

unshapely things

mark del franco



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Murder in the Weird . . .

I flipped open the folder without speaking. Nothing like autopsy photos to start the day.

Murdock leaned back in his chair. "Victim's been ID'd as a street worker named Gamelyn Danaa Sidhe. Only been around a couple of months. One arrest for hustling. So what are you thinking?"

"Nothing," I said.

"Come on, Connor," he said, stretching his arms behind his head. "I'm not asking you for a name. What's this starting to shape into? If it were your basic murdering psycho, I'd say we have a disassociative personality acting out anger against victims who represent some kind of past psychological trauma."

I couldn't resist smirking. "And what makes you think you're wrong?"

He laughed. "I'm not saying I am. But given his choice of fairy prostitutes, his use of wards, and the ritualized placement of the stone, I'd say there's a layer to him that you might enlighten me on."

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THE BERKLEY PUBLISHING GROUP

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada
(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Group Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia
(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), Cnr. Airborne and Rosedale Roads, Albany, Auckland 1310, New Zealand
(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty.) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196,
South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd., Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

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UNSHAPELY THINGS

An Ace Book / published by arrangement with the author

PRINTING HISTORY

Ace mass-market edition / February 2007

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For information address: The Berkley Publishing Group,
a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.,
375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.
eISBN : 978-0-441-01477-4

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375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014.

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<http://us.penguin.com>

*To Mom and Dad, who have waited.
And to my partner, Jack Custy, who never
expected to live with fairies and elves and the
occasional vampire, yet does so willingly.*

acknowledgments

I may have written this novel, but others made it a book. Many thanks to my agent, Andrew Zack; my editor, Anne Sowards; and my copyeditor, Sara Schwager. Officer Carol Ann Liguori of the NYPD provided great information regarding police procedures. They have made this a better book with their input and advice.

I am lucky to have a supportive crowd of friends and family. Thanks to: Paul Carroll, John Liguori, Andrew Schieffelin, Marianne Cutler, Sandy Bardsley, and Caedwyn (who is so cute); Beck Hemperly, Susan Altman, Kristin Lofblad, Rich Paradis, Robyn Renahan, Susan Hileman, and George Carner; Bess Hochstein and Kipp Lynch; Grace Polivka, who was That Teacher; my fabulous sisters Jody, Teresa, and Michele, who make me laugh and always share secrets; my grandmother Josephine Amore Del Franco, who would have loved this, except for the swearing; and to Jezebel, who stood faithfully beside me through the entire creation, and who is sorely missed.

A special thanks to Francine Woodbury, who Knows Stuff, always has beer and coffee, and has an uncanny knack for reminding me of things I forgot and telling me things I never knew, but needed.

The wrong of unshapely things is a wrong too great to be told

—W. B. Yeats

The alley was slick with rain and a rainbow-hued slop I didn't want to think about. As I ducked under the yellow crime scene tape, something brown oozed away from my feet, and I almost tripped trying to avoid slipping on it. Flashing lights illuminated the dark end of the alley where an ambulance was and a couple of police cars waited. About forty people milled around, a good three-quarters of whom probably had no other reason to be there than to check out the latest victim.

As I came around the nearest car, Detective Lieutenant Leo Murdock of the Boston P.D. waved me over. "Hey, Connor, it's another fairy," he said.

Fairy. Not that there was anything wrong with that, I thought sardonically. Not down by the docks of the Weird, where a dead fairy in the middle of the night was becoming all too common. He didn't have to tell me anyway. I had smelled the blood back when I turned the corner from the main street.

"Same MO?" I asked. We walked over to where the medical examiner crouched, doing nothing to the body.

Murdock shrugged. "You tell me."

The naked body lay on its back staring up at the empty night sky. He was a pale-skinned male, not particularly well-endowed, but you can never really tell when someone's dead and leaking blood all over the place. Blood still dripped from the edges of his split-open torso, the lights glittering on the pool it formed around his waist. A shock of long white-blond hair fanned out around his head, little bits of organ tissue flecking it. At the center of the wound in his chest, a gaping hole showed the mangled evidence of a missing heart. His wings lay flat against the ground, a ward stone resting on each of them.

I nudged the medical examiner out of the way and crouched. The rank smell of alcohol wafted up from the body. Damn fairies never learned. They so much as look at a bottle, and they're drunk, but they still keep drinking the stuff. Putting on a latex glove, I eased a couple of exposed arteries aside and found the small stone I expected. I felt an odd null zone to my left and glanced up at Murdock. His holstered gun hovered over my head.

"Back off, buddy," I said. "Your gun's screwing me up."

Murdock put on an embarrassed face as he stepped off a ways. He never remembered about coffee iron, and I never remembered to remind him, so I guess we both were to blame. As soon as he was a few feet away, the essences started to assert themselves. Nothing unusual, just the dead guy, maybe another fairy with him earlier in the evening, maybe an elf or two. His crotch reeked of human. He must have had a busy night—usually humans barely register.

Other than the heart, nothing else seemed to be missing. A slash across his right palm looked like a defense wound. It wasn't too deep and glanced off to the side. Probably too drunk to put up much of a fight. A couple of rings on each finger and most of the toes. The killer hadn't been interested in money.

