

Until five short years ago, the Realm was the undisputed ruler of Creation. The only ones still willing to argue the point were hill-men savages and the glorified bandits that populate the Scavenger Lands.

The Empress had it all, a never-ending reign. And then, she vanished. Now, it seems like the Realm's dominion is nothing but a fading memory.

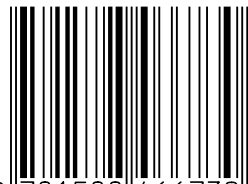
The world tears itself apart. Great powers come out of hiding in the Empress' absence. The dead have destroyed a city in the East, and the Realm's armies marched to defeat against the Bull of the North. Every kingdom is full of war profiteers and prophets of woe. An age of war approaches with the certainty of an onrushing storm.

As a mortal in the Age of Sorrows, you must survive as best you can in a time of warring heroes. As the world trembles on the eve of the Time of Tumult, you must find your way without special might or wisdom. Will you rise to defend your ideals or merely seek to survive?

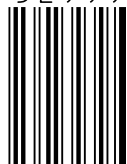
What stories will they tell of you?



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Sample file

...and then the bartender said, “Gods and sorcerers are like faggots and junkies. You just can’t get rid of them. I mean, you can get up on your high horse, and you can say, ‘We won’t have any of that foul sorcery in this town,’ and the Immaculates can rail against people who set up shrines, but the truth is, they’re not going anywhere. You’re just the same as the anti-opium nut on his wagon or the guys who lay for rakes coming home from the boy bars. The only thing those folks are doing is making themselves feel self-righteous. They aren’t changing anything. The human need to change the world is as central to us as the need for sex and thrills. Even if you scare someone off, they’re still a faggot or a junkie, they just can’t hook up. It’s pretty much the definition of futility to keep people away from something they go out looking for.

“And, gods of the Scavenger Lands bless them, the Council of Nexus realizes that, and it has a very understanding and, I think, progressive view on the matter. And while it can look pretty small-minded from the perspective of someone having it enforced on him, I don’t mind telling you that I agree with it. Yep, if you’re wondering, I do work for the secret police, and yes, this is a tavern for sorcerers. I am the barkeeper, a friend to the patrons, and no, you cannot ask me to set you up with someone to sell your soul. I can see you’re new here, and I’ve heard your name around, and so, I’m gonna tell you how it is. I don’t make these rules, but I think they’re fine.

“There are two rules of magic in Nexus. The first is “Don’t get seen.” Nexus is built on trade, and merchants don’t come to places where demons walk the streets and sorcery patently flourishes. The scene is big here, and everybody who’s anybody has a sorcerer. That doesn’t matter — keep it looking small time. Don’t be a high roller, don’t break the ice, don’t make the shills wonder if they should go somewhere else to sell their wool next year. If you fuck up once, maybe they will just hurt you, cut off one of your nuts or something. If you fuck up twice, you die for sure.

“The second rule is “Do not prey upon this city or attempt to overwhelm it with your magic.” Don’t send out demon assassins to pick off the Council. Do not snatch bums off the streets for use in your black magic. Do not enthrall people and have them give you all their money. Do not do the sorts of things that sorcerers do that make sorcery illegal in other places. The reason those things make sorcery illegal is because they are wrong and they are threats to society. If you did them in Nexus, other people would do them too, and it would fuck up the program. Here in Nexus, the penalty for fucking up the program is death, and you will not be the special exception.

“So all that established, how can I help you?”

Fucking great. Everyone in this town is on the take. I don’t know if I should shit or go blind. I am totally unready to cope with this shit. Until, like, six weeks before, I was an apprentice court sorcerer in a city in the Hundred Kingdoms that you have never fucking heard of. Its people thought they were the shit — three squares even in lean years, and there was always a different traveling entertainer every couple of nights. I grew up in Great Forks, and I know splendor, and let me tell you, it was the armpit of nowhere, but they had it pretty good, and I didn’t think the place was going anywhere. It seemed like a good place to go to ground. How wrong I was.

