

HOOK, LINE, AND SLINKER

TALES OF WEIRD FLORIDA

MARTIN SHANNON

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For my wife, she knows why.

*P*elting rain smeared built-up dirt across the Dad Wagon's windshield. I kicked the wipers up a notch, but that only angered the grime even more. The light turned green, and I coaxed my Mazda through the particularly large puddle that filled the intersection. There was a moment's hesitation by both me and the car as the water came dangerously close to the door seam, but thankfully it stayed below it, and we inched through without stalling.

There's a first time for everything.

The Dad Wagon lurched along, sliding through deeper puddles and doing whatever it could to flirt with automotive disaster.

My phone chirped, and I hazarded a glance at it, knowing full well I was in direct violation of my own family rules.

Don't text and drive—well, it's more like boating in this storm.

There was no picture to go along with the message, but there didn't have to be. I knew who it was from the words alone.

It's happening again, are you close?!

A brilliant flash of thunder lit up the sky and pulled my attention away from the phone—none too soon as the stop light directly in front of me was now red. I slammed on the Dad Wagon's brakes and it groaned in frustration, skidding on the last twenty feet or so of wet road.

Only an idiot drives around in this...

The wind picked up and Tropical Storm Florence sent rain at me sideways, effectively pressure washing a few weeks of yellow-green pollen off the driver's side. I took that moment to fire off a response.

I'm trying, how bad?

Bad, very bad.

The light turned green, and I gunned the Mazda's engine,

pushing it through the deep puddles and down the flooded road toward Lifeway Hospice.

My phone chirped again, but this time I didn't risk looking away from the road, Florence had shifted direction and was sending us off the road—she must have felt the Dad Wagon would have looked much better in one of the many culverts that lined the edge of this narrow stretch of road. I pulled back hard to keep us on the straight and narrow, but didn't stop to check the message.

I already knew what I was dealing with—Umbralings.

I flicked the wipers up to full blast and pushed my car into the heart of the storm—high wind be damned, I had a job to do.

My name is Eugene Law, and I'm a professional Magician.

I don't pull rabbits out of hats, nor do I saw women in half. I deal with the supernatural forces of evil hellbent on our shared destruction, and the occasional Magickal item that has worked its way into the Sunshine State. I've been doing this since High School—that's when most Magicians figure out they've got some talent, and in doing so either find a willing teacher, or get consumed by the dark things the love to snack on the innocent.

Isn't Magick great?

Another text lit up the tiny phone screen, but the Dad Wagon chose that moment to fishtail around the next turn. The net effect sent my phone tumbling into that damnable crease between the seat and the center console.

That's going to be a bitch to find later.

I wasn't far now, just a few more turns. Florence shifted the wind again and my smear-filled windshield cleared just long enough for me to see a large oak branch in the debris-littered street. I swerved to avoid the tree limb, but sometimes the old Mazada sometimes prefers to zig when I

request a zag, and in this case that meant we took the pointy end of the branch through the under-carriage. The cringe-inducing sound was made ten times worse when the derelict limb decided to puncture the muffler.

The Dad Wagon was now impossible to ignore, thanks to its new deep-throated exhaust cannon.

The bright lights of Lifeway Hospice cut through the rain and I followed that glow into the parking lot. Above me, multiple hundred-year-old oaks swung with the wind. Not willing to press my luck further, I found one of the few spaces not covered by one of those hulking monstrosities and parked the Dad Wagon there—even though it was one of the farthest spots from the door.

My phone chirped again, and I shoved my fingers between the seats, but came back empty handed.

Stupid phone. I'll get you later.

The rain picked up, slamming the Mazda like a pressure hose and making it difficult to see the golden-orange glow spilling out the automatic doors of the main building.

I pulled a small duffle out of the back seat and set it in my lap.

I unzipped the bag and discovered my horn-rimmed glasses laying gently in their soft floral-patterned pouch on top. I'd picked them up at the Sponge Docks in Dunedin—an old, sweet-as-pie librarian had been willing to part with them after I'd exorcised the poltergeist screwing with her expert filing system.

Don't mess with the Dewy Decimal system—Dewey's got friends in high places.

They weren't quite my size, meaning they pinched my nose something fierce, but that wasn't what made them valuable.

They let you see the Gloom.

The Gloom existed in the same space as our own, a dupli-

cate reality that is chock full of dark and evil things. Seeing the Gloom was a neat trick, but visiting the Gloom was borderline crazy. It was home to Deep Magick and forever-hungry creatures that would like nothing more than to chew on your face—sort of like visiting my wife’s family.

