

EVILSpeaks

WARRIORS and WATCHERS Saga #1

S. WOFFINGTON

Evil Speaks
Warriors and Watchers Saga, Book 1

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TO BOB

The moment I contemplated that perhaps the magic called love is best left for those younger, you magically appeared and proved me wrong. You can prove me wrong anytime!

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Chapter One



“This is a bad idea, Benny,” said Maximus, eighty bucks clenched in his hand. Maximus was one of those geeky kids. His parents, knowing full well he’d be a scrawny math and science nerd—because his father was a scrawny video game developer and his mother was a scrawny chemist—decided that a gigantic name would overcome their son’s predetermined geekiness and make him a great man one day. “My parents advised me to seek a diplomatic solution to my problem.”

“You tried diplomacy. Dillon stuffed your face in a toilet filled with red dye.”

“I’m aware of that,” said Maximus, his face an orb of red atop a white stump of a neck, like a talking fairy-tale mushroom. “But you’re not mean like he is. If you get hurt, I’m resp—”

“You don’t know me, Max,” said Benny, aware that Maximus hated to be called Max, but he couldn’t be bothered with such a long name. “I’ll tell you something you don’t learn in math or science. People grow mean or calloused or cynical or solitary for all kinds of reasons. Including me.”

“That *is* science. It’s called psychology. You wouldn’t shove my face in a toilet.”

Benny grabbed the money out of Maximus’s hand and stuffed it down the front pocket of his black jeans. He had, at first, turned down Maximus’s offer of cash for defense. He had no reason to intercede in the affairs of his newest school, but the cash was his means of escape, so he agreed. “Considering I’m about to fight him on your behalf, and you’re paying me for it, your theory of my kindness is less credible.”

“Good point.”

Benny removed his sunglasses and handed them to Maximus. “You’re responsible for these. Break ’em, and it’s another eighty.” Stubble shaded his jawline because his mother had held him back when he flunked the eighth grade last year—he simply quit trying. She made him do it over—this he hadn’t expected, so now he tried just hard enough to pass. His dark wavy hair fell to his shoulders. His black tee shirt advertised his favorite band, EpicEvil, and his favorite album, *Rise Up to Extinction*, which was also the title song. An emaciated man and woman, wailing in torment, stretched tightly across his muscular chest. A prized possession, he refused to toss it, even though too small.

“Let’s go, Toad Eyes!” shouted Dillon, swirling about in his old football jersey and shorts, punching the air with his fists and hopping about on expensive tennis shoes. Dillon’s buzzed red head tilted to and fro. His large red lips, pursed amid large freckles and a pasty-white complexion, looked like a split plum thrown against a mud-spattered stucco wall. Dillon’s “Plan A” for nearby Princeton, his father’s alma mater, was to gain entry through football, but his coach, first, and then the youth football league, banned him for unnecessary roughness after he put a player in the hospital

with a concussion so serious, every time Kenny was asked to recite his name, he said “Kermit the Frog” and zapped the air with his tongue. Dillon switched to lacrosse, while his father worked on suing the youth football league. “Plan B” involved prodding (sometimes paying) others to help Dillon with homework. But what began as a lucrative tutoring business for Maximus had turned into demands for completing Dillon’s homework and writing his papers. Profitable prods soon became demands, then threats, then physical torture.

“Awooooo! Ruff! Ruff!”

Dillon’s friends howled like a pack of wolves because Benny’s first nickname at his new school was Wolf Eyes, not Toad Eyes, but the girls began using it as a compliment, cooing, “Hey, Wolf Eyes” or “Wha’s up, Woofy.” Bree, Dillon’s ex-girlfriend, even started a fad among her clique, wearing tops that she had specially printed with the green eyes of a wolf. So Dillon found a lower species with which to ridicule the “new boy.”

The name “Toad Eyes” had come from an incident in the science lab involving Blaze, the fire-bellied toad who lived in a tank. Blaze had a green-and-black back with a bright red-and-black belly, the red meant to ward off predators. Likewise, Benny had unusual eyes: half green and half reddish brown around a black iris. What’s weird—because sectoral heterochromia was not unheard of in humans or animals with round eyes—is that both reddish halves tilted at forty-five degree angles, exactly opposite to one another. It freaked people out. It used to freak Benny out.

