

Warlock's Wrath

Book One of The InVaders

by William T. Dove

“Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don’t we consider it his duty to escape? The moneylenders, the knownothings, the authoritarians have us all in prison; if we value the freedom of the mind and soul, if we’re partisans of liberty, then it’s our plain duty to escape, and to take as many people with us as we can.”

Ursula K. Le Guin

Prologue

When the InVader ships arrived, they seeded the atmosphere with Double V, a lethal virus that killed over ninety-nine percent of the global population within days, leaving fewer than ten million survivors worldwide. Most of those had proven to be immune to the InVader Virus, but there were a few, a very few, who contracted the virus but survived.

After two days of delirium, they awoke – *able to do magic!*

Most mages can only use magic from *one* of the eight Schools, but a handful found they could weave spells from all eight, manipulating energy, matter, time, and bending the very fabric of the universe to their will.

Warlocks.

The most powerful of these is John Callum, whose wife and daughter were killed by Double V, his young daughter dying while he held her helplessly in his arms.

His enemy has handed John a weapon. Can he learn to use his power in time to stop the InVaders from finishing what they started—the extinction of the human race—and to get the thing that John Callum desires before all else...

Payback for what they took from him.

Now: Close Encounters

If it hadn't been for Jupiter, I wouldn't have seen them.
Shadows within shadows; three of them.

I'd heard there were places in Russia that had kept the power on, but here in America, the last power grid shut down over eighteen months ago, throwing us back to the dark ages. It was the middle of the night, and I was sitting on a park bench on the outskirts of Boulder, the darkened corpse of the city spread out below me, a decaying reminder of a world that no longer existed.

Sleepless nights were normal for me. When I slept, I was haunted by the ghosts of my dead wife and daughter.

And I saw my little girl, dying in my arms.

It was late April. The snow was gone, but the night air was still laced with frost. I was dressed in my usual cargo pants, hiking boots, and lined workman's jacket, which was to say that I was freezing my ass off. I was watching the stars rise, glimmering through the ghostly plumes of my own breath, and lying to myself that I was winning the war with my demons when Jupiter winked out. Just for a second.

And again.

And one more time.

Jupiter had risen twenty minutes before and was lurking low on the eastern horizon. The moon had taken the night off, and the western half of the sky was enveloped in black clouds, an early spring storm creeping in from the mountains. Under that encroaching, funereal blanket, the park was dark as a crypt, and other than the stars, I could barely see a thing.

We don't notice how much light pollution there is around us until it's gone. Without the constant glow of human civilization, the darkness of a moonless night is a death shroud.

Now that I knew where to look, I summoned a glimmer of light. It was a subtle spell, something that wouldn't be noticed by anyone but me. The magic curved what light there was, gathering it from the night around me and focusing it on the area where Jupiter had

performed its vanishing trick. Those faint emanations then bounced back to me, allowing me to see as though it were dusk, instead of the sepulchral gloom of a stygian night that conjured images of things that weren't there.

We had not seen or heard from the aliens since their ships were spotted on the outskirts of the solar system over two years ago, unless you counted Double V, the virus they seeded the atmosphere with that had killed eight billion people within days.

Had killed Sharon and Katie.

There'd been plenty of speculation from scientists and science fiction geeks, in about equal measure. Most of the experts believed they would look at least a little like us; something about how any environment conducive to allowing a species to develop interstellar travel had to be very similar to ours. Two arms, two legs, walking upright. A head with sensory organs that encased a brain, and binocular eyes for depth perception.

The eggheads hadn't been far off.

Despite the spell amplifying the light, my companions in that dark night appeared only as silhouettes. There were indeed three of them, one for each of Jupiter's blinks.

They were humanoid, seven feet tall, with unnaturally long arms that fell just past their knees. Long hair streamed from their heads, floating in the night breeze, forming ephemeral halos around their shadowed features.

They moved with a preternatural, liquid grace in a choreographed dance, shifting position around each other, forming a single organism, stalking the night. They were ghosts, sliding across a background of shadows, and they moved with the coiled readiness of fighters.

Or predators.

It was too dark to make out clothing, if they wore any, but they were definitely carrying equipment. Backpacks, and what could be rifle butts sticking up over their shoulders.

And they were silent, leaving in their dark passage not a whisper of sound to be carried on the night air.

We all have our quirks. One of mine was stillness. It wasn't anything I did intentionally. It was just that once I parked myself, I sat very still. I'd lost count of the number of times I'd scared the hell out of Sharon or Katie when they'd come into the family room while I was settled in my chair, reading. Sometimes their eyes would pass right over me, but register only an empty room.

Our eyes are developed for picking up motion, a trait that kept our ancestors alive while not wasting brain processing power on things that weren't a threat. My wife or daughter would plop down on the couch, turn on the TV, or flip open a magazine, believing they were alone in the room.

Then I'd turn the page.