The prince had a Dragon-Blood who fought in all his battles, and I guess the outcaste was pretty decent because we took in a lot more than we gave, in terms of tribute. I was still the “apprentice,” but I was pushing 30 and doing most of the work, while waiting for Haderu the Wise to retire or

push off. I'd been a journeyman when I left Great Forks, but Haderu wanted me to be his "apprentice," and I didn't argue. Maybe you'd quibble with it, but it was a condition of my employment, and a bad house is better than walking the roads. He could call me a monkeyfucker if he wanted, I didn't care. I figured, in the end, when I settled down for my 30-year stint as king shit, it'd lend me legitimacy to have done it that way.

So, about a year ago, this all changes. Haderu and I were up at the fort, and there's no way to describe it, the place just went instantly to hell. We'd had some bad omens, so everyone was on edge, and then someone — one of the kitchen boys — shouted there'd been a murder. It seemed like few came to the alarm, and the runners sent out to find the absentees mostly never returned. The few who did narrated scenes of murder in every inhabited location. In no more than five minutes, half the people in the fort were just dead. No explanation, just the obvious signs that they'd been slain bloodily with a blade. There had been no noise or cry. From the fact that most of the messengers never came back, we knew the killer was still active in the keep.

Haderu and the lord and the Dragon-Blood had all been up in the throne room, and they moved down to the front court to command from the front door as soon as people started turning up dead. I was with them, of course. We had no idea what the hell was going on, but the outcaste was covering us with his jade daiklave, and I felt supremely confident (I helped Haderu sketch out his diagram against gods and demons. We weren't sure what was murdering folks, but it certainly seemed that a spirit of some sort was probably the cause. We didn't know of anything so powerful in the region, but it was our best guess.

It was also wrong. I was down on my knees finishing up the diagram, and Haderu was just standing up to lead the incantation of sanctification, when all of a sudden, this fucking little girl drops down in the middle of us. The Terrestrial swung at her instantly, so fast that the way I noticed the girl was as the target of Ouchuwe's daiklave. Suddenly, she's a bear, and damn, everyone is dead. Ouchuwe left a claw on the thing's ribs, and then, the she-bear, twice as tall as a man now, just pounded through his defenses and drove his corpse to the stones so hard she shattered the cobbles. Then, the prince and Haderu were felled, unfortunate enough to be standing upright when the bear-girl's talons scythed by.

I dropped the chalk in my hands and ran in the opposite direction she was facing. I heard her turn behind me, but I think she would have had to chase me and didn't see me as a threat. I ran around through the postern gate only to find there were a dozen beastmen cleaning out the pantry fire-brigade style, while two buck-ogres stood guard.

I went out to the place in the woods that Haderu had told me to meet him at if the fort were ever burned and looked under the rock for the bolting money. The generous allotment suggested to me that Haderu's opinion of his employers had been considerably less positive than my own. But it sure didn't feel like that at the time, and judging my locale's conditions to be going West at a rapid pace, I decided to up stakes and relocate to more convivial parts. What I've seen and heard since then suggests to me that it was the renegade Lunar warlord Sleeves of War who killed the prince, my master and the outcaste at the gates to the fort and that I might actually be one of the luckiest people alive in Creation today.



It was my observation on my travels that the world is entering a time of woe and that if I wish to prosper, it would be best to accept a purely parasitic mode of existence. As a rootless knave, I'd be suited for existence in a world where owning a house simply meant you had property to loot.

I set my sights on Nexus, thinking that, if I was to be a parasite, I would go to what surely must be the greatest focal point for refugees and the dispossessed, where the permissive local laws, or lack thereof, would allow me to prosper best while battenning on my fellow man. Surely, Nexus would be teeming with marks.

Oh, how naïve I was then, to think that the fat, matted bush of the river harlot's legs didn't have room to accommodate just one more sucker.

