

Mill Avenue Vexations

Yeah.

MILL AVE

VEXATIONS

It gets
that weird.



Volume One: Vexations

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By Kyt Dotson

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Prelude



Only a Day Away

Vex's eyes blurred their focus on the grey steam rising from her cup of hot cocoa. She savored the flavor of a sip; then exhaled softly to listen to the sound of her own breath against the quiet. The hush that blanketed Mill Avenue knew no limit to its embrace.

The simple pleasure of the hot chocolate took Vex away from the violence and horrors she had witnessed over the past hectic days. Without a thought, she dropped her hand and let it rest on the handgun sitting on the table in front of her. She ran her finger down the cold, black exterior, feeling the pits and impressions of letters and numbers in the barrel.

A week ago, Vex would have never touched such a weapon, yet here she sat, drinking a cup of cocoa, the gun's holster poking into her ribs.

A week earlier a lot of things were different.

Vex turned her head, her eyes sweeping across the ruins of Coffee Plantation. The coffee house looked as if it had been struck by a bomb. All of the glass windows in the front and the sides were blown out, the shattered glass sparkled on the ground—the unbearable heat from outside floated in through the broken windows, barely reduced by the shade and the deepening twilight. Vex could distinctly recall the crunch of the shards under her boots

from when she walked in. The tables and chairs usually set out for patrons lay twisted, broken, and scattered across the cracked floor. It was a miracle that the machine that heated up the milk for hot cocoa still worked.

Through one broken window Vex could see the building across Mill Avenue. It had been rendered into a smoldering ruin. Nobody would be buying anything from Campus Corner anytime soon. The very road around the building rose up in great bulges where the heat of the fire that consumed the building had melted the asphalt. Urban Outfitters was in no better shape, just kitty corner from where Vex sat. Although the building's glass front had been smashed open as if by some giant hand, the lettering with the store's name still gleamed brightly on broken red brick between two barely standing pillars like a twisted urban Stonehenge.

The scattering of trees and bushes that lined Mill would no longer be providing shade and solace from the desert sun; they had been burnt to cinders or blasted to splinters from the violence that had ravaged the area around Arizona State University. It left the shattered buildings and blistered roads as a blackened testament to the battle that had been fought there merely a day before.

Nothing had withstood the wrath that descended the previous night. The Harkins Centerpoint Cinema wouldn't be showing any more movies, except for maybe a post apocalyptic reality film looking out from the lobby. Even the Brickyard hadn't been spared from the cataclysm; it had been razed to a smoking crater in the ground. While Vex would shed no tears for that eyesore, she would miss the Borders that the building contained.

Somewhere amidst the desolation a solitary cicada buzzed a melancholy call.

After a moment of reminiscing over the collateral damage, Vex discovered that her cocoa had grown cold. She shook her head and pushed it away from herself. While she liked drinking it hot, she hated it cold.

“Paaaaaaper flowers...”

In the distance a voice rose up from the descending twilight as an Evanescence song began to play. A smile touched Vex's lips

and she stood.

The handgun came to her hands with a conscious motion and she seized the grip tightly with her right hand and pulled the slide back with her left. It pulled back with a smooth movement and came to a solid stop about half-way as she expected, the gleam of a silver shell casing glinted up at her from inside and she let it go. The slide yanked itself back into place with an audible click.

Certain that the gun was in safe condition, she shoved it snug into the holster and walked out of Coffee Plantation.

Once again, glass shards crunched beneath her boots. It reminded her less of walking over the shattered remains of windows, tables, and chairs, and more like walking on gravel. The notion was dispelled from her mind when she had to step through one of the blasted windows because the doorway had been melted and twisted into an impassable tangle.

The others lurked around one of the few intact tables, nestled up against a shattered wall that used to be Duck Soup. Two dozen eyes immediately flashed to her as she walked through the swiftly deepening shadows of twilight and extended her hands towards them. They huddled in the shadows, sat in groups sipping water from plastic cups pilfered from the remains of Coffee Plantation, and waited. There they were, the only people left to take a stand against the darkness and fight the final battle, a ragtag and bobtail group of unlikely saviors: the street rats.

Silent, for once, they all waited. Vex could hear their breathing, loud and harsh in the quiet night, an irregular beat echoed against the Evanescence music in the background.

“It’s time to mount up, kids,” Vex said. “That’s our battle cry. Come, follow me. For I will lead you into fire.”

