

You don't *know* Tempe until you've seen it through the windows of my cab. It's not that I don't like my job—I love my job—it's just that I don't like a lot of the people who I meet. Sometimes, places make better people than the humanity, but there are notable exceptions.

Really, who builds an upside-down pyramid out of glass and doesn't expect supernatural *repercussions*? You look at a dollar bill, and you see the eye; you look at that building, and you start to wonder: *where is its eye?*

CURIOS YET?

**SHOULDN'T YOU BE READING
OR SOMETHING?**



Vexations

Volume II
The Calm Before

Kyt Dotson

Mill Avenue Vexations

Volume 2: *The Calm Before*

By Kyt Dotson

If you are interested in *Mill Avenue Vexations*
please visit

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posting of this storyline.

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Chapter IV



The Calm Before

Small knots of people walked down the sidewalks of Mill Avenue in the fading light of dusk. The sun had vanished behind the buildings, the cerulean blue of the sky gave way to a soft grey-blue hue, and the clouds painted across it tinted rosy like pink cotton tatters. Even with the dimming sunlight, the giant “A” on A Mountain still gleamed bright yellow. The street lamps hadn’t come on yet; it was only twilight.

The passersby ignored the sights beyond the storefronts and cars driving past on the roads. They chattered amongst themselves, oblivious to their own worlds. Some stopped in front of windows to examine storefront collages; some visited them to buy clothing, books, or drinks. None paid heed to the sky as it changed, none but a select sensitive few. Their clear eyes glanced skyward, drawn by a sudden sense of foreboding. A small group of street rats, spanging near Cold Stone Creamery, paused in their conversation to watch the sky.

Further down Mill, next to a white gazebo in an enclave from the street, a man who called himself Richard was doing a tarot

reading. He had laid out his reading cloth with the most astute care, few wrinkles were visible on its surface. It aligned exactly with the lines-of-ley that passed through this place. He could not see them, nor had he known any evidence to their existence, but he knew that they were there, nonetheless. The cards sat in a neatly squared pile in the corner to his right. He was doing a reading for the city.

A reading for Tempe.

Music and laughing voices filtered down the concrete stairs nearby from a bar upstairs. The soft sounds of voices echoed from the entrance to the Graffiti Shop behind him. Though the air was still, the trees that grew in the alcove rustled as their leaves shook. The sky shimmered rosy red patterns between the openings of the dark canopy above. The smells and sounds of Mill also entertained him from the street-side opening to the alcove: exhaust fumes, hurried footsteps, and the rush of heedless traffic.

The Tower—catastrophe, sudden change. Crossed by *The Star*—hope.

Richard’s hands tingled. Perhaps there will be an economic crash, people will lose their jobs, strife will be rampant, but as long as there is hope there is a future. This is not uncommon for cities. He has seen it before.

The Hanged Man—sacrifice.

Richard doesn’t know what this means, but he feels compelled to continue the reading, to complete the design, but the design he sees in his mind does not match any reading he has ever done before. His fingers reach to draw more cards and place them. *The Knight of Wands. The Queen of Cups. Judgement.* Richard cannot stop himself, he doesn’t understand, the cards are answering a question that he didn’t ask—

“Hello, I see you have cards,” a voice said nearby. The sound broke Richard from his reverie of placing the cards and he glanced up into the brown eyes of a girl. “Would you give me a reading?”

He recognized the girl as Megan; he’d seen her before out on Mill. She wore black cat ears atop her head; one of the ears was bent

tipped. Her eyes flashed as she smiled in the dimming light and she carefully set a backpack with a bright cat face down nearby. Reality reasserted itself again, Richard felt as if he had been dreaming the past few moments, but when he looked down the cards were still there. He couldn't help but feel, however, that the design was unfinished.

"Sure," he said, trying to shake the feelings he had received from the reading from his head. "I can do you a reading, but—" Richard glanced around. "Let's go somewhere else. How about down into Graffiti?"

He felt the need to get away from the lines-of-ley and their energy. Perhaps another reading, one that didn't include the city, would be able to clear his mind. Perhaps he would be able to separate himself from this experience. Whatever was going on, Richard didn't want to be part of it.

"Sure," Megan said, snatching her backpack up again. Then she paused to glance up at the sky. Her gaze flickered a moment between the reddening clouds and the fading blue of the sky; stars were already beginning to peek out. "Do you think it's going to rain? I get this strange feeling when I look at the sky, but I don't think the weather said anything about rain..."

"Yes," said Richard, absently gathering up his spent cards; he tried not to look at them as he shuffled them back into his deck. "I think there's a storm coming. A big storm."

"I'll see you inside," she said.

"Be there in a moment," he replied.

He tied his reading cloth around his cards and glanced around. It was time to leave town. One more reading; then it was time to leave this place. He knew that he would have to leave a warning, but there his responsibility ended. He had been told before by others who divined the nature of the cards that these things happened. When big things were brewing it was best not to stick around for them. If the Changing Hands bookstore had still been on Mill he would have known to leave a note, but now that it was gone

he wasn't sure.

