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Nighttime in the city made me feel at home no matter where I was. The sun goes down, and the city changes, becomes its own dark twin, rich with mystery and surprise. The interplay of light and shadow, the garish and the mundane, produced stark contrasts that changed my perspective of the world. Details stood out in the pooled light of streetlamps that were lost clutter in the daytime. Faces became cloaked with meaning or menace. Mysteries deepened, too, the unnoticed receding into the unseen.

Maybe that was my way of romanticizing the Weird, the decrepit Boston neighborhood I called home. It looked abandoned during the day, the tired dumping ground for the shunned fey—the fairy folk from Ireland and Germany. At night it came alive, filled with humans and fey folk hustling for one thing or another, partying too hard, staying too long, and pushing themselves to the limit. At night it came alive, which means that sometimes someone ended up dead.

That's what Convergence brought to the world. When Faerie merged with modern reality a century ago, it brought not only fey people but all of their hopes and hatreds. Dannan fairies ruled from Tara in Ireland and looked down at all the rest of the Celtic fey. Teutonic elves occupied significant parts of old Germany and threatened war at every turn. Caught between them were the refugees from the old ways—the solitary fey that didn't fit in with the mainstream. They spread across Europe and the Atlantic, hoping for a better life than they had known. Instead, they ended up in places like the Weird while the usual power players moved into the upper echelons of human society.

I had spent my professional career seeking justice for the fey. Connor Grey was the go-to guy for crimes involving fairies and elves or any other fey species. I was one of the best—maybe the best—investigators the Fey Guild ever had. The Guild was the

administrative arm for High Queen Maeve at Tara and leader of the Celtic fey. When I lost my druid abilities in a fight with an elven terrorist, I got kicked to the curb. That's when I learned the Guild cared only about the Guild, the rich, and the powerful, and I had been a pawn in its political schemes without realizing it. I spent a year moping, watching my friends, my home, and my money disappear. For another year, I helped the Boston police department solve crimes that the Guild could not care less about—crimes against the weak and the powerless rungs of fey society. I didn't help the Guild or the police anymore, not really. Now I did favors. That was a kind way of saying no one wanted to give me official sanction. I had screwed up a lot of plans for a lot of powerful people in the last year. Now, I helped people I trusted and hoped that my trust wasn't misplaced.

Eorla Kruge Elvendottir was one of those people. She had tried to find a way to unify the Celtic and Teutonic fey and failed. She defied her cousin, the Elven King, and broke away from his rule. With her own court in the Weird, she vowed to take care of anyone who needed it and leave ancient rivalries behind. When she received reports that people were going missing and a strange blue light marked their disappearance, she asked me to look into it.

I had spent the evening chasing rumors, loud noises, and flashes of light. The light came from essence, the energy that bound everything in the world together. As a druid, I sensed the nuances of essence and could recognize things by their unique signatures. Except hunting essence in the Weird was an exercise in frustration. With so many fey living here, sorting out trails was a painstaking process. I was good at it, but tonight wasn't successful. Whatever was causing the disappearances was as elusive as my reputation.

I was on my way home when I spotted a Boston police car parked beside a pile of broken concrete. The Tangle lay beyond, the section of the waterfront that made the rest of the Weird safe and secure by comparison. This end of the neighborhood was a burned-out husk, the epicenter of a night of fire and riot a few months earlier. Little remained of the businesses that had managed to survive. Where the Tangle was a nest of intrigue and danger, the area next to it had become a wasteland of nothing. Even electricity was spotty—a few streetlights remained standing, but the buildings were clothed in darkness

without even a hint of a squatter's candle. The hard white light of an arc lamp made finding the crime scene easy.

A building had once been where I stood but had collapsed into a heap of rubble from the heat of fire. An unsecured strip of crime-scene tape fluttered in the wind. I climbed over the first pile of soot-stained bricks and brittle mortar. Light shone from behind the next pile, dark shadows cutting through the beam of the arc light as people passed in front of the lamp. I threaded along a narrow wedge of space too filled with debris to be called a vacant lot.

“Something about not crossing a police line not apply to you, Grey?”

