

# **Mill Avenue Vexations**

## **Volume 5: *Drum Circle***

*By Kyt Dotson*

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Published in the United States of America by Kyt Dotson.

1<sup>st</sup> printing – October 2007.

# Chapter 13



## Chance Encounters

Some days in Arizona could be compared to different types of ovens, or the less used term: ranges. Over time, ovens evolved from mud and brick constructions, into free-standing pot bellied stoves, and eventually into gas and electric ranges. Saturday felt like it wanted to hark all the way back to the most blistering of all ovens: the coke oven. Under a cloudless blue sky and the relentless supervision of the noonday sun, Saturday baked.

Mêlée found it difficult to rouse herself from her sleeping spot after the terrible midday heat had finally passed. Even squirreled away deep into a crevasse formed by two weighty slabs of concrete, beneath the lee-side of a parking garage, she could sense the insatiable heat of the day outside. Many of the street rats had become abruptly nocturnal in the sudden rising temperatures and even in the deepening shadows, sleep blinked heavily in her eyes.

The asphalt outside her shaded cubby smelled liked smoldering charcoal.

As the sun fell cars slid lazily past and the city of Tempe began to stir. The crowds slowly began to return to the street, still lingering in the shade, sipping juices and iced coffee. Mêlée slid through their conversations like smoke, they barely noticed her passing. She mused about the swarms of out-of-towners who hit the Ave on nights like

this: with the day so hot to keep all but the most veteran natives indoors it squeezed them out into the night like a foot stepping on a discarded roll of toothpaste. Her tiny form darted between them without obstruction, a frictionless person.

The scent of cooking food mingled with a breeze off the Tempe Town Lake causing her stomach to rumble most embarrassingly. As 5<sup>th</sup> Street approached the crowds thickened; she could barely see the stoplight above the heads of the college-age gawklers milling about in front of her.

As quickly as she could, she found her way off the Ave proper and into the better seclusion of one of the side roads. It would extend her trip to Coffee Plantation some, but it would be worth it. Dodging and weaving between tourists and teenyboppers would become tiring and what she really wanted right now was something cold and milk-like to sip.

She made her way around the buildings, pussyfooting between them on silent feet brought from years of learning to walk across hot ground without shoes. Although, today she had shoes—their soles nearly gone and over worn from whoever had previously owned them—her feet and legs still remembered and recreated those reflexes.

Still a street away from the coffee house, Mêlée came to a stop. A chalked line stood out from the red and tan brick of a nearby wall. She had seen the symbol before, its shocked lines both weaving and jolting like a crisscrossing lightning bolt, with stubby lines sketched out of one end and a round dot on the other. The last one, scrawled badly near her sleeping place, had been quite primitive; made of thick lines like a hastily drawn image, done while pressing too hard on the chalk. This one seemed more elegant, the hand that created it did so with careful precision and not with chalk; this image had been chipped out of the bricks with a stone, like an urban petroglyph.

Mêlée's metal whiskers twitched as she slid closer and reached a hand out to touch the discolored bricks. When her fingertips encountered the chipped wall a shock went through her arm; she jerked back sharply and put her fingers in her mouth.

"Yow," she breathed. Her fingers tingled, as if stung. She pulled them out of her mouth and examined them in the fading light.

There was no redness or stone splinter on her fingers.

Glancing back at the scrawl, she noticed that it had changed subtly. The figure, if it could be called that, had extended—lengthened. The lightning-bolt had gained a very small segment near the top and tilted just slightly to the right. Puzzled, Mêleé cocked her head to the side and frowned. It could have been a trick of the shadows that she had not noticed that; the sweeping shade of a tree bristling in the non-wind had crept up over the bottom half of the picture while she had been examining it.

The sun was setting in earnest now.

Angry, Mêleé hackled her shoulders and hissed.

A rock lay nearby, very likely the one used to scrape it into the wall. She snatched it up and applied it vigorously like a child brushing her teeth. The rock bit deeply into the wall and obliterated the scraping as she did so.

“Hey! Stop that!”

Rock in hand, she looked up. The voice belonged to a man wearing a purple Proguard uniform. She had never seen him before, and she thought she’d learned the faces of all the guards. Ordinarily she could have simply waited and tried to explain, but something in his voice resonated within her. Something simply felt *wrong* about the way he moved. And he certainly was moving—walking towards her, with menace in his eyes. Something that looked like blood dripped in small trickles down his arm and across the back of his hand. It was hard to tell, the daylight was dimming.

Mêleé dropped the rock and bolted.

“Yeah, run!” he shouted after her, his voice sounded hollow and rasped as he yelled, it trailed off into a rattle like dried juniper seeds. “If I see you around here again I’ll trespass your ass.”

A safe distance away, and with no obvious signs of pursuit, Mêleé circled back. She squeezed between buildings and shimmed back to near where she had been before. From the safety of the deep shadows and the narrow space, she peered at the man wearing the uniform.

He had picked up the rock and was chipping out another, crudely made, variation of the lightning bolt image.

“That’s really messed up,” Mêleé said to herself as she shimmed back out.

Maybe going to Coffee Plantation wasn’t such a good idea after all. She decided that today she could have to try out Starbucks instead. *Chances are their milk isn’t that different anyway*, she thought to herself.

Vex always found something *significant* about the smell of old books. The fragrance of condensed words brewed over time and stirred very slowly by the bodies and hands of passing browsers. Shelves of old subjects, depths waited to be plumbed by the eagerly curious and fanatically intense alike. The bookstore, *Those Were the Days*, right off Mill Avenue plunged her into the very heart of that sensation every time she walked through their doors.