Perhaps Megan would know, he wondered; he could feel the spark within her. She knew magic. He could tell her during the reading and she could relay the warning to those who needed to know.

Certain of his plan, Richard headed down into the Graffiti Shop and tried to clear his mind. Clear his mind and find the right warning to give.

Though the participants had moved on, the cards were taken up. The reading was stopped, but it was not done. Few people understand that magical power is not invested in objects, it is not possessed simply by a set of cards, by the bones of the dead, or the entrails of young animals: it flutters like diaphanous butterflies in the souls of people. Where people gather, so does magic, it fuses into the places around them. Cities are also people; cities also have souls.

When a reading is interrupted it may not be completed by the actors involved, but as long as one still remains the reading does not simply stop because the objects of divination have been removed. Once set in motion, it does not simply let go.

It does not end until it is done: until the message is spent.

The Knight of Wands—a fair haired youth; *The Queen of Cups*—a kindly, brown haired woman with gentle eyes.

Korey, Darlene, and Mary Beth sat together in the TV room of Hayden dormitory. The evening had worn late, already it was nearly one A.M. but nobody could sleep. After the strange events of the previous evening, their usual fare at Denny's didn't have the same taste. They ended up sitting around until nearly eight A.M. doing nothing but drinking coffee and talking to other students. Now, even together in the TV room, Darlene felt disconnected from the world, as if she were alone even sitting with two of her friends.

Nobody had heard from David since they parted ways that morning. He hadn't answered his door when all three knocked on it. Korey left him a message on his answering machine saying where

they were, but it had been an hour since then.

Mary Beth came out of the kitchen carrying some steaming cups of café mocha. Darlene could smell the scent from where she sat near the muted TV; it was invigorating. She thanked Mary Beth as she took the mug from her and gently took a sip. The warmth at first burned her lips, but then she caught a sharp, numbing taste in the drink. Wincing, she looked up.

“What’s in this?” she asked. “It tastes minty, but it burns.”

“Delicious,” said Korey.

“It’s an Irish Coffee,” Mary Beth admitted, taking a sip of her own. “I put whiskey in it. Not much, though, I figured that we’d all need a chance to unwind.”

Darlene raised an eyebrow. “Where did you get alcohol?” she said in a conspirator’s hush, even though nobody else was around. “You’ll get in trouble if they find out you have it in here, you know.

“Oh, and thank you—yes, I could use a chance to unwind.”

“I have my ways,” Mary Beth purred. “Also, being the RA for this floor gives me some perks. Since I’m the one who would be catching me with the alcohol. And I just did, but I let myself off with a warning this time.”

Korey had already drained nearly half of his mocha a la whiskey. “What brand is it?”

“Jameson,” said Mary Beth. “Can’t possibly Irish up coffee without the Irish.”

Darlene smiled; she could already feel the warmth of the alcohol spreading through her limbs. She never was a heavy drinker, and didn’t know if she could hold her liquor or not—she had never tried before. Being tipsy was about as much drunk as she was willing to be.

Finished with his draught of coffee, Korey set it down on the table, scrubbed at his blonde hair with one hand, and checked his watch. “Didn’t we call David like an hour or so ago? Where do you think he is?”

Mary Beth shrugged.

“He might still be asleep,” Darlene suggested. “He plays some card game at Coffee Plant sometimes after classes, doesn’t he? What if he’s still there?”

“At one in the morning?” Korey shook his head. “I think it’s closed by now.”

“Oh, right.”

“Maybe we all need to get some sleep,” said Mary Beth. She looked just as bad as everyone else. Her dark red curls were tousled and haphazard on her head and she wore her sleeping shirt; it hung lopsidedly along her neck. Darlene knew she couldn’t look much better. “Has anybody *tried* to get some sleep yet?”

“I couldn’t close my eyes,” Korey said.

“Nightmares,” ventured Darlene. “I kept waking up every five minutes feeling like something was watching me. I couldn’t get a wink. The alcohol is making me feel sleepy, though.”

And it was. Darlene was beginning to feel drowsy and comfortable. The warmth in her limbs had wrapped into her chest, her breathing felt easy, and a gentle sense of lightheadedness had entered her senses. She lay back in the cushioned chair a little bit and her vision swam. She could feel herself drifting away.

Mary Beth set something small and hard in Darlene’s hand. “Oh, I think you left this in my room a few days back.”

It was a small red box with the words “*Kolstein Violin Rosin*” written on the surface. “My rosin?” asked Darlene. “How did I manage to forget that?” Her head was foggy and her voice wavered.

“You might find it easier to sleep in your own bed, hon,” Mary Beth said, hoisting Darlene up onto her feet. “Go back to your room and sleep.”

Mary Beth was generally the boss of the group. It was why she was given the position of High Priestess at the ceremony. What she wanted done got done. Darlene often felt irked when people told her what to do, but there was always something about Mary Beth’s tone that made it feel more like she was giving a good suggestion of what to do, not commanding. So people usually did what she asked.

So, asked to return to her room and sleep, Darlene was more than happy to do so. The door to the TV room closed with a hollow click behind her as she made her way out of Hayden and crossed the parking lot. Korey and Mary Beth watched Darlene leave, her braid swinging back and forth like a pendulum across her back.

