

# TALES OF THE HARROWED LAND

-DARK FANTASY / SWORD AND SORCERY ROLEPLAYING-

## RULES PRIMER

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# Dedications

This Work is Dedicated to My Mother

Who always encouraged my reading, delvings and roleplaying, and excursions into the imaginaiton. Even those strange and dark. Who impressed upon me the importance of the literary, and saw to my eduction and learning.

And to Her Mother

Whose hours spent with me when I was a child formed my love of the story. She spun many accounts of the old world: a great tapestry of myths and folklore. Her stories of far off places, of curious visitations and the people on the edge of the world fueled my childhood passion for the strange. Perhaps she was the first Tale Teller in my life.

-Mothers Day  
May 14, 2023

For all the strange creatures.

The old Goddesses and Gods whose names now are only echoes. Those creatures of the wood and shadow - who have always been at the edges of our world.

For the tellers of Tales... Especially those ancient people declared primitive. The indigenous singers whose voices were drowned out by the modern din - silenced by the roaring guns and grinding of the machines of "progress". But whose Tales evoke truths of a world more raw, but more honest.

# WELCOME TO THE HARROWED LAND!

Greetings Hero! Scheming nobles, rough swordsmen, keen eyed burglars and magicians of woodlands and darkness – all are welcome!

This is Asvárna - a new world of ancient cultures, hidden danger, intrigue and heroic action. Enter a dark fantasy setting of decayed empires, ancient ziggurat cities, vast marshy plains and a bloated angry red giant sun.

What role will you take in the building of the New Territories? It won't be easy. Your fellow humans – survivors of the Infestation of other worldly fiends - may be a boon. Or they may be only out for themselves.

Strange creatures and wild animals lurk on the fringe of humanity. And all the while the parting gift of the Karkaron fiends – corruption - has embedded itself in the land itself... Magic is made wild and risky. The temptation of grandeur can transform the wanton into... something else.

The ancient tablets have been retrieved, the papyrus scrolls have been laid out. The first words of the story have been written. Now you will begin writing your own Tales of the Harrowed Land.

## THROUGH A HAZY GLASS

If you are reading this you likely already know what a role-playing game entails. This is a primer – a shortened rules set and encapsulated scenario (called a Tale) that takes you to the imaginary world of Asvárna.

It is a grim place with a glaring red giant sun, two moons (one of which looks like a shattered skull in the sky) and vast humid plains surrounded by craggy forlorn peaks.

To the north and east is a great ocean that none alive have traversed. To the west, spanning far to the south is a forest, grown dense and dark over the last 1000 years, that few can claim to have entered. Fewer claim to have returned from its depths.

The world emerged from a devastating supernatural plague, brought on by the infestation of otherworldly horrors. Remnants of ancient empires, strange wanderers, and primitive cultures convene and clash on a seemingly small, but somehow still grand palette called The New Territories.

And in this world Heroes – larger than life adventurers - make their fortunes in the twisting ancient city avenues or among the sprawling wilds.

In these tales the heroes are taken to the steps of ancient lost cities, meet mysterious cults and seedy nobles, encounter avaricious crime lords and strange beasts. And they may even stumble upon a hint of re-emerging darkness

## WHAT IS FAMILIAR, WHAT IS NOT?

Many of the RPG concepts you may be familiar with appear in Tales of the Harrowed Land. Most notably it is a Roleplaying Game. One person acts as the Overseer (Game Master) and creates a story for 1 or more players. The Overseer controls the flow of time, the unfolding of the plot, and all of the Non Player Characters in the game (Royals, shopkeepers, bandits, urchins, monsters) that the heroes encounter.

The players take on the role of Hero characters – the main actors in the play, the protagonists of the story. And navigate the structure set forth by the Overseer.

There are a lot of familiar tropes: barbarian sword swingers, stealthy rogues, tribal magicians. But what is different is that there are no set classes or levels. Every character starts with a concept and then allots points to attributes, skills, gifts and other aspects that define what the character can do.

Tales is human-centric. There are no elves, dwarves or other non-human races (at least none that are... socialized). Each culture is rich and deep and draws loosely upon our own history and mythology.

