



ROGUE

The Nexus Season One: Unseen World

Episode Three

SAMPLE

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PREVIEW

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DSPNS1E3 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.



Welcome to Arcanum

Amber slipped on a hotel bathrobe and stepped out of the steamy bathroom. She went to the window and opened it as far as it would go, which was about two inches. When the hotel was new, back in the 1920s, these windows would have opened fully, but alas, hotel windows didn't do that anymore. Too many people jumping out of them over the years, she figured, and regulations had changed. Especially a place like this, the Nova Hotel, that had been standing during the Great Depression. Ah, well, a little fresh air was better than none.

She picked up the room service menu from the desk, considering. Did she want to fill out the overnight order card, and have breakfast delivered first thing in the morning, or did she want the option to sleep in?

The hotel's breakfast choices sounded superb and waking up to an extravagant breakfast already on its way up the elevator sounded like just the sort of luxury she'd been seeking when she'd decided to come to Arcanum on the spur of the moment, to get away from things at home for a weekend.

She filled out the card, marking lemon ricotta pancakes with blueberries, uncured turkey bacon, and a triple-shot latte. Who'd even *want* to sleep in with a breakfast like that to wake up to? She could always take a nap later if she wanted.

In addition to the room service menu, hotel phone directory, and housekeeping information, was a magazine titled *Welcome to Arcanum!*, featuring

local attractions. Flipping through the bright, glossy pages, she noticed several restaurants with excellent breakfast options. She left the breakfast card on the nightstand rather than hanging it on the door.

She sat down on one of the room's two beds, picked up her portable smoke alarm from the bedside table, and pressed the *test* button. After confirming the unit was on and functioning, she stood back up, hands going to the belt of the robe. She'd laid her nightgown out on the other bed, its blue satin shining in the light of the bedside lamp.

Looking back up toward the window, she noticed a moth fluttering against the glass. She pulled the robe around herself again, the moth serving as a reminder of how visible she was in her brightly lit room to any pervert out there in the night with telescope. She turned off the lights before she finished changing for bed.



The scream of an alarm snapped her awake sometime later, and she sat bolt upright. Looking around, she could see, even in the dark, the smoke filling the room. She leapt out of bed. She placed her palms flat against the room door, testing, before opening it. It was hot. Looking down, she saw smoke billowing into the room from under the door.

She'd known it was a bad idea to stay in a room with only one exit, but hotels with fire escapes were hard to come by and her trip to Arcanum had been last-minute. She'd confirmed there were multiple exit routes out of the hotel itself, but that wasn't enough when she was trapped inside the room. She coughed, the smoke already irritating her lungs, her eyes streaming. Maybe if she opened the window, that would let some fresh air in.

But she knew better than that. Opening a window near a fire created a vacuum, drawing the flames right to you. Maybe, she thought, she could tie the bed linens together, make a rope. That would still mean opening the window, but then she could be out and away. She had two beds' worth of sheets and pillowcases, and probably a spare set in the closet. She could add the shower curtain, too.

It still wouldn't be enough, though. She was on the ninth floor; she didn't have enough fabric to get her close enough to the ground to safely drop. Her only hope was to draw attention to the window, so the firefighters below would notice

her.

She turned on the bedside light, then went back to the room door to flip the switch there as well, turning on the bright, overhead light. She touched the door again, checking, and it was hotter than before, almost too hot to touch. She placed a fingertip against the metal doorknob and pulled back quickly. Looking down, she saw a small blister on her finger.

As Amber backed away from the hot door, the flames overcame the wood. Brightness swelled around the edges of the door, then flames began to appear, like orange tongues reaching through the crack, seeking. She screamed, running toward the window, trying to get as far away from the door as possible.

She flung open the window and put her whole head and shoulders outside. The world below was a twinkling galaxy of red, white, and blue flashing lights, the ground teeming with emergency responders. She took a deep breath of the relatively fresher air before realizing what she'd done.

She heard a whoosh and a crash behind her. Turning to look, she saw the door had lost the fight against the fire. The flames poured into the room, drawn by the open window. As the fire raced toward her, she had no other choice.

She sat on the windowsill, rotated her feet from inside to outside, and jumped.



Hum

“Just coffee, lady,” the man at the front of the line said. “I don’t want none of your mo-ko-cheeto-crap-o-lot-tay horseshit. Just coffee in a cup. Why is that so damned hard to figure out anymore?”

