

WOLFMATE



Book One of
A Sheltering Wilderness

Chandler Brett

Dire Wolf Books

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BOOK ONE OF A SHELTERING WILDERNESS

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A PERSONAL NOTE

AS I LOOK BACK, I WONDER IF I COULD HAVE PREDICTED what was to come and whether there was any way to safeguard against it. I intended so much good for The Wilderness. Surely you can see that? Inevitably, though, you will read what I write here in the light of events to come; there is no escaping that. I still pray you will somehow find these words a gift, a balm to alleviate any pain. I did not intend to hurt you in any way.

Memory is a strange, unpredictable thing. We don't always remember what we want, and we frequently hold onto moments we would rather forget. I have struggled to construct this account because I feel it is crucial for you to understand what life was like for us in a less complicated time, a time with less suffering. Despite the way my memory may sometimes fail me, I choose to remember these days for your mother's sake. I also hope to preserve the noble intentions which gave birth to the idea that has so changed our lives. And on the other side, I have included the story of the wolves; I do not think this account makes sense without them. I hope to change your opinion when you see what they meant to us.

Since you might eventually need to pass this story on to others, I have written in a more general way. Know, though, this story is for you. You above all will understand what is at stake, and may your memories of us—joyful ones, I hope—guide you to the truth. Know also that even though our world grew complicated and painful in the days of the diagnosis, your mother and I never wanted to roll back time, because that would have meant losing you. Your coming into this world was our greatest blessing. Your presence made the other burdens bearable, and you will always remain our beloved daughter.

1

WHITE WOLF

KAN AWOKE WITH ONE THOUGHT, HE HAD TO FIND HER.

Pushing off cold rock, he stood and focused on the valley ahead. A labyrinth of snow-dusted trees stretched in all directions. Towering pines, spruces, and firs dominated skeletal oaks, birches, and maples, the multitude surrendering ground only to a great river snaking into a lavender horizon. Monstrous gray mountains, tipped in winter white, guarded the valley's boundaries on the far left and right. As thick clouds invaded the sky and ushered in an early twilight, a biting wind drove Kan back. Was there any hope he could find her in that wilderness?

Breathing in deeply, he approached the edge of the overlook, checked the distance to the ground below, circled in place, and finally jumped. The rush of the fall ended when he broke through icy crust into softer, engulfing snow below. He kicked his legs, twisted, and pulled himself up out of the hole. Once he regained his footing, he shook himself and settled into a steady trot, following the slope of the hill down to the forest line. The movement felt good; it helped to shake loose the stiffness in his legs. In little time he came to the edge of the trees, a place where several branches jutted up out of the snow like misshapen claws.

When he spotted a familiar spruce, Kan ran to it, pushed past the low-lying branches, and began to smell the base of the trunk. The scent was too weak. Whining, he clawed to clear away the snow and ice, and after he had burrowed several inches, he thrust his snout deeper. Yes, this was the marker, the border of their territory; he had not been

mistaken. The smells sparked memories of running with his mate, under the evergreens, past streams, sharing in the hunt, enjoying the freedom of the mountain woods.

Yet something was wrong; the scents were thinner than he had expected. Members of the pack had not passed this way in many days, perhaps weeks. What did this mean? What had disrupted the pack's patrol? What kept them away? He whined again, scratched at his trench in the snow, and then marked the spruce trunk with his own scent. Though there were advantages in leaving no signs of his passage—avoiding unwanted trackers who might cause trouble for him—he placed his marker in the slim chance she might circle past him in the woods, so that she could follow his scent if necessary.

Jumping away from the spruce, he paused to examine the woods before him. Branches above creaked under the weight of accumulating snow, and shadows obscured the path ahead. A heavy stillness rested beneath the trees. Why had the pack retreated? Were they in danger? Was she okay? With growing concern, he dashed forward.

Tracking while it was snowing was difficult; the wind, moisture, and white blanket would cover, dampen, and disperse scents. With his snout low to the ground, breathing in the frosty air, Kan followed as best he could, relying as much on familiarity of place and routine as on the smells he could differentiate. After several minutes he spotted the pack's next marker at the base of a Korean pine, sniffed it, and discovered that it was just as neglected as the first. Lifting his head, he listened closely. There was little sound in the woods, most of the animals apparently having migrated or gone into hibernation. Kan continued onward, studying the terrain for any signs that could help him understand the neglected markers or give him a clue to her present location.

His mind flashed with possibilities; he wondered what it would be like if another wolf from the pack found him first. It would be a gamble whether he would find a friendly greeting or a fight, for pack politics could have changed while he was away. Even if she were there to soften the tension by being the first to approach him, the first to nuzzle in close, to sniff him, to bite playfully, there still might be a male who decided to take advantage of the moment to make a move to exert dominance over him. Leaving the pack for any extended time created an uncertain return, and if she were not there—he did not want to think of that—but if she were not there, then there would be an even greater chance he would find conflict.

He made good time as darkness descended, but an unexpected scent suddenly brought him to a stop. Lifting his snout, he breathed in the odor and studied it; there was now another reason to be cautious. He quickly scanned the forest around him, snow dominating the landscape even under the trees, only the tips of some leafless twigs peeking out. Taking a few cautious steps forward, he focused on the trees nearby and found what he was expecting, long, deep gouges a few feet up one nearby pine, the scratch marks of tiger. First, the size of them troubled him—he had never seen gouges that large—yet as he studied them, he began to find their location equally disturbing.

The last few times Kan ran with the pack, they had come on signs of a tiger possibly encroaching on the farthest edges of their land. The scents were strange since tigers and leopards normally kept to themselves, offering no real threat to the wolf pack, but this marker, deep in wolf territory, now gave testimony that a large tiger was hunting on land the pack patrolled. Certainly the pack would have sighted this competing predator in the middle of their woods—that had to explain the neglected markers Kan had found earlier. What drove this tiger, though, into open competition with the wolves? Scarcity of prey, no doubt. A starving tiger, particularly one of this apparent size, became a significant problem for the wolves. The pack would be in danger not only in the loss of food, but wolves traveling alone through the forest, as he now was, could become this predator's next meal.

A crunching sound from behind startled him. Quickly, he turned and scanned; there was something large moving a distance away, behind several trees. Kan felt the presence of another. Reacting, he growled, bared his teeth, and crouched, ready to defend himself. At first all became still, save for one of the creaking branches above, but then he caught sight of movement between the branches several leaps away, a dark form raising its antlered head. For a moment its eyes locked, frozen in panic, with Kan's, the uneasy communion between predator and prey. When instinct took over, the elk finally kicked and dashed away in the other direction, leaving behind a mist of snow and the scent of fear drifting in the wind.

Resisting the temptation to give chase, holding firmly to his purpose, Kan relaxed a little. As he straightened, though, he found himself, out of habit, throwing his head back into a howl, announcing to his pack the sighting of prey. When only silence followed, he regretted not controlling the impulse. Was his pack anywhere near enough to hear the

signal? The tiger certainly heard it and now knew a wolf walked in the woods. Would the call bring the beast down upon him? The lone howl would reveal he traveled alone. No hungry tiger would pass up such an advantage in a hunt.

Kan had to pick up his pace. Resuming his search for the next marker, hoping he was moving away from, not toward, the tiger, he jogged faster, his paws shifting rhythmically through the snow. The ground sloped up for several yards and then finally gave way to a large icy rock, overlooking a lower bed cutout by a river, the one Kan had seen earlier from a distance. At the river's edge, the view opened up to the left and the right. Though the pack smell was stronger, it was not as powerful as he had expected, and now the snow was falling harder, frosting his muzzle.

Strangely, there was the faint scent of something else on the air. What was that? He pushed forward, though, his desire to catch up with his packmates running strong. As he had done many times before, Kan dropped from the rock down to the bed several feet below, with the intention of following the river along to where he expected to find his pack. This time, though, as his paws broke the fresh snow, he caught movement in the corner of his right eye and heard a peculiar growling increasing in pitch and volume as he turned.

There, at the edge of the thick darkness of the river-worn alcove, directly under the rock ledge from which he had leaped, was some sort of carcass, well-scavenged, ribcage exposed, and behind it, just visible, a squat form squirmed in the shadows. Kan had barely identified it when a mass of black fur, led by a tight ball of a head, jaw open, teeth forward, shot out at him, charging through the snow. Before Kan could flee in the other direction, the wolverine had knocked him back, coming up under him, clamping sharp teeth on his left side.

Kan shifted his weight, just barely holding his balance against the wolverine. He struggled to push the attacker off, but it would not let go; instead, it wrapped its arms around his body, scraping and digging with its claws. Kan jumped and turned, trying to shake himself free, but the wolverine was closer to the ground, had better footing, and reaped the benefits of first sighting. Unable to escape the wolverine's hold, Kan felt one of the attacker's teeth finally break into his side; he yelped in spite of himself.

The pain brought new effort, and Kan reached and bit toward the wolverine's snout. The first time he missed, filling his mouth with snow, but the second time he hit the mark.

