



# THE RELIC HUNTER

The Nexus Season One: Unseen World

Episode Five

## SAMPLE

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DSPNS1E5 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.



## Hole

“Traffic’s backed up from Riverbend Hospital downtown to the Nova Hotel by Riverfront Park, due to a large sinkhole that appeared on Gemini Parkway at around seven o’clock this morning.”

“The timing of this couldn’t be much worse, could it?” The voice of Gabe, one of the morning anchors, was hard to hear over the helicopter’s noise, but Gia was used to it.

“No, it could not, Gabe. We monitor Gemini Parkway every morning for rush hour traffic because it’s one of the busiest routes in Arcanum. At seven, things are usually still moving at a good speed, but that means we had a major accident hazard as well as a traffic stopper. Had this opened at eight, cars would have been sitting on top of it and fallen in, but instead those cars went in at driving speed. We’re still awaiting word on the severity of those accidents.”

Gia gestured to Chris, her pilot, to move so the camera could get a better shot of the cluster of emergency vehicles at the head of the stopped traffic. The sinkhole itself was almost impossible to see through the tangle of cars, people, and flashing lights all around it. As the helicopter dropped lower, however, the scope of the damage became more apparent.

“I hope you can see this,” Gia said. “The hole itself is easily...” She did some quick, mental math, involving a lot of guesswork about the size of various vehicles. “Twenty feet long, and ten feet wide. At least one vehicle has fallen into

the hole, and several others are partly in and out. I can only speculate as to the depth of the sinkhole, but the first vehicle does appear to be fully below street level.”

“Any idea when they’ll have traffic moving again?”

Gia rolled her eyes at the *get the chatty woman back on track* tone in his voice. “We haven’t heard anything,” she said. “I’d say, based on the scene below me, it’ll be several hours at the very least. There’s accident damage to deal with, and then the road itself. The sinkhole is affecting at least two lanes, and they’ll need to assess the cause before letting vehicles use the remaining lanes again.”

“Thank you, Gia,” Gabe said. “We’ll check back with you later.”

“We’ll be here, Gabe.”

Gia sighed. She understood her job was to help people plan their morning commute, but this was genuine news. She was sure Gabe was talking about it on air right now, taking the story for himself. Can’t let the lowly traffic reporter scoop him, after all.

She pulled out her binoculars, checking out the chaos below. Tow trucks had begun pulling vehicles out of the pileup. Some of their drivers stood, talking to police officers, apparently unharmed, while others were being checked over by paramedics. There appeared to be few serious injuries, which was surprising, given the nature of the disaster.

As she watched, they pulled one driver out of the hole on a stretcher, presumably the driver of the first car, the one that had plowed full speed into the hole. Gia was less hopeful about that person’s condition. He seemed conscious, at least, looking around in confusion as they wheeled him from the car toward one of the several ambulances.

“Bryson, you running?” she asked the camera operator.

“Yep.”

“Zoom in on the hole, up near the front of the car. Chris, can you get us any closer?”

“What are you seeing?”

“I’m not sure, but...” she refocused the binoculars. “Something.”

“I think I see it, too,” Bryson said. “What the hell is that?”

“Chris, can you find a spot to land?”

“Sure thing,” the pilot said. “What’s down there?”

Gia smiled. “A story.”



## The Wall

“That’s it for today. Remember your papers on thermoluminescence versus optically stimulated luminescence dating are due next week.”

Mari shut off her voice recorder and closed her notebook. She was just starting to shove everything into her backpack when Professor Martin spoke.

“Mari, can you hang back a minute?”

She slung her bag over one shoulder and approached the front lectern. “Yes?”

“Did you see the story on the news about the sinkhole on Gemini Parkway on Monday?”

Her stomach muscles tightened in anticipation of what she hoped she was about to hear. “I did. And I heard they found something?”

Professor Martin nodded, smiling. “They sure as hell did.”

“What is it? I only saw a brief mention in the Chronicle.”

The professor removed his glasses, wiped them with a cloth from his pocket, and put them back on. He wasn’t bad looking for his age, though Mari wasn’t sure how old he was. He was probably around the same age her Uncle José had been, mid-forties or so, but something about college professors made them always seem older. “We honestly aren’t sure.”



“We?”

“I’m leading the research team. And I was hoping you might want in.”

“Really?” The croak in Mari’s voice reminded her to breathe.

“Really. Interested?”

“Uh, understatement.”

“Excellent. You have some time now? I can give you a quick rundown of what’s what.”

