**Worldbuilding – specific stories & legends:**

I’ll be using this document to store specific stories about events or famous individuals and myths (the line between the two tends to get blurrier the further back you go in time) for the world of Eos separately from the more general worldbuilding document. I won’t be repeating stuff that’s already been outlined in detail over in the main document, though. You guys are, as usual, welcome to contribute whenever you feel like it.

**Eldath:**

**The Ormunculi heresy:**

**Date & location:** 3A 400-408/522, the Broken Bowl & the Neck

The Ormunculi were the first major heresy to arise in the wake of the Great Schism between the Northern and Southern Rites & the general collapse of centralized authority north of the Neck between the 2nd and 3rd Ages. Their sect was founded around 3A 20 by the itinerant preacher Dorus Flaminius, a zealot who had forsaken his noble family & the associated privileges in his early adulthood after partying so hard that he nearly died from consuming too much alcohol. Dorus, who later renamed himself Ormunculus, rejected the primacy of both the Holy Father in Aldurias and his rival in Ellis, declaring both to be corrupt pretenders: according to him, the former’s line had turned to self-worship and confused Errai’s will with their own, while the latter was a clearly politicized puppet of the Ellisian Emperor. ‘Ormunculus’ also preached other radical & millenarian ideas that included seizing all land from the nobility and the Church to be equally redistributed to the peasantry, destroying all religious icons and outlawing iconography (in his view, humans would inevitably come to worship the objects themselves instead of the figures they represent), letting the people elect their own kings, abolishing taxes and above all, a belief that the End of Days had come and the Thiarnari barbarians ravaging the North in increasing numbers were a force sent by Errai to scourge His fallen descendants for their sins.

To nobody’s great shock, the Church deemed Ormunculus a heretic. In 3A 26, he was finally captured by the soldiers of the Holy Father Kazfiel III and sentenced to the Holy See’s traditional execution method for heretics: he was blinded and his tongue removed, after which he was bound to a wheel and the executioner smashed every one of his limbs with a hammer before finally, mercifully landing the death-blow on his face. However, his disciples and written works survived underground (sometimes literally, as the Ormunculi later became infamous for constructing fortified tunnel networks as their bases), waiting for an opportunity to finally rise in revolution.

That opportunity finally came in 3A 400, 374 years after Ormunculus’ excruciating death. Constant barbarian aggression, the internecine fighting plaguing the states of the ‘Broken Bowl’ north of the Holy See’s Estates, crippling taxation and demands for levies imposed by said lords of the Broken Bowl to fuel their wars and poor harvests caused by worse-than-usual weather had all added up to an overwhelming sense of despair among the commoners of central Eldath. After an outbreak of plague further devastated southern and central Eldath, an Ormunculi prophet known only to history as ‘Acadinus’ emerged in the hills of the County of Scaptia to proclaim that the End of Days was nigh, that the time had come for the people to overthrow the corrupt old order, and that they had to be ‘swords in the angels’ hands’ to cleanse Eos of the corrupt nobility and Errai’s ‘rebellious’ descendants in preparation for His coming. Hundreds answered his call at first, then thousands, and after he managed to inflict an unexpected defeat on a Scaptian suppression force, tens of thousands.

Acadinus led his horde to storm first the capital city of Scaptia itself, where a mob supporting his actions attacked the Count’s garrison and forced his gates open. The Ormunculi burned down the local church with the clergy still in, ransacked the castellum (central fortress) and murdered Count (‘*Comes*’) Diodorus III by roasting him alive & forcing his family to consume chunks of him before brutally killing them too. From there, the revolt spread like wildfire. Wherever Acadinus went, he alternated between preaching a gospel of radical equality and one of fire, wrath and hatred for the upper class & the Church. The Ormunculi buried every noble army, and later even the Holy See’s own forces, amassed to oppose them with sheer numbers, and left a string of atrocities in their wake: burnt-out churches and shattered icons, dead clerics, defiled and mutilated or outright murdered aristocrats, and massacred villages as well, for the heretics did not take kindly to other commoners who would not recognize their teachings as true or refused to allow them to ‘requisition’ supplies from their households. When the rabble stormed the city of Argentium (now Piume d’Argento), they burned down the Archives of Sariel where the Church had been storing its records for the past 1200 years, not one scrap of which survived. Not much land reform actually happened in this entire time either, as Acadinus was determined to overthrow the Church first and his followers preferred to burn & pillage the lands they roamed through instead of settling down.