The wolverine finally lost his grip, and Kan was able to spring free. At the moment when he thought he would escape, though, Kan felt a sharp pain clamp down on his back left leg. He whipped his head back to see the wolverine's teeth deep in his leg, blood clumping around its mouth and running down into the snow.

That's enough!

Now fueled by anger and pain, Kan twisted to bite down on the back of the wolverine's neck. It took several tries to get a good grip on the wriggling form beneath, but he eventually found it. Even though he had gained a commanding hold on the wolverine and was biting down with some force, his stubborn opponent refused to let go of his leg, so Kan shook his head and bit harder, finally feeling his teeth tearing into some flesh, beyond the ball of fur in his mouth. The wolverine finally let go of his leg, but then rolled and dug its claws into Kan's chest. With the release of his leg, trying to minimize the wounds from this new attack, Kan pushed off, first slipping, then getting just enough purchase from the rocks beneath the snow to clear the reach of the wolverine. Without looking back, he ran, splashing across the river.

Only on the other side did Kan confirm that the incensed animal was not following. Obviously hurt, the wolverine stood dazed, yet still growling, teeth bared in a horrible grimace, daring him to come back. They stood there a moment glaring at each other, until the wolverine was finally satisfied and turned to retreat into the darkness. Only the broken ribs of the stripped carcass remained in view.

Kan did not like the thought of being bested by this wolverine—what would his packmates think? He was not interested in the carcass and would have preferred avoiding the fight altogether. What had it accomplished? It was so stupid. He was soaking and chilled now, cuts on his chest and side, and a long torn stretch on his leg, which he sniffed and licked, despite the pain. It was going to be a problem, but he did not have time to rest. If he was going to find her, he had to press on.

After taking a drink from the cold water, still wary of the wolverine, Kan resumed his quest, following the bed alongside the river, stepping around the icy rocks, now limping to take as much pressure off the bad leg as possible. He began to worry. The smell of blood from his wound would announce his presence sooner than he would have liked, and it made him an even easier target for the Amur tiger roaming this forest. It also would complicate the politics of his return to the pack. If another wolf saw a weakness, then

there was certain to be a challenge. Trying to counter these anxieties, he focused on finding the gait that was the least painful, yet could cover the most ground.

The flow of the river was strangely comforting in the darkness; it spawned memories of a happier time. In the summer he would come here with her to play, to cool down, splashing in the water at the edge of the river. On the first run, he would chase her up the bank, nip at her tail, twist, and then she would chase him back down. In the winter they were more cautious about getting wet. With this thought he noted the irony of the chill on his chest and legs, wet from his run from the wolverine. She would laugh at me, he thought. I was sloppy.

He finally sensed he was nearing his destination—that gave him strength—yet he did not hear the howls and the barks he associated with this space. Surely the pack would have sensed his presence by now, two or three of them, at least, bounding down, scouting ahead to be first to greet him. No one came, though. What was wrong? He climbed out of the riverbed, hobbled his way up over the icy rocks, past several more trees, and finally entered a familiar clearing. The pack's scent was strong around him, but a quick scan revealed that no wolves currently found shelter there. Kan stood alone in the snow, tired, confused, his leg throbbing.

Sniffing about, he discovered the pack scents were indeed weaker, days old now. He began to differentiate the scents of the pack members. He could identify the alpha male and female, as well as several mid-ranked males and females, and the omegas at the bottom; he did not linger over any of these. He was looking for hers. When he eventually did find it, he breathed it in deeply, some of his anxiety fading. For a moment he was comforted with a vision of Lana, milling among the others in the pack; the peacemaker, the soul of the tribe, she moved with grace, wisdom, and beauty. In the next moment, though, the scent drifted, and Kan shook off the dream, for it could not satisfy. He wanted to see her in front of him now, her amber eyes glowing, her fur thickened for the winter. He wanted to feel the captivating mystery of her presence. Above all, he wanted to know she was safe.

Why was she not there? Why had the pack abandoned this spot? What would have caused them to leave? He should have picked up on the signs, the neglected territory markers, the scratch marks of the tiger, the scavenging wolverine—the pack would have allowed none of these when it was running strong. Where did they go? Frustrated, looking

for some answer, Kan threw back his head and howled, his voice sounding loud and long in the night sky. When he needed a breath, he stopped to listen, but again there was no reply. Releasing the pain in his leg, the desperation of his search, and the concern over the absent pack, he howled again and again.

When no answering call echoed back, he felt the urge to drop into the snow, to give up. His quest had failed. All he had found so far this evening was a spooked elk, an inhospitable wolverine, and the ghost of a tiger. All he could show for his effort was a mangled leg and several scratch marks on his chest. He needed to rest.

But he had not come this far to stop now. She needed him, so fighting against the impulse to give in, he breathed her scent again and set to work inspecting all corners of the site, carefully distinguishing the directions of the most recent markers. He eventually determined the pack had moved, apparently as a group, toward the south. He left his own scent markers in the abandoned camp, next to hers, and took off after the southern trail, relying more on his nose than his eyes in the dark night.

At least, he thought, the snow has dropped off. Only an occasional flake now drifted in front of him. Though tracking was a little easier, he still had to contend with his leg, which was burning now despite the cold. He would have to take a break, after hobbling for some distance, and try to lick his wound. Fortunately, the forest seemed rather quiet. Quick shadows occasionally did appear and disappear, but he did not have time nor the desire to identify them.

Coming on a short spruce, he inspected its trunk and found a marker with a scent more acrid—at last, one that was fresher. He had found his pack's trail. After lifting his head and howling, he listened as his call faded into the night. Was he correct? Were they nearby? He searched the silence for a hint of a response, the night air icy on his muzzle. Finally, a returning howl surprised him. For a moment he doubted, but then another voice followed, and then another. Although the pack was still miles away, Kan yipped in excitement.

Listening closely, he sought to identify the voices. The first howl had to belong to Danuwa. Of course, he would be in the scouting party. How strong had Danuwa become in his absence? How would Danuwa receive him? Much would depend on who else traveled in the party. Who were the others? Those voices belonged to Noya and Sasa, the twins, from the same litter as Danuwa, but of radically different temperament. Kan was

glad to hear them, for they in the past had been close to his beloved, running with her on many hunts. And then there were two other howls mixed in. Though Kan could recognize both of them as young males, he could not identify them specifically; they were not familiar enough. They had to be the pups from the litter born last spring, though. That made only five total, a small group from the pack. Where were the others?

Kan continued to search for Lana's howl among the others, but when he still could not locate it, fear crept in. Why was she not calling? Where was she? Was she hurt? Abandoned? Or was she truly gone as he feared? And how was he going to face these others, wounded, if she were no longer running with them? For one uncertain moment, he did not know what to do—and then he committed. For good or ill, he was going to find them. If she is gone, he thought, then let them turn on me.

Though in pain, and anxious about how his former packmates would receive him, Kan limped on, occasionally stumbling. This part of his journey was punctuated by occasional calls, howls that with time grew closer. As the five wolves approached, he learned from their howling that Danuwa was in the lead, and that the two other male voices were close to him. Noya and Sasa also were running nearby. Kan began to hope they would be able to temper their brother, as they had sometimes done before. The tenor of Danuwa's voice troubled him, and when it sounded obviously near, Kan paused to lick his leg again to lessen the smell of blood with saliva. There could be trouble, and he must not appear weak before the patrol.

As the scent in the air confirmed Danuwa was near, Kan remembered an earlier time when Etsi, the mother of the pack, had given birth to a large litter of seven pups. Even when she had lost two of them, the five remaining had had become a challenge to the seven adult wolves. Each adult, including Kan and Lana, had been required to help. From the beginning, Danuwa had stood apart from his brothers and sisters. He was a troublemaker even then, Kan thought.

One day stood out in Kan's memory. Several in the pack were chasing the pups back and forth through a field of tall, golden grass. While he was still trying to decide whether to join, Danuwa had broken off from the others to chase and nip at him. It was all part of the game, but when he thought Danuwa's bites were getting too intense, Kan had rolled the presumptuous pup onto his side. Instead of turning his belly up, as the other pups in the litter were doing, Danuwa growled and bit up at Kan's neck. Not wanting to be

a part of this challenge, Kan opened his mouth wide and clamped down on Danuwa's muzzle. He held the pup in place, but the growls continued. Finally, Kan gave up, released him, and ran over to the others, hoping someone else would distract him. The ploy worked, for the alpha male, the leader of the pack, had jumped on Danuwa and put him in his place.

Now in the chill of night, Kan looked for a place to greet the wolves who approached; he wanted as much an advantage as he could get. As soon as he found a tree that had fallen partially to the ground, another tree holding it up at an angle, he stepped carefully along its trunk toward a high perch where he could see who was coming first. It was not long after he was in place that he spotted a swift shadow bounding through the distant snow. Stealth is not on his mind, Kan thought. He's hoping he can intimidate me.

