

THE PROTECTORATE OF THE NORTHERN MARCHES

A SUPPLEMENT FOR THE ELDRITCH LIVE ACTION ROLEPLAYING GAME

The ELDRITCH Live Action Roleplaying game is a lovingly crafted work of fiction created by John Kozar, Faye Ferguson, and Spencer McGhin, with additional input from, and content created by Megan Durham, Jessica Sills, Thomas Marshbanks, Galen Hall, and Joe Meyer. Special thanks to Lehanna Allen, Carl Holzbog, and anyone else who ever listened to us prattle on about the project. Thanks to everyone who helped to make this strange dream a reality.

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WELCOME TO THE THORNWOOD ...

Considered by many to be a place of mystical energy and forgotten legends, the Thornwood is a realm apart from the Kingdom of Arnesse. Home to an ancient people who share a powerful connection with the land and the spirits of the wood, it is a place of wonder for some and terror for others. For those who travel too deeply and carelessly into the wood and stray from the paths, are rarely seen again. This is a place of deep sorrows and ancient grudges, home to a people who have suffered beneath the yoke of occupation and while bent, were not broken. It is a place of hope, for the people of the wood are survivors who have protected their legacy from those who would see it undone. But as the winds of change blow through the trees of the Thornwood and beckon the Woodfolk to leave their forest, the question remains if they will heed the call and what they will do once they have left their sanctuary.

USING THIS GUIDE

The player supplements for Eldritch are intended to provide detail information beyond that which is known to the general player population. All information in this guide is to be taken as in-play information, known by you and others in your corresponding faction. You may over the course of Eldritch events, discover new information that corresponds to your faction, however you will be able to share this information as you wish.

MAJOR FIGURES OF THE MARCHES

Giles Bannon II

His Majesty, Giles Bannon II, King of the Ardan, Lord Sovereign of the Seven Protectorates and Defender of the Vale

While King Giles II has never visited the Northern Marches, his name is well known among the Woodfolk. While few are open about their distaste, one can see how most feel when they see the reaction to his name. Many Woodfolk consider him to be a kinslayer for killing his Father and his wife and stepmother, Queen Maeve, sister of Ard-Bantiarna Innis. Others have heard the tales of his puritanical morality that seeks to reward the pure and punish the profane. Most of the Woodfolk have heard that the King passed a series of moral

codes several years ago, but few within the wood know or obey them. Quite a few Woodfolk are terrified that Giles II is the harbinger of a second attack on the Thornwood that will seek to purge the Northern Marches of the old ways forever. Most are determined to stop him, no matter what the cost.

Aline Bannon

Her Majesty, Aline Bannon, Queen of the Ardan, Queen of Flowers

Queen Aline is King Giles Bannon's wife and while little is known of the King, even less is known of his wife. Tales have said that she is both beautiful and kind. Most know that she is a Blayne, the daughter of the Lord Paragon of the Hearthlands Frederick Blayne. Thus, most Woodfolk regard her as likely a simpleton and not educated enough to understand that she is married to a monster. It also has been said she has an affinity for flowers, which the Queen shares with many Woodfolk.

Lady Paragon Bodhmall Innis

Ard-Bantiarna of House Innis, Keeper of the Oak Cathedra

Leader of House Innis, it is said that her line descends directly from Bridgit herself, and for this her word is never called into question. She is as beautiful as the spring, but with a heart as frozen as the Everfrost and a spine as straight and unyielding as ancient oak. Little is known about Lady Bodhmall as she remains very private and working mostly through surrogates.

Ser Llewelyn Braoin

Knight Master of the Ivy, Keeper of the Ash Cathedra

Ser Llewelyn is the leader of the Knights of the Ivy. He is known to be one of the greatest archers and huntsman in all Arnesse, deadly with both a bow and a blade. Ser Llewelyn is also known to be a man of great honor who takes his oaths to Ard-Bantiarna Bodhmall very seriously. Ser Llewelyn is also the man responsible for the defense of the Northern Reach's borders and in times of war is the head of House Innis' armies.

Cathbad Ironwood

Ceannasaí of the Woodswards, Keeper of the Birch Cathedra

Cathbad is an older man, still fierce in his advanced age, with one eye grey that marks the only souvenir from a standoff with a Carnagan Werewolf. That and the pelt of the great beast, which he proudly wears wrapped around him as trophy.

Aina of the Red Teeth

Ceannasaí of the Wolf Guard, Keeper of the Yew Cathedra

It is said that Aina understands more of the ancient practices that created the Wargs than any other person besides Bridgit herself. Aina is a heavy drinker who breeds Wargs - her own Warg, Canagan is so large that it is sometimes mistaken for a bear.

Owyn Skycloak

Draíochta Elder, Keeper of the Hazel Cathedra

Owyn is an old man and keeper of the ancient healing herbs of the forest. He is considered by many to be a staunch traditionalist and has even sided with the views of House Bannon on several occasions. This has made him increasingly unpopular among the people. He has taken to spending long stretches of time in the Eternal Grove waiting for a sign or portent that will guide House Innis through these difficult times.

HISTORY

The following section details that common historical information known to those who call the Northern Marches home. While there is certainly more history to the faction, it will need to be discovered via the proper in-game channels.

THE COMING OF THE DARKNESS

Oh, Medeina! With our song, we mourn you. Tall as the spruce, lithe as the willow. Child of spring and mother of summer, our shadows danced with yours in the high meadows as we wove our dreams into reality with the vines of your hair. When you were with us, our voices echoed, our eyes saw beyond the horizon, and our very word called forth the spirits of the trees. The world is colder without you.

-Bridgit's Dirge

WHILE MANY COMMONFOLK KNOW LITTLE OF ANCIENT HISTORY, FEW IN THE THORNWOOD DON'T KNOW THE TALE OF BRIDGIT AND HER BROTHER INNIS AND THE DEATH OF THE GODDESS, MEDIENA, THE GREAT MOTHER. House Innis was once led by the immortal twins, Bridgit and Innis. Bridgit was dark haired and ruddy, her voice like a spark, with a bow that sang like a lark; while Innis was fair haired and quiet, his sword as fast and silent as a wolf in the woods. Innis had long since put away his blade and, with only the strength of his will, built Innisfree out of the living wood of the forest, nurturing and growing the very trees into shapes that could

house all the children of Mediena. Bridgit, meanwhile, worked with the Woodswards, great warriors and woodsmen, to protect and guide the people.

Then came the Darkest Night. Armed with knife and torch, they took those faithful to the Old Gods, the priests, the draíochta, and their supporters. They also took the books, scrolls, relics, and artifacts of the faith. Oh, how much old knowledge was lost as draíochta groves were put to the torch! Many were killed, burned for crimes imagined by their murderers, others were taken to camps where they were imprisoned and held in deplorable conditions unfit for even animals. Most died in those camps, tortured to death by wicked captors or neglected to the point they starved to death.

In the days that follow, Thornwood comes under attack from the forces of those who wished to see the Old Gods destroyed. House Richter and House Hale, whose names are still cursed by all who love a life free of tyranny and murder. They came with iron, steel, and cannon, cutting down trees and burning the forest before them. Beset on all sides, the Woodfolk fight valiantly but cannot hold back the tide of foes. When they reach the sacred grove, the twins Innis and Bridgit join the fight themselves, killing hundreds of soldiers before Innis himself is slain, said to have been pierced by a dozen arrows.

Bridgit is forced to retreat, the warriors of the wood are forced to watch in despair as their most sacred relic, the Athan, is burned to the ground and Mediena herself drawn forth as the mighty tree is consumed. The eldritch cannons of House Richter pierce her immortal body over and over. It was said that the cannonade lasts for almost half an hour during which the Great Mother did not fight back, but merely wept and sobbed with pain. And as her tears flowed down her cheeks and so too did all the forest seem to cry out with her in a chorus of despair. From miles around the birds and beasts of the woods wailed and the trees shook as if by invisible hands.

There was nothing left of Mediena. House Richter earned the title that many Woodfolk call them to this day - Godkillers.

Stay hidden, stay safe. Just leaves among the branches, wind among the grass.

With the fall of Mediena and the death of Innis, Bridgit sank into solitude. In the Eternal Grove, surrounded by her most loyal followers, the great immortal slowly becomes entombed within the tree at its heart and as magic withers and fades from the world, the great heroes of old are fade into myth and legend. In its moment of greatest weakness, the Thornwood is

plundered and House Bannon's troops occupy the once sacred lands for over a hundred and fifty years in a time known as the Bitter Harvest. The people of Thornwood found themselves bereft of their homes and goods, and even their daughters and wives were given to the occupiers to take as their own. To this day, the people of the Thornwood bear the scars of those dark times and while the land has grown strong again, they have not forgotten the horrors visited upon them.