Once she was out of sight, Mary Beth turned to her boyfriend.

“You.” Mary Beth pointed at him. “Come with me to my room.”

“I obey,” Korey snickered.

“You bet you do.”

Chapter V



The Wanton Wand

“Two-Six-Four-Victor-Echo,” squawked the radio. *“Victor-Echo, are you there?”*

“I thought I turned that thing off,” Vex grumbled. “You are one hell of a distraction, Patrick.”

Work shift had ended over an hour ago, at one A.M. Normally she switched her radio off at that time, to prevent events just like this, but she had forgotten this time. Even if strange magics were being used by stupid college students and dire things awaited them, the taxi service still had to be run. Of course, if she took time off every time she caught youngsters dabbling in magic they didn’t understand, she would have been out of a job long ago. So she put in her six hours of driving.

Non-paying passengers were a generally prohibited, but nobody was going to tell on her. Patrick was quiet when she had a fare, and he sat up front with her looking strangely businesslike in his button down shirt—she had him stow his biker jacket beneath the seat. If anybody asked she was going to tell them that he was a supervisor doing a ride-along (not something that ever happened, but hey, what did anyone know?) But nobody asked, in fact, today

nobody seemed to want to talk.

Fortune had it that Vex only taxed three fares that day. This meant less money for her in tips and general wages, but she didn't mind. It gave her a lot more time to chat with Patrick about the goings on.

Right now they were shooting up Camelback towards Phoenix. The nighttime air whistled around the outside of the cab with a mournful whine and the hazy lights of Phoenix ahead gave the sky an eerie false-twilight appearance. The city seemed to be covered by a dome of luminescent air.

"So, this crystal you found in the candles, it's something special?" Patrick asked.

"It's a soulstone." Vex patted her pocket where she has secreted it. "They are used to trap spirits and store energy. I think in this case they were being prepared to steal the souls of those kids. There were three candles with soulstones. I have one of them so I can currently save one of those kids from losing his or her soul."

Patrick leaned back in his seat. "So, you're telling me that there are actually things out there than can steal your soul?"

"That's exactly what I'm telling you."

"Not saying that I believe in any of this—you always were the weird one at school—but with this *soulstone* you could say, take my soul right here and now?"

"No." Vex changed lanes and slowed for a red light. "It doesn't work that easily. You have to be involved magically with the soulstone or a talisman that contains it first. You have to be doing magic with it before it can do anything to you."

"Okay, that's good to know."

"What would I want with a ratty soul like yours anyway?" she said, flashing Patrick a wicked grin. "Well, I suppose if I had trapped your soul I could make you a loyal zombie, happy to follow my every whim... I can see where that would be useful."

"Already got—"

"*Two-Six-Four-Victor-Echo please respond,*" the radio barked

again.

"Your friends really seem to want to get hold of you," Patrick said, eying the radio.

Irritated, Vex snatched up the receiver and punched the send button. "Squawk this is Victor-Echo, come back."

"Squawk this is dispatch, Victor-Echo. Your cab has been pinged for its regular inspection, return to base, over."

"Gary is that you? I'm currently off duty and heading into Phoenix."

"Yes it is, lady, why don't you flip-a-bitch and cm'on back. The boss is hopping around like he's got hot grease on his balls over that report of your near-accident yesterday."

"I always wondered where you learned to talk like that," Patrick said.

She rolled her eyes at him and clicked in again. "Tell Mr. Boss Man that I own this cabby, Gary, and that I'll be in tomorrow to have her inspected. Oh and, let him know that he shouldn't wax his junk with hot grease."

"I'll tell him that, but he won't be happy."

"Then I'll tell him tomorrow—"

"Oh yeah, by the way, your Da was here today asking about you. I think you should maybe give him a call. He's not looking so good these days."

"I'll think about it; he isn't there right now is he?"

"No, he left a few hours ago. The old man said he needed a nap, maybe you should get in touch with him tomorrow."

"I said I'll think about it ..." she mimed an exasperated sigh; made as if to release the send-button, but pulled it back to her lips instead. "Look: I have to get some shuteye. Vex out."

"See you tomorrow, lady. Out."

The radio chirped for a moment when Vex reached out and flicked the receive switch off. The green light on the dash slowly faded out to black.

"That was interesting, I didn't know you were so foul mouthed at work," Patrick said. "Family problems?"

“Welcome to the big city, country-boy,” she said, checking again to make sure that the receiver was actually switched off and she wouldn’t be interrupted again. “What do you mean: family problems?”

“Your dad. I didn’t know you had one—er, I mean, you’ve never talked about your parents. Not like you couldn’t have one, but you get my drift.”

“Oh, him,” she said. “My dad and I have... Issues, I suppose is the term. Left my mother and I when I was eight. Reappeared right after mom died, five years or so ago, said he wanted to be part of my life again. I wouldn’t talk to him at all if it weren’t for this job. He got it for me.

