



DARK REFLECTIONS

The Nexus Season One: Unseen World

Episode Seven

SAMPLE

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Sara Blake



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PREVIEW

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DSPNS1E7 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.

Prologue





Grand Opening

Sini looked around the newly renovated and remodeled Crystal Unicorn, making sure everything was in place. From the baskets of crystals, packets of herbs, and bottles of essential oils and flower essences along the side wall, to the jewelry case by the cash register, to the bookshelves by the seating area at the back of the sales floor, everything was fully stocked, neat, and ready to be shopped.

She'd hung sheer, black fabric from the ceiling in spots throughout the store as an artistic representation of the veil between the worlds. The gauzy material filled the gaps between display cabinets, defined the edges of the large window at the front of the store, and fell in wispy strips over the doorway to the tiny, separate room that housed the candles, replacing the beaded curtain that usually hung there. Pomegranates and pumpkins sat on various surfaces, adding to the combination Samhain-Halloween theme.

In addition to the store's permanent furnishings, three small tables with two chairs each sat in a row down the center of the floor, ready for the psychic readers she'd hired to give free readings during the party. Half the sales counter had been re-purposed to house an assortment of food. Sini had originally planned to offer a simple spread of appetizers, from crudité and pigs-in-blankets to little cakes. A short while after she'd brought some of the cakes to Arjun and his friends at the theatre to try, however, she'd gotten a call from Kaden's girlfriend,

Mari, with a much better offer. “That smells amazing,” she said, approaching the counter.

“Thanks,” Mari said, placing a small menu placard amid several paper bags filled with tortilla chips and paper ramekins of salsa.

Mari used to own and operate a taco truck, which had been destroyed in the same two-day storm that had trashed the Unicorn. Rather than rebuild and reopen, as Sini was doing, she’d decided to just take the insurance payout and focus on school instead. She still had some leftover ingredients and supplies—things that hadn’t been in the truck when it was ruined. Sini had hired Mari to make and serve tacos and churros for the party, rather than making appetizers herself.

“You want to try one?” Kaden asked, looking up from a stack of freshly-warmed tortillas. “We have beef, chicken, and veggie. I wanted fish, but Mari said those wouldn’t keep long enough in a setup like this.”

“I’ll definitely have one in a bit,” Sini said, silently thanking Mari for not cooking fish inside her store. Normally, she would have also made a suggestive comment about coming back later for Kaden’s beef, but Mari seemed like the jealous type, and she needed their help. “You still good with running the register?” she asked, turning from Kaden and Mari to Ella, who was also behind the counter, organizing the tickets and drop-box for the door prizes.

“Yep,” she said. “You’ll need to give me a crash course in how it works, and anything special I need to know about pricing and whatnot, but I’m all yours for the night.”

Sini went to the back of the store where Alaric sat on a purple sofa. “I will never understand why you bother with this ridiculous novelty shop,” he said. “You have a perfectly respectable, *real* apothecary, right through that door.” He pointed to a door marked EMPLOYEES ONLY beside a shelf holding an alabaster sculpture of a capybara. Sini’s shop was really two-in-one; The Crystal Unicorn, which catered to the New Age and Neopagan communities, and The Alabaster Capybara, open only to mages and other members of the true magickal community. “And you wouldn’t have to dress like...” He made a generalized gesture toward her outfit of a blue, plaid, schoolgirl mini skirt, a white T-shirt with the Crystal Unicorn logo on it, a short, blue cape and a black witch’s hat sitting atop her bright, blue hair. “Whatever this is.”

“You’d understand if you saw the receipts,” she said, brightly. “There’s a lot of money to be made selling crystals and Tarot cards, let me tell you. Besides, it’s fun.” She did a quick spin in place, making the skirt twirl up and give a brief flash of the rainbow-striped panties underneath.

Alaric looked around the bright, colorful space of the store. “We have different notions of fun,” he said.

"Ain't that the truth," she said. "Speaking of the 'Bara, you still down for your job for the night?"

"I am," he said. "Though I can't imagine I'll have anything to do."

He wasn't wrong. Alaric's job for the evening was to watch out for any real mages who might come to the party, wanting to shop from the 'Bara. He'd let them in, through the EMPLOYEES ONLY door, fill their orders, and ring them up. The odds, though, of any serious mages choosing to come into the shop in the midst of the party were slim indeed. "Really," she said. "As long as you make sure none of the unicorns sneak into the 'Bara, I'll consider it a job well done."

"That I can do," he said. "Especially considering the door is locked."

"Still have your key?"

He pulled a key tied to a length of sparkly, pink yarn from under his stylish, black turtleneck. "I do." He seemed offended to have the bright, glittery yarn anywhere near him.

Sini gave him a thumbs-up and headed through another EMPLOYEES ONLY door beyond the seating area. The back room was shared between both shops, running the full length of the double storefront. "You gonna hide back here for the whole party?"

"I've considered it," Arjun said, not looking up from the book he was reading.