Chapter I



Vexations

Streetlights whisked by, casting shifting bands of white light across Vex’s hands and the steering wheel. All of the traffic lights were green for her cab tonight; it was an easy fare, a straight shot down Southern from Mesa Drive to just past Mill Avenue. Price. McClintock. Rural. The major streets blurred by in an almost surreal progression. Three in the morning on a Wednesday night. No traffic.

The stars were out on a very clear night and the moon glowed like a silver disk in the sky overhead. If it weren’t for the fact that her taxi’s A/C was stuck permanently on, Vex would have rolled her window down.

That’s when Vex noticed her: a woman standing by the side of the road, like an apparition, just past Rural. A pool of lamplight embraced her as she looked at and through Vex as the taxi passed. When Vex checked her rearview mirror to get another look at the woman after passing, Vex saw that she was no longer standing there.

A chill swept through Vex and numbness tingled in her hands on the wheel.

Daughter. Our daughter, a voice crooned in her head. *Are you ready? It begins.*

* * *

“Do you think we did it right?” David asked, licking his lips. A sheen of sweat glistened on his forehead in the flickering candlelight. With a huff, he wiped some of his short brown hair away from his glasses. The lenses of his glasses were perfectly round and frameless; certain people teased David saying that they made him look like a geek. Not that his personality didn’t do that for him well enough.

“Of course we did it right,” Darlene said. The heat also brought a slight amount of perspiration to her forehead as well. Silently she thanked herself for pulling her hair into a long braid; now it wasn’t likely to stick to her face or get tangled up. She picked up on David’s marked dismay at the ceremony easily, even though he himself was the one who had sorted out most of what had to be done from the books on magic they had collected from Borders and Bookmans. Darlene prided herself in being more practical than worrying about such a thing; and she figured she knew the designs and motions of the working even better than did David.

“Good,” David breathed with relief.

Darlene paused a moment to light the next candle. “If I were off by one tenth of an inch at this point we would be so screwed by now...” She stopped after lighting the small black wick and looked back over the design on the floor drawn out in silver powder over red paint. “Uh oh.”

“Uh oh, what?” David said suddenly concerned, his startled eyes became comically gigantic behind his glasses.

“I think that I drew a line wrong,” Darlene snickered. “We’re all doomed!”

David frowned, hearing the sarcasm in her voice. “That is so not funny.”

“Chill out, you two,” Mary Beth snapped as she stepped around a bookshelf into the candlelight. Her squarely-built boyfriend, Korey, followed close behind. Darlene waved. Mary Beth’s curly red hair bobbed around her freckled face as she

nodded back. Her commanding presence brought a hush to David and Darlene and they both waited meekly for Mary Beth to make a final inspection of the sigil.

The four were now together. They had been practicing magic together ever since they’d met each other in the Hayden Dormitory recreation room the previous year. Though, nothing so elaborate as the ceremony tonight. Everything had to be perfect, the sigil work on the floor done by Darlene, the white robes sewn by Mary Beth’s hand, the necessary chants pulled from books by David, and Korey... Korey was always simply an extension of Mary Beth but with muscles.

Korey and Mary Beth were both dressed in the white silken robes that everyone had donned at the beginning of the ceremony. Mary Beth’s robes were adorned with strange symbols drawn in with magic marker that spiraled up from the hem of the robe and split into two twining spirals around her breasts and connected near her throat in a symbol like the one Darlene had painted on the floor.

“It does look a little crooked,” David whined. He adjusted his eyeglasses and pointed.

Darlene gestured dismissively with her free hand. “I drew it exactly like it is in the book, it’s crooked there too, haven’t you looked?” She held the book out to him with one hand, he squinted.

Mary Beth sighed loudly. “It’s an Elder Sigil. It’s not a Star of David, okay? The so-called crookedness is because that point develops into the Celestial Spiral, there, with the seat of power where that candle is.” As she spoke she swirled her hand about the symbol and traced the lines with her pointed finger. “Darlene did a good job of painting it. I’d say it’s flawless.”

“Thank you High Priestess,” Darlene said, making a smart bow.

“I’m not High Priestess until the ceremony starts.” Mary Beth waved an admonishing finger. “So, is everyone ready?”

The rest mumbled their assent.

“Good. No interruptions?” Mary Beth leveled her gaze and looked pointedly at David.

He shook his head. “This top floor of the Stacks has been closed up for renovations. I just happen to have the key. It’s three AM. Nobody is going to bother us.” He pushed his glasses back up onto his nose. “At least I don’t think so.”

