

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.

Mill Avenue Vexations

Volume 7: *Doom in the Distance*

By Kyt Dotson

* * *

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 lettering copyright © 2008 by Kyt Dotson

Cover illustration copyright © 2007 Suzanne Gildert

<http://www.gothicfall.co.uk/>

Back cover illustration copyright © 2007 Sanjana Baijnath

<http://www.sanjanasart.com>

Chapter heading illustrations copyright © 2008 Alan Gallo

http://www.emptyroomstudios.com/a_gallo.php

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

Published in the United States of America by Kyt Dotson.

1st printing – January 2008.



Chapter 19

MILL AVE

Seeing Things

“There have been seven Amber Alerts issued for the Phoenix Metro area over the weekend,” the woman on the flat-screen television told the gathered students. *“Increasing reports of disappearances has prompted the Mayor to increase police presence on our streets. In a statement made to the press, the Sheriff tells us that it isn’t uncommon for people to wander away in the increasing heat. You should take care of yourself, stay indoors—with air-conditioning—during the day and drink plenty of water as the temperatures reach into the high one-twenties.”*

“We now return you to our continuing coverage of the Tempe Massacre.”

Megan tore herself away from the screen. She’d seen enough images of that to last her a lifetime. Every news channel was running the story, each trying to outdo the other with the amount of gore and shock they could get onto the screen. The commotion at the mountain had pulled a lot of students into the little dining area in the basement of the MU where the TV set was. The crowd quickly usurped the remote and it was all anyone wanted to watch—it was also all anyone wanted to talk about.

She put her fingers against her temples and tried to put it out of her head. Unfortunately, all that did was punctuate the sudden hush in conversation around the room. On screen, some girl named Julie Doty stuttered out answers to questions as she sat, huddled in a blanket, in the back of an ambulance. One of two survivors (the other had

already been rushed to the hospital), the reporters announced. *“And you heard it all here on Channel 15.”*

Megan felt nauseous.

Outside, even in the shade provided by the side of the building, the overbearing heat of day brought a sheen of sweat to her brow. She had exited into a cement patio; it cut from ground level down to the basement doors with a flight of shallow stairs. The doors closed slowly behind her, cutting off the chilly air-conditioned building as she slumped under a canvas umbrella at a metal table. Nearby, an empty wind swirled up some dry, crinkling leaves around nearby benches like a child idly stirring an uneaten meal.

The telltale rattle of feathers brought Megan’s attention to the neighboring table.

“You wouldn’t be here to tell me something, would you?” she asked the chestnut colored bird, an Inca dove. It stared back mutely with a beady black eye. No answer.

Nothing felt right about this world this weekend and the whole “Tempe Massacre” simply topped it off. The animals back at home had been restless and refused to eat—she had a small army of cats and birds to return to for company but for the past few days they had become more and more agitated. Almost as if they had expected the ghastly crisis now unfolding on the side of the mountain.

Her mother ran a rescue out of their house, taking in wounded pigeons, starlings, grackles, and other birds to rehabilitate them for release back into the wild. As wild as flying around the city, sitting on cars, and stealing crumbs from roadside restaurants could be. The constant presence of birds in her life had been reaching into her dreams of late.

Uncannily portentous dreams that sometimes struck her even when she was awake, like the time she saw that boy, David, screaming for help. The most recent involved him, and three other college aged kids, standing around the ‘A’ on the mountain with candles in their hands. The ‘A’ writhed with black birds of every feather; a cacophony of harsh birdsong rose from the shivering mass of beaks and eyes. Starlings, ravens, crows, blackbirds, and grackles crowded together pecking at the wet paint on the huge letter; the red dripped from their

beaks and speckled their feathers as they squirmed against one another. She couldn't see their faces, but Megan knew one of the kids with the candles was David. They too were blanketed with pecking birds, but she doubted it was paint that glistened redly on those beaks.