The store had been a haunt of hers since the first day she’d set foot on Mill Avenue as a much younger girl, right out of high school. It was one of the first places she’d found could actually cater to her bibliophile needs for out-of-print and strange books that few other places in all of Phoenix could contend—and it was literally right on her doorstep.

She thumbed thoughtfully through a book describing the old architecture and buildings of Tempe; it included a long section about early Arizona State University, and even described—much to Vex’s amusement—the very building that the store was set in. Which was only a few years away from declaring its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

A lot like the books in the bookstore, Mill seemed to be a shelf that carried old and wise shops right next to the plastic and glass exteriors of young and flashy storefronts.

“Hey look,” a girl’s voice piped up nearby. “This one says that it has love spells. *Ten Magical Missives That Can Change Your Life*.”

Her companion replied. “Yeah, get that one, we can try it. I saw another book like that at Borders. It reads like a diary.”

Vex rolled her eyes at the giggling that ensued and did not turn to look as the two girls, still chattering, walked behind her towards the store’s exit. Fortunately, none of the “magic” sold in modern books would yield anything of any real consequence for the uninitiated, except maybe rashes from badly chosen concoctions. These girls

probably wouldn't face anything worse than burning their dorm rooms down with forgotten candles if they tried what was in that book.

While scanning a few lines from the page about the placement of some old Hohokam ruins around the Phoenix and Tempe area, a whisper seemed to rise up from the words on the page and surround her with the gusting sounds of a breathy conversation. Even with the warding magic of the makeup to protect her from the voices, sometimes old places buoyed them up to just below the threshold of her hearing despite. Though, something about the wraithlike dialogue caught her attention and she let her attention drift from the book.

The whispers simmered just out of earshot in the way that the voices of a cocktail party next door did in the late evenings. It felt like listening to twenty conversations at once, broken by the staccato twinkle of wine glasses clinking together, a rising and falling, undulating tide of truth and gossip so well mixed as to become inseparable. But there, even through the haze of the other voices, one vocalist struck out—akin to a choir where all the altos were singing flat, but one.

Once she had closed and returned the book to the shelf, Vex moved with the opiate grace of a person sleepwalking as she strode, almost on tiptoes, towards the source of that one whisper. It grew louder as she ascended the stairs that flanked the opposite wall of the store, and beckoned her to rise still further.

Her early experiences with the voices ran a lot like this. The strange surrender to intuition that lent knowledge into the ways that things worked, beneath the surface of their sounds—in those cocktail conversations and wineglass twinkles—a vast ocean of working knowledge waited, but so did *she*. But this time, Vex could tell that it wasn't her mother's voice guiding her, but something deeper, something perhaps connected to the building—or a book.

Vex found herself looking up at the spine of a fabric bound volume. She reached for it.

*Starling, you mustn't look for them.*

Eyes narrowing, a frown creased her lips. She could feel eyes on her, and for a moment Vex could see the stormy sea-foam grey-green of her mother's eyes gazing from across the cocktail party of conversations. She reached for the only weapon that worked against

the intrusion of this voice: anger.

"Don't you fucking call me that," she growled under her breath. Only her mother called her "Starling," not even her father used that nickname. "My little starling," her mother would say. "My dark songbird." Admonishing this phantom whisper wouldn't stop the transgression, but at least it made her feel better.

*They are not yours to find,* the voice continued. *We cannot go with you should you walk after them. Always by your side. At your beck and call. If you want power, we will give you power. If you want knowledge, we will give you knowledge.*

The softer voices faded, the cocktail party dwindled away, leaving only a ringing hollow black, filled only with her mother's voice. Bracing and all too real.

*I say this because I love you—and you are not ready to face what you will find there.*

"Then make me ready," Vex spat. "I'm going with or without you."

That seemed to get them, the voice did not reply. She waited a long moment, giving her time to collect her thoughts. In spite of how useful the voices could be, with their visions and information, it always carried a price if she was noticed. Her early interactions had seemed far less sinister, but then, she mused, she had also been extremely naïve then.

She slid the worn book out of the shelf; it was reddish and bound with white thread. The cover was unadorned except for the title and author on the spine: *The Wisdom of the Red Hills – The Collected Notes of Fr. Eusebio Kühne*, by Thomas Coloradas.

Book tucked into the crook of her elbow, she turned, and saw *her*.

Eyes wide, Vex froze. It was her mother. Gwendolyn Vice Harrow, standing motionless, cast in yellow lights of the bookstore. The fragrance of jasmine that always accompanied her hung in the air like a payer offering to the gods. An unfelt air current rustled the hem of her dress and teased at her raven tresses. Her eyes, undaunted and caring, gazed directly at her daughter.

Vex's head swam. Her veteran instincts responded but she held

them carefully in check. The floor shook with slight tremors and the books in the shelves rattled.

Her mother raised a light-haloed hand and Vex could see that she had little more substance than a mirror projection on scrim. The apparition spoke.

“Do you remember when you were ten,” she said, “and we visited the ruins in North Phoenix? You chased lizards and marveled at the ancient artists who had drawn spirals and pictures on the tumbled stones. For weeks afterwards you used your crayons and ingenuity to create reproductions of those stones and placed them all around the house. I was so proud.”

Vex bit her tongue and glared.

