

Issue Four | Spring 1995

You're not in Kansas anymore

New Players start here, with guidance from Patrick Brady

This is based on the players' handout for my Hall of Stone campaign, set in northwest Tsolyánu. Player-characters all begin as clan cousins in the town of Chéne Ho. The following is the gist of what players need to know at the outset:

The planet you're on is called Tékumel. It was originally colonised by star-farers, but you don't know that. (It was sixty thousand years ago and things have gone downhill a bit since then; see box below.)

Your country is Tsolyánu, one of five great empires. The social background is not medieval, but closer to that of ancient China or India. The social system is a complex hierarchy of extended family groups called clans. Politeness and honour are very important.

There are no horses or other riding animals (the colonists didn't bring any). There is a draft animal, the Chlen, which is like a six-legged triceratops.

There are no stars in the sky. There are two moons, one green and one red.

There are several intelligent species, of which humanity is one of the most feared. The intelligent species are divided into two blocs. This dates back to the initial colonisers/natives split.

Tékumel is lacking in metal deposits. Iron and steel are extremely valuable.

The eco-system comprises a mix of native, imported, artificial and mutated lifeforms. Some of them are very unpleasant.

Portable Memory Core 5:
External reception (audio); universal translator engaged.

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"Science Officer, reporting for commander. As the last surviving Alliance Officer, I leave this record in the hope that a humanspace ship will eventually find the colony world of Tékumel It's been sixty years since the stars went out. We never did find what hit us—my guess is some kind of weapon using a modified warp bubble, although it would have to be much larger than anything we developed.

"The human colonists have pulled together well, perhaps better than our nonhuman allies, but the Ssú and the Hlüss are a growing threat. This was their world once, and perhaps it will be again. But I am hopeful; standards of education are difficult to maintain, but the human spirit survives. We have power from the reactor of the grounded ships, but the lack of metal deposits on Tékumel is going to be a problem in the future. We also lack any draught animals. We hardly thought to bring homes or meat animals to our new home, and now we must find substitutes among the indigenous fauna."

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"Do you hear me, Memkor? My grandfather showed me the ritual to awaken you as his grandsire showed him. As tradition decrees, I make the report. The harvest was good this year, and we have traded three hma for a chlen to pull our new cart.... Er... Oh yes, and some traders came in the spring."

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"A wizard of the Bednalljan Empire fears not the spirit of the casket. Let it contest with me, and we shall see who is the greater.

"Pah! It does not emerge. This spirit is a craven thing."

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"...See, the little light comes on. I told you it wasn't dangerous, Hashran. Some device of the ancients, to judge by its markings. The only one like it in the Empire. Brought back by my great grandfather from one of his campaigns in the West. Not sorcery exactly, but certainly knowledge, if we could only understand how to operate it properly. The problem is, it doesn't seem to actually do anything..."

"Hashran? What are you fiddling with there? It could be dangerous! Hashran!"

(The sound of an explosion, followed by volcanic hissing.)

The planet

Tékumel has only been partially terraformed. It is big but light (lacking in heavy elements), around 0.9 g. The year is 365 days.

Tékumel is generally hot. In southern Tsolyánu it gets so bad that things pretty much close down in summer. As you approach the equator temperatures soar towards 60 C, forming an effective barrier to human exploration. There is no record of humans ever making it to the southern hemisphere and back.

The Empire

Tsolyánu (pronounced soul-YAHN-oo) has been in existence for 2359 years, ruled (with a few hiccups) by the Tlakotani clan. The present God-Emperor is Hirkane Tlakotani, now an old man. His sons and daughters must vie to see who will reign after him. (The succession wars are about to start.)

The Tsolyáni are a proud people with an old civilization. Four neighbouring empires exist, but none is as great as ours.

People

There are no Caucasians, no Nordic types. Albinos and blue-eyed people are reviled as freaks.

The Tsolyáni are the main ethnic group in the Empire of Tsolyánu. Complexions range from golden tan to coppery brown. Men average 5'7" and have what we would call slender/medium builds. Women tend to be a few inches shorter and a little lighter in colouring, with rather voluptuous figures. Hair is fine, straight and glossy black; there is little body hair.

The peoples of the northern continent are all fairly similar to the Tsolyáni, with the exception of the N'Iüss barbarians. N'Iüss are about a foot taller than the average Tsolyáni, and considerably more muscular. They are often employed as mercenaries and bodyguards.

Mythology

The most common creation story is that there was no creation: things just are. The gods are regarded as higher forms rather than prime causes, rather like the ancient Greek idea. Very ancient stories refer to humanity travelling from the home of the gods at a time when the heavens 'Were lit by lamps'. Modern theology puts humanity on the food chain, not at the top of it, which is why the protection of the gods is so important. The exact nature of the gods is regarded as pointless speculation and even a bit irreverent, like wondering what the Emperor really looks like.