Nexus sees waves of refugees all the time. Every time there's a big war in the Hundred Kingdoms, another few thousand wash up on this most inauspicious beach. To the locals, this was like an especially busy harvest season, and the dinars of the dispossessed were their glittering fruit. It sometimes contented me that all these rabble would probably be slain or forcibly parted from their ill-gotten wealth soon. In the meantime, I was an out-of-towner looking for an angle in a city that did not favor strangers.

I had what I thought was a lot of money, but it turned out to be a lot less than I thought it was. I think that I can pay about another two weeks worth of rent on the little room that I'm living in. I know that I am living pretty high on the hog compared to a lot of people in this city, but I really don't know if I can explore the lower social orders and live. My landlord is a retired headhunter who gave up banditry and rents out these little bachelor's apartments. He's told me that he'll eat me if I fall behind on my rent, and I've become aware that that's not actually illegal or even seen as wrong in this city.

I needed to start peddling people their horoscopes, and fast. I didn't need to hear the local pint-puller at the thaumaturge's bar tell me that he worked for the secret police and that these were the 12 simple rules to keep your nose clean while your practiced sorcery in Nexus. I wanted to make my landlord's sons grow up strong by filling his purse, not his stewpot. I'd pack it up and take a boat up the river to Great Forks except I don't have enough money for the passage anymore, and I don't know if I want to see the place it's probably about to become. They're probably about to start passing out the good drugs and getting everyone wound up about their posterity in the city's grand epic tale of victory. Footnotes on a death roll. I don't want any posterity I can't eat.

"After having heard all that advice, I think I'll just have a small beer and roll on."

"Understandable," he said and memorized my face.

I left in a leisurely sort of way and lingered nearby, savoring a slab of barbecued meat I hoped was from a stock animal. It wasn't very long until someone approached me. I didn't know if he was a recruiter for the secret police or an agent for one of the people who had recruiters in the bar. From the way Nexus worked, I couldn't see that there would be much difference.

The way I had seen things, this town was already going to hell. They might have been ready for the flood of refugees, but the government of Nexus seemed to have made a tactical error and let other powers come to roost in their territory. My cannibal landlord was a member of a basement-worshipping cult of Dace, a mercenary soldier the city hired by the job to protect its interests. There are people who say he's one of the Golden Ones, the "chosen prophets"



that every street-corner preacher has invented to represent this year, and there was no bolt from the blue, no pressure on him to break up the cult.

I figured the people running the town wouldn't bother with a sting operation. They'd already lost their privileged status and were probably just recruiting. The guy asked me if I'd be willing to see a lady he worked for sometimes. I said sure, if it was about business. He said it was, and I went with him, and that's how I started working for the Tang-Zen crime syndicate.

So, I've been where you're standing. I've walked out of the Talking Stick shaking my head at Murufu behind the bar there and the size of his balls. The secret police are cool and all, but there are sorcerers out there who better themselves by means other than peddling horoscopes and fending off curses. The Tang-Zen has an army of magicians, mortals and even some outcasts. Our leader's the head of the syndicate's lady, and they're in tight. Have you been here long enough to learn who Ophilis Ses is? Yeah, that guy? I had dinner with him over at his place in the Cinnabar last night. And here I am, talking to you? If you're a good worker and a smart guy, there's a seat at the big man's table for you, too.

No, you don't need to step up right now, man. And this is not a pushy sort of pass. We don't need to be pushy. We're right here. I'm just telling you this — I don't think what I was thinking before Azure Path's recruiter walked up on me was wrong. I think this city is going to hell, and let me tell you, I may not have lived here for years, but I can tell you that bartender remembered your name. This city's going to hell, and when it realizes that, the Council is going to try to kick everyone who can possibly endanger it out. You can either be here with us or you can prepare to hit the highway. You come by any of our shops and say that Candle sent you, and they'll put me in touch with you.

Here's a bag of dinars. Take it, courtesy of me. This isn't work. This is me to you. Don't sell your ass to the secret police. Don't get eaten by cannibal landlords. This is the shittiest city in the world, and you are fresh fish. Good luck sister, see you around.