“Go there. Visit those stones again. Recall your crayons and the lizards, and everything that I have taught you. Among those stones, lives an ancient memory, as old as the land itself, it recollects a time a lot like now.

“It knows where the children have gone and why you cannot follow them. It will tell you why you are not ready and you will understand.”

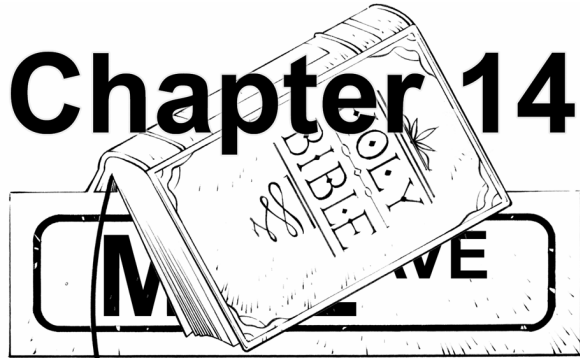
Her mother let her hand drop and gave Vex such a look of deep consideration that for a moment, she almost forgot that her mother was dead. And this apparition had been doppelganging her voice for years. Every photograph of her mother had been carefully squirreled away in a box, shoved behind a pile of coats, and left there. Seeing her again, even now in this ethereal form, threatened to open the sluice gates holding back far-distant memories and emotions pent up from years of keeping the phantom of her mother at bay.

Stiff backed, Vex walked through the ghost figure and did not pause for the top of the stairs. She shambled down them with such a clatter that everyone downstairs turned to look at her. She ignored them and made a beeline for the checkout desk.

Passersby outside Those Where the Days stopped short of their walks and cradled their expensive coffee as a woman clothed in black and wreathed in barely restrained fury bustled past them in a huff. The ever present chatter on the street subsided when she stomped by.

After her passing, conversation was slow to return, but return it did—as the crowds had only just begun to fill the Ave.

# Chapter 14



## Street Preachers

As the brilliance of the sun guttered around A Mountain and receded from the tops of the buildings around Mill Avenue, Vex ventured back out onto the street once again. The crush of people and car exhaust vanished with the gentle rush of an evening breeze, clearing away the stale scents of day and replacing them with the head clearing perfume of fresh night air. The olive and brown streetlamps began to flicker dimly on as darkness descended, filtering the crowds with gentle shadows as they gathered and gabbed at street corners.

Vex found Patrick and Nathan in each others' company—apparently having recovered from their spat from the day before. Watching them from across the street, she smiled; she had worried some that Nathan wouldn't get along with Patrick after that, and vice versa. Nathan had never really been a one to keep grudges, but she had sensed that Patrick had a propensity for petty irritation.

They were bonding over one of Nathan's favorite Saturday night games: heckling the street preachers.

Though he himself was Christian by admission and wore it like a badge, he didn't find the behavior of those who proselytized on the Ave much to his liking. And even with his legendary disagreements with Vex herself on the nature of religion and faith, he often conscripted her for ad hoc performances of satire and cheerful vitriol for

the benefit of the crowds gathered to listen to the preachers.

She walked into the middle of a favorite tirade of the weekly sermonizing—something about becoming liars and thieves for the most minor offenses. Today the crowd appeared larger than usual, the size quickly explained away when the speaker, standing on his stepladder with his microphone, handed out a two-dollar bill to a girl wearing a black ballcap turned backwards on her blonde head.

Nothing else could draw a crowd on Mill quite like the promise of money.

Nathan noticed Vex first, tugged Patrick's shoulder and pointed. Both young men turned in unison and bowed elaborately.

"My lady," Patrick said, taking her hand and kissing it above the knuckles. "It is good to see you this evening. I was just spending some time with your friend, Nathaniel."

"Forsooth," Nathan said, stumbling over the words. "It is fort—portentous, your arrival, into this delightful gathering."

"Did you have a run-in with the SCA while I was away?" Vex asked.

Nathan shook his head.

Patrick grinned. "Well, no," he said. "A few minutes back microphone guy—"

"Micah," Nathan said.

"—was asking everyone what it makes them if they tell a lie. The answer, obvious I suppose, is 'a liar.' But Nathan here countered that we are also soothsayers."

"Truthsayers," Vex said; "a soothsayer is entirely something else."

"Yes, that." Patrick grinned, pleased with himself. "Well, after that got said, Nathan set off on this 'Shakespeare In Love' sort of talk and it actually caught on with the crowd for a while."

"I'm glad that you two got over your differences from yesterday," she said. "Enjoying the show?"

"Yeah, it was a thing to do before you showed up."

"Now that you're here," Nathan said, "would you like to add to our merry band of hecklers? Heaven knows these guys need rousing from time to time and we haven't been keeping up our side of the

bargain lately.”

Vex held up a hand. “I don’t really want to get into it with them tonight,” she said, “and I’d rather not smear my makeup again.”

“Again?” Patrick asked, glancing between her and Nathan.

She waved her hand out, indicating the preachers and their microphone. “Last time Nathan and I got into it and the weather was like this—and I was using oil based makeup like I am today—things got a little ugly.”

Even with the cooling wind blowing down the street, the terrible temperatures of day still lingered. The evening chill only went so far to take the punch out of the smothering heat—but the warmth that remained still retained the strength to divest street goers of their jackets and outer garments, leaving a sweat-glistening menagerie of flesh for the hollow light of the streetlamps to illuminate.