Several trees away, the shadow slowed, and Kan knew the other wolf had spotted him. A low, guttural rumble, not yet a growl, sounded, as the shadow continued moving toward him. In the dim light, the darker fur of Danuwa's undercoat, snout, and eyes blended into the darkness, leaving visible only the lighter fur of Danuwa's exterior coat in a mask eerily resembling a skull.

Two other shadows, smaller than Danuwa's, came trotting up behind him, stopping before they got within two lengths of him. While keeping his eye on Danuwa's approach, Kan breathed in the scents of these two males and was finally able to identify them as the pups from Etsi's last litter. They had gotten bigger since Kan had seen them last, and he wondered how loyal they were to Danuwa. This was not the welcome he had wanted.

Danuwa chose not to approach Kan face on, but to head toward the base of the tree. Following Danuwa step for step, Kan twisted slowly to the point where he was looking down the length of the tree at Danuwa. Kan could see his eyes now, could see the nervous energy and the cold ambition.

At this moment, the two females, Noya and Sasa, emerged from the forest shadows. Although they warily kept their distance, they whimpered restrained greetings and wagged their tails. Danuwa did stop a moment to look them over before he placed a paw on the tree. If the encounter went badly, maybe the sisters would be able to keep the three males from killing him.

He had to put up a good front. Despite the pain that wagging his tail brought to his leg, he tried to stand tall for this inspection, demanding to be greeted as an equal. Danuwa

confidently walked over Kan's paw marks in the snow along the trunk and came to stand in front of him. Kan bowed in greeting, lowering his head to his front paws, yet keeping his eyes looking forward. Danuwa brushed up against him, mouth open, sniffing him—here was the situation that Kan had dreaded. Danuwa had approached tail wagging, but when he located Kan's leg wound, he started to growl. Kan immediately tensed, and in a heartbeat, felt the masked wolf's paw strike his flank. He tried to keep his balance, but his bad leg gave way, and he stumbled sideways, hit the trunk below him at the wrong angle, and rolled off, falling to the ground below.

As he tried to catch his breath and stand at the same time, Kan panicked and was not able to get out of the way quickly enough before Danuwa jumped down on him, pinning him to the ground. As he breathed in snow, Kan heard the growls of the other males nearby.

Here was the test; he had only a moment. Even with Danuwa's weight pressing on his shoulders, Kan managed to push off with his front legs and twist out of the hold, leaping in the direction away from the other two approaching wolves. He had to use his wounded leg in the process and did not get as much distance as he wanted. He knew the others would be on him soon. Cutting sharply, he managed to get himself mostly turned around in time to face the charging Danuwa, who hit him and sent them both rolling, thrashing legs entangled, teeth gnashing wildly. Kan found himself on the defensive, trying his best to keep his opponent's jaws away from his throat.

One lucky turn, and he was able to grab Danuwa's ear, producing a yipe that kept the other two males at bay. Only temporarily, he knew. Danuwa pulled free and stood, head lowered, hackles raised, growling low. Just able to get to his feet, Kan crouched in answer, meeting his opponent's stare. He had to end this quickly, or he would fall to the order of the pack.

Danuwa, though, with something to prove, charged again, hitting him hard. Kan managed to stay standing this time, but his opponent knew to press his attack, causing him to pivot onto his bad leg. He fell again, Danuwa biting down on his shoulder and then the back of his neck. When he tried to force himself up, Danuwa held him. Kan tried to twist free and failed again. He was losing his will; he felt darkness closing in. He did not want to surrender, but the snow was icy on his chest.

Suddenly, a heavy jolt from above pushed the pressing weight off him. Despite the burn where his opponent's teeth raked the back of his neck, he felt some strength return. A familiar scent in the air filled him with hope, and he stood to see another wolf standing over his enemy, her mouth closed over Danuwa's muzzle, the moonlight glimmering on her fur, her growl demanding attention. Here she finally was, Lana, his white wolf. He wanted to rush to her side, but instead found himself transfixed by her display of authority.

Danuwa struggled beneath her and was finally able to jerk free and stand. He glared back at the white wolf, and the other two females, who had joined her, before cutting short a growl, shaking himself, and shoving the smallest male to the ground as he finally trotted away.

Lana turned around and walked toward Kan. When her muzzle touched his, the tightness in his shoulders eased. Dropping back into the snow, he felt her nuzzling in, licking his face and ears. Was she really there?

The other two females finally approached too, playfully nipping at him, joyfully barking. They offered a quick greeting and then retreated. He was back with the pack.

But he was too tired to care, and his leg hurt. Though he wanted to run with his mate, he closed his eyes and felt his breath heavy. He was aware someone licked his wounds.

Her voice fell softly on his ear. *I'm glad you're back, Kanati. I'm glad you found me.*

2

FEATHER

"I PREDICT YOU NEVER MARRY, TOVARISHCH," MICK GOADED ME while we climbed the steps to our second-floor apartment.

Tovarishch, the Russian word for "comrade," had become an inside joke for us. One of those times that first year we were flung together by fate, or by the Admissions Office at least, when our suite of fellow graduate students had gathered for dinner in an attempt to get to know each other better, Mick had asked me and the other four guys gathered around the table what we knew of Russia, and I flippantly joked everyone there called each other "comrade." When he frowned, his eyes dark in the low-lit restaurant, I doubted my attempt at humor—until his eyebrows lifted a second later and he said sarcastically he had much work to do to educate us culturally-challenged Americans. By this point Mick had lived in the States several years and taken enough university courses to know the language of political correctness. Despite his corresponding jab, I did apologize later just to be certain, and he promised all was well. As he walked away, though, he said, "Do svidaniya, Tovarishch Williams." See you later, Comrade Williams. There always seemed to be an edge to the way he said it, but the deep, warm timbre of his voice dispelled any thoughts he had somehow insulted you.

Again sensing that challenge, as we neared the top of the stairs, and not wanting to be outdone, I said in a tone of mock indignation, "And what would you know?" Jumping past him to open the apartment door, I continued, "I suppose you'd tell me I need to move to Russia to improve my prospects."

Stepping inside, Mick said, “If you were so lucky, you would learn Russian women keep their men fat during day and warm at night.”

“You better not say that too loudly here in America. Our women will jump you for such chauvinism.”

“Ah... but I have accent, and I know how to dance,” he boasted.

“Yes, you’re a regular Don Juan, aren’t you?”

Mick tossed my suitcase and backpack on the floor in my room. Since he lifted weights, my luggage caused him no problems. I looked around at all the stuff I’d been able to cram into my sedan and lamented the task of unpacking, even as I was also excited about the possibilities of setting up the apartment.

“The place looks good,” I said, walking back into the hall and catching a glimpse inside Mick’s room, behind the half-closed door. There was a pallet bed on the floor, and on the far wall, a large poster of a tiger jumping, claws extended, mouth open. No luggage was out, so he’d already had time to unpack and settle in.

“It is better than last year’s closets,” he agreed.

The year previous we had lived in a suite with a small common area, that never evoked a sense of comfort, a shared bathroom, which none of us liked, and six even smaller rooms, each just large enough for a bed, a desk, and a closet. While living there, feeling confined and claustrophobic, I frequently cursed the moment of weakness that led me to think on-campus housing would be a better option, for financial as well as social reasons. Ultimately the decision would pay off, for the shared plight, the feeling we were ascetic monks committed to our cells, did pull us together, despite our different degrees and varied departments. All brand new students to the university, we six shared a similar goal, the slow process of building a network of friends from the ground up. It was here I met Mikhail Lossky—Mick to his friends—a Russian pursuing a doctorate in biology. I later would wonder if we would have met any other way.

“So how are things in Vladivostok?” I asked. We had only talked once over the summer, a time he called me from his native homeland to brag about sailing in the Golden Horn Bay since he knew I loved the coast. He had also dropped he’d been tracking an Amur tiger in the Zov Tigra National Park—who wouldn’t think that was cool.

“I enjoyed the time at home. My family is well.” By family, he meant his adopted father. “And you? How is Atlanta?”

“No real changes,” I said. “My parents are still as busy as ever.”

“Did you get to visit Outer Banks?”

“No, we’re not all so lucky as you. My parents were tied up, and I wasn’t happy about it. I told my uncle, though, I’ll be going next summer without them. You may have to watch out this semester. Since I didn’t get my coastal fix, I may be a bit stir-crazy.”

“That’s too bad,” Mick said with mock sympathy, dropping on the couch in our living room, propping his feet up on the coffee table. I saw he’d been true to his word and put up a poster print of the Golden Horn Bay on one wall and a decorative anchor on another. We’d decided a nautical theme would be best for our bachelor pad.

I sat on the sofa chair we’d picked up second hand and could feel the wooden slats under the thin cushion. “No, the real highlight of the summer came a couple weeks ago, with the release of *Transylvania Nights VII*. I can’t wait to show it to you. The game is immersive!”

“I look forward to hunting werewolves with you,” Mick grunted, as if we were vikings going out on the battlefield.

Smiling, I said, “I also got a new pair of Reality glasses for my birthday.”

“I was wondering. You look less like a geek.”