The dark shape of a uniformed police officer stepped into view from the side of the pit. Officer Gerard Murdock directed his flashlight at me, forcing me to turn away. “Hey, Gerry.”

He moved closer. “I asked you a question.”

I tried to squint past the beam of light. I knew Gerry—I knew all the Murdocks—through their brother Leo, a homicide detective with the Boston police force. Gerry's tone didn't sound like he was joking. “Eorla asked me to check things out, Gerry. What's going on?”

He had his hand on his holstered gun. At least, I thought it was holstered. “I don't care what some trumped-up elf queen wants. Get out of here before I get clumsy.”

To be kind, Gerry had what might be described as an anger-management problem. His father—who had been police commissioner—was murdered under odd circumstances, and Gerry wasn't happy the case had not been resolved yet. “I'm just doing my job, Gerry.”

“Do it someplace else,” he said.

I held my hand up to block the flashlight beam. “I'm sorry about your father, Gerry, but I didn't kill him. You know everything that happened that night. I know you read the report.”

He inched closer. “Yeah, well, of the people who were there, two are dead, one's in a coma, and you used to sleep with the other. Excuse me if I'm having a hard time with your credibility.”

For months now, I had been letting his attitude slide. His father was dead. I wasn't lying when I said I didn't do it, but I did have an unwitting role in the events that led to it. It made me feel guilty, so between that and respecting his grief, I took the taunts and accusations. "Gerry, I told the truth. When Manus ap Eagan wakes up from his coma, he'll confirm it."

He sneered. "Really? He's going to confess to murder? That I'd like to see."

Except for their father, I liked the Murdocks. I was getting tired of tiptoeing around Gerry's temper and tired of him. "Yeah, well, I don't see you so quick to confess to murder."

Gerry dropped his flashlight and grabbed me by the front of my jacket. He bent me back, keeping me off-balance. "You listen to me, you punk bastard. I don't give a damn about you. You want a bullet in the head, you keep talking."

I smirked. "You wouldn't be the first Murdock to shoot me."

I read his body language wrong and didn't see the arm moving. He punched me in the face, his fist sliding off my cheekbone. I pushed him off me, and we stumbled away from each other. He pulled his gun.

"I miss something important, Gerry?"

Detective Lieutenant Leonard Murdock stood on the pile of bricks I had come down. If it wasn't for Leo, I would have died now and then. I've returned the favor. We were gym buddies first, then work partners, then friends. Why he stuck by me after the mess I brought into his life baffled me, but it meant a lot. With his hands in his pockets, Leo stared down at his brother. Gerry glared at him, then at me. He holstered the gun and stalked off. Leo picked his way down the pile. "I see you're making friends as usual."

"I didn't start it," I said.

"I didn't say you did, Connor. Gerry's been a little temperamental lately," he said.

I touched my fingers to a tender cheekbone. Nothing felt broken, but the eye would darken by sunup. "A little? He hit me, Leo. Why the hell isn't he on desk duty? He shot Moira Cashel."

Moira was the reason Scott Murdock, the police commissioner, was dead. He was going to kill her and ended up shooting me by accident. Gerry killed her during the riot

that happened afterward. Leo and I walked toward the crime scene. “The force is shorthanded. All internal investigations are on hold.”

“You need to talk to him, Leo. I didn’t kill your father,” I said.

He looked tired. I didn’t blame him. “I know. I will. Why was he in your face anyway?”

“Eorla asked me to check out some disappearances around the Tangle, and I ran into this on my way back. Gerry wasn’t happy to see me.” Eorla Elvendottir had stopped the riot and brought calm to the neighborhood, at least calm by the Weird’s standards. In the process, she broke away from the Elven Court and set up her own, making the Weird her particular area of protection. The human government was having a little problem with that. It didn’t get the connection between Eorla’s standing up for the Weird and the fact that humans did little to protect the people down here.

“Then we’re both here to work. I’ll talk to Gerry. Stay out his way for a while,” he said.