The characters in Tales are way above normal people in power level. Most of the citizens in the world are only Low or Average NPCs (which affects a number of their traits). The heroes tower above them in skill and ability.

The game is broken up into segments of play called Tales (scenario, adventure) and within that are Chapters (think of acts in a play or chapters in a book), Encounters (think of individual scenes in a movie or TV show), and then finally Action Sequences (action based "rounds" when things get heated).

In the full game, Heroes grow over Chapters and Tales, and eventually these become Sagas – grand story arcs that sometimes span the lifetime of a hero. Or even a civilization.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

The most important things are: A scheming Overseer and players who take on the roles of Heroes.

You don't need much to try this primer. You will find pre generated characters in this booklet.

It will also be handy to have some way of taking notes on hand.

And a handful, nay - a fistful – of 10 sided dice.

## THE MEAT ON THE BONE

At the core of the game are characters. Without characters - both the player character heroes and the NPCs controlled by the Overseer - an RPG does not exist.

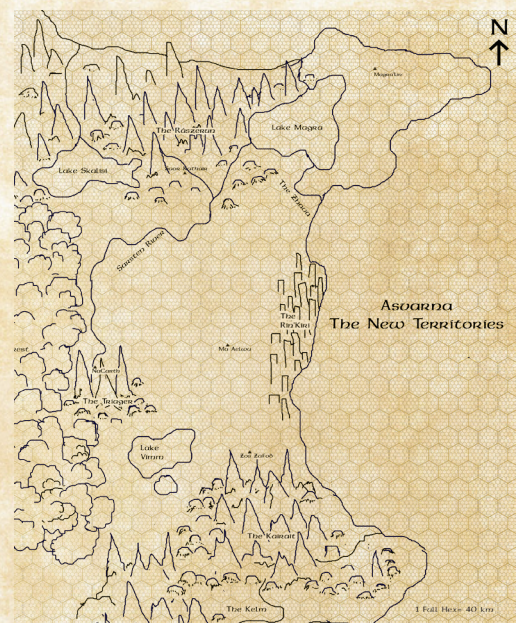
This next section will take a brief look at what makes up a character, and a look at the people of the Harrowed Land!

There are six unique cultures inhabiting the New Territories. Each one has their own history and language. They may seem familiar but alien all at the same time.

In the full game the robust character creation system and lore will allow you to explore these cultures and access over two dozen skills, sixty gifts, plus an in depth rules for incorporating and even inventing your own magic.

This primer is meant to just give you an idea and taste of what is possible in Tales of the Harrowed Land.

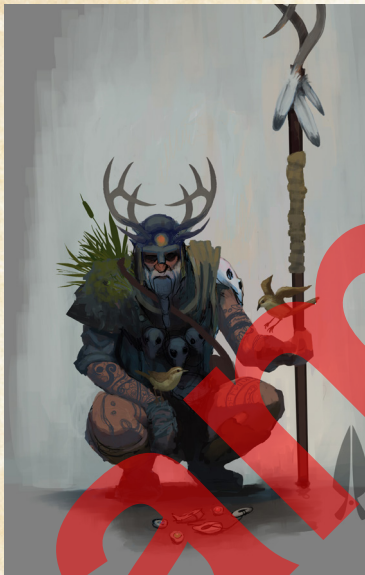
There is enough information to use the pregenerated characters and the Dumān Steel scenario.



# PEOPLE OF THE HARROWED LAND

## THE HAPSHAR

Along the borders of the Niogi Forest, among the foothills of the Triager peaks, are the walls and oddly spiny and warped towers of the crumbling and grey city of NaCarth. Once a capital of the old Empire, the place has become the new seat of power of the formerly imperial Hapshar. They are a lithe and pale people known for both their aristocratic bearing and degenerate and depraved ways. The center of their belief is the veneration of family and ancestor. Wise and devious - unscrupulous trading and noble scheming is their hallmark. But from their line also come many a renown warrior, magician and entrepreneur.