My chair wasn't more than four feet from the end of the couch, and their monkey brain interpreted the sudden motion right beside them as a predator. Before their higher brain could tell the damned monkey to shut up, they'd jump and scream, bolting off the couch as though zapped with a cattle prod.

Katie, our daughter, was convinced I did it on purpose.

It was because of that stillness that the InVaders hadn't seen me. I was on the park bench no more than forty feet away, with bushes and the slope of the hill behind me, and I was just part of the scenery.

Then I screwed up.

Remember, no one had yet seen one of the aliens, unless you counted the seven poor bastards on the ISS, and we'd never heard from *them* again. I didn't startle, if that's what you're thinking. I'd always known the aliens would have to land sooner or later. Frankly, I was surprised it had taken this long.

No, I leaned forward.

Dumbass.

The human brain is schizophrenic by nature. It can calculate Einsteinian physics, compose symphonies, or assemble a complex machine. But presented with something new in the dark, it wants to get closer for a better look, as though six inches over a distance of forty feet was going to make any difference. The Three Stooges didn't see me, but something else did.

I felt the dart slam into my Shield, and all hell broke loose.

Then: Two Years Ago...Plus Two Months

I was in my study, researching a story on government corruption, which pretty much described my life at that point. Years earlier, I'd realized, much to my dismay, that our government and media were lying to us about just about everything. I started posting videos on YouTube and Facebook on evidence I was digging up. I made Freedom of Information requests, interviewed experts and whistle-blowers, and just generally exposed the complex web of lies and deceit being used to hoodwink average Americans.

YouTube and Facebook promptly banned me. That's when I knew I was on the right track.

So, I moved to X, which had recently been purchased by Elon Musk and was no longer censoring, and Rumble, which had never censored. My audience kept expanding, and a friend suggested Substack, where I could monetize what I was doing. I was in my early 40s then, and getting tired of my career as a programmer. Besides, AI was replacing coders. Within a year of setting up my Substack, I was making as much as an independent journalist as I had been as a code monkey, some of that coding having been for the very government I was now exposing.

I'd just gotten to a really meaty part of the data I'd collected, and was on the verge of proving that the 'wildfires' that had been burning record numbers of homes across America were being started with a microwave Directed Energy Weapon, when Sharon called from the living room.

Many women are anxious by nature. Not Sharon. She was our family's rock, the glue that held us all together. That woman could stare down a charging bear, and not only would the bear blink first, it would soil itself and run crying for its mommy. I bolted from my chair when I heard something in her voice I had almost never heard in our nineteen years of marriage.

Fear.

“Honey, come here. *Now!* You've got to see this.”

I banged my shoulder against the study door frame, dashing to the living room to see what could possibly be scaring the otherwise unflappable love of my life. She was standing in the middle of the room, staring at the TV on the wall over the fireplace, where Fox News was on. Since I'd started my journey of exposing mainstream media lies, I'd warned her more than once that Fox wasn't much better than the others. They just lied about different things. I was about to start into my usual rant when I registered what was on the screen.

The photo didn't mean much—just some blue lights on a dark background, and fuzzy at that. But the caption below sucker-punched me in the gut.

Alien Ships Headed for Earth

It had to be a joke. I thought furiously about why they would tell such an obvious lie. It was mid-February. April Fool's Day was still six weeks away. And besides, media outlets hadn't tried something like that since Orson Welles broadcast War of the Worlds in 1938, even though the nationwide panic it had supposedly caused was largely an urban legend.

The anchor was some woman, unrealistically attractive like they all seemed to be these days. Her face was familiar, but I couldn't remember her name. I never watched mainstream news anymore. In my opinion, watching mainstream news to find out about the real world was like watching porn to find out what married sex was like. They both feature women with fake eyelashes and fake boobs who are paid to lie to us.

Then I tuned in to what Miss Too Perfect for Words was saying.

“...ships were spotted several days ago by astronomers at the Paranal Observatory in Chile. The sighting has since been confirmed by the Roque de los Muchachos Observatory in Spain and the Mauna Kea Observatory in Hawaii. What you are seeing is the best image we've been able to obtain, showing the drives of fourteen ships decelerating toward Earth.

“We’re told by the astronomers that using triangulation from the observatories, they’ve been able to determine that the alien fleet is currently just inside the orbit of Neptune, decelerating toward Earth at point one gee, or one-tenth of the Earth’s gravity. Their drives are emitting light and x-rays that would have been detectable years ago, but the ships are approaching from the direction of the south pole, ‘downward’ from the plane of our solar system, where we are told our telescopes almost never look, which is why we didn’t detect them until now.

“The ships appear to be headed toward a rendezvous with Earth, and given their current speed and deceleration, will arrive in Earth orbit in just over thirty-four days. While we can hope that the aliens are friendly, the famous physicist, Stephen Hawking, warned years ago that any aliens who made the extremely difficult journey here from a faraway star system would almost certainly be hostile.”

