

## Chapter One

Detective Lieutenant Leonard Murdock's car was parked out front, so I knew which building had the dead body in it. That was the way of the Weird, my little corner of Boston, where the fey go when they have nothing left. And when they had nothing left, they ended up dead, in a building without an intercom or an elevator or someone to stick around and talk to the police.

Leo and I went back a few years now. I often wondered if he regretted meeting me. I've caused him a lot of pain, none of it intentional, but painful nevertheless. I spent time trying to figure out how to make things up to him, but I worried I might never be able to. Despite that—and the past—we remained friends, and when Leo called asking for help, I showed up. I walked up the stairs, spiraling around the open atrium that led to the sixth floor. The air had the tang of bleach and turpentine and blood. No one opened their doors as I passed, caution winning out over curiosity. No interest meant no involvement, and no involvement more often than not was the best course in the Weird.

The last door on the top-floor landing stood open, somber yellow sunlight cutting through the darkness of the apartment interior. I paused on the threshold, sensing Murdock's body signature and that of an elf. Murdock's signature was faint, a touch in the air from his passage. The elf's signature saturated the area, the gradual accumulation of essence from spending time in one place.

"Back here, Connor," Murdock called out.

He did stuff like that now, sensing things he couldn't see, like my presence in another room. When I met Leonard Murdock, he was a detective lieutenant with the Boston Police Department, and he was human. He was still a cop, but not quite human anymore. Recent events had unearthed secrets about his family—and me—that revealed that the Murdock siblings were half-druid, the children of a human father

and druid mother. As his druidic abilities appeared, Murdock took them as a matter of course. He had a body shield, which was hardened essence, and increased strength, which was part of the genetics of a druid. As the spell that had hidden his abilities for years faded away, he seemed to be picking up a bit of a sensing ability. His wasn't a refined ability—even full druids didn't always have full use of their abilities—but Murdock was learning how to use what he had.

I moved through the spartan living room—a simple couch with two armchairs, all castoffs from some other time and place. In the corner was a kitchen setup, small studio-style appliances, a drain board with a single plate and mug. Like most living space in the Weird, it was interior decorating via street finds. A fine layer of dust covered everything else, not quite dirty, but untended.

Murdock didn't look up as I entered the bedroom, cool professionalism on his face, dark eyes hiding his thoughts. He wore his standard work outfit of khakis, pressed white shirt, and understated tie. With a small flashlight, he studied the items on the nightstand. He had an analytical mind that served him well in his job, yet he didn't use that same approach with his personal life. He didn't anguish about the day-to-day crud that came his way. That attitude was why we worked so well together. I couldn't stop thinking about crud.

The elf lay on the bed, a sheet pulled to the waist and exposing a naked torso. A quick read of his body signature told me he was the apartment's occupant. He was a man in prime physical condition, skin sculpted with muscle but riddled with old scars. His relaxed face gave the impression that he was asleep, as if oblivious to the black arrow embedded in his chest, clean shot to the heart. Between the lack of odor and the evident body signature, he hadn't been dead that long.

"Looks like he died in his sleep," I said.

"They say that's the best way to go," Murdock said. With a gloved hand, he picked up a bottle and read the label.

"Where's your team?" I asked.

He replaced the bottle and flicked through scraps of paper. "On the way. Priority delays."

Priority delays were standard on these days. Everyone was short-staffed—the Boston police, the Guild, and the Consortium. Riots and terrorist attacks will do that to a city’s administrative functions, and Boston had seen more than its share of both in the past few months. The most immediate cause was the destruction of the Boston Guildhouse, headquarters of the diplomatic arm of the Seelie Court, which ruled over the Celtic fairies. A number of Teutonic elves had died in the building collapse, which tied up personnel from the Teutonic Consortium, the Guild’s counterpart and ruling body of the elven people. That left the Boston police to fend for itself, dealing with an anxious human population and not a few fringe elements taking advantage of the disarray. Hence, priority delays.

“Who called it in?” I asked.

“Street worker. She hadn’t seen him in a while and wondered if he needed some of her expertise,” he said.

“I didn’t notice any street worker when I came in,” I said.

“She’ll call if she remembers anything,” he said

“You let her go?”

He picked up a wallet. “Believe it or not, Connor, I have a few longtime sources down here I can trust.”

That was a little bit of an ouch. Murdock and I started working together because I could provide a perspective on the fey in the Weird that a human cop might miss. Sometimes I forgot that didn’t mean Murdock didn’t know how to do his job. “Any signs of entry?” I asked.

“None. Door was unlocked when I arrived,” he said.

I leaned over the body for a better look at the wound. Elves used arrows as their weapon of choice. Arrows were hard to trace unless someone was cocky enough to have them made custom. Another advantage was that they could be charged with essence and fired with precision, helpful when one’s ability to control essence-fire wasn’t fine.

“Notice anything funny about the body position?” Murdock asked.

