

Mill Avenue Vexations

Volume 4: *Portents*

By Kyt Dotson

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

www.millvexations.com

for the latest news, discussion forums, information, sneak peeks, artwork, and online posting of this storyline.

* * *

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are either fictitious or are used fictitiously, especially in the cases of celebrity.

Text, cover lettering, and interior chapter headings copyright © 2007 by Kyt Dotson

Back illustration copyright © 2006 Kiddo

Back comic lettering copyright © 2007 by Kyt Dotson

Cover illustration copyright © 2006 Marlon Teunissen : <http://www.dreamcgallery.com/>

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions.

Published in the United States of America by Kyt Dotson.

1st printing – February 2007.

Chapter X



Morning at Vex's

A single ray of sunlight broke through the heavily black draped windows of the room and crept slowly across the carpet. When it touched the foot of the bed, Vex's eyes fluttered open. The clock on the wall read nine A.M. in large, green numbers. She at up in her bed and stretched. Nine in the morning was a bit early, especially on a Saturday, but she didn't feel like sleeping any longer.

The events of the night were blurry, but judging from the fact that Patrick was not asleep next to her, she figured that they were rather boring anyway.

The bed was an antique thing made of wrought iron, with twirls and pirouettes of metal rising at the head and feet. Four posts of black iron rose up from the corners and held the canopy in place. She cast the veil aside and rested her feet on black carpet. She had designed the décor to suck as much light out of the room as possible, a lush black carpet, grey painted walls, and blackout curtains on the windows. Yet still, almost as if it had a mind of its own, that one ray of sunlight always found its way into the room.

Vex flung open her closet and pulled out a specially selected outfit: a sleeveless, black laced dress with a ruffled skirt and criss-cross bodice section, an opening in the waist for her to secrete a wallet and a knife, and enough pinning that it wouldn't get caught in

doors or underfoot. The black dress coupled with a long-sleeved red shirt, and its smart silver buttons down the side finished off the effect nicely. It was Saturday. With no work, it was time for play.

She slipped out of her nightclothes and into the red shirt, leaving the dress to wait for her on the bed, and went into the bathroom to take a shower and then prepare her makeup. As any morning went, the application of her makeup was always the most important.

Without further dawdling, she pulled the bathroom door closed behind her and hit the shower. Recollection of the previous night clarified slowly and she remembered that Patrick had decided to sleep on the couch in the living room. Even slightly drunk, he had been extremely strict with himself, and really closed off when she had attempted to coax him into her room. Of course, she hadn't tried very hard at that—when they'd arrived home she actually felt rather tired.

Except, the night actually started out okay. Patrick, distressed and upset from his experience with the police and the murder next door, relaxed quickly once he had two glasses of heady alcohol in his system. Soon he was loose and smiling, and she hung on his every word as he recounted his childhood in Montana—or maybe it was South Dakota, Vex had never left Arizona so it was hard for her to keep states too far in the East separate in her head. He grew up with everything she didn't. Loving parents who were still together, brothers and sisters tumbling around a warm home, and two dogs. She could almost imagine the mountain vistas rising up into a crystal blue sky, with pinprick stars twinkling at midnight and buttery yellow light melting over the hills as the sun rose in the mornings.

From the stories of his picturesque childhood, Vex wondered what possessed Patrick to cause him to uproot himself and crash land in Tempe. Whatever it may have been, he wasn't telling.

If he had any flaw it was that he was too much of a Boy Scout. At the end of the evening, there it was, glimmering through the cloudy murk of the alcohol. He didn't relax his old fashioned hard-nosed upbringing for a moment—he even held the apartment

door open for her, minutes before stubbornly demanding to sleep on the couch. And at his height, she didn't envy him the couch.

In the end, she couldn't blame him. After all, Vex mused, even though he was on the rebound, his last girlfriend did try to kill him.

As steam began to rise from the bathtub, she hoped that Patrick was doing okay on the other side of the door.

Patrick awoke to the sound of running water. The second thing that surfaced through his bleary return to consciousness was the pain. Not a headache as would have been common after a night out carousing and drinking, but instead a sharp spike piercing his neck. He rubbed at the sore crick to soothe his complaining muscles and mused. He didn't get a chance to really look around the night before, but now he noticed that it was quite dark. Sitting upright brought the twinge of a hangover to his head, so he paused a moment before getting up to find a light switch. The scent of burnt incense and leather mingled with the odor of the musty rags stuffed under the air conditioning unit to prevent it from dripping on the floor.

After hitting the light switch, he stretched and wandered around the room a little. Vex had a strange and eclectic taste for the objects she kept in the living room. A glass skull sat alone on a shelf, a clutch of books on magic held between bookends designed to look like unicorns graced another, and next to the television there was a series of pictures. One peculiar photograph, sepia and fading, displayed a scene of scruffy mountain-men wearing cowboy hats and brandishing rifles as they stood over the prone body of an extremely large bird. The strange part of the picture that caught his eye rested with the bird—the wings were leathery and veined like those of a flying dinosaur. The other pictures had equally strange subject matter.

In the next room, Vex bumped around in the shower.

