

The Radiant Eye of the Prince Eselne



About Tekumel

Tekumel is a fantasy world with a history stretching back 60,000 years or more. It is inhabited by humans of South Asian, Mesoamerican and Middle Eastern descent, plus a large variety of nonhuman intelligent lifeforms. The published game EMPIRE OF THE PETAL THRONE assumes that Tekumel is a lost colony of starfaring mankind; this may or may not be true in this campaign. In any case, the inhabitants aren't aware of the "lost colony" theory.

The game is set in Tsolyanu, the greatest of the world's empires; the year is 2367 of the Golden Seal. Most of Tekumel's nations are highly class-conscious and formal, but none more than the Tsolyani. When two Tsolyani meet, it is usually obvious which is of higher status, and therefore to be deferred to. Tsolyani prize "noble action" above all else, which means keeping your place, knowing your role, and performing as a hero of the ancient epics would have done. Most story interest in Tsolyanu, as in Japanese literature, focuses on situations where a man must fulfill several different obligations and the tension between them. In the early stages of the game, when everyone is still learning how to act like a Tsolyani, there won't be much of that, but once everyone has a clan AND a temple AND a military superior AND political allies to please, then it starts getting interesting.

Tsolyanu is an autocracy, in which the Emperor never leaves the great city of Avanthar in which he is attended by his retainers, the Omnipotent Azure Legion. The Emperor owns everything and everyone in the Empire, and technically can tell anyone to throw themselves into the fire at any time. In practice, of course, as Tsolyanu is a vast land of fifty million souls, the Emperor exercises power through a vast bureaucracy of bureaus, temples and military districts, though all derive their power through him.

When the Emperor dies or abdicates (although in practice, abdication is vanishingly

rare), all his sons and daughters are brought to the capital to compete in the Kolumeljalim, a series of contests of wit, skill, strength, determination and cunning, in which all but one of the contestants perish. The survivor is crowned Emperor. An heir to the throne may "renounce the Gold" and declare himself not a candidate, retiring to a life of idle luxury and taking no further part in politics, at any time before the Kolumeljalim begins. There are also "hidden heirs," taken at birth and raised by various temples or families to be revealed at the appropriate time. The most recent Kolumeljalim, in 2366, pitted Prince Eselne (the favorite of many of the player-characters) against Prince Dhi'chune, the spooky devotee of Sarku, God of the Undead. Eselne won and is now Emperor.

The gods are very real, and their priests have many magic spells at their disposal. There are two major houses of gods, the Gods of Stability and the Gods of Change. The Stability Gods are:

Hnalla Lord of Light
Karakan Lord of Ever-Glorious War
Belkhanu Lord of Peaceful Afterlife
Avanthe Lady of Virtuous Motherhood
Thumis Lord of Scholarship

The Gods of Change are:

Hru'u Lord of Darkness
Vimulha Lord of Firey Destruction
Sarku Lord of Life After Death
Dlameish Lady of Wanton Sensuality
Ksarul Lord of Secret Knowledge

Although they bear some resemblance to good and evil pantheons from traditional fantasy, the Lords of Change are not thought of as wicked or wrong, just different, nor are the Lords of Stability wholly good. Rather than the Silmarils vs. the Nazgul, the two houses of gods are more like the Vorlons and the Shadows, each with some valid points, each with some excesses.

Tsolyanu borders two nations with which it is currently at war. Mu'ugalavya, to the west, is a land as rich and vast as Tsolyanu, whose natives profess obedience to Vimulha, the Lord of Fire, above all others, although all the gods are venerated to some degree. The

Mu'ugalavyani invaded the forest state of Do Chaka in 2365, using an army of the Ssu, loathsome monsters who detest all mankind, as their icebreakers to shatter the army of Prince Eselne and sack the city of Tumissa in Tsolyanu. The plan, led by a general named Tewfik, failed when a group of Tsolyani agents (the player-characters) stole the Eye of Commanding Enemies, a magic item which kept the Ssu hypnotised. When the Ssu awoke from their trance, they turned on the Mu'ugalavyani, rending the army to the four winds.

To the north lies Yan Kor, a federation of highland princes forged by the charismatic Baron Ald. Ald has old grudges against Tsolyanu, specifically the previous Emperor Hirikane and his greatest general, Kettukal hiMraktine. The Yan Koryani army is huge, as most Yan Koryani men are warriors, with women running the economy and skilled trades. They have won a few battles against armies led by the bookish Prince Dhi'chune and the bold, but rash, Prince Mridobu.



Mask of the Mihalli A Tekumel Campaign

The third Tsolyani Empire novel, "Mask of the Mihalli", opens with the coronation of the 55th Emperor Eselne of the empire of Tsolyanu. Tsolyanu is the mightiest and most refined of the nations of Tekumel, an ancient, cultured world inhabited by many races and with a 60,000-year-long recorded history.

