



By Mark Del Franco  
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## Chapter One

The water cut off in the middle of my shower. Irritation settled over me as I suspected the mayor and the police had taken another drastic step to isolate the neighborhood from the rest of the city. When you lived surrounded by barricades and security patrols, a little paranoia happened to the most optimistic person—and I wasn't that person. As I toweled off soap and shampoo, reason crept back in. Even if the mayor of Boston blamed the local population for the recent catastrophes plaguing the city, shutting off basic utilities would be a recipe for disaster. I chalked up the situation to either a building-management problem or a water-main break. Which was the point at which Murdock's number lit up the caller ID on my cell. Murdock rarely called during the day unless I was helping him on a case. When he convinced his bosses to consult Connor Grey, it wasn't likely to be a pretty situation.

In the Weird, the bad stuff went down at night. People fought. They screwed up. They died—sometimes by accident, sometimes by their own hands. And murder happened, too, more frequently in this end of town than any other. That's why the

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neighborhood had the reputation it did. One of the reasons anyway. As a detective lieutenant with the Boston P.D., Murdock tried to contain the worst of it.

When the problems spilled into fey territory, Murdock called me for advice. I didn't mind. I needed the money. Despite having limited abilities these days, I was still a druid. I knew the foibles of most kinds of fey—understood their abilities, their politics, and their perspectives. Even after a hundred years of coexistence, humans had trouble understanding what motivated even fairies or elves to do the things they did, let alone all of the vast subspecies of fey. There was no denying that manipulating essence caused all kinds of trouble. But, it wasn't "magic" like the non-fey thought. It was a system. It had rules. It could be understood. And Murdock wanted to understand it.

I flipped open the phone. "I'm guessing this isn't a social call."

Murdock's low chuckle prickled in my ear. "Oh, I don't know. We can always go for a beer after and guess where the missing head is. You'll probably want to shower first though."

"I just had half a shower, and now there's no water," I said.

"I've got plenty of water for you. Summer and B Street. Can you make it?"

"Be there in a minute." I closed the phone. The intersection was a brisk walk from my apartment. By "brisk," I meant "frigid wind that would be in my face no matter which direction I faced." The neighborhood of the Weird was bounded by water—the harbor to

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the east, Fort Point Channel to the north, and the Reserve Channel to the south. Several long avenues stretched from one end to the other and acted like wind tunnels. Winter was the worst for it, making December my least favorite month, even if it did have Yule.

I put on a gray hoodie and a knit cap, then my leather jacket—the streamlined, padded one, not the old biker. I had lost the biker jacket in TirNaNog a few weeks earlier. Since I might have accidentally destroyed the Land of the Dead in the process of escaping it, I couldn't complain too much about the jacket. TirNaNog was weighing on my mind a lot lately. Briallen, one of my former mentors, tells me I brood too much and blame myself needlessly. Easy for her to say. She didn't apparently destroy another entire dimension that finally opened after being blocked for over a century.

A blast of cold air greeted me on the street. Of course. I bunched my hands in my jacket pockets, hunching forward as I walked. Clouds covered the sky, a flat white expanse that threatened snow but refused to deliver. When tourist brochures called Boston a walking city, they never mentioned winter.

I cut the corner to Old Northern Avenue into more wind. To the north, the financial district's skyscrapers clustered along the edge of the harbor, hard exteriors of glass and brownstone and steel that stared down on the Weird as if they didn't quite approve of the jumble of warehouses and failed office buildings that sat across the channel.

The Weird was a neighborhood of the lost and forgotten as much as a place where

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people escaped whatever passed for their lives elsewhere. Sometimes that was a good thing, a fresh start in a place that challenged them to get their acts together. Sometimes it was a bad thing, a sad end for people ground down by circumstances beyond their control. It was where I lived and hoped and dreamed, like so many others did.

