

When you've seen as much as I have... This city, these people, this place—the Ave—it can all start blurring together. Friday after Friday, face after face, men, women, yuppies, scabs, droids...they all blend into one neverending, edgeless, eyeless crowd.

Listen to us, daughter, we are your path to salvation. Your grace. Through us you can find peace...

A wiseman once told me that searching for serenity in a city was like wishing for rain underneath a waterfall. The water will keep rushing, but you can never tell if that was thunder or storm-clouds in the mist.

You already know the way: we've shown you before. You need only listen. From the dangers hidden in the darkness, we have protected you; when you were terrified, we coddled you; when you needed shelter, we pitched ourselves against the elements. When you are ready to come home, we will be waiting.

So it's like that for me. A constant deluge of faces. A couple with a kid rode in my cab yesterday. I know I keep telling myself that I hate kids; that I never want to have any, never to subject my scions to this world... But there was *something* in that little girl's dancing blue eyes that I couldn't quite ignore.

And, we will always love you.

Something a lot like serenity.

**Two-Six-Four Victor-Echo,
come back.**

Well, gotta go.
It's been *surreal!*

KYT DOTSON



Incantations of Incarnation

Mill Avenue Vexations - Volume 3

Mill Avenue Vexations
Volume 3: Incantations of Incarnation

By Kyt Dotson

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

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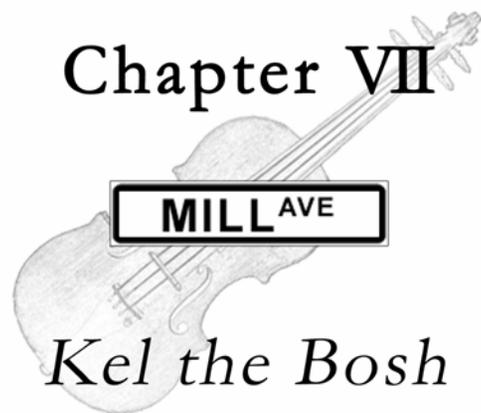
This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either
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Darlene stood in a hallway. It was an ordinary hallway. Like any she might see in an ASU class building—or a dorm.

Except that this one went on forever. Door after door after door pocked the walls ad infinitum until the walls vanished into a distant darkness. All the doors had numbers. Darlene couldn't read them. She only knew that they were ascending as she moved forward. She was walking towards the room she wanted.

Somewhere someone was playing the violin. The minstrel chords lilted and twirled; teased from the strings by an expert hand.

Darlene walked faster. She was getting closer. It was one of these doors.

Ahead, a door was open. Wan yellowish light pooled out from beyond. That was it, that's where she was headed.

A face peeked out at her. Korey.

Korey wait! Darlene wanted to shout, but he vanished into the room.

Unsure why, Darlene broke into a run. She reached the door and entered the room—

—and emerged into another corridor. Another hallway. It was an ordinary hallway. Like any she might see in any hospital.

Korey was ahead of her, much further ahead of her than she expected him to be. Bloody footprints glistened in the yellow light.

Darlene was running. She had to help Korey...

The hallway went on forever.

The faster she ran the further away he seemed—

When Darlene awoke Friday afternoon, after a very long and disturbed sleep, she discovered police cars flanking the front entrance of Hayden Dorm. Several RAs whom she recognized were hovering around like nervous mothers, and cops were strolling about with grim faces. Darlene was certain she also saw several ASU bigwigs moving among the assembled gawkers. Her curiosity soon abated when a uniformed cop blocked her from reaching the dorm and directed her to move elsewhere.

“Crime scene, ma’am,” he said huskily.

To all her questions he just shook his head. He did ask if she lived in Hayden and where she was that evening and seemed satisfied with both answers: no, and sleeping.

If it could have been called sleeping. The most perturbing and twisted dreams twirled in the vacancy of missing memory of that night. Darlene couldn't quite shake the feeling that Korey was in grave danger when she woke only half-an-hour earlier. It had galvanized her into throwing together her outfit, briefly washing her mouth out with Scope without brushing her teeth, and rushing outside to discover this.

Whatever must have happened, it had to have been gristly. The cops were stopping people left and right, even those who lived in the dorm, the entire place was cordoned off. Yellow tape blocked the entrances and suspicious gazes swept from every direction like searchlights.

Darlene shivered.

“My friends live in that dorm,” she said to the officer. “I hope they're okay.”

“You'll hear about it on tonight's news. Just be glad *you* weren't involved.”

Korey and Mary Beth would be seeing her tonight when she

played at the Coffee Plantation on Mill. Darlene could see that she wasn't going to be getting anywhere near Hayden without some fast-talking, and she'd already blown that. There was no sense in worrying until they didn't show up to watch her play. At least, that seemed the practical attitude to take.

Darlene slouched. Her stomach growled.

Practical or not, she hadn't eaten all day and the fast food restaurants in the basement of the MU would be closing soon. She knew that if she wanted something cheap, and soon, she would have to get moving. The situation at Hayden Dorm would have to come later. Mary Beth and Korey could tell her all about it when they came to her concert.

Yes, Darlene smiled, they could explain everything...

Practical. Got to keep a practical attitude, Darlene chided herself.

She shrugged her violin strap up higher on her shoulder and went to get herself some food.

"After giving you a tarot card reading, he gave you this card and told you to give it to me?"

