

A FAETFUL ENCOUNTER

Tom Shutt

A Faetful Encounter © 2017, Tom Shutt

All rights reserved under the International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to any actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Warning: the unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in prison and a fine of \$250,000.

A Faetful Encounter

Some nights just change everything in the blink of an eye. Kerrigan was determined not to blink.

I was assured that the night would be a quiet one. That should have been my first warning.

All Hallow's Eve is never quiet in the supernatural world, and even less so in cities where all sorts of bad stuff can go down.

Florida's gators in the sewer have nothing on a troll under a bridge.

Regardless, when the call came in for me to hunt down just such a troll, one of the repeat offenders I've dealt with before, I suited up and strapped in my wand. Holiday or not, I had a job to do.

Chapter One

The headquarters of the Magically Armed Brigade was located smack dab in the center of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love. But if I was feeling anything at the moment, it sure as heck wasn't brotherly love. It was almost the holiday, which every fairy worth their wings knew would spell trouble for the MAB.

Magic was strongest this time of year, as Samhain approached. Our world and the spirit world was most closely aligned during what humans called Halloween or All Hallow's Eve, which tended to bring out all manner of nasty beasts. Technically, they were all equally protected under the ruling of the Solstice Court. But the moment they stepped out of line, they became my problem. And I'd already made a request to have off this holiday weeks ago.

"But why can't I get the time off that I requested?" I growled, putting the question to my chief, Burr Renaulds.

The squat dwarf wasn't a fairy, which was a bit of an oddity, but then, dwarves were immune to fairy magic. So it could never be said that anyone was getting promotions or special treatment based on magical influence over a dwarf.

But spirits be, I wish I could cast a spell on him now and get out of here.

I'd spent a full day in my uniform already, and now that Burr was stonewalling me, it didn't seem like I would be feeling the refreshing breeze of a cool night kissing my skin anytime soon.

"You know how these things are," Burr said, fiddling with his bushy mustache. "Agents are double-booked, assigned to be in two places at once. You're already in this place, and Kendra is away on assignment."

Kendra. My cousin. I had hundreds of them, a toxic side effect of having a lifespan that crossed over centuries. But Kendra had always been a particular thorn in my side with her flakiness.

That flakiness had never extended into her work life before, though, and something told me Burr was trying to pull a fast one on me and cover for her.

But why?

"You're the commissioner for the whole city, though," I said lightly. "If there is an error in arrangements of officers, that falls squarely at your feet."

He grunted noncommittally. "The fact still remains, we need you on this."

“A troll under a bridge? Seriously? That’s where they *live*. You’re basically asking me to evict some poor sap with the intelligence of a toddler. Let him get caught in the river and swept out of the city.”

“This bridge doesn’t cross over a river,” Burr said grimly.

He shuffled a manila folder into his hands and tossed it across the mahogany desk toward me. In spite of myself, I leaned over and picked it up. “The Reading Viaduct,” I read, and then groaned.

“Exactly.”

The Reading Viaduct was a run-down expanse of old railway that wasn’t in used by the city anymore except for the occasional freight cars. It was an eyesore now, one that, as I continued to read down the page, it seemed the humans wanted to renovate and transform into something useful and beautiful.

“A park?” I asked, raising an eyebrow.

Burr nodded, his dirt-brown eyes shrewd as they peered over the desk at me. “The humans are having a surge in good conscience, it seems. Rusted steel is on the way out, and they want to erect a monument to nature in its place, right in the middle of the city. But before they can do that, they can’t have a troll lurking in the shadows nabbing innocent people.”

I felt the blood drain from my face. “So that’s what the problem is. How many so far?”

“Three missing persons reports filed over the past two months. All traveling alone, at night, under the overpass of the bridge.”

“Three strikes,” I muttered.

Burr didn’t even grunt this time. The rules were well known regarding what happened to those who struck out against humans, threatening the supernatural community’s discovery. Murder was reprehensible above all else. If by some stroke of fate these poor humans were still alive, they would undoubtedly have the gruesome experience seared into their memories, a story to tell to their great-grandchildren.

