

The Usurper's Gambit

An Adventure for Fate's Edge - Ecktoria

Adventure Overview

Title: The Usurper's Gambit
Region: Ecktoria – Marble, Brass, & Fire
Theme: Legitimacy, bureaucracy, ritual power, imperial decline
Level: Veteran (Tier III)
Length: 4–5 Sessions

1 Premise

Ecktoria, heir to the shattered Utaran Empire, stands on the knife-edge of civil conflict. A charismatic pretender has seized the loyalty of the capital militia, silenced dissenting censors, and begun invoking ancient rites to claim the Mandate of Everflame. Meanwhile, the recognized heir — King Aldric the Lamé — clings to legitimacy through law, tradition, and the blessing of the High Temple.

The players navigate a city where every marble colonnade hides a conspiracy, every mosaic conveys a political message, and every oath is engraved in red-lacquered tablets guarded by the Censors. They must decide: bolster one claimant, forge a third path, or engineer a peaceful transfer of power in a system designed to resist change violently.

2 Hook

Choose or roll (DV 3 Investigation to determine truth):

- **The Envoy's Humiliation:** Before the Great Baths of Aurix, the Lamé King's Envoy is publicly mocked, their ceremonial staff struck from their hand — a grave insult in Ecktoria. The crowd cheers the Pretender's heralds. (Social/Skill challenge, Presence + Command vs DV 4)
- **A Dead Man's Seal:** A courier collapses into the players' arms with a sealed tablet bearing the mark of a supposedly-dead claimant. If true, a surviving cousin could upend every faction's plans. (Investigation + Lore vs DV 5)
- **A Contract Invalidated:** A lucrative patronage contract is voided by a Senate Decree — half the Senate claims the decree is legal, the other half claims the seals were forged. (Legal investigation, Sway + Lore vs DV 4)

3 Key Factions

3.1 The Lame King's Line

The Lame King's Line

Description: Imperial-bureaucratic loyalists adhering to law and tradition

Key Members: High Priest of Everflame, Coin-House Factors, Veteran Standard-Bearers

Strengths: Ritualistic power, institutional authority, legal legitimacy

Weaknesses: Slow, cautious, inflexible

Methods: Ceremonial rites, legal procedures, traditional military

Position: Controlled (established authority), Desperate (losing popular support)

DV for Alliance: 4 (mutual benefit), 5 (neutral), 6+ (opposed)

3.2 The Pretender's Cause

The Pretender's Cause

Description: Reformist movement promising "New Augustan Revival"

Key Members: Reformist Senators, Condotta Captains, New Merchants

Strengths: Popular support, military flexibility, economic influence

Weaknesses: Shallow legal standing, reliance on charisma

Methods: Public demonstrations, military action, economic pressure

Position: Dominant (popular momentum), may shift to Controlled under pressure

DV for Alliance: 3 (shared goals), 4 (neutral), 5+ (opposed)

3.3 The Silent Opposition

The Silent Opposition

Description: Reject both claimants, seek provincial autonomy

Key Members: Guild Conspiracies, Shadow Council, Regional Governors

Strengths: Economic sabotage, decentralized structure, patience

Weaknesses: Disunity, lack of public support

Methods: Economic pressure, covert operations, political manipulation

Position: Controlled (hidden influence), may shift based on player actions

DV for Alliance: 4 (shared opposition), 5 (neutral), 6+ (competing interests)

4 Key NPCs

4.1 King Aldric the Lame

King Aldric the Lame

Role: Recognized heir to Ecktoria

Age: 45

Skills: Command 4, Lore 3, Presence 3

Knowledge: Imperial law, ceremonial rites, political tradition

Motivation: Preserve legitimate succession and imperial stability

Complication: Physical disability affects public perception

Position: Controlled (legitimate authority), Desperate (losing ground)

DV for Persuasion: 4 (appeal to duty), 5 (neutral), 6 (opposed)

4.2 Duke Marcus the Bold

Duke Marcus the Bold

Role: Charismatic pretender to the throne

Age: 38

Skills: Presence 5, Sway 4, Command 3

Knowledge: Public relations, military rites, popular sentiment

Motivation: Seize power through popular support and reform

Complication: Limited understanding of true imperial traditions

Position: Dominant (popular support), Controlled under legal pressure

DV for Manipulation: 3 (flattery), 4 (neutral), 5+ (opposition)

