

A Three Hour Tour Backgrounder

Fresh from your success in retrieving the magical Sythian jewels known as the Black Eyes of the Demon Spider, your team from the *Imperial Inspection Bureau* (IIB) expected a period of rest and relaxation, particularly following the arduous march back through the Demon's Anvil under constant Sythian harassment. Now, the mysterious jewels were secreted in the vaults below the Imperial War College, undergoing study on their powers and potential benefits to the Empire. Unfortunately, competence often bred other missions...and this was no exception!

A prominent senator, F. Salvius Lurio, has quietly approached Emperor Legatus X and asked for assistance in locating and retrieving his daughter, Porcia. Apparently, she eloped with her Berylian Tutor and headed for the Jewel Cities. Unfortunately, their small ship was overtaken by a Corsair vessel and all aboard were either killed or captured. Divination magic has determined Porcia is being held on a small, fortified island in the Venhessian chain and her father just received a ransom demand for 100,000 solidi...a princely sum! Your team has been assigned to retrieve the wayward Porcia and return her to her father.

While this type of task normally falls below the Emperor's notice, F. Salvius happens to be his cousin and childhood friend. What's more, the Senator owns the largest horse-herds in Upper Pyladia and his support and goodwill are critical as Emor seeks to build a mounted force to contend with the Sythian *cataphracts*. Therefore, the Emperor has asked for your team personally (and asked for complete secrecy and discretion).

After being given 48 hours to rest and gathered supplies, you are bundled onto a small, fast coaster with a crack crew of Imperial marines and depart for the Venhessian Isles. Three hours before dawn on your third day out of port, you are put ashore on a secluded beach, about a 2-hour march from the Corsair fortress, grandly named Port Royale. The captain bids you farewell and starts tacking around the island, ostensibly to deliver the ransom demanded by the Corsairs. Armed with a rough sketch of the defenses, the last known location of Porcia and fistfuls of weapons, you strike inland. You have 24 hours...

The Emorian Empire

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 tenuous 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, content to “nibble” at the Southern edge of the Empire. The Corsairs of the Crescent Sea prey on merchant ships of all nations, raid coastal towns and extort ransom for captured notables.

The Corsairs of the Crescent Sea

The Corsairs are the scourge of the Crescent Sea. Almost eradicated 5 years ago (at least on the Southern Crescent), Emor's recent Sythian troubles have shifted resources away from maritime patrols and allowed a resurgence of the piratical threat.

The Corsairs draw human flotsam and jetsam from every race and culture. *Saar*, halfings, *Caeldyn*, *Khazardyn* and, of course, humans all call the “Brotherhood” home. Criminals, deserters and adventurers from the Empire to the Lost Northern Provinces and the Jewel City-States to the far reaches of Eastenmarch find a home among these rogues and ruffians.

The Venhessian Isles, a cluster of heavily wooded islands surrounded by treacherous reefs, shifting currents and rumored sea monsters has long been a

haven for the Corsairs. Port Royale, burned to the ground by an Imperial expedition seven years ago, now berths a dozen pirate vessels or more. Ranging from leaky coasters to captured Opalite galleys, these vessels and the ruffians that man them are a threat to any who sail the Crescent Sea.

Despite their lawless nature, the Corsairs make far more money from ransomed nobles than dead ones, so ransom demands are often honored. This is probably the only thing keeping young Porcia alive.

The Imperial Inspection Bureau

During its heyday, the various bureaus, directorates and departments of the Imperial Bureaucracy, staffed by lifelong professionals, was the glue that bound the far-flung Empire together. Every function, from lamp-lighting to rat-catching to supplying the legions to inventing new and better ways to defeat the Empire's enemies was controlled by a particular bureau. Emperors would come and go, but the machinery of Empire hummed on, greased by the efficiency of the Bureaucracy.

With the decline and near death of Imperial Emor, the Bureaucracy is not what it once was. Efficiency has been supplanted by bureaucratic malaise in many departments. Despite the vigor of Legatus X, many things now move at a snail's pace (unless, of course, hefty bribes speed things along).

Fortunately, the Imperial Inspection Bureau, or "The Inspectorate", is one of the few departments that boast any efficiency. The current Emperor's father took personal control of the Inspectorate during the Sythian Wars to improve the performance of the Legions and his son has followed suit. The Inspectorate is tasked with investigating poor performance in the Legions, supply problems, training and morale problems and other military issues. All inspectors are veteran legionnaires, auxiliaries or battlemages and answer directly to the Imperial Chamberlain.

Line troops view the Inspectorate with a mix of envy and loathing (similar to the Internal Affairs division of a police department). Their ability to relieve commanders on the spot, while not routinely exercised, makes them suspect in command circles. Despite the power they wield, smart inspectors keep a low profile, since abuse of power can lead to removal by the Chamberlain, a poisoned draught of wine or a knife in the dark. Legionnaires refer to Inspectors as the "Muris" (rats) – behind their backs, of course.