“Good enough,” Mary Beth said. “I know that we haven’t done anything so complicated before, everyone knows that we have to keep as close to the script as possible, right, or this just won’t work. Everyone ready?” She glanced around and only willing expressions greeted her. “Positions everyone. Like we rehearsed.” She knelt down and scooped up her conducting wand up, a small black rod with a silver tip. The wand was actually a conductor’s baton, painted black, and consecrated in the way the book demanded for the spellcraft.

Darlene walked around the Elder Sigil on the floor and out of the two circles of salt drawn around the entire working area. Both circles had not been connected yet; that would happen right before the beginning of the ceremony. Different magical symbols had been drawn by Darlene’s deft hands in salt and iron between the two circles.

She knelt down in the shadow of an empty bookcase and unhooked the latches on her violin case. She lifted the lid and removed her violin and its bow in a single practiced motion. A stand with the necessary sheet music had been set up inside of the circles directly opposite where Mary Beth would be standing. Darlene set her violin at the base of the music stand and dodged Korey as he moved to his place.

While Mary Beth hummed softly to herself and looked as if she were off in another world, Darlene added the last bits of salt to complete the two circles.

“The warding circles are now complete,” Darlene said. “The book warns that nobody must cross these lines or the protection will be broken. So, nobody leave the circle, no matter what you see or hear.”

“Spooky,” Korey said with a wry smirk. Silent up until this point, his sudden addition seemed to punctuate the group’s anxious mood. Mary Beth made a silencing gesture and the grin on his face

faded and his expression returned to appearing bored.

David snickered, but he too was silenced by a glance from Mary Beth.

“Darlene,” Mary Beth said.

Darlene nodded, brushed her thick brown braid off of her shoulder, and lifted her violin to her chin. She had to bat at the paper on her music stand with the bow to make it lay flat; an uncanny draft of air ruffled at the pages and pushed them slightly to the side. When Mary Beth lifted her baton high and pointed at Darlene, she began to play.

The song started out with several very long notes on the G string. Darlene could feel the vibration through her hand from the instrument as she pulled the bow across the string. Each motion of her bow hand brought out a slightly varying sound from the last as she walked the instrument slowly up the scales. Soon she moved to the next string and the song became more complex, forcing her to switch between the strings with carefully timed motions. All this came easily to her well-practiced reflexes.

Soon, Darlene felt as if she were running her hands through water, the music flowed through her, and she became the instrument.

Sweeping the baton along with Darlene’s music, Mary Beth’s eyes took on the far-away look again as she focused on the spell. Korey and David watched her carefully from their places along the sigil, standing with Darlene in a semi-circle in front of Mary Beth.

When Mary Beth lowered the baton again and swished it side to side, they saw what they were waiting for and began to chant.

*“Anaton, anaton, redmarath ar-ay ar-ay,
Domare naghti, domare naghti, tavi.”*

*Rothame, rothame, redmarath ar-an ar-an,
Domare naghti, domare naghti, tavi.”*

The chant melted into the violin as Darlene adjusted the speed of her playing to match the boys' baritone chant. Mary Beth smiled as she could feel the music and chant interweaving. The chant repeated two times and it was her turn. The spell required three components, the Musician who was Darlene, the Chant being Korey and David, and the Voice of the High Priestess.

Mary Beth took in a breath and lifted the book up in her other hand to reference her lines and when the music was right, she began to sing. Slightly off key at first, she quickly brought herself down a notch to match the violin perfectly; Darlene also changed her playing slightly to accommodate Mary Beth's voice as she began to sing.

After the first few words, a breath of air stirred in the silent room, ruffled at the pages of the book, and rattled the nearby windows. Mary Beth smiled. Something was working. David glanced around a little, the gleam of the candles glinting in his glasses, but he didn't break the chant.

Darlene seemed lost in her playing and didn't notice when the pages of music were buffeted from the music stand by a short snap of wind. Her eyes closed to the world, she kept the tune breathlessly following the chanting, and Mary Beth's heightened singing.

The lines of the sigil seemed to liquefy in the candlelight. A soothing orange glow began to suffuse out of the figure that extended through the lines in a gentle cascade. It was a brief and barely noticeable change, but Mary Beth was certain she wasn't the only one who had seen it. Shadows seemed to lengthen in her peripheral vision. She could see shifting figures in the candlelight, and the windows began to fog over.

As the song began to near its end, the bookshelves nearby shook with the vibration and frenetic energy of Darlene's violin playing. She had become so absorbed in the final gyrations of the song that she had nearly knocked the music stand from its place. As quickly as the music seemed to dash into a harmonic train wreck it began to taper off...