“Thanks, man.” I took the glasses off, held them out in front of me, and watched Mick’s reaction in the blue-tinted reflection of the lenses. “They’re pretty wicked. You get Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality with the flip of a switch. It’s amazing how sharp the pictures are you can take with them too, and it’s difficult to distinguish them from regular sunglasses anymore.”

“I got the surround sound set up already,” Mick said, changing the subject, wanting to show off his own new toy. He reached for the remote control and within seconds had a European rock ballad blaring from the phalanx of speakers around the room. The sound was sweet.

“I brought the wall screen and projector,” I added. The screen would cover an entire wall in our apartment and would be our gateway, with our Reality glasses and an Internet connection, to some intense adventure gaming. Back in Atlanta, my parents would frequently upbraid me for how many hours I’d be online, so I was looking forward to gaming without a conscience standing in my doorway.

“Shall we set it up?” he said, a sly grin on his face. It didn’t take much to tempt me.

Within the hour, we had the screen set up and were testing the connection speeds, graphics capacity, and sound quality. At first the display did not measure up to what I was expecting, so we spent more time than we intended troubleshooting the problem, eventually locating the source of interference. When the graphics were crystal sharp, I made the mistake of logging into my gaming account, just to see how it looked, and of course, I then logged Mick in. We were soon sucked into the massive online gaming world of *Transylvania Nights VII*.

Only taking a break to order pizza for supper, about 9 p.m., we chased monsters through Romanian castles late into the night, only quitting when headaches and sore eyes told us we'd pushed ourselves too far. We logged out finally and headed to our separate rooms. I pushed past my luggage, found my mattress, and pulled a blanket over me since my Russian roommate loved to keep the apartment so cold.



I forgot to set my alarm for the next day and slept through the first session of a class I was supposed to attend. Since my parents pressured me to work my way through graduate school, and my finances were tight, I had signed up to be a teaching assistant. My hope, though, was that I could instead find part-time work at some gaming company in Raleigh, but the executives out there did not come through on my timeline. They kept promising something would open up for me, but my first year was close to ending, and I had to make a plan for the next. When I finally committed to being a teaching assistant, it didn't take a week before I got the job offer I'd been waiting for. Although I wanted to drop the TA assignment, I knew I had to keep my word—particularly when my parents didn't give me a choice.

By sleeping late I had missed the first session of Dr. Stanley's Special Topics in Technology. Thinking I should at least head off any trouble, I did write a short email apology to Dr. Stanley. To my relief, later in the day I found a laid-back response, asking me just to look over the included syllabus and informing me I'd have to make my own introduction to my discussion group since it would meet before the large class would gather again.

So the next day as I worked my way to the assigned room in the engineering building, I found my mind still was not on the class, but pulled in other directions—setting up the apartment, looking forward to starting my new programming job, and

continuing to explore new ground in Transylvania Nights. I'd like to think I'm not entirely anti-social, but I wasn't looking forward to the prospect of standing up in front of a group of students, all their eyes on me.

After climbing a couple flights of stairs on the way, I was surprisingly winded when I reached the classroom. I wasn't going to enter like that, so I took several more steps down the hallway to a corner where I pulled out my phone to provide cover from the attention of the students rushing past. After momentarily closing my eyes and breathing deeply, I finally turned back and walked deliberately into the room. As soon as I entered, several students already in their seats looked up at me, nervously, expectantly. At that moment, something happened, some spirit of mischief possessed me, and I didn't walk to the front of the room as everyone expected, but instead impulsively ducked my head, turned, and climbed the steps up to the back row to take the seat in the far corner. It wasn't difficult to blend in; my clean-shaven face was youthful enough, and I was wearing jeans.

From the highest point in the room, I quietly observed the undergraduates who were milling about, obviously a little agitated themselves. I cannot remember their conversations exactly, but I'm sure the students were expressing their typical first-of-the-semester anxiety about course assignments or swapping stories about what had happened over summer break, movies watched, jobs taken to raise a little spending money, trips squeezed into their busy schedules. I noticed a few international students and, as the room filled, discovered the gender breakdown actually favored the women, unlike several computer engineering courses I had taken which much more often went the other way.

The clock on the wall was about a minute away from the class start time, and the twenty or so students who were there started to look around at each other.

One, a male student with frizzy blond hair and large shoulders, broke the ice, "Has anyone seen our TA?"

Several students looked away, a little embarrassed to answer his indiscrete directness.

But a dark-haired young man who hadn't shaved in a while and was dressed in a skull-and-crossbones t-shirt took up the cause. "No, he wasn't there when Dr. Stanley introduced the others. He may not be here."

Another student asked, "Has anyone heard anything about this Williams guy?"

Still another inquired, "How hard is he?"

Others said they had asked around, but could not find anything.

One declared, "He must be a computer geek to be a TA for this class." I cringed at the stereotyping.

Frizzy Blond saw his opportunity. "Well, let's give him ten minutes. If he doesn't show, then we'll pass around a sheet of paper, write our names down, and leave."

On the front row, a walnut-haired young woman with dark glasses forced herself to speak, "What happens to the list?"

Skull-and-crossbones batted the question down. "Leave it on the desk."

Dark Glasses continued, "What if the next class throws it away?"

Skull-and-crossbones, evidently irritated at being challenged, shot back. "Why don't you take it to Dr. Stanley then if you're so worried about it?" His eyes ran over her. "The walk would do you some good anyway."

Several noted his harsh tone and looked away, not wanting to get involved. Some of the women in the class flushed with anger at the implication of the last statement, but remained silent. I was about to stand up and end the foolishness, when another female voice entered the fray, a slightly deeper voice, melodious, clear, commanding, "You shouldn't talk to her that way."

A good part of the class turned to look at her. She was on the other side of the room on the second row, and I had to stretch a little in my seat to see her. Her long, straight, dark hair, gathered loosely behind her, was adorned by a single cream-colored feather, several inches long. Before I knew it, I felt my hand tapping the button on the side of my glasses, taking a 3D scan of her profile; some part of me wanted to remember the moment.

Skull-and-crossbones stood, a bit confused. "Really?"

Feather looked back at him, her gaze unwavering. "No, you shouldn't. Your comment was insulting, and all she was doing was thinking ahead, unlike some of us."

Skull-and-crossbones growled, "Who do you think you are to tell me what to do?"

Frizzy Blond reached out and put a hand on Skull-and-crossbones' shoulder. "Man..."

Addressing Dark Glasses, Feather said, "Don't worry. I'll take the list."

Having observed we were several minutes past time, I finally stood, saying, “That won’t be necessary.” As I walked down the steps toward the front of the room, I felt the class inspecting me. How did I measure up? Tossing my satchel on the table, which I then pushed against the wall, its legs screeching on the floor, I finally turned to face the class. All were seated again, and most of them were frowning, some in confusion, one or two mouths open in surprise; some a little quicker were bitter at apparently being tricked.

My tongue tripped. “M-my n-n-name is Donovan Williams.” I recovered, “I will be your TA for Dr. Stanley’s Topics in Tech—or that’s what I call it.”

A general, indecipherable muttering passed through the class, revealing I was not scoring highly on student satisfaction. I looked down at the information on my tablet. In the search for normalcy, I started to call roll and discovered the fringe benefit of identifying those who had starred in the pre-class drama: Skull-and-crossbones was Dave Littleston, Frizzy Blond was Larry Trask, and Dark Glasses was Katie Menken. I found myself stumbling over an unfamiliar name, Tsula Watie.

“T-t-t-sool-ay What-i.”

The melodious voice spoke again with controlled patience. It was the woman with the feather, the name I most wanted to learn. “The *ts* is one sound, almost like a *j*. Tsoolah Wah-tee. I’m part Cherokee. Most people have trouble with my name.”

I immediately made a phonetic note on my roll. I wasn’t going to repeat the mistake; I didn’t want to be counted among “most people.”

Reaching the end of the roll, I moved on to reviewing the syllabus and requirements for the course, then asked the class how their assignments were going, and finally began to relax myself as I realized most of the class seemed relieved to get on with our work. I do not remember much more from the actual session. I stumbled through as best I could.

When I finally dismissed the class, two or three anxious ones, including Katie from the front row, came up to me to clarify their understandings of the class projects. While they were asking these questions, I noticed Tsula remained seated, waiting. The others finally left, walking out into the hallway pushing past the line of students eagerly awaiting the sign they could enter the room and claim their seats for the next class. I turned to gather my books, but her voice stopped me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

She was standing, watching me closely. I had to acknowledge her. Since butchering her name, I had largely avoided glancing at her side of the room.

Her hair was dark brown down her shoulders, accentuating a diamond-shaped face of golden complexion. She was dressed in blue jeans and a brown blouse with an intricate blue-bead pattern suggesting a bird with wings outstretched over her chest. She was slim, but there was nothing fragile about her appearance. Her amber eyes, deep and sincere, measured me.

I was caught off-guard. "Excuse me?"

She rephrased her question. "Why didn't you interrupt Dave when he was insulting Katie?"

I didn't know what to say.

She broke the awkward silence. "You could have made a difference."