Liam sighed. All the barista had asked was if he wanted room for cream. He was never going to get his own coffee at this rate. He pulled a ponytail holder out of his pocket and fiddled with it, pulling it taut, wrapping it around first one finger then another. He probably didn’t need coffee anyway, especially this late.

But he knew his jitters had nothing to do with caffeine. It was still a week until the full moon, but he could feel it coming. His skin felt tight, itchy. He was hot. He gathered his shoulder-length, black hair and wrapped the holder around it once, twice, then halfway to make a bun. The exposed back of his neck felt cooler for about ten seconds, then was hot again.

“What can I get you?” the barista asked as he stepped to the front window of the Bayou Brew truck.

“Medium coffee and an order of beignets,” he said.

“You got it,” she said. She handed back his debit card and he moved around to the pickup window at the side of the truck. He passed someone walking in the opposite direction with their own beignets and had to concentrate not to actually snatch them out of their hands. The scent of sugar and fried dough made him

nearly double over with hunger. He looked up, taking in the lopsided moon. It was a little early for his appetite to spike, and very early for how twitchy he felt.

He rounded the corner just in time to get sprayed with a mix of chicory coffee and saliva. Mr. Mo-Ko-Cheeto was having another fit, this time at the pickup window. “I said just coffee. What is this flavored crapola?”

Liam’s muscles tightened. He looked at the moon again, reminding himself it was early, willing himself to calm down. *Ignore this asshole.*

“We serve New Orleans style coffee,” the guy at the window said, tucking a stray ringlet of tightly curled, black hair back under his cap. “It has chicory in it. It isn’t something we add to each cup, it’s part of the grounds. It’s mentioned in several places on the menu board.” Liam wondered how many times a day the guy had to deliver that speech to an angry idiot.

“It’s disgusting,” the man said. “You’re in America now, you should serve American coffee!”

The guy didn’t bother to clarify that New Orleans was an American city, or that he just worked there. He knew, as did Liam, that, to a dickhead like this, *American* was code for *white*.

The man tossed his full cup on the ground, one foot from the trash can. The air hummed in Liam’s ears, his temper rising alongside the tension in his muscles. “Sorry about him,” he said to the guy in the window, as he picked up his own order up from the counter. He was cute. Liam would have taken the opportunity to flirt were he not feeling like he was about to vibrate out of his skin.

The guy—Liam didn’t have the concentration to read his name tag—rolled his eyes. “We get at least one of those a day. Them, and the ones who don’t understand we’re a coffee shop and don’t have jambalaya or crawfish.”

“I can imagine,” Liam said. “Do you hear that?” What he’d first thought was his own anxiety was growing into an audible hum. Looking down, the hair on his arms was starting to stand up. It was like standing next to something giving off an electrical charge.

The guy nodded. “I think the lights are about to go out again. I hear that buzz sometimes, before a blackout.”

Liam had to move out of the way then, for another person to get their coffee. He headed to a table with his own coffee and beignets, the hum so loud now he could feel it vibrating in his chest. He felt a burning sensation, and looked down to see he’d sloshed coffee from his cup because his hand was shaking. His breath came fast, his muscles sang in tandem with the humming. He looked up at the

moon again but knew, now, that it didn't matter. He dropped his food on the ground and ran into Sylvan Park, away from the crowd.

There were people in the park, too, but only on the well-lit walkways and open grassy areas. Liam ducked into a copse of trees, where it was shadowed and private. This couldn't be happening, not now. Why was this happening now? How?

But however it was possible, it was happening. Liam dropped to his knees, his shaking muscles no longer able to support his weight. His back jerked and stiffened as red-hot pain shot through him. The muscles of his limbs strained against his bones, as the different parts of his body tried to be different shapes at the same time. His clothes tore off of him before he remembered he should have removed them.

He tried to concentrate on staying quiet, lest someone in the park hear him and come running to help. Attempting to help him right now would be a fatal mistake. His arms and legs shortened as his face elongated, his body shifting from the shape of a man into that of a wolf with caramel brown fur.

At some point during his transformation, the power had gone out. Liam burst out from the trees into the darkened park, lit only by the partial light of the gibbous moon. The people would be blinded, feeling their way around, seeking the park exit. But, to Liam, their scents made them more visible than at the brightest part of the day.

The wolf howled.



A New Case

Kaden liked Zephyr; it was a shame Gina was going to kill him. Zeph had discovered a zipline, running from the back of the balcony down to the stage. It would have been used to allow an actor or a prop to appear to fly onto the stage during a performance. He was currently up in the balcony, testing the connections, making sure it was safe so he could play on it.