He hoped that she wasn't too angry with him over the previous night for turning her down when she not-so-subtly asked him to spend the night with her. He just couldn't. Patrick had felt too

tipsy from drinking and didn't want to take advantage—although now he realized like there was any advantage to take: she didn't drink anything. “Don't be ridiculous,” she'd explained, “we shouldn't need to call a cab when I just happen to drive one.”

She had to be the strangest girl he had ever met, and since his impromptu move to Tempe he'd met a lot of strange girls. Except, unlike most, he felt like there was something trustworthy about her. For all her flashy nature—especially the flagrant outfits and overdone Goth makeup—and brash, no-holds-barred attitude, she wasn't pushy. She didn't ask more of him than what he offered, listened more than she spoke, and presented a solid and responsible exterior. Something that few of the college girls going to ASU seemed to have going for them. Unflappable, his mother would have called her.

The previous night, after the visit with the police he really needed to unwind. He groaned when he realized that after a single beer he must have gushed monstrously about everything—which for Patrick usually meant his childhood. Miraculously, Vex took it all in stride, she listened intently, nodded at all the right times. She didn't chide or snicker. But it did make him realize how little she spoke of her own family or her own childhood. In fact, the previous night he'd managed to do almost all of the talking, with the exception of ordering more beer.

Nothing like a double murder next door to make him homesick.

If the shower was running, he expected that Vex would be out of her room soon.

He wandered into the kitchen and opened up the fridge. It seemed to contain the essentials of single life: milk, orange juice, wrapped up tomatoes, bacon, and blueberry juice (he had to read the label to tell what that was.) The lowest shelf, however, held two lone plastic containers, both marked: perishable, do not open until full moon. After a moment of consideration, he decided that he was willing to let the red liquid inside them remain a mystery.

Among the crockery he found a few workable pans and, after going through the cupboards and drawers, he recovered a spat-

ula and two clean plates. The stove worked, so Patrick went about making some breakfast. It was the least he could do to pay Vex back for letting him sleep at her place.

The shower turned off, Vex towed off carefully, making especially certain to dry her face, and when she was done she wrapped her hair in the towel to keep it from dripping water onto her forehead.

Inside of her apartment, Vex was safe from the voices. Her craft at warding had advanced greatly since her early days of study and now wards laid over the entire apartment could have stopped the metaphysical equivalent of a locomotive. However, exiting the apartment left her once again vulnerable to magical maladies of many sorts, the voices included. So she devised her favorite warding magic technique yet: specially crafted makeup. Ground together with certain magical reagents such as rutilated quartz, mica, butterfly wings, and finally a mixture of rowan and elder essences.

For ordinary days she used a makeup that looked subtle and more flesh toned to hide it from the fares. However, for days that she had to herself she could go with her full style, using shades of black over a stark foundation. Today, she decided to paint an Eye of Isis around her left eye using a special batch of warding makeup. It had accidentally been mixed with too much mica—the final effect produced a black that spontaneously glittered in the presence of any light source.

After a time of tedious, careful applications, Vex surmised that she had done it properly. She went back into her room, shrugged herself into the dress, drew the laces tight, tied them up, and opened her door into the rest of the apartment.

The smell of cooked bacon greeted her as she stepped through the door.

“Good morning,” Patrick said from the kitchen.

Curious, she padded around the corner and peeked. A pan and a spatula poked out of the sink, discarded, and Patrick held two plates. On each was a toasted sandwich.

“And you cook?” she said, incredulous.

“My mother liked to expect that we’d be able to feed our-

selves,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind...”

Vex chuckled and shook her head. “What is it?”

“Bacon-egg-tomato. B.E.T. You don’t have any lettuce, and it is breakfast, so the eggs made sense to me.”

“Works for me,” she said. “Let’s eat. Then I have to make a phone call...and after that we can hang out for a bit before I have to run an errand.”

“What kind of errand?”

“Remember that strange message on the back of the Tarot card that I told you about? I have to get that translated.”

“Ah,” Patrick said. “You sure have a strange life for a taxi driver.”

“Not unlike many hacks before me, no doubt.”

In the rising heat of the morning, the few street rats who hadn’t slept the night before clustered together among the shaded tables of Coffee Plantation overlooking the intersection of 6th and Mill Avenue while they gabbed about drama and nonsense. The green trees dotting the roadside up and down the Ave shivered in the passing wind as cars rumbled past, creeping sometimes to an impatient standstill for the stoplight. Three red-bricked, green topped buildings clustered themselves together there, awnings extended to block out the brilliant sun for paying customers. Most of the other clientele at Coffee Plantation positioned themselves in the thoroughfare cut between the coffee house and the empty hollowness of Duck Soup, hidden from the street.

Security guards dressed up in green and purple uniforms kept a wary eye as they walked past, but bothered nobody.

A young woman walked past Fat Tuesday, a restaurant that sported loud music and drunken dancing after dark, placed right next to the coffee house, weaving through some disused fountains as they burred. She moved surefooted along the warming red and grey brick of the open mall. She wore no shoes and the rough texture bit at the soles of her feet. With each mincing step, the expensive material of her dress swished about her pallid, white ankles. If her shoelessness seemed out of place to anyone, it drew no eyes.

Two guards wearing Proguard uniforms, lounging against the red wall, roused themselves at her approach.

