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A Sense of Shame

Enhancing Tsolyáni role-playing with rules for loss of face

Tsolyáni culture strongly values honourable behaviour. Ignoring this aspect of the culture in role-playing means that the game becomes little more than D&D with interesting monsters. These new rules help encourage players to act more like real Tsolyáni. Players are given the choice: observe the Tsolyáni code of honour and get to the top of the heap, or disregard it and remain a free agent.

The rules measure any blemish against a character as Discredits. Too many Discredits will hinder promotions, and may even result in the character losing rank and social prestige. A new attribute, Honour, is introduced. Characters with high Honour are often forced to act whenever they acquire Discredit; characters with low Honour have more freedom of choice, but may find themselves passed over for promotions.

Honour

A character's Honour attribute is rolled for on 2D10. It indicates the degree to which the character feels obligated to act according to the unwritten code of correct behaviour that pervades Tsolyáni life.

A character with high Honour finds it difficult to compromise his ideals of duty and propriety. He is likely to take offence at any remark that might cause him to lose face. A character with low Honour is what 20th Century psychologists call "unscripted": a person motivated by free will rather than by the sense of shame and duty that forces the actions of most Tsolyáni.

Having low Honour does not necessarily mean that the character is a scoundrel. He might indeed be a Machiavellian schemer hiding behind a facade of noble action, but he could just as easily be simply amoral. Such a one could be an enlightened Adept of Dra, for example.

Stung into action

An unmodified Honour check is made whenever a character incurs a Discredit. If the 2D10 roll is less than or equal to Honour, the character is obliged to settle the Discredit (for example by duelling one who has insulted him). A roll higher than Honour leaves the character free to accept the Discredit without being forced to take action.

Players are free to settle Discredit burdens voluntarily without making an Honour check. If they do this they have the option to increase or decrease their Honour score by 1. This represents the fact that the Honour check indicates the character's careful weighing-up of the exact limits of his required behaviour. A person who acts without this careful consideration is demonstrating that he is a free agent whose actions are not necessarily dictated by the need for public respect.

Burden of duty

Any duty carries with it a Discredit, the value of the Discredit indicating the loss of face the character will suffer if he fails in the duty.

Example: Lieutenant Vajra hiMichashin is ordered by her captain to carry a message past enemy lines, but she stumbles into an ambush and loses the message while retreating. Vajra makes an Honour check. Success means she must suffer the full weight of the Discredit burden. A failed check means her lack of honour allows her to ignore the shame. (She may still be punished for her failure, but that is a separate matter. The Honour check merely determines if she personally feels compelled to atone for it.)

Discredit where it's due

A Discredit is any burden of obligation, and one who allows himself to build up a large debt of Discredit will lose the respect of others. This is no slight matter in a society as status-conscious and bound by tradition as Tsolyánu. A lord who has a large Discredit and does nothing about it will find his retainers drifting away. A merchant will lose his customers. A priest may lose the favour of the gods.

If a character receives a very large Discredit (25 points or more) from a single action and then fails to discharge it, he may feel obliged to "do the decent thing"—either resigning or (in extreme cases) sacrificing himself to the gods. The character can avoid this by failing an Honour check.

Example: Shazir and Khiro are told by their clan elders to escort a clan-cousin from another city and see that no harm comes to him. Unfortunately, while passing through a forest their group is attacked by Dzor and the man is killed.

Both must make Honour checks. Shazir's Honour is 12 and, rolling 7 on 2D10, his check is successful. He immediately incurs a Discredit of 25 points value. If he is not excused by his clan elders, Shazir will have to lose his life to atone for the shame of having failed in his duty.

Khiro's Honour is 4 and he rolls a 6. A narrow scrape, but he manages to find some loophole that lets him squirm out of having to immolate himself. He must still tally the 25 point Discredit on his character sheet. The disgrace is such that he is automatically demoted from 10th to 9th social Circle, as a 10th Circle character must not have an outstanding Discredit of more than 20 points. Still, as he notes the preparations for Shazir's sacrifice to Vimuhla, Khiron reflects inwardly that life without honour is better than honour without life.

Discredit values

When a character incurs a Discredit, the referee should tell him the value of the Discredit based on the guidelines given in the table. The maximum Discredit a character can safely have at any one time depends on his Circle. If he goes above this maximum he will find it difficult to hold his head up among his peers. His influence will decline and he may even be demoted within his profession. No one in Tsolyánu has respect for a man or woman who does not repay their Discredit.