Before I could decide how to respond, she walked out of the room without another word. Her exit evidently was sign enough for the students outside who were waiting to start pouring in, and I was forced to move too, even though I felt I had left something unfinished. Out in the hallway, I looked for Tsula, but she had already vanished in the crowd. I tossed my satchel on a wooden bench to collect my thoughts.

That didn't go as planned. What a wonderful mix of students for my first class! And who did this Tsula think she was? It really wasn't any business of hers how I conducted my class. And was Dave really that out of line? I didn't like what he said either, but did Tsula need to make a scene? Wasn't Katie being just a bit annoying? This was college after all. Time to grow up.

The more I thought about it the more irritated I got. This TA assignment was going to be more of a headache than I had imagined. Not a good sign. I decided the best policy, though, was to ignore Tsula's challenge for the moment. I had plenty of first-of-the-semester errands to run, anyway, enough to occupy the rest of the day, so I went straight to work and was mostly successful in keeping the headache at bay.

That night was a different story. Lying alone in my room, I was unable to keep my mind from rehearsing that class session. When I remembered the picture I'd taken, I pulled it up on my Reality glasses. It wasn't as clear as it would have been on the new wall-screen Mick and I had installed in the other room, but I didn't want to risk his coming in on me, and the image was sharp enough for my late-night eyes. I studied that dark hair,

the turn of her nose and lips, the line from her ear down her neck to the suggestive curve of her blouse, but I paused longest on the cream-colored feather and the serene intensity of her eyes. Cherokee. I was intrigued.

Her words returned to me. *You could have made a difference.* A difference? What did that mean? What did she expect? There was something in the way she said it. What was it? She said it like she was wounded, like someone had hurt her. I was suddenly disappointed in myself. Had I blown my first day? But then anger resurfaced. Who was she to judge me? I shut the glasses off and tossed them onto my desk.

Although I tried, I found I couldn't sleep. I played out different scenarios in my head. What if I had walked to the front of the class from the start, what if I had intervened earlier, what if I had held Dave in check? But I didn't do any of those things, and Tsula had challenged me. Her criticism could have been worse, though; she could have asked her questions as soon as I walked to the front of the room. She could have tried to embarrass me in front of the whole class. But she still chose to challenge me. She still presumed she knew the best thing for me to do. The thought kept bruising me, like a pebble inside my shoe.



Rather than getting there early, I showed up precisely on time for the next session and started calling roll, thereby declaring I meant business. Only two or three students didn't return. Dave, Larry, Katie, and Tsula were all there. I had practiced Tsula's name beforehand and managed to pull off a decent approximation. She smiled at the attempt.

After the roll I returned to class policies. "Although this is an engineering course and most of the assignments will be clearcut, I do like to promote group problem solving. Look around you at the others in this class. Treat this group as a think tank. Learn their names. We will be given certain tasks throughout the semester, and we are going to work on them together. We will value each person's voice." Here I looked specifically at Dave, who glared back, Katie, who looked down, and Tsula, who nodded.

I continued, "We will, of course, reward excellence. Creative ideas will always help your grade, but think tanks always work best when we allow each person to contribute his or her strengths. If you cannot agree to these terms, if you cannot treat your fellow classmates with at least a measure of respect, then I would suggest you leave now, go find a drop form, and bring it to me to sign before the end of the day."

The class stared back at me blankly, no one venturing to respond. Once I'd gotten that out of the way, I turned to reviewing the material for the week. The rest of the session ran fairly well, and over the next several meetings, to everyone's relief, we settled into a dependable routine.

I only slowly warmed up to the prospect of teaching, never entirely losing the feeling the sessions were an obligation. Tsula's presence in the course continued to be a complication; I could never relax. I had to give more to the class than I wanted, knowing she would ask the tough questions the other students did not care to ask.

"I think Dr. Stanley was dodging the real issues here," Tsula said during one memorable session, breaking the general silence after my recap of one of Dr. Stanley's recent lectures in ethics and technology. I noticed Dave roll his eyes.

"How so?" I was curious.

"I didn't feel he ever addressed how we should be using technology."

"Wasn't that the point? We each have to make the decision for ourselves?"

"Sure. There is individual responsibility, but we each should think also about our social responsibilities."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Give me an example."

"Why should we use all this fancy technology to create spellbinding games or jaw-dropping special effects in movies? What is the purpose of it all? How much time will we give to finding new ways to separate us from the real world around us, where animals are going extinct and pollution and war are still raging and children are dying of malnutrition and hunger? Are we going to get more excited about blowing someone up in a video game than we are about tracking a wolf through a living forest?"

Larry jumped in, looking over at Tsula, "You need to relax and have some fun." I saw some of the other students quietly nodding.

I continued, a little defensively, looking around at the class, "Is entertainment inherently wrong? Don't we need some downtime?"

Katie said, "I probably could spend a little less time with the games on my phone." She often would back Tsula up in an indirect way. She hadn't forgotten what Tsula had done on the first day.

Tsula wasn't finished. "The problem is people have too much 'downtime' now. They define themselves by their 'downtime' and wake up in the morning organizing their lives around it."

"What if these moments are more real to them than their regular lives?" I asked.

"Good one," someone whispered. I got a momentary charge out of the affirmation.

"That's the problem, isn't it?" Tsula continued.

"Why?"

"Because it's escapist," she said, leaning forward. "We have too many problems in the real world, for people to be playing games with no ultimate point. Technology has become the opiate of the people."

Her revision of Marx was provocative, but before I could respond, Dave spoke, "So you're hoping some solar flare will come along and fry all our tech?"

Tsula frowned back. "It might force our society to remember what is important."

I realized many in the class were not paying any attention to our argument, and those who were were just watching, curious spectators with no desire to enter the fray. I tried to divert the back-and-forth by calling on some other classmates to voice their opinions. I had to pull them into the discussion. Tsula must have realized what I was doing and backed off a little. After class, as she was getting ready to walk out, I called her by name, the only time I initiated a private conversation during the semester, and she walked over.

She had a questioning look on her face.

I asked, "What do you think we should do with technology?"

"It should be a tool, and we should use it to make the world a better place."

"Isn't that a bit simplistic?"

"Life isn't as complicated as we make it."

I said sarcastically, "So our tombstones will read, 'We could have made a difference.'"

She grinned. "Maybe."

The smile disarmed me.

She spoke again, "I'm afraid I dominated the discussion today."

"The others have just as much of an opportunity to speak. Don't worry about it. I doubt they have given these topics as much thought as you have."

“My parents taught me to speak up for what I think is right.”

“I’m curious,” I started. “Have you ever played an online game?”

“I’ll have to confess I’ve never really played any video games. In high school I had friends who tried to get me to play, and I tried some games that responded to body motions. The dance game was a little fun.”

“You admit to having fun?”

She ignored me. “I never really saw much of a point.”

I defended, “Role-playing games are like an interactive story. If you get some creative people behind them, they can be just as immersive as a good book.”

“You get to be a part of the story?”

“Yes. My favorite games have always been a mix of role-playing and strategy, those that tell a good story. They create a world you can live in and enjoy. If you want to stop following the story and just explore a place in the game, you have that opportunity too.”

“Again, isn’t that escapist?”

“It depends on what you want,” I defended again. “If you want to ignore the world around you, you can turn anything you do in that direction.”

“I’ve gotta run,” she said, moving toward the door. “I don’t have much time for lunch before my next class.”

“Would you like...” I started to ask her to lunch, but caught myself.

“What?” She looked back over her shoulder.

“Nothing. See you next time.”

She smiled, and I watched her walk out, admiring the hug of her jeans. In the quiet following, I couldn’t decide whether I was more relieved or sad to see her go.



The semester progressed, and despite how Tsula vexed me, I remained keenly aware of how we both shared the same campus. On those days when Dr. Stanley lectured, I was required to sit toward the front with the other TAs, for he would sometimes call on us to demonstrate a principle. It was also an understood honor we were separated from the undergraduates who populated the rest of the lecture hall. Before class, though, I often would stand looking up at the seats, and I could spot Tsula when she came in. I knew the dark hair and her slender form. I could identify her walk and generally how she dressed. Occasionally she would spot me and wave—what I thought was a polite, distant wave.

Despite what you might think, a university campus can be large enough so you don't see someone even if you are looking for them. I only bumped into Tsula once outside the classroom. I was headed into the engineering computer lab, and she was rushing out, a stack of books in her hands, and we almost collided.

"Sorry," she said, and when she recognized me, she seemed embarrassed.

"In a hurry?" I asked.

"I've got a deadline." I noticed the topmost book in her arms was titled *The Return of the Wolf*.

"What're you reading?"

"I'm tracking the wolf population in the United States over the last fifty or so years."

"Wolves?"

"It's a project for one of my classes. I'm a biology major, with a zoology emphasis," she offered as explanation.

I nodded.

"Have you ever seen a wolf?" she interjected.

"I've seen a fox or two run across the road, and I've seen all sorts of animals in the zoo, but I don't think I've ever seen a wolf."

"You really should. They're beautiful creatures," she said, her amber eyes fixed on me.