4.3 Grand Magistrate Valeria Thorne

Grand Magistrate Valeria Thorne

Role: Keeper of imperial law and succession precedents

Age: 52

Skills: Lore 5, Insight 4, Sway 2

Knowledge: Every precedent for imperial succession, Pact of Three Flames

Motivation: Preserve legal integrity of imperial system

Complication: Torn between legal duty and political reality

Position: Controlled (institutional power), Desperate (personal safety)

DV for Legal Consultation: 4 (proper approach), 5 (neutral), 6+ (hostile)

4.4 High Priest Dominicus

High Priest Dominicus

Role: Keeper of the Sacred Brazier and Everflame

Age: 67

Skills: Arcana 4, Presence 3, Lore 3

Knowledge: Coronation rites, divine signs, spiritual legitimacy

Motivation: Ensure rightful claimant receives divine blessing

Complication: Torn between stability and renewal

Position: Dominant (religious authority), Controlled under political pressure

DV for Spiritual Guidance: 3 (genuine seeking), 4 (neutral), 5+ (manipulation)

4.5 The Lame King's Envoy

The Lame King's Envoy

Role: Mysterious representative of King Aldric

Skills: Subterfuge 4, Insight 3, Command 2

Knowledge: Secret negotiations, hidden political moves

Motivation: Advance Aldric's cause through covert means

Complication: Unknown true identity and loyalties

Position: Controlled (operating in shadows), Desperate if exposed

DV for Information: 5 (secrecy), 4 (proper approach), 3 (trusted ally)

5 Key Locations

5.1 The Grand Forum

The Grand Forum

Description: Marble theatre of politics with multi-level balconies

Features: Statues of emperors, mosaic floors, colored awnings

Political Significance: Center of public opinion and political theater

Challenges:

- Navigating public sentiment (Presence + Sway vs DV 4)
- Interpreting political symbols (Lore + Notice vs DV 3)
- Avoiding public humiliation (Social challenge, DV 5)

Position: Controlled (normal), may shift based on current political climate

5.2 Imperial Arena

Imperial Arena

Description: Site of trials by ordeal and ceremonial oaths

Features: Underground tunnels, ceremonial spaces, public viewing areas

Uses: Military demonstrations, legal trials, political statements

Challenges:

- Participating in trials by ordeal (Varies by trial type)
- Navigating underground tunnels (Stealth + Athletics vs DV 4)
- Public performance under pressure (Presence + Command vs DV 5)

Security: Heavily guarded during public events

5.3 Coin-House Floor

Coin-House Floor

Description: Byzantine-style financial temple with gold seals and clerks

Features: Abacus-boards, wax tablets, chanting clerks

Power: Financial control can bankrupt provinces or fund armies

Challenges:

- Understanding financial records (Lore + Wits vs DV 5)
- Bribing or influencing clerks (Sway vs DV 4)
- Sabotaging ledgers (Tinker + Subterfuge vs DV 6)

Position: Controlled (legitimate business), Desperate (illegal activity)

5.4 Censor's Hall

Censor's Hall

Description: Labyrinth of documents, shame-tablets, and censored histories

Features: Red lacquer tablets, genealogical records, censored archives

Significance: Maintains The Line of Fire - genealogical record of claimants

Challenges:

- Finding specific documents (Investigation vs DV 5)
- Deciphering censored texts (Lore vs DV 4)
- Avoiding detection (Stealth + Subterfuge vs DV 5)

Security: Extremely tight - access requires high-level authorization

5.5 The Fire-Blessed Basilica

The Fire-Blessed Basilica

Description: Spiritual heart with gold and lapis dome depicting Everflame

Features: Sacred Brazier, ceremonial spaces, religious artifacts

Importance: Final coronation ritual must occur here

Challenges:

- Gaining access during blockade (Combat/Skill challenge, DV 5)
- Participating in coronation rites (Varies by role)
- Convincing High Priest (Presence + Sway vs DV 5)

Current Status: Blockaded by Pretender's forces

6 Adventure Structure

6.1 Act I — Cracks in Marble

Opening Scene: Players witness public demonstration of shifting power through one of the hook scenarios.

Key Objectives:

- Investigate signs of Pretender's growing influence
- Determine if Duke Marcus's claim has substance
- Identify key supporters and opponents of each faction
- Begin building relationships with influential NPCs

Sample Encounters:

- **Statue Alteration Investigation:** Notice and investigate changes to imperial statues. (Investigation + Notice vs DV 4, Controlled/Limited)
- **Militia Patrol Encounter:** Deal with new militia wearing unfamiliar colors. (Social/Combat encounter, DV 4)
- **Political Rumor Gathering:** Collect information from Forum conversations. (Sway + Insight vs DV 3, Dominant/Limited)

Act End: Players discover evidence of systematic effort to legitimize Pretender's claim. Advance Legitimacy Clock +2.