Patrick unzipped his leather jacket further, silver loops dangled at the ends of a multitude of metal toothed zippers all across his chest and arms—underneath revealed a white wife beater, allowing for an ample display of his own perspiring chest and arms. As usual, he managed to be slightly out of place with his outfit, as he wore a pair of dull, slate cowboy boots. He poked his thumbs into the pockets of his black jeans and grinned at Vex.

“So, what are we up to tonight?” he asked. “What else is there to do?”

“We could introduce you to a few people. You’ve already met Nathan.” She swung her attention to the crowd and noticed a small girl standing on the brick planter near the corner bearing a look of disdain on her face. “Ah, perfect. That’s Alex.”

As Vex took Patrick by the hand and drew him out the assembled faces, the preacher standing on his step-ladder belted into another tirade:

“Lechery and debauchery have brought our very civilization low. Sex is a gift from God and should be cherished in the bond of marriage between a man and a woman. Sex outside of marriage is fornication and a sin.”

Like most of the crowd, Alex dressed light: a very short pair of cut-off jeans, trailing white threads, and a low cut blouse that accentu-

ated her compact body and swelling breasts. A few locks of her dark hair rested lightly on her pale skin, tumbling unruly curls across her chest that settled inches above her folded arms.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” she shouted. Several heads in the crowd turned to look her way.

“And only a woman of loose morals, a harlot, would dress in such a provocative way. You youngsters are shameless and squander God’s gift. As pornographers make coin off of it by selling photographs and films—and post it onto mile high billboards, flaunting for all to see.”

“Well, you have part of that right,” Alex shouted back. “Sex surely is a gift from God—but if you really believe that gift can be photographed, or filmed, or... How did you say? Put up on a billboard and flaunted. Then you have no clue what that gift is. Maybe you’ll understand better one day when you’re older. Meanwhile, do us all a favor: grow up or shut up!”

Applause and jeers drown out the amplified reply.

Vex reached over and tugged on a belt-loop of Alex’s tight, cutoff jean-shorts. “Hey girl,” she said.

The girl’s dark eyes flashed down and she smiled. Alex placed her hands gently on Vex’s shoulders and used her as a brace to hop down. Her head only came up to mid-chest on Vex, and not quite so far on Nathan and Patrick. Noticing them, Alex smiled flirtatiously and swung her hips.

The preacher had recovered the crowd and began yet another riveting lecture about clothing—or lack thereof—and how being an all-night partier could end a person up in Hell, or worse. The group gathered around Vex tuned him out.

“Patrick,” she said. “Meet my friend, Alex. She’s been a regular down here for longer than I have.”

“Yours?” the small girl asked, eyeing Patrick. Vex shook her head. “He should be.”

Patrick chuckled deep in his throat and extended his hand. “It is a pleasure to meet you, Alex,” he said, his voice drawling.

She ignored the extended hand and hugged him, squeezing tightly. “Don’t be shy,” she admonished and released him. “I don’t

bite...much.” She winked.

He nodded.

Noticing a flicker of mischief in Alex’s eye, Vex piped up before she could take it any further: “Alex is a student at ASU. She takes dance. Quite good at it too.”

Alex curtsied. “I like to think so, myself.”

“I saw you perform at Gammage recently,” Nathan said. “A charity recital of Swan Lake. You were quite impressive.”

“Thank you. Not my ordinary venue for performance, but I get my gigs where I can. Nowadays I prefer practicing.”

“I’ve passed by the Music building quite a few times,” Patrick said. “Do you practice with a bar and a mirror like ballerinas do? Or is it on an actual stage?”

Vex snickered. “Actually, she practices dancing at a club.”

“A dance club?” Patrick asked.

“Strip, honey,” Alex said with another wink.

“I still don’t understand how you can sell yourself like that,” Nathan said. “You’re obviously a talented dancer. You could do so much better for yourself if you didn’t... Well, you catch my drift.”

Alex waved rebuking finger at Nathan with a don’t-make-me-come-over-there look. “I can shake my booty just as well on the practice floor as I could out here with my friends. But mirrors don’t enjoy the show as much as living, breathing people do,” she said. “If you catch my drift.”

Nathan sighed.

“Vex,” Alex said, “I hate to trouble you, but have you noticed any weird goings on recently? I mean aside from it being on into autumn and it’s still hotter than a tea kettle. There’s been some weird rumors going around about people just disappearing, and some of my regulars have been having these nightmares.” She shivered and hugged herself. “These past few days have been really off.”

Vex shook her head. “As much as I’d like to bear my soul on this subject, I’m taking night off of that job.” Nathan and Patrick both rolled their eyes in almost the same manner; not only had they made up from that first encounter scrap but skipped straight to catching up. Vex wondered if she would have to separate them after all.

Alex pointed a finger and winked; clucking her tongue she said, “You do that.”

“So,” Patrick said, “you do this every weekend?”

“Me?” Alex asked. “No. I dance Saturday nights, usually. But, like your girl, I needed the night off. So here I am. And, usually I wouldn’t mess with them.” She thumbed at the preachers; then gestured to the ground beneath her feet. “But this corner has been my people watching spot for years now and hell if I’ll give it up without a fight.”

“So you’re heckling them for the sport of it?”

“What sport? I’m outwitting numbskulls.”

“It’s not about the heckling,” Vex explained to Patrick. “What Nathan and I do is about performance. When someone like the guy behind us gets up on a ladder, with his big sign, and invites argument, he’s putting on a show. They’re just showmen.”