## THE FROAR

The untamed mountains and woodlands to the north are homeland of the clannish Froar. Once they were isolated, but can now be found in many cities and villages across the new territories. They are statuesque, broad, wild and bronze skinned. Each of their families are bloodlines allied with an animal totem. The large size of the Froar and their reputation for roughness is balanced with their affinity for nature magic and the wild places. Few know the outlands better. The Froar now only skirt the edge of their former homeland. The peaks there have become haunted by dark, winged horrors.

## THE MELUK

Far across the great plains – known for their steeds and skills with anvil and spear – ride the Meluk. They hunt, herd, and trade. At one time their range and tribal lands swept far to the south and west. But since the great renewal they only roam as far as Niogi and the treacherous Kairat peaks to the south. In the last generation they have been landed, building Mu Aelwu, a town of bamboo and low timber where tribes gather to trade, council and debate. They are on a quest for a lost oasis deep in the plains, where dwells the spirits of their ancestors.



## PRIMER RULES - PEOPLE OF THE HARROWED LAND

### THE RUBARI



To the north sits the most ancient city of the land: Magra'Lin. Its ziggurats and wide garden lined concourses hint at the place's antiquity. This is the domain of the Rubari. They are marked by a rigid culture and overseen by the ancient and secretive cult of the Blazu Razed. The Magra peninsula was the only part of the land not infested by Karkaron corruption and the Blazu Razed's cloistered magic is said to be the reason. Once known as a remote oasis among the muggy swamps on the northern coast, people from all regions have now crammed within it's walls. The Rubari are now wardens of what is now the Territory's most populous - and most diverse city.

### THE SUUAT

Through the living memory of all the Suuat have wandered. They that lay claim to the royal lineage of a sunken land far to the south. The Suuat travel across all of the New Territories, often alone but sometimes gathering with their extended kinfolk. These family lines form long and deep ties bound by complex honor customs. Their internal society is unknown to most outsiders. Ancestral songs in a poetic language speak of the great wonders of their once vast empire, magic and old gods. All of that is now lost beneath the waves. Often traders, scouts, trackers and spies, they've learned to survive between and underneath the societies of the New Territories.



### THE VARINKA

To the south of the great plains, among the forboding Kairait peaks is fallen Zos Zafod. It is a haunting ruin that the ancestors of the Varinka came to occupy centuries ago. Now the shadowy people are the keepers of whatever occult powers and strange spirits murmur secrets within the walls. The Varinka are known as the land's most versed sorcerers. This makes them a target for much suspicion, and much envy. It is said the eldest among them start to take on a reptillian or avian countenance.



# THE CHARACTER SHEET

This section is a break down of character statistics. Shown here is a full sheet used for Hero and Major NPC characters. Many of the characters in the intro scenario have a reduced NPC character sheet. Rules for using some of these the character elements are detailed later in the rules primer.

## Name, Culture, Concept

The player and hero **Names** are what both the human player and their hero character are known by. The **Culture** indicates which of the six types of people the character hails from. **Concept** is a general idea of what makes up the character. Such as "Flamboyant Sorcerer" or "Famed Assassin".

## Attributes

These are the core of a character. The score indicates the number of dice in a pool when performing Challenges based on that attribute.

**Body** denotes strength and endurance.

**Finesses** is a character's quickness and manual dexterity.

**Mind** is a character's wits and perceptiveness.

**Presence** is a character's inner will and their effect on other people

Human ratings are 1-10.

**TALES OF THE HARROWED LAND**

Player Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Hero Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Culture: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Concept: \_\_\_\_\_

**Attributes**

Body: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Finesses: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Mind: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Presence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Traits**

Initiative: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Defense: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Prowess: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Glory: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Essence: \_\_\_\_\_

**Health**

Total: \_\_\_\_\_ Current: \_\_\_\_\_ Wounds: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (4 Die or 50% -3 Die or 25%) Harming: \_\_\_\_\_

**Action Points**

Essence Max: \_\_\_\_\_ Current: \_\_\_\_\_ Corruption: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Tapped: \_\_\_\_\_