THE AGE OF KINGS

Though the affairs beyond the wood matter little to most in the Northern Marches, the bard's songs speak of a Queen who took the throne of Arnesse after a mighty struggle with her siblings. Her name was Queen Eleanor Bannon and she would take as husband, a man known to be her half-brother. Though to some in the Kingdom this seemed shocking, the Woodfolk were little surprised; they were already well acquainted with the travesties and atrocities that the Bannon was capable of.

This Queen was a fair and just ruler, but her husband, King Miles, was a despot and disloyal to his wife. He paid for his transgressions and his pride with his life but Eleanor reigned on, in time, finding some solace in the arms of an Aragonese nobleman named Astor. Eleanor Bannon sat upon the throne for almost thirty years, and spent much of that time trying to undo the damage she had done prior to her ascension. While some good was done, it was not enough to return prosperity and peace to the Kingdom. Could a single lifetime wash clean that much blood on someone's hands? Eleanor bore a son by King Miles, Giles, who would take the throne upon her death.

King Giles I is remembered fondly and bitterly in the wood. He continued what his mother had started and returned peace and wealth to the Kingdom of Arnesse. Giles was the first King since the end of the Bitter Harvest to welcome a delegation from Thornwood to Highcourt and extended this gesture by naming a noble of House Innis to the King's Council. Giles did much to increase administration, trade, and justice within the Kingdom. He empowered the nobles of Arnesse with even more legal authority and while some were fair, it ultimately armed despotic lords with more ability to oppress and abuse their people. Marriage annulments were also made legal, a change that was used half a year later to end his first marriage to Queen Rosalind, the mother of his son, Giles the Younger.

Rosalind and her son flee north through the Marches and take succor with House Hale while the King marries his second wife, Elysande of Corveaux, who, a year later, bears him a

daughter, Emma. The wood is rarely privy to, or caring of, the treacheries and intrigues of Highcourt, but when the Queen is accused of adultery years later and executed for her supposed crimes, many in the Marches find the allegation exceedingly hard to believe. This is made even more suspicious when he marries the Queen's cousin, Alice, also of House Corveaux. Queen Alice dies in childbirth a year later, and not a few say that the King was cursed for unkindness to Queen Elysande.

Many years pass and the King descends into grief and, some say, madness. He declares that he has received a vision that the Aurorym faith would bring about the end of the Kingdom of Arnesse. King Giles summons advisors to his court, including nobles from House Innis to his court. He seeks counsel. The Lady Maeve Innis is among their number and shortly after her arrival in the capital, the King begins to court her. Shortly after, he passes an edict restricting the practice of religion throughout the Kingdom. In response, unrest about his policies rises in the much of the land. Spread by religious zealots and malcontents within the Midlands and Everfrost, rumors run rampant in the Kingdom, including that the King plans to ban faith entirely and that he is controlled by a witch. Many believe Lady Maeve is in fact the witch.

When King Giles I marries Maeve of Innis, many in the wood grew hopeful that House Innis could finally return to a place of prominence in the Kingdom. But it all comes undone when Queen Maeve is announced to be with child in 750. Fear of an Innis heir to the throne fuels the allegations that the King and Queen are both involved in witchcraft. These calls are joined by powerful voices from within the Aurorym faith who say that the King must be removed from power. In 751 Giles the Younger, son of the King, allies with Houses Blayne and Hale, and marches on Highcourt with a rebel army to seize the throne from his father. King Giles I calls his banners and Innis sends a powerful force south to aid him. Innis soldiers also harass Giles the Younger's army as it travels and buys more time. Despite countless acts of heroism and valor that day, the rightful king of Arnesse, Giles I is defeated by his son on the battlefield at Lanton. Rumors run wild throughout the Kingdom about the Aurorym faith and how its valiant Vellatora knights carried Giles II to victory almost single-handedly. King Giles I and Queen Maeve are captured, put on trial for witchcraft, and both are burned at the stake for their alleged crimes. Giles II is crowned King of Arnesse in 752. He promptly cements his alliance with House Blayne by marrying Aline, daughter of Lord Paragon Frederick Blayne.

THE PRESENT

"We may no longer have our magic, but to this day, the Woodwards keep the woods safe and none dare wander its trails without their permission. Our Guardians still yet read the path of the stars and the stories of the seasons in portents of what is to come and visions of what has happened before. The Draiochta study and cultivate the plants of the forest and the beasts of the field until they understand the path in which a vine will grow or in which a rabbit will run. We have taken the name of our greatest builder, Innis, and we will remain in our forests, building, long after the mayflies and their houses have fallen. Our knowledge is sought after by the other kingdoms and our warriors are without peer."

- Sir Owyn, Guardian of the Root

The year is 763 and King Giles II has sat on the throne of Arnesse for twelve years. Feelings toward King Giles II are immensely negative. Firstly, because he's a member of House Bannon and second, because he is seen as almost solely responsible for the very public execution of Lady Maeve Innis, sister of the current Lady Paragon, Bodhmall Innis.

The King has been an immensely polarizing force in Arnesse during his time on the throne. While Giles II is spoken of being an intelligent and visionary ruler, he has done little to outreach to the Woodfolk during his reign. Many who call the Northern Marches home fear the King and the Aurorym faith declaring much of the protectorate to be practitioners of witchcraft and sending an army to the Thornwood to deal with it. As a result, the Thornwood has heavily restricted entry to its borders and has been readying for war since Queen Maeve was murdered. This fear is heightened by the fact that the King is a devout follower of the Aurorym faith, which is immensely unpopular among many Woodfolk and has yet to find any real audience in the Thornwood. Reports reach the people of the wood that Giles II ruthlessly enforces morality upon the world around him. The pious are rewarded and those who are declared to be profane are punished. These days, the King empowers and trusts only the faithful and the unfaithful are often disregarded or marginalized. Those he deems threats are killed or exiled.

The Woodfolk of Thornwood have a position unique among all the peoples of Arnesse. Like the Tarkathi, they are one of the most ancient in Arnesse. This has given them a long and storied identity that while the ways of the past are no longer celebrated in the ways they once were, the traditions of days long past still color and influence many parts of the world

with a strange, almost otherworldly mysticism. Of all the people in Arnesse, they are among the most reclusive. It is rare for Woodfolk to venture into other lands without good reason and if they do so, it is often for a specific reason or mission. While they stop just short of being truly xenophobic, they rarely welcome outsiders into their realm and those that do enter are expected to obey the customs and ways of the wood. Those who enter the Thornwood without leave of its rulers are unlikely to make it out alive. There is a saying among some Woodfolk: "The wood cares little for those who live without, but suffers not those who trod carelessly within."

But times are changing faster than the Woodfolk would like. Many have come to realize what happens to those who sit, spectate, and do nothing. Their people have suffered the humiliation of occupation and the shame of having their way of life torn from under them. While it has made some cautious and shy, it has given them an inner and outer strength that few peoples in Arnesse possess. Already they have seen the death of their beloved Queen Maeve Innis at the hands of a faith that would likely name them witches as well and do the same. Powerful voices have called to protect their homeland at all costs, but most realize it is likely only a matter of time before the torches come once again to burn their homes. In the Northern Marches, the appetite for seeing the people of the wood return to a place of prominence among the noble houses of Arnesse is growing. Within the last few years, the number of Woodfolk travelling beyond the wood has grown more than in any other time in their history and while they are far from opening their borders and becoming a cosmopolitan society, they have begun to consider that their future likely lies more without than within. Some have even taken action.

A second force drives the Northern Marches and that is the very real and present threat of war with the Dusklans. The forces of House Richter have repeatedly and sometimes even violently invaded the Western Thornwood. They have come seeking lumber, cutting down trees on false pretense that the land is theirs. This has sent House Innis' Woodwards into direct conflict with the Iron Guard and Richter regulars. The conflict has damaged vast swaths of forest and caused not a few fires. Some who make their homes within the lands of House Brevis have been made homeless by the violence, their villages raided and often burned. Worse yet, the King and the nobles in Highcourt have showed no signs of interest in these events, some even claiming they are not sure any attacks are happening. These attacks have enraged many within the wood and most Woodfolk are determined to fight off these invaders no matter the cost. The conflict has been going on for months and shows no sign of letting up, running the real risk of the

situation growing into a wider regional war between multiple houses. The Woodfolk have no plans to let the Richters repeat the events of all those years ago while they still draw breath.