"No, actually, he didn't say who to give it to," Megan said. She ran her finger along the outline of a butterfly drawn on the concrete floor with magic marker. "He just gave it to me and said to deliver it to the first person it reminded me of. That was the price of the reading. Did you know him?"

Vex shook her head and pursed her lips. She stared at her reflection in the large mirror that made up this wall of the Graffiti Shop. Her lipstick was flaking slightly; she would have to fix that in a moment. The rest of the store displayed prominently in the mirror as a riot of colorful drawings, sketched lines, racks of clothing, and glass cases. An overlarge cloth banner hung up against the back of the store displayed the words: CRADLE OF FILTH. Tangy incense smoke drifted down from above, where a smoldering stick was

Presently, a pair of girls, flourishing and giggling, crashed

down the stairs and whooshed between Vex, Nathan, and Megan. The lazy swirls of incense smoke blurred into a hazy pall in their wake. Together they bumped and jostled their way over to the front counter, where the longhaired and wise-eyed keeper of the Graffiti Shop sat. He raised his chin and an eyebrow.

"Girls. My key?"

"Here you go."

Lawrence lifted the bathroom key from the glass counter with a caressing motion. "Sweetheart," he said, "in my dreams, I get to frisk you for it."

Vex chuckled and smiled, turning her attention back to the conversation.

"Do you recognize the writing?" Megan asked.

"It's Enochian: the language of the angels."

Nathan snorted disapprovingly. "More heretical garbage spread by heathen, cloaked in the guise of enlightenment. Everything mankind needs to know is written in the Good Book. In the beginning there was the Word and the Word was not Enochian—"

"Nathan?" Vex snapped.

"Yes?"

She gestured for him to lean closer. He bent down and she said: "Do shut up."

"Right." With that, he went silent and she turned her attention back to the tarot card.

"So..." Megan said. "What does it say?"

The letters were written in a spiral starting in the upper-left corner of the card and scripted clockwise, twirling inward toward the center. It wasn't a formation that Vex had ever seen used with Enochian before, she was used to it being written in ordinary lines by Westerners expecting to read it like a book. Rotating the card she discovered a new interplay between the lines above and below. The names of particular angels emerged from the text; extending from the edges toward the center at certain angles, much like a crossword puzzle.

“It’s rather complex,” she said finally. “I think that it’s a warning. This wasn’t written by some idiot boob reading a book on Wicca. This is the genuine article. I don’t know how to read it, but I have counted the names of seven different angels. Seven is a powerful number.”

Nathan shook his head in disgust but remained quiet.

Megan shifted uncomfortably. “Why did he give it to me?”

Vex’s eyes flashed and secret smile crossed her face, white teeth gleamed between black parted lips. “You mean you don’t know?” she said. “You’re a witch.”

—*Ring... Ring... Ring...*

After the twelfth ring, Darlene hung up. The payphone jingled, clacked, and dumped her thirty-five cents out into the change hopper a few moments later.

Darlene rubbed her jaw and hefted her violin. The answering machine should have picked up after at most five rings. According to the clock nearby, it was nearly a quarter past six, Darlene knew that she would be expected on Mill to start setting up before a quarter to seven. There was no time to worry about why Mary Beth’s answering machine wasn’t doing its job.

The trip to Mill took her past Hayden Library. On one side was the glass and metal tower of the Stacks and the other the green lawn covering the underground library. A cylindrical monument rose up out of the lawn looking like a lighthouse with glass windows near its top. A few students were lounging on its lower steps. The entrance to the Hayden Library was closer to the Memorial Union—the building where Darlene had just gotten dinner—and descended into a pit of tan stone via a wide set of stairs. Darlene had passed beneath the tan arch at the top of that staircase many times, even now still covered with broad leafed vines sporting white hanging flowers.

Palm trees rose up on one side of the path as Darlene walked to University, crossed, and turned in front of the chapel there. As she

walked she barely paid attention to the students walking past to and fro, in mobs, and alone. They wore all manner of styles of clothing, mostly short-sleeves and shorts because of the warmer climate; it would be a couple months before people started wearing long sleeves or even long pants as a rule. Together they moved on foot, passing each other without notice. They had somewhere to be, Darlene had somewhere to be.

Curious people were already gathering near the setup at Coffee Plantation. Darren, the operations manager, waved Darlene over to a black top table to set her things down. She shrugged her backpack off, but kept her violin. It wasn’t ever a good idea to part with such a thing when on Mill Avenue, too many people were wandering around and it could easily be snatched if she wasn’t looking.

“I’ve got all the amps set up. We just need a mike test. How quickly can you get set up and do that?”

“You have that quarter-inch jack that I asked for?” Darlene unzipped her violin case, pulled out the bow, and adjusted the tension screw.

“Yeah, right here.”

Darlene took the lead and the jack from Darren and looked at it carefully. It gleamed in the sunlight for a moment, burnished like gold. Only expensive leads, like this one, were gold plated. “Good,” she said. “This is what I needed. I can be ready for a test in about five minutes.”

Darren glanced down at his watch. “Great. I’m going to grab myself a glass of water inside. I’ll be back for the sound check.”

As he left, Darlene reached inside of her case, flipped up the front compartment and pulled out her rosin. The rosin was packaged inside of a small box, and then wrapped with a soft cloth that was useful for cleaning the bow and strings. Darlene cleaned her violin every time she put it away, so there was no need for that now. She laid the rosin on the table and unwrapped it with her free hand.