The trio spoke in whispered tones for a few minutes before parting ways; then she wandered out among the assembled tables and past the scattered coffee drinkers. They paid her no attention as she slipped past, as if she were an invisible apparition. There, she stopped in front of one of the trash cans.

“Come to me,” she said softly, reaching into the trash. “Come to me, dear heart. Ah, there you are.”

She withdrew a closed hand, opened it momentarily to examine the contents, and smiled. A small, irregularly shaped crystal rested there, a bluish glow emanated from within like a tiny candle flame. The young woman put the soulstone into the black purse slung over her shoulder, right next to an empty can of pepper spray, and walked away, disappearing from sight into the shadows of the buildings beyond Duck Soup.



Vex checked her mental map while reading off the street signs in her head. Wilson was somewhere between Priest and Mill: Beck Ave, McKenny Street, Roosevelt Street...and finally Wilson. She lit her signal, slowed up by letting off on the gas, and turned right onto Wilson. Blue skies crested over dully painted houses on either side of the street, the black asphalt of the road continued ahead, and terminated at a white house with a slightly browned yard. A large river-rock and cement wall blocked the very front of the house from view. As Vex drove into the curved driveway, she noticed that the wall seemed to be some sort of planter, just without any plants.

Patrick exited the cab at the same moment as Vex; she locked both doors behind him. In tandem they closed their sides and approached the house.

“So, who lives here again?” he asked as they passed into the shade near the front door.

“A friend,” Vex said.

The door opened before she even knocked. A very pale stick of young man, half-wearing a white button-down shirt, stood just beyond the threshold. His brown hair shagged down to his shoulders and a few strands stuck to his forehead, just above his glasses. Cold air breathed out of the house in a gust, displacing the

sweltering heat of the day for a blissful moment. He nodded and smiled when he recognized Vex.

"I had expected you earlier," he said, "do come in out of the sun."

Patrick shook his hand and introduced himself as he walked inside. The young man introduced himself as Brent.

A large table dominated one side of the room and shelves upon shelves of books decked the walls. The carpet looked worse for wear, but the furniture and books were in immaculate condition. In a room set like an alcove to the side two computer monitors glimmered, one with code and text, the other displayed a shifting starscape with tiny spaceships flying past, firing lasers, and exploding in bursts of light. The place had all the smells of an old house, plus the chemical smells of detergent and acrylic paint.

Patrick's attention caught on the table the moment he walked through the door. It was covered with a large plastic map dotted with small silver and painted figurines of bipedal machines. While a great number of the books set in the shelves were books on magic and other esoteric subjects, Patrick noticed peppered among them were also a good number of role playing game books.

"A-yup," Brent said. "I was just trying out some rule change ideas that I had for Battletech."

Patrick found a supplement book lying on the couch, he picked it up. "I haven't seen this before. May I look at this? I used to play. I promise that I won't damage the book."

"Sure, sure," Brent said then turned to Vex. "What can I do for you?"

Vex removed the Tarot card with the silver runic writing and handed it to Brent.

Patrick had become fully immersed in the Battletech manual. Vex had seen him do the same thing at a bookstore before; at least he wouldn't be getting in the way as long as he was distracted.

"It's Enochian," Brent said. "But I think we already know that. I've never seen this strange configuration before; the spiral is new, but interesting. Give me just a moment to clean up."

Cleaning up turned out to be arm raking all the figurines

into the center of the table like a pile of leaves, lifting the plastic map by its corners, and carrying it gingerly out of the room. A minute later, Brent returned with an armful of books that he unloaded onto the table. He then darted between the shelves for a few more minutes and selected three more books, also adding them to the growing mound. Soon a pad of yellow ruled paper joined the books as well as four mechanical pencils.

"Let's see what we have shall we? I am thinking maybe Golden Dawn, very likely Dee," he said and went to work.

Two of the books displayed tables of text and letters, and one of them in particular had a strange colored table with four major squares surrounding a small white central one. He referred back to that one repeatedly while writing notes down onto the yellow pad. After almost five minutes of writing and consulting the books Brent beckoned Vex.

"These angels that you noticed are Edlprnaa, Adoeoct, Aaetpio and finally, in the center here is Zedekiel. This construction is unheard of, and all of those angels, except the last, are from the Great Watchtower of the South: the tablet that governs fire. Zedekiel is air, and is connected to Jupiter.

"There are one...two...three other angels at these angles, and—" Brent ran his fingers over the diagram, tracing and following symbols on the reddish table of letters in the lower-right. "—they are all on the fire tablet."

Vex nodded. "Okay, so there's a lot of fire and one Jupiter on the whole thing, can you give me an idea as to what hell that means?"

"Well, fire is a powerful sign of activity or action or destruction. No telling. The presence of the King of the fire tablet—Edlprnaa—means that it has strong effects on all the rest, but Zedekiel, I think is a balancer. Probably the patron of the person who wrote this." Brent paused and shook his head. He stabbed his finger at the card on the table meaningfully. "I don't think the angels are the important part of this; I think they're to prove to someone that the message is authentic."

Vex shrugged her shoulders. "Okay, so what does the mes-

sage say?”