INNIS HIGH HOUSES

HOUSE INNIS

Castle: Innisfree

Ruler: Bodhmall Innis, Ard-Bantiarna of House Innis

Ruled by the Ard-Bantiarna herself, Innisfree is a mighty hold deep within the Thornwood. Despite its remote location the city is the largest in the Northern Marches, housing almost forty thousand people. Save Lydiard, Innisfree is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the Marches and is likely the place that most outsiders have visited if they have ever been to the Thornwood. Those who have visited say that the beauty of the city alone makes the journey worth it. Built out of the very forest itself by ancient shaping magics, Innisfree is the ultimate expression of man living in harmony with nature. While access is limited, those with coin can pay exorbitant fees to visit Innisfree, which is seen as the ultimate mystic destination in Arnesse. The city is frequented by those who seek a particularly forbidden piece of lore, that hard-to-find herb, or others who wish to embark on a vision quest to find their inner selves. This is one of the few cities in the Northern Marches with an active and thriving marketplace - the Living Market. While one can acquire and sell goods at the market, its primary function is to distribute goods that come in from outside the Thornwood to other holds deeper within the forest.

HOUSE BREVIS

Castle: An Rath

Ruler: Onora Innis, Bantiarna of An Rath

Onora Innis is the Lady of House Brevis and Ard-Bantiarna Bodhmall's great aunt via her grandmother, the late Fiachna Innis. The eagle-eyed lady trains and raises birds of prey which House Brevis uses to better track outsiders and enemies within their territory, though to be completely honest, there isn't much difference between the two to the old woman. She has outlived every one of her four husbands, and remembers the names of her hawks better than those of her dozen children and scores of grandchildren. There is quite enough to go around for her enormous brood, however, as she makes quite a bit in trade from the Cirque and from the taxes that the house receives from merchants using the Old Forest Road.

Mostly concerned with organizing and facilitating trade with the Cirque, House Brevis sits on the border of the forest, acting as a gatekeeper to deeper roads of the Thornwood. The cities of Lydiard and Aediobri both are within its domain. The Richter border city of Elminsk is causing Brevis significant issues as Richter forces and commonfolk from Elminsk continue to raid into the Thornwood for wood and supplies. The Knights of the Ivy have increased their patrols in the area and have been joined by quite a few Wolf Guard. As this conflict continues to escalate, the region around the Western Thornwood grows even more dangerous to travel and live in.

HOUSE EBORA

Castle: Eagle's Roost

Ruler: Wilem Ebor, Tiarna of Eagle's Roost

One of the few ruling lords within House Innis, Tiarna Wilem Ebor is the eldest son of Lady Liadian Ebor and Orin Innis. Like his father Orin, Wilem is a Knight of the Ivy under the auspice of the Wolf and is a cousin to Ard-Bantiarna Bodhmall Innis. This vassal house controls the great ford across the River Nore, to the North of Innisfree. In addition to their main holdings is the port city of Miobrin.

While those of House Ebor do not see quite as much fighting as, say, House Oban, raiders from Hale lands do often intrude upon their lands trying to raid the shipping caravans that cross the ford or travel up the River Nore to Miobrin. The great ford at Nore's Landing is a marvelous sight, and the Eagle's Roost is built directly into the cliffs atop the falls, commanding a view of both the ford itself and the entirety of the lower River Nore. A series of ingenious platforms and rails bring goods and passengers from the ford down to vessels in the lower Nore. A spiral of beautiful stepped gardens around the outside of the Eagle's Roost is known as the rainbow path, called such for the light show that constantly plays in the mist of the falls and provides water to the bounty of flowers cultivated there.

HOUSE ANNALEE

Castle: The Blind Shoot

Ruler: Kassity Annalee, Bantiarna of the Blind Shoot

Lead by Kassity Annalee, the granddaughter of Fiachna Innis' brother Nigel, Bantiarna Kassity cares more about the state of her gardens than the organization of a high house. However, given that The Blind Shoot is the southernmost outpost of the Woodwards, there is more than enough organization to go around. Sir Urquhart Silentstalk, a Knight of the Ivy under the auspice of the Cat, is the leader of the Annalee Woodwards and most of the daily running of the Basal Break falls to him.

Where Bantiarna Kassity shines, however, is in her skill with the riches of the soil. Under her skill and that of her mother Ciarran, the ancient gardens of Annalee have expanded past their bounds and many medicinal and usable herbs that were thought to be extinct have been resurrected or recreated through an intensive breeding process. Many inquire about the wonders of these gardens, few ever are permitted to see them. The rulers of House Annalee do their best to ensure that access to their botanical treasures is neither easy, nor cheap.

HOUSE VERUBRI

Castle: Nuinn's Cairn

Ruler: Ninaine Verubri, Bantiarna of Nuinn's Cairn

The Verubri family are one of the few that cannot trace their lineage back to the line of Bridgit and Innis, but instead received recognition as a high house due to the strength of their artistry. A line of artisans, silver smiths, and jewelry makers, those of Verubri pride themselves on the beauty and functionality of their wares. Every Bantiarna and Tiarna of their house is a master of their craft and it is assumed that any children they have of worth will follow in their footsteps. Ninane Verubri herself is a master silversmith and Innis Bodhmall wears only jewelry that was created by Ninane. Verubri's lands house Innis's largest silver mine and their artisans are known their skills in jewelry and metalsmithing.

One of the few stone fortifications within Thornwood, Nuinn's Cairn sits squarely in a grove of massive ash trees which the Verubri regularly harvest for staves or the shafts for arrows. They insist that their ash trees are never to be cut but give access to their limbs that drop every summer. They claim that that the arrows and spears from ash wood freely given fly the truest. It is a magnificent stone structure, with every inch of the walls covered by elaborate carvings, shaped by artists of old with artistry unmatched by the skill of modern masters.

HOUSE GLEANNA

Castle: Tynron Crag

Ruler: Coleen Gleanna, Bantiarna of Tynron Crag

The Bantiarna of Tynron Crag is Coleen Gleanna and is a second cousin to the current rulership of House Innis. Married to Tiarna Holcombe Innis, Grandson of Nigel Innis, it is rumored that Bantiarna Coleen finds the Magisters of Firewatch smart and attractive and that if it weren't for her intervention several Magisters would have been thrown out of the Apotheca order for breaking their oaths. Within the northeast woods, Gleanna is home to Innis's largest Apotheca tower, Galdorleoth, built around the top of a natural hill that

has been increased to beyond its natural size. Given its height there is also a large contingent of Woodwards camped there who keep ever vigilant for fires and other threats to the forest.

HOUSE OBAN

Castle: The Armored Fox

Ruler: Firas Oban, Tiarna of the Armored Fox

Oban is the most martial of all the vassal Houses and exists on the North border of the Thornwood and the ancient city of Lune is within its lands. Its Tiarna has the same title as their castle, the Armored Fox, and Firas Oban is swift and deadly. Cold and merciless, he is extremely xenophobic and dislikes the presence of outsiders at all in Innis lands. He does occasionally show a bit of human emotion where relatives are concerned. Perhaps because he lost his wife Glynnis in childbirth, he thinks all the better of his several children and he has been known to even crack a smile when forced to engage with his grandmother - the infamous Onora Innis.

Bramblewood is also known as the thorns of Mediena, and it is an area near impregnable to those who do not know the protected paths through the dangerous underbrush. It is here that the Knights of the Ivy are primarily housed and trained. The Great Wargs of Innis are bred in the village of Lune. They are said to have taken wolf pups from an otherworldly source which allowed them to grow to such a massive size. Once the site of the Groves of Lune, before the trees were destroyed in Richter's furnaces, Lune is primarily made up of members of the Wolf's Guard and associated support staff.

TRADITIONS OF THE NORTHERN MARCHES

THE GROVESKEEPERS

While there is always a head of House Innis, they are nothing more than a mouthpiece of the council - the Groveskeepers. Comprised of leading members of the Ard Draiochta, the Woodwards, the Knights of the Ivy, and local cabal of Fayne, the council prides itself on holding all discussion behind closed doors, always providing a united front to outsiders. The head of House Innis is always a woman, being Bridgit's representative to the outside world. While the position is technically chosen by vote, traditionally, only members who can trace their line to Bridgit herself are ever considered. The position is for life, and many heads choose their successors. Each member of the Groveskeepers has a

chair in the Eternal Grove, of which the magnificent Oak Cathedra is reserved for the Ard-Bantiarna, the Lady Paragon.