Dillon waved his arms to stop the wolf howls and initiated croaking sounds. “Toad Eyes, Toad Eyes,” barked Dillon.

Benny clasped his hands behind his back to stretch in preparation to fight.

“Crik! Crik! Crik!” shouted the crowd waiting for the match to begin on the basketball court of a carefully selected, remote park not far from the school

Benny had researched fire-bellied toads, and besides his discovery that they were not really toads at all, but frogs, he was pleased to find they were extremely aggressive. Voracious diurnal hunters, they searched day and night for their next meal—basically, if it moved, they ate it. As Benny locked eyes with Dillon, he remembered his mistake of taunting Dillon with this information.

When Dillon entered the science room one day, he informed Mr. Shipley, the instructor, that the office needed him pronto. “It won’t take long, Mr. Shipley. I’ll monitor the class.” Mr. Shipley believed Dillon, because he was the instructor’s student assistant.

Once out of sight, Dillon boasted, “Time to test your theory, Toad Eyes. I haven’t fed Blaze for two days.” He then pulled Frizzy, the seven-inch, red-and-gray eastern milk snake from its habitat and dropped it into the tank with Blaze, full grown at two inches.

Before Benny could push Dillon’s friends and other aghast onlookers away, Blaze had gobbled half of Frizzy, head first, and continued to swallow. Benny picked Frizzy up by the tail and slid Blaze off, much like pulling meat off of a skewer of barbecued chicken. He barely had time to toss Frizzy back in his tank before Mr. Shipley returned, and Dillon apologized for misunderstanding the office’s request.

Benny had grown accustomed to taunting. His eyes made him different. And since difference was not tolerated in children beyond the age of four—that’s when kids turned mean, he discovered—Benny turned mean in defense. He’d never hit anyone, but at his last school, he had pushed a kid away more forcefully than intended, and the kid fell backward, sprained his arm and gashed his brow on a desk, requiring two stitches. Benny landed in detention, not the boy who taunted him—ceaselessly, after this incident. In detention, Benny folded his arms over his chest and ignored the lecture about “sticks and stones” and “free speech.”

“Crik! Crik! Toad Eyes!” chanted Dillon’s followers, while Bree and her followers chanted, “Wolf Eyes! Wolf Eyes!” and howled.

Benny cracked his neck, one side then the other. He stepped into the imaginary circle of battle, where he and Dillon paced slowly, sizing up the other.

“Crik! Crik! Crik!” shouted the boys. “Wolfy, Wolfy,” chanted Bree, while others—the fence-sitters—remained silent, awaiting a victor to hail.

Benny grinned. “Time to tutor you in manners, Dill Pickle!”

Maximus and his friends exploded in laughter, the girls giggled, and even Dillon’s friends cracked a smile here and there.

Dillon’s face flushed red with rage. He swung at Benny, who dodged the blow with ease.

As Dillon’s body twisted away, Benny punched him in the stomach so hard it knocked the wind out of him. Even Benny was shocked at how hard he had hit him. He stared at his own fist in disbelief.

Dillon let out a bark, gasped, doubled over and slunk back to catch his breath.

“Crik! Crik!” shouted Dillon’s friends, louder now.

“Get him, Wolf Eyes! Dill Pickle needs manners,” shouted Bree. “You’re the toad, Dillon!”

Dillon straightened up and lunged at Benny full force. The two locked forearms. As they turned each other about, Dillon tried to throw Benny over, but he could never get his leg behind Benny’s knee.

Dillon head-butted Benny, who grasped his opponent even tighter and dug his fingers into Dillon’s arm. Dillon’s eyes popped open. He wrenched this way and that trying to pull away.

A surge he’d never felt before in his life shot through every vein and artery of Benny’s body. He let out a growl and snarled in the air before smashing his head down against the bridge of Dillon’s nose. He fought to pull himself back as if two sides warred within him, one bent on total annihilation, the other on peace. At the moment of impact, Benny shoved Dillon away with a sense of having spared his life. His hands shook. His eyes shot to his adversary, already apologizing.