After that dream, Megan called up a friend and left the house. She couldn't bring herself to even look at the birds in their boxy cages, peeping behind the thin chicken wire mesh. She didn't want to go into their room and imagine blood dripping from their little beaks. The roar of the chirping and whistles only served to remind her of the gruesome dream. Her parents were fast asleep, even though the birds weren't. She avoided their accusing eyes by leaving through the garage and sat on the edge of the sidewalk to wait for her friend to pick her up during that midnight hour.

Now her eyelids drooped and her chest hurt when she inhaled too deeply. Trying to sleep in the basement TV room hadn't worked out so well. She could feel the heat turning her already weary muscles into rubber, but she didn't want to go back in and deal with the television again.

So, when an extremely familiar black clad woman walked past arm-in-arm with a swarthy, leather jacketed young man, Megan rushed back inside to collect her cat backpack.

Vex turned to the sound of a voice calling her name and saw a girl dressed mostly in grey with a disheveled look running towards her, a familiar backpack shaped like the round face of a wide-eyed cat clutched under one arm. Megan. Patrick had been talking about the girl, Mary Beth, his neighbor who he barely knew anything about except for her haughty attitude and terse "Welcome to Hayden Dormitory" speech when he'd first moved into his room. She put a hand on his arm to catch his attention, he stopped in place. It took the girl only a few moments to reach them and after she did, she bent over, hands on her thighs, and tried to catch her breath.

"Am I glad to see you," she said. "I was just thinking of looking for you and there you were."

Patrick raised an eyebrow. Vex shrugged at him, and said to Megan: "Well, you found me."

"Remember what you told me Friday night after we met on Mill?" the girl said. She had regained her breath but struggled to find the right words for what she was trying to say. "That I'm a witch? I know I totally blew you off when you said that. Silly me. Anyway, I've been dreaming things—*seeing* things."

"That's been going around." The goth cabdriver shook her head at Patrick's changed expression and folded her arms. "Tell me what you saw."

"Related to that stuff on the news." She gestured behind her, the cat backpack slid down her arm, and she hiked it back up to her shoulder; then she made a gesture as if to say there was more. She took a deep breath and kept on. "And before we met, last week, I saw someone I know calling for help. He's disappeared."

She went on to describe the specifics of her vision involving A Mountain and the birds. Explaining how she recognized one of the four people standing around the 'A' as the boy who had vanished after the card game: David. Vex remained grimly silent as Megan stumbled over descriptions of feathers, blood, and barely seen features.

"There also were two girls and another guy," she said. "The dude was tall and blonde, built like a jock, Swedish maybe. One of the girls had red hair, curly, and she was dressed like a schoolgirl. I knew it was David, even with all those birds...eating them. Because I could see his glasses reflecting like mirrors."

Patrick looked very uncomfortable and by the end he broke in. "Do you remember what that gypsy woman said?" he said to Vex. "'His eyes will be mirrors.' With a tall and fair boy—I think she meant blonde—and a girl with red, curly hair..."

"Yes," she replied, "I remember that."

"It's awful," Megan said. "I saw *that* happen the night before it actually happened. When I'd heard David calling for help and he didn't show up again I thought it was just a fluke. I've never seen things like that before." She hugged herself. "I don't know what to do."

"I think you're in good company now," Patrick said, trying to sound comforting.

Vex regarded the girl silently and frowned. The aura around her suggested that she had access to much deeper resources than sim-

ple visions and foretelling dreams—which had led to her original outburst about Megan being a witch. Something she didn't regret saying now that the shit was really hitting the fan. The girl's divinatory ability would probably come in very handy while trying to determine what was going down.

"So, do you recognize anyone else from my vision?" Megan asked.

"Yeah," Patrick said, "except I think she's dead."

Vex heaved a sigh. "And if the other two are connected, the second girl is the one who disappeared from Mill on Friday."

"Would you recognize the redhead if you saw her again?" Patrick asked.

"I couldn't see their faces, quite," the girl said, "they were covered in birds."

"There's a picture of her on her door," he said. "That is, if the police haven't taken down everything on her door. I haven't been back..."

"You know where she lives?" Megan asked.

"She used to live right next door to me," Patrick said.