Mary Beth sang the last line of the song, letting her voice

draw out for as long as she could keep her breath... David and Korey let their chanting subside... Darlene—in a reversal of the first few notes played—slowed, let her numbing fingers drink up the vibrations of her violin's strings, and took her bow from the still resounding strings...

As the last note faded, all that could be heard in the room was Darlene's hard breathing.

A gust of sudden wind flooded into the room, it raced from the floor like a torrent of black, rose up like a whirlwind around the Elder Sigil and blew out all the candles. Their wicks sputtered and spat as they spent themselves into the gust and suddenly the room plunged into darkness.

David gasped.

After a moment everyone's vision began to return; the light from outside the windows emitted by various ASU buildings was more than enough to see by. For a long moment nobody spoke.

"Did it work?" Darlene asked finally, as she slowly sank to the floor as if unable to stand. She set her violin gently onto its back and let her sweaty hand slide down the back of the bow. "Did we do it? I could really *feel* it, but my hand got greasy, I was afraid the bow would slip."

"I think I saw something," David said, adjusting his glasses and glancing outside the circle.

"All that for better grades," Korey snickered. "Well, that was fun." He wiped his hands off on his pants and stretched with a yawn.

"I think..." Mary Beth said calmly. "I think it worked. I felt it. I really felt it that time. Wow."

"So," David said cautiously. "Does this mean that I'll ace that test on Monday? Heh." He pushed his glasses up his nose again. "Well, bring it on."

Mary Beth and Darlene shared a gaze for a moment and then both shook their heads. The entire spellcraft was indeed supposed to help benefit their grades, although the old book spoke of benefits to "power" and not academics. With the book, and a few websites later, the two had developed a formula that seemed to

suggest that it would offer just that.

“Cool enough,” Korey said. “So, who wants to go get some food at IHOP? I certainly can’t sleep after all that.”

One of the candles lit again with a sizzle.

Darlene narrowed her eyes. “Are those trick candles?”

“Uh, no,” Korey said. “I bought them, I should know.”

“It could be a paraffin flare,” David said in his lecturing voice. “The candles may have been put out by the breeze but they were still hot enough to ignite the wax again.”

Just when he finished, a second one relit, and with it a low moaning sound whistled against the windows.

“Two?” Darlene said.

The sound began to rise in volume and the rest of the candles lit, flashing to life. Mary Beth turned around suddenly as if she felt someone touch her and she backed towards the other three.

“Did anyone else see that?” David said, swallowing hard.

“See what?” Korey said, walking towards the edge of the circle. “I’ll go turn on a light or something.”

That’s when the screaming started.

Chapter II

MILL AVE

Bad Omens

Four figures huddled together. Blood red lines drawn on the floor tracing a twisted hexagram with a circumscribed hemi-spiral. Hiding within a barrier of salt, protected by the ancient talismans against evil...

The room twists. Footsteps trace the outside of the barrier. Seeking a way in.

Blood on her hands. The blood on her hands slick like sweat—

“*What the hell are you doing!? Wake up!*” a voice shouted in panic.

Startled by the shout, Vex looked up. The bright stream of headlights shone through her window, another car was directly in front of her! She wrenched the wheel hard as a horn blared and the bright light blinded her as her foot sought the brake. The shriek of tires on the pavement rang in her ears as she watched a lit neon sign slide absurdly past outside the windshield.

The taxi came to a lurching stop by the curb and with a hiss the engine stalled. Her knuckles had become white with pressure from holding the wheel and her hands were slick with sweat. Vex could hear her heart beating in her ears louder than a subwoofer speaker.

Vex’s fare, the man the back seat, didn’t look very happy. Mr. Suit and Tie with a Crumpled Fedora—now a smashed and

crumpled fedora—must have clutched it against the divider grating when she made that maneuver. His face was red as she turned to look at him. A brief glance out the window and Vex could tell that she was just on the other side of Mill Avenue.

“Look,” the man said after a moment. “Where I need to go isn’t that far away. I’m just going to get out here. If that’s okay.” He said this as if he was going to give her a choice. He opened the door and pushed some bills through the hole in the safety grating. “Keep the change.”

The man walked away briskly without looking back and quickly vanished into a side-street while Vex tried to recover herself.