“Last year,” Nathan said, “there was a guy who would stand out front of the MU with a similar sign. He shouted until his voice went hoarse. A few days into this along came a student with fire in his eyes, a passion in his voice, and a bottle of Powerade.

“That day they started their routines at about the same time—but as the preacher’s voice faltered and failed, the guy with the Powerade went on about The Gospel of Thirst. It was an example that I took to heart. If there’s a place for satire, this is it.”

“Did the Powerade guy offer any to the preacher who was losing his voice?” asked Patrick.

“Yeah, but he wasn’t taking.”

The roar of an engine revving brought attention to the street. A sporty, red roadster with three male, and somewhat drunk, occupants nearly spilling out the doors sat at a red light. They shouted and whistled at the crowd, several choice phrases were directed at the preachers, and one hollered a cheer for ASU’s football team, “*Go Devils! Woo!*”

“Son, your fast car is going to drive you straight to Hell!” the man on the stepladder trumpeted in reply. The occupants of the vehicle couldn’t have heard him; they were already speeding down Mill, high on drunken jocularly, hooting and screaming gibberish into the



wind.

“Points for good use of the Sun Devils’ name,” Vex said with a snicker. The stupid grin plastered on Patrick’s face teased a smile from her lips and made her heart flutter. She crooked a finger at him. “Come with me, it’s time that I introduced you to the Drum Circle.”

“As you wish,” he said, stupid grin at full intensity. “Lead the way.”

As they walked, Vex and Patrick had to step over a litter of dozens of trod upon, crumpled, and torn pamphlets—most passersby who took them from the eager hands of the men, women, and children standing around the corner tended to simply drop them where they stood. “Six in the morning on Sunday you can tell exactly where the preachers were standing by the piles of trash,” Vex said.

“That seems like kind of a waste,” he said.

She looked up at the ruff of his short brown hair; perspiration glistened on his broad brow and wet the edges of hair, curling the tips of some of the longer hairs around his ears. His blue eyes regarded her gently as she paused to smile. The look in his eyes harkened her back to the relief she felt when she found him and Nathan together. She realized that she wanted them to be friends, or at least tolerate each other. She had managed to spend a lot of time with Patrick recently—and Vex wanted more.

“What is it?” he asked, as if sensing her thoughts.

Instead of speaking her mind, she covered with a joke. “I just get this image that you should be wearing a cowboy hat. A big one. Black. Good guys wear black.”

Maybe it was too early and, unlike Friday, he wasn’t tipsy on whiskey. Having almost been killed by his last girlfriend should have meant one hell of a rebound, but Patrick managed to be a gentleman. Sane, stoic, down to Earth—Vex understood why she liked him so much: he was everything she couldn’t be.

“It’s my accent, isn’t it?”

“No. It’s the boots. I love your accent.”

Behind them, Micah, or some other street preacher, continued to rant at the dwindling crowd and unheeding passersby. One hand held a red-bound bible with gold edged pages, red and green ribbons

fluttering as he gestured with upswept arms.

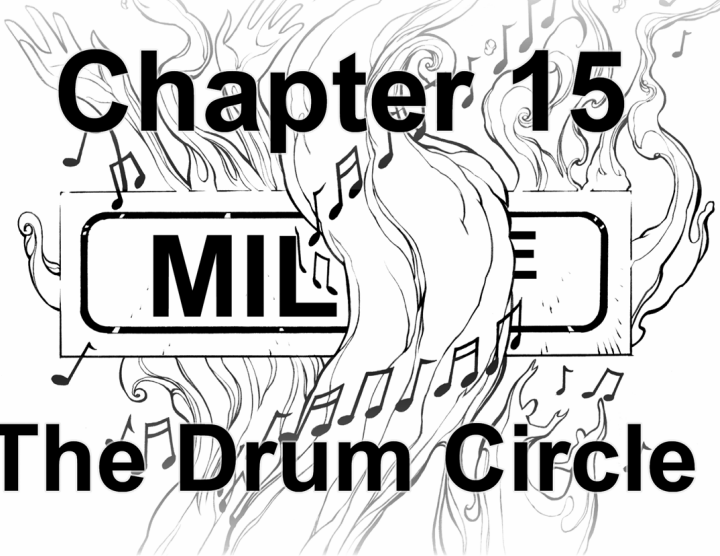
“We hear in the Book of Matthew:

“*And ye shall hear of wars and rumors of wars; see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet. For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in many places. All these are the beginning of sorrows.*”

“These are the birth pangs, the footprints of the Messiah, and as the revelation of the Kingdom of Heaven nears they come closer and closer together. Earthquakes, hurricanes, wars –

“Just today the very ground opened up, ladies and gentlemen. It opened up just north of Phoenix and consumed two Greyhound buses. A sinkhole opened up under Interstate 17—out of eighty-three passengers only twenty-three lived. Sixty people were swallowed by the very earth never to be rescued! And surely the wrath of the Living God will swallow *you* if you do not leave behind your unclean lifestyles.

“Whatever you do: do not get caught flat-footed. Repent today. Give yourself to God. For in His coming no flesh will be spared.”



# Chapter 15

## The Drum Circle

The noise of the street and the shouting of the preachers faded behind them as Vex and Patrick entered another world.