I glanced around. The alley was a classic dead end, all the doors and lower windows boarded up tight. As I started to get up, I caught sight of something red shoved between a dumpster and a box. It looked too clean to have been there very long. I stepped carefully around the body and leaned in. It was some kind of fabric with residue of the same essence as the dead guy. "Bag this and check the

dumpster,” I said to no one in particular.

As I started to turn away, I paused, sensing something. The dumpster sat against a blank brick wall. I climbed up on it and inhaled. Bingo. A flit. Flit essence fades fast, so it couldn't have been there very long. I mentally kicked myself as I jumped down on the pavement. I hadn't thought to check very high up at the other crime scenes.

“Any flits around when your guys showed up?” I asked Murdock.

He shook his head. “Body was found by someone who called 911. People were everywhere when we got here.”

I just nodded. Didn't mean anything in particular. If a flit was here when the cops arrived, people would have remembered it. Flits made it their business not to be seen too often. They were pretty good at it, camouflaging their scent, too, unless they had no reason to. Like if they didn't think anyone would look for them fifteen feet above a rank-smelling dumpster. It was a small lead, no pun intended, and I knew just who to go to ask about it. I decided not to tell Murdock. It was bad enough that I didn't understand why I couldn't just wave a magic wand to solve these things. No use having him terrorize the flit population if it was just a coincidence.

“It's the same MO,” I said. I snapped off the latex glove.

Murdock nodded and frowned. A lot of people think Murdock's dismissive. I knew him well enough to know that he cared about the freaks in the Weird. He'd been on the detail too long not to be able to transfer out anytime he wanted. But he didn't. Just another thing I admired about him.

We walked back to his car. “You want to wait for a lift?” he asked.

“Nah, even I'm not that lazy. It's just a couple of blocks.”

He turned back to the crowd at the barricades. “Suit yourself. I'll send you the file.”

“Thanks,” I said.

At the end of the alley, I pushed my way through the motley crew of gawkers that were held back by a police barricade. A huge woman, easily seven feet, towered over everyone, her hair flowing up even higher, tight green spandex straining against an enormous bust. I shook my head. Someone once said when it comes to murder, there's always a woman. I didn't think so in this case, though. Besides, in the Weird, half the time you didn't know if the woman in front of you was the real thing or even what species she was.

As I made my way through the maze of streets, I couldn't help but think what a waste it all was. Every time the papers said things were getting better, I knew it was a lie. As long as there were desperate people, there would be the Weird. And as long as the Weird existed, I had a reason to get up in the morning. So maybe it wasn't such a bad thing, at least for me. I never fooled myself into thinking I did more than gnaw around the edges. Even before my accident, I only kept the flashpoint from turning into conflagrations like everybody else did. I may not work in the big power league anymore, but I still pull my weight even if now I'm poor Connor Grey, crippled druid. At least I didn't have to deal with the politics of the Ward Guild anymore. And they do send disability checks.

My career at the Guild had been moving pretty fine. The Ward Guild monitors the fey—the druids and fairies, and the elves and dwarves—and acts as a policing agency as well as a diplomatic corps. Every city with a major concentration of fey has a Guildhouse that serves as headquarters for the locals. Ultimately, all the Guildhouses report to the top in Ireland. Good old Maeve, High Queen of Mucky-Muck at Tara.

I miss some of it though. The money. The big apartment. A date any night of the week if I wanted. My picture in the paper. In my time, I got to handle most of the high-profile crime investigations. But that's over. All gone now. Washed away the moment I met up with an environmentalist elf at the nuclear reactor. Asshole had a power ring he didn't know how to use. He lost control, and some kind of feedback loop with the reactor happened. The next thing I know I'm waking up in the intensive care unit at Avalon Memorial with a migraine and most of my abilities gone. I could have cared less that the entire Northeast power grid went down. Nobody died. Not even the stupid elf.

The doctors are baffled. They know the problem is a dark smudgy mass in the middle of my brain but they can't figure out if it's organic or not. No diagnostic, technological or otherwise, has been able to penetrate it. They offered to go in physically and look, but no one knows enough about the interface between living tissue and ability for me to trust them. They can use someone else to experiment on and get back to me. Having the power ring would go a long way toward helping figure it out, but it disappeared with the elf. I'd wish the jerk were dead if I didn't hope to find him someday. I just hope Murdock isn't around when I do. He'd just go all ethical on me and stop me from killing the guy. But then, he's just as upset about the whole situation as I am. Or at least thinks he is.

Murdock's a good guy. Sometimes too good for his own good. He knows I won't take charity, but that doesn't stop him from dangling interesting cases in front of me. The system was set up for the Guild to handle any crimes involving the fey—meaning anyone with the ability to manipulate essence—while the municipal police retained their usual jurisdiction over everyday humans. The way everything plays out, though, is that the Guild wants only fey-on-fey cases. The glory cases. Petty crimes, whether they involve fey or not, get punted to the local P.D. Whenever the Guild considers a crime a human matter, and most times it does, Murdock's unit picks up the slack. Human police have to take care of the Weird because the Guild doesn't much care about the fey here, unless someone important gets caught doing something. Between the disability and the occasional check Murdock squeaks out of his consultant account, I can pay the rent.