Dillon flew backward. His pack of friends caught him as he fell to the ground of the basketball court. A single drop of blood fell from Dillon’s nose.

“I think he broke my nose! He’s insane!” shouted Dillon, pointing a menacing finger. “Fight’s over!” He jumped to his feet, holding his nose and wincing. “My father will have you expelled!”

“Been there. Done that.” Benny wiped his brow with his forearm and eyed the crowd, who eyed him back in stunned silence. Bree and others averted his gaze. Benny offered a weak apology followed by a warning to Dillon and his bro pack. “I didn’t mean to . . . Just . . . just stay away from Maximus!”

“My father already hired a replacement—one who knows his place and follows orders.” Dillon stormed off, followed by his gang. The girls dispersed, as did the nerds, all but Maximus.

Benny reached out to take his glasses from Maximus, who stammered for something to say. He didn’t expect a thank you. It would have been oddly inappropriate, and they both knew it. “Back to diplomacy, Max. Your parents were right.”

“Dude, your eyes, the red is so bri—” A single look from Benny shut him up.

“Gotta go, Max. Ma’s waiting for me at the university.” Benny headed down the tree-lined street, reliving each new start at each of the new schools he had had over the years. This was, officially, the worst ever.

Benny named each move as a new life. He became inured to teasing by Life Number Three, calloused by Life Number Four, a loner by Life Number Six. And now, in Life Number Seven, the

transformation was complete: the butterfly had devolved into a caterpillar and tucked itself back into its cocoon where it planned to remain, insulated from the outside world.

Benny couldn't remember the exact moment when he started numbering his many panicked moves from city to city or state to state, same as the proverbial cat had numbered his nine lives. He just did it. His ma said they moved to "keep Benny safe," but in fifteen years he had never figured out safe from what, and Ma never said, not really. It had something to do with his father's death, a man he'd stopped caring about a move or two ago. Gone is gone. And that made him calloused. Proudly so. Callouses thickened the skin. They could harden the heart, too.

"My father died when I was three." That fact had rolled off Benny's tongue easily. The moment he had said it, Bree glared at him like a doctor ready to bandage a wound, and, when she asked, "How did it happen?" the pat response was, "I'd rather not talk about it," after which she gushed apologies and clawed his bulging bicep, proud of herself for having found a reason for the new boy's aloof disposition. The story then flew around the school via the Galloping Gossip Girl hotline—faster than the speed of the Internet—until his story grew into an unspeakable tragedy of such horrific proportions that it rendered Benny mute on the subject. Before the day was out, it seemed like every girl in school shot googly eyes and pointy fingers at him as they passed by. Some of them, like Bree, stood willing and ready to crack his shell by salving his unspeakable wounds with tender sympathy—which he readily accepted—but really, it became a contest and he became the prize.

Who would extract the deep, dark story from his lips?

Needless to say, girls flocked to his side. He liked this very much but pushed them back with the ease of a simple response: "I'm sorry. I just can't get close," after which they gushed, "I understand, Benny. Take your time."

Benny knew that by tomorrow, the girls would peel away, uttering some new gossip about a violent past or criminal history, no doubt.

"My father died when I was three." At first, Benny didn't believe it himself. But when repeated over and over again, it became his new truth. Solid. Affirmed.

Benny gained a sense of peace by creating new truths. He stopped trying to make new friends. Funny thing though, when he let go of people, he grew more attached to his stuff, like the tee shirt of his favorite band. But he lost stuff, too.

When running away with seconds to pack, Benny and Neeve, his mother, left stuff behind. Like furniture and televisions and bicycles. "Just leave it! We'll get a new one," Ma shouted. But there was rarely money for a new one. The number of boxes dwindled. The most recent move had whittled them down to a satchel apiece, his computer, a dartboard, two potted plants and a clunker car: a rusty faded-yellow box with dull headlamps that had once been a taxi.