There are ten deities, in two opposed factions called the Tlomitlanyal and the Tlokiriqaluyal. Direct religious conflict between the two factions is banned by an ancient peace agreement called the Concordat, which prohibits a 'hot' war. So, several Temples are engaged in a cold war of unparalled viciousness.

The great majority of the population are illiterate, superstitious and conservative. You take the faith of your family. Most people are not fanatics, but there are always a few and they act as they believe the god desires (Vimuhla has berserkers, Ksarul has assassins).

The Temples control education and maintain an oligopoly on arcane knowledge. The kind of "zap-magic" common in role-playing games is the province of a rare few; you will not have encountered it. This allows more conventional nastiness to predominate.

Currency

The Kaitar, a gold coin weighing 3 grams, is worth some £50 in modern money. Twenty silver Hlash make up a Kaitar. Twenty copper Qirgal make up a Hlash. Credit and inter-clan favours are commonly used instead of coinage, and there is a rigorous code of commercial honour.

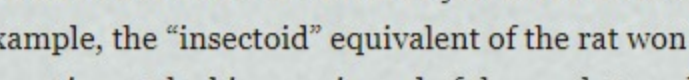
Literacy

Literacy is a specialist ability in Tsolyánu, like computer skills in our society today. About 10% of the population are literate, and most of those are bureaucrats and priests. Very few aristocrats or peasants can read and write.

Merchants are rarely literate. They don't need to be. Historically most businessmen have been illiterate; the Tsolyáni maintain this fine tradition. Where complex accounts require notation, tally sticks are used. These are pieces of wood marked with clan symbols and other marks representing goods and quantities. The stick is split vertically. One half stays with the purchaser as an invoice; the other acts a reminder to the retailer. The two halves are put together when the contract is completed. Because the marks are hand-made they are erratic and very difficult to forge. (This was the system used in Britain for a millennium. The increasing literacy rate only made written accounts practical during the 19th century. The fire that destroyed the Houses of Parliament in 1830 resulted from the over-zealous burning of obsolete tally sticks.)

Another limit on literacy is the cost of the raw materials. The standard format for paper is a scroll 30cm wide and 100cm long (about as big as six A4 sheets). This can cost the equivalent of anything from £4.00 to £20.00. Parchment or vellum costs even more.

Reading and writing are not all; calligraphy is also very important. A hastily scribbled note is considered worthless, even if the information it contains turns out to be correct. (It's not just what you say that's important, but the way that you say it.) Tsolyáni writing reflects their social relations. Western 20th century interaction is truncated; the Tsolyáni favour more of an Arab approach, where it takes ten minutes to get past enquiries about your family.



Ssú Attacking

Baron Ald Tsolyánu has been at war with its northern neighbour, Yan Kor, for several years. Yan Kor was previously a loose hegemony of almost autonomous city-states, but it has been unified by an empire-building visionary in the form of Baron Ald, a former mercenary from the north-eastern state of Ssa Allaqi.

Mutant spiders ate my Chlen

The ecology is weird. Each colonising species brought its own animals (mankind brought relatively few) and the indigenous flora and fauna are like something from the Jurassic Period. Some lifeforms are so fundamentally different as to be mutually poisonous, or at least indigestible. The Time of Darkness brought uncontrolled competition. Sixty thousand years on, species have had time to adapt. The fittest survived;

their descendants rule.

There are similar lifeforms which may be the result of convergent evolution. They are lumped together anyway. For convenience the old Earth terms can be loosely applied: spiders, worms, snakes, insects, fish and birds. There are very few of what we would call mammals. This is because the spiders, worms, snakes, insects, fish and birds either ate them or just killed them without bothering to eat them. (They're like that.) For example, the "insectoid" equivalent of the rat won the niche from our furry cousins. There are a lot of reptiles operating at the big vermin end of the market, and they eat the small vermin. The "birds" have some competition from gliders and floaters, the true wing being only one way of getting airborne.

Many of the middle-to-large animals have six legs. Sensory arrangements also vary. Several animals have more than two eyes. The three-eye arrangement is common in sight-hunting reptiles, which means they have a very wide arc of binocular vision.

Most people have a very limited knowledge of the natural world. If you live in a place where dinosaur-sized monsters wander the forests, curiosity is a risky business. To most humans there are only two types of animal: the ones you can hunt, and the ones that hunt you.

Common animals

The Chlen: A "triceratops" with six legs, used for haulage. It can charge reasonably fast for a short distance, but most of the time it lumbers along at a couple of miles an hour. Its hide can be peeled, shaped into armour and weapons, and then hardened by a chemical process to give Chlenshe, a light horny material about as hard as bronze. In the absence of iron, this is what warriors have to make do with. At least it allows lots of fancy armour designs lacquered in snazzy colours.