THE WOODSWARDS

One doesn't join the Woodswards, they're chosen - often at a very young age - and raised into the order. They're taught to read the path of the roots across the soil and the way wind funnels through the leaves. They train until they can spot the path made by a rabbit through the brush at a hundred yards and fire a bolt through its heart before it knows that it has left the safety of the shadows. Ser Cathbad Ironwood is the current leader of the Woodswards, Innis's legendary scouts.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE IVY

The Woodswards are known to be some of the finest archers in Thornwood and the Knights of the Ivy are chosen from the finest of the Woodswards. It is a common tale that no archer can qualify to be a Knight of the Ivy unless they have demonstrated exceptional valor in battle and passed a series of tests that include stringing a bow at a weight over 100 pounds and hitting a target three times in a row 400 meters away, with three arrows. Many are drawn from the ranks of the Woodswards, though any who can demonstrate exceptional skill with a bow and as a woodsman can seek to join their ranks. Given that the Innis leadership can be highly female dominated, knight orders are one of the more reliable ways that a man might distinguish himself, and thus both the Woodswards and the Knights of the Ivy tend to be heavily male. The current head of the Knights is Ser Llewelyn Braoin, and he is a very friendly man known to be deadly with a bow.

GUARDIANS OF THE ROOT

Among the Innis there are those who have been tasked with keeping memory, stories, and songs alive, preserving them for future generations. They are called the Guardians of the Root. To become a guardian, one must train for more than a decade in the art of performing and the history of House Innis and its vassals as well as hundreds of stories, poems, and bits of philosophy handed down over many years. They must also complete a final performance and trial, called a meabhraigh.

THE WOLFGUARD

Among the Woodswards are the Wolf Guard, riders of the mighty battle Wargs. It is said that Aina understands more of the ancient techniques and practices that created these wolf-like creatures than any other person besides Bridgit herself, and that only the bravest and fiercest of souls can ride a Warg into battle. These Great Wolves are primarily bred in the forest village of Lune and it is whispered that their stock comes from an otherworldly source. The leader of Wolf

Guard is Aina of the Red Teeth. Her warg, Canagan, is said to be so large that it is sometimes mistaken for a giant bear.

(Note: Wolf Guard are unplayable by players)

THE DRAIOCHTA

For generations, the Draiochta have kept what they can of the old ways of the Thornwood alive. Originally known as the Priests of the Wood, they were chosen by Medeina, the Great Mother, as the guardians of ancient tradition and speakers for the forest spirits. Known to be very reclusive and secretive, the few Draiochta that remain wield an incredible amount of power and influence within House Innis and its protectorate.

(Note: the Draiochta are unplayable by players)

BATHING AT THE WELL

During the first full moon of the year, while frost still holds tight to the forest, unwed maidens unbind their hair and go to dance and float in the waters of the lake nearest the Eternal Grove. It's said that while floating you'll experience a vision of your one true love, although some girls have said that instead of seeing the man they were destined to marry the well instead granted them visions of the path of their future. While not as popular a practice, some young men have a similar celebration during the time of the first new moon.

GIVING BACK TO THE FOREST

It is customary for families to dedicate one child, typically the eldest, to the forest. These children are typically given to the one of the community organizations, typically the Draiochta, the Woodswards, or the Knights of the Ivy, although it is not uncommon that they are given to the Fayne or the Apothea. Their families do not abandon them entirely however, often sending them letters and presents throughout their childhood and making donations of goods or labor to the organizations they have been given to. Families who do not follow this tradition tend to be looked down upon and quite often suffer a substantial loss of status and position within the community.

CHALLENGE OF THE FORD

It is common for young warriors in Thornwood who do not want to compete in a formal duel to challenge each other to climb the falls at Eborra below the great ford, with he who reaches the top considered the victor and the winner of whatever argument started the challenge. The authorities in Eborra try to discourage such challenges, as it is common for the River Nore to claim the lives of one or both participants.

HOLIDAYS

RETURN OF LIGHT

In the first days of the second moon, when the first stirrings of life are noticeable, much of Innis celebrates the Return of the Light. Children climb the tree branches to fill them with so many lanterns that the canopy of the forest looks like the arch of the night sky and the community comes together for an evening of feasting and stories to mark the end of the winter.

BLOSSOM SEASON

The final days of the fifth moon are known as Blossom Season, where the great trees of Innisfree bloom into a shower of hanging white flowers. The last full moon of the season is often marked by a great festival in which it is customary to give a bouquet of white flowers to someone you intend to court.

NAMING DAY

In the first days of the eight moon, as the first wheat harvest occurs, those children who have truly spoken in the last year are brought to the Draiochta. They are asked a series of questions intended to figure out what kind of person they may become and are then given names based on the spirit for which the child is determined to share an affinity. It is considered bad luck among the Innis to name a child before it can communicate, as it is not believed that their spirit fully inhabits the body until they have the gift of speech. Most infants are called familiar pet names until they have reached their naming day. Typically, children who are going to be “given to the forest” are promised to an organization on their naming day, although parents may, and often do, choose to keep the child for a bit longer after they have promised them.

BRIDGIT'S DAY

The Fall Equinox is marked by Bridgit's Day and is a day of remembrance for all to remember the fall of the ancient Goddess Medeina, Mór-Máthair, the Great Mother, and Bridgit's mourning of Medeina and Innis's deaths. All the young maidens get together and create a Mediena doll of oak and willow branches, and carry it in a procession through the town stopping at various village buildings and houses to ask the people within, representing in turn the spirits of Wolf, Hawk, Cat, Stag, Yew, Oak, and Ash to give the doll an offering. After each visit those persons who represent the spirits join the procession until they reach a central location where the doll is burned atop a huge funeral pyre. While technically a somber occasion, the procession is often quite merry, with people grandly acting out their parts as the

representative spirits and the celebrating the resulting pyre with forlorn music, good food, and very strong drink.

FEAST OF THE FALLEN

In late Fall those of House Innis celebrate the Feast of the Fallen just as most of Arnesse does, however, they have several major differences. It is commonly believed among the Innis that during the Feast of the Fallen the veil between the worlds is thinner, and it is thus a good night for divination. Many pour molten candle wax slowly into cold water and read the resulting patterns for insight into the coming year. Rather than simply remembering those ancestors who are precious to them, young members of House Innis use the day to try to figure out which of their family's ghosts they should pay their respects to. It is common for children approaching puberty to spend that entire night alone in the woods deep in meditation, seeking guidance from the spirits for their future.

LEGENDS OF THE NORTHERN MARCHES

THE WHITE HART

The white hart is a mythical albino stag whose appearance signifies the beginning of extraordinary adventures. White Harts allegedly draw adventurers deep into the forest where lie the margins of the Otherworld. Many tales are told of knights or hunters who pursued the white hart deep into the woods, only to find themselves in another place or time. To see one is said to be good fortune or a sign of dark times to come. To kill one is said to grant the hunter a wish but that they will be cursed with disastrously bad luck. The stag is said to be a true faerie beast, with one foot in this world and one in the mystical forest of the Queen of the Fae. Its white color is said to symbolize purity, but also a strong connection to the spiritual and its antlers symbolize the spreading branches of the wood. While House Innis has never confirmed if such a beast exists within the Thornwood, there have been credible tales over the years that the hart is real. Certainly, if such a mythical beast exists, it would be protected by the Woodfolk, as not a few hunters would see this as the greatest of trophies.

JENNY GREENTEETH

*Come into the water and bathe, my love
Come swim in the swirling pool
Down in the deep with the rocks and the bones
You'll swim with me now, you fool...*

Also known as Screeching Ginny, Jenny Wi' the Airn Teet, Peg Powler, or Nelly Longarms, this terrifying entity is said to be a creature that lurks in bogs, rivers, ponds, and lakes, pulling the unwary into the water and drowning them. She is said to have a particular affinity for the flesh of young children and will grab them whenever she can. The tales say that those who linger too close to the waters edge will see a pair of eyes beneath the water. Then, quick as a flash, the long-limbed bogy reaches up to snatch the ankles of the unsuspecting. Once firmly in her bony grasp she drags her victims down to her dark, damp lair and gobble them up, often while still alive. She is said to be a ghastly green color with dark flowing hair, long bony fingers, dirty sharp nails and foul green pointed teeth. Almost everyone who lives near a body of water in the Northern Marches has a tale about someone they know, or know someone who knows someone, who was taken by Jenny Greenteeth. Some have speculated that she is a malevolent Fae but others say she is just a tale used to keep children from playing near the water's edge.