Some terrible things had happened to Murdock—to all the Murdocks—because of me. Leo told me he wasn’t going to hold them against me. He said that what had happened might have been my fault in a sense, but I wasn’t to blame. Other things, other people, had their parts in it. Knowing I wasn’t to blame didn’t help my guilt. People were dead, people Murdock cared about. I was part of it and didn’t know how to fix that. At least Leo believed me about what had just happened with Gerry. Even with a bruise forming under my eye, I had to let it go and let him handle it. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

I wasn’t the only person Eorla had sent to monitor that the Boston police did its job without prejudice. Across the pit, a red-uniformed elf stood out like a signal beacon against the pale gray sky, one of Eorla’s men. Near him, a thin tree fairy, her skin a pale gray, hair a thick-layered mat, shuffled along the ground.

Down in the shallow hole, the dark figure of Janey Likesmith busied herself around a dead dwarf. A Dokkheim elf, Janey was the sole fey staffer at the Office of the Chief Medical Examiner. I admired her dedication. The fey cases the Guild didn’t want landed on her desk, and since the humans didn’t know what to do with them, she had to handle them alone. After the insanity that had almost burned down the Weird, she had more than her share of bodies to sort through. The Guild gave token help, and the OCME

focused more on the human remains its staff knew how to handle. Janey needed a break, but I didn't see one coming anytime soon.

She had spread a small tarp a few feet from the body; her travel bag, from which she withdrew instruments and laid them at the ready, was open. The police officers at the next crime-scene tape let me pass under without hassle. I picked my way down the slope. Janey smiled at Murdock before she looked at me, the cool night air steaming her breath from her mouth. "Happy Yule."

I returned the smile as I crouched next to her. "A few months late."

She kept the smile. "I haven't seen you since the beginning of the year. Despite everything that's going on, Connor, the return of the light is something to look forward to. That's what Yule is for."

All the fey celebrated Yule with variations on the basic theme of renewal in celebration of the days getting longer. The Teutonic fey focused on peace and the future. I didn't know the specifics of Janey's Dokkheim clan, but peace wasn't a bad thing to hope for. "You're right. Happy Yule."

The dead dwarf didn't look like he had found much peace and happiness. He knelt on gravel, hands slack to either side and his head dropped back. Milky eyes the shade of raw oyster stared at the sky, and his mouth gaped in horror or shock. As I shifted closer to the body to search for any obvious wounds, the black mass in my head pulsed low and steady, like a headache coming on, or—more accurately—a bigger headache. I always had a headache.

The black mass plagued me. MRI scans showed a dark shadow in my brain but nothing tangible. A spell feedback during a fight had left the mass behind, and it had damaged my ability to manipulate essence.

At first, the mass gave me headaches. Then it started to move around, change shape, and hurt like hell. Not long ago, the mass changed again, seeming to have a will or purpose of its own. Sometimes it extended from my body in a way I didn't understand, but its effect was clear. It drained essence from whatever it touched, and if it touched people, it could kill them. I could kill them. There was no separating me from it in the eyes of the world. Whatever happened to the dwarf caused the dark mass to react.

Janey set thermometers around the body to get base readings. “I don’t think he’s been here long. No obvious animal damage, and he’s still in rigor. Hard to tell with a fey death, though. If essence is involved, it complicates the physical readings. Plus, this pit creates its own microclimate. We’re out of the wind, so the temperature will scale differently in here.”

“Isn’t this a bit late for you?” I asked.

She scribbled a note on her pad: the time of my arrival and where I entered the pit. “I heard the call as I was going off shift and came out to get it done. I would’ve gotten the call anyway. Everyone’s backed up.”

What she didn’t say is that no one from the OCME would have responded unless no other crimes were happening—a rarity—and her job would have been that much harder with a processing delay.

At the lip of the pit, the ash fairy huddled on the ground, her head twitching from side to side. To the non-fey, she appeared to be a crazy person sniffing the ground, but the fey recognized the behavior as sensing for the trail of someone. Indentations in the sand led up the slope near her. “Has anyone been that way? I think we have footprints.”

Janey grabbed her camera. “Good eye. I’m the only one that’s been down here.”

We climbed out of the pit the way we had come down and circled toward the indentations. The ash fairy peered at me from beneath her dark tangle of hair, then shuffled back as I approached. She pointed a long, pale arm toward the ground. “Dead earth. Doesn’t feel right.”