I hit the front door of my building just as dawn started creeping up. Home is an old mill warehouse in the twilight zone at the edge of the Weird, barely describable as converted. The elevator up to the fifth floor is slower than walking, but I usually don't bother with the stairs. It's cheap and it's quiet and the neighbors are not prone to scrying in the middle of the night, which wakes me up. Most of the other tenants are retirees and art students, and I think we still have dwarves in the basement, though I haven't seen them in a while. My apartment's on the top floor corner. I used to have a cool retro sanctum sanctorum, but now I make do with a one bedroom overlooking a rotting pier. The view of the harbor beyond that is nice, though.

I do my living in the main room, the larger one, and my working in the smaller one, which sits in the corner of the building. That way I can work without the sun coming up in my eyes in the morning and have a view of the Boston skyline and the airport from my desk. They make ample diversions anytime, day or night.

I slipped into the squeaky chair in front of my computer and booted up. Opening the case notes, I gave the new victim his own database file, made notes on the scene and the body, and plotted the crime scene location in the map file. Murdock would send me more particulars as soon as he had them. Tonight's victim was number three in a weekly cycle, so Avalon Memorial had agreed to give any new cases top priority. Big of them.

The latest victim could have been either of the first two. Male fairy, prostitute by trade, found in

remote alley with his heart missing. A stone was placed in the chest cavity and ward stones set on his wings. The ward stones I could figure. Even a drunk fairy could manage some kind of flight, so the perpetrator needed the wards to nullify the wings. The stones were obviously some kind of talisman replacement but not part of any ritual I ever knew. They weren't charged with anything, either, except normal body essence. If any real power were involved, the residue would have lasted a lot longer than the time I took to get to the scene.

I leaned back in the chair and skimmed the bookshelf that ran around the room along the top of the wall. Ancient leather spines fought for space with cheap trade paperbacks in a profusion of incantation primers, spellcaster work-books, grimoires, rune dictionaries, pronunciation guides for fourteen languages—three of them technically dead and one that never was—and a complete set of first editions by Lloyd Alexander. The ritual I needed to know very likely lay buried somewhere in the pages. As I contemplated an old Celtic handbook of spells perched close to the edge, I decided three hours' sleep was way too few for ogham reading—or anything else.

I got up and went into the kitchen galley off the living room. The fridge bulb made it abundantly clear I needed to get some groceries. I pulled out a thimble-size bottle with a little yellow point of light in it. "Glow bees" most people called them, the poor man's sending. Humans with fey friends used them mostly, though they didn't work for everyone. Even when they did, the average human had to hold them for a couple of hours to get a decent charge on them. Email was quicker. I have to use them now. Most of my sendings go astray these days.

I slipped it in my pocket to warm it up. By the time I got the futon open, my pants were humming. As I took the bottle back out, the little light danced up and down inside, emitting its characteristic faint buzz. Carefully, I took off the lid and cupped the ball of light in my hands. I brought my hands to my lips and said, "Stinkwort. The Waybread. Noon." Opening my hands, the glow bee shot up and hovered a moment, then popped through the window.

I crashed on the futon and was asleep before the morning news began. Four hours later, I was seated in The Waybread, eating lunch for breakfast. A Chinese couple had opened the place a few years back hoping to tap into the elf market. They didn't know honeycomb pie from scallion pancakes, but the burgers were pretty decent. It catered mostly to teenage tourists on a day jaunt to the bad-ass part of town. I liked it because I wasn't likely to run into anyone I know. Most of the friends I had left had a better taste.

Noon came and went. I sat twiddling a coffee straw and watching the completely human crowd. Every time the door opened, their heads would bob up only to return to their plates without a wing or pointy ear sighting. No one bothered me. Druids aren't obviously different. We look human but have more sensory abilities and, of course, can tap into essence. After another twenty minutes, my bladder would no longer stand being ignored. I went to the restroom.

I was just about to take care of business when a voice over my head observed, "At least you're not sitting down."

Above me twelve inches of loincloth-clad flit hovered, tawny-colored arms crossed, face pinched, wings spread in dark pink anger. "Stinkwort, what the hell took you so long?" I asked.

He moved down in front of my face. "Me? It's about time you came in here. What the hell were you thinking sitting out there with all those people? How long do you think it would have been before the bunch started with the cameras? You think I have nothing better to do than pose for some human?"

"Sorry. I was hungry." I looked down, then back up. "Um, can you give me a sec?"

Stinkwort glanced down and flipped his shaggy blond head with scorn. "Fine. I'll be in the alley. He winked out. He winked back in. "And stop calling me Stinkwort." He winked out again.

True to his word, I found him sitting on a crate in the narrow passage behind The Waybread. He hovered up as I came out the back door so that we were able to face each other. He was still pretty angry. "So what do you need, oh great and powerless one?"

I frowned. "That's pretty low even for you, Stinky."

"Call me Joe," he said. "If you can't keep that straight, I'm out of here."

Nothing amuses me more than an angry flit. They try so hard to be menacing, an oxymoron when it involves wings that are blue or yellow or, in Stinkwort's case, pink. Especially pink. He had a point, though. Stinkwort is an awful name. Whatever his mother was thinking when she gave it to him, she was keeping it to herself.

"Okay, Joe. I'm sorry. About the restaurant. About your name. About what I just paid for lunch. Can we call it a truce?"