THE WILD HUNT

*The hunt is out, torch-light and screams.
The forest shows another face
To those who hide than to pursuers.
Each trunk he glides behind becomes
The axle-tree, and space between-
Spokes of the wheen on which he's bound-
Radiates like avenues.*

*All animals and birds are hushed.
Focus of the insects' interest,
Their buzz betrays him. Pine-needles
Point, and bushes wilt the better
To expose their prey.
His terror cannot be disguised,
His smell is carried by the wind.*

*The hunt is out. Pack and victim meet.
Sacrifice is made, the forest sated.
God, animal, and human share
The pledge of blood, belief
That through this guild incorporated*

*The elements return to balance,
And power renews in every creature.*

The Wild Hunt is a piece of folklore that has origins in the North and the clans of the Everfrost are said to have a similar tale. The true origins of the Hunt are shrouded in mystery but it is said that it began with a king of old who once ruled the Thornwood named Woaden. Woaden was a great hunter and loved to travel deep into the woods in search of trophies. There, he encountered a mystical Fae grove, where its denizens told him that even greater prey lay in worlds beyond this one. Tempted, he was drawn further and further afield into distant lands and he neglected his own kingdom. By the time he returned from his hunt, a lifetime of men had passed and his kingdom had been divided between many other nobles and kings. Enraged, Woaden swore a curse of vengeance upon all the nobility of the wood who he felt had stolen what was rightfully his and retreated into the depths of the woods.

Some say that there the Fae took him and he became one of their own, the Huntsmaster of the Wild Hunt. The tale is told that Woaden still prowls the depths of the woods hunting for nobles descended from those who stole his kingdom and those that cross his path are given a choice - try to escape or join the Wild Hunt forever. On the coldest winter nights, Woaden blows his mighty battle horn, Carnyx, and summons his pack of supernatural hunters and fierce hounds. Accompanied by massive wargs known as the Cwn Annwyn, they chase down any prey they can find or come across. Legend says that on those nights, the blood of a nobleman smeared upon the threshold of a door will keep a home protected from the Hunt.

THE AOS SÍ

*Over hill, over dale,
Through bush, through brier,
Over park, over pale,
Through flood, through fire!
I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere;
And I serve the Fairy Queen,
To dew her orbs upon the green;
The cowslips tall her pensioners be;
In their gold coats spots you see;
Those be rubies, fairy favours;
In those freckles live their savours;
I must go seek some dewdrops here,
And hang a pearl in every cowslip's ear.*

To many in the Thornwood, the Fae or the Fair Folk are as real as anything else in life. These creatures, called the Aos Sí in the old tongue, are said to have existed since the dawn of time itself, another race which calls an otherworldly realm its home. The Fairy Folk come in many different shapes and sizes. From the beautiful, ethereal lords and ladies of the Fae known as the daoine sídhe, to the tree-dwelling dryads, to the mischievous pixies, and savage red caps, the Fae come in many different types. While Fae may appear harmless and even helpful, the wise know them to be at best mischievous and fickle, at worse terrifying, malevolent, and even murderous. Legends say that the Fairy kidnap children and take them to their realm and replace the infants with changelings, Fae doppelgängers that live in the child's stead, causing untold misery and woe to the family. To this day, the Woodfolk are quick to warn others of the dangers of going too deeply into the woods or of wandering off the well-established paths. Tales are often told of how they make their homes at the center of mushroom rings called fairy circles or of how to identify a Fae and methods to ward one away. It is a common practice in the Thornwood to leave regular offerings of food and drink outside their homes to placate the Fair Folk.

THE THIRSTY WOOD

Two brothers lived on the border of Annalee. The eldest Briann was promised to the forest by the father, but his mother couldn't bear to part with him and kept her boy as close to her for as long as she could. He had a brother, Eamonn, who was as like him as a twin.

Briann wanted to stay with his mother, and so, even as young as he was, he decided that he was going to kill his brother and take his place. So, he took young Eamonn out into the woods for a walk.

They walked deep within the woods, until they lost track of the sky- the sun- until the dead leaves on the ground were as dark as the shadows they walked in. Eamonn could have been suspicious, but instead he walked closer to his brother, scared of the noises in the shadows.

It was the last thing Eamonn would do, as his brother pulled him into a final embrace and gave him to the forest with a single slice of his knife.

He watched the blood drain out of his brother's body and felt regret. Tears running from his face he turned and ran- but lost the path home. He tumbled and fell, covered in bramble and earth as true night fell.

But Briann was not alone.

The blood of his brother had found its way into the roots of a tree, and it had awakened in it a darkness. The tree drank greedily of Eamonn's heartblood, until there was no more for it to drink.

And yet it still thirsted. It felt more alive, more powerful, than it had ever felt before. It would not give that up, not while it could smell the presence of another so close to its roots. It struggled mightily, focusing on all its will upon its body, and walked.

Briann had collapsed into a heap, exhausted and spent. He never awoke to find his way back to his foolish mother.

It is said that the tree still walks, still thirsting- ever eager to keep the blood flowing through its trunk.

THE WELL

Know that the well doesn't always give you what you think it will, little one. I too bathed in it when I was your age- I put on my brightest white and my verubi bracelets and unbound the braids of my hair to float in those moonsilk waters. It was warm, warmer than it should have been while frost clung to the branches, and I did not feel a chill as I slipped into the well at Bridgit's grove.

But I did not dream of a man, tall and dark- nor even of one short and sweet! No, instead I saw a high mountain, far from my beloved woods. Far from my family and everything I knew.

And yet I knew it, and I continued to know it. Once I saw that mountain top I could not forget it. It called to me, sometimes as a whisper, sometimes as a shout, until I could not ignore it. I took a Cirque caravan far from the Thornwood, much against my family's desires, much against mine. But I could no longer ignore it.

I did not find a man on the mountain top when I found it. What I found instead was something different. Call it a calling, wrapped in an adventure and tied with more hard work, fear, and effort than I ever expected when I undid my hair and danced inside that circle of trees. No, I did not find a vision of my future love.

And yet, I would not trade it for anything.

THE FORBIDDEN PATH

Sionnach was the greatest trainer that the Draiochta had ever seen. People spoke of his Wargs with awe, never had the beasts seemed so smart, so strong. The horses he bred were creatures of grace and beauty, tall and lithe, and the falcons he had trained flew higher than all their fellows. He tamed the creatures of the forest and glen until it seemed as if there was nothing he could not do.

Until he overstepped his bounds. He decided that if the creatures of the Vale had no challenge for him, he should instead try for those of other worlds. He turned to the monsters of the wood- the Leshy, the pale wurms, the caoranach, the pooka. After all, what were these but animals of a different type?

The other Draiochta warned him, told him he was overstepping. But he did not listen.

For a while he even seemed to succeed. He tamed creatures that had been whispered about in stories, displaying them for all to see- never noticing how the trees around his house were growing thick with rot. Never noticing how little he slept any more, or how thin his shadow had become.

I won't taint your nightmares with what happened to him, but know that the ruins of his home lie in that direction, and that's why we never take the shorter way through the woods to Ebor.

FAOLAN'S MEABHRAIGH

The Draiochta from Annalee shuffled quietly in the open courtyard outside the tower, waiting for the gates to open and let them continue on their way. Each of them was doing their best to hide their nervousness, many had their hands tucked up in the long sleeves of their robes or their hoods pulled down over their eyes.

All except for Faolan. He made eye contact with the Magisters of Gleanna tower and practically smirked. He wasn't particularly surprised when the guards ordered their group to disrobe, and he pulled his own robe over his head much less sullenly than the elders he was accompanying.

But despite much shaking of clothing, as well as patting down of hair and beard, not a single strip of paper was found among them. The Magisters paid close attention to Faolan, even subjecting him to a search of his ears and mouth- checking his well-tanned skin for symbols or marks.

Through it all, Faolan smiled, and they found nothing.

But, as he sauntered out of the gates into a patch of sun he started reciting from the tome of forbidden herbal recipes he had memorized, all to the tune of a rather bawdy ditty. Stealing information from Gleanna, he thought as he waved happily to the poleaxed Magister. What a nice ending to his meabhraigh.