All living things emanated essence, the energy that keeps the Wheel of the World turning. Tree fairies were attuned to their clan trees and the earth. Some fey sensed essence as druids did, saw it as shapes of color with a secondary vision that human science hadn’t figured out. People left traces of essence on whatever they touched, even in the air. The longer they remained someplace, the more essence residue accumulated. The footprints leading out of the pit and across the empty lot didn’t shine with essence light. The earth surrounding the prints wasn’t missing its natural essence, making the prints themselves stand out even more. They had no telltale essence signatures that would identify the person or species. Someone powerful was responsible for removing the essence—or responsible for helping someone else do it.

Janey photographed the area. “So this is likely a murder.”

We were in the Weird with a dead dwarf that didn’t get reported by whoever was with him when he died. The odds were slim that he died of a heart attack. I gave her shoulder a squeeze. “I’m going to look around. I’ll let you know if I see anything else.”

She inhaled, resigned. “I’m backlogged, so I don’t know when I’ll get to this autopsy.”

“You always do your best,” I tried to reassure her with a smile.

Murdock skirted the edge of the pit. “Find something?”

“Nothing, actually, and that’s the problem. Essence is missing where it shouldn’t be missing.” From the spot where the footsteps exited the pit, Murdock followed me as I traced the faded spots across the lot.

“I thought everything had essence. How can it be missing?” he asked.

We reached the broken sidewalk and squatted closer to the ground like the tree fairy had done. “Suppressing essence is possible. Powerful fey, like the Danann fairies and the Alfheim elves, can dissipate essence, scrub an area to eliminate any trace of it.”

Murdock turned back toward the pit. “Why would someone that powerful be down in the Weird?”

I pursed my lips. “Why does anyone come down here, Leo? The powerful fey may not live down here, but they do stuff here they don’t want people to know about.”

The blank trail ended on the sidewalk. The area was one of the worst hit from the fires and rioting during the winter solstice. Buildings were left nothing more than their facades, their main structures slumped behind. They needed to be knocked down. That didn’t stop people from picking through the remains for anything valuable. They wouldn’t find much. The intensity of the fires had destroyed everything. I didn’t have much to offer Murdock either, not when the initial clue at the scene was nothingness.

A few blocks away, a burst of blue light lit the sky over the Tangle, the section of the Weird even people who lived here feared because of its deserved reputation for lawlessness. “What the hell was that?” Murdock asked.

I narrowed my eyes as the light faded. The essence was strong enough for Murdock to see it with natural vision. “I’ve been chasing it all night. Witnesses say it’s like a fast-moving cloud that sweeps up people.”



“Anyone killed?”

Death was only a matter of time in the Tangle. “Not yet. Lots of missing, though.”

An awkward silence settled between us. “I thought I’d run into you at the hospital,” I said.

A slight smile creased his face. “Are you spanking me?”

I shifted on my feet. “Sorry. That was passive-aggressive.”

He chuckled. “Yeah. And that’s one of your better qualities.”

I frowned. “I was just asking.”

“Oh, lighten up. Yes, I’ve been to the hospital. Almost every day. Believe it or not, they have morning visiting hours.”

I was on friendly terms with late-night breakfast at dawn. “I hate seeing her like that.”

He sighed. “A silent Meryl is a terrible thing.”

Meryl Dian and I were in a relationship of a sort, but what that sort was eluded me. I didn’t know if it was love or if I didn’t know what love was, but we had something intense going on. During the riots, she’d gotten caught in some kind of spell backlash and had been in a coma ever since. For months, her brain activity had been so minimal, it didn’t even register. All I knew was I missed her terribly and wanted her back.

“We should have lunch,” Murdock said.

We hadn’t done anything as normal as have lunch together in weeks. Despite what he said, it was hard not to feel like he was freezing me out, and I couldn’t say I blamed him. “I’d like that.”

We stepped back as a medical examiner—a human one—arrived. “It never ends, does it, Leo?”

“Nothing lasts forever, Connor. Things won’t always be like this,” he said.

After everything that had happened to him, Murdock could still say something like that. Hope drove him and a faith I didn’t have. I tried to hang on, though. I didn’t think I had a choice. It was either that, or let the bad guys win.