

# Beneath mithril spires

*Winter never loosens its grip on the mithril spires of Volkavaar. Snow falls all year round, a pale blanket on the slate roofs churned to grey slush in the busy streets. Sometimes it becomes so cold that the river feeding into the harbour freezes solid, and when it does the citizens of Volkavaar celebrate with a glorious Ice Fair and contests of ice-skating and dog-racing. Weather watchers suggest just such a winter is coming, any day now. The city is barely more than a century old, at least in its current form. During the rebellion - the revolution - that saw the old feudal system overthrown in the name of the Common Good Volkavaar sustained serious damage. Rather than rebuild, the remaining structures were torn down and a new city rose in its place. A city planned and laid out with precision, with wide avenues, with defensive walls sufficient to hold an army at bay. Over the years since the city has grown beyond the wildest dreams of those first architects, and the sharp angles and clean lines at the heart of Volkavaar are surrounded by the kind of sprawling, chaotic, unpredictable mazes of streets and buildings that mark the urban centres of the rest of the world. The symbolism is not lost on the scholars and philosophers.*

*And there are many of those in the city. At the heart of Volkavaar stands a grand university, dedicated to magic and engineering; to the practical arts of the artisan and the theoretical sciences of the prognosticator; to history and politics; to philosophy and art; and to all the thousand other subjects that make people, people.*

*Or perhaps the true heart of the city is the great Temple of the Common Good, a truly inspiring edifice of white granite and mithril, a great school in its own right dedicated to the principles that guided the Commonwealth to become the world*

*power that it is today. Even pilgrims of the way cannot help but be moved by the grandeur of the halls and galleries, the art, the stained-glass windows and murals that depict the many ways the world can be made better if one only has the courage of ones convictions.*

## **Overview**

Each season the Civil Service prepares a summary of the Empire's relationship with the foreign nations, based on communications received from their ambassador, along with any useful intelligence gathered from other sources. While the Senate and the other houses of Imperial power may respond to these offers, it is important to note that it is the appropriate ambassador that the foreign power will expect to hear from. Their communication with the foreign power is the primary element that will determine the tenor of any response.

The Commonwealth are perhaps the closest allies the Empire has among the five other great powers of the known world. Committed to the idea of ensuring the greatest good to the greatest number of people, their martially inclined society does not always agree with the Empire, but they clearly respect them. The Empire shared their mastery of magic with the magicians of the Commonwealth, and Commonwealth soldiers fought and died alongside the Freeborn in the fall of Siroc. Both nations are dedicated to extending their influence over the whole world, and know that only one of them can fulfil their grand ambition, but for now they can be friends.

The Commonwealth ambassador to the Empire is Militärattache Ludkhannah Schöningen, of die Stahlhalle in the port-city of Volkavaar, a veteran soldier who reports to the generals who hold the reins of political power in their nation. An old campaigner, they generally speak plainly and as honestly as any

politician can when dealing with their Imperial counterpart.

## **Commonwealth**

- Status: Foreigner
- Ports: Leerdam and Volkavaar
- Ambassador: Lucia Sanguineo Rezia di Tassato of the League

## **The New Embassy**

- The Commonwealth is pleased to hear that the Empire has started work on building a new embassy

There is some good news; the Empire has started building a new diplomatenschloss to replace the embassy destroyed by the Grendel invasion of the Brass Coast. Poldi Hellebrant, a respected Commonwealth siege engineer, has arrived in the town of Hedra, in Necropolis, to oversee the work and reported quite favourably on both the land set aside and the progress of the construction.

Members of the Civil Service who have spoken with Poldi report that they are particularly pleased with the modernity of the docks here – a far cry from the more traditional facilities of Crown's Quay. She has expressed some concern however that the proximity of Cargo, and the embassy there, means that Jarmish and Commonwealth vessels will both be travelling along the Couros river which might prove... problematic.

## **War in the East**

- The Commonwealth and Jarm are both engaged in open warfare over the smaller nation of Lantir
- The Commonwealth are disappointed that the Senate did not

grant leave for military captains to support the war against the Jarmish

The Commonwealth remain occupied with their war with the Principalities of Jarm. They do not discuss the actual progress of their conflict with Jarm; perhaps the Militärattache is wary of allowing information to fall into the hands of their enemies. The Commonwealth fields more armies than the Jarmish, but the Magician-Princes more than make up for this deficit with their mastery of magic.