He stared at me a moment, long, bushy eyebrows hanging over glittering eyes. Then he did that smile, the one that keeps on going from ear to ear. "What can I do for you, Connor?"

"I need some help on these fairy murders." Joe blanched, hovering back in fear. "Wait!" I said. "Don't bug out on me!" Flits can be so, well, flitty.

He paused, looking at me suspiciously. "What can I do about it?"

"A flit was at the last murder, maybe the others," I said, before he changed his mind. "Have you heard anything?"

He kept looking at me, a sour expression on his face. "That's all anyone's talking about."

"But have you heard anyone say they were there?"

He shook his head. "No one would say so if they were. If the murderer can kill one of the Danann... ." He left the rest unsaid, surprisingly. Most of the fairy folk think their own special people are the best of all possible fairy, all the others a sad imitation to be tolerated and pitied. Flits, especially, can be sensitive about their place in the universe. For Joe to come close to admitting that killing a Danaan fairy is harder than killing a flit showed how shaken up he was.

"I know a flit was at the most recent one," I said again. "I don't know if it was with the victim or the murderer, but it's the only lead I've had."

"No flit would stand by for murder," he said. He scowled again. "Did you say 'it'?"

"Okay, given," I said. "But I don't know if *he* or *she* knows the murderer and stumbled upon him at the act this time, or if it was a friend of the victim."

Joe considered for a moment, tapping his chin. "Everyone's upset. People are talking of hiding 'till it's over." He pursed his lips then. "You said 'it' again."

I smiled my best you're-the-best-Joe smile. "But you know people, right? People who would know of an upset flit?"

"I just said everyone's upset. What are you, deaf now, too?"

"Well, maybe someone who's upset in a different way. Like maybe someone who saw something. Look, if it's out of your league, Joe, I'll understand. I can try and find someone else."

He did this funny little annoyed dance. "I didn't say I couldn't find out."

I beamed at him. “That’s great, Joe. If you hear anything that might help, let me know.”

He studied me for a moment, eyeing me up and down. “So, how are you feeling?”

I shrugged. I knew what he was asking. “The same. No change.”

He nodded absently, trying not to show too much concern. Joe was at the hospital when I woke up from the accident. He peered up the alley as though something very interesting were happening in the next trash heap. I didn’t see anything, but flits look at the world differently. “I haven’t seen you around. I was wondering what you were up to,” he said.

“Sulking,” I said with a smirk. I was pretty sure he was lying. For all I knew, Joe could have been ten feet behind me for weeks, and I wouldn’t have known. He never stays away for long. Actually, I should say he never hides from me very long. I realized years ago that he watched me a lot. He’s pretty good at staying out of sight, but every once in a while he makes an oblique reference to something in my life that I didn’t think he’d been present for. His clan was from the west end of Devon in the old country—old, as in most of them were originally from Faerie—and those folk tended to attach themselves to families. I’ve known him since I was a kid, and I know he knew my parents before that. Besides, his favorite cookies always disappear out of my apartment, and I rarely eat them.

Joe huffed a little. “You should go dancing,” he said. He winked. “I could set you up with a date.”

I did laugh then. It was an old joke between us. The last time I let Joe fix me up was high school. I spent two hours with a troll who talked all the way through *Star Wars*. “I’ll work that department on my own, thanks.”

He kept glancing up the alley and getting twitchy. Too exposed probably. “Well, look, I gotta go. If a flit is involved, I’ll find it.”

“Thanks, Joe. Um, did you say ‘it’?”

He barked at me like a dog and winked out. People who don’t have much exposure to flits think it’s some incredibly marvelous interaction. They’re just people though. A little eccentric, maybe, but still just people who happen to wink in and out of sight. And they’re harder to reach than someone without call waiting. If they don’t want to talk, they don’t, and they’re not just a little bit paranoid. But then, I were less than a foot tall, I’d be careful where I went, too.

I strolled up the alley to Old Northern Avenue, the main drag of the neighborhood. Most people called it the Avenue, but if you lived in the Weird, you earned the right to facetiously call it “Oh No” in casual conversation because that’s what the uninitiated often say when they get in over their heads down here. Thirty or so years ago if someone said an entire residential neighborhood of sorts would be thriving on the waterfront in this part of town, you would have said they were crazy. An odd mishmash of warehouses and parking lots had turned into loft apartments and new, albeit sometimes indecipherable, businesses. Most of the property is owned by dwarf syndicates who thought they’d make a killing if the state built a new tunnel across to the airport on the other side of the harbor. But, as usual, the syndicates got a little too greedy and started renting out space to the fey folk to increase their profits in the meantime. Before they knew it, tenant unions cropped up and killed the tunnel plans. Now the dwarves are stuck with the property. Eviction isn’t much of an option for them since many of their tenants have a penchant for turning them into stone when negotiations get nasty. It’s illegal, of course, but the city doesn’t have the money or the ability to trace every spell cast in a rental dispute. So the dwarves content themselves with raising rents whenever they can. They pret

much have a stranglehold on the construction business in the area, though, so I guess it eventually balances out for them.