Sharon hit mute, and we stared at each other before saying, at exactly the same time, “*Oh god. What do we tell Katie?*”

Our daughter, thirteen, just discovering boys and high-strung by nature, worried about *everything*. This was going to scare her witless. I could look forward to at least a week of night terrors, as her imagination conjured up images of Cthulhu-like aliens chowing down on her tender teenage flesh.

As it turned out, the decision was taken out of our hands.

Since Katie had turned ten, and Sharon and I had finally relented and given her a cell phone, I had vacillated between haranguing her about being constantly glued to her mini idiot box and forgetting that my teenager was more plugged into the world than I was.

Sharon’s phone rang. It was Katie, freaking out, as expected. I drove to the school to pick her up, and spent the fifteen-minute drive home trying to calm her down.

“Sweetie,” I said, in my most patient, reasonable ‘*Everything’s going to be OK*’ voice, “we don’t even know if it’s actually aliens. Maybe it’s just a group of comets or something.”

Said comment earned me the usual long-suffering ‘*my dad is an idiot*’ eyeroll I had come to expect from my daughter.

“Dad,” she responded, her voice laced with scorn, “Comets don’t decelerate. They’re obviously aliens. And Hawking says when they get here, they’ll enslave us all. Or eat us. They didn’t come here to roast marshmallows and sing Kumbaya.”

Katie was the center of my universe. It simply wasn’t possible to love someone more than I loved her. But she was also the exact opposite of me in almost every way, and we’d been butting heads since she was old enough to talk, which she did early. She was speaking in whole sentences at eighteen months. Not grammatically correct, of course, but descriptive enough to make her opinion of her father’s ideas clear.

According to Katie, I was opinionated, emotionally stunted, inflexible, stubborn, paranoid, and so right-wing that my ideas on how a family and society should function had passed into irrelevance around the time of the dinosaurs.

But she was wrong. I’m not paranoid.

Exactly thirty-four days later, the alien ships parked in Earth orbit. Despite countless attempts at communication sent by radio, laser, and God-knew what kinds of secret government tech, they had never once responded to our messages. A group of tree-hugging nut jobs had even set up a light and sound show on the Devil’s Tower in Wyoming. You know, the mesa that was featured in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*.

At the time, I quipped to my girls that with human stupidity like that on display, the aliens would decide there was no intelligent life here and leave.

I thought it was funny.

The day before their ships entered orbit, a shuttle launched from one of them. It was a perfect sphere, which led to a flurry of online comments from Star Trek geeks about the Borg. I never watched the show, but Katie told me the Borg were a race of cyborgs that flew around in cube-shaped ships, except for their scout ship, which was a sphere.

Not to be outdone, the Star Wars geeks chipped in with comparisons to the Death Star. Apparently, there was some kind of rivalry between these two groups of incels—a word I learned from

Katie. I'd tell you to look it up, but the internet hasn't existed for almost two years. It means 'involuntary celibate'—someone so nerdy they have no hope of *ever* getting laid.

Whatever the status of their mating prospects, the Star Wars geeks won, which led to connecting the aliens with Darth Vader, thus 'InVaders', with a capital V. The name stuck.

Personally, I think it's stupid.

The sphere docked with the International Space Station, where seven astronauts had volunteered to stay in orbit until the aliens arrived. Just before docking, the aliens jammed all transmissions to and from the ISS. The seven astronauts, six men and one woman; four Americans, one Canadian, one Russian, and one Indian, were never heard from again.

A month later, the InVader Virus struck, and the world ended.

Or at least, my world.

Now: Rules

The Shield spell is one of my better ones; one of those spells where I congratulate myself for my cleverness.

Magic doesn't make mages all-powerful. There are rules. The First Law of Thermodynamics still applies. Energy can be neither created nor destroyed, but can only change form. This means there's no free lunch. Spells require energy, and that energy has to come from somewhere, as magic can't create energy, but can only manipulate it.

Most of the time, spells can be powered by surrounding energy sources. Heat in the air or the ground, electricity from ions in the atmosphere, or even photons can provide energy for a spell. But some spells don't use physical energy as you're thinking of it. Spells that affect time, for example.

The Shield surrounds my body at a distance of approximately six feet, which means it's not a sphere, but an amorphous oblong. Think of it like a giant, invisible bubble roughly the shape of my body.

It has two components. First, the trigger, which requires almost no energy to maintain, and that energy can be easily pulled from the heat in the air around me. All the trigger does is detect when an object of any significant mass crosses it, heading for my body, at a velocity greater than eighteen meters per second, or forty miles per hour. That's the speed at which an object, say, a rock, could cause injury. Anything slower than that, or anything not headed on an intercept trajectory with my body, is ignored.

Maintaining the trigger does require some concentration on my part, but it's like chewing gum. Unless something happens to seriously interrupt my focus, I do it without thinking about it.

