouts, horse-archers and lancers, for being the first (and as of 3A 1480, only) force of cavalry to use arquebuses and lariats while mounted, and for refusing to kneel before any monarch, even their supposed sovereign (they only bow their heads in the Velyky Korol's presence).

**Kingdom of Grom:**

**Basics:** Based on Vladimir-Suzdal, Muscovy and the early Russian Tsardom. It's a wintry land of evergreen forests, icy coves and barren fields along the northwestern coast of Eldath, in other words clearly a great place to live. The Gromar are mixed-blood descendants of the Antae who first settled this land in large numbers and the Thiareike who conquered them back in the 8th and 9th centuries, and the Gromar nobility in particular is almost completely descended from the conquering Thiareike chiefs. Also one of the most brutal and violently expansionistic empires north of the Neck, with an army and people hardened by constant Thiareike raids from the north & Dolyan counteroffensives from the south. The reigning Kirrol (king) of Grom is a sadistic tyrant who has nevertheless managed to end 100 years of civil strife, when the writ of royal authority barely ran outside of the capital of Vodyan…by bribing/intimidating the typically rowdy nobility into following him unquestioningly (and massacring any highborn families that refused his orders) within the first years after his ascension. He is now looking to invade Dolya, which has fortunately for him fallen into a civil war several years ago.

**Note 1:** The Gromar royal coat of arms features a crowned gray seahorse rising from a sea of blood, with a dark and starless sky overhead.

**Note 2:** Thanks to having to constantly fight for survival against the Thiareike & Dolyintsy, the Gromar have an unusually liberal attitude towards magic that's pretty much the polar opposite of their societies'. Many noble bloodlines have produced mages (traditionally specialists in electrokinesis, with even the weakest noble mages being able to shock anyone who touches them & project small electric fields) who are then treated with all the respect due to mundane nobles, and the royal house of Vodyatich is legendary for its own dreaded magical specialization in manipulating the flesh and blood, often to gruesome ends, of both other people and themselves. The Gromar have no formal magical association, although mages are still prioritized for conscription into the royal army in times of war.

**Note 3:** Grom follows its own religion, the 'Cycle of Storms', which incorporates elements of both the Northern Rite Church and traditional Thiareike religion. They emphasize Errai's nature as a destructive force and a divine warlord, consider the Thiareike gods to be angels, and are perfectly cool with the ritual sacrifice of slaves & prisoners of war on holidays. The Cycle is led by a 'Volvh', a high priest appointed by the King, and does not recognize the blood claims of House Yahrellis to leadership of all the faithful.

**The Thiareike clans:**

**Basics:** Based on the pre-Christian Norse Vikings, and here they've obviously (mostly) avoided conversion to Eldath's Christianity analogue in the Church of Errai. Brutal hardasses who live on some forsaken freezing rocks off the northern coast of Eldath, and love to raid each other & richer kingdoms for loot and slaves to support themselves. When they aren't raiding, they're fishing or mining. They aren't big fans of magic, considering what it did to their homeland, but make up for it by being some of the fiercest individual warriors in all of Eldath.