The following sections provide guidelines for you to determine Discredit penalties. You may also decide to enforce smaller Discredit penalties for minor matters, and these can often act as a spur to move the game-action along when players are being a little sluggish.

When two actions conflict and a character is liable to incur a Discredit either way, the proper course is to undertake the action with the larger potential Discredit. The other action then incurs no Discredit. This is because the character has behaved correctly, and no-one can think ill of him because he was forced into a dilemma. (If ordered by your fathers to refuse a challenge to duel, for instance, you should obey; there is no Discredit penalty for refusing the challenge in this case.) This only applies if both sides of the dilemma are publicly known, though. Discredit represents public shame, and even a character who behaves correctly must accept a Discredit if the reasons for his action are not clear to others.

For most Tsolyáni the paramount duty is one's duty to family. Bringing the family into disrepute or causing the death of a relative incurs a Discredit of 25-30 points. Failing to defend the family or avenge a relative's murder incurs a Discredit of 20-25 points. Taking no action when your family is insulted brings a Discredit of 1-25 points (depending on the source and severity of the insult). Disobeying the heads of family incurs a Discredit of 10-15 points. In all cases the heads of family can grant a dispensation which absolves the character of any Discredit.

Next comes duty to the clan. Discredit values for transgressions against clan-cousins of other lineages are 90% of the values given above for family.

A character who joins a legion or temple is expected to give the same loyalty to his superiors that he would give his lineage elders. In practice, however, the moral imperative is not quite so strong. Discredit values for transgressing against one's superiors in the army, priesthood or bureaucracy are about 75% of those listed above for family. Large undischarged Discredit in these circumstances will result in dismissal from the legion, temple or Palace.

Characters are not very likely to receive a direct command from the Emperor, but it could happen. The Emperor's command should be treated as carrying a potential Discredit just 1 or 2 points less than the command of one's clan elders or liege lord. A powerful lord could thus countermand an Imperial order given directly to a vassal, but would be uncomfortable if he received the order himself.

Insults

It is tremendously important to Tsolyáni that they avoid losing face in front of others. Any disgrace that falls upon a character's good name, or the name of his family, must be avenged.

When you insult someone, you place a Discredit on them that can only be removed by a payment of Shamtla or a duel. If you succeed in an Etiquette check (with a modifier of -1 to -5, depending on the insult) then the other person has no redress and cannot demand Shamtla. They can challenge you to a duel, but you are perfectly within your rights to refuse. If you fail the Etiquette check, on the other hand, you cannot legitimately refuse Shamtla or a duel without taking a 10 point Discredit yourself.

Wiping the slate clean

It is possible to reduce your accumulated Discredit by outstanding actions that bring strong public approval. Such actions include great bravery, making a good marriage, lavish spending on a family banquet, etc. The referee will permit such actions to reduce accumulated Discredit by 1 to 5 points.

How soon they forget

A character's accumulated Discredit is reduced by 1 point in any month in which the character has not gained any further Discredit.

Most of the time Discredit values must be set by the referee. The examples here are of quite common situations, and should serve as a guideline:

Refusing a legitimate challenge	10 points
Using dishonourable tactics in a duel	5 points
Losing a duel	5 points
Failing to keep your word	50% of Social Circle
Acting ignobly	15 points
Displaying incompetence	5-15 points
Not accepting your fate gracefully	5 points
Dishonesty	2points
Treachery	5-25 points
Heavily in debt	10 points
Socializing with slavers/moneylenders	1 point

A character's Honour score and undischarged Discredit may limit his career progression. Minimum Honour and maximum Discredit set limits outside which superiors will not sanction any promotion. If Discredit climbs too high the character will be demoted. (This applies also to social Circle, so that a character with much Discredit will be treated as of lower social Circle than he actually is.)

	<i>to reach this status</i>		<i>to retain this status</i>	
<i>Circle</i>	min Honour	max Discredit	min Honour	max Discredit
I to II	2	35	0	45
V to VI	5	25	2	35
VII to IX	7	20	4	25
X to XII	9	15	6	20
XIII to XV	11	10	8	15
XVI to XVII	13	5	10	10
XIX up	15	5	0	any*

* Once you're this important you'll never get demoted! However, a nobleman who accrues a large burden of Discredit without doing anything about it must expect his retainers to start trickling away.