Between the State Theater's marquee, gleaming with soft magenta light and black-lettered show titles, and the Bamboo Club, with its patrons toking at hookahs under green umbrellas, the sidewalk split away from Mill Avenue and curved out of the light. There, at the threshold, the red bricks of the Ave gave way to muted grey hodgepodge of cement squares. The sound of rushing water emanated from a fountain made of flat rocks and bronze cubes and the dusky scent of burning sage enveloped Vex as she inhaled it deeply.

Walking between the buildings felt like stepping through a doorway. As the cloud of sage enveloped them, the sound of gentle, rolling drumming and scuffling feet swallowed the outside world. Patrick stopped short, trying to take in the view and brushed against her. So absorbed in drinking in the vision of the drummers and audience taking their enjoyment from the night he didn't seem to take notice when she leaned against him and gazed at the Drum Circle as well.

A group had already assembled around the circular dais between the buildings. There, just beyond the ephemeral light of Mill, a patchwork of blankets spread across the cement, couples and groups sat on the glass and cement rise, and conversation clustered, whisper-

ing at the feet of the tall bronze statue there. Vex had always wondered at the bizarre sculpture. Originally it seemed that the round pedestal and the leggy bronze-metal silhouette had been erected simply to disrupt the drum circle. However, being a living thing—whereas the statue was not—the Mill Avenue Drum Circle adapted, the people made use of the new amphitheater created by the tiered base for seats, and the drumming still continued.

A close look at the strange, rust colored cement and glass pedestal of the statue revealed an interesting texture: the glass fragments across the surface all held periodical and newspaper print, like the random musings of a city trapped forever in amber. Only a few had enough text to make any sense, but nobody ever really read them and the few that did only wondered at the weird message in the art. Most ignored that and simply sat on it.

Once, she read the plaque dedicating the statue to some bygone agent of the city. "Standing Above the Crowd," entitled the strange visage of the stilt-standing sculpture. She couldn't bring herself to remember the name etched on it. Whoever it was had stood so far above the crowd that his name, much like his intentions, had obviously been lost in the clouds—invisible to the common people, who now huddled around his memorial's feet, equally oblivious.

The drummers and dancers were a ragged but picturesque bunch, ranging from young street rats with shining faces to older, bearded and wrinkled complexions surmounted by red cheeks and vivacious grins. An equal number wore all black outfits sporting silver chains, patches, and pale faces as did gypsy garish schemes of colors and stained glass ensembles that jingled as they twirled. Bare feet stamped the ground alongside heavy boots, white stockings, dingy sneakers, and the occasional high-heels. Billowing sage smoke eddied around the drummers and dancers alike, clasping about their wrists and haloing their heads in otherworldly light.

"I'd heard of it but never seen," Patrick said.

"Then let me be the first to welcome you to the Drum Circle," Vex said. She tugged on his sleeve. "There are a few people that I would like you to meet."

One such person presently revealed himself as he dodged

around a cluster of dark eyed, pale faced goths—several of whom glared haughtily at her, she ignored them for the dark chocolate face of the one who approached. As he walked, his black dreadlocks became apparent, a spilling mane that lashed at his shoulders with each stride like a willow tree with leaf-thick branches. Spicy cologne wafted from his skin and mingled with the sage in the air. “Vex Harrow,” he boomed and revealed a predatory crescent of brilliant white teeth.

“Patrick, I would like you to meet An—”

“Doctor Moungeaux at your service, should you be needin’ such.” A vaguely Caribbean accent edged his words with melodic baritone swoops. He pumped Patrick’s hand with an eager handshake, and when gesture was complete he gripped his hand for a moment, turning it over to examine the palm. “You’d do to have worse company, broda, you’re in for a bite o’ trouble next few days. Da lwa tell me so.”

Patrick withdrew his hand. “Is that a Jamacian accent?”

“Haitian,” Doctor Moungeaux said, touching one of the many dangling shrunken skulls that populated his ragtag outfit. It was made of strips of oily fabric of varying colors and patterns, fringing his entire body in a scarecrow ruff of rags. Here and there fetishes of feathers, bones, and skulls hung; with every motion of his hands and legs they banged together with a hollow wind chime death-rattle.

“A pleasure to meet you, I’m sure,” Patrick said.

“Andre,” Vex said, “you don’t have a drop of Haitian or Jamaican blood in you. Drop the act.”

Moungeaux lifted his chin and placed his fists on his hips. “Woman, why are you dissin’ my *ber-i-tage*,” he said. The accent totally gone, he spoke in a deep voice but plainly American dialect. He looked at Patrick almost pleadingly, who was fighting to keep a grin off his face. “The old traditions of my people beckon me; I heard the lwa whispering my name... That’s how I roll.”

“Andre here is one of the more colorful characters you’ll meet out here,” Vex said to Patrick. “But just don’t take shit from him. It’s not how *I* roll.”

“Wait, I think I’m getting the hang of this. So let me guess,” Patrick said, “you practice voodoo?”

Andre/Moungeaux chuckled then, overcome with some

amusement, threw his head back and roared with laughter; his mane of dreadlocks shook and tousled about his face as he lowered his head again. He clapped Patrick on his shoulder with a meaty hand. “You sound as if you don’t believe yourself, brother.” He flashed a look at Vex. “Is she getting you into trouble she shouldn’t?”

“Nothing he can’t handle,” she quipped.

“Voodoo can’t *really* be real, can it?” Patrick narrowed his eyes. “Cutting the heads off of chickens and throwing entrails on walls? You don’t really do that, do you?”

Andre opened his mouth to reply, Vex cleared her throat. “Not so much,” he said, “but I have used chicken blood on occasion.”