Objects can be used to store magic. When the dart hit the trigger, the time differential part of the spell that was stored in my belt buckle activated instantly, and the world around me stopped.

Even if their eyes could track that fast, an observer wouldn't notice anything change about the speed of the dart, because it didn't. But they *would* see me 'disappear', and reappear about a foot away,

far enough to dodge the dart. In reality, I didn't disappear. I moved. But because time at the center of the Shield was moving much faster than everywhere else, it would appear to an observer that I had teleported about a foot to one side.

When the dart hit the trigger field, I felt it, because I'd designed the spell that way. The Shield's time differential meant I could literally dodge bullets, but that did no good if I wasted precious time looking for where the bullet was coming from, or blindly dodged *into* the bullet. The dart hit the Shield directly to my left, at my chest height, meaning a little over three feet off the ground, as I was sitting on the park bench.

I did take the time to look at it. All I knew until then was that something moving very fast had hit my Shield. Since it was likely alien tech, I wanted to see it. I knew it wasn't a laser beam because if it had been that, time differential or not, I would already be dead. There's a very significant difference between a beam travelling at the speed of light and a projectile. And besides, since light doesn't have mass, I was pretty sure a laser wouldn't trigger my Shield.

I was expecting a swarm of flechettes, or at least a tungsten round. But no, it was clearly a dart, with fletchings and a nasty-looking needle. Which meant whoever fired it wanted me alive. That could be good or bad, depending on how you want to look at it.

I had absolutely no intention of being taken. Whatever the InVaders wanted me for, it wasn't to explain the cultural references behind internet memes.

As to my perception of time at the center of the Shield, if you're thinking of that scene from *Over the Hedge*, where the squirrel, hyped up on caffeine, casually strolls around pushing objects out of the way while the rest of the world is on pause, it's not like that. I could dodge the dart, but only if I moved *fast*. The Shield works by speeding time up at the center, but this effect is a gradient, dropping off as it moves toward the edge of the Shield where time moves normally. This meant that as the dart got closer to me, it gradually sped up, catching up with my accelerated time. If I wasn't out of the way when it got to about two feet away, I was screwed.

I dived off the bench into a shoulder roll, dropping the Shield once I knew I was out of the path of the dart, and heard it smack into the wooden back of the park bench.

You're probably wondering why I dropped the Shield, with three bogeys in front of me, at least one more to my left, and no way of knowing if there were more. I had no choice. Remember, time spells work differently than those that affect material physics. I can't borrow heat or light for a time spell. In fact, inanimate objects can't be used at all, because they don't age.

To make a time spell, I have to steal time from something that is strongly affected by it. A rock wouldn't work, even if it was hot. Bury a rock in the ground. Come back in a million years. Same rock.

Bury a human in the ground, and a million years later, you've got dust. Actually, a lot faster than that. So, to make a time spell, I have to borrow time from something that's affected by it. And the easiest source of time was my own mortal body, slowly marching inexorably toward senescence and death.

My Shield is one of those spells that's extremely useful, but I *hate* using.

If you're thinking I'm some young guy, I'm sorry to shatter your illusions. While a lifetime obsession with exercise, a lot of it at the gym, means I don't look anything like most 49-year-olds you've seen, I'm well past the point where I have my whole life ahead of me. The Shield spell ages me by about six weeks every time I have to use it. And this is not the first time I've had to use it.

In the past two years, the world has become a *very* dangerous place.

To make the Shield move with me would require not only maintaining the time differential effect, but moving it so that it released matter and energy behind me, while enclosing matter and energy in front of me. It's possible, but I don't even like to think about how many years of my life that would cost.

As I rolled, I reached inside my jacket and grabbed the Juice injector. Shit was about to get real, and I was going to need an edge.

Then: The Juice

I'd found the Juice entirely by chance. A little over a year ago, when the gas started to go bad and I realized I would soon be on foot, I raided an Army barracks in upstate New York. Most people don't know that gasoline degrades after about a year; two years if you add stuff to it that stabilizes it. This meant that a year after The End, vehicles were pretty much useless, unless they were designed to run on propane, but there were very few of those around anymore.

'The End' is a reference to a scene from an old sci-fi novel by Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle, where a comet strikes the Earth. Before it hits, when people still aren't sure if it's going to, a journalist is interviewing the head geek from Jet Propulsion Labs and asks if the comet striking would mean the end of the world.

The JPL scientist responded with, "Oh, no...the end of civilization."

That's what Double V had done. It had killed 99.88% percent of the global population in less than a week. While that still meant a little under 10 million people left, when you factored in that twenty-five percent of those were children and elderly, it took only days before the infrastructure shut down completely. Trains, ships, and trucks stopped right away, their crews and operators mostly dead, bringing the shipment of food, fuel, medicines, and other essentials to a *very* final halt.