“I’m done with classes for the day,” she said. “Need to send one quick text, and I’m all in.”

“Perfect. I’ll leave you to it. Head into my office when you’re done.”

She pulled out her phone and opened her ongoing chat window with Kaden.  
MIGHT NEED TO MOVE OUR PLANS - ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES ARE AFOOT!

She was about to shove the phone back into her pocket when the three little dots appeared, letting her know he was replying. GO GET ‘EM, INDY!

She rolled her eyes at the adorable geek, smiling. She pocketed the phone and headed into Professor Martin’s office through the door behind his lectern.

He’d laid out a couple of photographs, printed on letter-size paper, across his desk. They’d been taken at the sinkhole site, by someone standing at the edge and looking down. There was still a dented, blue Hyundai with shattered windows inside the hole, but on the other side of it...

“What is that?”

“We don’t know much yet. It’s big, we know that. Looks like a fragment of a cave wall or the like. Which might lend some explanation for the sinkhole. Gemini Parkway runs parallel to the Pollux River, the full length of the city. If there was a natural cave that close to the river, it’s likely it could have filled with water long ago, and gradually pressure and erosion may have weakened the top of the cave.”

“And those storms last month couldn’t have helped,” Mari added. She left out what she knew about the supernatural origin of the two days of torrential rains and hurricane-level winds that had pummeled Arcanum a little over three weeks ago.

“Definitely not. That part’s up to the geologists to figure out, of course. It’s what’s *in* that hole that matters to us.”

“And what’s in the hole?” She still couldn’t quite tell from the fuzzy pictures.

“Like I said, we think it’s a cave wall. It has markings of some sort, though nothing we recognize from the photos. We also don’t know whether the fragment visible in the picture is the only piece. It’s likely there’s a whole collapsed cave down there.”

“If that’s the case, what then?” Mari asked. “I can’t imagine the city’s going to be okay with us turning one of the busiest roads in town into an archaeological dig site.”

“That it will not,” Professor Martin agreed. “They’re giving us a very short window to get as much as we can lifted out of the hole before they begin repairs. I’m bringing you on late, since you’ll be research only, not recovery. We have a crew with a crane out there now. In fact,” he said, pausing to look at his watch. “I need to get my ass out of here and over to the site. Is your contact information on file still current?”

She confirmed.

“I’ll be in touch soon, then. Welcome to the team!”

“Thank you so much,” she said, following him out of the office.

She pulled out her phone again as she left the classroom. NO NEED TO CHANGE PLANS, AND I HAVE AMAZING NEWS!



Kaden sat in his car. A few months ago, he’d also taken a moment before each visit to the Arcanum Public Library, but it was different now. Now, instead of checking his hair and popping a breath mint, he was psyching himself up for what might turn into a tense, awkward encounter. At the last minute, he still popped the mint.

The Research Librarian’s desk was on the third floor. Kaden’s shoulders tensed at the absence of the ASSISTING WITH RESEARCH, BACK LATER sign that meant Ella was elsewhere, but he kept walking. He needed to get past this weirdness if he was going to continue working with Ella.

She was wearing a skirt today, something she didn’t do often. The grey plaid garment was probably designed to be a miniskirt but, due to Ella’s petite stature, it ended a modest couple of inches above her knees. A light grey sweater and a pair of cute, blocky, grey shoes with low high heels completed the outfit. He

looked around the library as she bent to put something away in a low drawer, determined not to watch her bending over. He liked Mari a lot, but it didn't make Ella any less pretty.

"Oh, hey, Kaden," she said, standing back up and noticing him. Her glasses slightly magnified her eyes, something he'd always found endearing.

"Hi, Ella."

"Let me grab your notebook," she said, turning away again and reaching into another drawer. She retrieved the book and returned to the front counter. "Anything new and exciting going on?"

*Always*, he thought, but he didn't say it. This, not Mari, was the main reason things had grown increasingly awkward with Ella. Back in June, Kaden had launched a blog called *Arcanum City Secrets*, intended to explore the many unexplained phenomena people observed in their city. Ella had helped with the project, even before he'd launched the site, by keeping this notebook. As the Research Librarian at the main location of the Arcanum Public Library, a surprising number of people came to her with questions about things they'd seen or heard around town. Anything strange or supernatural, she added to the notebook, ready to share with him when he came in.