“Four chalices are poured into one. The city on fire—no...the city of fire—builds a new Babel: a tower of bones. Stars fall from the sky counting three and four. The seal at the Mountain Un shatters. The old formulas are undone... Then there’s some gibberish and—odd.”

He paused for a moment then and squinted. “That’s not an Enochian symbol, at least not one that I’ve ever seen. It is very similar to... Perhaps it’s something from the Ge’ez alphabet...”

More pages fluttered under his swift fingertips. Several books had been laid open across the table, and the card seemed to have been forgotten for the moment. He mumbled to himself while running his fingers down various tables, diagrams, and paragraphs. All of the books had numerous notes in various colors of ink in the margins; he consulted those more often than he did the actual text.

He mumbled strange verses and phrases in between *No*’s and *Ab*’s.

Idly, Vex slid the Tarot card from the table and looked at it.

“Where is the strange symbol?” she asked.

“Near the center. Five characters out,” replied Brent, absently thumbing through another book full of notes and symbols.

Vex’s eyes followed the characters out from the center in their spiral pattern. When she found the symbol she didn’t need to recount to know it was the one that he had gotten stuck on.

“You won’t find this one in your books,” she said. “It’s not Enochian. I know what it is.”

“What?” he said, looking at her over his spectacles.

“It’s an at-sign.”

“Ridiculous,” Brent said, snatching the card away from her. “How can that—no, it is an at-sign... How weird. But, if that’s an at-sign then this must be an e-mail address: bxxtr at asu.”

“A student at the University? I don’t get it,” Vex said, trying her best not to sound incredulous.

“Well, there is only one way to find out,” was Brent’s reply. He walked over to a computer with the yellow pad, and opened up an e-mail program.

I found your e-mail address on a Tarot card written in the language of Enoch. I think the message is for you, Brent typed in. He added the e-mail address and hit send.

Vex waited. She didn’t use computers very often, and e-mail even less, even though she had an account with Hotmail and had learned how to sync her digital camera with a computer to get the pictures out. So when Brent patiently watched the computer and it did nothing after he had sent his e-mail, Vex kept a hushed silence too.

“Well, at least it didn’t bounce,” he said. “It could take hours for this person to check their e-mail and get back to us.”

Presently the computer beeped. An e-mail had been received from the address on the Tarot card. It contained five words: *Who gave you the card?*

“What should we say?” Brent wondered aloud.

“Zedikiel,” Vex said.

He typed that into the reply and hit send.

The reply returned in less than a minute: *Meet me tomorrow, Sunday, at 10 a.m. in the center of the Social Sciences building. Bring the message with you. Don’t be late.*

“Do you know where that is?” Brent asked. “Looks like you have an appointment.”

“Yes,” Vex said. “It’s that strange building north of the library entrance that has a big, square courtyard and a tarp for shade.”

“Well that’s settled,” he said, leaning back in his chair. “Is there anything else that I can do for you? This has been truly illuminating.”

“There is another place that I’ve seen Enochian recently. If I were to bring you a photograph of it would you be able to translate it for me? The kids who drew it had mixed it with olde witch’s script. I can translate what was in the witch’s script, but I can’t translate Enochian.”

Brent nodded. “Yes, yes, of course. Though, I’ll have you know that witch’s script, Theban, is actually one of the Enochian Angelic Alphabets. It’s one of Agrippa’s ciphers that he published

in the *Libri Tres de Occulta Philosophia*.” Brent gestured to one of the larger, dustier tomes opened on the table. “Chances are the entire incantation written was following Enochian rules.”

Vex frowned and rubbed her finger on the table. “I did not know that,” she said slowly. “I’ve been assuming that the kids who wrote the sigils had no idea what they were doing—you know how it is. A group of kids get it into their heads that they want to do magick, they pick up some trash book on Wicca or *Enochain for Dummies* and off they go.

“Draw a few circles, chant a few words, dance a little dance and *viola*...nothing happens. At least, most of the time.” She glanced over at Patrick to see if he was paying attention. With his nose buried in the game manual she guessed that he was probably oblivious, but the quirk of a smile on his lips belied his silence. She could tell that he was staying out of the discussion for her benefit. That probably wouldn’t last long.

She continued anyway, “But now... Now this seems a bit more sinister. I had a feeling that one of them knew what she was doing, our culprit, the one who is trying to steal the others’ souls. And, I’ll bet that she inscribed the runes and sigils using both alphabets to hide the incantation. Maybe I underestimated her and she’s been one step ahead of me the entire time.”

Patrick looked up from the Battletech manual. “She? Is it female intuition that you’re automatically guessing that the bad guy is a girl? Weren’t two of the kids at that ceremony guys? Doesn’t that make it a fifty-fifty chance?”

“That’s not it,” Vex said. “I’m sorry to tell you this, buck-o, but girls are just naturally more apt to use magic as a weapon to commit murder, gain power, and subvert nature. Most of the mages that I’ve actually run into that knew and meant what they were doing were women, equally so for the bad ones.”

“I don’t get it. Men and women have an equal talent for evil. I don’t think that it’s fair to assume a gender.”

She took an exasperated sigh. “Yes. Men and women have an equal talent for evil, Patrick. I’m not saying that women are more evil than men. I’m just saying that women are more likely than men

to use magic to do evil... Look, just trust me on this one. Or just assume that I’m assuming that my culprit here is a woman because I myself am a woman and it comforts me to think that I know the mind of my prey.”