I couldn’t have that, and neither could the MAB.

“When was the last disappearance?”

“Three weeks ago,” Burr grunted, “which is why I’m confident it will happen again soon. The troll’s gonna be hungry.”

Unbidden, the thought of bones cracking, marrow spilling, blood flowing freely from gashes and severed limbs came to mind. I squelched the mental image immediately.

"We don't have many free agents on hand at the moment," he continued, "and you're already here and in uniform."

"About to get off duty –"

"This won't take more than a few hours. Then I swear up and down, left and right, you can take your time off. C'mon, Kerri, this is important."

"*Every* job is important." I sighed. Arguing the point was impossible; at the end of the day, I couldn't disobey a direct order. "And it's Kerrigan, not Kerri."

Burr held his hands up in surrender. "Kerrigan, sorry. Can I count on you to take care of this troll?"

My thoughts shot toward how humans used the same term nowadays – not to describe the fearsome beast that preyed on them from the shadows, but much less frightening online presences who reaped pleasure from needling strangers' delicate sensibilities.

"Yes, sir," I huffed. "You know you can always count on me."

I didn't let on how fatigued I was feeling, how even with the magic enhancements from my armor, my arms felt sluggish in rising to snap off a crisp salute. Instead, my lips formed a smile weary enough to tell him I was tired, but firm enough to assure him I could get the job done. It was always like that for us women in the MAB – walking a fine line that showed we could be capable in the workplace without trampling over the menfolk's fragile masculinity. If Burr only knew just how strong I could be...I would have his job instead of being just another agent.

Or I'd be out of the force entirely.

That was the way the world worked.

"Splendid," Burr said from beneath his whiskers. He gestured to the file still in my hands. "Keep that, and glean any more information from it that you can. Hopefully we can get this whole thing resolved before sunrise."

"Yes, sir."

I rose from my seat, stretched my legs by standing up onto the balls of my feet, and then left the glass-paneled room, channeling all my frustration and fatigue into a purposeful stride. I had a job to do.

Chapter Two

The MAB bunker was expansive like the inside of a warehouse, with plenty of room above me and to the sides as I made my way toward the elevator, but like all fairy buildings, it was nestled deep underground. The city of Philadelphia, home to over one and a half million humans – a truly staggering number, when I considered how much smaller their population had been around even a hundred years ago – didn't have the freshest air, but right now I wanted to feel something other than the filtered oxygen being pumped into the underground compound. I wanted to bask in the glow of the moon and feel the gentle breeze stir through my air like a teasing lover.

After an interminably long ride up in the elevator large enough to hold any manner of supernatural creature – maybe even tonight's troll, if I made it duck – the familiar *ding* announced that I'd reached my destination before the doors slid open.

I was immediately assaulted by a dizzying array of scents and sounds. Sizzling flat heat surfaces nearby prepared cheesesteaks, burgers, and Southeast Asian cuisine, and fryers bearing mozzarella sticks, onion rings, and curly fries weren't much farther. Fried foods were a favorite among us fairies, contrary to a lot of humans' beliefs that we ate exclusively "natural" whole foods like berries and salads.

Give me something greasy, salty, or sweet any day, though, and I'd be your girl.

The Reading Terminal Market had been the perfect place for the MAB to set up headquarters. Not only was the place a veritable smorgasbord of all our favorite foods, but the hustle and bustle almost guaranteed that we could come and go unnoticed, even as I emerged from our front stall – a fully functioning Amish pretzel stand – in full metallic MAB regalia.

Most humans might assume I was doing some sort of cosplay, or an early Halloween costume, but I cast a subtle glamor over myself just in case of any wandering eyes that got too curious. My armor would look like the uniform of a private security outfit. Still conspicuous, but not the kind that you would go up and mess with.

I reluctantly weaved my way through the crowd of hungry marketgoers and pushed through the glass door leading outside, inhaling deeply as cool, crisp city air whisked away the thin sheen of sweat that had started to form on my skin. A breeze caught my hair and dragged a strand across my face, and I tucked it back behind an ear before turning north. That was where the Reading Viaduct lay, abandoned and in disuse.

