

FLASH VISIONS

John R. Monteith



Stealth Books

Nate raised the nose of the alpha he had named Rex. Unimaginative, he admitted, but concise. Blessed with enormity at over one hundred pounds, Rex, the king, led the pack.

Scents of small animals caressed a canine snout, but the blood-scent of the white-tailed deer carcass Nate had planted across a rival pack's territorial boundary enticed Rex. The wolf hesitated, and Nate allowed him a final sniff for adversarial scouts. Nothing.

He let Rex glance over his shoulder, and through lupine eyes, he viewed starry brilliance above the tree line. In the wilderness of Northern Michigan, the night sky escaped urban light pollution and offered the wolf a crisp view. Lowering the beast's gaze, Nate saw six subordinate males crouched in the grass awaiting their leader's move.

Nate released a growl from Rex's throat, summoning the party forward. Forepaws brushed cool grass, and claws dug into hard dirt. A spike of adrenaline told Nate that his experimental wolf knew that he had crossed into enemy territory for the bounty that would fill his empty stomach.

Shoulders chugging... heartbeat rising... lungs expanding... haunches springing... sprinting within Rex's body. A sick childhood had left Nate's body frail, and although his brother had coached him to health through nutrition and exercise, he felt like an invalid reborn within the lively Rex.

The wolf spied the deer carcass silhouette and darted toward the meal. Nate sensed anxiety as the wolf stopped in rival territory to feed. Hunger drove Rex as he sank his fangs through the hide and ripped away entrails.

"No," Nate said in his human-lupine mind.

Rex released the flesh and growled at his hunting mates as they tore into the meat. Most of them stopped, but Nate had Rex pounce in silence on a youngster who ignored or misunderstood his cessation command. The adolescent recovered, faced Rex, and growled, but then it came to his senses and lowered his gaze.

"Drag," Nate said.

Rex sank his incisors into the back of the doe's neck, lowered his body, and yanked. His paws slipped in the grass, but the deer budged. His companions realized his intent and joined him. Impressed by the strength of combined canine jaws and shoulders, Nate withdrew the pack back into Rex's territory with dinner.

He then raised his snout, and sought scents in the wind.
Enemy scouts.

The rival pack's patrol would reconstruct the crime scene from the deer's blood trail bisecting their territorial boundary. What challenge the approaching sentinels would pose to Rex remained uncertain, but Nate considered it someone else's problem.

"Wait for the new master," Nate said into his wolf-human mind. *"He is coming."*

He looked up to a video camera strapped to a pine branch, planted Rex's tail on the earth, and raised a paw to his ear in salute. He extracted his consciousness and returned to his body within the control center of his brother's cabin.

He awoke three miles away and blinked. The leather scent of his meditation bed confirmed that he had returned to his human self.

"You're back in the basement, Nate."

His wife's amplified voice sounded authoritative. He had married Christina for her beauty, brains, and boldness. He welcomed her presence as his lab control technician and as his veterinarian – a useful player on a team that embeds receivers into the skulls of animals like Rex.

"Got it," he said. "Normal self-extraction?"

"Yeah," Christina said. "Can we skip the post-extraction report and hurry? Leo's ready."

"Right," Nate said. "I'm okay. Send him in."

From his semi-reclined position, Nate lifted the soft helmet that sensed and magnified his brainwaves, and then he lowered it to the pinioned arm beside the bed. As he rolled to the ground, his

sneakers thudded the concrete floor, and he heard the soundproof polycarbonate door click open.

His younger brother, Leo, eclipsed the room's sterile white overhead lighting with his broad shoulders. Before Nate could stand and stretch out his stiffness, his brother whipped by him and launched his buttocks onto the bed.

"My turn," Leo said.

Nate twisted and reached for the soft helmet, but Leo ripped it from his hands.

"You've trained me for this bro," Leo said. "Just get behind the glass with our better halves and let's push this envelope."

Nate stepped through the door and latched it shut behind him, leaving his brother alone on the floor. Pride swelled within him as he realized that his brother, the superhuman former submarine naval officer, martial artist, and self-made millionaire who seemed to cheat death for a hobby, delighted in his apprentice role for Nate's cybernetic animal control experiments.

He nudged his wife aside and sat before the control panel. Through the transparent polycarbonate, he watched his brother recline and raise his thumb. Leo's voice crackled through the loudspeaker.

"I'm ready, bro," Leo said.

"I don't like this," a woman said.

Nate glanced at his sister-in-law, Linda, who stared at her husband through the glasslike wall.

"He'll be okay," Nate said. "It's just a training run. He's controlled animals before."

"Not a wolf. Just little furry things. Why don't you practice hot swapping chipmunks or house cats?"