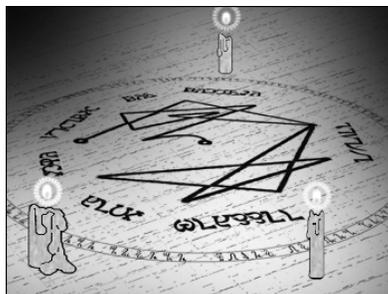
“They never learn, do they,” Vex growled to herself and turned the key. The engine coughed once but then roared to life. She pulled the taxi into gear and hit the accelerator as hard as she could. The taxi peeled out hard from the curb and she spun it around to face back down Southern; moments later the cab was careening onto Mill Avenue.

The vision clearly depicted somewhere Vex had a little bit of familiarity with: the Hayden Library Stacks. She’d been in them before looking for books. She couldn’t tell quite exactly where but she figured that when she got closer to the exact area it would become obvious. Things of this sort generally were.

“Does anyone have any freaking clue what that was?” Darlene said sharply. She pushed David away from her; he had all but climbed into her arms by clinging to her when the screaming started.

“I think we should get out of here,” David said, hugging himself.

“Well, it’s over now.” Mary Beth threw her head back and raised her voice in authority, trying to take command again. “We have to clean up the ritual—”



“Sorry, hunnybun,” Korey said quickly, cutting her off and grabbing her hand. “I think we can leave it. Let’s get the fuck out of this place.”

Korey half-fought, half-dragged Mary Beth towards the exit, David wasted no time in following, and Darlene didn’t waste any time in getting her violin back into its case before turning to follow the other three.

Before she went after them though, she paused just long enough to blow out all the candles. She spent barely enough time to blow each one out—hard—but not so much as to remain alone in the room for any longer than necessary. Satisfied that the candles didn’t look like they were going to flare to life again, Darlene immediately sped to the slowly closing door to the stairwell.

“What took you so long?” Korey said when Darlene squeezed through the door.

“I couldn’t leave candles burning,” Darlene said irritably and glared; “something could catch fire.”

“This is someone’s idea of a stupid joke,” Mary Beth railed back at Korey, whose grip did not wane.

“Some joke,” Darlene said as the door closed behind them. Everybody sighed with relief when they heard the door at the top of the dark stairwell latch solidly; even Mary Beth, who despite her air of nonchalance, showed obvious signs of anxiety in her expression.

Chattering nervously amongst themselves, the four exited the Stacks through a side-door unlocked by David’s deft handling of his keys and they walked purposefully away from the place. The full moon lit their way when there were no sidewalk lamps, but as a whole the group avoided the backs of buildings and anywhere darker as they made their way to IHOP on far side of campus.

If anyone had been paying attention to their surroundings instead of carrying on in an uneasy hurry towards the restaurant and away from the Stacks, they would have noticed a darkly clad figure racing to where they had just exited.

Vex found the room with extreme ease. The magickal residuals from whatever happened were especially intense in the Stacks,

gathering strength as she went up the stairs. Obviously *something* had taken place on one of the upper floors. After checking a few doors, she finally found one that was open—the very top floor.

When Vex pulled the door open, the air rushed out in a hollow sigh. It played gently with the black locks of hair that hung on either side of her face and ruffled her lacey black clothing. Caution compelling her footsteps, Vex reached into her belt and withdrew her ivory athame—a magickal knife carved from whalebone and etched by her own hand to stand proof against anything Otherworldly.

Her boots clacked solidly against the unfinished floor and echoed through the various bookshelves scattered around the room. Deep furrows were churned in the layer of dust on the floor where some bookshelves had been pushed out of the center of the room to make space for a very fascinating display of lit candles. The center of the room stood completely clear of dust, but the edges showed footprints and signs human of activity.

“What do we have here?” Vex said to herself as she stalked into the room.

The people involved in this ritual were obviously long gone. They were probably just stupid college students anyway. Perhaps they spooked themselves. It would be for the best; if Vex ran into them doing this she would have had to beat some sense into them.

The design on the floor looked exactly like the one she had seen in the unbidden vision in the taxi. A twisted hexagram painted with a spiral and several extra lines that added the optical illusion effect of a second star, a pentacle that didn’t exist in the lines. The entire diagram was surrounded by two circumscribed circles poured with salt containing recognizable Enochian symbols invoking angels and Witch’s Script invoking other protections.

“Sigil work.” Vex shook her head as she surveyed the layout.

The Enochian seemed almost out of place with the sigil in the center, as if they didn’t belong to the same traditions. It was just like kids these days to find old books of mysticism and then mix them together like a tossed salad. Generally, that’s also all that came

out: something only good for cleaning out someone’s bowels. However, once in a while someone with actual talent would inadvertently create a working with real power and bad things would happen.

A music stand that had been set up on the far side of the sigil was knocked over on its side. The metal bands of the stand flickered in the guttering candlelight.