I pushed Betty’s glasses on and turned the car over just long enough to get the wipers to clear the windshield. What I saw next, though, made me question my chosen profession.

The hospice was covered in thick strands of threaded darkness, like some sort of summer camp project done full scale, and crawling along those strands were the bulbous, spider-like bodies of Gloom vampires, better known as Umbralings. These weren’t the Bela Lugosi style vampires, these were more akin to supernatural ticks, big as golden retrievers with an appetite to match.

I took off Betty’s bedazzled glasses and shoved them in my jacket pocket—sometimes it’s better when you can’t see the evil—then beat a path for the front door, tucking the bag under my arm and trying to forget about the spindly Gloom ticks dangling just above my head.

The automatic doors whisked open and ushered me in to the sterile reception area of Lifeway Hospice. While they’d tried to brighten it up with cheerful colors and inviting paintings, the lobby still had its gray tile floor and harsh overhead lighting, both of which put the screws to the little joyful energy still hanging about.

I found Sue behind the main reception counter, sliding over a banker’s box of knick-knacks to my favorite mechanic. Given the spit and duct tape state of the Dad Wagon, I’d gone through a few car guys over the years, however my current grease monkey was the best by far. Short and stocky, with close-cropped ginger hair and a talent for keeping engines running far beyond their expected life, Rob was quite the catch—mechanically speaking of course.

However, next to Rob, Sue made quite the sight. He was a mountain of a man, easily six feet tall, and whose tattoos had their own tattoos. I'd met Sue during a diving expedition gone bad—really bad. Did you know the Blue Holes in the Bahamas doubled as a portal to the elemental plane of water? And that they are guarded by oversized sentient octopuses? Not I, and—as luck would have it—not Sue either. Still, we saved each other's bacon more than once during that trip, and since then the big man was always quick to call me in when things got weird, and in Florida that was pretty damn often.

“Is this everything?” Rob asked, turning a few items over in the cardboard box.

“Yeah. Listen man, I'm really sorry for your loss.”

“Rob,” I said, running a hand over my soaked head. “What are you doing here?”

Rob turned his tired eyes toward me. “Hey, Gene. My aunt passed away this morning. I was just coming by to collect her things.”

“Oh, wow. I'm sorry. I had no idea—”

“It's all right, she was in a lot of pain.”

Sue was busy trying to get my attention from behind the red-haired mechanic, but I wasn't about to interrupt Rob. He looked bad, but then again, his aunt had just died. Still, I couldn't shake the feeling this was more. The bags under his eyes had their own carry-on luggage, and his typically straight shoulders had drooped noticeably.

It might just be the death in the family. You moron, the building is crawling with Umbralings, and suddenly you are believing in coincidences?

I took a deep breath and slipped Betty's Gloom goggles back on my face. The thick strands of woven darkness glittered across the lobby, dangling from the ceiling and hanging in graceful curves like flowing tapestries. While he didn't

have a Gloom vampire on him, Rob was covered in festering bites—the poor guy must have been fed on for weeks. However, there was something else, a bright red and pulsing spot along his neck.

That's not an Umbraling bite... what is that?

Gloom beasts like Umbralings love negative energy: sadness, pain, and the depression that come along with loss. Lifeway Hospice must have been dinner buffet for them. It didn't help that the building also appeared to be right smack in the middle of a low-grade thinning.

The Sunshine State was known for many things: retirees, golf, beaches, and—among Magicians—thinnings, threadbare spots in the veil between the real world and the supernatural. No one really understood why, but Florida seemed to exist at that geometric focal point of weird that made it ground zero for easy passage between here and the great beyond.

Location, location, location.

At that moment the lights flickered, then cut off completely, plunging the three of us into an inky darkness. It didn't take but a moment before the telltale prickle of Umbraling feelers danced across my face.

Bold.

These weren't your standard run-of-the-mill Gloom-beasts, like Sue had indicated in his text, these were different. They were aggressive, plentiful, and—worst of all—very hungry.

The first fang grazed my skin and sent my heart racing—physical contact from an invisible thing can do that to a guy, even a Magician.

I pulled Betty's glasses off and ripped my bag open, but before I could dig into it the lights popped back on, this time accompanied by the hum of a backup generator. The automatic doors whisked open and a literal blonde bombshell raced in, holding up a jacket against the driving rain.

She flipped her hood back and shook out those gorgeous ringlets, letting them fall in soft curls around her face.