INDUSTRY OF THE NORTHERN MARCHES

The Northern Marches is not a place known for its industry. As a matter of fact, the concept of industry has been largely forbidden in the wood. The Woodfolk seek to live in harmony with nature and thus seek to disturb the world around them as little as possible. There is an active, but limited logging in the wood and the small amounts of wood produced are some of the most sought after in all Arnesse for both its quality and beauty. The bowyers of the wood are legendary for their skill and the fabled bows of the Thornwood are sought after by archers throughout the Kingdom. The jewelcrafters and the metalsmiths of Verubri are some of the most renowned in the Kingdom as well and rare is the noble outside of Thornwood who could ever afford to acquire their works. The flatlands outside of Thornwood are also some of the most verdant of farmlands, even outproducing those of the Corveaux and the Blaynes. But the Innis export little food, choosing instead to stockpile it and provide very well for their own people. Few within the Marches go hungry, even during the harsh Winters. Save the Corveaux, there are also few peoples better trained in the arts of animal husbandry than the Woodfolk and those few beasts that ever are sold command extremely high prices.

The ancient tales say that the Woodfolk were once masters of nature and their crafts involved the shaping and growing of plants, from the miraculous great trees to hallucinogenic flora. While the arts and magic that allowed that have long since passed, the people of the Thornwood learned how to reproduce much of what they had lost. They have fiercely protected plants and creatures their ancestors had created and developed entirely new strains, concentrating on those that could be used to either torment their occupiers or be sold to other houses. This has left them with a bit of a negative reputation among the other houses, as their addicting powders and vials have done almost as much damage as their poisons.

These days, House Innis and its vassals possess some of the greatest stores of medicinal and protective concoctions of all the houses and are often sought out for strange disease cures and protection from cursed creatures. In addition, their scouts and Woodwards are superb trackers and scouts, often sought for their skills. It is also rumored that the libraries at Innisfree contain some of the most complete sets of information on lost lores, if that information were to ever again to become useful.

THE PROTECTORATE OF THE NORTHERN MARCHES

The Protectorate of the Northern Marches lies sandwiched between the Richter Dusklands, the Hale Everfrost, and the Blayne Hearthlands. It is dominated by the Thornwood, an old forest which has been well taken care of despite foreign occupation for over a century. But, especially outside the protection of the woods, those within Innis lands watch their borders carefully, always at the ready for a possible incursion from the outside. Cut through by the River Nore, the area is one of rich abundance and temperate weather. With the protection of the Thornwood even the plains manage to avoid extreme changes in temperature or season and the area enjoys a long growing season with relatively short and mild winters. The River Nore and the Old Forest Road are the two primary trade routes through the Protectorate. The smaller River Lagan that has its source at the well in the Eternal Grove at the Broken Bough is also an important, yet less traveled route.

The climate of the Northern Marches is temperate and in the northern regions, quite cool. The winters are short and mild, but feature a good deal of rain, can be chilly, and are often both gloomy and overcast. Mists are a common sight both within and the wood and upon the moors. During the summer, it is warm but still surprisingly wet. Parts of Thornwood are considered temperate rainforests given the amount of rainfall they see within a given year. This makes the Thornwood the lushest and most verdant lands in the Kingdom. The Marches are brilliantly green during the spring and summer, turning to a dazzling array of oranges, reds, and yellows in the autumn. Even in winter, a surprising amount of green still flourishes.

INNISFREE

Deep among the boughs and branches of the Thornwood is the city of Innisfree. Approaching from the wide and winding forest road, you would see the ivy-covered, stacked stone walls that mark the entrance to the city. The first thing you

might notice however, as many travelers have often cited, is the smell. For just beyond that of tree, moss, and soil, are the otherworldly scents of burning dried herbs and flowers, many of which are native to the area. And just past the walls of Innisfree, and through a great gate of rune carved oak, the city of Innisfree spills out into all directions. Though it is one of the great modern cities of Arnesse, every home, temple, and tavern has been constructed in and among the Thornwood, such that it is hard to tell where the city ends and the forest begins. If you look hard enough, you can still see the remnants of an age those of Innis would sooner forget. Great swaths of their verdant forest are still recovering from a terrible Bannon and Richter occupation that lasted over a century. Cobblestone streets give way to paths hidden among the trees. Candles hang in abundant and ornate multi-hued lanterns suspended from every branch and limb. Nothing in Innisfree speaks of excess except beauty. Nature always seems on the cusp of reclaiming that which was once hers.

BROKEN BOUGH

Near the center of Thornwood is the Broken Bough, a stone and wooden keep that betrays a tragic magnificence. Appearing to be more grown than constructed, its towers weave and wind their way among the canopy of the Thornwood, ending abruptly in scorched and blackened spires. Broken Bough itself is the home of the ruling body of House Innis, the Groveskeepers, and houses the Eternal Grove. It is known to be a spiritual center for mysticism and while Innisfree is by far the largest city, Broken Bough is the true heart of the Thornwood. Broken Bough has the unique distinction of being one of the few castles in Arnesse held by a council as the Groveskeepers are the rulers of that domain.

LUNE

Upon the edge of the Bramblewood sits the village of Lune. Built upon the ruins of the ancient Grove of Lune, the town is well known as the source of House Innis' much-feared wargs. They are raised by the warg keepers in specialized kennels and the method used to grow them to their titanic size is a closely kept secret. Wolf Guard are trained in Lune and it is also the home of their headquarters, the Wolfhome. Lune is not open to outsiders, but receives visitors with valid business for the Wolf Guard or the town residents. Visitors to Lune have described it as more military encampment than town.

AEDIOBRI

Aediobori is one of the few cities within the Innis lands that isn't located within the woods. Rather, this plains city swells and shrinks depending on whether or not the caravans from the rest of the realm are in residence. In temperate months

Aediobori has much the same air as a festival with merchants from all over Arnesse trading for the bounty of the Marches.

MIOBRIN

Miobrin is a port city and the northmost city within House Innis lands. As such it is a typical target for Hale raiding parties who are eager to try for the merchant ships which often dock here. An old, windswept city, it is made primarily from brick rather than the wood of the forests as it was built by House Bannon's architects when they occupied the wood. While the Innis have few ships and navies, Miobrin has one of the few shipyards in the protectorate and is closely guarded.

CORGARFF

Corgarff guards the River Lagan to the Broken Bough and hosts a small population of Draíochta who believe that the mixing of the waters of the river that comes from the Eternal Grove and the Sea holds mystical power. They use the plants that grow in the brackish waters of the river delta, as well as harvest the threads of silk from the great clams to make a strange gleaming cloth called byssus that is believed to bring good fortune and prosperity. Corgarff has traditionally had good relationships with the Corveaux vassal House of Penrose, as traders from there often sail into Corgarff to avoid the hefty tariffs placed upon roads within the Hearthlands. Their goal is to acquire the rare herbs from Annalee lands.

BRAEMAR

Braemar is a port city within Brevis lands and is named for the point that it is located on. The rocky area is primarily occupied by shepherds and goatherds with the only notable landmarks being the great bell towers at Braemar. These watchtowers are kept constantly manned to ensure that no invaders from Hale lands try to take the long way around the continent or approach Miobrin and the River Nore from the North. If invaders are spotted the bells sound, and a series of watchtowers send the message to Miobrin and other cities.

ALFORD

Alford, meanwhile, is primarily a fishing city built around a large source of freshwater. It is the largest fishing village within the Innis lands and has a population of active fishermen with many traditional fishing boats of all sizes anchored in the port. Those of Alford are some of the only members of the Innis that follow the spirits of the water, the Whale, the Porpoise, and the great sea birds. They're also one of the few cities within the Innis that have a relationship with the peoples of House Rourke, as the seafaring great house often stops there to trade with the the high house of Gleanna and to carouse and make merry in the alehouses of the city.

LYDIARD

Lydiard is important primarily as it is the location of the Hexen's Schola Venefix. Bantiarna Onoro, as well as the rest of House Brevis, believes that House Blayne sees the chantry there as a chance to expand their influence into Innis lands and, given the proximity to Blayne lands, there is a fear that Blayne might just try to annex Lydiard if not closely watched. As such there is a larger than normal post of the Knights of the Ivy stationed there than would normally be in a small town. Lydiard is also a surprisingly bustling town. For many, it is as deep as many get into Innis' lands without an invitation. There is an active and large market as well as numerous taverns and shops. Caravans and wagons come in and out of the town on almost a regular basis and the Innis have set up an embassy in the town center to manage visitors.