Eight years of this transpired before the rising was finally brought to a sudden, bloody conclusion. In 3A 408 Acadinus led his horde of rebellious rabble, now numbering around 90,000, to the very gates of Aldurias. Holy Father Israfel IV had been forced to summon the garrisons of the forts on the Neck & draft thousands of Aldurian civilians to shore up his own numbers, and even then he had barely a third of the rebels’ numbers. On the first two days of the siege, while the rebels hacked down trees to build siege ladders, onagers and crude battering rams and Acadinus ranted about the maledictions he would afflict upon Aldurias and the followers of the ‘corrupt and fallen’ Northern Rite, Israfel led the faithful in prayer marches throughout every tier of the city and had his men play loud music to drown out the Ormunculi’s taunts.

On the third day, the assault on the city began. The Ormunculi swarmed the walls and, though the ancient magic worked into their foundations cast down their ladders with men still on them and turned away the boulders thrown by their catapults, enough of them managed to reach the defenses of Aldurias through sheer luck & weight of numbers to start fighting the garrison. The defenders, motivated by their own religious zealotry and the knowledge that their friends & loved ones were in for it if the rebels (who, after all, had a reputation for visiting psychotic violence on everyone who isn’t them after a victory) prevailed, fought hard throughout the day, but nonetheless still buckled under the enemy’s far superior numbers. Four hours of desperate fighting on the walls later, Israfel unveiled his plan for victory: he raised his white staff and emitted a searingly bright light from it, which signaled his cavalry – 7,000 men of high birth, all far better equipped and trained than the Ormunculi – to storm out of a pair of postern gates and charge at the besiegers, annihilating the troops who had gathered at the base of their ladders and leaving the Ormunculi who were already on the walls unsupported. Israfel personally sought out Acadinus and met him in single ‘combat’, which actually meant that he simply used his tremendous magical power to cause Acadinus to explode on sight.

Unsurprisingly, this resulted in the Ormunculi mob falling apart and routing. Israfel insisted that his men should pursue them and cut them down without mercy, even after reaching the Ormunculi camp where their families and camp-followers were gathered: he had shown them that their prophet was false and (in the Church’s books, anyway) probably Demon-possessed, but they were still guilty of innumerable crimes and should still be punished until, in his own words, ‘their screams, their children’s screams and their children’s children’s screams grow loud enough to sing the True Lord to sleep by nightfall, and terrifying enough that *our* children’s children will learn from their example what transpires should they defy the righteous will and power of God’s Blood’. 140,000 Ormunculi, between 50-70,000 of whom were non-combatants, were slaughtered and their corpses displayed on hexagram-shaped frames until they caused a minor outbreak of plague. The Ormunculi sect would survive for another hundred years in small pockets of rebellion before being finally eradicated, but they set the tone for many later populist heresies that would challenge the Church: iconoclasm, a rejection of the Yahrelii family’s right to rule or even their descent from Errai, and radical equalization of the social orders were recurring themes in heretical uprisings as late as those of the Vinculi in the 15th century, 1100 years after Acadinus’ death.

**The Servile War:**

**Date & location:** 3A 901-910, present-day Umari territories

The ‘Servile War’ is the name given to a major 10th-century slave uprising in the Umari Empire, which was instigated and openly supported by the Ellisians. At this time, although the Umari were far from conquering all lands south of Eldath’s Neck, they had taken over a little more than its southernmost third and had forced Ellis onto the defensive for nearly 80 years. Inspired by what the Illamite slave rebellion across the Radiant Sea was able to accomplish, and envious of the rival Northern Rite’s success in gaining converts among the rebelling slaves there, Holy Father Jehudiel II of the Southern Rite advised Emperor Ioannes IV of Ellis to push the tens of thousands of *saqaliba* (slaves of largely Antae descent, ‘harvested’ from the Antae populations that Ioannes’ ancestor had allowed to settle the plains & savanna of the Ellisian-Umari border as payment for their service as soldiers in Ellis’ struggle with the Umari) working the fields and valleys of the northernmost Umari conquests into rebellion, at which point the Ellisian army could march to assist them.