“Turns out good ol’ Da owns Fairlight Taxi Co. He keeps me from getting fired when I scare the fares or nearly wreck my car. I suppose he feels guilty; I just don’t give a damn.”

Vex realized that Patrick had gone silent; she glanced over and shook her head apologetically. His eyes shimmered in near darkness of the car interior.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to spout off like that,” she said.

“Ah,” he said and took a deep breath. “The intrusion was mine, I prodded. Your family is your private business, forgive me.”

She chuckled. “Don’t be sorry. I guess you were going to hear that spiel some time or another.” The hazy green of a traffic light swung past overhead, casting playful shadows throughout the cab. Vex looked up to check the street name and smiled. “Oh, and by the way. We are here.”

The lights of the cab swung around from the dusty asphalt of Camelback and illuminated a small building set back behind a strip mall. At first glance it looked like an ordinary residence, a house with a black roof, pointed windows, and an everyday looking doorway. But after a moment it the sign above the door reading, “The Wanton Wand Crystal Shoppe,” became visible. The inset from the mall was a parking lot, and the windows displayed books, wands, crystals, and other New Age paraphernalia.

“Cozy,” Patrick said.

“Yes, it is.” Vex turned the ignition off. As the noise of the engine died down and the lights from the cab switched off the door to the shop swung open to reveal a thin woman with a grey scarf tied around her head. She nodded when she saw Vex as if she were expecting the visit. “And Patrick.”

“Yes?”

“I want you to keep it zipped about your, ‘not that I believe in that crap,’ commentary when you’re here. I don’t want you insulting these people. They are good friends of mine and if you act narrow-minded like that around them it will reflect poorly on me.”

Patrick opened his mouth to retort but he took one look at Vex and reconsidered.

“Got ya.”

Cozy was as good a description as any for the warm but cramped quarters that Vex and Patrick entered into.

The house may have been built like a residence but the entire front of the house had been turned into one large room, with two exits in the back. One covered by a curtain, and the other marked: PRIVATE. Shelves of odds and ends marched from one end of the room to the other displaying crystals, phials, wands, boxes of polished and unpolished semiprecious stones, vials of sweet smelling perfumes, stacks of incense, boxes and containers of various shapes and sizes, and books. One wall was dedicated entirely to bookshelves, not orderly like one would have expected a library, but laid out in a haphazard array of shelving levels and lay of books.

The soothing smell of burnt incense lingered in the air along with the electrical sensation reminiscent of the passage of a thunderstorm in the desert. The thin woman with the headscarf led Vex and Patrick around the counter, through the door marked PRIVATE, down a musty stairwell, and into a bare room. It was unfurnished except for a single, low table in the center, some cushions, and closed chests along the walls.

All the while, Patrick kept silent and waited.

“Madame Summer,” Vex said, “it is good to see you again.”

The woman and Vex embraced briefly. Aside from her grey headscarf, she wore a gypsy’s outfit of varying hues of blue, green, with yellow edging. Golden medallions hung from every surface of her clothing and glittered in the light of the single lamp in the room. “It always be a good day when you come to visit me, Vexandra. Though I feel that trouble brings you into my bosom. Please, you and your friend may sit. Place the fetish on the table.”

Vex gestured for Patrick to kneel down next to her as she knelt down in front of the table on one of the cushions. She removed the soulstone from her pocket and set it on the table.

“Ah, you have found a *bun grauni*. Clever, clever, little foxes. They prance in the moonlight and when eyes are watching they are still, their eyes closed they think that we cannot see them, but their tails we see. You cannot hide from Madame Summer.”

She hovered close and snatched the stone from the table.

“*Kaski san?*” asked the woman of the stone. She held it cupped in her hands and gazed at it as if she were examining a bug. The stone began to emit a formless, blue light. “*Kaski san?*” she asked again.

“I see children,” Madame Summer said. “They walk too close to the shore, they be watched by monsters. I see torches, no, candles. Much like those my people use to light our wagons and keep at bay the darkness.”

“Can you tell me how to recognize them?” Vex asked.

“*Ssb,*” quieted the woman, her eyes reflected the blue glow, and she put her finger to her lips. “I see these children. I cannot tell you their names, but perhaps I can tell you where to find them. There be one: he be tall and fair like a man of the north, but you will not find him. There be another, he be small and dark haired and his eyes mirrors be, you will find him where the water meets the road. Then there be another, she be of red and curly hair and you will find her in bed.

“Finally, there is another, dark of hair and eyes, who wears

her hair like she is *posbrat* and she will *kel the bosh* tomorrow, an audience will listen to her story where the Gaujo gather.”

Patrick glanced at Vex. “But that’s four, didn’t you say—”

“There were only three stones,” Vex finished for him. “I surely did not miscount them.”

“Yet there be four children tied to this stone,” Madame Summers said. “And yet there is more. The powers here invoked be beyond my ken, but I can see their tails, the clever foxes. I should take this *grauni* to my husband and we will summon the *trito ursitori* to tell us more.”

Vex rose to her feet. “The three? Madame Summer, please may I join in the ritual?”

The woman shook her head; she covered her hand and the soulstone. “You may not, my Vexandra, however dear to me you be. It not be for Gaujo.”