6.2 Act II — Shadows in the Censorium

Opening Scene: Grand Magistrate Valeria Thorne is attacked; players must respond.

Key Objectives:

- Protect or avenge Grand Magistrate Thorne
- Navigate Censor's Hall to uncover truth about succession

- Find or protect the Pact of Three Flames
- Expose forged genealogies or hidden legitimate claimants

Sample Encounters:

- **Censor's Hall Infiltration:** Sneak through document labyrinth. (Stealth + Investigation vs DV 5, Desperate/Standard)
- **Genealogical Puzzle:** Verify authenticity of claimant lineages. (Lore + Insight vs DV 6, Controlled/Great)
- **Archivist Interrogation:** Extract information from knowledgeable but secretive clerks. (Sway + Insight vs DV 4, Controlled/Standard)

Act End: Players gain crucial legal knowledge about succession. Advance either Lame King's or Pretender's Legal Standing Clock +2.

6.3 Act III — Coin, Steel, and Fire

Opening Scene: Pretender's forces blockade the Basilica; crisis point reached.

Key Objectives:

- Mediate between factions or choose sides
- Sabotage opposing faction's efforts
- Escalate conflict through strategic actions
- Prepare for final confrontation at coronation

Sample Encounters:

- **Coin-House Sabotage:** Disrupt financial support for one faction. (Tinker + Subterfuge vs DV 5, Desperate/Standard)
- **Mercantile Leverage:** Negotiate with New Merchants for support. (Sway + Command vs DV 4, Controlled/Great)
- **Basilica Siege:** Break through Pretender's blockade. (Combat/Strategy challenge, DV 6)

Act End: Players position themselves for final act. Advance Coronation Readiness Clock +2.

6.4 Act IV — The Coronation of Ash or Glory

Opening Scene: Dawn at the Basilica; final confrontation begins.

Key Objectives:

- Decide which claimant to support or oppose
- Participate in coronation ritual and Trial of the Everflame
- Deal with consequences of previous choices
- Determine Ecktoria's future political structure

Sample Encounters:

- **Rhetorical Duel:** Participate in public debate before the people. (Presence + Sway vs DV 5, Desperate/Great)
- **Ritual Combat:** Engage in ceremonial combat under priestly supervision. (Melee + Spirit vs DV 5, Desperate/Great)
- **Miraculous Display:** Create or expose fake divine signs. (Arcana + Subterfuge vs DV 6, Controlled/Great)

Act End: Resolution of succession crisis. All clocks culminate in final outcome.

7 Key Mechanics

7.1 Legitimacy Clock [8]

Advance +1: Public demonstrations support Pretender

Advance +1: Lame King's supporters lose ground

Advance +2: Key legal documents are compromised

Advance +1: Religious figures declare for Pretender

Advance +2: Military units defect to Pretender

When Full: Pretender achieves effective control of capital

7.2 Legal Standing Clock [6] (Separate for each claimant)

Advance +1: Genealogical evidence discovered

Advance +1: Precedent found supporting claim

Advance +2: Key legal figure declares support

Advance +1: Ceremonial requirements met

When Full: Claimant achieves legal legitimacy

7.3 Coronation Readiness Clock [6]

Advance +1: Religious preparations completed

Advance +1: Military support secured

Advance +2: Public opinion shifts decisively

Advance +1: Ceremonial artifacts gathered

Advance +1: Opposing faction neutralized

When Full: Coronation can proceed

7.4 Imperial Favor Track

Exalted: +2 die to all imperial interactions, access to highest circles

Respected: +1 die to imperial interactions, normal access

Neutral: Standard imperial interactions

Suspect: -1 die to imperial interactions, limited access

Enemy: Hostile reactions, wanted by authorities

8 Endings

8.1 Aldric Crowned Lawfully

Aldric Crowned Lawfully

Lame King's Legal Standing Clock fills first

Stable but static Ecktoria that prizes tradition

- Official positions in imperial bureaucracy
- Access to traditional imperial resources
- Honor and respect among conservative factions
- May become tools of rigid bureaucracy
- Ongoing tension with reformist elements
- Limited ability to drive significant change