The plan went off without a hitch at first. Unlike the case with Illam, Ellis’ spies and missionaries did not have to cross across the ocean and through an archipelago of hostile slavers to reach their allies: the supply route to the *saqaliba* rebels was much shorter – the lands they worked began just past the Umari-Ellisian border – and thus Ellis found it much easier to get the slaves armed and organized than the Holy See ever did. Furthermore, Ellis had no problem with sending tens of thousands of troops across the border to aid the *saqaliba* directly, unlike the Holy See which was forced to send small quantities of trusted officers with their missionaries to indirectly support the Illamites by training them due to (once again) the great distance between their lands & Illam as well as the usual risks of a naval expedition in the Middle Ages. Finally, Ellis had no shortage of enthusiastic volunteers: in the 6th century, the Antae migration to southern Eldath had been led by brothers Berich and Perich, the youngest children of the last undisputed Antae Paramount King Tvarich, and while both were settled around the center of southern Eldath Perich’s followers dwelled in the northern settlements while Berich’s took the south and were later overrun by the Umari. This meant that many Antae still living under Ellisian rule were happy to go to war to aid their beleaguered ‘brothers’ just south of their homes. The result was that Ellis accomplished in nine years what it took the Holy See thirty to do with Illam: by 3A 910, Ellis and its *saqaliba* allies had reconquered all territory lost in the past century, reducing the Umari to only about a fifth of southern Eldath and forcing their King of Kings to sue for peace.

But the story didn’t end there. The *saqaliba* were outraged that Ellis would not be giving them their own independent country, not even as a puppet state, but would instead directly annex the lands they were living in back into the Empire. Even after Emperor Ioannes tried to calm the situation by appointing an Antae nobleman descended from Berich to rule them as an autonomous vassal, all this did was buy the Ellisians a few decades of uneasy peace on their southern frontier before the Antae seized the chance provided by one of Ellis’ periodic succession crises to rise in rebellion. While Ioannes’ grandson was too busy fending off rival claimants looking to usurp his crown, the Southern Antae were able to establish two independent kingdoms under the rule of Perich and Berich’s heirs in short order, respectively called Sklava and Buzhe. Three-way wars between Ellis and Solamut, the Southern Antae states and the Umari (and four-way ones too, where Buzhe & Sklava would fight each other) followed for the next 400 years until the Antae and much of Ellis’ remaining territories were finally swallowed by the Umari advance, rendering the original Servile War completely pointless.

**Prince Beorhtred Beorhtwulfessunu of Brel:**

**Date & location:** 3A 950-964, Brel

Beorhtred Beorhtwulfessunu Efte was the eldest son of King Beorhtwulf I, the ruler of Brel between 941 and 977. He was a soft and lazy child who was regularly trounced by the other boys at court in sparring sessions, could not ride a horse properly, pitched tantrums whenever he didn’t get his way as though he were still a toddler, and preferred to laze around and sate his enormous appetite rather than do anything productive with his days. This marked him as a poor candidate to succeed his father, as Brel’s shores were being attacked every day by Thiareike raiders from the north. Beorhtwulf made no secret of his preference for his second son, Prince Beorhtric, who was shaping up to be a worthy swordsman and equestrian capable of making him proud, but never made a move against Beorhtred out of respect for his wife Æthelhild, who loved her children equally.

However, Beorhtwulf’s patience was not limitless, as Beorhtred found out in the summer of 964 when he pitched another one of his infamous tantrums and struck his mother because she had failed to roast pork just the way he liked it. Beorhtwulf commanded his eldest son to accompany him on campaign against the Thiareike, literally chaining him to a horse that he then led with a rope when the Crown Prince first refused, and once he engaged the Thiareike in the Battle of Tweoxnam he had Beorhtred placed in the front rank of his army’s central shield-wall – the single most dangerous location on the battlefield. When his generals pointed out the obvious risk he was subjecting his own son to, Beorhtwulf bluntly informed them that he knew and that it was time for the boy to ‘prove himself a man of Brel’, or else die trying. And die trying he would: the inexperienced and wholly unprepared Beorhtred was one of the first casualties of the battle, his head opened up by a raider’s axe. Beorhtwulf was unfazed and led the Brelynn to victory anyway. Upon being shown Beorhtred’s corpse the King expressed no grief or remorse, instead declaring that Beorhtred was obviously unworthy to succeed him and incapable of keeping Brel safe, so really he and his soldiers should thank Errai that ‘He saw fit to elevate my worthier son Beorhtric, the true salamander, to the seat of Crown Prince by this miracle’.

