



BLOODY BRIDGES

The Nexus Season One: Unseen World

Episode Eight

SAMPLE

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Sara Blake



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PREVIEW

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DSPNS1E8 Preview

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ABOUT THIS SERIES

Welcome to Arcanum!

The Nexus is a series of print (or digital, for you folks in e-book land) fiction, structured in the format of a television series. The individual books, called *episodes*, are novella-length, ranging from 10,000 to 40,000 words.

Each episode has a self-contained plot of its own, but also builds toward a season arc.

Season One consists of nine episodes. There will be a Season Two, but Season One is a complete series in and of itself.

Also, for those readers following my Barrow City fiction, I should note that The Nexus is set in a completely separate world. There is no overlap between my Barrow City and Arcanum fictional worlds.



Watershed Bridges

“*The Exorcist*, *Five Nights at Freddy’s*, and *Pet Sematary* are all playing,” Bailey said, scrolling through the movie theatre app on her phone. She pushed her magenta hair out of her face and read the last title again. “That’s not how you spell *cemetery*.”

“*Five Nights at Freddy’s* looks good,” Logan said through a mouthful of half-chewed churro. “I watched the trailer the other day. Looks like that old pizza place over in Newgate from when we were little, Pizza Twins. The one with the creepy robot-puppet things.” He led the way onto one of the many bridges along the Watershed pathways.

“Yeah, but we can watch that one online,” said Sam. “They released it in theatres and streaming at the same time.” They followed Logan onto the small, wooden bridge, stopping halfway to look down at the little stream flowing under it.

Bailey shoved her phone in her pocket and hurried to catch up. She reached the other two at the middle of the bridge and said, “True, plus it’s PG-13. I could do without a theatre full of fourteen-year-olds.”

“Especially on Halloween,” Sam said. They launched into an imitation of a squeaky voice. “*Ahh! I’ve never seen a horror movie before! I have to scream in public and pee my pants!*”

Logan laughed. “Seriously.” He pinched a chunk off of his churro and dropped it into the water.

"Hey," Sam said. "You're not supposed to feed the fish."

"Everybody loves churros."

"So, *Exorcist*, or *Pet Sematary*? Seriously, why is it spelled that way?" Bailey watched as a fat koi rose to the surface and sucked down the chunk of floating, fried dough.

"No idea," Logan said. He took the next-to-last bite of his churro, then tore up the last bit into smaller pieces and tossed them into the water.

"You really need to quit that," Sam said, but they didn't actually sound all that concerned.

"*Exorcist* starts at 8:20, and *Pet Sematary* starts at 8:45. If we do *Pet Sematary*, we'll have time to hit the haunted house first."

"There's a haunted house?" Logan asked.

"Yeah," Bailey said. "Over at the amphitheater."

"So, it's outdoors?" Sam asked.

"I think there's a tent," Bailey said. "Kandyse posted something on her TikTok yesterday. It looked fun."

"I dunno," Sam said. "I'm not a fan of those places."

"Why not?" Logan asked. "Issums scairt?"

Sam rolled their eyes. "It's not that. It's just... like, they're not allowed to actually *touch* you, but they get all up in your personal space. It's like being picked on by a big brother going—"

"I'm not touching you!" Logan finished for them, putting a finger half an inch from their nose.

"Exactly!" Sam said, swatting the finger away. "I hate that shit."

"I'll pay for your movie ticket if you come to the haunted house," Bailey said. Now she'd brought it up, she really wanted to go check it out.

"Pass," Sam said. "But if you really want to go, my nerdy heart would be delighted to wait for you in the bookstore. You can have your jump scares, and I'll get my own heart rate up the old fashioned way: with caffeine."

Before Bailey could respond, Logan stopped short in the middle of the bridge. She and Sam both banged into him.

"Why'd you stop?" Sam asked.

Without speaking, he pointed at something on the path ahead of them.

Bailey and Sam looked where he indicated. "I don't see anything," Bailey said, keeping her voice low, just in case.

"Me neith—wait," Sam whispered. "Yes, I do. Over there, at the edge of the bridge."

Bailey looked. It took a moment for her vision to pierce the gloom, but once it did, she jumped like she was already at the haunted house. A pale face hovered

in the dark. An old man with an unkempt beard stood behind a bush, looking at them.