As predicted, I was given a small berth by the humans I passed. With the exception of several small children, all of them were taller than me, but the uniform they saw warned not to start any funny business. I was little, but fierce.

The moon wasn't quite full tonight, though it hung heavy like an 8-months-pregnant human woman – not quite ready, but too rotund to be ignored. I felt its radiant light washing over me, unhindered by cloud cover, as I marched the few blocks north toward the Reading Viaduct.

Worn stone and creeping moss and vines greeted me when I finally reached a part of the derelict overpass. Shadows clung to the areas beneath its arches like a child unwilling to be parted with its mother. Even with my enhanced vision, my sight couldn't penetrate the dark gloom; something was definitely holding the grim cover in place.

I retrieved my wand from its holster on my leg and held it aloft, willing a surge of magic into the tip of it. There was nobody around to see me, as far as I could tell, but even if there were, either the glamor or the Concord would have convinced them I was merely holding up a cell phone or flashlight to see the way forward.

"Troll?" I called out, not knowing the thing's name. "I know you're here."

Somewhere, I added silently, glancing at the nearest shadows with distrust. My wand sent the shadows scattering like pill bugs from under a disturbed rock, seeking shelter somewhere away from the harsh violet glow. The wand was attuned to my magic, the core of it acting like the perfect channel for my magic to flow from the grip, down through its length, and out the rounded tip. Whorls lit up as I sent another faint pulse of energy to the wand, causing it to emit a flash of light that illuminated the underside of the overpass like an old-fashioned camera bulb going off.

In the instant of illumination, I caught the faintest hint of *something* irregular. Whether it was just garbage resting the wrong way or a more sinister omen, I didn't know. I went in the direction of the irregularity, though, and after a dozen steps, I released another pulse.

Violet light flooded the tunnel – and didn't hit any irregularity.

"Great," I sighed out on a puff of air.

I didn't like the idea of alerting my presence by keeping the wand lit, but underneath the current of fear coursing through my blood, the logical part of me knew that trolls were nocturnal, ambush predators. It would be *beyond* stupid to continue without my wand lighting the space in front of me. The troll would be able to see me regardless, wand or no wand.

“Olly olly oxen free,” I called out, waving the wand to my left to peer into an open crevice in the wall. With the exception of that one jagged line, which concealed nothing more than beer cans and plastic bags, the structural integrity of the old viaduct still seemed intact. “All out in the free. We’re all free.”

Unsurprisingly, the troll didn’t respond.

I trod down a shallow incline, dipping below street level, until it evened out and a cavernous passageway extended off to either side. Openings in the ceiling at regular intervals let in stray beams of moonlight and the castoffs of streetlamps, but for the most part it remained dark as an abandoned tomb.

“My name is Kerrigan,” I said, not bothering to raise my voice. The viaduct was empty and silent, and my regular speaking voice bounced readily down the long, wide halls. Even though I couldn’t see the troll, I suspected the strange shape I’d seen earlier had been its arm, or some other limb. Once it had realized I wasn’t a human, it had made itself scarce, though I had a feeling it was still somewhere nearby, keeping tabs on me. An armed fairy – one that was in its domain on the word of the MAB, no less – wasn’t something to be trifled with, and the troll knew it. “I’m here on behalf of the MAB,” I told it in gentle, soothing tones. “Do you want to tell me who you are, what you’re doing here?”

One of our “occupational enhancement” courses through the department had focused on how taking a conversational tone with perps tended to reduce the likelihood of violent encounters. Putting on a friendlier tone made it harder for them to associate the fairy’s presence with a negative outcome, even if they were in the process of being arrested.

Then, an echoing question reached my ears.

“You...hurt?” the gravelly voice asked, the sound like moist earth rolling over itself in how it rumbled. The way the viaduct’s interior was formed, it was impossible to know if the voice originated from five feet away or five hundred.