**Skills**

Skill	Rank	Attribute	Die	Rank	Attribute	Die
Acrobatics (Mind/Presence)	0			0		
Animal Handling (Presence)	0			0		
Athletics (Body/Presence)	0			0		
Climbing (Body)	0			0		
Concealment (Mind)	0			0		
Deception (Mind/Presence)	0			0		
Endurance (Presence)	0			0		
Gambling (Mind/Presence)	0			0		
Insight (Presence)	0			0		
Intimidation (Presence/Body)	0			0		
Leadership (Mind/Presence)	0			0		
Languages (Mind)	0			0		
Lore (Mind)	0			0		
Magic (Presence/Mind)	0			0		
Mechanics (Presence)	0			0		
Medicine (Mind)	0			0		
Perception (Mind)	0			0		
Range Combat (Presence/Body)	0			0		
Reading (Presence)	0			0		
Robbing (Presence)	0			0		
Stealth (Mind)	0			0		
Sneak (Mind)	0			0		
Subterfuge (Presence)	0			0		
Sight of Hand (Presence)	0			0		
Swordplay (Mind)	0			0		
Swarm (Body)	0			0		
Tarot (Presence)	0			0		
Unarmed Combat (Body/Presence)	0			0		
Unconscious (Mind)	0			0		

## Traits

These are derived from the Attributes.

**Action Points** are spent each Action Sequence to do things.

**Corruption** is the influence of the dark forces of the Harrowed Land. (This may also be used for successes in challenges, with a price...)

**Defense** is how hard it is to damage the character.

**Power** is the character's control over mystic energies. (This is the die pool to cast magic effects and sometimes resist magic)

**Essence** is the inner life force and connection to the living. (This is spent to power Gifts and is used when casting magic)

**Health** is how many wounds a character can take. (Losing health causes die roll reductions and eventually unconsciousness and death)

**Initiative** indicates who acts first in an Action Sequence.

**Glory** is a measure of fortune and status.

**TALES OF THE HARROWED LAND**

Hero Name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Portrait: \_\_\_\_\_

**Gifts**

Gifts	Progression	Activation Cost/Requirement	Description

**Languages**

Kvosson (Common Trade)

**Persona**

**Weapons/Attacks/Abilities**

Name	Power	Attack Pool	Skill Rank	Roll	Range	Short	Range/Long	Range/Max

**Armor**

Name	Rating	Notes

**Possessions**

Character Notes

**Currency**

Magra Chips

Sma

## Skills

These are how the character interacts with the world and accomplishes tasks. They each have a Rank. The Rank is added to the die results during a challenge, usually based on an attribute. Human ratings are 1-10.

## Gifts

The "super powers" and unique talents that make the hero larger than life. This includes the ability to use magic, social and lineage traits, potent combat maneuvers and extra sensory abilities.

## Languages

These are the languages known by the character. This will usually be their cultural language and the common trade tongue "Kvosson". But it may include others.

## Attacks and Armor

A quick reference section that lists all the hero's combat statistics.

## Possessions

Notable possessions the hero has. It is assumed most heroes start with items common to their concept and profession.

## Lucre

This is a measure of fluid wealth and social credit. In longer games it allows heroes disposable income that they don't have to track.

## Persona

Elements of the hero's personality and background. These help in roleplay and also have tangible effects on the game during long term play.

## Currency

The coin of the realm is a silver Magra. Each is broken into 6 chips for small exchanges.

## PLAYING THE GAME

Tales of the Harrowed Land uses the **Knucklebones** Dice System.

Everything in this game is resolved entirely through the use of 10-sided dice.

These are generally rolled in a group called a Die Pool. The goal is to beat a specific number called a Challenge Rating.

Each die is treated as a separate score, not added together.

Each of these dice are modified – often by a Skill Rank on the character sheet as well as by encounter or environment factors (i.e. deep shadow or fog can modify a Challenge based on staying hidden. A person dodging and weaving may be less likely to be hit with an arrow, modifying ranged attack challenges).

More successes on the dice usually indicates that the attempt is more effective.

This Challenge Rating is sometimes revealed at the time of the roll. Often times it is kept secret by the Overseer.

### FORMAT NOTES

Within this document most dice rolls will be formatted with the size of the dice pool followed by the modifier to the dice results.