Vex knew better than to feel insulted, she was an outsider; her request was too forward and she was refused. She swallowed her pride and bowed her head. “I understand, please accept my apology for being so forward.”

“Go now. Find these children. They need your help, if they are not already dead.”

Outside the night was wearing on, and while there was a slight breeze bringing the stink of the city with it, there was no chill in it. Even with three A.M. rolling around the air was tepid, hot, and dusty. A lone car drove past down Camelback Road towards Phoenix, but aside from the sound of their footsteps, Vex and Patrick heard no other noises.

“That was spooky,” Patrick said as Vex pushed the door open for him and reached under the seat to pull out a newspaper. “And—Vexandra?”

“Don’t ask.”

He continued on without missing a beat, “What is this thing about this girl who is going to kill the Bosch? Is she supposed to murder a painting or something? He was a painter wasn’t he?”

“How cryptic can you get anyway? Where the road meets the water. This is why I don’t like fortune tellers, you know, they never tell you anything straight. It’s all about taking your money.”

“She didn’t take any money from us.”

He crossed his arms and sighed. “Well, you’ve got me there.” He turned to look at her. “So, what are we going to do next? I can’t believe you’ve got me coming with you on this wild goose chase.”

Vex folded up the newspaper and gave him a level look. He was handsome but that only went so far sometimes. At least he wasn’t totally stupid, and he did do a good job of not insulting Madame Summer, so she figured he deserved a moment to vent about that.

“I found one of them. Her name is Darlene Ann Barlowe, and we can find her at Coffee Plantation on Mill at seven P.M. tomorrow.”

“What?” He looked genuinely shocked. “Don’t tell me, you’ve got gypsy magic in your veins too and you just pulled her name out of the air?”

“Nope,” she said. “Madame Summer didn’t say ‘kill the Bosch’ she said ‘*kel the bosh*’ which means: to play the violin. My *gypsy magic* is my talent for literacy.” She folded her copy of the *State Press* and tossed it into the back seat. “Mrs. Barlowe will be playing the violin for an audience at Coffee Plantation tomorrow, and is the only person listed in the newspaper playing any violin tomorrow.”

“I see, well shan’t miss that performance, now can we?”

Vex quirked an eyebrow at him. “Nope,” she said, finally looking over her shoulder and backing out of the parking lot. “Say, would you be willing to give me a ride home from the garage? I’ve got to turn this heap in for its regular inspection.”

“I thought you’d never ask. I always did like it when you were a damsel in distress,” he said. “Except that you’re not a damsel and I guess I could hardly call needing a ride distress. Sure, not a problem.”

Vex shook her head and sped off, away from the shapeless light that marked downtown Phoenix.

Chapter VI



The Hanged Man

The sun rose on Tempe and the fountain behind Coffee Plantation. Though of late it had been empty of water, today the mist machine billowed fog and water gushed down its ledges. A few stragglers here and there mingled among the chairs, a pair of street rats sat quietly in the sunlight at the front of going-out-of-business Duck Soup and bantered between themselves. Flat, bronze figurines of the Native American figure Kokopelli still lined the windows of the store, glinting in the sunbeams beneath the “CLOSING SALE” banners. The copper-colored hunchbacked dancers continued to play their flutes unabashed by the doom that had come to the shop that sold them.

Mêlée purred softly under her breath and greeted the pair of indigents lurking in front of the store, both with closely held hugs. She made her usual rounds, greeting the gathered celebrities of the streets: Doc, Corpse, Nightshade, Maniac, Sparky, and Antoinette. Sparky nodded a ragged head with a smile from over his drums, slung over one shoulder; and a few others gave her greetings as she prowled past.

Nobody slept much last night; there was something wrong in the air.

Remy had fallen asleep, headfirst on one of the tables. Now that he was awake, Mêleé suppressed a chuckle at the crisscross pattern it had left on his forehead.

“So,” Mêleé drawled with a throaty growl, “it seems like something’s going down?”

“Yeah,” came the reply, Maniac. An empty cigarette carton cart-wheeled aimlessly through the air, its contents now spent. “Got a light?”

“Nope, sorry,” Mêleé made a show of hands and spread her threadbare jacket to show how her pockets were empty. A lighter was produced by nearby street rat and Maniac lit his last cigarette with thanks. Mêleé continued, “What’s going on?”

“I don’t know, dude,” Maniac replied, exhaling a plume of smoke. “Things are just strange.”

“Anyone know what this is?” Nightshade leaned over and thrust a notebook under Mêleé’s nose, who gently took it to examine the chicken scratches and lines. On the facing page were some scrawled quotes, but on the other, deliberately set away from the writing was a line-heavy design. The figure was jagged like a lightning bolt, with lines thrusting out of the undulating center, and terminated in a thickly scribbled black dot.

“No,” Mêleé said after a moment of gazing at it. Nightshade tilted the page to show Maniac, who shook his head. “Where is it from?”

“I’ve been seeing these scratched into the walls around where I crash.”