When the last of the cloth was free from the rosin a jolt went

up Darlene's arm, like a static shock had struck her. She winced; her arm tingled and ached like she had struck her funny bone. The world blanked for a moment and a ghost-white whisper of a mist fluttered up, out of the rosin, and evanesced into the air.

"Ow," Darlene said. She massaged her aching arm until the pain subsided. "I should really be more careful."

A small shard of glass glittered atop the rosin. Darlene picked it up, shrugged, and dropped it into the nearby trash bin. With the help of a bit of sandpaper, Darlene scraped the rosin lightly before rubbing the bow along it seven times; she quietly and carefully counted each stroke under her breath. It was a ritual she had inherited from her first violin teacher: *seven strokes makes the grace*. With the rosin applied properly, she completed her ritual by unbinding the violin and lifting it out of the case.

Five minutes had passed, or at least the time it took Darren to get a glass of water had passed, because he was back with his water.

"Ready for that sound check?" he asked.

"Check away," Darlene said, plugging the gold lead into the violin.

The sound test was short and simple. Darlene played a few notes on the strings, and Darren adjusted some of the knobs on the amp to match the sounds. During her little test, Darlene played a *petit glissando* and decided that she needed to get the violin into slightly better tune; she could hear a reverberation between the A and E strings.

The problem was easily fixed with a gentle turn of the peg.

"What time is it?" Vex asked suddenly. The conversation had gotten too interesting, she was losing track of time. She kicked herself mentally for that. Despite her weakness for banter and knowing that she didn't have a good sense of time, she had forgotten to pay attention. Megan and Nathan had already gotten into a spat about religion, and the girl didn't take Vex's mention of witchcraft very seriously. Not that it was easy to take anything seriously coming from

someone wearing pale foundation, black eye makeup, and black lipstick.

Megan pulled a tiny cat clock from off her backpack. "It's seven oh three," she said.

"I'm late," Vex said. "Patrick really should have shown up already, I have a concert I need to attend."

"A concert?" asked Nathan.

"At the Coffee Plantation, a girl is playing the violin. I meant to go listen."

"Oh, I didn't hear about that," Megan said.

Nathan quirked an eyebrow. "I didn't know you had any interest in the arts, Pagan. I thought you were all about that loud devil music that you blasted in your cab the last I rode with you."

"It's purely business, I assure you," Vex graveled. She rose onto her feet and balanced herself against the mirror. The incense smoke was beginning to make her heady. Vex knew that she needed to be clear headed when meeting this girl. She could be the witch in the group who was trying to steal the other's souls.

"I'll come with you," Megan said and pulled on her backpack.

"I'm not being left behind," Nathan said when Vex glanced at him.

She shrugged. "Sure thing, come along both of you, I suppose I could use the company."

She waved to Lawrence where he stood behind the counter. He was with the customer, but spent a moment to nod back. Vex made her way through the store, weaving between the racks of clothing, and ascended the back stairs. The smell of grease, car exhaust, and recently smoked cigarettes replaced the gentle incense. Rumbling music from a nearby car stereo with too much bass echoed from the walls, and gravel crunched under her boots.

Vex turned to say something to Nathan when the most peculiar sensation fluttered in her chest. A voice whispered in her ear—

*No, daughter, you cannot have her. The Old Ones are calling her name.
She is spoken for. She is not for you.
—and then the music hit her.*

Chapter VIII



Incantations of Incarnation

A rip in the veil begins to tear. Much like a run in a pair of fishnet stockings, it starts as a single broken thread—then begins to unravel. Threads spiral away from threads. And the veil is that diaphanous barrier between this world and the next; and the rip is the sound of a violin playing. The notes become dazzling stars, emerging powers, spilling their luminous lifeblood in ominous tapestries of fraying threads.

Somewhere between here and then, now and there, Another reaches through.

In Tempe, on the corner of Mill Ave and 6th Street, Darlene played a song she never heard before. She hadn't set out to play it, it just happened. The music came to her fingertips as surely as she had practiced it to perfection for hundreds of years, and she performed it perfectly. The song rang clarion from the stings of her violin without bias or reverberation; it transcended the power of the amps; it rose above the rush and motion of Mill; it surpassed even the meager bounds of sound and air and became emotion: the impetus that moves souls.

The swelling crowd stood entranced, unable to look away from Darlene as she played. She felt filled up with perfect motion,

unable to steer herself away even if she wanted. And she didn't want to. The violin was an instrument of her will, and she became the instrument of the music.

Darlene became a moment of perfect beauty.

In Mesa, an elderly Mormon couple died watching television. They were only in their mid-sixties, but their hearts gave out at the same time. In the same moment—or as close as the coroner could tell during the autopsy later. There were no toxins present, no other reason for their deaths. Natural causes, it was ruled. Reruns of old Benny Hill skits ran that day at seven o'clock on Fox, the channel the TV was on.

In Gilbert, a young Mexican man came home to discover that one of his dogs had unearthed a skeletal hand in his yard. When the police forensics agents excavated the yard—thus forcing the young man to park his beat-up, blue pickup truck on the street—they discovered another skeleton holding its hand, and that one held another's hand, and another, and another, in a great chain reaching ten meters down into a mass grave.

On the very edges of Chandler, where people still sometimes kept goats in their yards, a woman was roused from a fitful midday nap when her dog started barking. She pushed her back door open to discover a grisly scene: all of her goats had died horrible, bloody deaths. Their entrails strewn across her back yard. No authorities were contacted about the incident. The Chupacabra was blamed.