The tale of Beorhtwulf’s ruthlessness reverberated throughout the ages as a sign of Brel’s extremely martial tradition, showing the world how little its kings thought of even their own children should they fail to prove themselves on the battlefield. The story was directly invoked by King Ælric III nearly 400 years later in the early stages of the Sixty Years’ War: on the eve of the Battle of Frégune in 3A 1337, he gave his own eldest son the Crown Prince Æthelwulf the extremely dangerous task of leading 2,000 horsemen and a dozen battlemages (out of his army of 20,000) across a river, through a forest and into the rear of a 35,000-strong Meravian army, where they were to attack the Meravian command post and kill or capture his rival King Pierraud – likely defended by the mightiest paladins and water mages of Meravia. When his lieutenants told him that this plan had little chance of success, like Beorhtwulf King Ælric shrugged and said that his son would either ‘win his spurs’ that night, or else die trying – no big loss, as he had three younger sons to replace him. Unlike Beorhtred, Æthelwulf’s story ended on a much happier note, as he actually succeeded in his task and made his father proud by bringing him Pierraud’s head.

**Emperor Harudion VIII of Ellis:**

**Date & location:** Lived 1441-1479, reigned 1464-1479, Ellis

Harudion VIII of the House of Maraios, son and successor of Emperor Philotheos III, was the immediate predecessor of the incumbent Empress of Ellis, his daughter Erennia II. When his father died from liver failure brought about by his rampant alcoholism in the summer of 1464, then-seventeen year old Harudion inherited an empire that was on the verge of complete destruction. He was described by both Ellisian and Northern chroniclers as a ‘perfect prince – bold in battle, spirited, handsome, quick to laugh, slow to anger and generous to his people’, and proved himself to be an able and energetic monarch who never lost a battle against the Umari and managed to temporarily stop their advance towards Ellis itself, despite always being outnumbered at least two to one. However, a lack of manpower and the intrigues of his (or his wife’s) enemies at his own court prevented him from holding on to any lands he managed to recover from the Umari for more than a year.

Emperor Harudion was killed in the Battle of Karthin Pass in the summer of 1479, barely a year ago. Having been informed that the Umari were advancing in full force on Ellis where ‘full force’ was defined as ‘an army 150,000 strong’, and realizing that he could not realistically defeat a horde of that size with the limited resources available to him, Harudion sacrificed himself and the entirety of the Ellisian cavalry – 6,000 men – in a risky gambit: they would raid the Umari camp, destroy their siege weapons and eliminate as many Umari nobles and royals as they could, almost certainly dying in the process. The Ellisian Magical Association offered what help they could, with the Grand Arcanist Elaudos Ralethannos using his power to identify several little-known paths into the Karthin Pass that the Ellisian horsemen would use in their attack, but ultimately they were directed to stay home and defend Ellis in case the battle went poorly. It did and didn’t: Harudion accomplished his goal, destroying the Umari siege engines and killing their King-of-Kings Jahanvir in single combat, but only at the cost of his own life and those of every single Ellisian who rode with him. Jahanvir’s successor immediately called for a truce, which Harudion’s wife Sevenna (as regent for their underage daughter) agreed to.

The Umari respected Harudion’s courage enough to send his body and those of his men back to Ellis for a proper burial, without looting or (further) mutilating them, and even did the imperial family a favor by reattaching his severed head to the rest of his corpse with wire. However, as the Umari suffered comparatively light losses at Karthin Pass (around 7,000 men, which is nothing out of a 150,000-strong one) and quickly got back to building new siege weapons and drafting more soldiers for another run at Ellis, his death may soon be rendered pointless.