Mêleé shrugged and licked her lips, a motion that caused the metal whiskers in her lip to sparkle in the morning sunlight. “Graffiti maybe?”

“Things are just strange,” Maniac repeated.

Nightshade retreated with her notebook, shaking her head, and Mêleé tilted her head to look at Maniac.

“Going to be at drum circle tomorrow?”

“Yeah,” he said. “You?”

“Yeah.”

The Hanged Man—a sacrifice.

Korey woke up in Mary Beth’s bed alone. The bedclothes smelled like sweat and lovemaking. Though entirely spent by the night before, the smell made him feel just a little bit aroused. He glanced around the dark dormitory room: there was an open closet, a window covered with a heavy blanket to keep the sun out, a dresser with a mirror above it, and a wall that divided the room in half. The other half of the room would have housed a roommate, but RAs received special treatment. Mary Beth had no roommate.

The sound of movement in the other side of the room brought him to his senses.

He rose out of the bed.

“Bethany?” he asked the quiet air. “Is that you?”

The sheets slipped from his naked body, and stuck for a moment to his legs. He tried to slap them away and discovered that they felt clammy and slick. The sheet peeled from his leg like wet clothing.

The hiss of the air conditioning became the only sound that greeted his queries. But then something shuffled again in the dark on the other side of the room. He walked the few paces over to the door. Calling her name again, there was no reply.

He reached for the light switch.

His hand touched another; the flesh was cold and clammy. He shrank back. He couldn’t see in the darkness but it seemed like another person was standing there, also reaching for the light switch. Something gurgled wetly nearby.

“Uh, Beth, honey?” he said, once again reaching for the switch and this time he turned it on.

Korey screamed out. He screamed until he could scream no more.

* * *

Dropping the cabby off for inspection went without a hitch. After Patrick left Vex at her apartment, they parted ways so that he could get sleep. She did the same thing. She awoke sometime late afternoon, well past the hottest hours of the day according to her clock, but certainly not too late in the day to miss the festivities that were planned.

Six o'clock on a Friday. Coffee Plantation had its fill of customers inside and sitting in the tables and seats, those that still remained—the seats nearest to the coffee shop had been removed for amps, wires, and other equipment for the musicians to use when their time came to perform. The displaced peoples clustered together on the sidewalk nearby, laughed, and cajoled together. Vex only recognized a few of them: Lily, Remy, Rain, and Andrew. The group numbered over six, and they hustled and shuffled whenever the crowds walking past along the Ave pushed around and through them.

This caught none too few glances from the TEAM workers walking along Mill, wearing their white shirts and discerning gazes. Vex was never sure what to think of them, impromptu security for a public space, with radios and watchful gazes. She had seen them working the Ave for years now, she rarely spared them more than a glance; they weren't cops so they didn't matter. So when one of them watched her for too long for standing next to the red brick planter at the edge of 6th and Mill, her back against the green grating of the Centerpointe sign, she ignored him.

A year before there had been little green grates that served as benches attached to these planters. People could sit on them. At some point they had vanished. Vex didn't know when, it was just like one day she had come out to Mill and suddenly there was nowhere to sit. It was dreadfully annoying. Certainly, people complained about it. Though, she quickly began to notice that the people who complained were the people who actually lived near the Ave, not the tourists, and not the students who got to go home during the summer.

Peeved at the TEAM member staring at her from his perch next to the Coffee Plantation awning and outside juice bar—a part of

the coffee house that Vex had never seen used for that purpose—she stood up, brushed her trench off, and crossed the street briskly. A man standing there offered her a pamphlet; she brushed him off with a wicked smile and the gentle admonition that she'd already gotten one. She shifted to a sultry walk that accentuated her curves and the tightness of her outfit as she passed—trying her best to imitate the sashay that many girls used to walk across the dance floor at the Nile. She could tell that it worked from the tightening of his expression. People could disapprove of her as much as they wanted: they weren't responsible for her.

She passed the alcove into the now-empty Wells Fargo branch when a voice stopped her.

“Tsk, tsk, teasing people like that, one might think you were *trying* to pick a fight.”

This time it was Vex's expression that tightened.

“I don't have to answer to you, Christian.” She did not let her recognition soften the hardness of her voice. His name was Nathan, but she called him what he was: a Christian.

He wore an oddly overformal outfit of a smart-white suit, white tie, and jacket, a glimmering symbol of his faith—a crucifix—displayed prominently on his lapel.

“Still wearing the devil's sign, I see,” he said.

If there was anything that Vex disapproved of more than someone who dressed her down with their own ideology, she could not think of it. Her fight with Nathan was ages old, wrapped up over and over again in legends and stories never told for mortal ears, held over dinner tables, at wartime councils, and in the hearts of men. She hated him the first time they met, but that was when she was a freshman in high school—many years earlier. While her opinion hadn't changed since, she had come to tolerate his casual jibes for what they were: attempts to categorize her into his narrow-minded view of the universe. The years of contention and rivalry had forged a strange rapport between them that few other people understood.

“While I would normally stand beside myself for a joust with

you, Christian, I do not have time for this right now,” said Vex; exasperated, she picked a convenient falsehood: “I have somewhere to be.”