Neither Sue nor I looked away—we couldn't. This girl was beyond stunning.

"Gene, this is Cordelia, my girlfriend."

* * *

"ROBBIE, we've got to go. The storm is really picking up steam."

Cordelia wasn't kidding. From the looks of things outside the wind had shifted direction again, and this time it was pushing the large oak's branches toward the parking lot.

"Yeah, Rob. Listen, it was good seeing you, but your girlfriend's right. You two should get going before it gets any worse.

Judging by the amount of Umbralings here, it's going to get a lot worse.

Rob hoisted his aunt's box of things, and together with Cordelia he headed for the automatic doors.

"Thanks for coming, bro," the nurse said, coming around the reception desk to meet me. "I know we talked about this before, but I think it's getting worse."

I nodded. "I know it is."

The automatic doors whisked open. Rob and Cordelia made a run for their car, but the couple hadn't gone more than a few feet before one of the large oak limbs gave way. A combination of the rain and wind must have been too much for that old branch as it broke away from its mooring and crashed into the Lifeway Hospice sign. The broken limb positioned itself perfectly across the driveway, making it impossible to get a car out of the lot.

Rob and Cordelia ran back into the lobby, shaking the rain off their clothes.

“So much for leaving now, I guess we’re stuck here for a bit,” Rob said, wiping the rain from his face.

The lights flickered again; this time, however, they didn’t drop out completely.

“How long do the backup generators hold?” I asked, keeping an eye on the flickering lights.

Sue cocked his head to one side. “Typically a lot longer than that.”

“How many staff are on the clock today?”

“Just me. We’ve got most of the patients moved thanks to the storm and all. However, with Florence hitting hard now I’ve been waiting for a break in the rain bands before I transport the last one..”

“I think you need to risk it, these things are acting a lot more aggressive than I would like.”

“What are you talking about, Gene?” Rob asked, setting his grandmother’s box against the counter.

“Just a smal—”

“Pest problem,” Sue said, finishing my sentence. I didn’t like lying to Rob, but the less people that knew what I do, the easier it was to do it.

“Ah.”

“Robbie, let them be,” Cordelia said, unzipping her rain coat and *inadvertently* giving us an eyeful of her tanned, toned physique. “Sit with me, I’m cold.”

One of the monitors flashed behind Sue, throwing a bright red light against the wall. “Shit! Hold on, Gene.”

The big man returned to the reception desk and checked the display.

The screen flashed again, this time a decidedly angrier red.

“Shit!”

The nurse cleared the reception desk and bolted down the hall. I turned to Rob and Cordelia. “Stay here.”

I fished a small metal lantern out of my bag and placed it on the table. It was an old, boxy design, with cheerful cutouts of frolicking animals on each of the sidewalls.

“What’s that?” Cordelia asked, tilting her head at the small toy.

“It’s a shadow box lantern,” Rob said, leaning forward in his chair. “My aunt used to have a few of these.”

“Why do you carry around a shadow box lantern?”

“I’m eccentric,” I said, placing a small battery-operated tea-light inside. “Just leave this on for me and sit near it.”

Bright horses and leaping rabbits danced across the walls as the tiny light filled the dreary reception area with fun shapes.

Rob didn’t seem to mind, but Cordelia wanted nothing to do with my miniature light show and turned up her nose at it. “Why?”

Because it’ll channel a little positive energy into this place—hopefully enough to keep the Umbralings in this room from snacking on you.

“I just don’t want it to get broken,” I said, removing Betty’s glasses from my pocket. “Just keep an eye on it for me and don’t go anywhere.”

“Whatever.”

That’s the ticket.

I carried my bag into the hallway and started counting doors while I looked for Sue. Umbralings were rarely this plentiful, or this aggressive. I’d had a few direct confrontations over the years, but like most pests, the easiest solution was almost always environmental modification. It was no different than when we had roof rats in our attic after we moved in. I’d had tried all manner of solutions, both the Magickal and the mundane, but those damn rats kept getting back in. In the end, the best option had turned out to be the easiest—removing the fruit tree. We’d had an old orange tree

in the yard that the rats loved to snack on, and with their food source gone, they promptly moved on.

The lantern wasn't perfect, and it sure wasn't doing anything for Rob's girlfriend, but the enchantment on it was sound. It *should* elicit feelings of happiness, joy, and love—at least that's what it was supposed to do. Umbralings aren't much for love, joy, or happiness. So, just like with the roof rats, I was banking on removing their food source going a long way in improving our situation.