**Empress-Mother, Dowager and Regent Sevenna of Ellis:**

**Date & location:** Lived 1443-present, reigned as Regent 1479-present, Ellis

Sevenna of the House of Synadenos is the widow of the previous Emperor Harudion VIII and, at present, the ruler of Ellis in all but name. Few at the imperial court knew what to expect of their future Empress when she was officially married to Harudion at the age of fourteen (at the time, he was a week short of his sixteenth birthday himself), which was also the first time the two met in person: it was public knowledge that her family, the Synadenoi, were an ancient and respected line descended from Marae’s fourth son, and her father was a *Hypatos* (‘consul’) or chief advisor to the reigning Emperor Philotheos, but virtually nothing was known about Sevenna herself beyond her physical beauty and refined courtesy. Anyone who thought the future Empress would be an easy pawn to manipulate soon found that she was anything but however, as she chose her friends carefully and gained a reputation as a cutthroat intriguer with a string of dead or disgraced rivals within five years. In her defense however, her paranoia and ruthless tendencies seem to have only emerged after the poisoning of her first son soon after his first birthday, rumored to have been brought about by a rival noblewoman who sought to share Harudion’s bed and was found with her throat slit in the bath a few weeks after, and only got worse with the deaths of her next two children, culminating in her fourth and only living child Erennia being the most heavily guarded person in Ellis and perhaps all of Eldath even prior to her coronation.

Today the Empress has secured her and her daughter’s place at the pinnacle of the Ellisian government, in the process installing her eyes and ears everywhere from the army & city guard to the bureaucracy and even the households of prominent merchants. She is also known to be engaged in extensive negotiations with the Northern Realms (chiefly the Holy See, the Dual Monarchy and Thurin) in a bid to secure their support against the Umari, even if it comes at the cost of Ellisian independence: her priority is not preserving that against anyone but the Umari, as far as she’s concerned the days where Ellis could support itself are long gone, but rather ensuring that her daughter can keep the throne for life and if at all possible, her grandchildren can sit on several thrones. The nobility are polarized on the matter of her reign, with everyone who isn’t already supporting her writing her off as a paranoid power-monger who values loyalty over competence and isn’t at all above selling Ellis out to the Northerners for protection from the Umari, and the commons (as they typically do) have far too many problems on their own plate to have a strong opinion of her one way or another.

**Empress Erennia II of Ellis:**

**Date & location:** Lived 1471-present, ruled 1479-present

Erennia of the House Maraios is the sitting Empress of Ellis, on account of being the only child of Emperor Harudion VIII and his lawful wife Sevenna to survive past her second birthday. As she was eight years old when she ascended to Marae’s Throne, she is obviously unqualified to rule in her own right, and so her mother now governs the country in her name as Regent until she comes of age. In fact, Sevenna may continue running the show even after Erennia reaches her sixteenth birthday, at which point she would be considered capable of ruling in her own right (should Ellis survive that long): she is a meek and timid girl who defers to her mother’s will on basically every matter from the sentencing of criminals to what to have for dinner (even issues where Sevenna allows her to have a say), and is unlikely to change for the better under Sevenna’s overprotective tutelage.

**Grand Arcanist Elaudos Ralethannos:**

**Date & location:** Lived 1420-present, held office 1470-present

Elaudos of the House of Ralethannos is the incumbent Grand Arcanist of the Ellisian Magical Association, which basically means he’s the top mage of the empire. He is widely liked & respected by all levels of Ellisian society as a wise, mild-mannered and generous old sage who is much more open to the public than his predecessors, freely dispenses good advice to both fellow mages and mundanes who ask for it, generally keeps out of politics and has extensively sponsored scholarship into new and little-understood fields of magic such as time manipulation. Ralethannos is also remembered as a firm ally of the late Emperor Harudion, and his precognitive magic was the single biggest reason why the Ellisians were able to accomplish all of their objectives in the Battle of Karthin Pass. Even the Northerners, generally not a people friendly to magic, have held him up as an example that all mages should strive to match.

However, beneath his wizened and sagely exterior, Ralethannos is a much more complicated and certainly much darker figure. Years of watching the Empire waste away under incompetent leadership and feeling a pang of hope when the much more capable Harudion took over, only to die in a hopeless battle after a pitifully brief reign, and the private realization that his research into time and spatial magic to turn the tide is going nowhere has driven him into a state of deep despair, which he struggles to mask from the world. Out of desperation at the continuing Umari advance, and determined not to exchange one foreign yoke for another by appealing to the Northern Realms to aid Ellis against the Umari, Ralethannos is now considering a plot to defeat the Umari by luring them into Ellis and – after trapping them between the city’s two lowest sets of walls – massacring their army with ‘holy flame’, a magically-enhanced flammable weapon used by the Ellisians in the past and stockpiled under the Magical Association’s headquarters…even if it comes at the cost of annihilating half the city’s population and removing both the Empress and the Grand Domestic, who have their own differing ideas on how to save Ellis.

