

# THROUGH SUNKEN LANDS

AND OTHER ADVENTURES

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*For Harold, who gave us more worn-out paperbacks and story recommendations than we can count, and, more importantly, took us to the city of Jundarr for the first time many years ago.*

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# CORE RULES

*Containing rules for making characters and playing games of*

**THROUGH SUNKEN LANDS**  
AND OTHER ADVENTURES

# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Through Sunken Lands and Other Adventures*. This game provides players and gamemasters with a simple set of rules based on those of its sister game, *Beyond the Wall and Other Adventures* and similar to older versions of the world's most popular fantasy roleplaying game. The game is designed to be easy to learn and fast to use at the table. There are many such games available. *Through Sunken Lands* is different for two reasons:

1) Flavor - *Through Sunken Lands* will allow groups to model most kinds of fantasy stories, but is particularly well-suited for modeling those found in classic works of Swords and Sorcery, particularly Robert E. Howard's *Conan* stories, Fritz Leiber's *Lankhmar* adventures, and Moorcock's *Eternal Champion* series. These are tales of alien and dangerous lands, clever but desperate seekers of fortune, and decadent empires.

2) Out-of-the-Box Play - While the core rules of *Through Sunken Lands* are similar to those of the numerous other games based on the world's most popular fantasy roleplaying game, it does offer something that the others do not: tools to play the game almost immediately and with little prep. Using special Character Playbooks and Scenario Packs, a group of players with a single gamemaster should be able to play the game with absolutely no zero prep in about three to five hours, from making characters to tasting a glorious success or a bitter defeat.

The game still works perfectly well for traditional playstyles, but we made it as a vehicle for quick, on-the-fly play, as we often found ourselves wanting to be able to sit down and play a roleplaying game without all the fuss that is normally involved. *Through Sunken Lands* is made up of the following sections:

*Core Rules* - This section gives you all the rules you need to make characters and play the game.

*How to Play* - This section tells you how to sit down and play an entire game of *Through Sunken Lands* in a single evening, from making characters to the end of an adventure.

*Jundarr and the Sunken Lands* - This section describes the sample setting of Jundarr, a great city of impossible size where men from many lands meet and a thousand gods are worshipped. The city and the other lands are given only in

broad strokes so that a group of players can take this setting and easily make it their own. Likewise, gamemasters may use and change the setting as they will without feeling the need to study a long text.

*Spells and Magic* - This section contains lists of cantrips, spells, and rituals for mages, as well as several examples of magical items.

*Bestiary* - This section has a selection of monsters for use during play, as well as sections on making your own demons, elementals, and petty gods.

This work also contains several Character Playbooks to help you create a group of heroic travelers who have already shared an adventure together, as well as Scenario Packs, which help the GM set up an evening's game. The 'How to Play' section describes in detail how to use Playbooks and Scenario Packs.



## SWORD AND SORCERY

There are a great many fantasy short stories, novels, comic books, television shows, and movies. Some are stories of daring heroes who risk life and limb to save a kingdom. Others are tales of young men and women of stout heart who learn magic, defeat a dark lord, and learn a lesson along the way. Still others read like dark histories of gritty realism which detail the rise and fall of noble houses and their machinations. The term “sword and sorcery” refers to a subgenre of fantasy which rarely has any of those elements.

Rather, sword and sorcery stories often involve rugged adventurers seeking their fortune amid crumbling ruins, living by their wits, and sometimes claiming a throne by the strength of their arms. The worlds in these stories often resemble ours in its ancient or classical period, rather than the high middle ages. There are rarely elves, dwarves, or faeries, but there might be ancient and alien evils that live in the dark places of the world or in the realms between space and time. The warrior queen of a barbarian people who travels the world and lives by her sword is a sword and sorcery hero, as is the decadent and learned priest-sorcerer who lives in opulence and trucks with terrible spirits.

Much has been written about sword and sorcery fiction (and better than we can). Further, it is rare that two people settle on an exact definition of the genre; most agree on the center of the style, but the edges are blurry.

Given that, we will describe our assumptions regarding sword and sorcery and the flavor it lends to this game, and leave further research to readers who are still curious about the genre.

As stated above, we take as our primary influences for *Through Sunken Lands* the *Conan* stories of Robert E. Howard, the *Lankhmar* stories of Fritz Leiber, and the *Eternal Champion* saga by Michael Moorcock, particularly the Elric and Corum stories. Also of note are the works of Clark Ashton Smith and Roger Zelazny. Additionally, H.P. Lovecraft’s stories, and their related mythos, also have a role to play in stories of sword and sorcery.