Banners in red and yellow and orange fluttered from wires hung across the Avenue as far as I could see. Even the streetlights had giant sun-shaped pinwheels spinning on top of them. Midsummer's Day was just a couple of weeks away. Fey folk and wannabes and hangers-on would descend on the Weir like a druid fog and dance and drink until beer came out their noses or they were arrested, whichever came first. Absolute madness would take possession of the entire neighborhood for twenty-four hours. It's a week of Mardi Gras insanity crammed into a day.

The Avenue was fairly empty. Since morning is not the favorite time of day in this part of town, business picks up around early afternoon. I opened a newspaper box on the corner and grabbed a copy of *Weird Times*, the local rag. TUESDAY KILLER STRIKES AGAIN the headline screamed. I stifled a groan. It didn't take Sherlock Holmes to notice the timing of the murders, but I hated when the press gave criminals catchy monikers. For the rest of the case, I wouldn't be able to not think of this psychopath as the Tuesday Killer. I scanned the article and was relieved to see that not all the evidence had gotten out yet. Everyone knew the victims were fairies and the hearts were missing. Given the weekly time frame that was developing, even a novice could tell some kind of ritual was being played out. The reporter speculated about a couple of theories, all of which I had thought of after the second murder and discarded five minutes later. No mention was made of the stones. They were the one thing Murdock and I had managed to keep quiet, and so far it seemed to be working.

The day after a crime is one of the best times to hit up sources for dirt before they calm down and realize they can barter their information for higher prices later. Given the lives the victims led, it was still too early to find their associates. Murdock wouldn't have a file on the latest victim for me yet, and I prefer to do book research at night. That left running things down the old-fashioned way.

I crossed the Avenue and cut down a small side street. Calvin Place is just a little connector street between two main drags. In better days, it had no better days. Time was marked by small service establishments that went in and out of business with the change of year. Near the middle of the north side sat one shop that had remained in place for decades with a single owner. Its wooden facade had turned ashen from lack of paint and the large plate-glass windows were so soot-stained you couldn't see inside. The sign that ran the length of the building had been installed sometime in the 1950s and hadn't been updated since: BELGOR'S NOTIONS, POTIONS, AND THEURGIC DEVICES. Half the letters were missing and a newer metal sign had been nailed just under it: CHECKS CASHED. As I opened the door, a little bell fixed to the inside rang mournfully.

At first glance, dust seemed to be the major item for sale. The space was crammed with wooden bookcases rising twelve feet high, leaning toward each other in the dim ochre light as though browsing each other's wares. Yellowed boxes with faded names, blue glass jars with odd shapes, old hard-covered books with no titles, and innumerable rocks, crystals, and baubles filled the shelves in no discernible order, most everything covered with the detritus of time. Here and there the subtle hint of something True lingered in the air, or something that was powerful at one time, but now just a faded shell of its former glory. As I moved along to the back, the unmistakable odor of unwashed elf hit me like a fist in the face. It's a lot like burnt cinnamon and not remotely pleasurable.

In front of the back wall stood a counter cluttered with piles of newspaper, receipts, and street flyers leaning against an old manual cash register. A coffee mug filled with warped wooden sticks had a label that said "Yew Wands, 10 cents," and, from the looks of them, that's all they were worth. The

back wall was lined with videocassettes for rental, most of them low-rent skin flicks, and rolls of lottery tickets. I picked up and examined a small jar of newt eyes in vinegar that was half-hidden under a carton of cigarettes.

The curtain in the corner parted, and the amazing immensity of Belgor shifted his way ponderous into the room. No one lived in the Weird for any length of time without knowing, or knowing of Belgor. He primarily dealt with the lower rungs of the neighborhood, which is to say considerably downmarket, operating a small numbers operation and occasionally fencing stolen goods. He kept himself low-key, just low enough to avoid any particular attention by the Ward Guild but not enough to avoid the occasional surprise visit from the Boston P.D. No one ever found anything though. I had enough on him to make his life miserable if I wanted, but as long as he feeds me decent information when I need it, I let him slide. It annoys the hell out of Murdock that I won't help put him away, but you make your compromises where you do. I try to mollify them both by coming in alone in the middle of the afternoon so Murdock doesn't have to know where I've gotten my stuff, and Belgor doesn't have to be embarrassed by my presence in front of his late-night customers.

The obese elf rested his thick hands on the counter and his fleshy, sallow face split with a patented cold smile. He had the long, pointy ears that come with extreme old age in elves and didn't bother to pluck the bristly hairs that grew out the ends. Not surprising from someone who was hygienical and challenged. "Good evening, Mr. Grey. What can I do for you?"

"It's the middle of the day, Belgor. You should wash your windows more than once a decade."

I pulled a ward stone out of my pocket and placed it on the counter. It was dead, just a short obelisk about three inches high, poorly finished in black and gray stone with just enough iron in it to make it useful for minor work. It was one of the ones found with the second victim, no different from the others that had been left behind. "Do you happen to know where this might have been purchased?" I asked.

Belgor pumped his lips at the sight of the rock, not deigning to touch it. "You know as well as I do, Mr. Grey, that this is standard off-the-shelf inferior merchandise. It could have been purchased anywhere between here and Southie. Most of my customers would not have the energy to overcome the flaws in it."

He had a point. Cheap ward stones were counterproductive. It took more energy to make them work properly than a finely tuned stone. If the killer were moving through a crowd with a good charge on his ward, someone would be bound to notice. A poor stone, crudely charged, would slip by most people until it was needed—say, on a drunk fairy. Someone with a fair amount of ability would be able to put it off subtly.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I said.