I found Sue in room 132, along with what I could only assume was the last patient to be moved, and a middle-aged woman occupying one of the visitors' chairs. I pushed Betty's glasses against my face and for a moment wished I hadn't.

Just like the lobby, black threads hung from the ceiling and dangled between the walls, however this time there were more. A lot more. At least five Umbralings were feeding on the poor woman—her body was barely visible beneath their bulbous, spider-like exoskeletons.

"Sue, don't move!"

The man-mountain stopped cold.

Movement out of the corner of my eye caught my attention. More Umbralings were coming, peeking from the edges of the midnight threads, their silent fangs quivering in anticipation.

"What's wrong with her?"

"Something you don't want to mess with, trust me. Just take a few steps back and let me get a better look."

The nurse begrudgingly backed away from what I assumed was the patient's trophy wife, or daughter, and in doing so gave me a better view.

Oh my.

The Umbralings had her good. Fangs deep and pumping away the woman's emotions, and right along with them, her life essence. If we didn't do something soon she was going

to stop breathing and beat the actual patient to the hereafter.

I unzipped my bag and placed it on the floor. One of the things I'd tried on the roof rats was poison. Being rodent geniuses, though, they got smart to it rather quickly.

Still, I took out more than a few of them in the process.

Sadly, they don't sell Umbraling pellets at the corner store.

An untapped market if ever there was one.

However, being a Magician, I had a few other options available to me.

"Is this like the blue hole?" Sue asked, keeping a wary eye on the woman.

"Sort of. Just be happy you can't see them—"

"Just so long as they aren't spiders—I frigging hate spiders, man."

"Ah, nope, nothing like spiders," I lied.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to give them something more exciting to chew on."

I removed an old clam shell corsage box and placed it on the floor. The flowers inside had long since dried to faded husks of their former glory.

"What is that?"

Pop.

I opened the dusty plastic and let the room fill with the faint smell of cloves and incense.

"This is the corsage of a young man who died in a car accident before he could deliver it to his prom date."

"Damn, man. That's terrible, I mean... wow."

"Tristitia," I whispered, willing a tiny bit of Magick into the decaying flower. I hated to lie to him, but it was all part of the process.

I needed real emotions, and something told me big Sue

wouldn't have mustered the same sort of military-grade sadness if I'd told him the truth—I'd bought the corsage on discount and let it sit in the hot garage a few weeks.

"Yes, it is terrible, depressing, and gut wrenching—premium-grade Umbraling feed."

Come on, you little bastards, take the bait...

The lead vampire sniffed the air. I don't know what they use for noses, but whatever they did had clearly picked up the scent of the corsage of depression.

Come on... just a little closer.

Its fangs retracted, leaving an angry and festering Gloom sore on the woman's chest before crawling down her leg. The other creatures took notice, pulling away one at a time.

"That's it..."

"What? Do you see something? What's happening?"

I'd forgotten the big man didn't have a set of Gloom-vision librarian glasses. "They're letting her go. Just a few more seconds and you'll be clear to—"

A shrill beep cut the tension in the room—the patient's heart rate monitor had flat-lined.

I spun around to find the spiritual form of the bed's current occupant floating above his corporeal form.

"What in the Sam hell is going on here?" the spirit demanded.

"Stop, don't say anything—"

It was too late. There was one thing vampires like Umbralings enjoyed more than Magickally induced sadness and depression—fresh meat.

* * *

SUE CHECKED THE DISPLAY. "Hold on there, Mr. Wagner..."

The spirit of Mr. Wagner hovered above his bedridden physical form. He was rail skinny, and with an impressively

groomed curving mustache. His hospital gown ruffled in the Gloom's eternal breeze—I was thankful it didn't ruffle much above his knees, as there were things I didn't want to see, spiritual or not.

“What the hell are those things?”

“Umbralings...”

“Umma-What?”

“Gloom ticks. Now listen, I need you to focus—”

Wagner scrambled like a crazy person, his arms and legs flailing in all directions. However, since he had no understanding of the unique dynamics of the Gloom, he was basically flopping around like a fish out of water—lots of activity, zero motion.

To make matters worse, all this gyrating was really only accomplishing one thing—sending out vibrations along the Umbraling webs throughout the hospice.

“Would you stop ringing that damn dinner bell for one second?”

The bulbous bodies of a dozen Umbralings crawled up the edge of the bed, feeling the air with their spindly arms and hungry fangs. Glorified Gloom ticks don't see like we do—it's more a smell and feel game for them—but Mr. Wagner was putting out more than enough activity to overpower whatever the garage corsage could muster.