Tsolyanu is ruled by the Emperor, who in theory owns everyone and everything in the Empire. In practice, there are four centers of power: the temples, the ministries, the legions, and the clans. The Imperial family gives to each the respect and deference their loyal support of the Empire demands.

Important people in Tsolyanu, therefore, tend to be from one of these powerful groups: either priests of the temples, ministers of the bureaucracy, officers of the legions or nobles of the clans. Some people have several roles: for example, a noble member of the clan of Golden Sunburst might also be a colonel in the Legion of the Mace Raised High, and at the same time a novice priest of Chegarra, Cohort of Lord Karakan, God of Ever-Glorious War. (Titles on Tekumel tend to the rococo.)

Much of the drama in a Tekumel game comes from the conflict among the characters' roles, rather than between the characters themselves. In the above case, let us say that our hero is on a quest to marry a rival's daughter, thus ending a feud which has caused

his clan much trouble over the years. But then word comes: the enemy is over the border, and his legion needs him! Which will he serve, clan or legion? Can he do both, or must he accept dishonor (a Tsolyani would say "ignobility") by betraying one or the other?

The Emperor is troubled when he takes the throne, and not just because of the bloody events leading to his succession (see "Seven Palms" for details; I'll post a summary at some future date). The priesthood of Lord Hnalla, God of Light, has fallen into apathy and despair, because they can no longer work the miracles their god bestows on them. Princess Ma'in, the vain, ambitious sister of the Emperor, has discovered that the temple of Lady Dlamelish, Goddess of Lust, is similarly afflicted. The empire relies on the temples for its moral foundation; if the gods are turning their faces from the Tsolyani, does it not mean that some dreadful crime is being committed, for which all are held to blame? Already there are calls for massive human sacrifice to appease the gods, and for foreign wars to take the prisoners necessary for mass sacrifice. The Emperor is by no means averse to foreign wars, but the Empire is already at war with the wild berserkers of Yan Kor, and in a state of very tense peace with the devout Mu'ugalavyani. It is a poor time to launch another invasion.

In this hour of crisis, the temple of Lord Ksarul, God of Secrets, proposes an expedition to the dark island of the Black Ssu, hideous inhuman monsters who hate humanity, and all its allied races, with a mad passion that drives them to plot insidious schemes for our downfall. The Black Ssu, according to the Ksarulite librarian Sheresa, have possession of an artifact called the Seven Malachite Octagons, which allows a sorcerer of the proper skill to observe the link between a priest and his gods. The Octagons could be used to see what crimes have turned the gods' faces away from humanity, so that these crimes may be expiated.

The Emperor deems it good, but wants the priests of Ksarul to have plenty of support from the other temples, clans and legions, so he is assembling a team of experts to retrieve the Octagons. Your characters will be those experts.

Characters

Vathek hi-Cxwtl-qo'or: priest of Ksarul and finder of the legendary 777th page of the Book of Ebon Bindings. Of the minor Barbed Hook fishing clan from the Chaka forest coasts. Named Keeper of the Keys of the Hidden Library of Kara-Korum, and about to inherit a vast arid estate bordering the desert country of Milumanaya.

Princess Jadis: a former priestess of Lord Hru'u, raised in the Monastery of the Cusp of Night. Member of the Cusp of Night Society and a well-known psychic sensitive. Discovered her Imperial heritage in "Contest of Champions" and married her longtime protector, the deaf-mute Natoro hiJevesan of the Omnipotent Azure Legion.

Hakiron Tso'mac, N'luss highlander. Massively tall, taciturn barbarian from the northern mountains who hired on with the Tsolyani army. Like Ksamanduish, a guide to remote places where evil lurks; also, and unlike Ksamanduish, expected to keep the priests of the group alive in battle, though it cost him his head.

Kialande of the Flowers (Kialande hiQadaryal), priestess of Hrihayal. Also from the very high clan of Sea Blue. Expert mediciner and knowledgeable in Imperial politics.

Mekelu hiMraktine, colonel of alien infantry. His Legion of the Mace Raised High (23rd Heavy Infantry) is composed of cohorts from half the races of Tekumel. Risked all to rescue his beloved from the clutches of Prince Dhi'chune in "Contest of Champions", despite her apparent complicity in the plot to assassinate Prince Eselne.

Ch'ri, Ahoggia signaller from the 5th Legion "Legion of the Mighty Prince." A short, four-armed, four-legged alien with no sense of decorum and a penchant for speaking blunt truths. Has decided Mekelu is his boon companion, and also pals around with Hakiron.