**(Number of Dice) + Modifier**

*Example: An attack is listed as 8D+6*

*This indicates 8 10-sided dice are rolled and +6 is added to the result of each one.*

Similarly Challenges have consistent notation. Attribute and Skill Challenge indicators will follow these formats:



**Attribute - CR - Challenge Rating**

**Finesse CR 8**

This means a number of attribute dice must be rolled against the Challenge Rating. Calls for Finesse Die Pool roll against an 8 Challenge Rating.

If listed as a Resistance Challenge:

**Finesse Resistance CR 8.**

That mean each success eliminates some or all of a game effect (damage, mind control, etc...).

Skill Challenges are notated like this:

**(Skill Required) CR (Challenge Rating)**

This means a Skill is required to meet that challenge. This is always the Attribute Die pool with results modified by that skill rank.

*Example: Deception CR 12 indicates that the Deception skill is used against a Challenge Rating of 12. Deception almost always uses the attribute of Presence. Presence dice are rolled and the Deception Skill Rank is added to each die, as they try to score successes against a 12.*

All fractions in Tales of the Harrowed Land are rounded down.



# CONDUCTING CHALLENGES

There are two key types of Challenges used in this primer: Skill Challenges and Attribute Challenges.

In an *Attribute Challenge* the dice are not altered by any other character ability unless the Overseer assigns a modifier.

They are always achievable on a 10 or less.

They are often used when no skill applies to a Challenge or more frequently as a Resistance Challenge. This is using roll to avoid some kind of game effect (damage, poison, mind control etc...)

*Example: Our Hero – named Fathra - is using their Presence to avoid succumbing to magic manipulation of the undead sorcerer – Nevra the Undying. Fathra has a Presence of 6.*

*The Overseer tells her that the Challenge Rating is 8 (based on the power of the sorcerer). Fathra's player rolls their pool of 6 Presence Dice. They score a 1, 3, 5, 7, 8 and 8. That is two successes due to reaching the Challenge Rating of 8 on two dice. Fathra avoids succumbing to the mind control of Nevra.*

Skill Challenges are the most common roll in the game. In this case a Challenge Rating usually between 10 and 20 is indicated and a character's Skill Rank modifies each die roll.

*Example: Trittu the Warrior has to leap over a slowly growing crack in a cavern floor as an earthquake begins. Their Player, Jerry picks up a handful of 10 siders. The Overseer declares that it is an Athletics Challenge with a Rating of 12.*

*Trittu's Body is 8 (8 dice are rolled) and their Athletics Rank is 6. Which means a 6 is added to each die. This should be no problem! Jerry rolls the bones... watching them spin... and one by one the results are revealed. 1, 2, 2, 4, 5, 5, 6 and an 8. Two successes! Trittu leaps the chasm and escapes before the quake sunders the cave.*

The Skill rank is 6, so 6 was added to each die for 7, 8, 8, 10, 11, and then a 12 and 14.

Typical Challenge Ratings Are:

	Attribute	Skill
Easy	4	7
Average	6	10
Difficult	8	12
Unlikely	9	15
Impossible.	10	18

Additional modifiers are applied to the Challenge Rating before the die rolls are made.

Modifiers aside from a skill rank always affect the Challenge Rating, not the die roll totals. A beneficial modifier is a reduction to the challenge rating. A more difficult Challenge Rating adds positive (like +2) to a Challenge Rating.

Some effects and situations alter the number of dice in your pool. Gifts often add bonus dice to a pool. Some supernatural effects reduce the dice of a target. The Overseer should tell players of all modifications before the dice are rolled.

*Tip: This math may seem confusing at first but most players catch onto it quickly. But here is are some hacks that early play testers devised:*

1 - Look at the highest die roll first and add your skill rank if necessary. If that doesn't succeed the attempt fails. If that succeeds, then see how many of that number you have scored. That is your number of successes. Then look at your next highest die number and repeat the process.

2 - If your Challenge Rating is known then you subtract the skill Rank from the assigned Rating. That tells you the minimum die roll necessary to succeed. if you have a Skill rank of 4, and know the Challenge Rating is 12, then any die scoring 7 or higher is a success. If you have a skill rank of 9 and the Challenge rating is 16, any 5 or higher on a die is a success.