Patrick looked at Vex, she grinned.

“Any friend of this woman is a friend of mine,” Andre said. “It is good to have met you, Patrick.”

“Likewise.”

Andre nodded and walked past, away from the drums and towards Mill, behind him followed the cologne of spices and the hollow knocking of bones. Patrick watched him go with a ponderous expression.

“Next you’re going to introduce me to a Satanist,” he said.

“Sadly, no,” Vex said with a mock sigh, “the Satanist and I don’t get along. Unless you want to watch me cold-cock her, there won’t be any introductions in that direction.”

“I meant it as a joke.”

“I didn’t.”

Without another word, Vex took his hand and pulled Patrick into a whirlwind tour of the Drum Circle scene.

She introduced him first to Sparky, whose snaggletooth grin gaped and mangy hair bounced as he told stories with his drums. Antoinette and her little daughter sat and swayed to the drumming and dancing as she offered tarot card readings, which Vex declined. Nightshade and her cobwebby outfit of black silk, leather, and spider web gauze scarves that she wore like veils across her entire body—she paused for brief greetings and then fluttered past, looking more like a wisp of black than a person. Several of the drummers paused long enough to shake hands with Patrick and talk, while the dancers per-

formed—from amateur belly dancers, wriggling sinuously in the pale white light, to kids enjoying the night, eyes closed and moving to the beat of the drums.

All around the concrete and glass plinth she led him, threading through the crowd, she was the needle and he the string. Here and there he pointed out faces that he'd seen hanging around the preachers earlier and when Vex knew them she stopped to make introductions. Most were street rats, one a chef going to ASU, a few college students mixed into the bunch, with the odd high school skater, a few goths, and none too few punks dressed in patches and safety pins.

Growing weary of the crush of people, even familiar as they were, and the heady aroma of the thick sage smoke, Vex eventually drew him away from the drum circle proper and out into the darkness that surrounded. Just beyond the light of the drum circle a rather peculiar building rose out of the ground: an upside-down pyramid.

The glass sides of the building rose up out of a one-story pit dug into the ground, and the sides loomed sheer, leaning outwards in all directions, glass windows reflected the lights from outside with sometimes visible scenes of office furniture, grayed walls, and dimly visible computer screens. The building stood almost ten floors high and capped flatly above.

"A little weird, isn't it?" Vex said. They were standing beneath one of the steeply angled glass sides, out of sight of the street, with the sounds of the drum circle still audible, but now mixed with the sounds of desert night. "It's the Tempe government building, from what I know. Strangest thing I've never seen."

"It looks as if it might fall over."

"Yeah, I keep thinking that too...but it's been around as long as I can remember and it certainly hasn't fallen over in that time."

Patrick just nodded, lost in thought.

"You really care about those kids," he said gesturing back towards the drum circle. "I always wondered what you did when you weren't driving your cab or running around...doing magic stuff."

Vex stubbed the toe of her boot against the rough walkway. "Yeah, I look out for them. We're all pretty much in this together," she said. "The normals—those people who walk past you on the street and

don't see you—are rather disconnected from what really goes on in the world. They don't see any of this, and when they do they complain about it and try to stamp it out. Few of us actually have someone to look out for us. I can, so I do."

"Reminds me of something my ROTC sergeant said back in high school." He paused and shook his head. "Don't look at me like that. *Everyone* went to Junior ROTC back where I lived—especially me. Heck, my father *and* my grandfather were both in the Army. Discipline 'em young, I'd always heard, and the uniforms meant something to everyone who looked at you.

"Well, early as I can remember my dad taught me how to hold a gun and how to shoot, and before I knew it, there I was, marching with other boys from my part of town and singing songs. Being told that soldiering was a duty and that our country needed strong young men to fight for it and look after it. I didn't do it so much because I felt like it was my duty—but because of the pride in my father's eyes.

"That and I felt more certain about myself with the strict rules."

"Yeah, you've always struck me as the Boy Scout type," Vex said. "You're too uptight about a lot of things... If only I could convince you to loosen up a little."

"Loosen up?" he said. "Yeah, well, that's part of why I left home and came out here to ASU. My dad was so furious he wouldn't speak about my decision. Would've thought he was expecting to lose his little boy. Talked at me like I was ten years old again."

"I barely remember what my father was like when I was little," Vex said. "My mother dominates those memories. He did do one good thing for me back then: he taught me how to use my fists. Though, after he left, I used them a little bit more than I should have."

"You told me he left when you were very young, I can barely imagine what that must be like."

"Don't try," she said. "My da now and the person from my childhood are totally different people. All I remember of him from back then is the smell of cedar chips, leather gloves, and a deep voice all emerging from a large, shadowy man. I remember feeling the stubble on his face, but not his face. I try to, but all I see is the man I know

today, but he's different. I'm different. And mom's dead."

"I'm sorry," Patrick said. "I'm intruding into your personal life." He and Vex had managed to move close together, the light from nearby lanterns reflected off of the angled windows nearby and cast haphazard shadows across their features. He started to step back.

She reached out and grabbed him by the collar. "Don't."

He stopped and glanced down at her hand.

"Don't what?"

"Stop pulling back," she said. "Every time we get slightly intimate you're always backing off, withdrawing. If you ever get too close for my comfort, I'll push you away. I'll let you know. If you want to be my friend you have to accept that I'll confide in you. And you should do the same."

"I just feel I'm being too forward bringing up issues of a personal nature."