"I'm so sorry."

Vex walked purposefully past. Standing out in the sun wasn't doing them any good, and it certainly wasn't getting them any closer to finding out what was going on. Whatever happened to be going down, it seemed broader and wider than anything she had encountered before. Certainly Phoenix had its fair share of supernatural activity, stupid upstarts playing with magick—like she'd suspected the four in Hayden Library a few days earlier had been; although now she was beginning to change her mind on that—and the occasional "big, nasty monster" but this was quickly getting out of control.

She wasn't about to let anything get out of control in Phoenix. Not in her city.

"Let's go," she said. "If this girl is related to all those people killed up on the mountain I want to know now so that I can call Madame Summer. These are too many coincidences."

Patrick turned to follow. Megan hiked her backpack back up onto her shoulder again and stalked after him, swaying momentarily

from her lack of sleep. He stopped to give her a hand to steady herself. Vex paused only momentarily to allow the two to catch up, but she smiled inwardly at how much of a Boy Scout her boyfriend really was.

Hayden Dormitory loomed ahead, wide-winged and constructed of brown bricks stacked up to three. squat stories. The structure was garnished with greenish metal staircases that matched the color of the low, square windows set regularly into the walls. Every time she visited, it reminded her less and less of a dormitory and more of a military barracks. The rooms, she recalled, were equally reminiscent. They crossed a parking lot and once in the shade of one of the stair wells, Patrick unlocked the side door. Chilled air that smelled of air-conditioning and old carpets blew out behind the wheeze of the hinges.

The three filed into the dormitory and the door closed behind them with a heavy clank. They didn't notice, however, as they passed inside, that someone had taken a magic-marker to the greenish flank of the stairway behind the door. Drawn in black lines, angled diagonally with the stairs, appeared the sketch of a centipede, legs akimbo and triangular head with a pair of feelers extended.

Chapter 20

Crime Scene

Personally, Vex would rather have done all of this alone. Except that she also didn't want to leave Patrick out of this part of her life—it was a very, very large part of it—and she had discovered from past relationships that it took a lot of explaining why she kept odd hours beyond her hack job. Then there was also Megan, just a girl who had been whirled up into events when the man named Richard handed her a Tarot card. A Tarot card that now seemed to be more portentous than had been originally obvious. Of course, the fact that Megan was now seeing visions containing the four dead kids that had set Vex onto this wild ghost chase meant it was best she be kept close.

Dozens of magazine clippings covered Mary Beth's door, featuring different depictions of war zones and strife, sometimes with headlines—but only those that listed numbers of dead. It all seemed rather morbid for how Patrick had described her door earlier. Overlaying the carpet of human atrocity, as if floating on an endless sea of reflected misery, were bumper stickers for Amnesty International and Sun Devil Social Club. A small poster in the middle held the picture of a red headed girl smiling and knocking a glass of champagne with an older woman

“That's her,” Patrick said, pointing at the poster.

Vex looked at Megan. The girl hugged her cat backpack and

said, “Yeah.”

The police hadn't shut up the room with police tape like she saw on TV and in the movies; instead a piece of paper sealed it against the molding with orange strips on either side. The hallway was empty from end to end, nobody was stirring, so Vex drew her athame and with a single motion she sliced the paper at the doorjamb.

“Won't they notice that?” Patrick asked.

“I'll fix it when I'm done.” Vex kept her tone cryptic and her words short; after cutting the seal she suddenly had too many things on her mind to explain—the voices were there, lilting dusky whispers near her ear. Patrick opened his mouth to say more, but she raised a silencing hand as she tried to listen to their words.

Patrick shrugged, frowning deeply, and Megan cast a nervous lopsided grin at him.

“This is so exciting,” she said. “I—”

“Quiet,” Vex snapped.

The voices were faint, but she could hear one speaking from the other side of the door, like a man mumbling about what he saw. She focused on that one. Megan and Patrick had gone utterly silent and she was grateful for that; the uttering was almost too quiet to be heard. She strained as much as she dared to listen, they had not noticed yet, and if she was careful they wouldn't.

