



THE NIGHT MARE

The Nexus Season One: Unseen World

Episode Two

SAMPLE

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Sara Blake

Author



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PREVIEW

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DSPNS1E2 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.



Obituaries

“Hello?” Kaden called out from the stage. “Anybody home?”

“Hey, Kaden,” said Gina’s voice.

He looked around, not seeing her.

“Up here.”

He found her then, her face poking out of a window at the very back of the theatre, above the balcony. “Coming down.” Her face disappeared from the window, and soon she was walking up the aisle toward the stage.

“What’s up there?”

“The light and sound booth. I’m trying to get the old projector working.”

“Why?”

She shrugged. “To watch movies?” It’s not *all* monsters and magick around here. We have downtime.”

“So, there’s a screen?” Kaden asked.

“Yep. Pulls down like a curtain at the front of the stage.”

Kaden remembered seeing a poster for a Captain America movie in the window out front before he’d known the secrets the Titanic Theatre contained. “Was the Nexus here before? When the theatre was open?”

“For a while,” she said. “Back when I was new to the team. Someone thought it would be a great hiding-in-plain-sight sort of thing. Movies only, nothing that gave us actors and stage crews to keep an eye on, but it didn’t work. The Nexus’ influence was too strong.”

“Yeah? I thought that was what the symbols around it are for.”

Gina had shown Kaden the Nexus the first time she’d brought him into the theatre. Deep in the subbasement, the Nexus was a huge ball of concentrated magickal energy, surrounded with glowing signs and sigils covering the walls.

She nodded. “Sort of. They’re called wards, and yes, they help protect the Nexus, and they do mute the power some. I’m sure you’ve noticed the difference in how it feels standing in front of the Nexus versus being up here. But it only mutes it so much; the Nexus still works, after all. Magick is stronger anywhere in Arcanum than in other places because of the presence of the Nexus, and magickal beings and creatures are still drawn here. Sitting right on top of it for the duration of a movie had a strange effect on some people.”

“What kind of strange effect?”

“You know how everything’s intensified during a full moon? Not just for werewolves, like me, but for people in general?”

Kaden nodded. He knew from his background in journalism that hospitals, police, even people who worked in retail and customer service all reported higher incidents of strange and outrageous behavior during the full moon.

“Well, imagine a place where it’s an extra powerful full moon, every night of the week. Everyone was overly emotional, which is bad when you’re showing them movies and feeding them a bunch of sugar. It was sort of like running a daycare center for adult-sized toddlers.”

“Fun,” Kaden said.

“So,” Gina said. “I see the notebook in your brainy little hand. You have something for us, don’t you?”

“I do. Let’s sit, and I’ll show you.” Kaden hopped off the stage, and they sat down in the front row. “I’ve noticed some strange deaths. I don’t know what any of it means yet, but there’s a pattern.”

“Things you saw on the news?”

“Two of them got some mentions on local news and in the *Arcanum Chronicle*, but not with any suggestion they were related. And the third wasn’t reported at all.”

“Then how do you know about it?”

“Journalist, remember? I’ve been reading obituaries every day since I became a Nexus Guardian, keeping an eye out for patterns. I track names and manners of death, then cross-reference those with news stories and police blotters. The first one I found was a man named David Marsh, who was riding the subway last Monday morning. Witness descriptions say he was sitting quietly in his seat one minute, then the next he was jumping around the train, yelling ‘get ‘em off me!’ and frantically brushing himself. Then he jumped right off the moving train.”

Gina cringed.

“Yeah. The next one got more news attention, just a few days ago. You might have heard about it. A woman jumped out the window of the Nova Hotel?”

“That Art Deco building on the riverfront?”

“That’s the one. Amber Jensen, a tourist from Cincinnati, jumped out the window in the middle of the night, in her nightgown. No suicide note. The people in the rooms next to hers say they heard her screaming before she jumped, like she was terrified of something.”

Gina nodded her understanding, leaving Kaden to continue.

“The last one is a bit different. I just found this one this morning, and it won’t seem like the other two until I explain what I think the pattern is.”

“Okay...”

“This one was a patient at Riverbend Hospital, George Lang. He had a fairly minor, outpatient surgery, a carpal tunnel release, and was in recovery. He hadn’t woken up yet, but was expected to soon, so they administered acetaminophen through his IV to take the edge off any pain he might wake up with.

“Except shortly after they did the injection, his blood pressure started to spike, and everything went haywire. He died before they figured out what was happening.”

“Allergy?” Gina guessed.

“That was their first thought, but no. I found his wife’s Facebook account, and she’s told friends he didn’t have any drug allergies of any kind, certainly not to something as common as acetaminophen. But here’s the thing—it wasn’t acetaminophen they gave him.”