These are the primary assumptions that we take from these stories:

*The World Feels Young* - There are “civilized” lands in the world, where a man can buy exquisite silks, rest his bones in a bathhouse, and listen to the recitations of great poets, but there are many more places beyond the reach of such pleasures. Much of the world is unexplored and uninhabited, and there are still kingdoms to be carved by strength of arms.

*The World is Old* - Conversely, the world is ancient beyond imagining. Numerous civilizations have risen and fallen, and the world is dotted with the crumbling temples and forgotten pyramids to prove it. Even earlier than all of these civilizations, ancient and alien people held sway before falling to decadence and depravity.

*The Spaces Beyond* - This world is not all there is in the cosmos; in fact, it is utterly insignificant. There are other worlds and other planes of existence, all making up a great multiverse. Sometimes, people travel between the realms, adventuring in other places entirely.

*Law and Chaos* - The multiverse is governed by two opposing forces, both ultimately incomprehensible to the minds of men. Law and Chaos engage in an eternal struggle against one another by their very natures, and are personified in the form of various deities and spirits. If characters adhere to one of these alignments, they may well find themselves drawn into cosmic battles.

*Magic is Rare and Dangerous* - Sorcerers and priests deal in things man was not meant to know and are best avoided. True practitioners of the sorcerous arts are exceedingly rare and often wicked. *Through Sunken Lands* will not present towns with magical universities, casual spellcasting, or potion shops.

*Fortune and Adventure* - The characters in sword and sorcery stories are always restless, always hungry for more. They want to go out and see the world, they want to get involved in things, and, most of all, they want to make their fortune. There is no room in these stories for someone desiring the simple life. Our heroes must seek treasure and glory! Characters in *Through Sunken Lands* should have at least two of the above motivations and should not wait around for adventure to come to them.

### BASIC TERMINOLOGY

*Through Sunken Lands* assumes that players are familiar with the basics of playing roleplaying games. We use the following commonly accepted terms throughout the rules: a gamemaster, or GM, is the player running the adventure, a player character, or PC, is a character controlled by one of the players at the table, a non-player character, or NPC, is any other character or monster controlled by the gamemaster.



*But We are Still Heroes* - That having been said, we like to tell stories about people who are fundamentally the “good guys,” and, contrary to some critics, we believe that Conan and Elric fit this mold. Neither are shining heroes who always do the right thing and save the day for altruistic reasons, but they usually *do* save the day. Conan wants a fortune and then a kingdom, and he does some rotten things, but he also rescues lots of people in danger. Elric has a horrible run of luck, much of it due to his own poor choices, but ultimately fights a mighty struggle against the chaotic deities to whom he had once sold his soul. The characters in this game are after the gold for sure, and they probably are not angels, but they should also be willing to jump into situations where they are needed.

## BEYOND THE WALL

*As mentioned above, Through Sunken Lands is built from the core rules and assumptions of its sister game, Beyond the Wall and Other Adventures. Like Through Sunken Lands, Beyond the Wall has Character Playbooks, Scenario Packs, spells, cantrips, and rituals. However, Beyond the Wall is designed to model the classic works of young adult fantasy by authors like Ursula K. LeGuin, Susan Cooper, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Lloyd Alexander.*

*Where this game features brave adventurers armed with steel and magic who seek out glory and fortune, Beyond the Wall is about young heroes on the cusp of adulthood. Their home village is the primary setting, and the characters must thwart wicked goblins, help their neighbors, encounter strange fae, and face dangerous foes from distant lands.*

*All material made for one of these games is fully compatible with the other. Gamemasters and players should find it a simple matter to use Playbooks, spells, or anything else from one game with the other, though the flavor may differ significantly. Throughout this book there will be further suggestions for using material from Beyond the Wall and Other Adventures in games of Through Sunken Lands, and ideas for how to change the flavor to better match that of sword and sorcery fiction. On the other hand, many fantasy stories happily ignore such tonal differences, and there is no reason that a group could not decide to do the same.*

# GETTING READY TO PLAY

The first thing the group should do, after finding some comfortable seats and grabbing some dice and pencils, is design their characters together. Each player should choose a Character Playbook that looks interesting to him and let the other players know what he has. The gamemaster, meanwhile, should be preparing to take notes in her Scenario Pack. She will also have her hands full keeping up with the players' ideas and helping shape a background narrative for the group.