The power grid took longer, but eventually that shut down too. Power generation stations, like dams and nuclear reactors, don't run themselves. They need technicians and engineers to oversee things and replace parts when they wear out. With only one in every thousand people surviving the virus, there were no technicians in most places, and sooner or later, something essential failed, turning off the lights for good.

Survivors left the cities in migrating herds. While there was plenty of non-perishable food to go around, given the dramatic reduction in population, it just wasn't human nature to share when there was no prospect of more. Of those who remained in the cities, some tried to establish community groups to stockpile food and

supplies, but most of those rapidly fell to internal politics and marauding gangs.

There was also the issue of disease. Millions of bodies lying around rotting is not good for your health. Cholera and even plague struck survivors who stayed in the cities, and the few who survived that soon left as well. As far as our cities were concerned, the world hadn't ended with a bang *or* a whimper. It ended with silence.

The country folk fared better, and many of those fleeing the cities found a new home in rural areas. The farmers had lost ninety-nine percent of their people, too, while livestock had not been affected, so they were in desperate need of people willing to work. Most of them would take you in if you surrendered your weapons and agreed to their rules. Rule number one was that if you didn't work, you didn't eat.

While the human race wasn't extinct, its long-term survival was very much in doubt. Farmers and ranchers formed collectives, and the better-organized ones even set up local governments and police forces, but with rioting and disease rampant in the cities, at least in the early days, and hundreds of thousands of suicides from despair, it was estimated that the 9.7 million who had survived the InVader Virus—thus, Double V—was now less than seven million. Spread around the entire world. And that meant that two years after The End, there were approximately a quarter of a million people left in the good ol' U.S. of A.

God Bless America. Or what's left of it.

Fort Drum in Jefferson County, near the Canadian border, had been home to the 10th Mountain Division. It was completely abandoned when I got there. In part because it was mid-January. With three feet of snow on the ground, the temperature hovering around minus 20 degrees, and no power or gas for heat, it wasn't surprising that any army personnel who had survived Double V had bugged out. Besides, the American government, and thus the armed forces, had effectively ceased to exist long before then.

I was looking for army rations. Without a vehicle, I would need food that was nutritionally balanced, took up minimal room, and was lightweight and easy to carry. I was absolutely not going to hike

around post-apocalypse America carrying an eighty-pound backpack of canned Spaghetti-O's.

Finding the storehouse wasn't hard. It was underground, but I'd already developed a spell that detected empty spaces. I could walk into a building and have a 3D map in my head within seconds.

That's how I found the lab.

The entrance was hidden behind a bank of fake filing cabinets in one of the back offices. It led to stairs that went down in dark, dusty flights, about fifty feet. The lab was also abandoned, but I decided to poke around. If the military had worked that hard to hide this place, it might have something I could use. It took a few hours of reading through mind-numbingly boring reports written in self-congratulatory geek-ese before I struck gold.

There's a reason superhero movies had been so popular before The End. Something in the human psyche loved the idea of being indestructible; of being so bad-assed it didn't matter what the enemy threw at you, you could shrug it off and keep coming. So, of course, military scientists around the world had been working for decades to create a 'super-soldier' serum. And these guys had found it.

Sort of.

It took three days of shivering in the dark, pausing occasionally to magically recharge my lantern, and reading binder after binder of research notes I mostly didn't understand to figure out why the Juice had never been used.

The Juice had a scientific name with more syllables than the alphabet has letters, which is why even the research scientists had taken to simply calling it the 'Juice'. Delivered with a device very similar to an EpiPen, the Juice hit the nervous system instantly. The result was a tripling of heart rate, instant dilation of the blood vessels and bronchial passages, a massive spike in neurotransmitters, and the adrenal gland going nuclear.

In theory, a soldier injected with the Juice could run seventy miles per hour and lift almost a thousand pounds over their head.

In theory.

Unfortunately, all the volunteers who tried it died. I couldn't tell from the notes if these were volunteers or 'volunteers', but what *was*

clear was that the human body couldn't handle it. The few who didn't immediately drop dead from a stroke or heart attack, who lived long enough to attempt a sprint or to lift a massive barbell, broke bones and tore internal organs loose, resulting in trauma so severe that none of them lived for more than a few minutes.

But the Juice worked, and there was a supply of injectors in the lab. By then, I'd already lived through multiple attempts on my life and was determined to figure out a way to use this stuff.

It took some experimentation, but weeks after I left the lab far behind, bound for warmer southern latitudes, I found a solution.

You probably remember gruesome scenes from movies where some poor bastard gets his stomach slashed open and his intestines spill onto the ground. But that's only in the movies. Our guts are held in place by connective tissues: the mesentery, fascia, and ligaments. Otherwise, we would die stepping down from a ladder when our heart and other organs splashed into the bottom of our abdominal cavity. That was my inspiration for the Weave.

The Weave is a spell that pervades every cell of my body with a net of magical energy. No matter how fast I move, it holds everything together.