Vex stepped towards the music stand and was stopped by a sudden sense of unease. She glanced down to see that she had nearly crossed the salt lines. The magickal protective circles were still intact and the barrier was trying to resist her passage.

“Someone knew what they were doing,” Vex said.

The magickal barrier’s power was infinitesimal compared to what Vex could muster, so she just cut through it with her athame and broke the protection spell by drawing her boot across the lines of salt. The air crackled with the release of the bound energies in the spell.

Vex moved between the candles with purpose. They looked as if they had been burning for hours, having nearly become piles of melted goo on the floor. One in particular caught Vex’s attention. It seemed to be misshapen in the center, something was bulging from it. She picked it up, blew out the flame, and examined the bulge.

With her pocketknife in hand, Vex removed a nicely cut, glistening quartz crystal from the center of the candle. Replacing the pocketknife in her belt, Vex prodded the crystal with her athame. It responded with a soft pulse of orange and felt slightly warm in her hand.

A soulstone. Vex quickly accounted the sigil and the candles. Three of the seven candles appeared to have soulstones in them, including the one that she now held, but Vex counted four positions where people could have been standing. Soulstones were used to trap spirits for use in magical invocation or—as the name suggested—to take souls from living people.

Someone in that group of four wanted the souls of the other three.

Vex hefted the stone in her hand and shook her head. This

was no ordinary group of would-be wizards she was dealing with; suddenly things seemed a lot more wicked.

“Freeze and drop the knife,” a voice said behind Vex.

A flashlight beam was shining over her shoulder and illuminated the sigil. Vex cursed herself for not even noticing the security guard sneaking up behind her. She realized that she really must have been lost in thought.

“I’m not going to tell you again,” the security guard said.

“It’s not what it looks like,” Vex said. She carefully slid the soulstone into her pocket and put both hands up.

“Slowly, on the ground, and kick it away,” he said.

Vex complied, letting herself down slowly and setting the knife as far as she could reach to her side, stood up again, and kicked the athame with her foot sending it skittering across the floor.

“Okay, turn around, slowly. Keep your hands out.” Vex turned around slowly but the light was in her eyes, all she could see was the flashlight, maybe the gun, the man’s badge, and his brownish pants. ASU Police. Vex recognized the uniform instantly.

“I think that I can explain.”

“You can explain at the station, young woman,” the cop said.

Chapter III

MILL AVE

Magic

Vex glowered in the harsh, bright lights of the exit and reception office of the Tempe jail. Beyond the metal grid an overweight policewoman chewed gum, rattled on an ancient keyboard, and sifted through plastic bags. A few moments sifting, a few moments typing, a beep from the computer...

“Can you go any more slowly?” Vex said.

“How do you spell your last name again?” the woman asked in a nasal tone. She sounded irritated. Vex would be too if she had a job like that.

“H-A-R-R-O-W.” Vex held the anger out of her voice. It was bad enough that the cops virtually stripped her before they threw her into the holding cell, but now to get her stuff back she had to wait, and spell her name over and over.

“Oh, there it is,” the woman said. “They have it in the system without the double-u.”

“Great,” Vex said.

“I’ll get your stuff... Just wait a moment.”

“I’m getting good at that.”

Keys jingled nearby and Patrick leaned on the shelf of the exit desk. She looked up to see his blue eyes gleaming in his

handsome face and Vex nearly beamed at him. Her savior. Though, the first knight in shining armor she'd ever known to wear leather pants and a ripped up biker's jacket. Today he finished off the look with a pair of heavy boots.

Thunk. "Two black boots," the policewoman said. Vex smiled. Finally: her boots. She couldn't quite understand why the cops wanted her to take them off and then took them away, but she felt naked without them.

"So," Patrick said, sporting a handsome but accusing smile. "What did you do this time?"

"Four silver rings with spikes, two spiked wristbands, and a silver necklace with a pentagram medallion," the woman announced.

Vex reached up to the counter and dragged the plastic bag holding her jewelry off of the counter and down next to her boot. She set about the task of lacing them up while Patrick chatted with the woman; he always was better at handling people than Vex was.

It took her an aggravatingly long time to lace her boots back up, put all of her rings back onto the right fingers, and wrap her spiked bands back onto her wrists. Of course, when the cops asked her to remove her boots she spent as long as she possibly could to remove them. Probably didn't score her any points. Vex didn't care, they didn't have to put her in jail.

Finally whole again, Vex stood back up.