The problem was, shortly after he'd published his first post, Kaden had learned the truth. The supernatural was very real, hidden behind mundane life, and he was now a part of the very secrets he claimed to be working to expose. He'd continued the blog and, in many ways, it remained what it had been created to be: a place for the citizens of Arcanum to report things they'd seen and share stories, building a bigger picture of what was going on than any one person could observe on their own. But now, if people started to get too close to a secret that needed to remain unexplained, he'd steer the conversation in a different direction. On a few occasions, he'd had to outright lie, which he hated more than anything.

Well, almost more than anything. He'd also had to lie to Ella more than once and had to at least omit pieces of the truth on a regular basis. By now, she'd reached the point where she could tell he was lying to her, hiding things, and she didn't appreciate it. They'd been engaged in a shy flirtation since the first time he'd talked to her across the Research Desk, but the more reason he gave her not to trust him, the more times she saw through his lies and obfuscations, the more awkward things grew. He really liked Ella as a person, flirting aside; he hated to see their potential friendship ruined because he was bad at keeping secrets.

"Maybe," he said, answering her question about anything new. "Did you hear about that sinkhole on Gemini Parkway on Monday?"

She groaned. "I didn't just hear about it; I was stuck in traffic for two hours because of it. And did anybody appreciate that I was actually trying to come in early? Nope."

Kaden nodded sympathetically, as though he could relate to having a job where being tardy was a thing. He hadn't had a job with set start and stop times since he'd worked in a bookstore in college. "That sucks," he said. "I know that was a huge mess."

"It was. I didn't get here 'til almost ten. First the storms last month, then the sinkhole, and every time, somehow it was my fault. Sorry, you didn't come here to listen to me complain."

He smiled. "Perfectly all right. But back to the sinkhole, did you hear anything about it later?"

"Honestly, only the estimates of how long it's going to take to fix. After that, I switched to figuring out alternate routes to work."

"Well," he said, hoping her bad experience with the road problem wouldn't sour her on the rest of the story. "Once they got the traffic mess cleaned up, they found something in the hole."

"Something? You mean, like, *something* something? Your kind of something?" Her interest was piqued; her already magnified eyes grew larger.

"Possibly my kind of something. It looks like that sinkhole was some sort of underground cave. They found a big fragment of a stone wall, covered in all sorts of strange symbols and markings."

"Ooo," she said. "I didn't see anything about that."

"There hasn't been much in the news," he said. "One little blurb in the Arcanum Chronicle, and that's about it. But my—" He hesitated, unsure how to describe Mari. To just call her a friend would be disingenuous, but she wasn't officially his girlfriend, either. Not yet, anyway. "I know an archeology grad student, and she's working on the project."

Ella's big eyes narrowed briefly. "So, what do they think it is?"

"They don't know," he said. "The Geology Department's still working on their part too, but I guess the prevailing theory is there was a cave under the road that's been filling, emptying, and refilling with water from the river for a long time and it finally weakened and cracked open like an egg. Last month's storms probably had a lot to do with that. If they're right, then there's likely more down there than just the one wall fragment they recovered, but since it's under one of the busiest roads in Arcanum, the city wouldn't let them keep digging. They had

to grab the one obvious piece and go, which is what they did. They just got it back to the school yesterday, so they haven't had time to discover much yet."

"This all going in the blog?"

Kaden tipped a hand side to side, to indicate *maybe*. "I'll be writing what I can, especially if it turns out more mysterious than normal cave art. But I have to be careful, so I don't get Mari in trouble. If things only their team knows find their way onto the internet, they'll know they have a mole. I can't risk her career like that."

Ella nodded. "Makes sense. Keep me posted? As much as you can, anyway. You said 'wall.' How big are we talking?"

"I don't know the exact measurements, but big. I know they couldn't get it into the lab where they usually study artifacts. They had to transfer it on a flatbed truck, and they're working on it in a sort of warehouse type of—"

A single chime sound interrupted Kaden. Ella picked up her phone and silenced it. "Sorry," she said. "I have to leave for an appointment. You can stay and go through the notebook, or you can take it with you."

"I'll take it," he said. It would be fun to take his time going over the entries; there was always more in the notebook than usual the week before the full moon.

"I'm parked in the garage," she said. "Are you?"

He confirmed, and they walked out together. It would have been a lot more exciting, he knew, had this happened even a month earlier. "I noticed you're a bit more dressed up than usual," he said. "I guess having an appointment explains that." He was careful not to compliment, lest it sound like he was insulting her usual clothes, or like he was flirting.

She nodded and looked around the hallway leading to the garage. Once she'd confirmed they were alone, she said, quietly, "My appointment *might* be a job interview."