She made to move along beside a family with two children: a boy and a girl wearing blue and holding ice cream cones. Nathan slipped out of the alcove and paced her, brandishing a serious look.

“May I accompany?” he said with a clipped breath. “I really must have a moment of your time.”

She nearly growled at him, but bit her tongue. She knew it was no use; when Nathan sank his teeth into something, he didn’t let go easily. “Fine,” she said. “Keep up the pace.”

With her usual gait, Vex left ordinary people behind in the dust. With her long legs, and smooth stride, she could slide along easily without winding herself. A feat that few other people were easily capable of. He paced her easily, even while having to dodge around people who themselves swerved to avoid her oncoming presence. Like any good local, she made a direct route through the tourists to Mill, they were trespassers on her homeland, and she let them know that with her bearing. Unwilling to walk even slightly behind her, Nathan could not reap the benefits of the wake that her passage produced.

“I would like to, *ahem*, apologize for our last encounter,” he said. “I was perhaps a little abrupt.”

“Abrupt?”

Vex stopped dead in her tracks and fixed Nathan with a withering glare. The motion was so sudden and unexpected that a young woman, wearing a shirt way too tight for her bust, yelped in surprise and backpedaled into her date. Together they stumbled and nearly fell into the nearby bus stop. Vex ignored them.

“You all but called me out for a fight and called me Satan’s Mewling Whore in front of half of Mill!” The booming sound of her voice reverberated from the nearby walls and people were staring. “I know that most of our little spats are half theatrical posturing, but you really pushed it that time. ‘Satan I rebuke you and your whore.’

Oh please, *Christian*.”

While Nathan was not a short man, he certainly wasn’t that much taller than her; she still managed to tower over him. When she was moving she had produced a wake, now that she stood stock still the sidewalk was empty. People nearby had stopped to stare at the exchange. If she were in any mood to see the comical nature of it all, Vex would have allowed herself a smirk at the vision of a black-clad admonishing a clean-cut young man wearing a white suit.

“I deserve that,” Nathan said. “I apologize, sincerely. I was out of line. I got caught up in the moment, and I have no excuse. Normally we have a, *ahem*, much clearer rapport. I feel like I tested your respect for me with that performance.”

Vex knew that he was trying to mollify her. She also knew that it was working.

“Don’t you remember? I’m a heathen; we’re not the forgiving type, that’s your shtick.” Her glower did not falter, but her resolve was fading.

“Can I buy you dinner to make up for it?” he asked.

She sighed. “Fine. But I don’t want any lectures out of you, hear?”

“Deal,” he said. “Well,”—he looked around, noticing the crowd that had gathered; people were starting to look embarrassed and turn away—“where were you headed?”

“Away from you,” she said. Seeing that her humor was lost on Nathan she continued, “No, really, that’s where I was headed. But, if you want to walk with me to Graffiti, you’re welcome to come.”

The crowd hadn’t entirely dispersed and Vex took pleasure in plowing through them.

Across 5th, a man stood at the corner casually greeting passersby, offering to sell them newspapers, he had a smile and a story for everyone. He smiled when he saw her and waved a hand. His curly brown hair turned honey brown in the sunlight, and his mustache gave his round face a friendly appearance. He had been

around for years, always standing on this corner, always sociable. If any person could be called a landmark: Dennis was it for Mill Avenue.

“Hi, Dennis,” Vex said.

“Hey there pretty lady, and gent,” he said with a grin. “I hope you’re having a good night out.”

“Good as always. And I am pleased to see you.”

He only bid a nod for her compliment, another couple was walking past and he moved on to talk to them. She smiled, and kept moving along, drawing Nathan along with her.

A short distance ahead, Megan’s sharp eyes caught the sight of Vex walking towards where she sat with her pencil and paper. She had been sketching for some time. Ever since the guy had given her that strange tarot reading and given her a card, *The High Priestess*, with some silver writing she couldn’t read on it. The interesting thing was, the woman on the card, and the woman walking toward her now looked very similar.

Megan closed up her sketch work, pulled the card from her pocket, rose, and walked to meet the young woman in black.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Mill Avenue Culture has been a big part of my life, even after I moved to Michigan. A lot of visitors miss out on most of it, seeing only what the City of Tempe wants them to see, and ignoring the obvious natures of the people who have actually forged what is wrought.

Mill is not simply a collection of buildings, of brick sidewalks and cobblestones; it is not just an asphalt road, with painted yellow lines, and plants springing out of road islands; it is every breathing person, every street rat, every business that has smiled on the people who gather there. Mill even includes those evil few who seem to think that they are above everyone else, harass and kick around the true people of the Ave.

We have a collective memory. We remember the grass hill that used to look over the Ave, long ago, that is now P.F. Cheng’s China Bistro. We remember Long Wongs and the loud, raucous music that surrounded it like a jitterbug perfume—now gone to a parking lot and then a blasted hole in the ground. We remember Café Boa, Java Road, and all other manner of edifices come and gone through our quiet watch. We remember when Rocky Horror Picture Show used to play at the Valley Art Theater.