Sue, blissfully unaware of the Umbralings and their fangs, was at Mr. Wagner's bed side. “What's happening?”

“Well, Mr. Wagner is jiggling like a caught fish, which in turn is bringing in more Umbralings than I can handle.”

“What can I do?”

“Yes, what can he do?” the suddenly stiff-as-a-board Wagner said, his eyes darting between the dozen or so Umbralings just below his feet.

“Nothing. If it's his time, it's his time. He should get a ride shortly.”

“Huh?” they both said in unison.

“His ride. If Mr. Wagner is dead, then someone will pick him up shortly for his trip to the other side.”

“You mean... Heaven?” the floating spirit said, pulling his legs in to avoid the sweeping feelers.

“Not necessarily...”

“I know we aren’t supposed to say this, but he really wasn’t a very good person,” Sue said, checking his monitor.

“What!?” the disembodied spirit asked as he spun in the air, his sudden response sending him drifting toward a large patch of black webbing.

“I don’t think he wants to hear that.”

“Well that’s just too bad. I was with him and his wife during those first visits. He’s a cantankerous old bastard. He made her feel terrible—insulting, rude, demeaning. I’d say he’s not up for the husband of the year by any stretch.”

“Bah!” The mustached spirit shook his hand at the nurse. “What do you know? Why, I’m a wonderful husband...”

A large Umbraling dropped down behind the floating man, dangling from threads of inky darkness and extending its feelers toward the cranky spirit.

“He disagrees with you.”

Sue shook his head. “I’m sure he does. Has his ride appeared yet? I’m guessing he’s on the bullet train to the bad place.”

Whichever way he was headed, there’s wasn’t a ride in sight—had I been I wrong? That was when I saw it, barely visible in Betty’s Gloom goggles—a razor-thin silvery thread that connected his spirit to his body.

That thread was his connection back to his living body, provided he didn’t get it snapped by Umbraling fangs.

Ariadne’s thread—he’s still alive!

The Gloom wasn’t just home to Umbralings and newly

departed souls, it was also somewhere you could visit—although I’m quite sure Mr. Wagner hadn’t wanted to.

“We have a problem—”

“What?”

“He’s not dead.”

The floating spirit slapped a hand against his translucent face. “That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you! I’m not de—”

Mr. Wagner’s words were cut short by the piercing fangs of the Umbraling behind him. Those translucent barbs punctured his spiritual shoulder and immediately began feeding on his essence. “Ah! So cold...”

“Can you bring him back?”

“What?” Sue asked, pulling open drawers and looking for something.

“Bring him back—can you bring him back? This wasn’t his time. We scared him right out of his body and now he’s about to become dinner for a very unpleasant Umbraling.”

Sue pulled an AED out of the drawer and set it on the table next the bed. “I can try. It might kill him, though.”

Seeing the limp form of Mr. Wagner slowly fade under the hungry fangs of an Umbraling made me think he wouldn’t mind us trying.

“Do it.”

Sue warmed up the paddles as the machine below him let out a faint whine.

“Clear.”

Whump!

A pulse of power roared through the tiny silver thread, and for a second I thought it’d been burned out. However, it hadn’t—it was faint, but still there.

“Do it again.”

“Clear!”

Whump!

Another arc of electricity raced through Ariadne’s thread,

this time it was enough to jolt Mr. Wagner back to consciousness and disengage him from the Umbraling's grasp.

"What.. I... Oh my God, help me!"

The poor spirit scrambled end over end, twirling in the air like a child's lost balloon.

All of this activity had done the one thing I hadn't wanted to do; invite the rest of the family to dinner.

Umbralings crawled in from all corners of the room. Large, small, it didn't matter, they were coming for the feast. Mr. Wagner didn't stand a chance, especially not when I noticed the frayed end of Ariadne's thread. Yes, the only thing tethering him to his frail body was now broken.

Crap.

Sue pointed to the monitor. "His heart is beating!"

More and more Umbralings poured into the room. "Not for long it's not."

I dug into my bag and pulled out a small freshwater reel and handle. It was just the sort of thing you'd take fishing, except you'd need a pole to go along with it. This one had a pole and a line, they just happened to be in the Gloom. It was a handy bit of Magick I'd found at a yard sale just outside of Weeki Wachee—that old merman didn't know what he had.

It's time to go fishing.

"We've got one shot at this!" I shouted, pressing down on the line release and whipping my arm back for the cast. "I'm going to pull him back to his body."