In Phoenix, in a morgue, the body of a recently killed ASU student opened her eyes, pushed open the door to the fridge, and walked away.

In Scottsdale, an office building filled with noxious sulfur smoke when a tunnel beneath the building ruptured. The yellow, foul smelling gasses seeped insidiously up through the floor, entered the ventilation system, and began to choke bankers and janitorial staff remaining after hours. Hazmat and rescue crews were dispatched. Thirty-three people died.

Nearby in Tempe, an executive in the Chase Manhattan

building on Mill Avenue received a phone call from a long dead partner. The voice on the line informed her that it was time to sell her stocks and reap the dividends. She never got the chance to take the advice; because, startled and confused, she left the building to take a smoke break, discovered she had no cigarettes, headed to the gas station across the street—and was hit by the Red Line bus. She died before the paramedics arrived on the scene. With her last breath, she bummed a cig off of one of the good Samaritans who stopped to help her.

Dark things stirred beneath the earth, old eyes opened onto a new world, and corpses shivered in their graves.

Near Graffiti Shop, Vex had collapsed to the ground and her body shook with seizures.

Nathan was by her side in an instant. "Quickly, grab her legs. I'll cradle her head so that she doesn't hit it on the ground." When Megan didn't move fast enough he raised his voice. "Hurry now."

Megan grabbed Vex's legs. They twitched under her grasp; Megan could feel the muscles clenching and relaxing under the skin through Vex's pants.

"What happened to her?"

"It's her demons," replied Nathan. He carefully cradled Vex's head in his lap, holding her gently but not preventing her from twisting back and forth. "She's not epileptic or at least that's what they discovered. It's something else. Her parents wouldn't pay for the more expensive tests to determine what was wrong, and because everybody thought it was an isolated incident the time that she collapsed like this at school she was never branded as having it.

"Otherwise she couldn't drive the taxi like she does."

"You mean demons like way-back-when everyone thought that epilepsy and seizures were caused by demons?" asked Megan. The tremors in Vex's limbs were subsiding.

Nathan shook his head. "Ah, no, I really mean demons. Back in High School—she dropped out you know—she was tormented. When I first met her I thought maybe she was just another one of

those wannabe Satan worshippers. She is a lost sheep, yes, but she's her own thing.

"Junior year there was a janitor who was...molesting students. It had apparently been going on for years, nobody knew. Then one day, Vex comes to school late. She walked right up and laid him out. *Pom*. I know we've nearly come to blows in our arguments before, but I never want to be on the receiving end of one of her punches. Not after what I saw her do to him.

"I don't know the whole deal. I don't know if she was one of his victims or what—but not long after that she had a nervous breakdown. She hears voices, you see, devils whisper in her ears. She spent part of our junior year in Camelback."

"The mental hospital?"

"Yeah—I think that the seizure is over," Nathan said, but he kept his hands cradling Vex's head. "Yeah, the mental hospital. Ah, anyway, she didn't come back to school after she got out..."

"Um, I don't really know why I told you all that." He took a deep breath. "I suppose I try to explain everything when I'm nervous."

"Don't worry," replied Megan, "people tell me things all the time. I have one of those faces—you know, trustworthy."

Nathan nodded and glanced down. "Vex, can you hear me?"

Vex's body had stilled, her muscles no longer twitched. Her eyelids fluttered open. A tear trickled down her cheek.

"We're too late," she said weakly. "They got her already."

Patrick sat sullenly in an uncomfortable chair staring across a desk at an overworked detective. Once again he was inside of the Tempe Police Station. At least last time he was rescuing Vex from the clutches of The Man, but now he was the one in their sights. It wasn't that he couldn't just get up and leave right now if he wanted, but he figured that he might as well do his civic duty and actually talk to them.

So what that he was the next-door neighbor of two students

who had been killed gruesomely? The body of the girl, his next door neighbor and the floor RA, had been found in the bed. The boy with her—another student who lived in the dorm but on the second floor—had been identified from what was left of him... Patrick hadn't actually "witnessed" anything. He was asleep at the time this supposedly happened. Yet they still wanted to take his statement, which equated to: "I was sleeping. I'm a heavy sleeper. Yeah I had a nightmare about screaming..."

"Are you sure you weren't even slightly awake and heard what was going on?" the tired detective asked, sweat was glistening on his brow.

"Yes, I'm sure," Patrick replied. "Hell, I have to sleep through the sounds of people humping, you get my drift? You have to be a heavy sleeper to stay in my section of Hayden."

"What about your roommate..."

"I don't have a roommate."

The detective scribbled something down for the hundredth time.

"Kid, there are two students dead. One is in the morgue and the other was carried out in buckets... There was a lot of blood in that room, the perp had to make a lot of noise to do that, maybe just maybe you—"

"No."

The air was chilly in the police station; the A/C was on strong enough that Patrick kept his torn leather jacket on. Yet, despite the cool air, the detective somehow managed to keep a consistent sheen of sweat on his forehead no matter how often he mopped it.

"Alright..." Patrick leaned forward to read the man's badge. "Detective Johann, I've told you everything that I can. I even agreed to 'come down to the station' as your man put it, and I've given you my statement. I have things to do and places to be, can I get going?"

Detective Johann squinted at him with dark eyes and the reflection off his brow nearly blinded Patrick. "Yeah, yeah," the man

said finally. “You can go. Take one of my cards. Call me if you remember anything.”

“Will do.”

As he exited the building, Patrick noticed the clock on the wall.