Kaden mimed locking his lips and throwing away an imaginary key. Once they were in the garage elevator, he spoke. "Good luck with your... appointment. I'd miss seeing you here, but it sounds like it's getting unpleasant lately."

"Thanks. It is. We've had some management changes, and of course, whenever there's a regime change it's always about money. These new people know nothing about Library Science and have no idea how things work. They don't understand what I do, so they don't understand why I'm here. They think anybody who works in a library is a librarian, and that we all shelve books and

check out materials all day. Do you know, one of them actually asked why we weren't using checkout cards?"

"As in, the old-fashioned ones with the paper pockets and date stamps?"

"Yeah."

"I've never even seen one of those in person."

"Exactly. Those have been gone almost as long as physical card catalogs. These people have that little clue. It's getting really frustrating working in a library with bosses who literally don't know what a librarian is, let alone a specialist like a Research Librarian."

"I'll bet. Well, extra good luck, then."

"Thanks."

Ella's car was in employee parking on the top level, so Kaden got out of the elevator first. "Talk to you soon," he said.

She smiled and nodded as the doors closed between them. Not an awkward exchange at all, for a change.



The sharp, artificial bell of Arjun's phone ruined the quiet. "Fuck," he muttered, reaching for the vexing device.

"Ready for round three already?" Sini said, rolling over beside him.

Arjun looked at the phone. It was a text message from Kaden. MARI'S ON HER WAY TO THE THEATRE WITH SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU. CAN YOU LET HER IN?

Yws. He'd hit send before he noticed the misspelling. Damned tiny letters. How did anyone use these monstrosities effectively? "Bugger."

"Mmm," Sini said, her voice heavy with sleep. "Gotta get me drunk for that one."

Arjun ignored her. YES he sent, correctly this time.

GREAT, THANKS! I'LL BE THERE A IN A BIT, BUT PRETTY SURE SHE'S GONNA GET THERE FIRST.

YOU ARE WELCOME, Arjun typed back, painfully slowly. He couldn't understand how young people typed on these infernal machines so bloody fast. There wasn't even an apostrophe to spell *you're*—he'd had to spell it out the long way—yet Kaden used them all the time, as did Gina. It had taken centuries, but all this computer nonsense the last few decades was finally starting to make him feel old.

He got up, leaving Sini in the bed. She'd called him shortly after the horrific storms a few weeks ago, wanting to resume their old arrangement. It was almost certainly a bad idea—Sini was unstable at the best of times—but he'd found himself succumbing to her suggestion all the same. He stepped into the pants he'd abandoned on the floor an hour previous, then put on his shirt. He ran fingers through his hair in the full-length mirror by the door, returning his mussed locks to their usual, *deliberately*, unkempt style.

"Nooner much?"

He rolled his eyes at Gina's smirk and crossed the theatre lobby, passing her without comment. The popcorn she was eating smelled wonderful, however, and he doubled back to grab a handful from her cardboard bucket.

"Hey!" she said, pulling the popcorn away. "I don't know where that hand has been!" She frowned, looking back toward the door to Arjun's suite of rooms. "Actually, scratch that. I *do* know where it's been, and yuck."

"Kaden's friend is on her way," he said, after swallowing his stolen popcorn. "We need to let her in when she gets here."

"Mari?"

"That's the one."

"Why's she coming alone?"

"You'll have to ask her when she arrives. Kaden sent me a message asking me to let her in, said she'll be arriving before him."

"Why'd he text you instead of me?"

"You'll have to ask *him* when he arrives."

Gina followed Arjun into the theatre auditorium, up the aisle, onto the stage, and through the curtains.

He grabbed another handful of her popcorn just as a knock rang out on the backstage door.

"Get your cooch-hands outta my—oh, hi, Mari."

Mari looked from Gina to Arjun and back again, obviously having heard Gina's unfinished comment. "Uh, hi."

"Come on in," Gina said. "Kaden said... Actually, I have no idea what Kaden said, since he chose to text Arjun instead for some reason. Arjun, what did Kaden say?"

"He asked me to let Mari in. He said you have something to show me?"

She nodded. "I do."

The three made their way back to the auditorium and sat down in the front row, by the aisle. "You've heard about the sinkhole on Gemini Parkway, and the artifact they found in it?"

"Somewhat," Arjun said. "I saw the sinkhole on the news but, fortunately, I don't have occasion to drive through there often so it hasn't affected my day-to-day. I've heard there was something found, but not any details." He left out that it was Sini who'd mentioned it; the fewer women taunting him about her, the better.