“If you use that zipline and hit my screen, you won’t live to regret it.” Gina’s voice boomed over the theatre’s sound system. She’d given up, for the time being, on restoring the film projector, and had spent the day getting her new digital one set up instead.

“Yes, mom,” Zephyr called back.

Kaden smirked and looked back down at his laptop. The comments on his blog, *Arcanum City Secrets*, were still buzzing with discussions about citywide blackouts, as well as lights in the sky and an occasional humming noise. He pulled up the city map in another window and marked the locations of the new reports. These new markers lined up with a pattern he’d been seeing emerge. The power outages themselves were affecting the whole city, but the lights, which he and his favorite research librarian, Ella, suspected were St. Elmo’s fire, and the humming noise some people were hearing, were occurring in a more localized area.

Two of the busiest spots for the lights and humming were in the Arts District, where the Titanic Theatre the team used as their headquarters was, and in and

around Sylvan Park, which was Kaden's home neighborhood. It wasn't only in those spots, though; Kaden had reports in his blog comments of people seeing and hearing the phenomena in a shopping center on the other side of Sylvan Park, a movie theatre a few miles down Castor Avenue from the heart of the Arts District, from an elementary school, and, just this morning, in Cygnet Metro Park. Overall, the sightings (and hearings, in the case of the hum,) had all been reported throughout a roughly round area covering about twelve and a half square miles.

Kaden jumped and looked up when the first line of "Carry on, My Wayward Son" boomed through the speakers. The movie screen was hard to see well with all the lights on, but the black Impala and flaming pentacle were distinguishable enough. That Gina would choose to test out the new system with *Supernatural* came as no surprise, but he did wonder why she was starting with a random episode at the end of a random season. As he was turning toward the booth to ask her, the lights went out. At first, he assumed she'd shut them off so they could watch the show, but when he turned back around, the screen, too, was dark and the sound had stopped as well.

They were having another blackout.



"Need some help?" Ella asked, approaching the front of the research desk.

"Maybe," the woman said, looking embarrassed. That was pretty common; people in a public library were rarely sure exactly what a research librarian was for.

"Trying to find a particular book?" she ventured. "Or need help finding information on a general topic?"

"Wolves," the woman said. "Or, I don't know, dogs, probably."

Ella waited patiently for her to continue.

"I guess I'm trying to figure out whether there are... Where there are still wolves. Or what dog breeds *look* like wolves?"

"Did you see something you're trying to identify?"

"Yes!"

“As luck would have it...” Ella said. She held up a finger to indicate *just a second* and turned back to the other side of the desk. She returned to the woman with a small pile of books she’d pulled a few hours before and hadn’t yet reshelfed.

She opened the book to the page the last person had ended up on. “Is this what you saw?”

The woman looked at the picture of a King Shepherd and frowned. “That’s close,” she said. “How did you know?”

“Whatever you saw, I don’t think you’re the only one who saw it. You’re not the first person to ask today.”

“It was definitely this shade of brown, but this has too much black in the fur. I guess that could vary from dog to dog, though. I don’t know. Maybe?”

“There are some other possibilities,” Ella said, paging through the book. She showed the woman several other breeds that had a similar appearance, breeds that could be confused for wolves. “Oh, and from what I looked up this morning, no, there aren’t any wild wolves in this part of the country, and no reports from the Arcanum Zoo about any going missing.”

The woman seemed relieved by that last part. “Okay, then,” she said. “I guess it was probably one of those king dogs you showed me. I hope its owner finds it.”

“Me too,” Ella said.

“Popular as always, I see,” said a familiar voice.

She looked up to see a smiling man, pushing his light brown curls out of his face. They flopped right back down when he took his hand away.

“Hey, Kaden.”

“Hi, Ella,” he said. “How’s it going?”

“Okay,” she said. She was terrible at small talk, and always felt especially bad at it when she was talking to Kaden. “What are you researching today?”

“Nothing new,” he said. “Checking to see if there’s anything new in the notebook. And saying *hi*.”

Ella was glad she kept the notebook in a drawer at the back of the desk; it gave her an excuse to turn away when she felt her cheeks warming. She’d suspected he sometimes came in just to talk to her, but he’d never actually said so.