“Seven thirty already?” He shook his head. He’d been there for almost three hours. “Talk about tax dollars at work.”

A uniformed cop gave him a look and he made his way quickly out the door.

The last rays of the sun were vanishing from the sky casting heavy reds across the thin clouds. It turned the moon hazy red, almost the color of blood, no longer as full as it was Thursday but still large and luminous enough to catch Patrick’s eye. For a moment, he thought he saw something pass in front of it, like the shadow of a hand passing over the lens of a camera. The moon wavered like water, giving it more of a likeness to blood.

Perturbed on a deep level, Patrick patted his jacket where he used to keep his smokes. But he had quit smoking six months before, there was no pack there. He cursed himself for having none.

“Why did I have to quit smoking?” he said as he made his way to his jeep.

The area around Coffee Plantation was emptier than usual for a Friday evening. The performance by the violinist, Darlene Ann Barlowe, had apparently drawn quite a crowd, according to the employee’s inside. Yet nobody could remember when the performance ended, or where the people who had stopped to listen had gone. When pressed most admitted they simply assumed that she had finished playing and everyone had gone about their usual ways.

Of course, nobody could explain why the event manager was missing—smoke break probably. He hadn’t secured and stowed the amp and other elements of the performance. Though most notably, neither Darlene’s violin nor her person were anywhere to be seen.

Vex asked that Megan and Nathan remain near the street

corner while she combed the area. They seemed to be getting along really well anyway and it permitted her some semblance of privacy. After she was mostly by herself, Vex turned her attention to what needed attending to.

“Why did you do that?” growled angrily. She could feel her rage, focused and palpable. She lashed out with its intensity as if wielding a knife, attempting to strike at something she could never touch with her physical hands.

We were protecting you, daughter, the voices replied. They echoed quietly in the back of her head, leaving hollow sense of covetousness behind. *This was not yours to interfere in. It would have been frowned upon and we could not have prevented the reprisals.*

“Explain this to me,” she said.

Ordinarily, Vex would not have deigned to have a discussion with the voices. She knew better than that. Talking to them only led to fears and doubts, and she could feel herself being drawn closer to their clutches. They had never been secretive about their intentions for her—just that their methods and information was never quite completely trustworthy.

It begins, they said.

“What begins?”

They are coming.

“Who is coming?”

The Old Ones, They Who Walk Before... Do not fear, our child, we will keep you safe. Always safe. You belong to us, you are our daughter, and they cannot touch you. We will prevent them.

“I don’t belong to you. I don’t belong to anyone other than myself.” Discussions with them always descended into this same disagreement. It was inevitable.

You don’t understand, child, you cannot find them. You cannot fight them and win.

“That’s not going to stop me. And furthermore, know you this, one day I am going to come for you.”

Only soft laughter greeted her then. Vex felt a gentle touch along her cheek, a gesture like a mother cupping a child's face.

We love you.

Vex smoldered with anger.

Chapter IX



MILL AVE

Friday Night on the Ave

Vex stirred at her hot cocoa. She had bought it two minutes earlier, but suddenly she really didn't want to drink it. The swirls of white and brown bubbles on the surface were entertaining enough for the moment. All of the scents of the night, fresh wind, exhaust fumes, mixed with the cocoa's aroma as she observed. Nathan and Megan sat around the table with her, nursing their own drinks. The sun was in the process of setting. Dimming light mixed with the Mill streetlights, creating an interplay of red flickers and blurry shadows; cars on the street became less distinct, even passing people seemed to lose their substance. Mill became a parade of hollow silhouettes in the twilight.

The amp, speakers, wires, and mixer had all been removed by the Coffee Plantation staff, and were once again replaced with the ugly dark green wire mesh chairs and tables. Despite the earlier disruption, people arrived and filled the tables; oblivious to whatever shadow play of paranormal arts had taken place a mere hour before.

The voices whispered cloying phrases in the back of her head—they were always stronger when in the presence of powerful magicks—Vex pushed them to the back of her mind and sealed them

away. Like a girl locking away memories she would like to forget in a chest in the attic, knowing that one day she might come back to torment herself with them again.

Megan chatted with Nathan while Vex stared into nothing. She ignored their voices more readily than she ignored the others. After a series of long pauses in their conversation, Megan shifted in her seat and rose, picking up her cat-shaped backpack.

“How long are you two going to be here?” she asked, pawing at her bracelets and adjusting her gauntlet and claw rings. Vex hadn’t noticed the claw rings earlier in the day. One of them was a silver draconic talon; it extended past the tip of Megan’s finger and covered both of her knuckles. Vex made a mental note to ask where she had gotten that one.

“I’m hoping that there’s some sort of residue left over after what happened to that girl,” Vex said. “Maybe I can pick up on something by being here. I think it’ll be a few hours at least. I have nowhere to go.”

Nathan just shrugged. “It was a pleasure talking to you, Megan,” he said. “I don’t know that I’ll stay *hours* but I’ll certainly be here for a bit.”

“Have a good night both of you,” Megan said. “It was good meeting you, Vex, and you too, Nathan. Take good care.”

Moments later Megan became another shadow in the gloaming procession that was Mill. Cars now had their headlights on, bearing bright gleaming facets of light from the various metal surfaces on the edges of buildings. One car drove past with neon blue lights underneath, giving it ghostly, glowing wings of azure light along the ground. A few minutes later another car drove past trailing its trunk and back bumper, they scraped and screeched as it drove past, spraying light like Forth of July sparklers.