"Oh, I think we're way beyond that," she said. "Look, Patrick, I am not your ex-girlfriend. I am not going to try to knife you through the heart, I might br—" His jaw tightened from the memory, Vex froze mid-beat, and her eyes widened. She pursed her lips and released his collar. "You're a virgin."

"*What?* I—"

She took a deep breath. "Dear gods, it explains everything. Why your ex tried to sacrifice you when I came to save your butt. Why I've been so inept at seducing you. I am so fucking stupid."

"I..." He swallowed. "Can't say that you were doing a bad job at it."

Vex felt like her heart had jumped into her throat. Every single clue was already there and she had totally, blindly missed every single one: the puppy dog loyalty, the slow smiles, and easygoing attitude that Patrick displayed every time they got together. He was totally out of his league but had no sense of it—and as a result so was she. The last time she'd made a mistake like that it'd blown up in her face. That was high school; she thought she'd gotten better at it by now.

"I guess all my cards are on the table now," she said. Her eyes searched his face as if it were a mirror of her own. "The worst I can do is break your heart."

"Vex," he said, the Southern drawl had returned to his voice. "I'd hate to rile you, but I've kinda gotten the sense that... Well, what with us getting together almost every day and hanging out that we've been steady and just not saying it."

"If you're willing to put up with me being a total retard." She felt a little dizzy, almost as if she'd been holding her breath.

"Can't say that I've noticed, actually. I think, though, we need to take this slow."

"Slow isn't something I'm good at." She reached up and smoothed out his collar where her rough grip had wrinkled it. "But perhaps you'd be willing to settle for gentle—er."

"Now that we have that settled," he said, his hand gently closing around hers, "there is something that I'd like to ask of you."

She lifted her gaze into his eyes. "What?"

"You—" he started to say, drawl firmly entrenched in his tone, but stopped short. She waited patiently for him to try again. "You have a second life that I think I've only scratched the surface," he said firmly. "Your second job. I reckon I make light of something very serious to you every time I joke about it. Jamie tried to kill me, sure. I believe that, I was there. But, sacrifice me because—well... It's just hard to wrap my head around."

"I'm just trying to say. A month ago I would have laughed if you'd told me that I'd be along for a ride to translate unusual symbols on a Tarot card or break into the library to take pictures of weird graffiti. What I'm trying to say is that I can tell this is all very real to you and I respect that."

A grin blazed on her face when he lifted his eyes again.

"Walk into fire," Vex said.

"I don't follow..."

"Come with me." She took him by the hand and led him away from the building and across one of the bridges. Together they descended across a grating and onto a small lawn of grass that rimmed the odd structure. "It's my unspoken motto."

"Don't people usually *run* into fires?"

"Like a fireman into a burning building?" she asked, he nodded. "That's exactly what I'm talking about. I don't do this because I'm

a hero: I do it because it's my calling. In your ROTC classes they taught you how to work as a team. Firefighters rush into burning buildings with their crews backing them up.

"When I walk into a fire, I'm going alone. I am doing it deliberately. With conviction. There is nobody else who can do what I do; anybody with me is just a liability... So I hope you'll understand why I won't be inclined to drag you along into the hot and heavy stuff."

"Is this a speech you give often?"

"This is a speech I never give."

"Why is that?"

They had walked several dozen steps, passed out of the grass, skirted some gravel patches sporting prickly bushes, and came to rest next to a brick and mortar box surmounted by a grating that came up the level of her chest. The muffled blare of giant fans below moving air out of the underground parking garage filled the air. Vex raised her voice against the din.

"Because I think that you can handle it," she said.

"Handle what exactly?"

"That some magic is real."

Without waiting for a reply, she jumped up onto grating and walked a few steps out into its middle. The roar of the fans surrounded her then, air coursed past her with such a force that it felt almost as if it could lift her off her feet. Through the lashing locks of her hair, she peered downwards at Patrick. Uncertainty and curiosity etched all across his expression as he looked back. "Come on up," she said. "Let's dance."

Patrick gripped her hand and she bore him up over the lip of the vent into the gushing air. Soon, his hair also whipped around with the undulations of some living thing. Vex laughed and touched his cheek with her hand. In the half-light cast from the parking structure she could see the strong lines of his face drawn in flesh: a strong jaw and a ready smile; innocent eyes and gently sloping cheeks. For a moment, she hesitated. His grip was strong in hers as she led his hands around her waist as if preparing for an actual waltz; and his eyes never left hers, but she could not tell quite what he was thinking.

What would he think, she wondered, if he only knew what

stray thoughts wandered in the ocean behind hers. She knew him to be a skeptic by word and manner, she doubted that he fully accepted or totally understood how serious she was that his ex-girlfriend had attempted to kill him mostly because he was a virgin.

"What if I told you I don't know how to dance," he said into her ear. The noise from the air rushing out of the vent made it necessary for him to hold her close and lean his head over her shoulder.

Everything was going as planned. She but only needed to concentrate. The cantrip was simple, its execution so reflexive to her that she didn't need to even murmur the words. Its form so ingrained she didn't need the crutch of a staff. Everything would be perfect.

"I'd call you a liar."

"I suppose you'd be right, but it's been years since I danced with anyone. Last girl I took onto the dance floor happened to be my cousin."

"Was she pretty?"

He snickered. "I was ten," he said. "Is this the magic you wanted to show me? Your feminine wiles?"

"Look down," Vex said.

She smiled when his hands tightened around her waist.