You didn't see unhoused people at Watershed very often. The sprawling shopping center was too busy, and didn't have great sidewalk connections to the rest of Arcanum. That, and Bailey assumed mall security patrols kicked them out regularly. Still, though, it wasn't unheard of, especially at night. Despite being a busy commercial center, there were plenty of natural areas, benches, and sheltered alcoves and doorways, perfect attractors for those in need of a relatively safe place to sleep outdoors.

But why would this guy be standing behind a bush? Maybe he wasn't unhoused; maybe he was a rapist or serial killer, ready to leap out and attack them. "I think we should go back the other way," Bailey said, already taking a first step backwards.

"But what if he needs help?" Sam asked.

"What if he needs help murdering you?" Bailey countered.

"He's not gonna murder anyone," Logan said. "It's Halloween; he's just out trying to scare people."

"Not helping," Sam said. "Jump scares and invasions of personal space are bad enough. Random people on the sidewalk will actually touch you."

"Come on," Logan said. "I'll protect you."

Sam rolled their eyes again. "Yeah, 'cause you're an Avenger."

Logan took three steps forward. Bailey and Sam, sticking close together, took a tentative one and a half.

The man behind the bush made a loud noise, somewhere between a wheeze and a trumpet blowing.

Logan jumped back, slamming into the other two. He must not have realized they'd been following so close; he yelped when he hit them, louder than the old man's noise. All three held their breath, watching the man behind the bush, waiting to see what he'd say or do.

The old man didn't move. He continued to stand there, behind the bush, watching them. He made another noise. This time, it was softer, much more wheeze than trumpet.

"I think he needs help," Sam said.

"So, call 9-1-1, or mall security," Bailey said.

"And say what? We saw a person being old in public? Anybody we'd call will ask if we've approached him. If we say we haven't, they aren't going to come."

They had a point, but, at the same time, if the guy wasn't in enough distress to merit a call for emergency services, then they could just leave, right? Bailey looked at her phone; they still had time before the movie, but her chances at the

haunted house were dwindling fast. She considered the irony of an actual scary experience getting in the way of her pretend scary experience. "Sam!"

Sam didn't answer; they'd already covered half the distance between the others and the man in the bush.

Logan called out too, but they kept walking.

"Hi," Sam said, approaching the man. "I'm Sam. Do you need help with anything?"

Bailey watched. She could hear Logan breathing hard behind her; so much for his *I'll protect you* bullshit.

"Can you talk?" Sam asked, when the man didn't reply.

In response, the bearded man made another wheezing sound.

"Do you want us to call someone?"

Again, the man just stood there wheezing, half hidden behind the bush.

Sam looked back at Bailey and Logan. "I think we should call security now," they said. "He isn't respon—"

It happened so fast. One minute Sam was standing there beside the man, looking back at Logan and Bailey with a concerned look on their face, and the next they were...

Bailey's mind couldn't make sense of it. There was blood everywhere, and pieces of... Oh, God, pieces of her friend all over the bridge, all over the path. The pieces, though, were rapidly vanishing as the... *thing*... continued to devour them.

What was behind that bush was no old man. It wasn't a person at all. It was... it was...

Bailey dropped to her knees, unable to look away. More importantly, unable to *run* away, which she knew she needed to do, but her muscles had turned to mush. She lay on the bridge, watching the nightmare before her, unable to move. Logan was pulling on her hand, urging her to get up, half-dragging her back across the bridge.

"We can't help them," he was saying, his voice thick with tears now rather than churro. "We have to go, we have to get to safety then call someone to—" He didn't finish the thought, though. Who could they call who could handle that thing? Who could stand any chance?

The monster looked up, its bearded face smeared with Sam's blood. Bailey tried to stand, but her legs still wouldn't support her. Logan tried one more time to pull her along, but his survival instinct kicked in and he let go, fleeing.

The wooden bridge vibrated as the monster's heavy paws pounded against it. Bailey tried to look at it, to see death coming, but her mind wouldn't let her focus on the creature. Instead, she looked where Sam had been, at the puddle of blood and bits that were once her friend. She noticed a single rivulet of blood trailing

away from the main pool, having found the seam between the sidewalk and the wooden bridge. The blood dribbled along the crack and into the stream.