Previous Adventures



Secret of the Ssu
A Tekumel Campaign

Characters

The heroes of this saga are the Intelligence Group of Prince Eselne's Northern Army. Their task, as our story opens, is to discover what secret weapon the enemy general Tewfik of the One Eye has up his sleeve for the coming autumn campaign season.

Hereschal hiTogu: Officer of the Omnipotent Azure Legion, which keeps its eye on the army and the realm. Expert in Mu'ugalavyani codes and spycraft.

Vathek hi-Cxwtl-qo'or: priest of Ksarul and finder of the legendary 777th page of the Book of Ebon Bindings. Of the minor Barbed Hook fishing clan from the Chaka forest coasts.

Jadis hiMalesinia: priestess of Hru'u, raised in the Monastery of the Cusp of Night. Member of the Cusp of Night Society and a well-known psychic sensitive. From the ultra-high, hoity-toity, none-of-us-will-ever-have-to-work Clan of Sea Blue in Tumissa.

Ksamanduish the Tall, renegade Mu'ugalavyani merchant, adventurer and treasure-hunter, acting as native guide. Revealed as a Mihalli, a shapeshifting alien with unguessable intentions, at the end of the Tubeway odyssey in 2365.

Hakiron Tso'mac,

Kialande of the Flowers (Kialande hiQadaryal), priestess of Hrihayal. Also from the very high clan of Sea Blue. Expert mediciner and knowledgeable in Imperial politics.

Story

A strange device carried by a Mu'ugalavyani agent is discovered to be a key for directing the tubeways, underground transit vehicles which span the world of Tekumel. By trial and error, the party discovers a plot by the Mu'ugalavuni general Radesh Chodoval to use the Ssu, hideous enemies of all mankind, as weapons. Chodoval has an Eye, an ancient artifact of powerful magic, which commands the Ssu to obedience. Slaying him, the party tries to find its way back to Tsolyanu through the tubeways, encountering:

- The temple of the Twelve Trumpets of Revelation in the city of Tsamra, capital of Livyanu, the land of sorcerors
- A drowned land of broken statuary and dark waters, inhabited by sliding, glimmering flat fish with stone and wooden tools
- An outpost in the Sighing Desert of Milumanaya, far from anything and anyone
- The lair of the Black Ssu, deep beneath the lost island of Bassu, where their king, Bassu, diverts tubeway cars into a deep pool to drown and rob their passengers. Here the party meets Taluvasz, a Livyani spy (he translates his title as "insincere messenger") and magical linguist, who accompanies them
- A tomb beneath the streets of Bey Su, bustling commercial city of the Tsolyani Empire
- A broken building in the Do Chaka forests, home of the melancholy Pe Choi insect-folk, and secret camp of the Ssu

- A vast metallic beehive-warren of innumerable Ssu in Ssuyal, their last jungle kingdom in the southeast

Eventually they find their way back to where they started (in the Do Chaka woods), but at that moment Ksamanduish reveals his true form! He is not a renegade, but a Mihalli, one of the legendary shape-shifting immortals who prey upon the folk of Tekumel by night, and he has stolen the Eye of Commanding the Ssu! He steals the tubecar, taking with him the luckless Taluvasz, whom he plans to interrogate, devour, and impersonate in the councils of Livyanu.

Without the Eye, our heroes' plan to command the Ssu against the Mu'ugalavyani is hopeless. They warn Prince Eselne, who mobilizes his legions in time to withstand the onslaught of the Ssu and the Mu'ugalavyani. Presently, the Eye's influence fades, and the Ssu turn on both armies, indiscriminately rending and slaying. The Prince is wounded, poisoned by the Ssu's claws, but Tewfik, the general of the Mu'ugalavyani, is driven out of the woods altogether. The Pe Choi swear loyalty to Prince Eselne, enabling him to add the Chaka districts to the Tsolyani Empire.



Contest of Champions A Tekumel Campaign

The heroes of "Secret of the Ssu", except for the traitor Ksamanduish, discover that Prince Dhi'chune has called a Kolumejalim on the death of the Emperor. But he has given the other Princes only two days to come to the capital, a distance of some 1300 miles! Prince Eselne, weakened by an assassination attempt, takes the tubeway to the capital, protected from sorcerous attack en route by his faithful retainers.

Reaching the Golden Tower of Avanthar, Eselne's champions compete in tests of battle, skill, diplomacy and luck. One contest is a draw, but despite Dhi'chune's efforts to cheat, the Eselnoi take seven of the nine palms and win the contest. Dhi'chune makes one more attempt to kill Eselne before he can be crowned, but is foiled by Mekelu, Jadis, Kialandi and Vathek. Mekelu's beloved, Zakaria, is found to be working with Dhi'chune, and Mekelu leads Kialandi, Chri, Hakiron and some of his legionnaires into a vast underground cave complex to save her.

Links