All of these things pass, in time, as Mill’s public face changes and twirls through all myriad of changes—but we are constant: we are the people. We are the culture of Mill Avenue.

Keep on drumming, people of the Ave. The Mill Avenue Drum Circle is one of the oldest and most respectable traditions that Mill has—it isn’t some watered down corporate store front; it isn’t some stupid stunt lent the Ave by the City in their addled wisdom; it isn’t an insult to the population of artists, college students, and outside

visitors like a lot of the events visited upon this little nation by the City. It is the essence of the culture that is Mill.

Though now the drum circle is pressed into exile, every Saturday at 12 A.M., by the City of Tempe police as they enforce a curfew on Tempe parks normally eschewed in deference to the drum circle and the culture it represents.

The midnight air over Mill Avenue hangs sweetly on my skin as I bask under the sallow laterlight of a street lamp. The drummers keep playing, feet keep pounding the pavement, and passing cars add their own urban rhythm to the tribal sensation of culture and community. I inhale deeply the scent of smoldering sage as it mixes gently with the tremulous night air; but there's something different, something has changed about this oh-so-familiar gathering that I have always come to love.

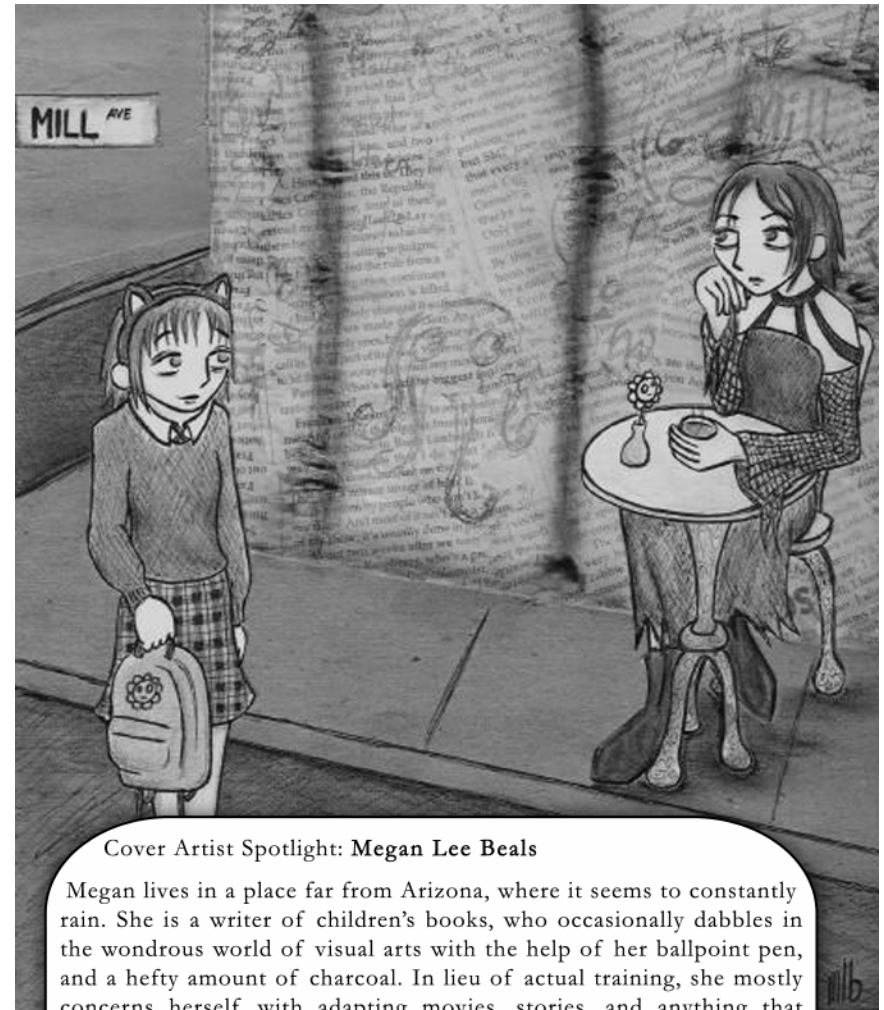
Tonight, I stand with them in exile.

If you're reading this and you don't know the Mill Ave Drum Circle, I urge you to come and visit wherever we may be. Ordinarily the circle convenes with drums around the Above the Crowd statue, but you can find us in exile in front of the Post Office on Mill.

Those interested can look to an article on Azcentral.com for more information, or to the Mill Vexations page for resources on this current annoyance—but, above all:

Keep on drumming.

In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni.



Cover Artist Spotlight: Megan Lee Beals

Megan lives in a place far from Arizona, where it seems to constantly rain. She is a writer of children's books, who occasionally dabbles in the wondrous world of visual arts with the help of her ballpoint pen, and a hefty amount of charcoal. In lieu of actual training, she mostly concerns herself with adapting movies, stories, and anything that piques her visual interest into her own, slightly bizarre style. This usually results in a vast amount of zombies and robots, and the occasional cute little girl. She is pleased to be involved in the **Vexations** project, because the world could always use another really good read.

Afterward