New starts were easier when he was the "invisible" student, the kid no one paid attention to, but his eyes made that impossible. Dudes inspected him with scrutiny the moment he stepped onto their turf. He was sure girls did the same with "new girls" on their turf. Checking out the competition. Benny had enough experience to know that if the girls ignored him, so, too, would the boys.

Invisibility became impossible the moment Bree and her chick click flocked around him. That necessitated the boys pulling him into their bro pack where they could keep tabs on him. Once a part of the pack, Benny would be bound and obliged by the unwritten "bro code" to stay away from the girls, at least the ones Dillon and his friends had identified as "theirs." As a bonus, if Benny joined one of their sports, the team could use his callous disposition to thrash their opponents.

But, by this time, Benny was no team player. And if he wasn't with the bro pack, he was against them. Not that it mattered now. He'd done it. He'd whittled himself down to not needing anyone or anything—even Ma. He'd planned on leaving after finals, which he'd planned on passing as a final

goodwill gesture. It's why he took Max's eighty bucks. To get away. Far away. To disappear. Now, he didn't care. He'd leave tonight after dark.



A black shark of a car turned the corner into the Chambers University campus. Luigi, the driver, rolled down his window and yanked the steering wheel hard left. The wheel grazed his pudgy belly as the car swerved to the opposite side of the road in pursuit of a slim, long-haired blonde carrying a load of books. He ignored oncoming drivers honking and shouting and maneuvering around him and lowered the tinted window.

"Hey, baby. It's a dangerous world. Let me give you a lift?"

The girl picked up her pace, nose in the air. "You're out of your league, you maladroit, undesirable cretin."

From the passenger seat, Antonio, a simpleminded man with slicked-back hair, asked, "What did she say? Must be a foreign student."

Luigi didn't answer. He swerved back to the other side of the road, allowing a dark grin to creep across his face. He exhaled a black fog that escaped through the window and swirled toward the girl. It formed the shape of Luigi and walked alongside the blonde.

The moment the girl turned her head, and shock and horror filled her blue eyes, the foggy image grinned and shoved her into a patch of bloodroot. Her fall decapitated the last white flower of the season. Her books flew into the air. A nearby groundskeeper turned to grouch, catching what he thought was a smile in a patch of black smoke that evaporated before his eyes.

"Like I said," Luigi muttered as he pulled the car to a stop along the curb. "It's a dangerous world."

"You sure she's here, boss?"

Luigi patted some papers lying between them on the seat. "Got her class schedule." He scanned the passersby for any sign of Anna Neeve Adez. "Someone's helping her. Just keep your eyes open."

"Then what?"

"Then, she leads us to the boy. He wants Benny. He wants his grandson."



Inside a tiny university office, Neeve, known as Sophia Smith by her professor, shifted uncomfortably as Professor Daniel Archer Daniels III poured himself a cup of hot water to make tea.

Dark circles hung below Neeve's fiery green eyes. She ran long, graceful fingers through unruly waves of red hair, a contrast to her drab attire: a white tank top, Bermuda shorts and cheap tennis shoes.

"Sure you won't join me for a nice cup of tea?" asked Professor Daniels, who sounded English, but wasn't, due to the fact he had spent a few academic years at Harvard and the way he sharply articulated every syllable. "Earl Grey," he added as he peeled the paper from a teabag and dunked it in his Chambers University mug.

Besides tall cases crammed with books and a floor stacked with even more books and papers, the walls held a grotesque combination of tribal masks, a world map stuck with pins, and several pictures of the professor, years younger—but with the same wild brown hair and bulging, brown bug eyes—standing next to primitive tribes and mammoth cave entrances. Human bones covered his desk.

“Maybe next time, Professor Daniels. Nice pictures. You look more at ease in them than in your lectures.”

Professor Daniels nestled his cup between a femur and a skull. He sat behind his desk, all the while dipping his tea bag up and down, up and down, as if counting the exact number of dips that would render the perfect brew. “Is it that obvious? I’m afraid you’re right. I am more at home in the field. Please, call me Daniel.”