The Kuni: A genetically engineered falcon. It has enhanced intelligence and specialised language comprehension. And it's more than you can afford.

The Hma: A llama-like animal used for fur and meat.

The Hmelu: A smaller, tastier Hma.

The Tiuni (cat): Not a common pet in the south (it can't cope with the local equivalent of the mouse), but found in cooler northern regions, where vermin don't pack quite the same armament.

The Tlekku (dog): Several breeds exist. Hunting dogs are like big setters.

The Renyu: A little bipedal animal occupying much the same niche as the dog, but more intelligent. Famed for its loyalty: "Man's best friend"—for those that can afford one.

Gene genies

Tékumel's original colonists were quite capable of building new animals for fun and profit. Some of that equipment survived and was put to practical (sometimes fairly unpleasant) use during the Latter Times. There are still bio-weapons from the distant past. Most are under the control of one of the power blocs (usually the secret societies of the various Temples). Meeting one is usually a terminal experience.

There are many odd beasts on Tékumel, and some of them are people. The N'Iüss are one solution to the post-holocaust survival problem. Given the choice of handing down books, technical knowledge and culture, the ancestors of the N'Iüss opted instead for engineering their genes to give their descendents raw physical power. Their civilization did not survive, but the enhanced genes did.

Friendly & neutral species

The sapient species on Tékumel are split into two factions: those associated with humanity and those who are inimical. This split originated in the interstellar wars of humanspace expansion. The inimical species lost and were penned into reservations by the victors. The species we can do business with are:

The Pe Choi: Elegant forest-dwellers with a chitinous exoskeleton. Weakly telepathic, so they know when harm is done to one of their kind. Peaceable. A relatively common sight in the cities of the north-west.

The Tinaliya: Small four-legged creatures with extremely logical minds. Few, and far away.

The Shén: Saurian bipeds that prefer hot climates. Very belligerent.

The Ahoggvá: Four-armed and four-legged; radially symmetrical with eyes on all four faces. Live in swamplands. Hate the Shén.

The Hláka: Furry winged biped with whip-like tails. Capricious and inquisitive. Sometimes employed by human armies as scouts.

The Páchi Léi: Reclusive jungle-dwellers that make good scouts. Friendly to Tsolyánu but hostile to the western empire of Mu'ugalavyá.

Hostile species

These are the enemies of mankind. They would like the planet to have a very different ecology. They are not numerous, but the regions they inhabit are hostile enough to discourage human incursion.

The Hlüss: Kind of aquatic scorpions eight feet long. They paralyse victims and lay their eggs in the body. Think of "Alien", only not so tough. (Barker dreamt these up before the Alien films were released.)

The Ssú: Four-legged and two-armed. Smell of cinnamon and speak in high chiming notes. Capable of hypnosis. Well organized.

The Hlutrgu: "Swamp frogs." Vicious; attack in hordes. Not overly bright.

The Shunned Ones: Weird chlorine-breathing aliens who dwell in sealed cities in the north. Technologically powerful but few in number.

One of the themes of Barker's world is the survival of humanity against the odds. Humans on Tékumel are not the fluffy neo-hobbits of too many RPGs. They are the people who brought you the Roman Empire, Rourke's Drift and Auschwitz. They breed fast, think fast, and make dangerous enemies. At the individual level many nonhumans are more dangerous than man, but humans make the best soldiers. To a Hlüss one human is a victim, but eight thousand are a legion.

The military

Several of the gods are proponents of warfare, providing strong religious justification for military action. In war the aim is to win glory and captives for sacrifice. And territory.

In Tsolyánu, soldiering is a profession with status. A captain (Kasi) has status equivalent to a high priest or a district commandant. The Tsolyáni peacetime army comprises 397,000 soldiers organized into seventy-one legions. In addition there are usually around a dozen legions of nonhuman mercenaries. An equivalent could be the British Army of the period 1850-1950. The Imperial Army is well disciplined, organized and supported. It is not used to losing. The God-of-humans the various legions make the regimental peculiarities of the British look inconsequential.

Officers are almost always from the upper classes. They may be chinless wonders but they are seldom cowards; they are expected to lead from the front.

Death before dishonour

The Tsolyáni military make the samurai look like Belgians. People will exhibit selflessness in combat which may seem extreme to modern eyes, but the Tsolyáni understand that the needs of the many must outweigh the needs of the few. A person who dies courageously gains great face. Of course, he is dead so this does him little good personally, but honour is contagious and so his family, lineage and clan also get some fraction of the glory. He bequeaths honour to his line and he will be venerated for it. For the typical Tsolyáni, brought up admiring the great deeds of his ancestors, there can be few better rewards.

A person who is a worshipper of one of the war gods also does himself some personal good by falling in battle. Getting off the cycle of rebirth is important and being recruited by a god is the best way to do it. Everyone has to die sometime; for a Karakan worshipper, a glorious death is a career opportunity.

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