Anyone with a dream of leaving the Weird would be sorely disappointed these days. A series of fey-related disasters had led the city to clamp down on the neighborhood, declaring travel curfews for those who lived there—but not, of course, for those who visited—and instituting roadblocks to keep people inside—but not, of course, anyone who lived elsewhere. Never mind that the local population had little to do with the essence-related meltdowns that had nearly destroyed the city of Boston. As far as humans were concerned, essence manipulation was magic, magic came from the Weird, and magic was destroying their comfortable way of life

Anyone with a passing experience of the local scene would have noticed how things had changed. Morning—even late morning—had never been the busiest time of day along Old Northern Avenue. Except for a few diner-type storefronts that served breakfast, the shops didn't even open their doors until nearly noon. Yet police cars were stationed every few blocks along the street, and the bridge had a roadblock. Overhead, black-clad Danann fairy agents from the Guildhouse flew sweeps from rooftop to rooftop, the morning sun glittering off their chrome helmets. Security was even tighter at night,

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at least along the main drag. Martial law was on everyone's lips, and not in an admiring way unless they were on the other side of the channel.

I expected to find Murdock on the corner of Summer and B, and with all the police cars, I almost gave a pass to the B Street Headworks. The yellow police tape across the front door drew my attention back. The building had started out life as a machine-shop warehouse long before the mysterious Convergence that brought the fey folk from Faerie into modern reality. By the early twentieth century, the warehouse had been abandoned. It remained shuttered as the neighborhood began to attract elves and fairies and every other species of fey that couldn't find a home elsewhere. That was when the trouble started.

There's a reason sewers smell the way they do. Down in the Weird, there were even more. Things get flushed, dumped, drained, dissolved, and disincorporated and ended up in a noxious stew percolating and meandering its way under the street to the treatment plant across the harbor. The Fey Guild helped the city of Boston install ward baffling in the main lines all over the city to capture potions and spells made with essence that found their way into the sewer system. The old building found new life as a headworks to collect anything charged with essence before it ended up in the harbor.

It wasn't a perfect solution. Every once in awhile, someone's porcelain went flying and landed on the news. Of course, everyone blamed the Weird because that was where

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the headworks was, but the fey lived all over the city. Just because they looked and smelled nicer on Beacon Hill didn't mean they didn't use the services of the water department.

I flashed my newly minted Boston P.D. identification pass. If anyone looked closely, they'd see that, one, I wasn't a Boston police officer, two, it was a tarted-up travel pass to and from the Weird and, three, my hair was not at its best the day they took my picture for it. Murdock pulled a string or two to get it for me. Being the son of the Boston police commissioner helped that way. Of course, if Commissioner Scott Murdock knew I had the ID, he'd blow a gasket. He's never liked me much and, since I've inadvertently been involved in every recent catastrophe, I was even lower on his list than usual.

The B Street Headworks was one of those places I passed, maybe paused to admire the Richardson Romanesque architecture, but otherwise without giving much thought to it. I had no idea what I had been missing. A wall of glass met me inside, large panes stretching floor to ceiling and the length of the building. Essence didn't travel well through glass, so the wall served as a protection barrier against what happened on the other side. And on the other side was an infernal wonder. Huge iron pipes snaked and twisted through a wide-open space filled with enormous stone cylinders. Conveyor belts rose and fell through a maze of smaller pipes. Steam rose from vats and release valves, hazing the lighting to misty gray and sallow yellow. Catwalks serviced the three-story

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height. Solitary fey in all their strange and beautiful-scaled and feathered and oddly colored skin glory lounged against the railings.

Solitary fey didn't fall neatly into any of the major species categories. The Celtic and Teutonic fey each had their own varieties, and the Weird was home to most of them. Scorned and feared for their appearances and odd abilities, it didn't surprise me that so many worked one of the most thankless jobs in the city. They peered down at a group of police officers clustered near one of the large conveyor belts on the main level.