"I take it you've seen one."

"I've had a chance to follow a pack and watch the alphas interact with the rest of the pack."

"Alphas?" I asked.

"Every pack has its leaders. There is an alpha female and male guiding each pack. Different alphas have different styles of leadership, different personalities. Wolves are social animals, and each has a way of contributing to the survival of the pack at one time or another."

"Sounds fascinating." I couldn't come up with a better reply at the moment.

"But I need to go turn my paper in," she said, a bit apologetically.

I stepped to the side to let her pass. "Then I'll see you in class." After watching her disappear in the crowd in the hall, I finally entered the lab.



The end of the semester eventually came, and my class gathered for their final exams. If you've never seen a group of people take a difficult test, it can be quite entertaining, with the frowns of concentration, the furious writing, and the poor soul who is constantly blowing his nose. I went into the class looking forward to finishing up this responsibility, and as each student turned in his or her assignment, I grinned. We were playing "and then there were none." I admit I breathed a sigh a relief when Dave walked out the door.

After an hour there were only three remaining, and Tsula was among them. I suddenly felt a tinge of regret, looking at the mostly empty classroom. I didn't understand it. Despite my resistance, our little group had formed a bond of sorts over those months together. I put down my work and watched the final three. When Tsula gathered her things together and walked forward to turn in her work, I stood, whispering, "Thank you," as we she handed me her paper. She smiled, paused a moment, then turned and passed through the doorway.

Returning to my seat, I held her paper in my hand, admiring her handwriting. Some sign of her presence remained behind. I flipped through it and was thrilled to discover a quick note at the bottom. "Thanks for a great semester. I trust one day you will make a difference!"

She spared a thought for me at the end—was it a note of admiration? Certainly hope. Again I was confused. My dominant feeling was I had lost something I didn't want to lose. Would I see Tsula again? I knew already she hadn't signed up for the course I was TAing in the spring. Would I see her on campus? But then I doubted. Did I really want more complications? Shouldn't I just quit while I seemed to be ahead? The semester had been exhausting.

The end of the semester was "crunch time" as I struggled to get my studies completed, to get those exams graded on time, and to keep up with my new programming job off campus. It is a fog now, but one image stands out clearly. My subconscious evidently understood my commitments better than I did, for in that last week, it brought me one of the most vivid dreams I've ever had.

Tsula and I were out walking in the woods, autumn leaves drifting around us. As animated as ever, she was arguing wolf habitat was again in danger, despite successful

efforts in the past to bring their numbers back from the brink of extinction. An eerie howl suddenly sounded above and beyond us, distracting my attention. As I looked in the distance for the creature who claimed dominion over the woods, I realized night had come upon us and I no longer heard Tsula's voice in my ear. Turning back toward her, I discovered she was no longer with me; I was alone in the woods in the dark. The howl sounded again much closer, and I started to run. A presence was gaining on me; I felt the hot breath on the back of my neck. I tried to run faster, but my legs were caught in honey. Darkness overtook me, and I struggled, swimming with no destination, nothing to hold onto. But then the darkness gave way to an approaching light, until all that was left before me was one shining cream-colored feather.

3

BITTEN

“DO YOU THINK IT’S WISE TO GO IN THERE, MS. WASHINGTON?” he asked, pulling aside the last wooden beam to expose the hidden weakness in the stone wall—a gaping hole and black emptiness beyond.

“I don’t think we have much choice. Process of elimination. This has to be the spot we’re looking for,” she answered, catching only a glimpse of Ahmed’s face in her lantern’s flickering light before he passed through the hole and disappeared into the tunnel.

“The dangers of working with a partner,” she whispered to herself, “but I don’t have much of a choice.” Taking a deep breath, Brie ducked her head and jumped after him, landing softly on the other side. Though the tunnel had looked expansive at the opening, Brie found she had to stoop slightly now she was inside.

Ahmed, who had walked forward several yards, turned back, his own lantern momentarily blinding her. When her eyes focused again, she saw he was standing, without having to crouch, right next to her, his khaki-colored shirt and pants hanging loosely about him, framing the golden skin of his bald head and arms. Behind circular spectacles, his restless eyes kept moving from the path ahead back to her.

“I wonder if this is how it’d smell if you were buried alive?” he asked.

“A pleasant thought,” Brie responded sarcastically.

Ahmed grinned, his dark goatee accentuating a twisted smile.

“Are you sure you can handle this, Professor?” Brie continued.

“As I already told you, I have to find my wife.” His voice was devoid of emotion. “It’s been three days now. The more time, the less chance I’m going to find her alive.”

“This is not going to be pretty.”

“We will find what we will find,” he said, then turned and started to follow the tunnel downward, no longer waiting on her.

“Yes, we will,” she whispered, her hand checking the placement of the long-barrel shotgun in her shoulder harness before she followed.

Brie watched closely as Ahmed descended, his stride tight, but quick, his lantern bouncing, releasing his shadow to dance on the wall and ceiling. All was quiet except for the shuffle of their feet and for Ahmed’s raspy wheeze. The incline ran steadily down for several minutes before easing and finally leveling off. Glancing backward, Brie noted the long climb back to where they had started; they were committed now. When she turned back around, she noticed Ahmed had paused his advance and was twisting his head one way and then the other, lifting his ears. She resumed her pace, but before she caught up to him, he stepped forward again, and this time she lost his shadow. In a few steps, she confirmed he had passed out of the tight tunnel into some larger chamber, immeasurably large since their light failed to reach the ceiling or the far walls.

“I’ve got a bad feeling about this,” Ahmed whispered.

Brie was looking up, wondering how large a space they were in, when she heard a rush, a thud, a man’s yell, and the crash of glass. As she turned, she lifted her lantern with one hand and reached for her shotgun with the other. A hairy shadow had Ahmed pinned to the ground, and the thin man was frantically trying to hold the shadow back as it continued to lunge at him. The snapping sound told Brie she only had seconds. Quickly and quietly, she placed her own lantern on the ground and reached up to steady the shotgun. Just before she had pulled it into position, she heard Ahmed howl in pain.

With the gun lifted, she shouted, trying to keep her voice from breaking, “Here!”

The shadow did not respond, so Brie fired one barrel in its direction, keeping her aim high so that she did not accidentally hit Ahmed. The edge of the blast evidently did find its mark, for the creature lurched to the side with a guttural grunt, leaving Ahmed to scramble back, blood soaking his shirt and arms. The creature turned, and Brie finally made out its face, the long lupine snout, the fiery eyes, the pointed ears, which twisted low and outward when it spotted her.

“Werewolf,” Brie spat, holding firmly onto her shotgun.

The werewolf growled, tensed, and then sprang toward her, high into the air, arms extended and mouth open. She fired the second barrel at point-blank range into the creature’s head and chest. It collapsed into a bloody heap just before reaching her.

“Professor,” she called while rushing to Ahmed’s side.

His head low, breathing hard, his right hand gripping his left forearm, he did not open his eyes for her. She quickly noted, beyond the bloodied shirt, deep gashes in his chest, but it was the arm that concerned her, the wrist and hand were twisted at a wrong angle, and blood flowed past his fingers. Though she reached to examine Ahmed’s arm, she could not move his hand.

“Did it bite you?” she asked.

Ahmed did not answer.

“Did it bite you?” she repeated, pulling stronger on his good hand. When she finally broke his grip, he groaned and fell on his side. There were deep holes in his arm, and white bone could be seen. His mangled arm was definitely broken.

She cursed, as she unbuttoned her long-sleeved blouse. When she finished pulling it free, she used it to wrap Ahmed’s arm, and he moaned at each touch. His breathing had slowed, and he was going limp in her arms.

“Don’t pass out on me!” Brie shouted.

Ahmed’s eyes flicked open for a second, and then they rolled back.

Hearing movement nearby, she tensed and looked back. Her lantern still sat where she had left it, only feet away, and its yellow light flashed over a massive ball of thick, brown fur hunched over the werewolf she had just shot. The creature nudged and sniffed the bloody carcass and whined when it received no greeting. Carefully, Brie laid Ahmed down and reached for her pistol, but at that moment Ahmed groaned, and the ball of fur lifted its head, bringing its face into the light. This werewolf was much larger than the first. As it focused on Brie, its lips pulled back to expose fangs and gums, thick grayish saliva dripping down. Over the barrel of her pistol, Brie watched it closely from her crouching position near Ahmed. The creature did not move, did not make a sound, but remained coiled, ready to strike.

Keeping her hands tightly around the gun, Brie stood.

The werewolf jumped, and Brie pulled the trigger, but as the light went out with a crash, Brie discovered the creature had not leaped at her, but her lantern. In the darkness that followed, Brie fired again and again.



“You’ve got a sweet setup here, mate,” Uncle Jack observed, as he leaned back on the cheap sofa and kicked off his sandals. My uncle knew how to make himself “at home” just about anywhere. This was his first visit to my apartment, not long after the semester began, just weeks after I’d first met Tsula. Mick was out, and I was showing my uncle around.