"Yes!" the twirling spirit said. "Please do that—chop, chop!"

I placed one hand on the frail man's bedridden form, and with the other I cast a whipping line out into the Gloom.

The silvery cord shot out with a rainbow arc into space between us, looping around the cranky spirit.

"Nice work, young man. Now reel me in!"

“Thanks, I’ve been practicin—”

One of the Umbralings lept onto Mr. Wagner, its long legs scrambling for purchase on the twirling spirit’s body. “Get it off of me!”

I snapped the line back like I had a big fish on the other end... which I sort of did if you stopped to think about it.

“I’m trying, damn it. Stop squirming around!”

He didn’t. Instead, the quarrelsome spirit only flailed harder, wrapping himself and the Umbraling tighter together. They were becoming too difficult to pull in, and I wasn’t about to pull his spirit, and a Gloom-dwelling parasite, back into his body—regardless of whether it would be an upgrade or not.

“Do it again, Sue.”

“Huh?”

“Shock him.”

“What?!” both the nurse and Mr. Wagner shouted in unison.

“Gene, you’ve got a hand on him—”

“Right. Trust me, I’ve got a plan.”

“Does it involve me getting eaten!” the old man yelled.

“But, you can’t—”

“Just do it,” I said, pulling back on the reel. “Now!”

“Clear!”

Whump!

A burst of electricity raced up my arm and into the reel. From there, it crackled down the silvery thread and right into the ball of vampiric Wagner. I smelled the burning ozone and had the distinct feeling of each and every muscle of my body contracting in one perfectly timed explosion of pain.

Note to self, don’t do that again. Ever.

The tangled mess of ephemeral fishing line, Mr. Wagner, and the Umbraling blurred in the wave of furious energy.

Come on, damn you.

Sue pulled the paddles back, and I fell back with them. Mr. Wagner and the newly cooked Gloom beast drifted softly back into his body. I wish I could have said the same for myself. Instead I hit the vinyl floor hard, the impact knocking the air out of my body, and something else with it.

“Gene!” The big man was at my side in an instant. He checked my pulse and readied his hands for chest compressions. I saw all of this because I was floating next to him.

Magick always has consequences, and sometimes it can be a right bastard.

“Damn it, damn it, damn it,” he said, hammering on my chest.

I wasn’t dead, I had Ariadne’s thread to prove it. The silvery cord floated just outside my body and kept me tethered; However, I must have been looking pretty bad, because tattoo mountain was already deep into CPR.

This was all well and good, but now I had to figure out what to do about the Umbralings, all of which were keenly interested in this newest choice morsel to fall into their collective laps.

Oh, hell.

I pulled on the thread, as that’s typically the fastest way to get back to your body.

Nothing happened.

Umbraling feelers clicked and fangs chattered.

I yanked the cord a dozen more times in rapid-fire succession like I was pull starting the lawn mower, and just like that bastard grass-rending machine, nothing happened.

That’s a problem...

* * *

“GENE!” Rob shouted, opening the door and racing to my side. “What happened to him?”

“He took a live wire to the chest,” Sue shouted between compressions.

“What can I do?”

“Sub in!” Sue said, handing over the chest compression duties to the stocky mechanic.

I’m so going to feel this in the morning—provided I survive that long.

I needed to think, just get a few minutes to get my wits together, and I’d be able to work up a plan. The Umbralings, though, had other ideas.

Spells, Gene. You’re a damn Magician now think of something.

“Easy, guys, you don’t want to eat Magician, we’re terrible for your—”

One of the Umbralings broke rank and sprung at me.

You haven’t visited the Gloom until you’ve had a timber-wolf-sized spider beast lunge at you. They should put that in the brochure, ‘come for the weightlessness, stay for the sheer terror.’

That’s it!

I’d forgotten about the flying. I wasn’t some new Gloom babe like old man Wagner. I’d long ago earned my shadow-plane wings—not literal wings, mind you, but the ability to control my movement.

The vampire missed the edges of my feet by mere inches, and instead of sinking fangs into the tasty spirit of Eugene Law, it ended up crashing into the hallway.

“Ho, ho, ho! You gotta get up pretty early in the timeless eternal twilight to catch a Magician like me, you stupi—”

Yeah, sometimes you really need to stop when you are ahead—or at least refrain from taunting.

I’d expertly shot out of the lunging grasp of one umbral-ing, and right into the threaded midnight web of another,

and this one made the one on the floor look like a wee babe by comparison.

That's Magick for you—crap.