The stench hit me as I let myself through a glass door. My body shields activated, patches of near-invisible hardened essence that protected me from essence attacks and reduced the effect of physical ones. They had covered my entire body once, and I could turn them on and off at will. Now they were fragmented, the result of an essence fight that had destroyed most of my abilities and left a black mass in my brain that hurt like hell whenever I tried to use what remained. I could still activate the shields, but doing it on demand was painful. Perversely, they reacted on their own now, which didn't hurt as much but ratcheted up my anxiety until I could figure out why they had gone on.

As I walked to where Murdock stood with the other officers, my essence-sensing ability kicked in. My vision filled with streams and clouds of light, the machinery and pipes glowing in multicolored hues of essence. The B Street Headworks acted as a giant filter, pulling essence out of the water and sewage before it reached the more mundane

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headworks that sifted garbage out of the system. The way some of the essence resonated with indigo and violet indicated a nasty brew that was probably what had triggered my body shields in the first place.

Murdock wore a B.P.D parka instead of his usual camel-wool long coat. To the amusement of several workers, the police officers had face masks on. Murdock glanced up from a trough that ran the length of the room. The top of the trough was covered with a glass lid that had quartz wards embedded in it to control the essence inside.

“Hope you haven’t had lunch,” Murdock said. A putrid stew filled the trough, murky gray water covered with an oily slick. Things floated in it, some of it unrecognizable, but way too much perfectly identifiable. Strands and eddies of essence flickered, more than the natural ambient essence all organic things had. Things intentionally infused with essence pooled in the water, precisely what the B Street Headworks was designed to filter. Unfortunately, one of those things was a male body. He bobbed on the surface, his brawny, naked torso slicked with black grime. His suede trousers had snagged on a seam in the trough and pivoted lazily against the side. To up the horror quotient, his head was missing.

“This has to be one of the most revolting things I’ve ever seen,” I said.

Murdock raised an eyebrow. “One of? I don’t think I want to ask.”

A flash of pink in the dim atmosphere caught my attention. Stinkwort walked along



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the tiny edge of another trough fifteen feet up, peering into its contents. For a diminutive fairy who topped out at twelve inches tall, a one-inch-wide path was not a problem. Stinkwort preferred to go by the name Joe, for obvious reasons. I've known him since before I could walk and talk, so I tended to think of him by his real name. "Where the hell did he come from?"

Murdock followed my gaze to Joe. "He likes odd smells."

I nodded. "It's why he likes your car."

"And your apartment," Murdock said.

"Touché, my friend. A lie, but touché."

Murdock gestured at the body. "We haven't found the head. The plant manager says this is an essence trough for outflow from the gross material filter. The body shouldn't have come through unless it had some kind of essence charge on it. That's why I called you."

I leaned forward. Druids had receptors in the nose and eyes that sensed essence in ways no one understood. My essence-sensing ability had become more heightened in the past few months, far beyond the ability I'd had before the accident. My vision sensing was more acute, too. I didn't have to be near something now to sense essence—I could see it. The essence coming off the body explained why it had ended up in the trough. The corpse radiated differently than normal essence. The filters must have had a fail-safe

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# unperfect souls

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to kick out anything it didn't know how to categorize. "He's Dead, Murdock."

Murdock pursed his lips and nodded slowly. "Excellent deduction, Connor. I wasn't sure what to make of the missing head."

I laughed at the dry tone in his voice. "Seriously. He's Dead, as in TirNaNog Dead. You've got a dead Dead guy."

A few weeks earlier, the veil between the world of the living and the dead opened on Samhain, the holiday that the non-fey world called Halloween. Under any other circumstances, that would have been cause for celebration, since none of the veils between here and Faerie had opened in over a century. But things went wrong—seriously wrong—and the veil slammed shut. When that happened, the Dead from TirNaNog who happened to be on the living side of the veil became trapped here. They were supposed to vanish at daybreak. They didn't.

Murdock's face went flat. The Dead were not his favorite topic. He was raised in a Roman Catholic home. Mass on Sunday was not a chore for him, but a duty and desire. Fitting the Dead into his worldview was becoming more and more difficult for him. "Why would someone kill a Dead guy?" he asked.