It caught me off guard, and I twirled with my wand-light in a tight circle before responding. “Uh...no, I’m not hurt.”

Did the troll think I was hurt? I wasn’t limping or anything.

A growl of disagreement came from far too close – and behind me.

“Not you hurt. *You. Hurt.*”

I frowned at the added emphasis, puzzling over it, and then it clicked. “No, I’m not here to hurt you.”

Not necessarily a lie. If the troll—I thought it was a male, though they all honestly sounded alike—came along quietly, then there would be no need for force.

“But I will defend myself if you push me to,” I added, keeping the wand held neutrally by my waist, neither raised to attack nor lowered in submission.

“Mmm,” came the noncommittal grunt.

What did that mean? It almost sounded like the troll was skeptical of my intentions.

“Do you know why I am here?” I asked slowly.

My gut told me the troll was up ahead of me, manipulating the cavernous echoes in a way that spoke of surprising intelligence. In their own domains, trolls fancied themselves kings and queens, hungry for those they could eat and distrusting of those they couldn't. I wouldn't have been surprised to learn that he had multiple ambush points picked out deeper in the viaduct tunnels.

“No,” the troll said simply.

“No?” I answered doubtfully. “Three humans have gone missing over the past two months. All around this area. You don't know anything about that?”

A moment of silence stretched on into a long minute, and prickly tendrils of apprehension tickled my spine. I was nervous to turn my back on the open section of tunnel where I suspected the troll was lurking, but really, *any* of the inky blackness could have concealed the troll.

Then a subtle breeze stirred, drawing with it the not-so-subtle stench of something with rotting flesh still stuck between its teeth, emanating from off to my right.

I sidestepped left. Wind whistled and fur rippled as a giant hairy arm came swinging down right through where I had just been standing, a vicious swipe that would have sent me flying. Its dark brown, almost black claws reflected back my magic's violet light for all of a second, but it was long enough for a sliver of fear to pierce its way through my heart. That blow could very well have killed me. I wasn't sure how standard-issue MAB armor would fare against the troll's two-inch razor-sharp claws, but I also wasn't keen to find out.

“Stop!” I shouted, projecting all the authority I could into my voice. With my wand clenched in my left hand, I pulled free a ring of dwarf-made metal, similar to the kind that made up my armor. Its single-minded energy leached greedily into the air around my hand, even taking nips at my palm and fingers, though my armor beat it back into submission.

Null energy. Nearly impossible to harness, and deadly when left alone to proliferate. It was common in our prison system, useful for subduing even the most violent of offenders who dared violate fae law. The collar in my hand was a miniaturized version of that same technology, though its effect was in no way subdued. I'd seen it sap the energy of even the hardiest of rogue imps.

As soon as the null collar was primed, I willed more energy into my wand and prepared my eyes for the flash that would follow. A pulse of brilliant purple illuminated the viaduct, and the troll shielded its beady black eyes with both shaggy arms – no more than five feet in front of me. Its face looked squished in, with narrow slits for nostrils on a nose with no ridge, just a barely raised mound centered above its mouth. Rows of teeth were revealed as it snarled against the light, bits of rotten flesh indeed visible between the serrated bony outcroppings.

Did I mention the top of its head was grazing the ceiling?

The ceiling that was twice my height?

This was only the third troll I had ever seen up close and in person; other times had been from seeing static photos while reviewing other agents' case files, or else I simply heard about them through the grapevine.

My awe didn't last long.

The beast recovered much faster than I'd expected, and before I could raise the collar and lunge for its neck, a meaty forearm swung through the air and collided with my left hand, sending the wand flying.

And as the violet light flew away and then disappeared, another pair of lights appeared.

Very clearly the stark, furious green gaze of a full-grown bridge troll.

Chapter Three

Oh frick.

Certain supernatural creatures – supers, in the community – got stronger the closer the world turned to Samhain. A deeper connection between our world and the spirit world meant that magic itself was more potent, and supers who connected deeply with that magical connection got the side benefits of it.