"The unicorns won't bite, you know." She walked behind where he sat at a wooden table and put her hands on his shoulders. She bent down and whispered into his ear, "but I might."

"The unicorns?" he asked, ignoring her suggestive comment.

"It's what I call the non-magick types. The ones who come in for the Unicorn side of the shop."

"I see," he said. He looked back down at the book.

"You know," she said, sliding the book away from him and closing it. It was a Library Science textbook, of all the random things. "We have about twenty minutes before we open." She put her hand down the front of his flowy, black shirt. Arjun always wore loose, flowing shirts and baggy pants made of cotton or linen, and yet he somehow managed never to look like a Renaissance festival pirate. Well, rarely, anyway.

"Shouldn't you be making sure everything's ready?" he asked, taking her arm and pulling it back out of his clothes.

She treated him to a heavy sigh. "Fine," she said, stepping away. "But you'd better not mope back here the whole night."

He nodded, nose already back in his book.

"We're opening early," she announced to the room at large, as she re-entered the shop floor and walked to the front. "Ella, turn on the music. I'll be over to give you your register lesson in a few."

Upbeat, Pagan folk music from Sini's "party" playlist began to pour out of the speakers, as she approached the door. She tapped a four-digit code into the store's fancy new electronic lock and turned the sign from *FUCK OFF, WE'RE CLOSED* to *GET YOUR ASS IN HERE, WE'RE OPEN*.



By eight o'clock, the party was in full swing. The crowd was the Unicorn's usual mix of middle-aged New Agers and twenty-something influencer types. Sini didn't recognize even a third of the people in attendance, meaning she might get a lot of new, regular customers out of this party if it went well. She made her rounds, talking to people, reminding them to sign up for the door prizes, get a free reading, or try a taco.

"How's it going?" she asked Nancy, one of the psychic readers, who was between customers.

"Eh," Nancy said. "I forgot to pack my scrying mirror. The crystal ball is great for show, but I work best with the mirror. You don't happen to have a scrying mirror around here I could borrow, do you?"

"Hmm," Sini said, going through the Unicorn's stock in her mind. Were there any scrying mirrors over by the Tarot cards, or in the jewelry case? She didn't think so. "Let me go look," she said.

There were no scrying mirrors anywhere in the Crystal Unicorn. Sini looked across the room, at Nancy, powering through doing readings with her crystal ball alone. Nancy wasn't a mage, but she wasn't exactly a tourist, either. She knew about real magick, even if she wasn't a practitioner. And her psychic skills were no joke.

Decision made, Sini crossed the store. "Did I miss a customer?" Alaric asked, looking up from a book. Unlike Arjun, he hadn't brought his own book with him; he'd clearly pulled *Contacting the Goddess Within* from her shelves.

"Just me," Sini said, pulling out her own key, hanging around her neck from more of the sparkly, pink yarn.

Alaric shrugged and looked back down at his book.

Sini locked the door behind her, then approached a display case of crystal balls, pendulums, and scrying mirrors. A few things on this shelf were mass produced and comparatively inexpensive, but not many. The only mirrors she had in stock currently were of the decidedly *not* cheap and mass-produced variety. There were three, all unique, rare, and powerful. She selected the least

powerful of the trio, gave it a quick smudge with some sage at the apothecary counter, then headed back out into the store. She wouldn't trust many unicorns with such a tool, but Nancy was only about half unicorn; she could handle it.

Sini returned to Nancy's table as she was finishing up a reading. When the customer left, she sat down and placed the mirror on the table beside the crystal ball. "It's not from this side of the store," she said, in a low voice.

Nancy knew about the Alabaster Capybara, even if she rarely, if ever, had need of anything from that side of the shop. She gave the mirror an appraising look. "It's unusual," she said, studying the glass-and-silver device, which was the approximate size and shape of a shallow cat food bowl.

Typical scrying mirrors were made of black glass; they were reflective, but not practical mirrors in any way. This one, however, was made of clear—if a bit smoky—glass, with a layer of pure silver underneath. A row of magickal symbols ringed the inside edge, etched into the glass, with more etchings adorning the silver, outer surface.

"That it is," Sini said. "I wouldn't hand this to just anybody, but I think you can handle it. It's powerful."

Nancy smiled. "I look forward to trying it. It feels like you smudged it already?"

It was Sini's turn to smile; Nancy being able to discern by touch that the mirror had been cleansed was evidence she'd do fine with it. "Sure did. It's ready to go, unless you have any special rituals you need to do first?"

Nancy shook her head. "It should be fine as-is. If it gives me any trouble, I'll let you know. Thanks for the loan."

"You bet," Sini said, standing back up. "Have fun. Be sure you take a break and get a taco at some point. They're crazy good."