## WHAT DO THE PLAYERS DO?

### EARLY LIFE

The first two tables in each Playbook deal with a character's family and early life. The characters should take turns rolling on the tables one at a time. Some of the characters probably come from disparate backgrounds, but others may well have known each other since childhood. Did two of the characters grow up in the great city? If so, does that mean that they knew each other in those days? Things like this can make your adventurers a tighter group, one with even more shared history. Even if this is not the case, players should pay attention to their friends' results anyway; they may matter to you a lot later, and you will soon be connected by your shared adventure in any event.

### UNUSUAL ABILITY SCORES

*Very rarely, a player may defy the odds and end up with an ability score of 20 or even higher while making a character with a Playbook. The highest that any ability score can start at is 19, and any points over that limit are simply wasted. While this might be disappointing, the player should not feel cheated! The benefits of having such a marvelous score will probably outweigh any points which might be lost by going over, and the ability score in question is likely to be one very important to the character's class.*

*A generous gamemaster may allow a character with a score of over 19 to spend two points from the high score to raise any other ability score by a single point.*

The important thing for the group to remember is to slow down and elaborate on the results as they go. It is no fun just rolling dice, one after the other, and making notes, so the players should talk and collaborate. The results on the tables only give a bare bones description of background events, and it is up to the players to weave a story out of it all. The players do not need anything too elaborate here (the best stories come up in play anyway), but they can certainly start learning a lot about their characters.

The Character Playbooks presented in this book come in four varieties:

*The Great City* - characters from these Playbooks were raised in the great city itself. For some of them, the city is all they have ever known.

*Foreign Lands* - these characters were raised in other "civilized" lands and have now made their way to the great city in search of adventure.

*Barbarian* - these characters are from distant lands where men still live in loose tribes or clans. They bring different skills than their companions from urbanized regions.

*Eldritch* - this character is a remnant of the great sorcerer kings and queens of the eldritch race and has entered the world of mortals.

If one character shares the same background as another (that is to say, if two players picked Playbooks of the same variety), the players should feel free to bounce off of each others' results. To this end, if one player with the same variety of Playbook has already rolled on the first early life table, other players with the same type of Playbook are allowed to skip rolling altogether and choose the same result if they would like. This can help to ensure that two barbarians are from the same tribe or that two citizens of the great city are related if that is what the players want.

*Example: Scott is using the High Cabalist Playbook and Jill the Pirate Captain. As they are both playing characters classified as foreigners, they have the option of sharing results on the first table in their Playbooks. Scott rolls first and determines that his character is from a prosperous and outward looking kingdom on the southern continent. When it is Jill's turn to roll, she considers foregoing the dice and simply*

agreeing that her character is from the same kingdom and shares the same table result. In the end, however, she chooses to go ahead and roll for herself, determining that her pirate captain is from a different place altogether.

### IMPORTANT RULE FOR PLAYERS!

*While rolling on the various tables in the Character Playbooks, a player may get a particular result that he absolutely hates, or may just see a result that he missed but that he really loves. Once during character creation, a player may ignore the result of a roll and pick anything he likes from that particular table. It is no fair going back and doing this later! The player should do this when it feels like he needs to so that he can make the character conform to his vision.*

## CLASS TRAINING

The next five tables in each playbook determine how a character became a warrior, rogue, or mage, and what his early adventures were like. These tables are different for all the Character Playbooks, so the players are unlikely to have any repeat actions showing up here. Again, all the players should take turns making their rolls and let the other players know what happened to their characters growing up.

By the third table in this section all characters, regardless of background, will have made it to the great city where the game will begin. The third table describes someone in the city whom the character has befriended or whom he trusts. There is a lot of overlap across Playbooks on this table, so this is another good time to find common ground between the characters. It is likely that several of them share friends or contacts in the city.

Players can learn a lot about a character's life in the great city as they make these rolls. Did the character study at the temples and libraries there? Does she still visit them? Do the other characters spend time there too?

The fourth table in this section is special, as it involves not just one character, but also the character belonging to the player to the right. This may be the first time the two characters met, or they could have known each other beforehand; that is up to the players to decide. The group will learn about something that the two characters did together from this table, and the result will affect both of the characters. These past events will all lead to the entire group meeting up and having an adventure together when the game begins.

The last table is also a little different; it gives the character a special item of some sort. That item might be some extra money, a minor magic item, an odd trinket, or even a townhouse in the great city. The value of these items might not be immediately apparent, but the GM is very clever, and she is likely already scheming about their history, purpose, or fate.

## THE OTHER BITS

After rolling on all of the tables, the character is almost complete. The player should total up the character's Ability Scores and jot them down on the character sheet, as well as any other information needed from the Playbook, such as saving throws. The player should also pick an Alignment now. The rulebook describes the three Alignments on p.11, but if a player is really unsure, he should just pick Neutral. The character also probably has some money to spend, so the player can pick a couple items that he might really want and give the gamemaster some time to plan things for the adventure ahead.

