

Unshapely things

By Mark Del Franco

from Ace Publishing in February 2007

CHAPTER ONE

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 van 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

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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 cold 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 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.

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"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 he 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. It's one of the things 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. "

"Suit yourself. I'll send you the file. " He turned back to the crowd at the barricades. A woman waved. He pretended he didn't notice. Murdock's got those dark eyes that make the ladies swoon and forget about dead bodies laying on the ground. With his angular face and broad shoulders, he's the only guy I know that gets hit on at crime scenes.

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

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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 flashpoints from turning into conflagrations like everybody else did. I may not work in the big power leagues 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 corp. 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 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

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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 at 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 diversion anytime, day or night.

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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 a 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 talismanic 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 workbooks, grimoires, rune dictionaries, pronunciation guides for fourteen languages--three of them technically dead and one that never was--and a complete set of first edition 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.

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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 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 that 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? "

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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's 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 the 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 Dananns.... " He left the rest unsaid, surprisingly.

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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 Danann 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 in 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 'til 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. "

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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 for which 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 folks 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, if I were less than a foot tall, I'd be careful where I went, too.

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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 access 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 pretty much have a stranglehold on the construction business in the area, though, so I guess it all 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 Weird 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. Morning is not the favorite time of day in this part of town. It's after lunch that business starts to pick up. 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

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think of this psycho 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 hardcover 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

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unwashed elf hit me like a fist in the face. It's a lot like burnt cinnamon and not remotely pleasurable.

A curtain behind the back corner parted, and the amazing immensity of Belgor himself shifted his way ponderously 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 age in elves and didn't bother to pluck the bristly hairs that grew out the ends. Not surprising from someone who was hygienically 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

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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 charged 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 pull 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. An odd 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 heart stones, had let the information leak out, only Murdock that knew the stones were selenite.

"When was this? "

He pursed his lips. "About six months. I remember it was before Yule. 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. "

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"Call me if he shows up again. I'll see if I can help. I'll stop by again. "

"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, he would keep his eyes open. How he knew about the stones at the crime scenes confirmed his knack for information. Sometimes I just trusted him, which is why Murdock gets so irritated.

End of Chapter One.

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Available in bookstores February 2007