I first tested the Weave by punching a tree – not very hard, mind you. I felt nothing. So, I hit it harder. Eventually, I was punching the tree with such force that bark was flying off, and my fists were slowly chewing dents in the wood.

Again, nothing. Not so much as a bruise. I moved on to punching a concrete wall with much the same effect. No matter how hard I hit it, I didn't break bones or even bruise. I did, however, develop a few scratches on my knuckles, which meant I *probably* wasn't bulletproof, a theory which I have no intention of ever testing.

Like any spell, the Weave needs energy. Not life force, fortunately, or I'd be dead of old age by now, as I'd had a number of occasions to use it already.

Which brings me to the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which says that perfect energy transfer is impossible. There's always some waste heat. After about ten minutes of reveling in my new 'Captain America' badassery, too distracted to notice how hot I was getting, I

passed out from heat stroke. Fortunately, this meant I dropped the spell, as any spell requires conscious effort.

I woke up some time later, dehydrated and with the mother of all headaches. Lesson learned. The Weave could only be safely used for a few minutes, as the waste heat from the spell bled into my body.

That was okay, though, as the Juice itself was designed to last about forty seconds. It seems the military scientists who developed it suspected it might be a *little hard* on the human body, so they made it short duration on purpose. But, I had a solution that allowed me to use the Juice and not die.

Magic had succeeded where science had failed. On the Juice, with the Weave, I was a superhero.

Now: Magic is Cool, But...

I stabbed the Juice injector into my thigh before I'd even rolled back to my feet. The injector was designed to be used through clothing, and as I felt the spikes dig into my flesh and the adrenaline-fueled rush of invincibility flood my body, I triggered the Weave.

Years of martial arts had taught me how to execute a smooth shoulder roll, and I came up sprinting. At that point, the Three Stooges were off to my right, and whoever or whatever had shot at me was to my left. Until and unless Larry, Moe, and Curly started shooting at me, too, I had to consider them the lesser threat.

Which left me with a very immediate problem.

While I knew the direction the dart had come from, I still couldn't see the shooter, especially since I'd dropped my light-gathering spell. The spell didn't take much concentration, and I'd practiced focusing through distractions, but seeing the InVaders *and* being shot at with a clear intent to be taken alive and then probably horribly tortured was a bit more than even my mind could handle.

This meant the alien hunters, or at least Dart Gun Guy, could see me, but I couldn't see him. I needed to fix that, and fast, as I was now sprinting in the direction the dart had come from, looking for my attacker.

If it hadn't been for the storm overhead, I would have been screwed.

Sheet lightning is caused by electrical discharges in the clouds, exciting free nitrogen and oxygen atoms, exactly like how neon glows when a charge is run through it. But it happens at random. I needed to make it constant instead.

The less I need to bend the laws of physics, the easier magic is, and for this, I didn't even really need to bend the laws. It was more like asking them nicely to *please* go along with what I had in mind. The current was already there, up in the clouds, just waiting for me to use it. Making the clouds overhead glow was a simple matter of maintaining a constant flow of electrical current. The magic was very similar to the Weave spell, but holding ions and atoms in a stable

matrix while feeding current into the loop from the surrounding clouds. Piece of cake. The park lit up with an even, dim glow. Playing field levelled.

And there he was.

Just as turning on the lights makes the cockroaches run for cover, bogey number four was standing up and moving out from behind the bushes where he'd been hiding when he took that first shot at me. He was levelling the dart gun to take another shot, so I jinked right and heard the dart buzz past about a foot to my left.

By then, I was up to full speed, the Juice and the Weave working together, and I was closing on the fourth InVader fast, at about the same speed as a car on the highway. Which meant I would reach him in under two seconds. As I was coming in at an oblique angle, the closer I got, the more he had to turn to track me. It was a race he was losing, and when I was less than a second away, he took another, last desperate shot that was so far off I didn't even hear it.

Even so, I almost stumbled when I got a good look at him. Her, It? Whatever.

Dart Gun Guy wasn't the same species as the Three Stooges. Not even close. He was creepily reptilian, with green and yellow skin and two large, bulbous yellow eyes. At first, I thought he was scaly, too, but that turned out to be some kind of environment suit. He was also a lot shorter than the others, no more than four and a half feet tall.

What the hell? Two alien races? And for reasons I couldn't even begin to guess at, both of them were pissed at me.

That mystery would have to wait. With no idea if the Three Stooges were drawing a bead on my back at that very moment, I needed to take Lizard Boy out of the equation as fast as possible.

By now, you probably have the impression that magic was my solution to everything. In actual fact, I believe in using whatever works at the time. I *could* have taken Lizard Boy out with a spell, but I had something more efficient in mind.

As I pulled level with him, his glowing eyes wide with panic, his finger clicking the trigger on an empty chamber, and still lagging behind my Juice-enhanced speed by several inches, I drew the Smith

and Wesson Model 66 revolver from the holster on my right hip and blew Lizard Boy's brains across half the park.