The player also will need to record the character's class abilities. Most of these will have been taken care of when rolling on the charts in the Playbook. For instance, rogues will have already generated their extra skills, mages their various spells, and warriors their weapon specialization. However, a rogue's special 'Fortune's Favor' ability, and a mage's 'Sense Magic' ability should be recorded now.

Also, if the group thinks it is important, the player can pick the languages that the character knows. Everyone speaks a common language which they share, but characters with high Intelligence scores can know more.

## WHAT DOES THE GM DO?

### MAKE NOTES

The things the players are rolling on their Playbooks' charts and their embellishments as they chat around the table are gold for you. The GM's Scenario Pack has lots of places for the gamemaster to write down important people, places, and things that come up during this part of character creation.

In particular, many (but not all) of the Scenario Packs have a table or two with blank spots for things that come up while the players are making their characters. The gamemaster will need to fill those in now, as the players are chatting and rolling, so that she can figure out the results of that table when the time comes. Any time something from their tables or their own brainstorming grabs the GM's interest, she should make a note of it in the Scenario Pack on these tables.

## PLAYBOOKS FROM BEYOND THE WALL

*There are a great many Character Playbooks available for Beyond the Wall and Other Adventures. Mechanically it is a simple matter to use these Playbooks in your games of Through Sunken Lands, but the flavor of these characters will be quite different.*

*The best way to address these tone differences is to take things one step at a time and be willing to make adjustments as you go. Instead of making friends with a faerie in the woods, perhaps the character met a strange spirit from another realm. Instead of fighting orcs on the road, maybe the character faced the warband of a champion of chaos and barely lived to tell the tale. Small changes like this can make the character feel much more appropriate to the sword and sorcery genre.*

*The Playbooks for Beyond the Wall have the characters begin in a simple village in a fantastic land. If a player wishes to take such a character and transport him to the great city, the simplest thing to do is to pause at some point during character creation and figure out how the character made that journey. We recommend sharing a contact with one of the other characters who are in the great city to further tie things together.*

*Note that Beyond the Wall assumes that characters begin at first level, so the player will need to 'level up' the character after finishing with the Playbook.*

*Playbooks made for Through Sunken Lands can, likewise, be used in games of Beyond the Wall. See p.12 of the 'Core Rules' section for notes on playing with first level characters and be prepared to adjust flavor and tone as needed.*

## GUIDE THE PLAYERS

It is important to look at how much time the group has to play and guide the players through the character creation process so that they will still have time to get into the adventure on the same night. The dungeon is waiting, and they do not want to miss it. We find that if you have around four hours to play, the group should spend around an hour on all the pregame stuff and then two to three on the adventure itself.

Alternatively, perhaps the players are being tight lipped or having trouble coming up with ideas to embellish their characters. That is a great chance for the GM to step in and prompt them with leading questions like, "Scott, I notice that you sailed to exotic islands in the past, and that Jill did the same. Do you guys think that you sailed together? If not, were you on rival voyages? Did you meet during that time?"

## ROLL ON YOUR TABLES

The gamemaster has tables in her Scenario Pack too, and they will help to come up with the background for the evening's adventure. While the players are making their rolls, the GM should make hers too. However, the gamemaster should be careful not to miss out on any juicy bits from the players' discussions, as she can always take a minute to make rolls while the players are filling in their sheets or picking equipment.

As the gamemaster is filling in information in the Scenario Pack and seeing the results of her own rolls on the tables, she should begin to get a vague idea of what is going on. Just as with the players, the GM will only have basic descriptions of things from the Scenario Pack. It is up to the GM to weave it all together. Many of the Scenario Packs provide short "dungeons" for the climax of the adventure. If so, the GM should go ahead and roll on these tables as well so that she is not stumped when the characters get there.

## WHAT DO WE ALL DO?

### RECENT EVENTS

By now, the players should all have characters with a history together and the gamemaster should have an idea from her Scenario Pack of what's been going on recently. All the group needs now is an impetus for those characters head off in search of glory and treasure.

Each Scenario Pack has a table called 'Recent Events.' Each player, in turn, should roll a die and see what happened to his character some time within the last couple of weeks or so. The character belonging to the player on his left was there with him for his recent event, and has a chance to help him out. This means that every character will have been involved in two events, and they should be weird and intriguing enough to get the players ready to get into the action right away once play starts.

Each result on the Recent Events tables gives the player an option of acting on the event and, thereby, making a roll.