“I mean . . . I love your lectures, too. I’m sorry if I—”

“Tut, tut, don’t apologize. As a scientist, I appreciate keen observation. You may not know this, but I have a PhD in forensic cultural anthropology and a master’s in comparative mythology.” He held the tea bag over the cup to let it drain. “Until discredited, that is, and made a laughing stock in the scientific community by a . . . well, it doesn’t matter. I’ll prove her wrong, if it’s the last thing I do.” He hurled the tea bag into the trash can, then sipped his tea in gentlemanly silence. “Ah, well, I’m grateful to be here. Teaching anatomy at the nurses’ school pays the bills.”

Neeve grabbed the femur and stuffed it into an unzipped duffle bag sitting by her feet. “I really appreciate your letting me take these home to study. I promise I’ll be ready for the exam on Friday.”

“I’m sympathetic. Just an old softie, really.” The professor leaned forward. “I see the effort you’re putting in, Sophia. It’s not easy to transfer to a new program—weeks before finals, no less. Frankly, I don’t know how you pulled it off. What’s your secret? Friend in the Dean’s Office?”

“No time for friends.” Neeve picked up the skull. “Except for my buddy, here, but he doesn’t talk much.”

The professor wagged a finger of warning. “Just be careful who sees you with those. I don’t know about your neighbors, but the lady next door to me is quite handy with a pair of binoculars.”

“Why? What did she do?”

“She overreacted, that’s what she did! A few months ago, I brought Harry home and—”

Holding a spine with a rib cage attached, Neeve froze. “Harry? The cadaver, Harry?”

“Why not? He lives on a cart with foldable wheels.”

“Technically, Professor, he doesn’t live at all.”

“Oh, you know what I mean, Sophia. It was late. I was prepping him for a midterm, and I was tired. I decided to take my work home. You know—homework.” Professor Daniels set his cup down to free his hands for embellishing the story. “I simply rolled him into the back of my station wagon, and off we went. It was past midnight when I got him home. And there I was, minding my own business, eating my freshly delivered pizza and sticking Harry with pins with numbered flags for identification on the morning exam, when the police burst into my kitchen, guns drawn. I nearly put out Harry’s eye.”

“Poor Harry,” said Neeve, putting the last item, a foot, into her bag and zipping it up.

“The brutes threw me up against the wall and patted me down like some kind of common criminal. The dean had to come over and straighten it all out. I nearly lost my job.”

“I’ll be careful, and I promise to take good care of these.” Neeve stood up to leave. “I’ve gotta go. My son is waiting for me.”

“I didn’t know you had a son. A boy needs a man around. I volunteer. Those are my initials, you know. D-A-D.” He laughed in a way that was harmless. “How’s he taking the move? That can be hard on a child.”

“It’s been rough for him. We lost Benny’s father when Benny was three. Since then, we’ve moved a lot, and . . . I don’t know . . . hormones, I guess. He’s fifteen. Angry a lot, mostly at me.”

Professor Daniels rushed around his desk to help hoist the heavy bag onto Sophia’s shoulder. “I’m here anytime you need me.”

“Thanks, Professor. I mean, Daniel. You’re a good man.”

“What a pretty necklace—unusual . . . ancient markings . . . but I’ve never seen them together.”

Neeve fingered the necklace. A circle of symbols surrounded a hand whose fingertips came together, enclosing a round red gem that floated freely in its palm.

“A gift from a friend who once gave me shelter in a storm. Well, I gotta go.”

Professor Daniels backed away, blushing. “Take care of my bones. I don’t give them to just anyone, you know.” He laughed at his own stupid joke.

A knock upon the open door made them turn their heads. “Ready, Ma?”

“Professor Daniels, this is my son, Benedito. Benny for short.”

Professor Daniels blushed and extended a hand, which Benny reluctantly accepted and shook.

“A pleasure, young man. Your mother is a hardworking student, as I’m sure you are as well.”

“Naturally,” said Benny.