Hematomancy, it said as if reciting out of a book. *An artery is preferable to the vein; the blood flows swifter, surer like a river testing its banks. When the blade is covered, side-and-side, flick'd like casting from the aspergillum. Once, twice, thrice, the aspersion against any flat vertical surface—a wall, a stone, a mirror. The recitant touches his closed eyes with the blood and imbibes from a specially prepared chalice, then speaks the words...*

After listening as long as she could without tempting the things that lingered on the other side, she straightened up.

“You two stay out here and keep a lookout. I don't want anyone disturbing me. And I need to be alone.” She didn't precisely need to be alone—but she didn't need either of them witnessing what might happen in the room when she started what needed to be done.

A magickal ritual of staggering power had been acted out in that room. The agitation and excitement behind the murmurs at the

edges of her hearing told her that much—some of them broke through the bubble of meaningless conversation to offer secrets, suggesting an understanding of what she could feel. Sacrifices were made in that room, blooded offerings to things that she could barely recall how to pronounce after hearing the voices speak their names. *That power could be yours*, the distant voices offered, *listen to us*. She shut them out.

No temptation was worth the price of that type of black magick. She'd seen it before, people who murdered other people for mystical gain also murdered a piece of themselves—they never came back quite the same. A corruption so damning that she feared its very touch. The mere presence of sacrifice magick here, in that room, gave her the chills, and if she wanted to know what happened there she had to go in.

She had to go in alone.

Back in reality, Patrick was speaking.

"...are you sure?" he said. "From what I hear...it's gory in there. On account of—"

"I know," Vex said, lowering her voice to a hollow mutter. "There's blood splattered all over the walls, seeped through the carpet, and soaked into the mattress."

Megan looked pale. "I think I'll stay out here, thank you."

"I'm not so sure..." Patrick began. Vex put a hand on his shoulder.

"Trust me," she said. Her fingers stroked down his arm until they rested on his hand. "I've seen much worse. I have to walk into fire. I must do this alone. I'll be fine."

Reluctantly, he nodded. "I'll keep an eye out for you. I think between the two of us, Megan and I can distract anyone who gets curious."

"Sure thing," Megan said absently. She had moved a few steps away from the room and had herself pressed against the wall. "It's creepy. Seeing her." She looked away. "I stayed awake after that nightmare because when I close my eyes I can see them. Covered in black birds. Those red beaks... She's one of them."

Patrick's distressed expression gave Vex pause.

"Trust me," she said again, but she knew she didn't have to.

She could see it in Patrick's eyes that he did.

For the scene of a crime that had occurred only a few days prior the cops and their agents certainly cleaned up the place well. The room was spare, totally devoid of any furniture on one side—the side where the murder had happened—the other side had two ugly chairs propped on the bed. A heavy dividing wall split the room into two separate areas, each one had a bed, a closet (both empty), a desk area with a lamp, and a dresser full of drawers beneath a scratched and marred mirror.

Murders, especially sudden and brutal ones, leave marks that human eyes cannot see, human fingers cannot touch, but sometimes they can be sensed. She herself was extremely sensitive to such things, but Vex could not pick up on any of the emanations that would have been present after such a terrible crime. All of the emotional energies—the blood dread, the terror, the pain and agony of the victim—had been spent, burned like Hell money, and poured into the ritual.

The metal box with wood paneling that the mattress would have sat upon lay empty, it loomed like a vacant stretcher in the convalescent ward of a hospital. Parts of the drab brown carpet were missing, cut away in squares to reveal darkly stained concrete stippled with gooey lines of yellowed glue. A chemical smell hung in the room like cheap perfume, mixed with an aftertaste of long stirred dust. The paint on the wall looked as if it had been scrubbed with metal bristles; the plaster had been raked away in numerous places. The room certainly appeared to be in disrepair and disarray, but little evidence remained of any blood, except the suggestive stains on the bare, bone grey concrete.