**Grand Domestic Galenos Mouzalon:**

**Date & location:** Lived 1432-present, held office 1476-present

Galenos of the House of Mouzalon is the incumbent Grand Domestic (*Megas Domestikos*) of Ellisian, which is to say he’s the functional commander-in-chief of the Ellisian military. Despite his family’s low standing in the Ellisian aristocracy (the Mouzalonoi were a family of common soldiers and low-ranking officers elevated to nobility ‘merely’ 200 years ago) and a tendency to antagonize his superiors with his blunt mannerisms and glory-hound tendencies, Mouzalon proved to be an audacious commander prone to taking risks and then making them pay off, no matter how seemingly improbable or reckless, and steadily climbed the ranks as a result. It was for that reason that Emperor Harudion, who considered him a personal friend by the 1470s, elevated him to the office of Grand Domestic over many older but more cautious (Mouzalon himself would say craven) officers of higher birth four years ago. Mouzalon went on to plan the offensive that culminated in the Battle of Karthin Pass, though despite his protestations Harudion went on to assign him to command the Ellis garrison instead of letting him ride with the attacking cavalry, a decision that ensured Mouzalon would live to this day.

Nowadays, though he remains Grand Domestic, Mouzalon has been butting heads with the Empress-Regent. Though he was a personal friend of Emperor Harudion, Sevenna does not share her late husband’s opinion of the Grand Domestic and considers him by turns an upjumped grunt unworthy of speaking in her presence & a reckless fool who seemed to not know the definition of ‘long-term planning’, who hungered for personal glory over the common good and who is plainly going to get them all killed. For his part, Mouzalon – ever a brutally honest and ill-tempered man – makes no secret of his contempt for the Empress Dowager (who he considers corrupt and more interested in preserving her own power than doing good for Ellis) and her overtures to the Northern Realms, peoples that he considers to be schismatic barbarians little better than the Umari, and believes that if only Harudion had given *him* the regency he’d be able to defeat the Umari, purge corruption at home and make Ellis great again without lowering himself to the level of accepting foreign aid. He now conspires against her to seize the regency and perhaps even elevate himself to imperial dignity by marrying/usurping her nine-year-old daughter with the support of the Ellisian Holy Father Sedecion III, a similarly (though more refined) anti-Northern, anti-Umari and anti-higher aristocracy fanatic.

**Esdath:**

**The Chénghuà Empress of the Long Dynasty:**

**Date & location:** 3A 680-698, Da Xia

Chénghuà has the distinction of being the first and only woman to rule the Empire of Da Xia in her own right, not indirectly through a puppet Emperor and/or influence at the imperial court, as well as the reason that women have since been outright barred from ruling under any circumstances. She was born Long Pei in 3A 640, the eldest surviving daughter in a minor noble family living in the suburbs of the Xian capital of Zhongjing, and for her childhood and most of her teen years nobody (Pei herself included) expected her to do anything with her life beyond marrying another minor noble of little note, bearing him children and helping him steward whatever paltry estates he owned for the rest of her days. That changed when in 3A 657, the young Mǎnyì (‘contentment’) Emperor happened upon her family’s estate and was so smitten with her beauty that he immediately asked her to return with him to the imperial residence as one of his concubines, despite already being married. Sensing a chance for social advancement, Pei and her family accepted. It took her only two years to be elevated to the rank of ‘Imperial Consort’, marking her as one of Mǎnyì’s official secondary wives.

Unlike his spirited and martially-inclined father who had overseen the completion of Da Xia’s Millennial Walls, Mǎnyì was a lazy, hedonistic and irresolute ruler who vomited at the sight of blood, happily delegated all administrative tasks to ministers of questionable competence and loyalty, and displayed little interest for anything beyond feasting with his friends & dallying with his growing harem. He did absolutely nothing to stop the brewing conflict in his court between his lawful wife, Empress Xia of the powerful House of Yan, and Consort Pei, who overcame her low birth to put together her own faction with her natural charisma & an affair with the imperial treasurer, granting her access to the funds she needed to secure supporters in the army and bureaucracy. As the years wore on, both women bore Mǎnyì several children (by the time of his death, the Emperor had 80 children by 24 different women, including Xia and Pei), and the dispute between them grew more rancorous as Pei plotted to place her sons on the Celestial Throne ahead of Xia’s, even though millennia-old imperial law decreed that the children of the official Empress Consort would always supersede those of a concubine or junior consort in the line of succession. Pei went to extraordinary lengths to weaken Xia’s standing, to the point where she allegedly strangled one of her daughters in the crib just so she could accuse Xia of the crime. Nonetheless, for all her ruthlessness and her powers of seduction, Pei could never get Mǎnyì to set aside his wife or to disregard his legitimate children’s rights to his throne.