Mill on a Friday night was a menagerie of sights and sounds. Gaggles of college students mixed with teenyboppers from Scottsdale, giggling herds of lollygagging teens, indolent trios of lotus-eater thirty-somethings out for a night of drinking and

cavorting, and stiff-jawed aging couples who had known Mill when most of the buildings were red brick.

Vex wondered about how much the place had changed in her own time. Especially now that a P.F. Chang’s stood where a lush and grassy hill, perfect for sitting on and reading during the breezy summer evenings, once existed. “First there was a hill, and then there was a pit of mud, eventually from the mud grew spars of iron and concrete, and now we have a Chinese bistro.”

The old landscape of the city had transmogrified from open spaces to storefronts and glass windows. Benches and chairs had vanished, replaced by ornamental trees with metal grates around their roots. A construction known as the Brick Yard had been created on the corner of University and Mill, not too far away from the Coffee Plantation, Borders had moved into its bowls. In her heart, Vex couldn’t fault the bookstore because she liked to spend time pouring over books, but she preferred the Changing Hands Bookstore—and that had given up its ghost and moved away from Mill when things started to change. She found that aside from Borders, the Brick Yard was largely disused: the shops were either boring and valueless or hidden from view.

Vex shook her head and went to sip her hot chocolate. She grimaced upon discovering that she had waited too long and it had gone cold.

“What are you thinking about?” asked Nathan.

“I’m thinking about how much of the world has gone by while I wasn’t looking,” she said. “I drive my cab through all of this every day, but I don’t often get a chance to sit around, sip hot cocoa, and just feel the world pass by. Mill has been here as long as I can remember, sometimes I feel like it’s going to be here forever.”

Presently, a shadow wearing a ragged biker jacket resolved itself from the crowded street. “So, what does a guy have to do to get a pint around here?”

“Patrick,” Vex said, cooing his name despite her best efforts otherwise. She stood up and hugged him tightly, wrapping her hands

together in a rough squeeze—rough enough to squeeze a startled sound from him. He was taller than her by more than a head, the hug buried her nose near his lapel, and the smell of his leather jacket was enticing. She kept the embrace brief and stepped back, casting him a narrow look. “I’m fit to smack you, where have you been? We were supposed to meet before seven,” she put her hands on her hips in her best mock-chastisement, “or did you forget?”

“Don’t go nuts on me now,” Patrick said. “I was detained.”

“Detained?”

“By the police.” Vex raised an eyebrow at that and he held up his hands. “Room right next to mine, a girl and a boy were murdered. And I don’t mean your run of the mills, garden variety murder. I mean Jesus-*fuck*-psycho shit—”

Nathan instantly chimed in, “Please don’t take the Lord’s name in vain.”

Patrick looked at Nathan like he hadn’t even noticed he was there until he’d spoken. Patrick’s voice hardened. “Who the *hell* are you?”

Vex immediately moved between Nathan and Patrick. “He’s a friend of mine. Both of you: chill. Patrick is usually less foul mouthed than I am, actually... Nathan? You don’t have to leave.”

Nathan had stood up and was brushing dust from his coat. “It’s alright. I was already getting ready to do something else. I can see that you two have some catching up to do. I should leave you to it.”

“Man, I’m sorry,” Patrick said. “I don’t mean to offend you, but today has been really creepy.”

“I understand,” Nathan replied and held out his hand. Patrick shook it. “It was nice meeting you, Patrick. My name is Nathan. I really must go. Good evening, Pagan.”

“See you, ‘round, Christian.” Vex nodded and watched him go. “You really do look bothered—distressed is the word you’d use for it, I think. Take a seat.”

Patrick sat down heavily and sighed. She could see dark rings

under his eyes, the muscles in his neck were tense, and the daring twinkle was gone from his eyes. She hadn’t noticed these things when had first arrived, she was too busy being happy that he had arrived at all—not that he was known for being unreliable by any measure. Sitting in his chair, Patrick looked like he needed to relieve some stress.

“So, if you really want that pint, we could go somewhere that sells alcohol,” Vex said. “You look like a man who could use a drink.”

“Distressed is right,” Patrick huffed. “And, no, that’s alright. I think the drink can wait. I should have just gone back to my room to sleep, but I don’t want to. Not after last night.”

“Tell me.”

“The police were a bit sketchy on the details,” he said, “but the girl and her boyfriend who were in the room right next to mine were butchered. From what I hear tell—and I didn’t *want* to hear tell—there was blood everywhere. Slasher type shit. Jesus, and I didn’t even wake up. I slept through it. Whatever *it* was. Ten feet away and I didn’t notice.”

Vex chewed on her lip. She was never good at consoling people. Normally she didn’t *want* to console people: other people’s emotions were theirs and she didn’t care much. She wanted to offer to let Patrick stay at her place; she knew he wouldn’t take it the wrong way. Though, for a moment she wanted him to take it the wrong way—she caught herself wondering if she could somehow take advantage of this situation. Cool blue eyes and the smell of leather...

No, she chastised herself. Patrick was too much of the down-to-earth blue collar sort for her anyway. He would get freaked out really quickly if he actually knew the full extent of her mystical activities, he was a good friend. It had to stay that way for now.

Temptation and charity aside, Vex knew the dread experience of sleeping at a murder scene.

Finally, she came to a decision.

“You’re staying at my place tonight, and I’m not taking no for an answer.”

He laughed after a moment. “No.”