Patrick only shrugged in reply.

“Brent,” Vex said. “Thank you for your time. Would you like a copy of the script on the Tarot card? I think that I may need it for my meeting tomorrow.”

“*Yub?*” said Brent. His head snapped up from the book that he was poring over. “Oh, of course—*hmm*—let me scan it. Just a moment.” He flicked the card up from the table and walked it over to his computer. A few keystrokes later, the whirr of the scanner filled the room, and bright light shimmered across the ceiling. A perfectly rendered image of the card and its lettering appeared on the screen. “Done.”

“Thanks,” Vex said, taking the Tarot card back from Brent.

“It was nice meeting you, sir,” Patrick said and shook Brent’s hand briskly. “Thank you for letting me look through that Battletech supplement. Maybe we can play together someday.”

“Anytime,” Brent said. “Yeah, that’d be neat.”

“How do I get those pictures of the sigils to you?” Vex asked.

“E-mail them to me,” replied Brent, passing her a piece of paper with an e-mail address on it. She stuffed it into a hidden pocket.

“Can do,” she said. “Thanks again.”

The midday sun and heat broiled like an open oven when Vex stepped out of the house’s air conditioned interior and into the grip of the desert. She could feel the sunlight on her back, searing into her back through the black material as she quickly made her way to the cab. She pulled open the door, slid inside, and unlocked the passenger side door while turning the ignition.

Even though the cab had only been under the Arizona sun for less than half-an-hour, already the interior was hotter than outside. Fortunately, the compressor in the A/C hadn’t yet given up the ghost and Vex luxuriated in the sudden billow of chilly air that

gusted out of the vents. She could almost imagine that the air from the vents had a foggy frost compared with the stagnant heat of the day.

“So, what does the card have to do with those kids?” Patrick asked as he clicked his seatbelt on.

“They’re not related,” Vex said, pulling the cabby into reverse.

“Oh,” he said. “Then why did we come here?”

“Because I was asked to set something in motion by the person who wrote the message on the Tarot card.”

“But why?” he pressed. “Why are you doing all of this? It’s something that I’ve been meaning to ask. What favor do you owe to those kids who were playing with magic?”

“It’s the same favor that I owed you.”

“Huh?”

“It’s my job.”

“You drive a taxi,” he countered. “I know, that’s how I met you the first time. That’s your job. Not this running around trying to make sense of magical incantations, voodoo, and meeting strange guys in their houses to look at Tarot cards.”

Vex smiled. Patrick was so cute when he was confused. She knew the day would come she would have to explain everything to him, and she worried that he wouldn’t understand. Actually, she mused, it was really a miracle that he had stuck around as long as he had. She said: “It was no coincidence that I was at your door the night that your ex-girlfriend tried to kill you.”

“You were there because I called a cab.”

“I suppose that you didn’t notice that the first swing she took with that knife cut the phone cord?” Vex replied. She turned the cab down 13th street headed toward ASU. “Dispatch had received half of your pick-up address and it was cut off.”

She could recall the incident like it happened yesterday.

When the squawk had come in from dispatch Vex already knew what was going on. Gary was pinging her radio to alert her that she might have a fare in her general vicinity at the same moment that She was hairpinning a turn from a major thoroughfare

onto a frontage road. Dust and gravel flew, the radio squawked, brakes shrieked, and the taxi came to a violent stop in front of Patrick’s soon-to-be-ex’s house. She jumped out of the cab before the engine had finished stalling and rushed into the cloud of dust cut by the bright taxi headlights.

The door unlocked with a simple incantation, she stormed into the house like a summer haboob, followed closely by a choking cloud of dust and dead grass. Patrick’s ex nearly had him down on the bed, he was struggling, the knife was raised. Vex recalled yelling something witty like, “*Hey bitch!*” and knocking her cold with a solid punch to the side of her head. Perhaps a little too solid. Vex also recalled her hand smarting for the rest of the night.

“I remember,” Patrick said, hanging his head. “You said: did someone here call for a cab? I was too shocked by what you’d just done to say no when you dragged me out of the house. I never thought Denny’s food could ever taste so good. But, if the dispatch hadn’t gotten the entire address how did you know where—”

“Remember that snark you made about women’s intuition earlier?” Vex said. “Well, I’ve got buttlords of it.”

“Yeah, I’ve noticed,” he said. “I apologize for that comment, it was short of me.”

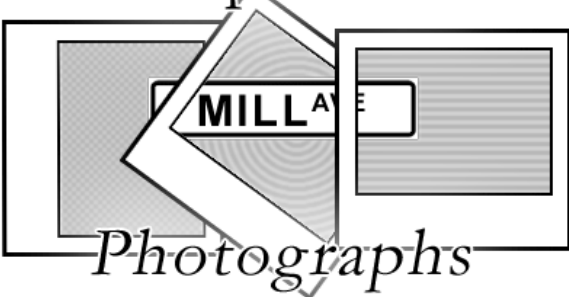
“I forgive you and don’t stop snarking; I need a skeptic to keep my on my toes.”