"Thank you for the lovely accommodations," she said, bowing. "But I am afraid that I really must go now. Ta-ta."

"Whatever, toots," the policewoman said. Then she smiled for a moment before going back to chewing on her gum.

Patrick just nodded and held the door open for Vex as she stalked out.

"I can see you're upset," Patrick said.

"They didn't have to hold me over night," she grumbled. "It was cold in there too. They took my boots."

"They didn't take your sense of irony, I hope?" he asked.

"No, that's completely intact."

"So, what landed you in the clink?"

The bright Arizona sun baked the back of Vex's head as she placed her boot against a white stucco planter, an ugly piece of urban artwork made to look like Hopi pottery. Whatever had been growing inside had long since shriveled and turned crispy brown from the desert sun. The planter sat well within a deep shadow, but the heat was still noticeable and Vex could already feel sweat beading on her forehead. She tugged at her boot laces to snug them tighter; then leveled her gaze at Patrick.

"You are in for a story, you know," she said. Patrick pulled himself into his jeep while Vex stopped to eye herself in the side mirror. "Aw, crud, my makeup is all smeared too."

"What, no bathroom breaks in the Tempe Gulag?" Patrick joked. "And, I'm all up for a story. I expect no less. Careful, the seatbelt might be hot."

"I know, I know," Vex said as she used her shirt to grab the buckle. The metal still nearly burned her through the cloth. "Think you could take me to my cab, Patty? I left it in the Gradi Gammage parking lot."

"How about we get a burger first?" Patrick said as he flipped through his keys. "If it's a long story I think we should get something to eat."

"Ah yeah, the height of humor as always." Vex shook her head; then she grinned. It was hard not to like Patrick for his suave attitude about the world. "Just drive, you big lug. I'll do the talking."

"As you wish."

"Stop kicking the table, please," David snapped at the young man sitting next to him.

"Oh, sorry," the reply came back, more shallow than before.

This was the third time that David had to ask the guy, Tom, to stop kicking the table. It was seriously ruining his concentration. Not that David thought his concentration mattered anymore; he was doing so badly he was going to lose the game in short order, unless some miracle surfaced from his deck.

The sounds of cards being slapped onto the table, moves being called, and tokens representing damage and health moved

around echoed to David's side. Although it was his turn, he stalled to take a glance at the layout next to him. The girl sitting there, Megan, had only started a few minutes earlier and only had two island and one swamp cards down. Most expectedly, she had two blue creatures in play.

"Going to go or what?" his opponent, Mark, said peevishly.

David sighed, rubbed his nose, and nodded. "Yeah, just a second." He put a mermaid into play. A weak creature, but it would help stem the onslaught when Mark's horde of creatures decided to attack. "I'm done."

"You've been really twitchy, dude," Megan said, setting a card on the table with a flick. She grinned when her adversary, a little fourteen year old redhead named Zack, winced. "Something going on?"

"I guess that I just had a bad night," David said.

"I'll say," Mark snickered. "Your game is off. I attack with goblin, goblin, and dragon." David pointed to a few cards on the table and after a few moments they were removed as well as one of Mark's goblins. "That's three points of damage. What are you at?"

"Ten now," David said, taking away a few tokens to mark the damage.

"Tell me about it," Megan said, now with another island on the table. She pulled her long brown hair away from her face and tucked it behind her ear and frowned at her cards. "Last night sucked majorly. I had the worst nightmares."

"I stayed awake all night," David said. "That was nightmare enough..."

"What happened?" Megan asked.

"Me and a few friends of mine, we decided to do this magic ritual thing that one of them had found—to help us with our grades. All of this voodoo with candles, chanting, singing and such. Didn't quite go as planned."

"Oh," Megan said and shook her head. "It's not a good idea to play with things like that, you know, craft magic."

At that moment, exhausted from the night before, David couldn't have agreed with her more. The screaming, then the

relighting candles, and things flickering in his vision, all together they were enough to make him not want to sleep.

He went to reach for his deck of cards when he saw something strange. One of the cards in his hand—that depicted a creature with a long face and very large eyes—turned to look at him. David put the cards face down on the table, rubbed his eyes, and picked them up again. The picture had not changed.

"I think I'm seeing things," David said.

"How long since you slept, dude?" Megan said, glancing over. "Not sleeping can make you see things."

David drew his next card and smiled. He turned most of his cards on the table to the side and laid it down. Finally, the miracle that he had been waiting for had arrived.

"Tidal Kraken!" David announced to Mark. "A six-six blue, unblockable."

"Wow," Zack said.