It wasn't until she heard the door click shut behind her that Vex let the voices return. Now that she was in the room they clamored like a mob on the other side of a closed elevator. Growling, clawing, muttering insensate commentary, they each had a piece to speak about the previous goings on and every one wanted to be heard. This was the part she never really liked, the part where she had to open herself up to them—just a crack, like a child peeping through a keyhole into a room filled with gibbering madmen. For the most part the voices mumbled only to themselves, shambling around in the dark, unseeing and un-

thinking, but for some of them this was just camouflage. Like the one that claimed to be her mother, it started out just like another one of those mutters, but Vex paid it too much attention and in that attention it blossomed into the threatening creature that could manifest itself into a spectral echo of the dead flesh-and-blood woman.

Steadying herself, Vex opened herself that tiny crack—just enough to let a glimmer of thought through—and *reached*. She could sense, beneath the restless vocal excitement, the movement of something larger, something gigantic and slumbering, as though a monster rolling over in its sleep. Unhesitating, she focused on the lecturing voice that spoke about blood divination, *hematomancy*, and listened again.

She plucked the words from the air, the memory of the voice echoing them back to her:

“Damare naghti tavi.”

The room rearranged with a suddenness that stole Vex’s breath and the voices rose up all around her. She shut them out and focused on the room.

Clothing suddenly filled the closet, and some of the drawers of the dresser had been pulled open, bloody garments spilled out of them onto the floor. The carpet squelched wetly beneath her boots as she shifted her weight to survey the surroundings. The only light came from the feeble desk lamp beneath the overhanging shelves above the desk. In the dim half-light, she could see that the bed was once again occupied.

A tall boy, blond and muscular, lay on the bed, pickling in his own blood; he clutched the blankets, his hands turned to claws from the agony of his wounds. His eyes open, he stared at the ceiling, shaking and gurgling as bubbles of red frothed at his throat. She looked at her hands: blood covered them from finger to elbow. In her left hand she held a curved, bloody dagger covered in obvious Enochian lettering; and in her right hand a heavy brush on a bending leather rod, strapped to her wrist like a riding crop.

Vex tried to turn towards the mirror to see who she was, but her eyes would not move. Crumpled in a closet corner like a rag doll, she spied a mass of clothing, damp with blood, that looked like a dress

and a nightgown of the girl whose picture adorned the doorway. As they were partially hidden by the shadows she could not tell if she was alive or dead. Not that she needed a better look to know, as a single alien thought lingered in her mind.

I’ve done it! I’ve done it. She’s dead and I’m still here.

Her eyes locked onto the wall. The boy’s blood had been spattered everywhere with the haphazard manner of an abstract artist flinging colored paint with a brush against a blank canvas. It splattered in clotting inky blotches that drooled and bled into one another with strange symmetry. With almost the same familiarity of seeing shapes in clouds, Vex could see what seemed to be clouds in the murky blood Rorschach images. They drew down out of the “sky” into a large letter ‘A’—the similarity of the reflected scene to the images on the news did not escape her notice—and then down, down, into an earthen eldritch dark. The ground drank the clouds into an open rectangular doorway surmounted with grim architecture constructed of impossible angles and optical illusion convergences of veins and insectile limbs.

And there were words.

A non-voice that rattled in her bones; it spoke in the manner of a man dying from a crushed throat trying to recite his last thoughts. She couldn’t understand any of the speech, but the message was clear. Obstacles needed to be removed; a price needed to be paid; rewards would be tendered...

Distracted from the vision, Vex noticed that the boy on the bed was looking at her. But, she realized, he wasn’t looking at the person whose vision she was experiencing, he was looking at *her*. She could see her own face reflected in his eyes; there she looked pale and stricken, the makeup around her eye that protected her from the very vision she had summoned floated on the pale bones of her face like a recent bruise.

“You...?” he said.

“Shit,” Vex replied. “You’re not entirely gone, are you? Hang on. I’ve got you.”