Trolls just happened to be the right amount of brawny and tiny-minded for the universe to have somehow deemed them fit to be *super* strong around the solstice.

This was the worst time to be going toe to toe with a troll.

I have to get out of here, I realized.

But even if I returned home, what would I tell Burr? That I had marched into the viaduct like I owned the place, been knocked on my tuckus by a Samhain-souped-up bridge troll, and was running home with my tail tucked between my legs?

No. I shook my head. There had to be another way to resolve this. I still had the null collar. If I could get the inhibiting metal looped around the behemoth's neck, then I would only have to wait for its strength to be sapped, and then I could take it out of here under my own power.

Killing the troll would be a last-resort measure only.

Disarmed and reeling wasn't a way to enter a fight, though.

"Wand!" I shouted, reaching out my hand. Like a bowling ball shot from a cannon, the slender rod of intricately carved wood rocketed through the air, arcing to meet my new position as I cartwheeled backward from a follow-up strike by the troll. Its fist smashed the concrete I'd just left, sending up shards that clattered against the ground as they landed several feet away.

My wand landed in my outstretched palm and stuck as if the two parts were sided with Velcro, and I curled my fingers tightly around its reassuring firmness. I would not let myself be disarmed again. I was squaring up against a troll, sure, but it was still embarrassing to have happen to an elite member of the MAB.

I raised my trusty tool – its uses were too flexible to label it as simply a 'weapon' – and lavender light burst from its tip, arcing across the space between us and striking the troll in the shoulder, splashing against its thick fur like water from a firehose hitting the side of a cliff.

The beast staggered, but didn't go down like I'd hoped. I had sent a stunning spell its way, enough to send any fairy to their knees. The bridge troll, on the other hand, looked merely annoyed, its green eyes narrowing.

"You hurt," it growled.

Maybe the spell *had* hurt it.

"Glora not hurt," the troll added.

The magic hanging on the tip of my wand fizzed out for the span of a few seconds. What did it mean this time? I had lashed out at it with my wand, true, but only in response to...

In response to what? I asked myself suddenly. I had entered the viaduct with my wand held aloft, magic always at the ready, and even though *I* had always known that I wouldn't kill the thing – Glora, if that was its name – the troll had no such assurances.

It stomped angrily toward me and raised another paw. A splash of moonlight from one of the open overhead panels brought all of its features into sharp relief, and I couldn't deny that, were I a human suddenly being confronted by this shambling mass of fur and muscle, I would have run in the opposite direction screaming my head off.

"Kerrigan not hurt!" I cried, mimicking Glora's broken speech pattern. I uncurled two of my fingers, letting my wand turn, the butt of it swinging outward, so that it was aimed perpendicular to my line of sight with the troll, rather than pointing straight at it. "See? I don't want to hurt you!"

Trolls had a bad reputation for being mindless, bone-gnawing killing machines, but Glora reacted to my words like a puzzled fairy child – still less developed than me or Burr, but maybe intelligent enough to carry on a conversation.

"Not hurt?" it asked, confirming.

I nodded seriously. "I am putting the wand away, see?" With slow, obvious movements, I angled the wand down toward its sheath on my leg. Drawing and sheathing the wand was such a practiced movement that I could do it all from muscle memory, allowing me to keep my eyes trained on the troll. Glora, for his part, remained immobile, watching with a blend of trepidation and limited curiosity. More so curious why this smaller creature was disarming itself in front of him, no doubt.

Then its verdant gaze flicked to the null collar I held in my grip.

Even though I hadn't had the chance to properly use the restraint yet, Glora no doubt assumed it was another weapon.

“In exchange,” I started slowly, “I need something from you.” I lifted the collar. “You need to put this on and let me lead you away from here.”

“No.” The huffed response came without hesitation. No anger laced the single word, just a simple refusal that bore all the weight of the troll’s intentions.

“Glora, you can’t stay here. Preying on these humans is drawing too much attention – the Solstice Court already wants me to –”

“No...preying.”

“I’m sorry?”

“No sorry.” The troll waved a hand. “No...blame.”