"It was his idea to skip the useless animals and work with predators. He's getting more excited about this than me. Hot swapping allows teams of human controllers to handle the animal over limitless terrain with no need to mess with their sleep, hunting, eating or mating schedules. Just constant twenty-four-seven control."

"So what? Who cares?"

“Picture an expendable and cheap force of animals working search and rescue in hostile territories. Picture them finding the bad guys in faraway lands or even at home. Pick the part of the world, then pick the species. And if the animal is capable enough, as we’ve proven enough times, it can serve as its own attack force. This is the next stage in animal cybernetics.”

Linda pouted and then opened her mouth, but Leo’s voice in the loudspeaker cut off his wife’s protesting.

“Let’s do this, bro. Time’s working against us.”

“Okay, your vitals are good,” Nate said as he pressed a button to relay his voice. “Preparing ten milligrams of serum. Ready, Leo?”

“Been ready!”

“Injecting.”

Nate heard a servomotor whir and watched cool stainless steel press against his brother’s arm.

The undulating of Leo’s chest slowed with an eerie chemical efficiency and, against the backdrop of jagged conical slices of soundproofed foam covering the concrete bunker of a basement, the vision reminded Nate of cruel psychotherapy.

He stared too long at his brother, and Christina had to break his daydream.

“He’s connected,” she said.

Nate scanned the liquid crystal displays before him. Leo’s pulse had accelerated, followed by his respiratory rate. A glance through the wall showed his brother breathing faster than normal – inspired by the metabolism of the wolf.

The signal quality of the transceiver mounted atop the cabin showed a two-way, transmit-and-receive lock, where the wire embedded under Rex’s scalp momentarily stored electromagnetic energy from the transceiver, blended it with the wolf’s mental energy, and then retransmitted data to the cabin. The lock and the high data rate added evidence to the connectivity between man and beast.

As final proof, the real-time view of the pack through the mounted camera showed Rex sitting at attention, his forepaw elevated to his ear in a salute.

“Yeah, we’ve got ourselves a hot swap,” Nate said. “Now let’s see if he can finish moving the carcass.”

“Sounds simple enough,” Christina said. “Given the stuff you’ve pulled in the past.”

Nate pressed a button, and a red light flashed from the pine-mounted camera, signaling Leo to recommence dragging the carcass. On his screen, he watched Leo respond by lowering Rex’s paw and bound to all fours.

Rex sank his fangs into the carcass and yanked. The deer budged and slid a few inches, but the other hunters joined their leader and imparted velocity upon their dinner.

“That’s a hot swap,” Nate said. “Two operators, retaining lock on one animal throughout one mission.”

“I got something on infrared,” Christina said.

“What?”

“Camera three. Right here.”

Nate looked at his wife’s long jaw and followed its swarthy angle along her outstretched arm to her small index finger tapping the monitor. Two glowing blobs of reds, yellows, and oranges revealed the threat.

“Two wolves,” Nate said. “Rival scouts.”

He turned back to Christina and rolled his gaze up her sloped nose to her captivating dark eyes.

“Switch monitors,” he said.

Using the gesture recognition system, he swiped his hand over his monitor toward his wife. He watched the image of the pack pulling the carcass slide in front of her, splitting her screen in two. She then swiped the rival scout image to him.

Recalling his learned wolf essence, he watched. The scouts held their position and appeared defensive. Nate realized that since their pack hadn’t killed the deer, they didn’t feel robbed. Angry that Rex’s scent lingered in their turf, he judged, but too cautious and confused to challenge.

“Alright,” Nate said. “We’ve got about ten minutes before Leo will extract and leave Rex to his-”

An alarm buzzed.

Instincts, carved into his subconscious by repeated training, spurred Nate’s hand to a silencing switch, relieving him of the noise. He stared through the glass and saw his brother seizing.

“Leo!” Linda said.

“His vitals are shooting through the roof!” Christina said. “Is this backlash?”

Nate craned his neck over his wife’s monitor and saw Rex convulsing on the ground. His pack mates paced around their leader with erratic head and paw movements, awaiting clarity on a behavior they couldn’t comprehend.

“Not backlash,” Nate said. “I’m pulling him out anyway.”

He lifted his hand upward and sent it crashing down on an emergency extraction switch. A liquid crystal gauge showed the system massaging his brother’s brain with alpha waves at ten Hertz. Another gauge showed the dormancy of the de-engergized transceiver system that had connected man and wolf.

Linda’s voice pierced his mind.

“Do something!”

“I just did. Give it a second.”

Nate glared at his brother and waited – hoping. He then eyed the display showing that his brother’s measured brain waves remained in deep theta.

“Give him adrenaline,” Linda said. “Do something!”

“No,” Christina said. “He’s too hyped up. That could kill him.”

“Get out of there, Leo,” Nate said.

“I should never have let him help you,” Linda said.