Patrick grinned at that. Vex glanced at him out of the corner of her eye and enjoyed the view, she wished that he would smile more often.

“So, where are we headed?” he asked, pressing a hand against the dash as she turned off of Apache onto a smaller road on ASU campus.

“The Hayden Library Stacks,” Vex said. “I need to get pictures of that ceremonial sigil.”

Chapter XII



Photographs

Most of the shops on Mill Ave opened a little late on Saturday, as if to set aside the morning for other things and prepare for the glut of people that would be passing through. The Hippy Gypsy threw its incense swathed doors open a little early that day. The girl who tended the store that morning smiled when she heard the birds singing in the trees that lined the Ave. The other stores, however, were a completely different story as to why they opened late—or not at all—this particular Saturday.

The Cold Stone Creamery, further away, set right next to the post office, opened two hours late because the entire morning shift had become sick with an unexplainable bout of pink-eye. All up and down the Ave, stores were still closed even at 11 A.M.; nearly all of the people who normally tended the stores weren't feeling well. Urban Outfitters only had two out of their entire staff who weren't sick with allergies, upset stomach, or some other inexplicable malady.

The only restaurant on a stretch of Mill from University to the bridge completely unscathed by the plague illnesses was none other than the Coffee Plantation. It opened at its regular time, entertained the morning's first customers, and started serving coffee amidst the confusion and conversation struck up by the strange

turn of events.

Nathan pushed the front door of the Coffee Plantation open and entered to escape the increasing heat of the day. He had not gotten up that morning with the expectation that he'd be visiting Mill so early in the day; instead he had intended to hook up with Vex again when the skies grew dim and she made her usual visit to the Ave. Then Saturday morning congregational Mass at his parish had been unexpectedly cancelled, due to the pastor being ill; the Christian Reading Room wasn't going to open for another hour; and Nathan discovered he had a hankering desire for some coffee.

"At least you guys are still open," Nathan said, casting a kindly wave and greeting to the girl behind the counter, who was waiting on a single customer. She smiled and waved back after counting out change and closing the register.

"Hey, Nathan," a voice said from nearby.

Nathan turned his attention to an unshaven and grinning young man sitting in one of the uncomfortable interior chairs—there were two types: those with cushions and those without—and inclined his head.

"Anthony," Nathan said, "when did you get back? Weren't you on walkabout or something like that?"

"Yeah, yeah, well, I had a feeling that I'd been away for too long. So I'd kicked my old bike into gear, trucked it back up the road, and here I am. How is life treating you nowadays anyhow?"

"Not bad," Nathan said. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and took a deep breath. "Things have been a little bit strange. Yes, I know what you're going to say: things are always strange around Mill. But no." He rubbed his fingers against his forehead. "It's the bad sort of strange. I think that Satan has plans here. It's reminding me of Sodam and Gomorrah. The iniquity is grotesque, Tempe's previous mayor was a Sodamite, the moral fiber of the culture is decaying before my eyes—" He let the words hang in the air and shook his head.

"That bad, hey?" Anthony said with a shrug. "This is a college town; moral fiber isn't what they're about. That's why there are people like you, after all. Eh, the way I see it, good is good as long

as nobody is being hurt. And you should give our mayor a bit more credit.”

“I doubt the Bible would agree with you on that one, sir.”

Anthony waved his hand. “Nevermind all that. Get yourself a drink and come back and grab a seat. How about a game of chess? Perhaps we can get our minds off of the wickedness in the world for a moment.”

“Sure.”

While Nathan was off at the counter ordering himself a drink, Anthony went and grabbed one of the rolled up, plastic chess mats from the games cubby, and one of the pouches with the chess pieces. Already there were two chess games being played at the neighboring table. He left the clock behind; a good game of chess needed some conversation, and conversation wasn’t easy when the game was timed.

He returned with a steaming cup of coffee—one sugar, three creams—and sat down across the table.

“Things have really gone batshit down in Sedona,” Anthony said. He had finished setting up the black pieces on his side of the board; one pawn and a bishop were missing. He stole one last, expectant look inside the pouch, saw that all the remaining pieces were white, and gave up. Nathan took the bag from him and started setting out his pieces.

“Sedona?” Nathan said. “Isn’t that where all the hippies and aliens are?”

Anthony held up a finger as if to tell Nathan to wait a moment, he fished around in his pocket, and removed a penny and a tall blue board game playing piece. “The penny is a pawn, and the Candyland guy is a bishop.”

Nathan nodded. Miraculously, the white side wasn’t missing any pieces.

“Anthony!” the girl behind the counter called. “Do you want a refill?” She waved a green Coffee Plantation cup at him. “If you have the money, I can ring it up and bring you a fresh cup.”

“Sure thing, hon,” Anthony replied. “And could you add vanilla to it? Café grande, just like the last one.”

“What were you doing in Sedona, anyway?” Nathan asked after a moment of watching the coffee being poured.

Anthony turned back to Nathan. “Yes, Sedona is where the hippies and the aliens are. That’s where I was just at before I came up here. I spent some time in a bed and breakfast dedicated to Bell Rock.” He set the exact change, plus tax, required to buy his coffee at the corner of the table. The coffee was set down next to him, the change scooped up; Anthony picked it up and took a sip without missing a beat. “I arrived this morning, in fact.”