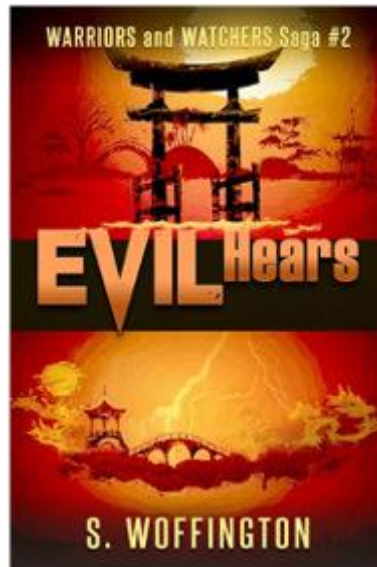
An earthquake rumbled beneath their feet. Professor Daniels gasped with the delight of a child having found a lost treasure. He raced to his computer and hit a shortcut key on his desktop screen that opened a site dedicated to seismic activity. The earthquake map showed simultaneous earthquakes around the globe. Daniels glanced at the world map on the wall—the pins coincided with the locations of the earthquakes, all but one, the one that shook his office. A news feed popped up on his screen. He opened it.

An Italian female reporter with horror and shock on her face pointed to the ruins of the Roman Forum behind her. A rocket-like column of fire shot into the sky. “Not ten minutes ago, an explosion rocked the Roman Forum, which you see behind me. There are no natural gas lines in the vicinity. Therefore, investigators suspect vandals or terrorists have set the explosion that continues to burn.”

“That’s awful,” said Neeve, but Daniels didn’t respond, so she added, “See you tomorrow, Professor.” She and Benny slipped out the door.

Professor Daniels noted the epicenter. He rose from his desk and stuck a pin in upstate New York. “That’s impossible. We would not have felt it this far away.” He glanced at the pin stuck in Rome, Italy, and removed a postcard just below it. He stared at the image, a marble relief of Marcus Curtius, a Roman soldier upon his horse, both in full regalia, stepping downward into a chasm in the forum believed to be an entrance to Tartarus, the underworld. “What in blazes—pun intended—is going on?”

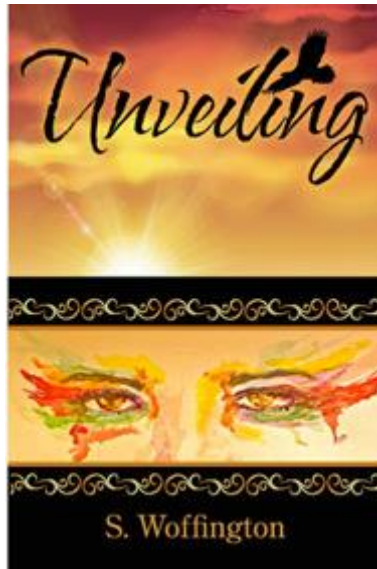
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What would you sacrifice to fulfill your destiny?

Sara—a spirited, young Saudi woman—is passionate about preserving and expressing her ancient heritage through her art. But this seemingly simple goal puts her at odds with her prominent family and the traditions of her heritage, which demand she veil her artist’s eyes. Forced to choose between her two greatest passions, Sarah escapes to America, only to find that unveiling entails far more than the removal of a black piece of cloth. This act of defiance thrusts Sara into a perilous triangle involving family, government, and a relentless suitor. Only by finding the courage to unveil her own heart can she paint her destiny.

About the Author

S. Woffington is the daughter of an oil Landman and a housewife. She lived abroad in her twenties: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; London, England; Rome, Italy. These early opportunities gave her a thirst for adventure, a desire to understand cultures other than her own, and a quest to paint page after page with words that capture it all. Woffington was a member of Sol Stein's Chapter One writer's group, which inspired her ambition to write. She attended the University of California at Irvine, where she completed the Humanities Honors Program. Woffington's honors thesis won distinction as "The Most Outstanding." Woffington then attended Chapman University and obtained two masters degrees: MFA in Creative Writing and MA in English. Her debut novel *Unveiling* received Honorable Mention from Writer's Digest SP e-book awards. Woffington lives in southern California. She works as a middle school teacher and a free-lance developmental editor. She is currently working on the Warriors and Watcher's Saga series, an epic mythological fantasy.