"Can I see that?" Megan said. David nodded and passed the card to her.

The moment she took the card, however, David felt a chill pass through him, like a sudden gust of cold air. She seemed to feel it too because she jolted for a moment and then glanced around like something touched her. When she didn't mention anything, David decided to remain quiet.

"That's pretty cool," she said, handing the card back.

"Yeah I like—" David started to say when he noticed motion in the card, like light shifting on the surface. The painting of the waves shimmered for a moment as if they were crashing down on the painted buildings and the giant monster's head turned towards him. A great maw filled with teeth, and yellow glowing eyes filled his vision. Stinking breath brushed warm against his face...giant claws reached for him—and he dropped the card.

David was standing. He didn't remember standing up, but the chair he was sitting in had fallen over backwards and Megan, Tom, Zack, and Mark were staring at him.

"You alright?" Megan asked.

David shrank away from the cards as if they were on fire

and stepped away from the fallen chair. “I think, I need to use the bathroom. I’ll be right back, someone watch my cards?”

He started to turn toward the bathroom in the building but Mark spoke up. “That bathroom has an out-of-order sign on it.”

“I’ll go to Borders,” David said and turned the other way. He barely heard the other voices that followed him out the door as he fled from the Coffee Plantation.

“That puts me at negative twelve life,” Megan said, dropping her cards on the table. “You win, Zack. Good game.”

“Thanks,” Zack said. He began to pick up his cards from the table and shuffling them back into his deck. “You had me going there for the last part, I wasn’t sure I was going to be able to win that one.”

“Maybe next time,” Megan said. As she shuffled her own cards back into her deck she glanced over at David’s cards. “How long as he been gone?”

“Twenty minutes maybe?” Zack said as he shuffled.

“Longer,” Mark said. “I’m getting bored, anyone want to play a game?”

“I’ll play,” Megan said eyeing the remaining cards. “I’ll put David’s cards away...” She glanced under the table. “He left his book bag behind too, he’ll be back for it, I’m sure.”

“Have at it, Meg,” Zack said and glanced across the table. “Tom? Game?”

Presently, a small girl, with bright yellow hair sporting a green streak down the center, slipped through the front two glass doors of the coffee house and glanced around. Spotting Megan, she fluttered over and put both hands on the table.

“Hiya,” she said.

“Hi Karen,” Megan said with a wave.

“Has anyone seen Osiris?” she asked. “I’m so looking for him.”

“Have you checked eJoy?” Megan asked. The container for David’s magic cards, a hard cardboard box, seemed a little too long to fit back into his already stuffed backpack, so she just let it stay

unzipped with the corner of the box sticking out.

“Yeah,” Karen said, rubbing the back of her head with her hand. “Nobody there has seen him in almost three days.”

Mark and Zack both shook their heads.

Megan nodded. “I haven’t seen him since Monday.”

“Weird,” Kate said. “I was supposed to meet him here today. Anyway, I gotta go—” She tilted her head towards the door. “—my mom is waiting for me.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll see you all at drum circle tomorrow. Kay.”

“Sure thing,” Megan said and watched Kate bounce back out of the coffee house and get into a waiting car. When she glanced down again at the table she noticed the Tidal Kraken card still there. “Funny, I thought I’d already put that in the backpack...”

Megan reached for it and picked it up.

Suddenly she was alone.

The world was grey and scratched like an old movie. It was Mill. She could see the stores, The Hippy Gypsy, Urban Outfitters, Borders, Ruby Tuesdays, each one strangely empty and lifeless. People ran through the streets in terror, their hurried footfalls silent. She could see them screaming and looking back at something.

Megan turned to look at what people were running from. She could see something orange from the corner of her eye then—

“Help me.”

“What?” Mark said.

Megan shook herself and blinked a few times. “What?”

“Did you say something?” Mark asked.

“Uh, no,” Megan said. The card was still held between her fingers. Without wasting another moment she simply slid it into the backpack, not wanting to touch the thing any longer than she had to.

The worst part about the entire experience was the feeling of *déjà vu*, for some reason it felt like touching the card the first time. And worse, the voice calling for help sounded exactly like David

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading the beginning of my tale of horror and woe. There will be more to come. I intend to highlight a lot more of the street life from my days on the Ave. I know that things have changed a bit from the setting that I have portrayed here – but there is one thing that I think that the spirit will always remain.

And remember, when the world is crumbling around our ears, when the sky is falling, when there's nowhere else to turn. Among those who take up hope, who come together to fight the darkness. There in the front lines: will be the Mill rats.

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