I smacked a hand to my forehead. Intelligence of a small child, indeed.

“I meant I didn’t understand,” I explained.

The glowering green-eyed beast paused to take that in, and in the silence that followed, its hot, heavy breaths filled the space with a sound like bellows working at a forge. Finally, it huffed and reached for something at its side. There was the grinding of shifting stone, and then I saw the troll heft a slab of broken concrete longer than my arm as if it were no heavier than a stick.

My fingers twitched for my wand again, but I smothered the knee-jerk reaction.

Glora placed the concrete on the ground between us, then said, “No preying,” while gesturing to its offering.

I glanced between the troll and its concrete, confused. “You don’t eat concrete?”

It stamped its feet, and I took two steps back, retreating out of the wan light cast by the moon coming in through the viaduct’s overhead openings. Glora wasn’t attacking, though; it seemed the troll was gnashing its teeth together as it mimed reaching out to the concrete slab.

“Find,” it rumbled simply in a low voice.

A lightbulb flashed in my head. “You’re a scavenger,” I said suddenly. “You found the bodies and...” I swallowed down the bile that threatened to rise in my throat. “You ate them.”

The troll’s demeanor shifted, a satisfied smile – or threatening grimace – taking over its face. I could still see pale bits of flesh mashed down between the teeth where they would have gnawed on the human remains.

The Solstice Court was unyielding in its judgments on how fae and other supers could interact with humans – killing them was wrong except in self-defense, which seemed an unlikely threat to a bridge troll. It was a bit more of a gray area where *corpses* were concerned, though. That fell more under the category of the natural cycle of life.

I hefted the null collar in my right hand, considering how to proceed.

“I have a solution that I think works for both of us,” I told the troll, hoping its comprehension of English was better heard than spoken. So far, it didn’t seem to be a problem.

The troll shifted on its feet and gestured for me to continue.

I was under no illusion that this beast could kill me without a moment’s hesitation if it chose to. Maybe I could shatter any slabs of concrete it threw my way, but like dwarves, trolls were remarkably resilient to most types of fairy magic. It was why I’d been sent down here rather than a green agent with little field experience under their belt. Not every problem could be solved with the wave of a wand or muttering of an incantation.

“I can guide you out of this area, to a different area altogether. One where you won’t bother or be bothered *by* humans.” I lifted my hand. “But I need to put this collar –”

A piece of rebar-embedded concrete went flying through the air, shattering against the wall several yards behind me and to the right.

I hadn’t moved from where I stood. The troll seemed more intent on scaring me off than causing me true harm, which gave me hope that I could reason with it.

“Lots more food, and fewer scary noises,” I continued slowly. “Do you prefer surf or turf? Fish or cows?”

Glora frowned at the ground, and I realized the troll was thinking. Then it said, “Fish.”

I nodded. “We’ll get you set up by the pier, then, far downstream. But you can’t remain here, okay?”

A pause, and then the troll bobbed its shaggy head, rough hairs scratching against the viaduct’s ceiling.

Now came the moment of truth. I clasped the collar in both hands and pulled so that one ring split into two semicircular halves. Glora flinched, but otherwise remained still as I guided the dwarven metal around the troll’s neck. It magically refitted itself as I pushed the two halves together again, cinching in place as a perfect collar.

Almost instantly, a shudder rippled through Glora's body, and I thought the troll might resist the null magic altogether. But then its muscles relaxed, and I reached out to grab it by the finger – its paws were massive, rough and leathery like a baseball mitt, and it was all my hand could do to not get lost in the troll's palm. Glora tensed and tried to shake off my hold, but the collar was doing its job; there was no more strength there than in the petulant thrash of a small child. It still required concentration to contain, but at least I wasn't being flung against the far wall and plastered there like fresh paint.

"Come on," I said soothingly. "Let's get you set up in your new home."

Chapter Four

I returned to the MAB headquarters under Reading Terminal Market feeling like the queen of the world. Not only had I deescalated a potentially life-threatening situation, but I'd gotten an innocent bridge troll out of harm's way so the viaduct's reconstruction could be continued without harassment.

