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Barbarous Experiment

Michael Cule explains why he prefers to keep his players in the dark

Last Issue’s scenario *Welcome to Jakáll* featured the ‘classic’ opening from *Empire of the Petal Throne*: the adventures of a group of barbarian refugees in the port city of Jakáll. I think this is the best, if not the only, way of introducing new players to Tékumel. It ensures that the characters are as ignorant as the players of the ways of the Imperium. There are other advantages too...

First, the characters have goals to aim for: wealth, a place to call their own, and Imperial citizenship. “What we gain too cheap we esteem too lightly” and the character who starts with high status has nowhere to go. His options are limited by the conservative strictures of Tsolyáni society; he must do as his clan expects. But the barbarian is a wild card.

Second, barbarian characters are free of preconceptions. They can join any temple, any legion, any faction they wish.

But the greatest advantage is that you never have to tell a player: “Well, you would know this already...” The tiniest detail of Tsolyáni life can be a source of delight. I recall the puzzlement of one player on seeing meshqu plaques for the first time. Also, the characters’ expectations of ethical and civilized behaviour can be sorely tested by their encounters with Tsolyáni culture, giving scope for much enjoyable role playing.

My own minor innovation was to use a large group—a whole (smallish) tribe of barbarians as the focus of the game. This ensured that the characters had a home and family to be loyal to. It also provided a ready source of replacement characters as the deadlier aspects of Tékumel took their toll.

The following is extracted from the briefing I gave to players:

Origins

Your people have been driven from the mountain valleys that were their homes by a horde of warlike strangers, the Devil People, who rode on the backs of beasts. During the exodus, many of the elders died, among them your war-chief. Pectai, the war-chief’s son, has taken his place.

Eventually the remnants of your people reached the port of Nuroab, which you believed at first to lie on the edge of the world. On the streets you saw the refugees from the plains, destitute and wrecked by drink and drugs. Pectai wondered how you would avoid the same fate, and then one day he met a ship’s captain who told him of his homeland, the Empire of Tsolyánu, far across the eastern seas. He told of the war being fought with Yán Kór, and how the Emperor sought recruits for his army. Why, one foreigner called Chulin had prospered so well that he rose to command his own legion, and brought his whole tribe to settle in the empire! Pectai grasped this straw. He paid the captain to take the whole tribe to Tsolyánu.

Appearance and clothing

The Hill People have light brown skins, dark brown hair and grey eyes. Build is 3” less than the average figures given in *GURPS B9*. They normally wear light cotton tunics and leggings. They have (or had) enough technology to make heavy leather armour, but not metal armour.

From what you have seen among the crew, the Tsolyáni are of a coppery brown complexion and about the same size as your own people.

Beliefs and customs

The way of life of the Hill People is based on one pivotal fact: that you are the chosen of the One God. God created the world as a home for beings worthy to be His children. He made first plants, then beasts to eat the plants, then meat eaters to prey on them. But He had still not made creatures worthy of Him, so He took the souls of various animals and created men and women from them. These He placed in the fertile valleys of the hills and bade them grow and learn to be worthy of Him.

But these people still had too much of the beasts in them. They fought and stole and murdered. So God, growing angry, drove them out of the hills to survive as best they could. Out on the plains, the people became even more bestial in their ways. Almost all forgot the hills and God’s commands. They died and their souls survived, but steadily degenerating so that they were reborn as animals or monsters.

One man, Vernech, was wise and learned, and he prayed to God to forgive the people. God would not forgive them all, but gave Vernech the right to gather together a handful of families and lead them back to the hills.

The commands of the One God are:

Respect God, creator of all, and strive to be worthy of Him.

Live your lives so that each rebirth finds you more worthy.

Respect your tribe and its elders.

Respect learning and wisdom in everyone, young or old.

Respect the property of all.

Respect the lives of others and fight only with good cause.

Teach these commands to your children; cast out those who fail to live up to them.

Good manners among the Hill People consist of deference to the tribe’s elders, politeness and truthfulness to all. Lying and hypocrisy are considered unworthy, but this doesn’t mean they do not occur. Theft, even of an outsider’s property, is grounds for expulsion from the tribe. This does not apply to loot taken in war. Such loot is the property of the tribe and must be turned over to the elders.

Disagreements between members of the tribe are taken to the elders for arbitration. If an agreement cannot be reached then duels may be fought as a last resort. These are normally to first blood, and old or infirm disputants may use champions with the elders’ permission.

Status

Rank is unimportant among the Hill People. Craftsmen, leading hunters and those respected for great achievements are Status 1. Elders are Status 2.

GURPS player-characters

All except Pectai start with 100 points. Two disadvantages are compulsory: Primitive (-5 points) and Social Stigma – Barbarian (-15 points). These do not count against the 40-point limit.

Pectai also takes Duty (to tribe; almost all the time 15-) for -15 points, and Sense of Duty (to tribe) for -10 points. These do count against the 40-point limit.

Two kinds of character will be useful in this campaign: Hunter/Warriors and Apprentice Shamans. The Psi powers known to the Hill People are Telepathy, Astral Projection, ESP, Teleportation and Healing. Starting characters should not have more than 5 Power in any area and skill no higher than IQ.

All characters must put 1 point into the Tsolyáni language, a Mental/Average skill, picked up from the ship’s crew on the voyage to Jakáll.

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