HOUSE & GUILD RELATIONSHIPS

The following details how the people of the Northern Marches generally feel about factions in Arnesse. This information is to be taken as in-play by you and other members of this faction.

HOUSE CORVEAUX

The Midlands shared a border with Thornwood for centuries until the Hearthlands was created a decade ago. While the Woodfolk do not regard the peoples of the Midlands with any open contempt, the Corveaux nobility were participants in the occupation of the Thornwood during the Bitter Harvest and by command of the Bannon Kings, intermarried with some of the Innis bloodlines. Thus, some of the Woodfolk see them as as complicit to the atrocities the Bannons have committed over the years as the Bannons themselves. Still, reports that reach the wood speak of the Midlanders as a good and fair people, so it is difficult for Woodfolk to judge them harshly. Most of the tales coming out of the Midlands speak of it as a place of justice and plenty, where the people are free and noble and while many Woodfolk are just and community-minded, the concept of strict adherence to justice and the rigid structure of the Midlands to be very restrictive. The open plains of the Midlands fascinate many of the Woodfolk as do the legends of their heroic knights. In recent years, as the Woodfolk have sought to look beyond their own forests, the Midlands have seemed like a natural partner. Already the Corveaux House of Penrose has an open trade route with House Annalee and there is talk of a growing relationship.

HOUSE ROURKE

The relationship between the peoples of the Thornwood and House Rourke has been a long and complicated one. In the past, it was said that there was a friendship and arrangements, some of which have lingered in some form into the present day. The Rourke freehold of Undertow sits directly across the Valdrfjord from both Braemar and Miobrin and Seaborn ships are a frequent sight along the coastline of the Northern Marches. What complicates relations is the fact that the Rourkes are not a single faction and a faction can be attacked by their raiders one day and be approached by a delegation the next. Even though the Innis nobility has assured the people that the Rourke are not to be feared, the eastern coasts of the Northern Marches have come under increasingly frequent attacks by raiders. Tales have spread throughout the protectorate about these attacks and sown fear among many of the Woodfolk. This has worked to undermine any general good will the Northern Marches may have toward the Seaborn. Still, there are pockets where many of the old agreements have held up. The port town of Alford has had positive relations with Rourke captains for years and largely be spared the raids. Still, most Woodfolk have likely never even met a member of House Rourke or a Seaborn, they are largely viewed with a great deal of skepticism and distrust.

HOUSE HALE

The Northmen of the Everfrost have long been neighbors and rivals of the Woodfolk. One might think the two would be bitter enemies, but long ago the peoples of the Northern Marches learned to accept that it is the way of the northern clans to attack and raid. In response, led by House Oban, the Innis have fortified their northern border in preparation for these attacks. There is an entire mountain range sits between the two protectorates, but that rarely seems to stop determined clan raiders from visiting the Northern Marches numerous times in a year. Sometimes the Hale are successful in their raids and other times they are not. Those who make their lives in the High Marches have learned to live with these attacks and years in a constant state of alert and conflict has hardened most. Many Woodfolk consider their neighbors on the other side as noble savages, honorable and bound to their oaths. It may surprise not a few that the Woodfolk have a kinship with the peoples of Everfrost. They are both adherents of the old ways and share many ancient legends, myths, and practices. It is said that their peoples have been fighting each other for a thousand years and some suspect they will fight for centuries more. What few among the Woodfolk can easily forgive is the influence that the lords of the South have over the Northern clans. Some feel that the continued aggressive actions and attacks of Hale may be a ploy by the Bannons to keep the

House Innis forces off balance and in a constant state of siege.

HOUSE ARAGON

The Woodfolk know little of Tarkath save that it is a desolate wasteland that few can survive in. To many in the Northern Marches a home without trees and greenery seems impossible to fathom. It has led many to speculate that Tarkath must be a place of great desperation and hardship, with people only surviving in unwashed, uneducated enclaves of humanity. Few can remember the time a delegation from Tarkath came to the Thornwood save the eldest. The tales that have reached the wood speak of an honorable, proud people, who revere the old ways and work toward the betterment of their community. These traits appeal strongly to the people of the Marches and they might be fast friends were it not for the vast geographic and cultural differences. It is also said that in the distant past, the Tarkathi were friends of Woodfolk but since then the two peoples have lost most of those old connections. They say that the South is a land that is haunted by the ghosts of the past and still plagued by terrible beasts from a forgotten age that lurk in the shadows. Rumors have also reached the Woodfolk that the people of Tarkath are decadent, hedonistic, and drug-addled. Given the Northern Marches' general stance toward drugs, at least part of that allegation is meaningless. The Woodfolk have a long history of being judged for being different than others and they are not quick to make those kinds accusations against others without sufficient evidence.

HOUSE BLAYNE

The Woodfolk have long had an uneasy truce with the people of the Hearthlands and their noble family, the Blaynes. Tensions rarely rise save when the Hearthfolk attempt to gather resources and do so in a careless manner that does not respect the Woodfolk's love of the land. More than one hapless logging crew has ventured too deep into the Southern Thornwood, never to be seen again. The people of the Hearthlands are quick to blame this on mythical beasts of the forest, but the people of the Northern Marches know better. Most Woodfolk consider the Hearthfolk to be rebellious, outspoken, and generally malcontent. For a society as old, spiritual, and steeped in history as the Northern Marches, the young realm of the Hearthlands seems much like an unhappy child crying for their parent's attention. Because of this, the Woodfolk have shown almost an unreasonable tolerance toward the Hearthlands in general. Despite their constant encroachment upon the borders of the Northern Marches and their all-to-transparent attempts to sneak the Aurorym faith into the Thornwood, the Woodfolk have remained a firm, but patient neighbor. Many among the Woodfolk claim to understand the plight of their Hearthland neighbors, often

referring to them as poor, uneducated, or blinded by their faith. Not a few people in the Northern Marches believe that the real problem lies with the leaders of House Blayne and that with some education and wise counsel, the Hearthfolk could be redeemed. Tales are told of Woodfolk trying to take on just such a mission and meeting with very limited success.

HOUSE BANNON

House Bannon has long been reviled by the people of the Northern Marches. The tragedies and degradations they suffered at the hands of their occupiers transpired centuries ago, but the pain is well remembered by the Woodfolk. The Bannon's actions are a large part of why the people of the Northern Marches have remained so isolated for so long. Those wearing the red and gold are not welcome in the Northern Marches and the Bannons do not venture into the wood unbidden. In their mind, The Innis have largely stuck to their woods and remained isolated enough that they have not been an imposition to Bannon's plans. Not only does history stand between these two houses, but their very philosophy. Whereas the Bannons are highly driven by greed, power, and personal acquisition, the Woodfolk are motivated by helping others in their communities, often freely giving up personal possession to do so. The Woodfolk also do not covet power, preferring to make decisions as a group rather than allowing a single leader to do so. Despite these strong feelings by some, a substantial number of nobles and commonfolk within the Thornwood remain secretly loyal to House Bannon's cause. Rumor has it that these individuals have been watching the progress of House Innis to ensure that it is not a threat and gently guiding the Northern Marches the way the Bannons would like. There is also a strong rumor that the attacks by House Richter in the Western Thornwood are Bannon ploy to weaken House Innis' defenses and keep them preoccupied.

HOUSE RICHTER

House Richter is a curse upon the tongues of the Woodfolk. They are called the Námh Mór, or the Great Enemy, the slayers of Mediena and the bringers of the engines that burned the Thornwood and began the Bitter Harvest. Even now, House Richter brings its iron and gunpowder to the borders of the Western Thornwood to seize land that is not theirs. To say that the Richters and the people of the Dusklands are disliked in the Northern Marches would be an understatement. If there are two factions that are on the brink of war at this very moment it is House Richter and House Innis. When the Shardmount erupted within the Dusklands twenty years ago and sent much of the realm into ruin, the Woodfolk did not lift a finger to help their troubled neighbors. As a matter of fact, they closed their borders and ordered their archers to kill

any refugees who fled into the Northern Marches. Hundreds of men, women, and children trying to escape the volcanic apocalypse were savagely cut down by the ashen arrows of the Woodswards. House Richter and its people are not welcome in the Thornwood and the outriders of Innis are watchful for those crossing into their protectorate from the West. Any who are caught trespassing are immediately put to death unless they can prove they are not from the Dusklands. Unlike other groups, who may be imprisoned or turned back, Dusklanders are typically killed and sent back to the Richters in pieces or flayed, while their heads are put on wood pikes at the borders along with the other common bandits and thieves.

