

## **BACKGROUNDER**

The Emorian Empire was the crowning glory of the Free Race's technological, magical and cultural achievement. Its' disciplined legions, skilled engineers and powerful battlemages helped spread the civilization of the Emorian Empire to the ends of the known lands. For nearly 3,000 years, the Empire was the dominant force in the land. However, like a mighty oak, impervious to external enemies, the Empire slowly rotted from within.

At the height of its glory, Emor began to wither. Its rulers became decadent and self-absorbed. Its mightiest mages delved too far into the dark arts and opened portals to evil, otherworldly realms, releasing ancient malevolent entities from their shackles and loosing them upon the lands. The Shadow-Plague followed, decimating populations in every province of the Empire.

The Race War came fast on the heels of the Shadow-Plague and the humans of Emor turned upon the gnomes, dwarves, halflings and elves that had been their fellow citizens for centuries. Emperor Narses III persecuted the Elder Folk for ten winters before revealing himself to be the Shadowlord – the Avatar of Azrael-Arhiman – and great horrors followed. For nearly 20 winters, the Shadowlord and his minions, the avatars of Uriel, Baelzar, Voryndiel and Kryshni ruled the lands of the Empire with an iron fist, killing tens of thousands in bloody games and ruthless conquests.

When all seemed lost, a band of valiant heroes raised the banner of rebellion against the Shadowlord. Most of the outlying provinces rose in revolt against the forces of the Shadowlord, joined by the remnants of the Elder folk to form the Grand Alliance. For another 10 years, bitter warfare scarred the land. Each side called upon arcane powers to aid them and towns, cities and whole provinces were laid to waste.

The Grand Alliance eventually triumphed, but the cost was very high, for countless thousands had fallen in the long war. Most of the Elder folk were gone and those few that were left either retreated completely from human affairs or married into human families, thereby diluting their bloodlines. Of all the Elder folk, only the halfling people survived as separate race – the rest, elves, dwarves and gnomes, passed into obscurity. Legend and folklore still speak of Elder folk that live in the remotest corners of the land, but a full-blooded elf or dwarf has not been seen the lands of the Empire for over 150 winters.

As for the Empire itself, the Shadow Wars had robbed it of its ruling family and many of its leading citizens and it was left sorely weakened. The once stable Empire was shattered by a series of vicious civil wars as one claimant after another sought the imperial purple. Legions proclaimed their own consuls and legates emperor and marched and counter-marched across the length and breadth of the Empire. After nearly a century of fruitless warfare, the Emorian Empire was a pale shadow of its former self, exhausted and impotent.

In the south and the east, province after province rose in rebellion – shaking of the mantle of Imperial Emor and declaring their independence. Emor had no strength to oppose these moves and was soon battling for its very existence. The kingdoms of the south and east formed the Sythian Federation and began to march on Emor itself. The Emperor Legatus IX stripped the remaining outlying provinces of their legions and consolidated all available troops in the Emorian heartland. Legatus IX succeeded in stopping the Sythian hordes at the very gates of Emor herself and defeating them soundly – although he perished at the height of the battle.

His young son, only 18 winters old, was proclaimed Emperor Legatus X and set about putting the Empire into some semblance of order. The young emperor, whose desperate cavalry charge had shattered the power of the Sythian army, succeeded against all odds. For 20 years, Legatus X has stabilized the Empire's borders and fought off all enemies. He has reclaimed several lost provinces, cleared the southern half of the Crescent Sea of corsairs and negotiated a lasting peace with most of the Sythian confederation. He wishes to return the Empire to its former glory, while avoiding the mistakes of earlier Emperors.

The Emperor is beset by perils on every side, however. The current strength of the Empire is brittle – one major defeat and all could be lost. The Empire has few natural resources left and must acquire most of its raw materials through trade or conquest. The resource rich north is out of reach to all but the boldest merchant families. Many of the Sythian warlords would love to see Emor pulled down stone by stone, but they bide their time and wait. The Corsairs of the Crescent Sea prey on merchant ships of all nations, raid coastal towns and extort ransom for captured notables.

This is the backdrop against where the adventure is set. The PCs will start in the small port city of Decimus (Oar), once part of the Imperial Theme of Lords. Since Legatus IX withdrew the legions 30 winters ago, barbarians, Felevar and Warveds have overrun most of the former northern provinces.

To the west are the wild barbarian tribes that never submitted to Emorian rule, even at the height of the Empire. To the north is the vast expanse of the Darkwood; home to the fey and evil Felevar and beyond that, farther to the north through a treacherous pass in the Pillars of Heaven is the legendary Isle of the Dark Druids, rumored masters of Darkwood. To the South is the Crescent Sea, across which is the fabled city of Emor – if you can survive the Corsairs and sea serpents. Far to the east, across the moors and highlands, is the Plain of Glittering Stone – once known as the Plains of Aresh – beyond that, the Eastern Barrier. Legend holds that, somewhere in that waterless waste, the Tomb of the Shadowlord lies. No living soul has ever visited the Tomb and no known tome or map marks its location. All that have sought the Tomb have disappeared in the wastes never to be seen again.