Then: Double V

My family was one of the first hit with Double V. Not only had it not made the news yet, it hadn't even surfaced on social media, or Katie would have told us.

Sharon and I took turns cooking. It was Friday, and thus, my turn. We were eating dinner, beef stroganoff, one of my specialties, when Sharon projectile-vomited stroganoff all over the kitchen wall. Fortunately, ever since Katie was little, she and I had sat at the head and foot of the table as my wife had learned early it was best to keep us separated at dinner, which meant there was no one across the table for Sharon to paint with braised beef and red-wine simmered mushrooms.

Katie, being a teenager, exclaimed, "*Ew! That is so ick!*" and immediately fled the kitchen, leaving me to deal with Sharon. My wife had been fine a few seconds earlier, joking about last night's family Canasta game and the embarrassing ass-whooping I'd received from our daughter.

Then she was drooling puke leftovers down her chin and looking greener than Kermit.

I had to carry her to bed, which she would have found romantic if her guts weren't churning like the washing machine on a spin cycle. She was weak and had vertigo so severe that she couldn't stand up by herself. I got her cleaned up, fetched a glass of ice water and a cold compress, and put a puke bucket beside the bed, although I couldn't see how she could have anything left to throw up, given the remains of her Exorcist impersonation running down the kitchen wall.

I was worried about my wife, of course, but I assumed it was just food poisoning. She worked for Drake & Wells, the largest ad firm on the East Coast, and that week they'd landed the American contract for the Chinese auto-maker, BYD. The whole staff had celebrated with sushi and an early start to the weekend. Food poisoning usually passes in twenty-four hours, so if I kept her hydrated and held her fever down, she'd be fine by Saturday afternoon.

I cleaned up the kitchen, then went back to check on Sharon.

She'd passed out, and I couldn't wake her. I grabbed her phone off the bedside table and dialed 911. I got a busy signal. I didn't even know that was possible. I'd been a paramedic in my youth and knew that if all the operators were busy, the system automatically added you to the wait list, and you would hear a recorded message. I tried again. Same thing. Just a beeping sound on the one number in America where that wasn't supposed to happen. *Ever.*

Then I heard Katie puke.

Her bedroom was across the hall from ours, and there was no mistaking the wet splat of vomit hitting the hardwood. I think I touched the floor exactly twice, moving from Sharon's side to our daughter's room.

I loved my wife with all my heart, but like any parent, our kid came first, and I knew Sharon would agree.

I got there just in time to catch Katie as she collapsed, nearly slipping in the widening pool of vomit as I did so. Fortunately, she'd been standing in the middle of the room when the nausea hit, so the bed was clear. I slung her onto it, then told her I'd be right back with a cloth and towel. After I cleaned her up, I pulled her puke-splattered sweat pants off. She protested, of course, but there was no way I was letting my sick daughter lie in her own vomit. After pulling a sheet over her, I went back to check on Sharon.

She was alive, but her fever was up, her pulse was rapid, and I still couldn't wake her. I tried 911 again. This time, the line was dead. There was no signal. I moved to my side of the bed and checked my phone. Same thing. The cell network was down.

For the first time in a very long time, I wasn't just afraid, I was terrified. It was clear there was something *very* wrong with my girls, and it didn't look like any help would be coming.

I emptied half the ice in the freezer into mixing bowls with water and put one beside each of them, with a cloth to bathe their foreheads. Sharon was a total fitness nut like me, so we hardly ever got sick, and despite the fact that Katie *hated* exercise, the healthy diet we forced on her meant she'd never had more than a mild case of the flu. This meant we didn't own a thermometer or have any cold and flu meds in the house, although I doubted those would help

anyway. I was pretty sure that whatever this was, it was a lot worse than the flu.

I cleaned up the puke in Katie's room, then spent the next hour going back and forth between them, changing their cold compresses, and getting Katie to sip a little water. She was still awake and lucid, and assumed Mom was the same. There was no way I was going to tell her that Sharon was unconscious and unresponsive, with skin so hot I could have fried an egg on it.

I guess *I* got lucky, in a way. I was taking a bathroom break when it hit me.

There I was, standing over the bowl, taking a much-needed piss when I felt it coming. I had just enough time to lean to the side and puke into the tub. It had been a while since dinner, so I didn't have as much left to throw up. I zipped up, turned the shower on to wash the bile and bits of half-digested beef down the drain, and splashed some cold water on my face. I'd gone from completely fine aside from being scared witless about Sharon and Katie, to feeling like hammered shit in seconds flat.

Whatever this was, it sure as hell wasn't the flu; or food poisoning.

Still, I obviously wasn't as sick as they were. For one, no vertigo. Immediately after puking, neither of them had been able to stand up, and even lying in bed, Katie was complaining about the room spinning. I didn't think much about it, though. When it came to bugs of any kind, I'd always been nearly bulletproof. Most of the time when the girls got sick, I didn't, and on the rare occasions when I did, I'd typically get a sniffle that would last a couple of days, and then I'd be fine. Despite feeling worse than I had in years, I was still upright, and I had a wife and daughter to look after.