Bailey's last thought was that Sam would be so mad their blood was going into the water. They hated it when people fed the fish.



Monster

“This isn’t quite how I pictured sword training would go.” Ella dropped her arm, letting the wooden practice sword rest against the floor of Marcus’ training room.

“Is your arm tired?” Arjun asked. He didn’t sound concerned.

“Yeah.” She shook the arm out, trying to relax the tight muscles. “I gave up karate when I was thirteen, but I didn’t think I was *this* out of shape. I didn’t expect a wooden sword to be so heavy.”

“It isn’t. That’s why you’re practicing with it first. Picture that wooden sword with a ten-pound weight attached to the very end.”

“That... would be hard to work with,” she admitted.

He nodded. “And now imagine you’re balancing that ten-pound weight not on the end of a strip of wood, but on a length of sharp metal that could cut you in half.”

Ella did imagine it, a bit too clearly. She shuddered. “Practice sword it is. But it sounds like I’m never going to be able to use the real thing. I’m not strong enough.”

“You will be,” he said. “Right now, we’re getting you used to how to stand and hold the weapon. After that, we’ll do precisely what I described, and begin attaching weights to the end of the practice sword. We’ll begin light and increase gradually; you’ll develop the strength you need as we go.”

“You really think so?”

"I do." He favored her with a smile. "Now pick that sword back up and show this monster it's chosen the wrong librarian."

She smiled back, then lifted the wooden blade and swung it at the practice dummy. It hit with a *thunk* and almost knocked her off her feet. "This is another thing I didn't expect," she said, once she'd regained her balance. "I thought sword fighting training would be more like in the movies or old books. Dodge, parry, that sort of thing. I figured we'd each have a sword and would be practicing against one another."

"We'll get to that," he said. "But how often do you imagine you're going to encounter an opponent with a sword in twenty-first century Arcanum?"

"Well..."

"Exactly. If you find yourself needing a sword, it isn't likely going to be for a fencing match. You're learning to defend yourself against monsters, not highwaymen."

"You ever sword fight a highwayman?" Arjun's being more than three hundred years old fascinated her.

"Sort of," he said, looking away.

"What do you mean 'sort of'?" He looked twitchy.

"Well," he said, continuing to twitch. "I've not always been the confident, upstanding demon you see before you, you know."

Ella made a fake gasp of horror. "You *were* a highwayman, weren't you?"

"Only ever out of necessity," he said. His shifty eyes said something different.

"You know, despite my extensive education, most of what I know about highwaymen comes from historical romance novels."

"That might have given you a rather romanticized impression of those rascals."

"It might. I might actually find them very attractive."

"I also suspect you may be trying to cut your lesson short because your arm is tired."

"It's not because my arm's tired."

Ella dropped her wooden sword on the floor as Arjun stepped close and put his arms around her. His kiss was gentle but deep, already familiar. She looked forward to her training sessions not because she was eager to learn to use a sword, but because they gave the two of them an excuse to spend time alone.

It had only been about two weeks since the incident that had brought them together; an incident that should, by all rights, have caused them never to want to look at one another again. Ella had found a book in Marcus' library she couldn't open. Arjun had used magick to release the cover, which had also released a magickal-construct version of the Roman god, Cupid. Alt-Cupid had

then proceeded to wreak havoc all over the mansion and grounds, using his arrows to fill people with either uncontrollable desire or overwhelming revulsion.

Ella and Arjun had both been hit with the *desire* arrows and had missed all the goings-on in the rest of the house while they obsessively explored each other's bodies in the basement room containing Marcus' disassembled library. It had been an imbroglio of consent issues all around, culminating in everyone having to fight Alt-Cupid in the nude. Even now, the fact that everyone on Arjun's team—including Kaden—had seen her not only naked but in the literal throes of passion filled her with humiliation.

After it happened, Ella and Arjun avoided one other for a short while, but she found herself thinking about him often, and not just about Alt-Cupid's horrible manipulation. After some careful questions asked of the others who'd been affected, she'd confirmed nobody else was experiencing any lingering effects of Cupid's influence, at least nothing beyond embarrassment and anger. Nobody still desired anyone they'd been arrow-shot to desire, and no one was still repulsed by anyone they'd been made to be repulsed by. Some of the victims had been couples in actual relationships, and the events had made lasting ripples, to be sure, but there appeared to be no residual magick.