“I haven’t been,” Nathan said after a long moment, absently sipping at his own coffee. He winced; it was a bit too hot. “To Sedona, I mean.”

“Well, you should,” Anthony admonished. “It’s a beautiful place—if you ignore the hippies and the aliens, not that they’re that bad either. The landscape is just beautiful, magnificent in fact, very blue skies, the clouds are streaks of white, the rocks are so red that you’d swear they were painted... Ah, it’s a good place.

“Been getting a little out-of-hand recently, though, I might warn. See, there’s this metaphysical vortex down there that attracts a lot of people. Psychics and the like, and aliens too apparently, Sedona is something of a hub of activity for every sort of strange occurrence. The people down there have been getting really antsy about something. A lot of the local mystics have been leaving town, people have been seeing strange omens out at Bell Rock.”

A sudden silence passed in the conversation.

Several chess moves later, Anthony spoke up: “On second thought, maybe you shouldn’t go there...you’d hate it.”

“You think?” Nathan said, trying to suppress a laugh. “I know that I come across as a real prude.” He took a breath and examined his situation on the chess board. Nathan had never been good at chess, but it still amused himself to think that he had a strategic mind. He moved the piece.

Anthony quickly capitalized on the move, placing a knight to capture a pawn and directly threatened Nathan’s king.

“Checkmate. Good game. Try again?”

“Clever,” Nathan said. “Yes, I’ll have another go. How did

you do that?"

"This time you go first," Anthony said, grinning. "That? That was just a variation on Scholar's Mate. It's a trick where you can checkmate someone in the first three moves. Took me a bit longer to get you, though. Hasn't anyone used that on you before?"

"No."

"Nasty trick. Good for getting newbies. I'll play more fair this time."

"I don't think I'll fall for that one again," Nathan replied.

"Good," Anthony said. "That's why we use it anyway."

"As I was saying earlier," Nathan went on. "I know that I come across as something of a prude. But that doesn't mean that I can't enjoy myself. Though, I figure that if I visit Sedona it will be for the scenery and not the *vortex*."

"Speaking of scenery, where are all the people?"

"I don't know," Nathan mused, watching as Anthony set up the last black piece. "At this rate when Vex shows up tonight we'll be the only people out here."

Anthony nodded. "If you see her before I do, say hi to her for me."

Nathan stared out the window at the eerily empty street and an uneasy frown played on his lips. Out of the emptiness, something sinister gazed back; for a moment it seemed as if the sky had been torn back and a negative sky glimmered beyond. A presence of great evil stared down.

In the window, the chess game reflected back. Nathan sat across from Anthony, the chessboard lay set with the armies of black and white facing one another across a field of white and blue plastic. The black king turned to look up at him, plastic eyes gleaming with malice; it smiled a grin filled with lion's teeth. The damned legions of Hell itself boiled around the black king. The white army lay routed and scattered in disarray, their white king leaned heavily on his staff like a crutch; his crown broken and sundered. The army of black charged. There was no escape.

A chill rushed through Nathan.

His breath caught in his throat, Nathan touched the cross at

his chest. "Angel of God, my guardian dear, to whom God's love commits me here, ever this day be at my side to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen."

"Did you say something?" Anthony asked.

The chill vanished, the trance broken by the spoken words and the prayer.

"Nothing," Nathan said. The chessboard was complete now. "Nothing... Shall we play?"

The entrance to the Hayden Library sat an entire story below ground, immediately underneath the green grass of Hayden Lawn. Students interested in entering had to pass through an arch of tan colored stone covered with green vines and red flowers and descend a cascade of steps into a wide courtyard—complete with tiny fountains gushing water in the corners. The entrance was a red-orange stone structure that reminded Vex of a reversed monastery gatehouse with a pair of pillars housing a giant concave window and balustrade rails winging the structure on the higher ground level.

Like most of the desert, the only green around the structure came from withered looking trees planted to line the shadowy walls; green trees, palm tree tops, and other foliage poked up above the terra cotta banisters and muddled with the royal blue of the Arizona afternoon sky. Birds chirped angrily from atop the shade wall and fluttered away. With the clarity of the sky came a hot, but gentle, breeze bearing the lingering musk of wet stone, the brittle scent of chlorine, and the sweet potpourri fragrance of the flower gardens blooming.

While starting down the steps towards the underground entrance, a flash of prismatic light slashed through the wide window between the pillars. Blinded for a moment, Vex put her hand up to shield her face as she trotted down the stairs. For a brief second the multicolored light silhouetted the lighthouse protrusion beyond.

Inside the lobby, a bored-looking student attendant sitting in the circular reception desk completely ignored both Vex and Patrick as they strolled past. Dim sunlight bathed the room from the glass windows facing outward and the skylight that poked out into

Hayden Lawn above. The clean, pine scent of cleaning detergents mixed with the papery odor of books, clinging to the ubiquitous, lingering library hush.

Vex led Patrick deftly through the various ups and downs, past glowing computer monitors, studious college kids buried in books, wooden showcases, tables, and bookcases. The quiet rustle of papers and low murmuring voices greeted them when they walked past a study room; a chair creaked with startling volume and an embarrassed student ducked her head as she froze in her seat. Vex simply smiled at her as she walked past and into a stairwell surrounded by glass windows.