I shrugged. "For all the same reasons someone would kill the living. When you've got an axe to grind against someone who died, I imagine the temptation to kill him again is pretty high when you catch him walking around again. Especially since you can do it over

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and over. The Dead regenerate the next day. Which brings me to this guy. Whoever did this wanted him to never come back. That's why the head is missing. Since the head is where the fey believe the soul abides, if you remove the head, you acquire the power of the soul, and the Dead guy can't regenerate. I'd get as much info off the body before dawn as you can. Without the head, it's going to disincorporate into its elemental essence and vanish forever."

Murdock looked even less pleased. Resurrection outside his Church was not something he liked to discuss either. "How am I supposed to find a motive for killing a Dead guy who might not have even died this century?" he muttered, more to himself than to me.

Joe fluttered down and landed on the trough. He peered through the glass at the body, twitching his nose and shaking his head. "I think he died two and a half hours ago."

"You can sense that by looking at him?" Murdock asked.

With a sage expression, Joe pointed. "Of course. See? His watch stopped. It's probably not waterproof." A murmur of chuckles rippled through the nearby officers. Murdock cracked a smile. Joe was fascinated by clocks and watches, mostly because he didn't see their point.

"Are you going to ask the Guild to look into this?" I asked.

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Murdock scratched his nose. “Not enough reason, not with everything else going on. They’ve already said they take no responsibility for any Dead from TirNaNog unless they become a threat to the city.”

“Well, at least that makes their position clear for a change.” The Fey Guild theoretically handled fey crime in the city. It failed, mostly owing to politics and indifference. If you had money or any kind of power, they were right there for you. If not, you didn’t get farther than the lobby—especially now, when the Guild had its hands full trying to keep the local human population pacified in the wake of recent controversies. Their usual lack of interest in the Weird had become intense interest—the negative kind. With the mayor and governor pointing their fingers at the Guild, the Guild looked for someone to take the blame and pointed several rungs down the ladder at the Weird. The Dead weren’t even on the ladder.

An officer stepped closer to Murdock. “They’ve cleared the main intake. No head. They can isolate this channel, but they need to get the rest back online.”

Murdock nodded. “Tell them okay. And call Janey Likesmith over at the morgue and tell her that Connor Grey says we’ve got a dead Dead guy. She’ll need to work fast. Make sure you say dead twice like that.”

Janey was a Dokkheim elf and the only fey person who worked for the Office of the City Medical Examiner. She didn’t have much support down at the OCME, but these days

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she was the last hope for fey murder victims the Guild abandoned. She was sharp and intuitive. I doubted we'd get very far on the body, but if there was anything to know, she'd find it.

Murdock raised an eyebrow. "I hear there's plenty in the budget to control crime in the Weird at the moment. You want in on this?"

I stared down at the body. If another Dead guy did the deed, I didn't know if I cared all that much. The Dead had their own rules that the living didn't understand. But if the killer wasn't Dead, that meant a nut job was running around the Weird, and we already had too many of those. "Yeah, I'm in."

A long screech went up as machinery restarted. The air shifted, its foul odor changing to a new foul odor as water rushed through pipes. Conveyor belts rumbled to life with a metallic rattling, and a heavy static tickled along my skin as essence filters resumed their work. Two men in headworks hazmat suits approached the trough, body shields hardened and augmented as they lifted the glass to retrieve the body.

A shimmer of essence scraped across my mind, signaling that someone fey was about to use a mental communication called a sending.

*He's not the first.*

My gaze swept the catwalks. The solitaires who had been watching had returned to work. No one made eye contact with me, and I had no idea which direction the sending

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had come from. Solitaries didn't trust many people, authority figures least of all. I may not be a member of the Guild anymore, but people knew I used to be one of its best druid investigators.

Whoever did the sending didn't trust me either.