In short, Cupid's arrows had caused Ella and Arjun to notice something already there between them, waiting to be discovered. They'd been exploring it, keeping it to themselves for the time being, and seeing how things progressed.

At the moment, they were progressing a bit fast for two people who had somewhere to be. "None of that," Ella said, gently removing Arjun's hand from under her shirt. "We have Sini's party, remember?"

Arjun's face dropped. "Oh, yes. That."

"Yes, that," she said. "You don't have to come, but we did both say we'd help out."

"Alright," he said. "But I'm bringing a book."

"Sounds like a good plan."

"Do you want to ride together?" Arjun asked, about ten minutes later, standing in Marcus' circular driveway.

Ella considered. People knew she was taking swordsmanship lessons from Arjun; no one would question why they were together. "Sure. And I grabbed you this. You said you wanted a book to take to Sini's shop."

He took the large, hardcover book from her and looked at the title: *Introduction to Library Science*.

"We were talking about my job the other night, and you sounded curious about what a librarian actually studies. Thought it might answer some questions."

“And also be dry enough to make me want to be more help to Sini?” he asked, one sexy eyebrow raised.

She smirked. “Maybe a bit of that, too.”

Arjun laid the textbook in the back of the van, beside his own, very real, sword in its scabbard. “Get in the van, you.”

Ella gave him a quick kiss, then went around to the passenger side door and climbed in.



“Grab that box of napkins, will you?”

Kaden took the box from the back of Mari’s car, closed the hatch, and followed her into The Crystal Unicorn.

Mari set the two thermal grocery bags she’d been carrying down on the store’s sales counter. “That’s everything except the hot plates and churro warmer,” she said. “I need to ask Sini where she wants me to set those up before we drag them in, so we don’t have to move them around a bunch of times. They’re heavy.”

Kaden thought most of what they’d lugged in so far had been heavy, but he kept it to himself. As much as he hated food service of any kind, even just serving free tacos to the customers at Sini’s grand-reopening party, he was determined to be a good, supportive boyfriend. “I don’t see her,” he said, looking around the small, colorful store. “She must be in the back room, or over on the apothecary side.”

The store was really two-in-one; the public face of The Crystal Unicorn, which sold new-agey things like crystals, candles, and Tarot cards, and the secret apothecary called The Alabaster Capybara, which sold herbs and actual magickal artifacts to serious mages.

“I’ll go check. Keep an eye on the car? We left it unlocked, and I don’t want anybody stealing the equipment before we have a chance to bring it inside.”

Kaden nodded and went to stand by the door, where he could see out onto Kent Street. A black van pulled in and parked behind Mari’s car. As he watched, Arjun Rakkar climbed out of the driver’s seat. To Kaden’s surprise, Ella McIntyre got out of the van as well. Marcus had recently hired Ella to curate his magickal library, but Kaden had known her for over a year; it was still strange to see her interacting with the rest of the team.

Kaden moved to the side so Ella and Arjun could come into the shop.

“Hey, Kaden,” Ella said.

"Is Sini in back?" Arjun asked.

"Think so," Kaden said.

Arjun muttered something that might have been some form of thanks and headed straight for the door at the back of the shop.

"Is Mari here?" Ella asked.

"She went to find Sini," Kaden said. He told her about needing to consult with Sini, the shop's owner, about where to set things up before they could bring in the last of their supplies. He knew he was over-explaining, but he couldn't stop himself; every time he tried to stop talking, the image of Ella's full, naked breasts rose unbidden from his memory, sweaty and bouncing as she and Arjun... "Mari thinks she might be able to get rid of the rest of the supplies left since her taco truck was destroyed in the storm, stuff like napkins, cardboard food baskets, churro mix. Then she can sell the last of the surviving equipment and she'll be out of the taco business for real."

Ella nodded, walking behind the counter and looking at the cash register. "I haven't run a register since high school," she said, trailing a finger across the keys. "I'm not sure if I'm nervous or excited."

"Excited?" he asked. He looked up but had to look away again. "You're an even bigger nerd than me."