As a result the outcome remains in doubt. It is perhaps notable that Commonwealth officers have abandoned the optimistic picture of a short, swift victory and are increasingly talking of a prolonged war in which they seek to use their superior numbers to bleed the enemy dry.

News that the Empire is disinclined to sell valuable magical tools to the Jarmish is obviously well received, but Militärattache Ludkhannah expresses disappointment that the Imperial Senate did not grant permission for mercenary-minded military captains to travel to the Commonwealth to help fight the Jarmish directly. The Commonwealth generals are disappointed but not surprised. It is understandable that the Imperial Senate would probably prefer those military units be directed to fighting the Empire's wars rather than be off fighting for the Commonwealth.

## **Matters of Mana**

- Militärattache Schöningen thanks the Ambassador for the gifts provided

The Militärattache extends the gratitude of the Commonwealth Generals for the gifts of mana and magical water provided by the office of the Voice of Liberty. Their gratitude is expressed

with diplomatic care - the gift is appreciated and the mana will be put to good use fighting the Jarmish, but by itself it won't be enough to turn the tide of war.

The best civil service estimates suggest that the Commonwealth may have as many as forty armies, though it is believed that not all of them are deployed against the Jarmish at this time. To give some idea of the scale of the problem, the civil service suggest considering how pivotal the Empire would find it to have a single additional enchantment for one season while they were fighting a force equivalent to the combined armies of the Druj, the Grendel and the Jotun. It would be significant certainly - and much appreciated - but by itself the impact would be muted.

Jarm is a great power, equivalent to the Commonwealth and the Empire itself. This is why the Commonwealth proposed the Sternenmetal Tower. Their analysts at the Leerdam University projected that the money raised, could be used to purchase anywhere up to three hundred crystal mana each season for the duration of the war. These are the kinds of quantities of crystal that the Commonwealth believe it needs if it is to match the Jarmish prowess with battlefield magic.

## **The Freedom Accords**

- The Commonwealth appear largely unconcerned by the efforts of Jarm and Asavea to build an alliance to oppose the Liberty Pact

There has been some talk in recent months about the Freedom Accord – an alliance put together by Asavea and Jarm in opposition to the Liberty Pact. It is an open secret that the Accord has been working to entice smaller nations, especially the Iron Confederacy, into joining. In their formal

correspondence, Ambassador Lucia suggested that the Commonwealth join the Sumaah Republic in working with the Empire to perform a joint appraisal to limit its influence.

Unfortunately there is little appetite for the Ambassador's proposal. Militärattache Ludkhannah does not see how such a thing could even work. There is no easy way for the Imperial civil service and their equivalents in the Commonwealth – in this case the scholars of the various universities - to work together on such a project. Even if they could, it would be very unlikely indeed that they could usefully explore opportunities in the Empire, the Commonwealth, and the Sumaah Republic simultaneously. She also believes that it is also very unlikely that any findings would be of general use – each nation is different and what might work to encourage Faraden to eschew the Accord would mean little to the Astanites.

The view of the Commonwealth is that what matters in the world are the actions of the great powers - the Empire, the Commonwealth, the Sarcophan, the Jarmish, the Asaveans, and the Sumaah. The Freedom Accords that the Jarmish and the Asaveans have signed are a concern, because any alliance between Jarm and Asavea is a concern. But the Commonwealth don't care what efforts the Asaveans make to bring their smaller neighbours into their alliance because they don't think it will make an iota of difference to their conflict with Jarm.

Of course, they don't want the House of Princes to form alliances with their neighbours - arguably that is what this entire war over Lantir is really about - but the Commonwealth are already exerting all their efforts to prevent that happening. They don't anticipate that the Empire can do much, or anything, to help with that, just as they don't believe their influence will be meaningful in preventing the Grendel from accepting Asavean help.

The Militärattache and their staff remain convinced that the Commonwealth should deal with affairs in their region of the world, and the Empire should, in turn, focus on their own. It is not like the Empire is short of neighbours who embrace slavery - the Jotun, the Grendel, the Iron Confederacy, the Druj - all these nations are built on slavery or appear to use some variant of it. The view of the Commonwealth is that the Empire should focus all its efforts on defeating these threats, since only the Empire is in a position to use armies and magic against them directly.