I had to stop the instant gut reaction flail—Wagner had driven that point home better than any textbook.

Think, Gene. You know the Gloom, it's your bag. You come here all the time... oh, those fangs are really big—stop, that's not helping. Focus on the problem; you have nothing with you and no way to draw power from the—wow, I think those are the sharpest fangs I've ever—power! That's it.

"Rob! I need the juice. You've gotta hit me again!"

The mechanic continued blasting his palms into my chest.

He can't hear—

"He can't hear you, you idiot."

"Who said that?"

"I did."

"Wagner?"

"Yeah."

The umbraling fangs were now practically on top of me, and I'd now learned they had a thin sheen of slime—who knew?

Dear Diary, did you know there's slime on umbraling fangs?

The body below me twitched ever so slightly.

"Well if you can hear me, tell them!"

"I can't."

The fangs glistened, sliding back and forth over each other like self-sharpening kitchen cutlery.

"Why not!"

"I'm not your damnable puppet, you know."

Wagner's pale fingers wiggled, but neither Rob nor Sue noticed.

Puppet!

I kicked my silver cord like a lasso, looping it over Wagner's translucent hand, which sat just inside his real one.

“Hey,” the octogenarian said. “What the heck are you doing? That’s my hand.”

Umbraling feelers brushed across my shoulders as if searching for the juiciest part to consume first.

Wagner’s hand swung off the bed, but still Rob and Sue didn’t notice, they were too focused on keeping me alive, or giving me the single largest bruise I’d ever seen.

Come on, guys! Look!

The Umbraling’s fangs extended, dripping tiny amounts of that newly discovered slime onto my neck.

Oh, hell no. This is not how I go out.

I pulled my legs up hard and swung them to the side, slamming Wagner’s hand into the AED and knocking one of the paddles down onto Sue.

“What the hell?” he said, rubbing his shoulder and seeing the shiny paddle on the floor.

“Should we hit him again?” Rob asked

The sharp fangs grazed my skin.

Yes! Yes you should.

Sue alternated between me and the monitors. “I don’t know...”

“Wagner!” I shouted, “Give them a sign.”

“What do you want me to do? I can’t move and I can’t talk.”

Long, hairy feelers wrapped around my mid-section, effectively signaling the impending end of my time in the Gloom—and anywhere else, for that matter.

“Do something, damn it. Cause they aren’t going to stop with me. Where do you think these guys are going to go next?”

The room was silent—even Rob had stopped his pounding.

Frrrrpppppppttt!

Mr. Wagner let out a long, loud, and perfectly musical toot.

Rob and Sue froze, then looked at each other.

“Ah... do you think that’s a sign?”

Sue placed his hands on the paddles. “Bro, I don’t know, but—”

Frrpt!

“That’s it, that’s all I’ve got,” the cantankerous spirit said, somewhat out of breath.

“Thanks, Wagner. I hope they—aargh!”

The Umbraling bit down on my shoulder, sending sharp, stabbing pain racing through my translucent body. I’d caught my own hand with a nail gun as a kid, but the bite made me feel like pure bliss in comparison.

“I say do it,” Rob said, pulling back his hands.

“Works for me.”

Sue turned up the dial and charged the pads. “Clear!”

My vision faded in and out. One second the machine was charging, and in the next the metal pads were on my chest. The Umbraling’s fangs dug deeper, and the first hints of poison flooded my translucent body.

Come on... guys... you can...

Boom!

For the second time today I got a hint at what the iron key felt like when Benjamin Franklin discovered electricity. I’ll let you in on a secret; it felt bad, really damn bad.

My silver cord looked more like a strand of Christmas lights than Ariadne’s thread. The surge of electricity slammed into me, and in turn lit up the umbraling attached to my shoulder like a flood lamp.

The bulbous creature flailed in its web, throwing me aside before crumpling into a blackened husk.

My whole body shook from the contractions, but I was able to focus just long enough to pull the cord.

There's no place like home...

I opened my eyes and took a deep breath, only to be greeted by my favorite mechanic and nurse kilowatt.

"Gene?"

"Yeah," I said, pushing myself up with weak arms. "Ugh, my chest hurts like a mothe—"

"You're alive!"

I had to push back from the crushing hug Rob was ready to give me. "Whoa there, buddy, easy on the sternum..."

"Damn, man, are we okay?" Sue asked, keeping an eye on Wagner and his wife. "I mean, are there any more, you know... things?"

Shit. He's right.

In the fall my glasses had landed on the ground and slid under the bed. Without them, I couldn't navigate a way out. "I need my glasses—"

"Robbie?"