The arrow in the victim stuck through the heart. A residual trace of essence on the arrow shimmered a faint emerald green. “Sheet’s on top of him, so he wasn’t standing with it wrapped around him. If the arrow had been elf-shot, it would have packed a punch when it hit. His body wouldn’t be this composed. He would have gone flying and not landed comfortably laid out on his bed.”

Murdock squatted at the opposite side of the bed to bring his line of sight level with the victim’s chest. He lifted the body on one side, then let it fall back. “Arrow goes through into the mattress. He must have been sleeping. He was stabbed, not shot. “

I pointed at the area around the entry wound. “There’s another telltale right here. Elf-shot forms with a bowfront of essence around the arrowhead. When it lands, the essence hits first and makes a circular burn mark before the arrow pierces the target. This guy’s got some burning, but it’s too small. The victim was likely sleeping, stabbed, then hit with a burst of essence down the arrow shaft to make sure he was dead. Janey should be able to confirm with a pathway analysis.”

Janey Likesmith was the fey specialist down at the Office of the City Medical Examiner. She was good at her job—great, in fact—though underappreciated. She was the lone fey forensics staff member in an agency that did not hold the fey in the highest esteem. The human staff resented taking care of jobs that the Guild or the Consortium should take, so they perceived fey cases as a drain on limited resources. Janey had helped solve more cases than most examiners, so they grudgingly gave her the space she needed.

“I’ll make a note to see her later,” Murdock said.

I checked under the bed. “Are you working a lot of cases together?”

He compressed his lips. “Yeah. Mostly routine.”

When Murdock stood, I noticed that the windows behind him shimmered with security wards. Wards could be made in all shapes, sizes, and materials to perform pretty much any function. Pump something up with essence, add a little directional spell work, and you had a ward. Glass was a strong essence retardant, but it could still break. The fey—at least those with reason enough to be paranoid—created

wards around property entry points. They reflected sight and sound and even enhanced the properties of glass to prevent essence-fire.

I walked around the bed and examined the window casements. The wood was much newer than the rest of the framing, recently installed. It had been charged with essence to create a barrier shield. “I think our victim was a professional.”

“Undercover?” Murdock asked.

I wandered back to the bedroom door. The living-room windows had wards, too. “The apartment’s nondescript, not many personal effects and the security wards on these windows are pretty sophisticated for someone who lives in the Weird.”

“Consortium?” Murdock asked.

I pushed my lower lip out as I considered it. “It’s a reasonable guess. The Consortium has as many spies down here as the Guild does. The guy could’ve been freelance, but it won’t hurt to ask around.”

I stared out the window. A few blocks away, another warehouse rose above its surroundings. A tall tower of wood-and-steel scaffolding stood on the roof, a nest of aged red air-raid sirens clustered together at the top. Murdock and I had found someone hanging from it not long ago. The victim had been someone who had played on too many sides of the game. In the end, no one was on his side.

Whoever the dead elf was, he thought he was doing the right thing for the right reason, even if it might have been for the money. That was the seduction of a life like his. People gave up much, in the hope that they would contribute to something so much more. It didn’t matter which side of the law they were doing it for, at least not at the end. In the end, they either gave up and walked away, or someone made the decision for them.

A squad car pulled up in the street below. Gerry Murdock got out of the driver’s side. No love existed between me and Murdock’s brother. He blamed me for the death of their father. I didn’t kill the man, but through no intention of my own, the entire Murdock family had gotten messed up.

“Gerry’s here. I’m not in the mood for him today. You mind if I skip out the back?” I asked.

Murdock's gaze swept the room. "Yeah, you might as well. The higher-ups are not going to be cutting any consulting checks to you anytime soon. Thanks for the favor."

I knew my consulting days were over. Ever since I lost my abilities, I had been surviving on disability checks from the Guild and the occasional consulting fee from the Boston P.D. The Guild had stopped paying me a few months earlier, and I didn't have the resources to force them to pay me. I figured it was just a matter of time before the police department dumped me, too. It was no surprise.

"Actually, I could use a favor myself. I'm meeting some people at the airport tomorrow and could use a ride," I said.

"Sure." He didn't look up. His tone wasn't enthusiastic. Murdock was having a hard time with my involvement in his life, too. The difference between him and his brothers was that he didn't routinely threaten to beat me up. As much as I would have loved to normalize things with him, dinner would have been asking too much.

A time existed not too long ago when I thought my life was getting back on track. I had given up trying to solve the problem of having no abilities. I had shed my desire to return to the Guild as a top investigator. I even had let go of the anger over the downward turn my life had taken. Yet, here I was again, without many friends or any means of support, with no clear path out of the situation.

"Did you ever feel like your life is going in circles, Leo?" I asked.

He chuckled. "All the time."

"I don't think I have many circles of hell left to go through," I said.

Murdock tilted his head. "You know what people forget about all those circles of hell? They're followed by the spheres of heaven."

I snorted. "And purgatory's in the middle. Heaven's a long way off."

Murdock shrugged. "Patience is a virtue, Connor. It all makes sense in the end."