"Terrible about these murders. Have you any leads?"

I like the way he just drops that he knows I'm working. Doesn't take Belgor long to hear much of anything. "I'm following a couple of things."

He pretended to pick dust off the counter. "I could be in a position to make a nice commission on the sale of some high-quality chargeable selenite. Selenite has a long and odd history of usage. An old gentleman came to visit me several months ago inquiring if I had such a thing." He chuckled and waved his hands about. "If only my humble shop could be so stocked," he said with practiced modesty.

I did my best not to look too eager. Unless the Guild, which had agreed to do a scan on the headstones, had let the information leak out, only Murdock knew that the stones were selenite.

“How long ago was this?”

“About six months. I remember it was before Yule.” He pursed his lips. “He was about your height and young. But at my age, everyone seems young.” Belgor tapped his nose. “My senses are not what they used to be. His essence was very odd. I thought he was an elf by first glance, but his ears were misshapen.”

“Misshapen?”

He wiggled his own pointed appendages. “Like yours.”

“Call me if he shows up again. I’ll see if I can help. I’ll stop by again.”

He bowed his head. “I shall look forward to it,” he said, looking anything but.

“Have a good night,” I said sarcastically. Outside on the sidewalk, I forced myself to sneeze to clear my nose of body odor. Belgor did very little for my growing animosity toward elves who do stupid things. I didn’t think he knew more than he said. He’s a shrewd operator. Wouldn’t have lasted as long as he has if he weren’t. He wouldn’t be so stupid as to hint he knew about the stones if he knew the murderer. I could have pressed him on it, but now that I had confirmed his guess about the stones, I would keep his eyes open.

A pounding on the door woke me at the crack of noon. I sat up in bed, rubbing my fist into my eye and wondering what had died in my mouth to make it taste the way it did. The knocking started up again and I put on a robe and opened the door. Murdock sauntered in like a cop.

“Do you know what time it is?” I asked. I hate waking up. I opened the refrigerator. Seltzer water, condiments, and glow bees. I had to go shopping. Every night the last thing I do is set up the coffeemaker to save a minute and a half. I hit the ON button. Murdock knows the routine. He didn’t say a word while I disappeared into the bathroom. The only thing that kills that morning shag rug feeling from a six-pack of Guinness is an extra dose of Crest, and the only thing that kills the Crest is black coffee. I didn’t come out until I knew it was ready. Murdock was in the study flipping through an herb dictionary. I slipped on a pair of jeans and yesterday’s T-shirt and joined him. The squeak of my computer chair sliced through my head.

I took a gulp of hot coffee, met Murdock’s eyes, and smiled thinly.

He smiled, shaking his head. “How can you sleep half the day away?”

“Same way most people sleep the night away,” I said. I hardly came from a line of farmers and never saw much value in dawn except as a sign that maybe I had stayed up late again. Murdock had probably been up too many hours already for me to think about.

He tossed a folder on the desk next to me, the edge of some paper and a compact disc sliding out. “This week’s victim. We’re still waiting for serology, but it will probably confirm alcohol and trace user drugs like the others. I took the liberty of putting the photos on disc for you.”

I flipped open the folder without speaking. Nothing like autopsy photos to start the day. Murdock leaned back in his chair, looking as fresh in his white shirt, classic red tie, and barely creased tan gabardine pants as if he had just dressed. “Victim’s been ID’d as a street worker named Gamelyn Danann Sidhe. Only been around a couple of months. One arrest for hustling.”

Gamelyn’s face stared out from a head shot with that disconcerting glassy stare of the dead, narrow fine features, hair so pale that his eyebrows barely showed. He looked young for a Danann, a hundred or younger, probably a runaway, or one of those fools who think humans are a fascination of their experience.

“So what are you thinking?” he asked.

It wasn’t a general question. Murdock’s own admitted fascination with fey folk drew him to the Weird and kept him there. The more you got to know, the more there was to know. Years ago, when I thought of such things, human curiosity annoyed me no end. I used to think being a druid was no different than anything else. Just a different set of skills. Not every druid excelled at his craft, just like not every human or fairy or elf. But that was before I lost most of my ability, before I learned what it was like not to be able to do things. Before I understood that only if you could make a spell work could you bring true intuition to understanding how someone else’s spell worked. Now I only have the intuition and limited ability. I have to confess to a certain amount of anger about it. But at least I have that. Humans had neither, no matter how many books they studied. It’s a mystery to them in the true sense, in the ancient theological sense. And like all mysteries, they hold out hope that the answers are easy if you know the secret. So Murdock, with all the sincerity in the world, asks me every time why

do I, who has been granted access to the mysteries by dint of birth, know.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Come on, Connor,” he said, stretching his arms behind his head. “I’m not asking you for a name. What’s this starting to shape into? If it were your basic psycho, I’d say we have a disassociative personality acting out anger against victims who represent some kind of psychological trauma from the murderer’s past. The trauma most likely occurred at a young age. The act of the murder is his way of taking control. Even without the evidence of aggressive removal of the hearts, he’s likely to be a male. Given all the victims are male prostitutes who service male customers, I’d consider that the killer was likely molested by a male, possibly a relative.”