“There was a mix up?”

“There was one *hell* of a mix up. They gave him something called methylene

blue by mistake. It's almost only ever used to treat one specific, rare blood disorder. There's no reason they would have given it to this patient."

"Okay," Gina said. "So, a suicide, a psychotic episode, and a malpractice case. What's the pattern?"

"None of the deaths should have been possible."

"How do you mean?"

"Start with David Marsh, the guy on the train. Picture the scenario. He's up, out of his seat, wiggling out about imaginary spiders or beetles or whatever he's seeing, and then he jumps off. That means the door was open. How did the door open on a moving subway train?"

Gina's brow furrowed. "Go on."

"Next, Amber Jensen, the hotel lady. You stay in hotels often?"

"Not often, but I've stayed in hotels, yeah."

"Ever seen one with windows that open?"

Her brow furrowed even deeper. "No, now you mention it. Most of them, the windows are solid panes. I've seen a few where the windows maybe crack open a bit, to let in some fresh air, but I can't remember ever being in a hotel where the windows opened wide enough to jump out of."

"Exactly. And for just that reason. Hotels don't want the liability of people jumping or falling out of their windows, so newer ones are built with windows that don't open. And the older ones all have them blocked in some way, so they don't open anymore, or only open a crack. The Nova was built in the 1920s, so its windows used to open, but they don't anymore. I called to make sure. They all have blockers on the window frames so the sash can only rise a couple of inches. You can get some fresh air, but you can't jump out unless you brought your toolbox with you and are ready to rip out some nails."

"So, what about hospital guy?"

"George Lang. That one's more possible than the other two, but it would have had to be a homicide or a billion-to-one mistake. I didn't bother calling the hospital, because I knew they wouldn't answer questions, but my research says, in general, they wouldn't keep a rarely used drug like methylene blue in the same place as a super common one like acetaminophen. That's not just for safety reasons, but for practical ones—why waste space in your primary medical supply area with something you might need to pull out a couple of times a year? That might happen in a tiny hospital or clinic, but not in one of the biggest hospitals in a major city.

“But, beyond that, even if someone had messed up and stored a vial of methylene blue in the wrong place, and even if someone else had then picked it up and not checked the label, they still can’t have switched them by accident. IV acetaminophen, like the majority of injectable drugs, is a clear serum. But methylene blue is, as implied, blue. Like, it’s very, *very* blue—like ink. If it was added to an IV saline bag, the whole contents of the bag would have wound up looking like window cleaner spray.”

“And was his IV bag blue?”

“I don’t know,” Kaden admitted. “Hospitals are subject to super-strict privacy laws, even when there *isn’t* a wrongful death suit on the horizon. There’s no way they’d tell me that, so I didn’t even bother to ask. But it wouldn’t change my theory either way.”

“What’s your theory?”

“These people all died in ways that should have been impossible. Jumping out windows and doors that have failsafes in place to keep them closed, and a medical mix up that should have been impossible to miss. I think someone, or something, is causing it.”

“How?”

“That I don’t know,” he said. “It could be a person or creature directly causing the failures. Someone could have removed the blocker from the hotel window and messed with the door mechanism on the train. And obviously, a person could have deliberately given George Lang the wrong medication.

“But if someone did that, they covered their tracks well. Because that hotel room? According to hotel management, the blocker is still in place. Even the police say it appeared untampered with. Same with the train; inspectors say the door was in perfect working condition after the accident.”

“I know you have another theory,” Gina said.

“I do. You and Arjun are the experts as to how it might tie into anything magickal or supernatural, but I think someone, or something, is messing with probabilities. Maybe if that window were pushed at *just* the right angle in *just* the right temperature and humidity conditions, it could bypass the blocker and open. Maybe the train door’s safety mechanism had a one-in-a-million chance of failing to engage, and number one million happened just as bug-guy was thrashing around.”

“And certainly,” Gina said, catching on. “That blue drug could have been stored in the wrong spot, grabbed by a distracted nurse, and administered by a new person who didn’t know what they were looking for while the person who

was supposed to be monitoring them wasn't paying attention. It would have taken a ridiculous number of slips, all at the same time, but it isn't impossible."

"Exactly," Kaden said. "So, any idea what could do something like that? Is there a spell, or some sort of math monster?"

"Math monster?" Gina asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Or, I don't know, something like a math monster with a less stupid name?" He grinned, looking through the floppy hair partially covering his eyes.

Gina shook her head, smiling. "You know," she said. "If I don't get the projector working, you're almost enough entertainment all on your own."

Kaden blew a raspberry at her.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go ask Arjun about your math monster."

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