He frequently called me “mate.” Once when I asked him why he did, he said it was a sailor thing. He had spent several years in the Navy, but I had a suspicion it was also a result of his year stationed in Australia. He always said the word with just a hint of an accent.

“I don’t know how you’re going to get a Ph. D. with this wall-screen greeting you every time you enter your place.”

“Thanks for the encouragement,” I said.

“So you’re going to tell me you haven’t played *Transylvania Nights VII* any time when you could have been studying? You haven’t played it late into the night and fallen asleep in class the next day?” His voice was searching and teasing.

“I did miss the first session of the class I’m TAing,” I confessed. Uncle Jack always could draw me out.

“I knew it!” he declared like a lawyer who’d just gotten a witness to reveal the crucial piece of evidence. “I’ll give you six months and then you’ll abandon this foolhardy plan and go work full time.”

“No,” I defended. “I’m committed to this degree.”

“And how does it fit into your plan of being a great video game designer?”

“I want to be the expert in my field.”

“Is that you or your dad talking, mate?” he asked, his eyes narrowing.

“You know Dad doesn’t want me working for a video game company.”

“You don’t need this degree to work at Tsunami.”

“But if I’m going to design the ground-breaking tech necessary to pull Immersive Reality off the ground, I need to know my field better than anyone else.”

“You are your father’s son,” he said finally and then pursued another idea. “Immersive Reality? Is that what you’re calling it now?” He seemed genuinely intrigued.

“I think my idea is a game changer, one that will put Virtual Reality to shame.”

“Wow! Someone thinks highly of himself,” he said, a large grin spreading across his face.

A scraping sound at the door told me Mick was back unexpectedly. A second later the door opened to confirm his return. He had a startled look on his face.

“Sorry, Mick, I didn’t get a chance to tell you my uncle was popping in for a visit.”

He was silent.

“I brought Don a copy of *Team Cobalt*. We were just going to get it cranked up. Would you care to join us?” My gregarious uncle was always pulling people in. He and Mick did share that in common.

“Yes, I would love to see the new game.” Mick had recovered. He had met my uncle briefly the year before, but they did not have much time to talk.

After Mick put his stuff away and rejoined us, we started.

Mick asked, “So are you the one who keeps Don in the latest games?” Mick had met my parents and heard me defend my plans to them several times on the phone. He’d also heard me talk about Uncle Jack too.

“I may have taught him to sail, but he is the captain of his own ship these days,” I heard him say, as we were thrust into the game’s opening scene—some tropical jungle, perhaps in Central America, our avatars dressed in soldier jungle gear.

My uncle was being modest. He and I would meet online just about every weekend, and had done so for years; we didn’t spend much time talking before we would jump into our latest game. We had explored all sorts of worlds together; we had been pirates, car thieves, superheroes, and soldiers of various stripes. Those were memories I treasured. He had been my mentor of sorts and without his help, I don’t know how I would have survived my childhood.



I was five years old when the massive, tiger-like dog came bounding around the azalea toward me. I did not run, for I thought it had come to play. My mother was visiting with someone who was sick, one of her “charity cases,” as my father called them, and I was in the yard kicking around my soccer ball with the daughter of the woman my mother was

treating, a girl who was taller than I was, smudges on her face, her hair in pig tails. Though my mother had asked me to stay close by, I don't think she realized how strong my little legs were. After a game winning kick, my ball rolled down the hill into a yard with more sand than grass.

"Be careful!" the girl yelled, as I started to run after my ball.

"I'll be al'right," I shot back at her. What did she know anyway?

The ball had slowed, but it was still rolling, and I wandered far. I did look back once to see the girl, shaking her head, her pig tails swinging, her hands on her hips.

My ball came to rest finally next to a car, in the space where a wheel should have been, and I was curious (all of our cars had wheels) and ran my finger along the ridges in the rusty studs that jutted out. I heard the thunderous bark first, and I did not know what it was until the dog cleared the azalea, its heavy paws throwing dust up behind it. The next events could not have taken much time at all, but whenever I rehearse them today, the images always creep; the dog is ever closing in on me—its brindle coat, black stripes on orange, one incongruous patch of white on its chest, the chain collar, and that drooping face with hanging jowls, as if it had been made of melting cheese.

As it neared, I held up my ball, inviting it to play, but its dark mouth opened wide, clamped down on the ball, and shook it with a ferocity that startled me. I heard the girl with pig tails scream behind me, and then I knew pain. The slobbery mouth was around my arm, and I could not pull away. I stood transfixed, looking into its eyes, observing something I'd never seen, a wild predatory spirit, and I was its prey. Although I did not fight, the dog did not let up, and under the pressure, I felt my arm snap. Darkness crept in, and I struggled to breathe.

I heard voices around me and recognized my mother's. Someone was on top of the dog in front of me, hammering at the back of its neck, yelling at it. "Let go! Let go!"

When the jaws finally released, I fell to the ground. I do not remember what happened next, only the warm firmness of someone's—my mother's?—arms around me, carrying me to safety.

I opened my eyes next when I was in the car. We were speeding down the road, and she was on the phone with my father. I hazarded a look at my arm, which I couldn't feel, and discovered my mother had already wrapped it. My hand was blue, though, with a streak of dried blood my mother had missed, and the angle of my arm wasn't right.

Before I knew it, we were at the hospital, pulling past the sign reading “emergency” and up to the curb where a man dressed in white was waiting. He opened the car door, reached in, and lifted me into a wheelchair. Within seconds, he pushed me through the automatic door and into the hospital, as my mother came running up behind us. There were others in the emergency room waiting, but my parents had the quick track, and the man in white immediately wheeled me back beyond another door he opened by hitting a large metallic button on the wall. Cold air surrounded me, and I was shivering by the time I reached a room.

My father intercepted us at the doorway, his voice the only thing I could hold onto in this strange world. “Donovan, everything is going to be okay. Dad is here, and I’m going to make everything right. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” I felt his hand grip my shoulder for a second.

Then I heard my mother’s voice shaking. “Richard, I’m sorry...”

“We’ll talk about it later,” my father cut her off as we entered the room, a small one with pale florescent light and no windows.

My father’s hand was again on my shoulder. “I’m going to fix your arm, Buddy, but in order for me to do that, you’re going to have to take a nap. One of my friends is going to come in here and help me get you ready. Do you think you’re ready?”

“Yes,” I croaked, still shivering a little under the blanket he’d given me.

“You hang in there, Donovan, and everything will be okay.”

My mother grabbed my father, and they argued to the side for a little, but then he winked at her in a strange way and walked out. A nurse soon appeared, her abdomen round as a beach ball, and she talked to my mother about babies as she stuck a needle in my arm. When my father returned, another doctor was with him. While this other doctor worked in the background with the clear tubes hanging above me, my father checked on me again. My mother kissed me on the forehead, and I drifted away.

I went under thinking my father would be the one working on my arm, but years later I found out hospital and insurance policies forbade surgeons from operating on their own family members. I was shocked as a teenager to learn my father had given in to policy. If there were a way around regulations, he was the type to do it. Of course, I was also shocked to learn my father had lied to me. He, of course, said it was a “benevolent lie”

to make me feel better in a difficult situation, but when I found the truth, I began to wonder how many other such lies might have shaped my childhood.

At the time I wasn't thinking about such things. The surgery went well—my father's friend knew what he was doing—but in the succeeding hours a staph infection set in, resisting the antibiotics the surgeon had prescribed. It was my father who identified it first, but even he had difficulty getting the rest of the hospital staff to acknowledge the need for more aggressive treatment.

The next couple days were fuzzy since I was wrestling with a fever. When my eyes were closed, the nightmare of the dog attack haunted me, and when my eyes were open, my vision was soft as if I needed glasses. There was enough of me present to record impressions of my father's animated discussions with others in white coats and to feel my mother's gentle caresses across my forehead. After over a week in the hospital, I emerged mostly myself again, but my arm was scarred, the infection having undermined the surgeon's work. My mother kept telling me it would fade with time and the application of creams, and my father would nod, but I could tell he was not pleased. Today, when remembering this scene, with the knowledge of what really happened, I imagine him whispering, "I would have done a better job."

When we got home, I discovered, sort of accidentally since my parents tried to hide it from me, they had also been arguing about something else, what to do about the dog. It was the day after I came home from the hospital, and I overheard part of a phone conversation my mother had with one of her friends.

"What do you mean it's more complicated? If my son had been bitten by that dog, my husband and I would be in court demanding the dog be put down," the small voice echoed far away in my mother's cellular.

"Richard adamantly refuses to consider that option," my mother countered.

"Is he insane? Does he care what you have to say?"

My mother was silent.

Her friend continued, "What do you think, Chelsea? What if other children wander into that yard? What if the dog kills the next child? Won't that be on you and Richard?"

"You're not being fair. The dog has an owner who is responsible."

"He's already shown he's not responsible."

“Richard doesn’t think killing the dog is a solution, and I agree we should give its owner a chance to make things right,” my mother defended.

“Make things right? It broke your son’s arm. What if he’d gone after Don’s neck instead?”