"Well," she said, reaching into her bag and pulling out one of those computer-things Kaden sometimes used. What did he call it? A table? No, a tablet. "The artifact was removed, and is currently at Arcanum University, in the Archeology Department, for study. I'm on the research team. It appears to be a fragment of a cave wall, probably an underground cave that collapsed, causing the sinkhole. It's covered in strange symbols no one's been able to identify, at least not on sight. Knowing the things I know, I wondered whether they might be *your* kind of symbols."

She pressed a button on the side of the tablet, and the screen lit up. She tapped on a little square, then slid images around like flipping through the pages of a book. "Here's the wall," she said, turning the screen toward Arjun. "Anything look familiar?"

It did not. He aimed a tentative finger at the screen, then pulled it back again, not sure what touching the screen would do.

"There are a few pictures," she said. "You can flip through them by swiping, like this." She demonstrated the flicking movement that caused the images to move across the screen. "If you want to zoom in on something, just use two fingers and pull out, like this." She demonstrated what looked like stretching the picture with her fingers.

He looked through the images, zooming in to study individual symbols, then out again, which she also showed him how to do. Most of the symbols bore some resemblance to common symbols, but it was as though someone had seen, and



not understood, various magickal symbols, then recreated them from faulty memory. "If these symbols are magickal," he said. "It's no language or system I've ever encountered."

"What are the odds of that?" Gina asked.

"It's certainly possible, especially if this cave is very old. But any system in regular use in the last couple of centuries, I'd know about."

"Whatcha got there?"

They all turned to see Sini approaching. Her bright, blue hair stood out at all angles, but at least she was fully dressed. "May I?" he asked Mari.

She nodded.

Arjun handed the tablet to Sini, who flipped and zoomed through the pictures like a pro. She wasn't long-lived like Arjun, but she was still a good deal older than she looked. When had he become the old man?

"What is this?" she asked, still studying the images.

"Something they found in that sinkhole on Gemini Parkway," Gina said.

"Where'd the pictures come from?"

"I took them," Mari said. "I'm an archeology grad student at AU. I'm on the team studying the artifact."

Sini looked at Mari as though she were a dress she might buy. She turned back to Arjun and asked, "She one of your wolfies?"

"None of them are *my* wolves," Arjun said. "And no, she's not a werewolf."

The sound of feet on the stage announced Kaden's arrival. "Good, you're here," he said to Mari as he hopped down from the stage. He turned to Arjun. "You recognize anything?"

"No," he said. "Neither does Sini."

Kaden sat down on the other side of Mari, away from Sini. Arjun hadn't seen it happen, but he assumed Sini had made sexual advances on more than one occasion; it wasn't in her nature to leave an attractive young man unpursued.

"So, it's not magickal then?"

Arjun shrugged. "It still could be. I'm old and experienced, but I don't know everything."

"Also," Sini added. "Not all magickal symbols are standard. It's perfectly possible to create your own sigils. They don't usually look like these, and it would

be super unusual to create a whole set of them and carve them into a cave wall like this, but it isn't unimaginable."

"I did notice several of the symbols repeat," Mari said. "They look more like writing than just a set of symbols. That's the working assumption in the department, that it's some sort of proto language. We have linguists looking at it, and they agree it seems to be writing of some sort, but they don't know what."

"Is that likely?" Arjun asked. "That it's some undiscovered language?"

"Not really. Nothing with similar markings has ever been found anywhere in the region. As far as we know, no Native American tribes in this area had any form of written language before contact with settlers."

"So back to magickal," Gina said.

Mari nodded. "It's my best guess, not that I can share that theory at school, of course." She turned to Arjun. "Would you be able to tell more in person?"

Arjun considered. "In terms of what the symbols might mean, no. But if the object itself has any sort of magickal charge or signature, I'd be able to detect it, and possibly learn something from it."

"Would you come look?"

Arjun hesitated. He hated dealing with people, especially ones inclined to ask him a lot of questions.

Mari read his expression well. "I can sneak you in after hours. That way, you don't have to deal with a bunch of pushy scientists wanting to know your field of expertise, where you went to school, and what your favorite discoveries are. I don't want to make up lies any more than you do."

"I'd like to look," Arjun said. "If it *is* something magickal, it's better we know." He left out the most important part, however, not knowing how she'd take it: If the object turned out to be powerful or potentially dangerous, they wouldn't be able to leave it in the hands of the mundane scientists at the university. Best not to broach the subject of stealing the artifact before he'd even been allowed to examine it.

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