A bit of him still did remain, and like the effect that created revenants and ghosts, it lingered in self-pity at the place he had been murdered. She reached for the scrap of his soul, sweeping her fingers

like a net for the astral stuff. She felt a tug and closed her hand around it. With the proper magick she could ensconce his life force in a makeshift soulstone, and perhaps save him from whatever fate the ritualist in this vision had in store for him.

The boy on the bed convulsed, his mouth opened to scream; instead blood gushed out.

There would be no saving this boy: he was too far gone.

A *presence* entered the room, howling. The sound shook the room like an earthquake, the walls cracked, the windows broke; the diaphanous tendrils of spirit-stuff she grasped between her fingers tore away, stolen into the bleak.

“Fuck!”

The door exploded open with such vicious force that it slammed into the wall and stuck—the knob embedded in the plaster. Vex backpedaled, shaken unexpectedly out of the vision. She summoned wards to defend herself and dropped into a fighting crouch—lethal spells of every variety filled her mind as she girded her armory of deadly magick. Her ears rang, the room was blurry, and she could not make out the silhouette in the doorway. She would only have to get past its wards—probably with her fist—and she would end it.

The shadow resolved.

Patrick entered the room. He wore an intense expression on his face and gripped a gun in his hands. He moved to her, sweeping the cramped space with the gun. He did not lower it until he was standing right next to her.

“I heard someone else in the...” he said. “There was a scream and something hit the wall.”

Vex relaxed; the wards faded.

Megan stood, pressed against the door of the opposite room, her cat backpack hugged tightly to her chest. “Vex,” she said, “your boyfriend is Rambo.”

“Put that away,” Vex said to Patrick through clenched teeth. “We need to get out of here. Everyone is coming to my apartment. Now.”

She had expended too much energy casting about at wraiths in the room. The wards she protected her against the intrusions of the

voices were brittle and almost shattered—she could feel them prizing at the cracks like street urchins pulling at a grate to reach a dropped coin. It took all she had to shut them out, but still she could hear them whispering.

After her boyfriend did something to the gun and then made it vanish somewhere onto his person she pressed the taxi’s keys into his hand.

“You’re driving.”

She didn’t even look back to see if they were following her, she longed too much to emerge into the banishing heat of the sunlight and be away from this place.

Chapter 21



With Much Ado

Patrick sat on the couch and listened to the shower run. It had been running for what seemed like a long time now. When they arrived at her apartment, Vex had gone straight into her room and closed the door a little harder than was necessary. The act, he thought, punctuated his feeling that she was angry with him—probably over his bursting in on her with gun in hand. Still, he resolved as he stewed, he would have done it again if the circumstances were the same.

Megan had moved across the room after their original conversation had dropped into a lull. In spite of the seamlessly quiet drive to the apartment she was full of mirth and conversation—mostly about the previous events that had transpired, but also a whole lot of questions about Vex and Patrick. If nothing else, she provided a welcome distraction from him fretting over what was going on in the adjacent room; not that most showers weren't totally mundane. If anything, he had learned over the past few weeks that nothing in his newly minted girlfriend's life could be easily termed mundane.

"I don't think anything is going to eat her while she's in the shower," Megan said from across the room.

"Am I that transparent?"

Megan flipped her head back to glance sidelong at him; she had one of the crystal skulls that made for bookends on the bookshelf in

hand. "No," she said. "You just remind me of one of my ex-boyfriends, that's all. He was protective. I thought it was sweet, but he'd make himself sick worrying about me."

"That's not what I'm worried about," he said, shaking his head. "I think she's pissed."

"Does she have any other mood?"

That elicited a laugh. "Oh, yeah. It may not look like it some days, but she definitely does."

"I'm wondering, since you're Vex's boyfriend," Megan said, "do you have any experience with witchcraft?"

Caught off guard, Patrick said the first thing that came to mind. "Not unless you count my ex-girlfriend trying to kill me with a curvy knife."

"That's fucked up," Megan said and went silent, avoiding eye contact.

He suddenly wished that he'd thought that one through before replying. He started to tell her that he didn't know what actually happened, just what Vex had told him, but thought better of making any more of a situation of it.