## Viyerda

- The Commonwealth do not want the Empire to contact the Viyerda but are trying to avoid causing offence with their refusal
- The Senate could send Naomi of Virtue's Rest to open diplomatic channels with the Viyerda
- The Celestial Arch could use a declaration to ask members of the Order to open diplomatic channels with the Viyerda

On that front, the Militärattache politely declines to provide approval for any Imperial outreach to Viyerda. Technically they don't ask the Empire not to make contact; instead they repeatedly assert that the Commonwealth generals have "failed to approve the Empire's request" in a way that makes clear that the state of affairs is not going to change in the future. This is very clearly an attempt to find a diplomatic way to say "no". The Commonwealth does not want the Empire to make the attempt, but they also don't want their refusal to offend their allies unless they are left with no alternative.

The civil service advises that this creates a challenge for the Empire. The Commonwealth have been consistent in their

belief that each of the three great powers of the Liberty Pact should be responsible for dealing with their neighbours. They don't expect to involve themselves in the local affairs of the Empire or the Sumaah without an explicit invitation to do so. They haven't explicitly refused the Empire permission to contact the Viyerda, but it is painfully obvious that they would rather the Empire stayed away. Pointed references to the Grendel, the Druj and others are a diplomatic way of suggesting that the Empire mind its own business and focus on affairs at home.

Contacting the Viyerda will upset the Commonwealth. It would by no means end the Empire's relations with them - there is more that underpins the alliance than that. But it will damage the friendship, such as it is, and it will send a clear message to the Commonwealth - a reminder that the Empire intends to pursue relations with those nations that border the Commonwealth, regardless of their ally's feelings on the matter.

Both of the options identified last season remain viable. The Imperial Senate could spend 60 thrones to pay for Naomi of Virtue's Rest to undertake a follow-up expedition to the Sea of Steel with a view to attempting to open diplomatic relations with them. It would require the Senate to authorise the work and would use one of the available opportunities to commission an appraisal for the season. Alternatively, the Grandmaster of the Celestial Arch could use a declaration of Concord in Conclave to ask the magicians of their order to make the attempt. It would only require a single declaration, but it would take six months to complete, and cost 100 mana, rather than the normal 20.

The Ambassador also put forward a suggestion that the Commonwealth might wish to dredge the sea around Rachensgrab to recover resources from the many slaving ships



sunk there. The inspiration is apparently the work closer to home, where the Empire is working with the Iron Confederacy to explore the wreckage of the Barabbine Fleet. The Militärattache appreciates the suggestion but they do not believe it would be profitable to make the attempt. The remains of three navies in relatively shallow water close to Imperial shores are likely to prove a lot easier, and more productive, to salvage than a scattering of small slaving ships in freezing waters many, many miles from any friendly ports.

## **Across the Sea of Steel**

*O captains, our captains! Show courage as many Marchers have done so before you. Answer Esteban i Del Rio Blanco i Guerra's call to explore the beyond the Sea of Steel. Virtuous for its extension of wisdom, ambition, courage, loyalty to our nation and our Empire, pride in your achievements, the prosperity of our people and vigilance of what lies beyond. Where we used to say "Nothing further beyond" let us change our tune!*

*Fredegar Bloodmouth, Summer Solstice 386YE, Upheld  
(Greater Majority 160-0)*

*Freeborn Captains! We appeal to the Ambition of our fleet owners to answer the call to adventure and Courageously sail over the horizon, discovering lands unknown to the East, and bring the Wisdom you earn back to the Empire.*

*Estevanico i Hayim, Summer Solstice 386YE, Upheld (86-8)*

- The Senate could use a motion to instruct the Civil Service to coordinate a series of forays into the Sea of Steel
- The expedition would cost 75 thrones and last up to three seasons
- A naval strength of at least two thousand would provide contact with a new independent foreign nation each season

The Sea of Steel is a mystery; Imperial captains know how to reach the major ports of the Commonwealth and Jarm, but most of what lies beyond that is terra incognita. The recent expedition to Rachensgrab discovered Viyerda, a single independent nation – but there is a lot more to the coasts and lands of the Sea of Steel than one semi-frozen archipelago.

The success of the trip to the Sea of Steel has cultivated some interest in further expeditions. The Freeborn Assembly passed a statement of principle raised by Estevanico i Hayim calling on sailors to explore the lands to the east.

The Marcher assembly endorsed that discussion. Interestingly the former – a judgement from a nation well known for its sailors and corsairs – did not receive a greater majority, while the latter – a judgement from a nation with no real maritime tradition to speak of – did.