“What did I just say?”

“I can find a hotel room tonight. I’ll stay there.” Patrick said. “It’s alright. You don’t need to put me up.”

“For once will you shut up and let me do something for *you*?” Vex scolded. “Ever since we met you’ve been doing things for me and you don’t ask anything in return. Well, that’s gracious and all that rot, but really, get over it.”

“But—”

“You’re sleeping at my place tonight and that’s final.”

A pregnant silence passed and he looked away, when he looked back the light had returned to his eyes. “As you wish.”

“Let’s go get that pint, shall we?” Vex said.

Elsewhere the Tarot card reading that began earlier that day continued to read itself out:

The Eight of Swords—crisis and enforced isolation, illness and oppression, major difficulties and adverse circumstances dictated by fate.

Three candles burned in a fitful circle on a concrete slab intended to be a stage in the center of the West Hall courtyard on ASU Campus. Three ASU students, practicing the Wiccan craft, held their hands up, each fingertip barely touching the others. Shadows scuttled against the walls and windows, cast from the climbing vegetation and trees grown along the edges of the courtyard. Only the meager illumination from windows gazing into the square gave any indication of its size.

A wind swirling through the dark boughs of the trees, rattled their leaves, and sang along in a hollow serenade with their chant.

As their chant subsided, so did the wind, but still the candles guttered. Quiet descended all around them as it seemed even the stars held its collective breaths.

Each girl heard a quiet melody played on a violin. The three looked around, uncertain, attempting to find the source of the music. Only echoes greeted them as they exchanged perplexed glances.

The indistinct specter of a young woman, holding a violin, playing it intently stood between the candles. The sound of the violin music whispered to the girls as they moved away from the candles and clustered to each other. The ethereal vision maintained a very lifelike quality. They could make out the blue of her eyes, the floating tendrils of loose hairs from the long braid that hung over her chest, and even the reflection of a rapt phantom audience in the polish of the instrument. As they watched, the young woman paused in her playing, a look of consternation crossed her expression, and she looked up.

In the moment her eyes met theirs she seemed to dissolve, and vanished like a popped bubble.

The girls fled that place then. Leaving behind their candles, the goblet of grape juice, the veil of gauze, and the letter opener they had used for the ceremony. In the grass where they stood they also forgot their book on Modern Witchcraft. It would be some time before any of them returned. That night, huddled together in a room in Manzanita Dormitory, they swore to each other never to toy with magic again.

While others reveled in the pubs on Mill Avenue, drank deeply of booze and sweet spirits, and sang off key karaoke, the diligent police officers who mounted themselves on bikes maintained their patrols. Amidst the night, they whisked on their mounts of steel and vulcanized rubber past street vendors, past revelers—through darkened alleyway and poorly lit college walkway they sped.

Ever vigilant against wrongdoing but not so vigilant that peril could not creep past them unchecked.

Three of Swords, reversed—war, breaking of a truce, quarrels and enmity.

Tiffany smiled when she saw the bike cop slide past her

through the murk. It was good to know that they were out here. She didn't have a good feeling about going out by herself in the dark. She knew that ASU had an escort program for young women, who had to walk home in the evening hours after classes, but she had never called them before; she felt no need to call on them now.

She had a can of pepper spray in her purse anyway and the nice man at the self defense store who had sold it to her taught her how to use it. Keep a firm grip, level hand, aim for the eyes, and squeeze. Just as effective as a Taser, he explained. Tiffany couldn't help but wrap her hands tighter around the ergonomic pommel of the spray can in that moment, the molding was ridged as to fit nicely into her small hand.

The sound and light of foot traffic from the Computing Commons faded behind her and she could see the lights of busier streets up ahead. The smell of dusty gravel and wet grass wafted around her, made sticky in the hot, humid air. Palo verde trees with their scratchy limbs rose up in lines and rows, tiny leaves shivering in an unfelt wind. Low bushes and other desert vegetation formed black pedestals around the trees and buildings.

Tiffany turned a corner under a dim streetlight. Somewhere a light went out.

Footsteps scraped in the gravel nearby.

"Hello?" Tiffany called. Several of the buildings were lit, there was more than enough light to see by; the parking structure wasn't that far away—only a few more feet. All she had to do was cross the road. She glanced around with a frown: her mind was playing tricks on her.

Trying to remember the tips she had been given, Tiffany changed the direction she was walking. She went directly for the road. There was more light there, and a greater chance of people watching. A passing car, someone else going to their own car in the structure, anything would be better than being caught alone.

The staccato blue-violet light atop a police telephone greeted her after she crossed the road. Tiffany moved toward it.

As she rounded the corner into the crisp light cast from the brighter garage lights, she felt relief wash over her. The car was only on the other side of a column just within sight. She relaxed her grip on the pepper spray can—

—and that's when it struck.

Suddenly: Arms. Tiffany couldn't see what was happening but she knew she was in trouble. Why would hands be reaching for her otherwise? Someone shouted and grabbed at her. Tiffany reacted with all of her pent up fear and paranoia charging her muscles with strength. And she shrieked.

Tiffany would have rather not screamed—it didn't seem very brave to scream. Yet, she was screaming.

She swung her purse and struck her assailant in the face. He staggered back a few steps and lifted his hands to shield himself, and then lurched toward her again, groping and flailing blindly. The pepper spray in hand, Tiffany gripped it firmly, leveled her hand, aimed it directly at the man's eyes, and pulled the trigger.