THE APOTHECA

The Apotheca are greatly respected throughout the Northern Marches. Though they are not quite as popular as the Sisters of the Fayne Moirai, they are an honored guild and welcomed in all places within the protectorate as advisors, surgeons, and apothecaries. Some call them the *lighiche* in the tongue of old. Herbalism, alchemy, and knowledge are all highly prized by the Woodfolk and one of the great Magister towers in the Kingdom, Galdorleoth, is located within House Gleanna's lands. While there is some contention between the Draiochta and the Magisters as to who has authority in certain matters, the Apotheca often yield to the social status and position of a Draiochta, but the Draiochta also realize that they are few and growing moreso with each passing season. The Magister's power is on the rise and in some generations, they will likely supplant the Priests of the Wood entirely. Most of the great lords and ladies of the wood have at least one Magister in their employ and places like Galdorleoth house hundreds of them. To most Magisters, Thornwood is a mythical land of undiscovered knowledge, forgotten lore, and fantastic beasts. It is said that a Magister could spend a lifetime studying the mysteries of the wood and not even begin to learn all there was to know. It is considered a high honor and a great fortune for a Magister to be assigned to the Northern Marches and save Tarkath, it is home to some of their best and brightest.

THE FAYNE

In the mystic land of the Thornwood, few are as welcome as the Fayne Moirai. In no place save the Sovereignlands are the Sisters so revered and respected as in the Northern Marches. They are held in high esteem for their oracular talents, insight, and martial fighting ability. The Fayne have been gifted a guildhall near the Eternal Grove in Broken Bough, a rare honor for any faction. Many of the Woodfolk revere the Fayne Moirai much as they would the Draiochta, seeing them as wise women who commune with the spirits and are granted visions. The Woodfolk's ancient culture has a long history of

revering mystic women, especially those who are granted visions. Some outside Thornwood would call those fate-seers witches, but the Woodfolk called them *buidseach*, the wise women of the wood. The people of the Northern Marches are wise to the ways of true witchcraft and much slower to judge what and is and is not malevolent. Most Woodfolk rarely see a Sister of the Fayne, but when they do, they are treated with an almost sacred reverence. To have one's fate seen by a Fayne Moirai is among the noblest of gifts that can be given. The Fayne are considered valued advisors among the Woodfolk, often consulted on decisions, and frequent sights at councils throughout the forest. While few of the noble houses in the Northern Marches are wealthy, they all have at least one Fayne on retainer and some have an entire cabal. It is said that some Sisters who live in the Thornwood become enraptured by the mysticism and drug use that is pervasive there, sometimes undergoing a radical transformation to a primal state as they fully embrace the spiritual culture of the region.

THE HEXEN

The Hexen are closely associated with the Aurorym faith, but unlike that religion, the Woodfolk have a level of tolerance for their presence in the Northern Marches. One of the Hexen's three training schools, the Schola Venefix, is located within the Innis town of Lydiard and while they are not a common sight in the Thornwood, they are known to the people. Their presence is tolerated by the people as the Hexen are seen as hunters and that is a paradigm that the Woodfolk can strongly relate to. The peoples of the Northern Marches are also a superstitious lot, many of whom genuinely believe in supernatural threats. Thus, when one of these situations arises, it is often a Hexen from Lydiard who is summoned to investigate the matter. Most times these situations just turn out to be a child who was lost in the woods or someone with a mental affliction that appeared to be possessed, but rarely, there is something otherworldly amiss. If you ask the Hexen of the Northern Marches, they will tell you that the depths of the Thornwood are no place for the uninitiated – it is an ancient place of forgotten power with many bad memories. Still, even when the Hexen are permitted within the Thornwood, they are given at least one Knight of the Ivy as an escort to ensure that they do not cause trouble. Despite their association with the Aurorym faith, quite a few Woodfolk hold the Hexen in high esteem, seeing them as bastions against the darkness. Quite a few tragic and heroic tales are spun of Hexen who battled forces of the unknown.

THE CIRQUE

The Cirque have a strong presence in many protectorates, but the roads and byways of the Thornwood are not freely open to them. The Woodfolk tightly restrict who comes in and out of the Thornwood and most times, caravans are forced to stop at the town of Lydiard and deliver their goods. From there, the goods are transported by House Innis' own trusted merchants deeper into the forest and distributed to the other holds within. Many Woodfolk see the Cirque as a massive unknown. This is also likely driven by the fact that few Woodfolk have ever met one. A guild driven largely by greed, who travel the world bartering for goods and coin is the very opposite of a society who largely shares what it has for the good of all. There is a very real fear that to allow the Cirque access to the wood and the lands of the Northern Marches would bring that very same greed to a land which has long avoided such a thing for ages. Those same people fear that with that greed will come the inevitable corruption that accompanies it. Still, there have been powerful voices among the councils of the forest that have said the Northern Marches badly needs the coin the Cirque offers and that it should open its borders to trade. The Cirque, for their part, are very interested in making better business arrangements with the Woodfolk, but to date have found their efforts to achieve this largely unsuccessful.

THE AURORYM

Given that many Woodfolk see the Aurorym as responsible for the death of Ard-Bantiarna Bodhmall Innis' sister, Queen Maeve, the faith went from distrusted by many in the Thornwood, to disliked and reviled. In the last ten years, the Aurorym and their representatives are not permitted deeper in the Marches than the town of Lydiard. That the Lydiard chantry even stands is a testament to the wisdom and patience of the Groveskeepers. Most Woodfolk are spiritual people who have roots in mysticism to the point that they feel more likely a member of the Aurorym faith would see them as a witch, rather than as a potential convert to their faith. Thus, many Woodfolk avoid the Aurorym and their Aurons when they can, lest they draw unwanted attention and questions.

PLAYING A WOODFOLK

The Northern marches are the remains of a land occupied. A century of occupation has left them with a gaping wound in their heart that is proving difficult to heal. Much of the meaning behind their traditions has been lost in the many years of persecution. What bits of their language and history they have managed to hold onto are used extensively, as if

only to make up for what they have lost. Things like how they refer to their Lords and Ladies (Tiarna and Bantiarna) are used with intensity and outsiders are corrected whenever they get the usage wrong. While they are working to find their way into the world again they are still reclusive and untrusting, and it is only in the modern day that some Woodfolk have dared to venture out beyond the borders of the Thornwood.

This strong desire to protect their legacy has led many among the Woodfolk to more deeply embrace spiritualism and their mystic roots through folklore and myths. These are people with ancient roots in a culture that the modern world has long since forgotten. Many Woodfolk, knowing how their actions could be perceived by others beyond the Northern Marches, keep very quiet about what they believe and practice. This has led to a society of secrets, of conversations in shadows, and fear of discovery. All Woodfolk have been told that Bannon and Richter spies lurk within the wood and seek to discover those are witches. That their enemies hold a list of known practitioners of the old ways and should the wood ever be invaded; they will be the first to be burned. But despite these perceived risks, the Woodfolk refuse to give up their ways.

But all is not as grim as it appears. Once one is accepted among their number, the Woodfolk are known to be a people of great kindness who enjoy good food, drink, and song more than many. Some of the finest bards in Arnesse come from the Guardians of the Root, spinning tales heard nowhere else in the Kingdom. The Woodfolk are a people who feel strongly about supporting their community and greed is a rare trait among them. Most give of what they can to aid the whole and the concept of coin is rarely traded amongst them. Instead, it is expected that if one does for the community, they will be provided for by the community. While leaders among the community are respected and honored, many decisions are made through a consensus of people, usually the eldest and wisest. This fragile ecosystem functions well in the closed environment, but there are very real concerns among many Woodfolk that it would not survive exposure to the world.

The Woodfolk revere the elements of nature very heavily. They are surrounded by the wood and infused with its life-giving energies. The seasons of the year heavily drive society and celebrations of those seasons is important to all the people of the Northern Marches. Almost as important is the concept of the cycle of life, from birth, to death, to rebirth. Much as a year progresses through seasons, so does a person from the first days of Spring as a child, to the final years of their life In Winter. The reason why the Aurorym faith has never taken root in the Thornwood is that many Woodfolk see no need for

religion beyond the very nature that surrounds them. Most still believe in the spirits of the wood, even if none can see them or speak to them in modern times. Most believe that when they die, their essence will become one with the forest and that the natural cycle will see them reborn once again.