"No," she said. "I'm not."

He smiled. "You're really not," he agreed, attempting another look at her pretty face.

"Sini says we can use any of the plugs behind the counter," Mari said, striding across the sales floor toward the front of the store. "Every outlet is on a separate breaker, so we won't overload anything. Hi, Ella." Her glance from Ella, to Kaden, and back again was very quick, but Kaden caught it.

Had it looked like he'd been flirting with Ella? *Had* he been? He didn't think so. Of course, Mari had been at the mansion for the whole Cupid fiasco, too; she'd seen as much of Ella as Kaden had. Maybe she was only jealous because of what he'd seen.

It hadn't only been Ella and Arjun who'd put on an unintentional show for everyone that day; Mari and Kaden had fallen victim to Cupid's arrows as well. They'd been drawn into a small, but genuine, orgy, right on top of Marcus' dining room table. Things had been strained between them ever since, and Kaden wasn't sure whether it was jealousy or blame on Mari's part, or just a guilty conscience of his own. "Let's go get the equipment," he said, hoping to break the tension.

Mari nodded and led the way out the door. Kaden followed, not looking back at Ella.



"I kind of feel bad, eating tacos without Kaden," Liam said.

"He's a big boy," Gina said. "Besides, he and Mari are serving tacos at Sini's store thingie, remember? I'm sure he's eating plenty of those."

"Good point." Liam bit his steak taco in half, chewing the huge bite easily.

Gina was a bit jealous; a mouth that big would come in very handy as the full moon approached and her werewolf appetite kicked into high gear. Shifting forms burned up a lot of calories. For most wolves, that meant eating incessantly for a few days before the full moon, then eating less, but still more than usual, for a few days after, to even back out. Gina, however, had the ability to shift any time during the month. Her appetite spiked after every shift, and she tried to keep her calorie intake high all the time, so she was always ready.

"Tell me again why we decided to come to the mall on Halloween?" Zach asked, looking out the floor-to-ceiling window beside their table. Watershed Bridges teemed with people, many with small children in costumes carrying trick-or-treat bags.

"Because Veracruz is my favorite Mexican restaurant, and you live to please me," Gina said.

"The kids should be gone soon anyway," Zephyr said, taking a drink of water. As the only non-werewolf at the table, his plate was notably smaller. Gina had wondered whether the recent emergence of Zeph's own special powers, something to do with the air element she didn't quite understand yet, might increase his appetite as well, but it hadn't. If anything, he seemed to be eating less. "Trick-or-treat was over at six, before dark."

"Now it's just a thousand teenagers running around trying to scare each other and hook up during a horror movie," Liam said.

"Yeah, much better," Zach said.

Gina smirked. One of these days, she was going to point out to Zach and Arjun how much alike they were.

One day. Not today. Probably not soon.

"Speaking of horror movies," she said. "Anybody up for one?" She'd managed to get the three of them to agree to an actual double date; no way was she going to let them off the hook with dinner only. They were going to eat, see a movie, then eat again while they walked over the cute little bridges like normal couples on a date. Well, normal couples with werewolf appetites, anyway.

"Maybe," Liam said, looking at Zeph.

"I could do a movie," Zeph agreed. "I assume Gina knows what's playing?"

Gina always knew what was playing. She listed the movies from memory, leaving out the ones she had absolutely no interest in. She didn't imagine any of the others would think more than three hours of Taylor Swift or Leonardo DiCaprio sounded like a good idea anyway, but she wasn't taking any chances.

"I vote *Exorcist*," Liam said.

Agreements went around the table. Gina remembered the titles from an earlier look at the Watershed Cinema's listings, but not the times. She pulled out her phone to check after instructing Zach to order her a slice of chili-chocolate cake if the server came by. Their only option for *The Exorcist* was at 8:20, unless they wanted to wait until 11:05. The late show would mean avoiding the teenagers, since it was a weeknight, but what would they do until then? She didn't think she could sell the idea of a romantic walk around Bridges Park for three solid hours, and nobody was going to want to do the haunted house, herself included.

She looked up from her phone to discuss the plan when a loud *bang* interrupted the Mexican pop music playing from the restaurant's speakers. Everyone in the noisy restaurant stopped talking at once and looked up.