Finally, in 3A 677 Pei decided the time for decisive action had come. As Mǎnyì (by now a monstrously obese man who had to be carried out of his bed by half a dozen servants) had continued to refuse her requests to declare their oldest son Zhao Yuan the Crown Prince, she paid the servants to drown him in his bath on one otherwise uneventful morning. With him out of the way, Pei claimed Empress Xia had arranged Mǎnyì’s assassination, taking advantage of the well-known fact that the two had never gotten along to add weight to the lie. Imperial Guardsmen loyal to her seized control of the capital and put Xia to death without a trial (according to legend Pei had her blinded, amputated her limbs and then threw her to a pack of starving dogs, the only company she ‘thought fit’ her archenemy), while most of Xia’s children who were still in the capital suffered unfortunate accidents in the following days. Pei placed Prince Yuan on the Celestial Throne, declaring him the ‘Gaozu (‘high ancestor’) Emperor’ after doctoring a fake will for Mǎnyì in which the late Emperor declared him the Crown Prince, and gave her soldiers orders to kill anyone who disagreed. However, Mǎnyì and Xia’s eldest and youngest sons, the official Crown Prince Zhao Shangjin and Prince Zhao Dan, escaped her grasp: the former, a strong young man, had been given a small cavalry command on the frontier by Mǎnyì a few weeks prior, while the latter was a toddler who was smuggled out of the capital by a loyal maid. When Pei sent soldiers to arrest Shangjin, they instead defected to his side and informed him of what had happened in Zhongjing. Shangjin declared himself the ‘Xiaojing (‘filial and respectful’) Emperor’, and a civil war became inevitable.

The first three years of the war went poorly for the forces loyal to the ‘Gaozu Emperor’. Pei’s son had proven to be a man much like his father: an indolent coward who preferred the pleasure gardens of Zhongjing to a military tent and had far more talent in bed or at the winesink than on the battlefield or in administration. Pei effectively ran her side’s war effort, but was surrounded by corrupt and ineffective officials on both the military and civil fronts (which was largely her own fault, as these were the men she could most easily bribe or cajole into supporting her brazen usurpation), and between 677 and 680 the Xiaojing Emperor’s forces relentlessly advanced towards the capital. After receiving word of a particularly heavy defeat in the Battle of Anshi, Gaozu lost his nerve and prepared to surrender. However, Pei would have none of it and upon seeing that her son really was determined to give up, had him strangled in his sleep. As her remaining sons were far too young to rule, and sensing an opportunity to finally rule in her own right, the ambitious ex-concubine arranged for her own coronation as the ‘Chénghuà (‘accomplished change’) Empress’ of the Long Dynasty, not only re-adopting her maiden surname but also having all of her remaining children abandon the Zhao name for it as well. Where her son and all her generals, including several of her brothers and cousins, had failed miserably to defeat Xiaojing in three years, she won the civil war in three days by having the rival claimant assassinated just as his army came into sight of Zhongjing’s walls. With no other viable claimant left to oppose her (as Zhao Dan had vanished), Chénghuà was able to securely sit atop the Celestial Throne for the time being.

Under Chénghuà, corruption flourished, but so did peace and stability. Her 18-year reign is remembered as a period of opulence, as she was forced to routinely throw gaudy festivals to appease her subjects and lavish favors, offices and bribes on the nobility to ensure none of them (particularly the Zhao Dynasty’s cadet branches) would try to overthrow her. To deal with her most recalcitrant opponents, Chénghuà established a secret police called the ‘Lǜmàozi’ or ‘Green Hats’ after their distinctive headgear: commanded by her brother, the newly-elevated Prince Long Xu, these green-capped agents would kidnap her rivals’ kin to serve as hostages or outright break into their homes and murder them to send the message that disobedience would not be tolerated under her rule. Elements of society who were displeased at Chénghuà’s rule would mock the Green Hats as the ‘Empress’ Whores’, as male prostitutes in Xian brothels traditionally also wore green caps, but for obvious reasons they would never do it to an agent’s face. To her credit, Chénghuà was also able to secure lasting peace & trade treaties with the Di, Kamrupa, Ishari and Antae Empires west of Da Xia in 3A 688, 689, 692 and 693 respectively, and is more fondly remembered as a patron of learning & the arts who especially enjoyed landscape painting. Chénghuà’s cruelty and oppressive tendencies were largely limited to the nobility and scholarly class, who were the only ones in any real position to oppose her; the commons neither prospered nor languished under her, and met Chénghuà’s indifference towards their lot in life with their own indifference towards her reign.