I couldn’t resist smirking. “And what makes you think you’re wrong?”

He laughed. “I’m not saying I am. But given his choice of fairy prostitutes, his use of wards, and the ritualized placement of the stone, I’d say there’s a layer to him that you might enlighten me on.” It was his turn to smirk and mine to laugh.

“All right, fine,” I said. “Given that the wards have to be charged, it’s not likely he’s human. He might have bought a charged ward, but there’s no room for error if the fairy is strong enough to resist. He might get lucky once, but three times leads me to think some kind of enchantment is used even before the alley is reached. So that leads me to believe the killer is fey. I’ve already told you that I sensed human, elf, and fairy essence on the victims, which narrows the possibilities to elf or fairy. It’s clearly a performed ritual, one I’ve never heard of. Most rituals are very proscribed. The methodical enactment of the murders supports that. The heart is considered the power center, so power is either being gained or taken away. Blood rites, particularly involving people, are very old, and were supplanted by symbolism long ago, much as Christians use wine for blood. If it is a real ritual, the killer would either have to be very old or have access to old knowledge.”

Murdock cocked his head to one side and squinted at me. “What do you mean ‘if ’ it’s a real ritual?”

I smiled back at him. “He may have no other motive other than a disassociative personality taking control from the perpetrator of his childhood trauma. Other than the wards, I haven’t sensed an expenditure of power that a ritual might entail. Just because he’s fey doesn’t mean the ritual does anything. It could just mean he has his own ritual for killing fairies.”

Murdock blew air through his lips. “Great.”

“And . . . he just might be finished,” I said. “It’s an outside chance. There’ve been three murders. Even if the ritual’s not real, the killer could still be operating within fey parameters. Three is a very powerful number. The first token stone was dark, almost black, the second, gray, and the last white. A nice balance. He might be done.”

Murdock scratched his head, then smoothed his hair again. “Is this your way of saying that magic isn’t always magic?”

I sipped my coffee. “No. Just that there are no magic answers. And stop calling it magic. It’s manipulated essence. That’s all.”

He stood up. “So we work it like a regular case, solve it with forensics and witnesses and evidence.”

I couldn’t resist. “On the other hand, the ritual could be real. If I find the ritual, we find the motive, and if we find the motive, we might have the killer.”

Murdock shook his head, laughing. "I don't know if you're trying to drive me crazy or just get more consulting fees."

I poked my cheek out with my tongue. "Both have their appeal."

He jerked his head at the door. "Let's go. We have to meet someone."

I rummaged on the floor for a pair of socks. I hadn't even taken a shower, so I wasn't going to worry about dirty socks. I threw on a baseball cap, grabbed a long leather jacket, and we left the building. I slid into the passenger seat of Murdock's car right on a poorly disguised romance novel. We all have our embarrassing secrets. For all his immaculate-ness, Murdock's car was a pigsty. Newspaper, take-out bags, and napkins mounted in the well on the passenger side to the point that the mats underneath were actually clean because they rarely had feet on them. Club invitations and gum wrappers littered the dashboard. It was why he couldn't keep a partner for more than a few months at a time. I think he does it on purpose.

"So, where am I going?" I asked.

"Talk to a couple of guys," he said, snaking the car in and out of the dumpsters behind my building to avoid the one-way street in front. "Street kids. The photos of the barricades show them at the first and third scenes."

He leaned across, opened the glove compartment, and handed me two photos. Two heads were circled in each, one a tall blond boy wearing a green tunic and a bow and quiver, the other should be about the height to the first and wearing some kind of dress and a black wig tied with a red sash. The blond looked familiar, but if Murdock hadn't told me they were both male, I'd never have guessed. At least not from the photos.

"Do you know them?" I asked.

"A little. They're runaways, been living the life to get by. No trouble as far as I know," he said. He made the turn onto Pittsburgh and cut into the next alley. He pulled up behind one of a series of boarded-up buildings. We got out of the car. Murdock scanned up and down the alley as he slipped on his sports coat. "Maybe they haven't been caught yet," he said.

He walked up to a door covered with several pine planks and pulled. It popped open easily on its hinges, boards and all. Murdock gave me a crooked smile and walked into the darkened hallway.

I stood behind him, apprehension creeping up my back. I never carried a gun, even when I was in the Guild. Didn't need one then. Even with extra senses and body-warding abilities, though, you can't stop that adrenaline rush that comes from stepping into blind situations. A faint prickling sensation ran over my face as I called up a weak body shield. At one time, the shield was amazingly tough. It wasn't much now, mostly my head and just patches on the chest and arms, and it would never stop a bullet. If someone threw something at me, like a fist or a brick, the force of the blow would be slightly blunted. It worked more for comfort than usefulness these days.

Sunlight penetrated just past the threshold, showing a debris-strewn hallway trailing off into black. The odor of mildew hung in the air. A door slammed not far off and a blazing high-voltage light snapped on in our faces. Instinctively, I dove for the floor.

Murdock looked down at me and burst out laughing. "What the hell are you doing?" he said.

"Who is it?" a voice demanded.

Murdock turned away from me and held his hand up to protect his eyes. "Turn off the damned light."

Robin!” The light went out to be replaced by a dimmer bare bulb in the ceiling. Murdock shook his head.