FOOOOOOOOOSH! A white blast exhaled violently from the nozzle of the spray can like a fire extinguisher. The hiss of the spray was quickly overwhelmed by an inhuman howl of agony. The man—Tiffany could clearly see that he was a man now—clutched his face and fell onto the ground wailing. He curled into a fetal position and bawled.

"You bitch! Why did you do that? God! It hurts!"

Now that she had better control of her breathing, Tiffany could see more details about him. He was wearing a uniform. A name-tag glistened on his shirt. Further details resolved as she looked around. Nearby there was a door: EMPLOYEE RESTROOM.

Better recollection of what happened struck and Tiffany realized that he wasn't attacking her; he had tripped after coming out of the bathroom.

Unable to handle what she had just done, Tiffany squeaked and ran. A shower of blind abuse and cries of pain followed her as she ran to her car. Tears were streaming down her face. She couldn't

tell if that was from the fright, what she had done, or if some of the stinging cloud of mist had gotten in her eyes.

She fumbled with the keys, her fingers shaking as she tried to nudge the proper one into the door. The key slid in and the lock popped. Tiffany reached for the door handle when a reflection in the window stopped her. The ghost pale image of a girl with curly reddish hair slick against her forehead stared back at her with shaded eyes.

Startled, Tiffany turned to look and she saw a young woman, completely naked, standing right next to her.

She opened her mouth to speak when something struck her upside the head. She spun and slammed face first into the car's window. As she slid down the side of the car she thought about her self-defense seminars and how they had never brought up this particular situation. Her vision faded to grey and another blow struck her neck. A splintering sound resounded with the dissonant twangs of breaking steel strands.

How strange, was Tiffany's last thought, *someone is beating me with a harp.*

Her broken and naked body would be found the following morning by a professor from the College of Education out for her morning jog. The police would puzzle over the strange bruises and ligature markings around her neck and shoulder blades, but they would not have any difficulty identifying the wood fragments and splinters in her flesh as those belonging to an expensive violin.

FROM THE AUTHOR

The Music of the Craft

I am certain that by now people probably have noticed that *Vexations*, or at least Vex Harrow, is rather Goth. And this being the third volume, I don't know how many will recall that the very first band mentioned in the text was *Evanescence*—who, as a band, skirt the very edges of what is Goth, aren't a good example of the music that I listen to while writing this. Also, because that segment is a flash-forward to the future of the storyline, there'll be a reason given why.

Since the subculture is built around a myriad of different social bulwarks, I thought that I would approach it with one of my favorites: the music. Needless to say, my true favorite is the literature—especially the classic Gothic Romance and Horror genres, but I'll wait on regaling everyone with that essay for another time.

I keep a mixture of music on hand: Gothic, Industrial, Techno, EBM, Punk. From a purely psychological standpoint, I think that the music that surrounds *Vexations* should be an adequate reflection of the different cultures that I see clash day-to-day in my life, and even for Mill. There is the naïve college students coming out of popular culture, there's the establishment, then there's the established street-rats, and finally there's the grim, modern veterans. In this age of computers and the Internet, of neon signs and hot-spots, there is still a place for fringe heroes. Sitting in the deepening twilight, their own beating music resonating with the rest of the world.

As a character, Vex lives at the crux of converging cultures—she herself lives among them but not in them: the nature of the supernatural and occult, and the everyday mundane that passes through her taxicab. In the background *Edge of Dawn* and *Blutengel* play out strange melodies, mixing into the German and Latin lyrics of *E Nomine*. Almost every musical genre has a strange attraction to other languages—other than English—the mystery of not understanding the lyrics, the growling or beautiful lilting tones of words without meaning where the voice truly becomes an instrument.

For those with computers, time and interest, there are two things that I suggest you check out: an Internet radio station that plays Goth

music, Tormented Radio—www.tormentedradio.com—and a podcast with two DJs who play a profound mixture of the music from this subculture, The Ungodly Hour—www.theungodlyhour.com. Being a strange child of the Information Age, I've found fair refuge there.

As a subculture, Goths are extremely enlightened. I use the word lightly here, to describe the breadth of the culture's reach; while one of the most central defining features of Gothic culture is the black-clad dress, makeup, and clubbing to melancholy and angry thumping music in dark clubs, there is also a great deal of worldliness as well. It is difficult to wed even subculture and music without some sort of bardic tendency. While popular music oozes out of car stereos and street-corner cafés, much of the music of the Goth subculture is underground and doesn't feel the need to be inoffensive. And by inoffensive I don't mean kittens, puppies, and flowers; by inoffensive I mean: without an edge, without a point.

The music of the underground has invariably been another vehicle for political and worldly opinion, but often framed in a more subterranean, more visceral package than the dulcet nothings of popular music. Many songs, much beloved, that come from producers and artists not so well known to the rest of the world, have entire complex stories of sorrow, doom, discrimination, personal (and human) worth, rapture, joy, individual exaltation.

As an author, I grind lenses and mirrors that refract and reflect the world, and hopefully my readers—through Vex and her world they can see theirs again, with all its angles and cataracts, glistening bling-bling and soulful eyes, strange music and stranger people. In all their splendor. And in that I leave you with a quote from Vex herself:

“You got that wrong, kiddo—we're not defined by our demons. I am not what I fight; I am why I fight. If you want to be my friend, don't be my friend because we have the same enemy; be my friend because we want the same thing: we want to be free to choose our own fate.”

Vex Harrow