When I got back to Burr's office, though, he looked as dour as a human child who'd swallowed a bag full of sour gummies expecting something sweet.

"I'm back, sir," I said, trying to cut through the dark mood of his glass-paned office high above the other working fae.

"So I can see," he said gruffly. "And in one piece. How did it go with the troll?"

"Her name is Glora," I informed him.

She'd confirmed her gender during one rather awkward exchange down at the docks where I'd asked her pointblank what I should refer to her as, basically tipping my hand to the thought that she could have been equally a man or woman in my mind up until then.

"She didn't kill any of the humans who went missing; they were dead when she found them." I omitted the part about her still going ahead and eating them. "I magicked up a big trench coat for her to wear when she goes out to eat, and told her to otherwise remain out of sight. I think she likes the serenity of the waves lapping against the riverbank at night."

This finally seemed to relieve my boss, who breathed out a sigh of relief. "So I can put this matter to rest, and assure my human contact that plans for the rehabilitation of the viaduct have the green light again, supernaturally speaking?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir. It was just by chance that the troll was down there to begin with—a totally random encounter."

"What of the missing humans?" he asked.

My heart clenched. "I have reason to believe they are all dead, sir. But Glora assured me that she scavenged from those bodies and didn't kill them herself."

"That adds another troubling question..."

"The question of who killed them?" I ventured. "I was wondering that myself."

“As far as I am concerned, with the troll off the hook, this goes back to being a human case,” Burr said confidently. “Let their police force take care of it.”

I nodded. “If that’s everything, then I’ll take off for the night.”

A glow to my right drew my eyes to the monitor displaying the surface world, Philadelphia’s Reading Terminal Market as dead and quiet as a Midwest graveyard. Creeping amber rays were crawling their way in through the glass doors that lined the sides of the massive ground-floor market.

“Morning,” I amended.

“Yes,” Burr Reynauds grumped. “Take the rest of the day off.”

“The week,” I asserted. “I asked for the week off.”

“Resources are stretched, Kerri.” Then his eyes softened, the crags around them growing less pronounced, and he added, “I’ll see about keeping you at the bottom of the call list for as long as possible. Thank you for taking care of the troll.”

“Absolutely, sir.” I was so relieved to finally be off duty, I didn’t even comment on his informal take on my name.

With that, I turned on my heel and marched in the direction of the elevator, avoiding the searching glances of my fellow MAB agents – the few who were here at this hour, at any rate. The only person who ever seemed to be here at any and all given hours of the day was Burr; the dwarf just would not tire, no matter how long he spent up there in his glass box overseeing the rest of us. I’d never known him to take off for a “sick” day – or week, as was about to be the case with me.

A few days of peace and quiet, stretching straight through Samhain, were just what the doctor had ordered.

I snorted as the elevator doors cinched shut with a mocking whisper.

Yeah, I thought, like that will happen.

The End

Begin the Accidental Fae series in the debut novel,

Murder Sidhe Wrote

www.TomShutt.com

* * *

Sign up for the newsletter for book updates, promotions, and giveaways!

<http://www.subscribepage.com/x1c6b2>

About the Author

Tom Shutt is a New York Times and USA Today bestselling author who writes urban fantasy with generous helpings of humor and a sprig of mystery thrown in for good measure. Once voted in as a close fourth place for junior prom king, he has been resting on his laurels ever since.

He lives on the perpetually green East Coast with some cats, dogs, and a basement full of mistresses. His favorite authors are Jim Butcher, George R. R. Martin, Jonathan Stroud, and Eoin Colfer. He knows how to hide a body from the police, and the research for his novels has likely landed him on a few security watch lists. He enjoys reading, gaming (Halo, Civilization, BioShock, Call of Duty, Minecraft), playing pool, chasing deer, hunting deer, riding deer, and lying about what activities he does with deer. His favorite shows include Supernatural, Game of Thrones, iZombie, and anything created by Joss Whedon.

Read more from Tom Shutt

www.TomShutt.com