Accompanying him on the couch was Megan's cat-faced backpack. He glanced at it. It stared back at him with wide brimmed eyes. The girl set down the newest object of her curiosity, a small man made entirely out of straw and corn husks, and wandered back to grab her backpack and sit down heavily next to him. According to the clock on the wall they had been twiddling their thumbs for the better part of an hour. It was a strange cooling off period for Patrick, as he was still a bit amped up from the events in the dorm room.

The ride back had been quiet mostly because Vex didn't say anything. She moved like a person bent under the crushing weight of a terrible headache. Patrick thought he'd seen that same expression before on his mother's face; she suffered from dreadful migraines that sometimes rendered her sightless with agony. The pained concentration stretching her features eased a little after all the doors of the taxi had been closed, but when he tried to ask how she was doing, or what was going on, he didn't get any answers other than, "Just drive. Take us home." Obliging, he did just that.

He couldn't quite define exactly why he'd grabbed the gun, that part was a blur, but the very real gut sense that something was wrong in his neighbor's room—where Vex happened to be—could not have been more clear. He had told Megan that he needed to change his shirt, and his dorm room was right next door anyway, so he left her in the hall to stand watch. After getting a fresh shirt from the crumpled fresh laundry still sitting on his bed he'd heard something that set unease in the pit of his stomach. The sound of a choked scream, sobbing almost, floated through the wall that separated his room from the next one.

That almost-indistinct sound went from “it could be my imagination” to “someone is being murdered in here” within seconds when he heard *something* strike the wall and the choked scream turned into a wailing howl. The weapon, a heavy pistol he'd brought from home, happened to be at the very back of the drawer—so, of course, he discovered it in his hands the moment he kicked the door down. Once the door banged open he discovered the room totally vacant, except for Vex, who had backpedaled and looked about ready to take a swing at him.

Recalling the look she'd given him then and there Patrick felt almost like he had been punched anyway. Shock? Anger? Disappointment? It didn't matter—all those emotions dissolved quickly behind the mask of pain she wore the entire ride home. He was going to have to explain. Apologize maybe. Some girls just didn't react well to having guns drawn around them, although Vex didn't seem the type to care.

Next to him, Megan had fished a handheld game out of her backpack. It *blinged* and *dinged* and *beeped* a few times before she suddenly flipped it closed again and looked at her watch. He figured that maybe she was just as bored, and probably as anxious, as he was. There seemed nothing to do now than wait. The life of the party happened to be in the other room.

“Patrick,” Megan said.

“Yeah?”

“Why do you have a gun in your dorm room, anyway?”

“Actually,” said a new voice from across the room. “I'm wondering the same thing.”

Vex stood in the doorway, looking clean and curious. He hadn't even noticed the shower had stopped running. The pained mask had been washed from her face and replaced with the fresh black curvature of wet hair and the glittering dark lines of her eye makeup. She had shaded both eyes with eye shadow, but the mascara around her left eye extended above and below, almost like an Egyptian eye—a makeup design that Patrick had gotten used to seeing on her—but this time it was subtly different. More intricate than before, extra lines and curves laced themselves across her cheek.

“You look beautiful,” Patrick said after a long silence.

“Thanks,” Vex said. She moved away from the door, enjoying the resounding clarity of his voice, and hers replying. The breach in her defenses had allowed them through like a crack in a dam. Until she had gotten within the better warded recesses of the taxi, it was impossible to tell the difference between someone real talking to her and one of the voices muttering in her ear. It was good to hear a solid human voice again and know who was talking.

Her apartment, of course, possessed wards significantly more able to provide proof against external intrusion. The moment she crossed the threshold they evaporated from her like fog cut by sun; but the violation had already been too much. Without much ado, she left Patrick and Megan by themselves in the living room and threw herself directly into the shower, as if she could wash the sensation of those clawed desires and their profound lust from her very being. It had been over a year since the last time she'd let her defenses crumble so far as to allow that to happen. It was impossible to be prepared.