Hoping her blush had faded, she returned to the front counter with the notebook. “There were a couple more questions about the lights,” she said, looking over the pages. She kept any questions or comments from patrons about strange phenomena in Arcanum in this notebook, to share with Kaden. “And there was a pair of teenage girls asking about spellbooks, but I don’t think that was anything but normal curiosity. I sent them to the Wicca section, and they seemed happy. There’s one other thing, though. I didn’t put it in the notebook, but I always wonder these days when I get asked the same question over and over.”

“What’s the new question?” Kaden asked.

“Wolves. I’ve had four people so far today ask me about wolves, or about dogs that look like wolves. They all seem to have encountered a stray dog that looked especially wolfy.”

Kaden’s brow furrowed. He looked down, seeing the dog and wolf books on her counter. “You have a picture of what they saw?”

She nodded. “I think it was this,” she said, turning the book toward him. “A King Shepherd. They all said it looks pretty similar, that the brown fur is the right shade, but that what they saw didn’t have so much black.”

“Isn’t that a weird amount of people to come running to the library over a stray dog?”

“Not necessarily,” she said, looking through one of the books for a different picture she’d seen earlier. She found it, and turned that book around for him, too.

“Holy shit,” he said, before slamming a hand over his mouth. “Sorry,” he said, much quieter. “Holy shit.”

Ella smiled, understanding. The picture was the only one she’d found of a King Shepard with a person in the photo, providing scale. They were enormous dogs. The one in the picture looked like a particularly shaggy German Shepherd except far bigger in all directions. Its head was twice the size of the man’s beside it, and sitting on its haunches, its ears reached his chest. “You can see why people might have been alarmed.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I have someone I should show this to.” He pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of the image.

“So, anything new going on with the blog?” she asked. Then she felt stupid, both because she read his blog every day and knew there was no new story and because if there *had* been something new, he’d have arrived with research to do.

“Not really,” he said, but he was distracted now. He kept looking between his phone and the dog book.

“You know someone in animal control?” she joked.

“What?” he asked, then seemed to realize what she meant. “Oh.” He gave a short, half-hearted laugh. “No. Just someone who... Just a dog person, really.”

Ella toyed with asking, “Has she seen a King Shepherd before?” as a sly way of slipping the “she” question in, but didn’t. She wasn’t that cool; it would come across weird and awkward.

Kaden’s phone buzzed, and he looked. “Actually,” he said. “I have to go. Thanks, Ella.”

“Anytime,” she said, but he was already gone.



“Saving people. Hunting things. The family business.” Gina spewed flecks of popcorn as she recited the line along with the actor on the screen. She was glad she’d decided to start the show over from the beginning now that she had the projector set up. Sam and Dean hadn’t even evolved their super-serious, gravelly Batman voices yet.

Kaden dropped into the seat next to her and stuck his hand in her popcorn. “Get your own!” she said.

“I think we might have a case,” he said.

Gina looked back toward the screen; the wendigo pulled the screaming wilderness guide into a tree. “Well, I got an episode and a half in, anyway.” She aimed her remote at the booth window and shut off the projector. Now they were sitting in the dark; she still needed to get the house lights under remote control.

“What’s the case?” she asked, once the lights were back on.

“You’ve said not all werewolves can do what you do, right?”

“Quote Vampire Diaries from memory? Dance ballet? Finish six cheeseburgers in one sitting? Because that last one, most can.”

Kaden rolled his eyes and sighed. “Shift when it isn’t the full moon.”

Oh, that. “Understatement,” she said. “The majority can’t. It takes years of work, and some special circumstances. Dare I ask why?”

He pulled up a picture on his phone and handed it to her. “That’s a dog from a book Ella showed me.”

“It’s a King Shepherd,” she said.

Kaden looked impressed. “Ella told me she’s had like four people asking her about this dog today, saying they’ve seen it around town and wondered whether it might be a wolf.”

“Okay...” She didn’t like where this was going.

“And to me, it looks a lot like you look when you’re shifted. Wrong color, of course, and you’re less, well, shaggy. But in terms of the general size and shape, this is in the right ballpark.”

Which was why she knew the breed on sight, of course. King Shepherds were hybrids of German Shepherds plus any of a few other very large dogs; they were basically giant German Shepherds. And German Shepherds looked a lot like slightly undersized wolves. “So, people are seeing a dog that looks like a werewolf, running around town on an off-moon. That’s worth keeping track of, but not sure it’s a case.”

“It wasn’t,” he said, taking his phone back and pulling something else up. “Until I got this news alert.”

“Oh,” Gina said, skimming the article. “Well, shit.”

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