Cordelia's husky voice broke the tension in the room. "Are you in here?"

"Yeah—"

"Don't come in!" Sue shouted, crawling under the bed to get my glasses. "It's not safe."

"Whatever..." the young woman said, pushing her way into the tiny hospital room. "Ugh, it's so... icky in here."

Sue placed the glasses in my hand. "Here you go. Can you get us a way out?"

Betty's horn-rimmed glasses once again showed me the room, with its flowing black threads and quickly encroaching brood of Umbralings. One them had already broken rank and was closing on the leggy blond.

"Yes," I lied, not sure if there was a way out. "Ah, Cordelia, if you would step over—"

The young woman turned to make eye contact with me, then placed a hand on Rob's neck. Her features melted away;

gone were those beautiful ringlets, as well as her angelic face and buxom chest. In its place was a hideous and deformed blackened beast with long narrow fingers and sharp claws. Her once-trim physique had grown pot-bellied and distorted, with sagging breasts that hung like overfilled saddle bags.

Succubus!

Succubus were demonic residents of one of the middle layers of Hell. They made their bread and butter sucking the life essence from unsuspecting men and women through weaponized sexuality—fatal lovers of the worst sort, and in my current state, way the heck out of my league.

Cordelia pressed her fingers against Rob's neck, that same red spot I'd found earlier, and did what Succubi do best, she drained more of his life force while giving him a pleasant sensation to the man bits.

Okay, so his girlfriend's a demon—where does he find these women?

"Videre..." I whispered, placing a hand on both Sue and Rob. There was no way they were going to believe this without seeing it.

"Oh my God!" Rob pulled away from Cordelia, but not before she'd powered up with a decent amount of his life's essence.

"If you want to get anything done, sometimes you just have to do it yourself," the young-girl-turned-Succubus said, grabbing the Umbraling and crushing its throat like paper maché.

Succubi and Umbralings don't get along, the former having a healthy disdain for the latter, and for good reason. You don't want anything else competing for your meal ticket.

It didn't take Cordelia more than a minute to tear apart or eviscerate the remaining Gloom ticks and stir up enough

shockwaves in the eternal twilight to send the rest of them packing.

Finally, the whirling young demon came to a stop and dragged a chair over to place herself in front of us.

“So, Magician,” she said, wiping the gore from her claws. “What are we going to do now?”

“I can’t have you hurting my friends,” I said, feigning bravado. I was too weak to banish her, but she didn’t necessarily know that.

“You’re too weak to banish me.”

Damn...

“What the—” Rob said, backing away from the imposing demon.

“Oh, Robbie. I wasn’t going to kill you. You’re just too... you. I don’t know. It’s hard to describe.”

My mechanic didn’t appear to know what to do. “Gene?”

Sue couldn’t tear his eyes away from what remained of the fading Umbralings. “They looked *just* like spiders, you bastard.”

“Well... I guess, sort of. If you squint really hard, and—”

The nurse cut me off. “And she just destroyed every single one of them.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Well,” Sue said, rubbing his chin with a tattooed hand. “I might be in the minority here, as she is completely terrifying—”

“Why thank you!” A claw-admiring Cordelia said, with genuine appreciation in her voice.

“—but could you do that again?”

Cordelia smiled like the cat that ate the canary. “Anytime.”

Sue turned to me. “She won’t eat us... right?”

“She lives on sexual energy.”

Rob blushed. “Oh. Well that explains a lot.”

Sue addressed Cordelia directly. “Do you need to... you know... do it?”

The Succubus admired her nails. “Oh, sweetheart, no. I can get what I need just from a touch.”

“And that touch won’t kill us, right?”

“She could very well kill you, that’s what demons do—” I said, still trying to get a full breath into my bruised and battered chest.

“No, in fact I’ll leave them feeling like they’ve just had the lap dance of their life.”

“Sue! Don’t even think about it!”

The big man ignored me. “So, just little bits at a time, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, Mr. Wagner, can she stay and take little bits in exchange for keeping those monsters away?”

“Sue,” I said, rubbing my very sore chest. “Let me put this in simple terms. This is a no bueno idea, bro. I mean, she’s a—”

Frrrrppppptttt!

“Cordelia, right?” Sue asked, extending a hand.

“Yeah.”

“You’re hired.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Martin Shannon is an emerging author of urban fantasy stories set in the world of Weird Florida. He sincerely hopes you enjoy them, but if not, he's got a banjo and he isn't afraid to use it.

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