Nancy assured her she'd try the tacos, and Sini returned to mingling with the party guests. A girl and a boy over by the Tarot cards caught her eye, and she headed their way. They were glowing red, their auras alight like road flares, but the phenomenon was for Sini's eyes only. It was something new she'd built into the store's protective wards along with the physical remodel: anyone thinking seriously about stealing would glow red, visible only to the caster of the ward.

She approached the pair from behind, quietly.

"It's loud and busy, nobody's going to notice," the girl said.

"Are you sure?" asked the boy.

"The employees are busy ringing people up and making tacos," said the girl, aiming a finger toward Ella and Mari. "Nobody's looking at us."

Sini, still standing behind the thieves, made a gesture with her left hand. The shrink-wrapped box of Tarot cards popped out of the boy's grasp. It floated in midair for a couple of seconds before a gesture with Sini's right hand placed it

neatly back onto the shelf. “It’s pretty stupid, trying to steal from a witch, you know.”



The two teenagers jumped and turned around. The girl made a strangled sound, trying to scream with no breath. After a few frozen seconds, the pair ran, panicked, out the front door.

Sini smiled. Neither of them would ever try to steal from her—or, likely, anyone else—ever again. You’re welcome, shop owners of Arcanum. She headed to the front counter, to check in on her helpers.

“What was that about?” Mari asked.

“Shoplifters,” Sini said. “Magickal items are a high-theft target, ridiculous as that is.”

“Why ridiculous?” Ella asked. “I mean, not saying people should steal, but I can see how stuff like magick books and supplies are appealing to exactly the type of people who’d be interested in them but not be able to afford to buy them.”

“All true,” Sini said. “But how well do you suppose stolen supplies work? You’re starting right out with bad karma on your tools, doing it that way. Plus, stealing from a magick shop means you’re likely stealing from a magickal *practitioner*. Dumb.”

“Guess they won’t be back any time soon,” Kaden said, smiling at the front door.

“Sure won’t. I scared the bejeezus out of them.”

“Hey,” Mari said. “While we have a lull, there’s something I’ve been trying to get Kaden to ask someone for as long as I’ve known him, and he keeps ‘forgetting.’” She made air quotes around the word.

“What’s that?”

“What’s the deal with vampires?”

“Deal?”

“Yeah,” Mari said, keeping her voice down. “I mean, ever since I learned werewolves are real, and magick, and a bunch of other things, I’ve been wondering about vampires. Are they real, too?”

Sini turned to Kaden. “You seriously don’t know?”

He shook his head. “I really do keep forgetting to ask. There’s always a lot going on.”

“Your little band of superheroes does like to stay busy.” She turned back to Mari. “Yes, they’re real. But you’re never going to see one.”

“Why? Are they invisible or something? That sounds like a stupid question, but I honestly have no idea what’s stupid anymore.”

Sini grinned. “Nope, not invisible. You’re never going to meet a vampire because vampires... are extinct.” She grabbed a churro and walked away.

She spotted Arjun near the back of the store, talking with Alaric, and headed that way. She’d made it about half the distance when a commotion near the front of the store caught her attention. “What now?” she asked, changing direction.

The disturbance was in the vicinity of the reading tables. Had someone been unhappy with the fortune they were given, and thrown a fit? Sini knew the readers she’d hired; they all knew how to put a positive spin on even the worst of news; they didn’t typically inspire freakouts. “It was right here,” she heard someone say as she approached.

It was Nancy. She was out of her chair and looking all around the floor.

“What does it look like?” someone asked, also searching.

“It was about this big,” she indicated the size of a cat bowl with her hands. “It was shaped like a shallow bowl, silver on the outside and mirrored on the inside.”

Well... shit.

“The scrying mirror?” Sini asked, arriving at Nancy’s table.

“Sini, I’m so sorry. It just vanished. I was doing a reading with the ball, and when I looked back up, the mirror was gone. It was sitting right here.” She pointed to a spot near the edge of the table. “I wasn’t looking right at it, but I’d have thought if someone took it, I’d have seen.”

“Maybe someone thought it was for sale,” suggested a girl in a skirt with big butterflies printed on it. “It might turn up at the register.”

“Hopefully,” Sini said, thinking that wasn’t likely at all. Who grabbed something off a psychic reader’s table, thinking it was merchandise for sale? “It’s not your fault, Nancy,” she said. “I’ll keep an eye out. I don’t have another mirror to loan you, but I have plenty of pendulums, if you’d like to use one of those?”

“No, I’ll stick to the ball,” Nancy said. “Again, I’m so sorry. I don’t know how it could have gotten away without me seeing.”

“Neither do I,” Sini said. “I don’t think it could have by accident. Whoever took it knew what they were doing. This wasn’t your fault. Go get a taco. You need a break before you start your readings again.”

Nancy agreed, apologized one more time, and headed for the food. Sini realized, too late, she’d encouraged Nancy to leave her own crystal ball behind, when they knew they had a thief lurking in the area. She waved her arms until she caught Arjun’s attention and gestured for him to come to the front of the store. Then she sat down to babysit Nancy’s crystal ball.