The noise had come from the window three tables away from where Gina, Zach, Liam, and Zeph sat. A woman at that table screamed and jumped out of the booth, as though whatever had hit the glass was coming through the window at her. Gina really hoped something supernatural wasn't about to ruin their nice time. She and Zach were finally returning to something like normalcy after the bullshit with Cupid at his father's mansion; she didn't need anything else now. She and Liam, the ones sitting on the outside edge of their booth, stood at the same time and went to look; the red smear across the glass did not bode well.

"What hit the window?" Gina asked. "Was it a person?"

The woman who'd screamed nodded. The man she was with held her, trying to comfort her, and said, "I think he went that way."

Gina turned where the man pointed, which was toward the restaurant's front door. Sure enough, as soon as she looked, a red-haired boy of about seventeen stumbled through the door, covered in what looked very much like blood. More people screamed and gasped, and he fell to the tiled floor. A wide-eyed hostess, even younger than the bloody boy, looked alternately between him and the bar, clearly hoping another employee would step in so she didn't have to deal with it. When the boy reached toward her, she stepped backwards.

Zach walked past Gina with purpose, approaching the boy on the floor. "What happened?" he asked.

"It was— My friends— I left—"

Zach knelt down. "It's okay," he said, his deep voice more soothing than Gina had ever heard it. "Slow down. Was there an accident?"

The kid shook his head. “Not an accident. He was— It jumped—”

“He? Or it?”

The kid was quiet for a few seconds, then shook his head. “I don’t know. Both. Neither.” He looked down at himself, seeming only now to notice the blood drenching him. “Oh God, oh God, oh God!” He shook his arms, as though trying to shake the blood off.

“Did someone attack you? Or an animal, maybe?”

“Maybe.” The kid’s eyes fixed on a point over Zach’s shoulder.

Gina thought that was it, he’d checked out, no more answers from him. But he must have been remembering, replaying the scene in his mind, because after a short while, he responded.

“It was a werewolf.”



“God, I missed these tacos,” Kaden said, talking through a mouthful. It tasted exactly like the ones from Mari’s truck, Tío’s Tacos, had.

“You eat tacos like twice a week,” Mari said.

“Yeah, but not these. I get why you’re letting the truck go, and you’re gonna be the best archaeologist since Indiana Jones, but the world will not be the same without Tío’s Tacos.”

Mari smirked and rolled her eyes, but he could see she appreciated the compliment. Of course, she’d inherited the truck because her uncle José, the *tío* in Tío’s Tacos, had been killed by a supernatural creature. He decided to let the truck talk stop there, lest he bring up bad memories.

Also, lest he bring up a subject he wasn’t ready to be completely truthful with her about, like the part where his friend and teammate, Liam, was the werewolf who’d killed José. That was a very long conversation for a much later time, after she’d learned enough about the supernatural to understand things like a rogue werewolf shift, and how Liam hadn’t been able to help what he’d done.

Kaden took a drink from his can of Dr. Pepper; his mouth had suddenly gone dry.

“We have to go.”

Kaden looked up, wincing a bit from the sharp bubbles in the soda. “We what?”

Arjun repeated himself, not elaborating.

“We promised to help with the party.”

"I got a text from Gina. We're needed."

"But—"

"Now."

Arjun was a man—or, technically, human-rakshasa hybrid—of few words, but this was laconic even for him. Understanding the urgency, Kaden turned to Mari. "Can you handle things without me?"

Mari, too, seemed to get what Arjun's tone meant. "Yeah. Go ahead. Can't ignore the bat signal."

It was Kaden's turn to roll his eyes, but he knew it was sort of true. He gave Mari a quick kiss, popped the last bite of his taco into his mouth, and grabbed his jacket. He snatched a churro before following Arjun out the door.

"What's going on?" Kaden asked Arjun, as they climbed into the van.

"Gina doesn't know," he said. "Or, at least, she didn't when she sent the message."

"Then why—"

"Someone burst into the restaurant where they were having dinner, covered in blood, claiming a werewolf attacked him."

"So, a rogue wolf?" Kaden really hoped it wasn't a rogue werewolf. He preferred monsters who weren't also victims themselves; it made fighting them a lot less complicated.