Comfortable again from the shower, dressed up in silk, and all of her makeup now back the way it should be. Vex tried her best to sound affable and chipper. If for no other reason than to set Patrick at ease—she had treated him rather unkindly, she knew, but there was nothing for it.

“But you didn't answer the question. Last I checked, guns weren't allowed in the dormitory. You could get in a lot of trouble having something like that in your room.”

He shifted uncomfortably on the couch, squirming under the

gaze of both Vex and Megan. “Well, it was a gift from my father...for when I went off to college. I think you remember what I said about where I’m from? Everyone is really big into gun ownership. I was no exception. I have another one in my room. I have a permit, of course, my father helped me get it before I came out here.” He paused, studying Vex’s expression, trying to gather what she wanted him to say but her expression remained inscrutable. “Look. I grew up around guns. I know how to handle myself. I thought you were in danger, I went in—”

Vex held up her hand and he stopped mid-sentence. “It’s fine.”

“It sure doesn’t seem that way,” he said. “You seemed angry, I thought I’d explain.”

“I was mad because I almost killed you where you stood,” she said. When he opened his mouth to say something else she cut him off, “Patrick, with my bare hands I am better armed than you can ever be with a gun. What I showed you back at the drum circle is nothing compared to what I can muster in a pinch. Believe it or not, I could have exploded that entire side of the room—and I almost did. Next time, leave the gun behind. Okay?”

“As you wish,” he said. For the first time ever since she’d met him, Vex felt a momentary doubt of his sincerity. It didn’t matter if he kept it with him or not, she mused, if they ever ended up in a situation he would actually need to use it she knew she would be saving his ass—not the other way around.

“And thank you for coming to my rescue,” she said. “Just...next time, trust that I can handle myself.”

Patrick nodded curtly.

“You have messages on your machine,” Megan said, changing the subject. Vex followed her gaze over to the kitchen counter where the answering machine’s light blinked on and off with a rapid beat; the number three glowed furiously on the display. It was probably her father calling. The news reports of the massacre would have sent him into a panic of calls—she didn’t look while she was in the taxi, but she guessed that the message light on the radio would be glowing as well.

“I can get them later. Right now, I have something else in mind.”

“Like what?” asked Patrick.

“When I was in that room,” Vex said. “I found out that the boy killed there was being used as a conduit for visions. Whoever killed him used his life force to look into the future. Kind of reading tea leaves for a serial killer. I tried to reconnect with what the person who killed him saw—and I saw a lot of things. But, one thing in particular, I found out that the dead boy is still there.” She paused a moment. “Well, part of him anyway.”

“He’s dead but he’s alive?” Megan said.

“Well... No, not exactly.” She gestured to Patrick. “A few days ago I found the remains of a ceremony in the library complete with soulstones. I’m still sure one of those kids was trying to trap the souls of the others, and since these two are part of that group I have no doubt of it now. I think, though, that when this boy was killed it stretched his soul between his body and the stone he was connected to.

“When I took the soulstone I got from that candle I might have disrupted part of what was going on. I might still be able to save the souls of these kids from whatever wants them. They’re not entirely gone yet. If a bit of his spirit still lingers in that room that means I can reach him. Maybe I can learn more from him...”

Patrick and Megan stared at her, uncomprehending. Vex looked directly into Patrick’s eyes wondering how far he would really be willing to go to understand the nature of her second-life. This next step would be a lot to ask of anyone not already steeped in the occult community. That still struck her as a strange thought, even the last few times she’d told herself she was letting him, letting him see more, she realized she had been carefully shutting him out. Like how she’d left him outside the room while re-activating the latent blood-magick in the walls.

That wouldn’t fly this time. Everyone involved would be coming along for the ride.

“And, maybe I can set them free,” she finished.

Megan was the first to speak. “How will you do that?”

“I have a friend who can contact the dead,” Vex said, letting a wolfish grin cross her lips. “Patrick met him at the drum circle.”

“I’ve said it before,” Patrick said, “you have some very strange friends.”

“You know a necromancer?” asked Megan.

“No,” Vex said. “A witchdoctor.”