The Empire could capitalise on this interest while it lasts. Mapping the Sea of Steel is out of the question due to the sheer scale. A vast ocean, thousands of miles across, it is not possible for the Empire to produce detailed charts of the waters the way they did with the Bay of Catazar. But the Imperial Senate could use a Senate motion to instruct the Civil Service to coordinate Imperial fleet captains heading east to carry out a basic survey of the sea, assessing the extent of the major land masses and plotting their rough positions in relation to each other. The exercise would not be cheap - it would cost the Senate 75 thrones, and take three seasons to complete, but it would provide a lasting improvement in the Empire's knowledge of the world.

If the Senate chooses to commission the Civil Service to support such a project, following the Autumn Equinox it will create an adventure for Imperial fleet captains Journey to the Sea of Steel, which would be found in the Independent

Action dropdown and supported by enchantments that assist in such endeavours. Captains would receive random production just as for any other independent action. Enchanted or upgraded fleets would receive commensurately more as standard.

If enough Imperial fleet captains supported the expedition then it would also allow the Empire to seek out the smaller independent nations distinct from the Commonwealth and Jarm that must surely lie there – just as there are smaller independent nations around the Empire. Each season that the Empire committed a force with a strength of at least two thousand to the expedition, they would be able to find a single independent nation. It's impossible to know how these nations might respond to Imperial ships, but regardless of any welcome, fleet captains would return with as much information as the Empire has now about Viyerda.

There are two challenges. Firstly, the Imperial Treasury is reportedly very short at the moment. Unless the Imperial Senate decides this expedition is a priority, they are unlikely to consider this money well spent. If that proves to be the case, the expedition would need the backing of wealthy citizens who could raise the money to pay for the project.

Secondly, and more importantly perhaps, the presence of Imperial vessels exploring the Sea of Steel will not go unnoticed by either the Commonwealth or Jarm. In the face of a polite request to stay out of the Commonwealth's back yard, this will be taken quite poorly by the Empire's ally. The Jarmish have less invested, but will likewise assume the worst from Imperial ships in waters they traditionally consider their own sphere of influence. While Jarm is hardly friendly with the Empire at the moment, relations are thawing a little. This would almost certainly arrest that thaw.

## Asavean Envy

- Fewer Commonwealth vessels are trading with Imperial ports due to the bounty placed on trade with the Empire by the Asavean plenum
- Imperial fleets have an advantage to trade with Commonwealth ports while the bounty continues

While the Commonwealth are enthusiastic about their trade with the Empire, the bounty placed on all ships trading with the Empire by the Asavean Plenum has started being felt. Commonwealth ships are not especially undefended, but fending off opportunistic pirates and privateers, and the occasional well-organised pack of Asavean vessels, stretches the goodwill of their merchants. There are still Commonwealth ships reaching Imperial shores, but the amount of trade has tailed off dramatically.

Militärattache Ludkhannah Schöningen counsels that the Commonwealth cannot spare many warships to escort its vessels due to the war with Jarm.

While Volkavaar and Leerdam remain open to, and welcoming of, Imperial traders the Militärattache has no intention of putting pressure on Commonwealth captains to undertake the increasingly dangerous trip to Imperial waters, at least not at the moment. They welcome suggestions from the Ambassador as to how they might help at this time, but caution that they cannot afford to be at war with two great powers at this time.

As mentioned last season, the lack of Commonwealth ships making the trip to the Empire is comparatively good for the Empire's fleet captains. Anyone trading with the Commonwealth this season will see a small boost to their profits (gaining the equivalent of a single rank) thanks to increased demand and, consequently, profits.

# Shrouded Schloss

- The magicians at the Lyceum Schloss are apparently doing quite well despite being cut off from the world

Finally, and somewhat belatedly, Militärattache Schöningen passes along their thanks to the Empire for their work protecting the Commonwealth magicians studying at the Lyceum Schloss. The misty wards that protect the island college of magic have kept the visiting magicians safe as well. Apparently several messages have been received from the wizards trapped there, reassuring their families and colleagues that they are doing as well as might be expected, surviving on fruit and fish and occasional food parcels delivered by heralds from the Night realm.

There have been requests however for an update on the situation outside the walls of mist, which are due to come down some time before the Winter Solstice. Should they be working with their Imperial colleagues to prepare for another Grendel attack? Is Madruga still in enemy hands? There has been some off-hand mention of cataclysmic magic in the area; should they be worried about it? Ludkhannah asks that the Ambassador speak with the Dean of the Lyceum and provide either reassurance or warning that they can pass on to the Commonwealth wizards trapped on the Lyceum isle.