“Why can’t we just use the elevator?” Patrick huffed, trying to keep his voice down. He pushed to keep up with Vex’s sweeping gait as she ascended the stairs. “Wouldn’t that be a bit faster?”

“The floor that we need to get to isn’t accessible by elevator,” she explained. “They’re remodeling it.”

“How high up is it?”

“Just four more flights.”

The stairwell finally terminated several floors up at a grey door with a large safety-glass window.

Vex waved Patrick to silence before he asked any questions, withdrew her athame from one of the hidden pockets in her dress, and knelt down in front of the door. He looked down at the knife with a dubious expression as she set the spell to work. Unbinding incantations were reasonably simple when a person had a clue how locks operated. With the tip of the whalebone blade touching the keyhole of the lock, she spoke the words quietly under her breath, coaxing the lock to unlatch.

With a soft click the lock undid itself and Vex thanked it quietly.

Patrick shuffled nervously nearby. “Okay, that’s new to me,” he said. “I didn’t know that you could pick locks. Say, wasn’t this what got you thrown in the clink just two days ago anyway?”

“It wasn’t locked that time,” she said.

The door swung open to reveal an unfinished room. Carpets were rolled up and laid against the walls, empty bookshelves

stacked flat against the back, and the floor was smooth concrete. The smell of dust and disuse immediately followed the panorama of emptiness. Vex could feel her skin prickle. The magical residues from the previous working still remained.

As did the working sigil, the candles, and the disturbed dust that Vex had seen before. Although, there were extra footprints added to the dust now: those of Vex herself, and the ASU police officers who had cased the scene while she was handcuffed. It looked as if nobody else had accessed this room since then—except that Vex knew better. The soulstones had been removed from the three other candles.

Vex cursed herself for not returning immediately after Patrick had come to get her from jail. It was a stupid thing to wait so long. She could only comfort herself that more than likely the other soulstones were taken while she was in police custody.

“You’re getting sloppy, Vex,” she said to herself.

“What?” asked Patrick.

“Nevermind,” she said. “Stay here, okay. Don’t touch anything. I *mean* that.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. “What is that symbol?”

“It’s a sigil,” she explained as she pulled her digital camera out of another pocket. It activated with a soft *whrr* and extended its lens. “They are common to certain magickal incantations used to summon and control extrawordly entities. Like demons and the like. Most cultures have them, but not all cultures use symbolic words in their works. Normally they’re pictures, images of what’s being summoned, controlled, or banished.”

Vex circled the sigil and took a few scene shots of the entire setup in relation to the rest of the room. Then she snapped a few pictures of the sigil itself, with the salt and iron circles around the outside and the puddles of wax goo that once were candles more visible. The Wicche Script around the outer circle had been drawn by an expert hand; someone with artistic experience in calligraphy had painted them. The sigil and the Enochian were a different matter altogether, but they still appeared to have been painted by the same person; their lines were blurred, splotchy and rougher than the

perfect elegance of the external script.

Patrick waited silently while Vex continued to take snapshots.

“The outer circle is a magickal barrier,” she told Patrick. “They might not have known it, but the barrier plus whatever working they did achieved some real results. When I came here that night the barrier was intact; I had to cut through it in order to get at the candles.”

“That’s where you found that soulstone.”

“Yes. And there were three more. They’re gone now.”

Vex walked to the windows. The room they stood in was spacious by ordinary standards. Wide windows at each of the four walls produced sweeping vistas of the buildings and the layout of the campus. She spent a moment at each of them to get pictures of the view with careful attention to give clues as to the facing and the orientation of the sigil to the windows themselves.

“I’m done,” she announced.

“So, what’s next?” asked Patrick.

Vex sashayed over to him, her black dress flounced in graceful waves at her feet, stopped just barely too close to him, tilted her head back...

“You are going to take me—” she started to say; then thumped the camera against his chest with a grin, “to the Computer Commons and help me e-mail these pictures to Brent.”

In Memoriam Dennis Skolnick

1955 - 2006

“You overly attractive Young People...Now that's what I'm talking about... Show me your Hands... Who knew?!”

Dennis will be immortally part of the Mill Avenue *zeitgeist*.

Accept this elegy:

Thy enemies are my enemies. Sleep, o'sleep without sorrow—*caidil e caidil e 's dhiot gach bron*—and I am going to freaking miss thee. Among the great tide of people who have passed in and out of my life, of Tempe, of Mill Avenue... he has always been an undying light shining in flamboyant and vivid color. When I think of Mill, I will always think of him. Monuments built by human hands that last the years, wear and tear, and become a fixture against the skyline come to be known as landmarks. With his regal charisma and brilliant personality, Dennis has always stood-out against the cultural background of Mill—he has always been and will always be a culture-mark.

Watching his exploits, following his deeds, and listening to the tales told by everyone who has in any small way touched his presence among us; a puzzle played out in light and shadow. The light of his public works, his outreaching spirit, and the memory of his brash presence—the dark of his struggle against addiction, the almost-romantic fatal flaws of his character, and his journey along that razors edge.

Kyt Dotson, author of *Mill Avenue Vexations*, Mill rat, admirer.