"I don't think so," Arjun said. "I suspect *werewolf* was simply this person's only reference point for a monster. Gina agrees."

That made sense. When someone who didn't know about the supernatural saw a real werewolf, they assumed it was a regular wolf, or even a big dog. But for someone whose notion of a werewolf came from movies and TV, any large, furry monster might register as a werewolf in their limited imagination. "So, what might he have seen that would have looked like a movie werewolf?"

"So many things," Arjun said. "None of them are good."

"Where are we going?"

"Watershed Bridges."

"The *mall*?" Kaden almost choked on his churro. "There's a monster at the mall? On Halloween?" The place would be beyond crowded. How many people had seen this thing?

Arjun nodded.

"Where at Watershed?" Everybody called Watershed Bridges a mall, but it was really a sprawling shopping complex; the developers probably called it something like a "lifestyle center." A monster at Watershed could mean anything from a creature lurking behind trees in a park to something devouring people on the escalator at Barnes & Noble.

"I'm not sure. They were having dinner at Veracruz and a teenage boy burst in, covered in blood and saying a werewolf attacked him and his friends. She said to let them know when we get there; I presume she'll let us know where they are then."

"They're going after it without us?" Kaden was flattering himself with the *us* in that sentence, he knew, but going after an unknown monster without Arjun was risky.

"I received one text message," Arjun said, starting to sound pissy. "Why don't you call her whilst I drive?"

Gina's phone only rang once, but it was Zeph who answered it.

"Is Gina okay?" Kaden asked. He switched the phone to speaker so Arjun could hear.

"Yeah, she's shifted."

"Do we know yet what we're dealing with?"

"No, but it's something bad. The kid took us to the bridge he was crossing with his two friends when it attacked. It's soaked with blood, but there's nothing else left, not even tatters of clothes. One of them was a girl, and even her purse is gone, though someone could have seen that on the ground and stolen it, I suppose. Whatever attacked them either dragged them off or ate them, right down to their clothes and belongings. That's what Gina's doing now, seeing if there's a blood trail leading away, or if she can pick up on the scent of the creature."

"What could eat two people, clothes and all?" Kaden wondered aloud.

"Did the boy give any more description after calling it a werewolf?" Arjun asked.

"Yeah," Zeph said. "They were crossing a bridge and saw an old man standing at the other end. There's a big bush there, and the kid said the guy was standing behind it, rather than on the path. He didn't talk to them, but he made weird noises, like he was having trouble breathing. Wheezing, but also a loud noise he said sounded like a trumpet. One of the kids decided to approach him, see if he needed help, and the thing jumped out from behind the bush."

"The old man?"

"That's just it," Zeph said. "The kid says it turned out not to be an old man at all. Its face looked like a man with a beard, but its body was, well, he's still calling it a werewolf, but something big and heavy, with a lot of teeth and claws. It was already dark, so he isn't sure about colors or details."

"Did he say anything about its tail?" Arjun asked, his voice taking on a dark tone.

"No."

"Can you ask him?"

“Sure. Anything specific I should ask?”

“No, I don’t want you to lead him. Just ask if he saw its tail.”

There was a pause while Zeph presumably walked over to the kid. “Hey,” he said in a gentle tone. “My friends who are coming to help have a question for you. Did you see the monster’s tail?”

There was silence for a moment.

“He’s nodding,” Zeph said. “What did it look like?”

The kid spoke, but it was too quiet for the phone to pick up well, even on speaker. When he’d finished, Kaden asked Zeph to repeat it.

“He said it was big and curved, wide at the base and narrow at the tip, almost as big as the rest of the monster. And there was something sharp at the end of it, like a claw.”

Kaden felt his body slam back into the van seat as they suddenly doubled their speed. “What is it?” he asked.

“Zephyr, do not pursue that thing until we get there. I’d tell you to have mall security evacuate the entire area, but I know they won’t listen. For now, do not try to find it or follow it, and do not engage with it. We’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The van’s tires squealed as Arjun pulled into the exit lane for Watershed without slowing down. More squeals from behind them told Kaden he hadn’t checked his mirrors first.

“Um... okay,” Zeph said. “What is this thing?”

“I sincerely hope I’m wrong, but I believe we’re dealing with a manticore.”