That plan lasted about ten minutes.

I checked on Sharon first, but there was no change, which was both bad and good. At least she was still breathing.

I was moving to Katie's room when the vertigo hit. It was mild at first. I lost my balance and bounced off the door frame walking in, then had to grab the bottom post of the canopy bed I'd made for my daughter two years ago to keep myself upright. The room was tilting

at an odd angle, scoffing at the law of gravity that said the floor was supposed to be 'down'.

Katie was still awake, but either *she* wasn't lucid anymore, or *I* wasn't. Nothing she was saying made any sense, and I was in danger of collapsing on top of her. That would be bad. At 5'11" and two hundred pounds of solid muscle, my weight across her chest could stop her from breathing. Sharon was 5'7", but there must have been a recessive short gene in our mix somewhere. Katie had reached her full, not-so-impressive height of 5'1" the year before, and she was slight like her mom, which meant my daughter weighed about half what I did.

I opened her bedroom window slightly. It was March, so Rochester, New York, where we'd lived since we got married, was still in the grip of winter. I hoped the cold air coming in the window would keep Katie's temperature down without risking hypothermia when the fever broke. Then I stumbled back to the master bedroom, leaning on walls the whole way. I popped the window there open an inch too before I collapsed on the bed beside Sharon. Just before I passed out, I noticed that Sharon's breathing had become rapid and shallow.

That was the last time I saw my wife alive.

Now: The Fist of God

I'd been moving around America since The End, more or less at random. Any time I thought about stopping somewhere, taking over one of the millions of empty homes in a real estate market where lack of demand had reduced the value of all properties to diddly over squat, which meant 'free for the taking', I broke into a cold sweat.

I couldn't have a home. Home was where my girls were, and that place didn't exist anymore.

As I travelled, sleeping in a different place every night, I dreamed of my wife and daughter. Every day, I practiced magic and dreamed of vengeance.

Daddy, please...

With Lizard Boy dealt with, it was the Three Stooges' turn. I could have braked and reversed direction, relying on the Weave to protect me from the deceleration, but that would have made me momentarily stationary and an easy target.

I tossed the revolver, as holstering it again while running seventy miles per hour over uneven ground would likely have me shooting myself in the leg. I'd find it later. That beautiful little piece of lethal engineering had saved my life more than once.

I curved to the right, aiming to run around a copse of trees and bushes that would make it harder for the Three Stooges to target me. I still hadn't heard any shots coming from their direction, which meant one of three things: they hadn't fired yet, they *had* fired but whatever they were shooting was silent, and it was only a matter of time before they tagged me, or they weren't carrying firearms. I really hoped it was the last one.

Daddy, please, I...

As I rounded the trees and sprinted back up the hill toward the three InVaders, I focused on the spell I'd used to light up the night. There was a strong storm brewing, the air compressing and building heat as it raced down from the mountains, high winds charging trillions of electrons with the fury of Zeus. Even though it was too early in the year for a thunderstorm, the potential was there. I just

had to draw it out, using my arcane power to make it submit to my will—to my need to make these bastards pay for what they'd taken from me.

Daddy, please, I don't...

Mages come in different power rankings, or Tiers. A Tier 1 mage can light a candle from across the room. A Tier 5 can call down a raging firestorm that will wipe a small town off the map.

I'm Tier 5.

As I ran, I was still calling on the power of the storm, pushing ions around in the clouds, circling the current around and around, building with each revolution—a ravening, lethal dynamo hungry to unleash its fury on the earth below. The night air buzzed with frenetic rage, lifting the hairs on my head and arms, while the power lines at the far end of the park were vibrating, the tone building in volume and pitch until they were screaming a banshee wail into the night.

...please, I don't want...

I crested a small rise that had partially hidden me from Larry, Moe, and Curly, my speed such that my boots briefly left the ground before digging into the frigid earth again, driving me toward my first real taste of vengeance *two years* after these *things* had murdered my wife and daughter.

Now that there was more light, I could see they *had* firearms.

One of them had drawn their pistol, but it wasn't aimed at me. He—She, It? I still couldn't tell—was facing toward the south end of the park, toward the power lines, searching for whatever was shrieking at them out of the corpse-cold darkness. The other two were facing me and spread out about ten feet apart. The objects I'd seen earlier sticking up over their shoulders weren't rifle butts. They were swords—big ones.

Moe and Curly were both holding their blades in a two-handed grip, waiting for me, as though they expected me to do honorable battle with them.

Fuck. That.

Daddy, please...

I was only sixty feet from them now, driving down on them like a race car on nitro. My blood was boiling in my veins while the air around me pulsed with power.

Daddy, please. I don't want to die.

I screamed out my grief and rage and called down the Fist of God.