8.2 Marcus Claims the Throne

Marcus Claims the Throne

Pretender's Legal Standing Clock fills first

Revitalized but turbulent empire driven by reform

- Positions in new imperial administration
- Access to military and mercantile resources
- Opportunity for rapid advancement
- Navigate rapid militarization and upheaval
- Deal with foreign ambitions and internal opposition
- Risk being purged if Marcus consolidates power

8.3 A Third Path

A Third Path

Players engineer alternative solution

- Install hidden legitimate claimant
- Establish Council of Three Flames
- Create regional autonomy under imperial oversight
- Key roles in new political structure
- Unique position bridging factions
- Significant influence over Ecktoria's future
- Ongoing responsibility for maintaining balance
- Enemies from disappointed factions
- Future adventure hooks across Ecktoria

8.4 Ecktoria Falls

Ecktoria Falls

All clocks fill without decisive resolution

City collapses into street warfare

- Unchallenged power in local territory
- Freedom to pursue personal agenda
- Reputation as survivor and leader
- Destruction of imperial institutions
- Ongoing chaos and instability
- Need to rebuild order from ashes

9 Rewards and Consequences

9.1 Immediate Rewards

- Imperial Signet Ring: +1 die to bureaucratic interactions
- Ceremonial Blade: Elegant weapon with historical significance
- Red Lacquer Tablet: Document granting special legal privileges
- Merchant's Charter: License for tax-free trade in Ecktoria
- Priest's Blessing: +1 die to religious interactions
- Military Commission: Temporary authority over small unit

9.2 Long-term Consequences

- **Aldric Victory:** Permanent positions in traditional bureaucracy, conservative allies, reformist enemies
- **Marcus Victory:** Roles in new administration, military/mercantile connections, traditionalist opposition
- **Third Path:** Unique political influence, cross-faction relationships, ongoing responsibility for stability
- **Ecktor's Fall:** Survival skills and local power base, but destroyed traditional institutions and ongoing chaos

10 GM Notes

10.1 Political Complexity

Emphasize the Byzantine nature of Ecktorian politics:

- Every action has multiple interpretations and consequences
- Legal precedents can be interpreted in conflicting ways
- Public opinion shifts based on ceremonial displays and rhetoric
- Economic power is as important as military force

10.2 Ceremonial Importance

Make ritual and ceremony central to the adventure:

- Proper titles and protocols matter for social interactions
- Ceremonial objects and locations have real power
- Public performances can shift political momentum
- Religious rites determine ultimate legitimacy

10.3 Bureaucratic Atmosphere

Create a sense of the weight of imperial tradition:

- Describe marble halls, gold decorations, and ceremonial regalia
- Emphasize the importance of proper documentation and seals
- Show the slow but powerful movement of imperial institutions
- Illustrate the contrast between public grandeur and hidden manipulation

10.4 Player Agency

Provide multiple paths to influence the outcome:

- Legal approach: Master imperial law and precedent
- Social approach: Manipulate public opinion and personal relationships
- Military approach: Use force to support chosen faction
- Economic approach: Control financial resources and trade
- Religious approach: Influence spiritual legitimacy

10.5 Story Beats

Use the political environment for complications:

- 1 SB: Minor bureaucratic delay, small legal complication
- 2 SB: Important document goes missing, key NPC becomes suspicious
- 3 SB: Public scandal damages faction, military unit defects
- 4+ SB: Major political upheaval, assassination attempt, ceremonial disaster

10.6 Session-Specific Guidance

Session 1 Focus: Establish political landscape and hook players into the conflict. Players should understand both claimants have strengths and weaknesses.

Session 2 Focus: Deep dive into legal and archival aspects. Players learn that legitimacy is complex and can be influenced.

Session 3 Focus: Crisis point with Basilica blockade. Players must make strategic choices that affect final outcome.

Session 4 Focus: Climactic resolution and consequences. All previous elements converge in final choices about Ecktoria's future.

10.7 Alternative Endings

If players attempt unconventional solutions:

- **Popular Uprising:** Players incite general revolt against both claimants
- **Foreign Intervention:** Players invite external power to resolve succession
- **Religious Solution:** Players convince High Priest to reject both claimants
- **Economic Coup:** Players use financial power to force political resolution

10.8 Scaling for Different Tiers

Tier III (Veteran): Standard complexity with significant political and military resources.

Tier IV (Paragon): Add foreign power complications, multiple simultaneous succession crises, and empire-wide implications.

Tier V (Mythic): Introduce divine intervention, reality-altering political magic, and consequences that reshape the entire region.