I stood up, brushing dirt off my coat. “You could have warned me,” I said.

He just kept chuckling as he led the way down the hall to a door at the end. When we reached it, it opened slightly, then all the way. A tall thin boy clothed in jeans and a white T-shirt faced us, long blond hair framing a strikingly handsome face. His eyes were wary as he backed away, and we stepped into the room. Another boy stood in the corner, his face incredibly feminine, with just the hint of applied color on his eyes. He wore a long shift in light blue with a matching piece of fabric tied around his dark hair. Most of the room was taken up by two narrow beds, the walls decorated with old posters, hanging fabric, and some standard household good luck charms. The far wall was partially covered by a thick maroon velvet curtain, behind which neatly arranged clothes could be seen on shelves and hooks.

Murdock lifted his chin at the blond. “This is Robin, and that’s Shay,” he said. I just nodded. Murdock sat down in the only chair. He leaned back and smiled at the kid in the corner. “How’s it going, Shay? Still doing the Snow White gig?”

Shay crossed his arms and frowned. “No. The damned dwarves quit. They said their cut wasn’t enough.” He rolled his eyes. “Like standing around watching takes effort.”

Murdock shrugged. “Too bad. I heard you were making quite a name for yourself.”

Shay draped himself on the nearest bed. “Who is this, Detective Murdock?”

“A friend. You can call him Connor.”

Robin arched an eyebrow, a small cocky smile twitching at one corner of his mouth. I was tempted to slap him. “*The* Connor, as in Connor Grey? I thought no one ever met you.”

“Consider yourself met,” I said. I stared right back at him, but he held my gaze. I was impressed.

Shay walked toward me with an exaggerated languidness. “I’ve seen your picture in the paper. You’re much more handsome in person. I don’t usually go for tall, dark-haired types, but you have very pretty eyes. Aqua.”

“They’re just blue, thanks,” I said. The kid was a hoot.

He smiled and strolled back to the other side of the room. “You were at the murder,” he said. Robin shot him an annoyed look.

“So were you,” said Murdock.

Robin moved closer to Shay’s bed. “A lot of people were there,” he said.

“Yeah, but a lot of people were not at two murder scenes,” Murdock said. The two of them looked studiously at their hands. “You want to explain that?” Murdock prompted.

Shay busied his hands with the chenille on the bedspread.

“You know they happened right near here. We were on our way home,” said Robin. He nervously ran his fingers through those long blond strands. His expression stayed suspicious though.

“Bad luck,” Shay whispered. He darted his eyes at me, then away to examine a poster on the wall, an old Deco print of a ship coming into port. Stylish optimism. “‘Turning and turning in the widening gyre.’ Isn’t that the way of it?” he murmured.

My heart caught a moment. I couldn’t help it. Something about the kid, his pretty little woman face

on a man's little body and the sadness in his voice. I didn't think it was an act. For a moment, I heard what must have driven him here and maybe what kept him here.

Murdock leaned forward. "Do you want to tell me something, Shay?" he asked softly. I could tell Murdock had felt it, too. Is that what kept him in the Weird?

Shay just stared at us solemnly. He reached up and removed his head scarf, shaking out long, brown hair. "It's the way Robin said. We were on our way home." Robin seemed to relax a little. "The first time," Shay continued.

"Shay! No!" Robin said, spinning away from us.

Shay tapped his arm. "It's all right." Robin reached out and held his hand. Shay fixed us with a defiant eye. "We were looking for Gamelyn the second time."

"You knew him?" Murdock asked.

Shay nodded. "I met him at the Flitterbug. He was sweet. Too sweet for that place. And drunk, like they all are when they first come here. A man kept buying him drinks. He made me nervous. I tried to talk Gamelyn into going home, but he said he was fine. They left together. I started to follow, but Robin came back, and we talked for a bit. Then I got nervous again, and we went looking for Gamelyn. We were about to give up when I thought I saw Gamelyn's friend go down an alley."

"What friend?" Murdock asked.

"A flit. She usually came around to talk to Gamelyn."

"Was the murderer still there?"

Shay shook his head, and his voice went soft. "When we got to the alley we . . . we found him and called the police. They'd only been gone about twenty minutes, but I guess that was all the time I needed."

"Could you identify him?"

Shay considered for a moment. "Probably. The Flitterbug is kind of dark. Not everyone goes someplace else, if you know what I mean. He looked old. Mean. I think he was fey."

"What kind of fey?"

"I don't know," he said. "One of the fairies or maybe a druid. He made my skin crawl. I never felt like that around the fey before. I didn't like him. And his voice. His voice sounded like someone took a saw to a violin. I would remember that voice."

"Tell me about the flit," I said.

Shay shrugged again. "I don't know her name if that's what you mean. She seemed shy. She only talked to Gamelyn. Half the time, I didn't even know she was around. She liked to curl up on his shoulder under his hair. She was tiny, maybe four or five inches tall."

"What color were her wings?"

"A pale yellow. That's why I didn't always notice her. Gamelyn had such lovely blond hair, like morning sunlight," said Shay.

"And you have no idea where she's from?"

Shay shook his head. "No. Like I said, she only spoke to Gamelyn."

Murdock cleared his throat. "Where were you, Robin?"

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