“Ginny, I don’t want to have this conversation right now.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Fine. I’ll call you later.”

“OK.”

I watched as my mother lowered the phone and reached to end the call. Her hand missed the precise spot on the touchpad, and she had to try again. When she finally succeeded, she tossed the phone several feet into her purse. Standing she finally noticed me watching her from the hallway.

“I’m sorry, Donny. I don’t want you to worry about these things.”

“What things?” I asked immediately.

“About the dog.”

When I didn’t say anything, she changed tactics and distracted me with cookies and milk. It wasn’t until that evening during supper, with my father on one side and my mother on the other, illuminated by the warm light of our dining room, that I remembered the conversation.

“Dad?”

“Yes, Son, what is it?” My father was eating quickly while flipping through a stack of papers he’d brought to the table.

“You’re not supposed to have papers at the table.”

He looked at me, then at my mother, offering her a smile that looked like a balloon that had lost its helium. “No, I’m not. I’ve just got an important meeting at the hospital tonight, and I need to be ready for it.” He went back to the papers.

“Dad?”

“I told you I’m busy.” He didn’t look up this time.

“What’s going to happen to the dog that bit me?”

The hand my father was using to flip through the papers stopped in midair and came back down to rest on the table. I saw him take a breath before he lifted his head.

“Don, I don’t want you to worry about that dog. You didn’t even know he existed two weeks ago. You need to work on forgetting you ever saw him.”

“But I can’t, Dad. When I close my eyes, I still see him.”

I felt my mother’s hand warmly rest on the hand I had up on the table.

My father paused, then went on, “Sometimes bad things are going to happen to you, but you can’t let them get the better of you.”

“Shouldn’t the dog be put down?” I parroted the words I’d heard on the phone.

My father’s eyes opened wide for a second, then retreated into a frown as he again looked at my mother. “Where did he hear that?”

She defended, “Ginny called today. She’s the one who said that. Not me.”

The mantle clock tolled half past the hour.

“Don,” my father resumed, leaning in closer to me. “Killing that dog is wrong. It is a living creature, and we should have reverence for its life.” I had heard those words before. My father and grandfather often spoke of *reverence for life*. They also spoke of some great man who liked those words too. It would be years before I would connect them to the Nobel-prize-winning philosopher, doctor, and environmentalist Albert Schweitzer and his influence over them.

“But the dog hurt me.”

“We’re not going to let that dog near you again. You’re not going to have to worry about it.”

“What if he finds me?” I didn’t understand why my father wasn’t trying to protect me.

“He’s not going to find you.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “You have nothing to worry about.”

I wasn’t so sure, but I wasn’t going to argue with him any more. Already at that age, I understood what his hand on my shoulder meant. Tousling my hair, he then leaned back, finished the rest of his supper in record time, picked up his papers, and dashed out the door. When he was gone, my mother had two more cookies and another glass of milk for me.

But that night I had another nightmare. I was in my own backyard when the dog, black stripes and melting face, jumped over the hedgerow and bounded toward me again. When I turned to run, I tripped, falling hard onto the ground, and then the animal was on

me, its jaws clamping down on my shoulder. I screamed in pain, and all went to fuzzy darkness as the dream ended and I woke up in my bed, feeling my own rapid breaths and the pain still in my shoulder.

The nightmares continued until Uncle Jack visited. My father was close to his brother, even though they rarely agreed about anything. My mother would often whisper to me how funny it was that two such different people could come from the same family. While my father often wore a coat and tie, my uncle wore beach shirts and shorts, sometimes in the middle of winter. My father lived in the urban heart of Atlanta, but my uncle split his time between an efficiency apartment outside Raleigh and a beach home in the Outer Banks. And then my father never played video games, though my uncle loved them.

Uncle Jack was the one who got me hooked. During the few days he stayed with us, he had his laptop, the one he had, in his words, “tricked out” for games. At one point my parents were busy with something, as they always were, and I drifted to the doorway of the guest bedroom to find my uncle shooting virtual skeet with a plastic gun. Thinking he didn’t notice me, I watched for several minutes, impressed with his accuracy; he didn’t miss a target. Drawn in, I finally entered.

“Would you like to try?” my uncle said, handing me the gun. “I’ve got the sensor mounted just above the screen, so all you have to do is just point and shoot.”

The gun was heavier in my hand than I expected.

“There are weights inside to give it a more realistic feel, though it’s still plastic.” My uncle smiled. “Go ahead, mate. It’s perfectly safe.”

I missed the first skeet, which came out ridiculously fast.

“Hold on a sec.” He reached down, pulled up the menu, and bumped it down from “Insane” to “Easy.”

I still missed when the gray disk flew across the screen. When I failed to hit the second as well, my uncle stepped behind me and reached to help me steady my arm, saying, “Take a breath and concentrate.”

This time when the skeet emerged, he helped me pull the trigger at the exact moment, and I yelled in satisfaction, “I did it. I did it.”

“You sure did, kid.”

He took a step back and sat on the bed while I focused on repeating my success. I knocked out about half of the targets before the game ended and displayed my score.

“How’d I do?” I turned around to check with Jack.

He winked at me. “You’re a natural.”

“May I do it again?”

I did a better job the second time around. When my score danced across the screen this time, my uncle stepped forward and accessed the menu again.

“There’s another level to this game I want to show you.”

He gently lifted the gun from my hand. The screen flickered and then something started moving. It looked like we were driving a Jeep in a dark jungle, large green fronds flashing by, and something was chasing us. When I saw the white teeth, I froze; something was trying to bite me. I suddenly felt cold. Yet at that moment Uncle Jack fired his gun; there was a small red flash, and as the biting thing slumped and fell, I realized it was a dinosaur.

“You OK?” I heard my uncle say. He had paused the game and was looking at me. I was breathing more heavily than usual.

“Yeah,” I squeaked through a dry throat.

“It’s your turn.” He handed the gun back to me.

I was surprised how much I welcomed it back. When he resumed the game, I jerked the gun wildly, missing my target.

“Focus,” Uncle Jack said.

Someone was calling my name, but the only thing I knew in the moment was that pulling that trigger silenced the gnashing teeth before me. I kept firing.

“Donovan! Donovan!” My mother’s voice sounded behind me. Then I saw her hands take the gun from mine. “Jack, while you’re here, I hope you’ll respect our rules.”

I saw my uncle lean back. “It’s not real.”

“You know what your brother thinks.” My mother was quiet in her anger; somehow that made it worse.

“The boy needs an outlet.”

My mother walked up to him and placed the gun in his hands. “Not this.” Then she escorted me out, hoping to lead me away from temptation, but I had already heard its call. That night I slept peacefully; it was weeks before I realized the nightmares were gone.



Uncle Jack also introduced me to *Transylvania Nights*. Those first years he and I would have to wait for hidden moments when we could indulge in our shared interest; it would be months before I could play video games. My parents never approved of them; they said they were a waste of time and only encouraged the thought that violence was the only way to solve our problems. After the confrontation with my mother and a conversation that evidently occurred later between him and my father—Jack only hinted at it—my uncle was supremely careful in hiding what we were doing.

Yet in my teenage years, I pushed back. Teens rebel in many ways, and I think my parents finally acquiesced, realizing they had things pretty easy. I know later my mother felt guilty about the amount of time they left me alone for the sake of their jobs, so they finally relented, just as long as I stayed away from the “mature” titles. Uncle Jack could finally give me games openly, and the first title was *Transylvania Nights*, a cutting-edge game, advertised as the most realistic game ever.

Uncle Jack laughed when he saw the ads, “What’s realistic about a monster-hunter? They’re just glad they designed a PC game.”

“I thought it was for multiple platforms.”

“Not that PC, but PC as in politically correct.”

He was talking about the central character Brie Washington, who had African and Hispanic ancestry, who in her fictional world grew up on the streets of Durham, North Carolina. The reviewers praised how her proportions were lifelike, how her wardrobe fit her role as archaeologist and explorer, unlike certain other games that put women with exaggerated measurements into minimal clothing. The gaming studio advertised that such decisions had made the character even more popular among women gamers, while the more realistic graphics on the combat with vampires and werewolves would keep the interest of male gamers.

The game was a great success, selling record numbers and spawning sequels in succeeding years, ones I preordered and played as soon as I could get my hands on them. Each time there was a special anticipation as I explored the new plots, worked through the new mysteries, discovered which characters I could trust, put down the monsters terrorizing helpless victims, and collected the treasures they protected. The sequels were fun, but they never did equal the sensation I got playing that first game.

My father once came in on me playing it on a large wall screen, with speakers cranked up. I still remember it well. I felt self-conscious—for one thing, because I was playing a woman character, but also because I could feel the weight of his disapproval palpably on my neck and shoulders. He never said a word, though, and after watching for a while, he walked quietly out of the room. Alone again, I shrugged, shaking off his silent censure. This was my choice. At the time, I was trapped in some subterranean den, with a wounded partner, shooting werewolves in the dark, firing again and again. There was no doubt; these monsters were not going to bite me.