The end came suddenly for Chénghuà’s reign. In 3A 696, Prince Xu and several of the Lǜmàozi were lynched by an angry mob in the city of Poying while trying to arrest Guo Zhuye, the popular Governor (‘Jiédùshǐ’) of Anxi Province in southern Da Xia. Chénghuà, livid at the loss of her brother & chief lieutenant, and retaliated by ordering Zhuye killed with his entire family and the removal of a hand from every adult man in Poying, but all that accomplished was escalating matters to a rebellion that took a year and a half to suppress & ruined Chénghuà’s reputation among the commoners. The Empress became melancholic, withdrawn and extremely paranoid, and in the early autumn of 698 she had the commander of the Third Army, the imperial host stationed closest to Zhongjing, assassinated after she overheard him complaining about the rigorous security measures she implemented around the palace compound. She appointed Prince Baoji, who she thought to be the meekest and most loyal of her surviving sons, to replace him. Just a week later however, Baoji unexpectedly betrayed her and laid siege to the Imperial Palace, having been permitted entry into the capital for a routine military exercise. The utterly unprepared Imperial Guard found themselves outnumbered eight to one and, when Chénghuà insisted that they should fight to the death, their captain instead knocked her out & delivered her to her rebellious son without even token resistance. Baoji promptly forced Chénghuà to name him Crown Prince and then abdicate so that he could become the ‘Tiānshòu (‘given by heaven’) Emperor’, after which he banished her to a convent in the remote western jungles of Da Xia.

But Chénghuà’s story was not over just yet. Baoji/Tiānshòu’s coup was predictably contested by his brothers as well as the now-adult Zhao Dan, who re-emerged in the far western province of Báilín with the Zhao imperial seal & a token given to him by his father in his possession as proof of his identity and who proclaimed that he was coming to take his rightful place on the Celestial Throne, an endeavor in which he would be supported first and foremost by the Governors & nobility of the western provinces. While Da Xia descended into one of its larger civil wars, Chénghuà (or rather ‘Sister Pei’, as she was forced to assume her birth name upon becoming a nun) worked to convince the other nuns at her temple to support her restoration. They finally acquiesced in 3A 701 and allowed her to use the small fortune they had amassed from years of pilgrims’ donations & tithes to raise a force of one-and-a-half thousand mercenaries…who were promptly routed in the Battle of Anyang, her faction’s first and last serious clash with Zhao Dan’s much larger army, late that year.

With her last hope to regain the throne smashed, Chénghuà hastily retreated to the convent where she sought refuge only to be betrayed by her erstwhile sisters, who feared Zhao Dan’s wrath. They were right to do so, as the Zhao prince would have moved the world to get his hands on the woman who had heaped so much misery and death on his family; when the defeated Chénghuà, now again called only ‘Lady Pei’, was delivered to his camp, he promptly had her fed to his pet tiger as revenge for her killing of his mother & siblings. Zhao Dan went on to defeat the various Long sons still around – by the time Chénghuà was finally executed, Tiānshòu had been killed in battle and the Celestial Throne usurped by his elder brother Daochéng, who had crowned himself the ‘Tiānchéng (‘made by heaven’) Emperor’ but still found himself at war with his remaining siblings – and properly reclaimed the Celestial Throne for the Zhao Dynasty at last in 3A 705, when he was officially enthroned as the ‘Hóngwǔ (‘vastly martial’) Emperor’ who would lead Da Xia to the height of its territorial expansion twenty years after his coronation, in the process destroying all of the rival empires Chénghuà had made peace with except for Ishar – a pity his conquests would not survive the 8th century. Anyway, as one might expect, one of his first domestic reforms was to outlaw women from ever sitting the Celestial Throne in their own right ever again.

**Seldath:**