“There! He’s out!”

Nate pointed to the display showing alpha brainwaves.

“Blood pressure is falling!” Christina said. “Heart rate and respiratory are still high, but he’s coming out of it.”

Relieved, Nate saw his brother's seizure recede to sporadic twitches. He expected calmness to reclaim Leo, but an eerie trembling remained. He pressed a button and spoke.

"Leo, you're safe. You're back in the control station."

No response.

"Leo, you're safe. You're back in the control station."

Leo lifted his soft-helmeted head and craned his neck toward the glass. The red rage of his flesh and black anger of his eyes struck a chord of horror in Nate's heart.

"What the hell's wrong with him?" Linda asked.

"I don't know."

Leo sprang from the bed and sprinted toward the door. The helmet and electrodes flew from his body, and his amplified shriek pummeled Nate's ears with scorched-earth angst. He launched his muscular mass into transparent polycarbonate, shaking the room. Leo repeated the attack, and as the plastic held, he ripped off his sneakers and launched repeated kicks into the door.

With each hammering of the wall, Leo howled.

"I'm gonna kill you!"

Slam!

"I'm gonna kill you!"

Nate pressed a button.

"Leo! Stop! It's us!"

His brother showed no sign of recognition.

Slam!

On the twelfth kick, fissures fanned from the point of impact.

"Oh my god," Christina said. "He's going to break through."

"Get out of here," Nate said.

"That's my husband," Linda said. "Let me talk to him."

"Get out of here!"

Nate pointed toward the hatch leading to the main cabin.

Slam!

The fissure grew to three times its size. Nate knew that one of the ensuing kicks would send his brother's foot, lacerated and bleeding, through plastic shards. He also knew that despite injuring himself, Leo would bring down the door.

Slam!

Following Linda up the ladder, Christina whispered.

“You’re going to douse him, right?”

“I didn’t want her to see it.”

Slam!

Nate lifted a plastic guard and pressed a button. A blinking display told him the sedation system had been pressurized and armed. He pressed the button a second time, and a nitrous oxide mist rained down upon the other side of the glass.

“I’m gonna kill you!”

Slam!

Noting the irony, Nate gave Leo credit for having included the sedation system in the control center’s design. The intent was to protect against backlash, based upon the recent episode where Nate had suffered the echoed emotions of a lion and had attacked Leo.

“I’m gonna kill you!”

Slam!

“I’m gonna kill you!”

Slam!

“I’m gonna...”

Slam.

The kick fell limp against the spider web of cracking plastic. Leo wobbled backward and dropped to his knees. Nate shut down the mist injection and watched his brother wrestle for consciousness, fail, and crumble to the concrete.

Nate rose from his chair and climbed the ladder. Reaching the top, he banged on the hatch. No response.

He banged again and screamed.

“It’s okay. He’s sedated. Open up!”

No response.

“Crap.”

He lowered his head to descend and ponder his next move, but the hatch cracked open. He looked up into the leads of an electroshock weapon.

“It’s me,” he said.

“Where’s Leo?” Christina asked.

“Sedated.”

“Did the door hold?”

“Yes. Barely.”

The hatch swung open, and Nate looked into Christina’s captivating dark eyes.

“He’s fine,” Nate said. “You just need to check on him and make sure he’s not over-sedated.”

“Why me?” Christina asked.

“Because you’re the only one with any medical training.”

“What about the air quality?”

“We’ll ventilate,” Nate said. “I’ll open the other hatch at the far end of the floor, and we’ll flush out the nitrous oxide with a fan from upstairs.”

“If you ventilate,” Christina said, “he’ll wake up.”

“Not if you inject him first.”

“You want me to wear a breathing mask, don’t you?”

“There’s no other way.”

Christina sighed.

“Fine,” she said. “Let’s just get it over with.”

Nate sipped tea at an oak table that lacked authenticity in its presumed austerity. His brother had built the cabin two years ago as his personal retreat. The northern white pine logs that bore the weight, formed the walls, and held the loft above smelled fresh. So did everything - the tables, the chairs, the gun rack, the fire place.

His brother had sought a relaxing country vacation home within a short drive of the Mackinac Bridge, but the place felt like new money trying to feign permanence, and the hardened bunker of the basement ruined the edifice’s attempt for rusticity.

“How long?” he asked.

“Any time now,” Christina said.

As if cued, the basement hatch clicked open. Nate grabbed a shock weapon from the table and stood. Christina did the same, joining him by his side.

Knowing that forces beyond his understanding had intervened in his wolf experiment, Nate trembled as the mountainous torso of muscle climbed into the room. He wondered if the rage episode were an aftereffect of some unknown influence or if something worse had taken permanent hold of his brother's mind.

Appearing groggy, Leo faced him.

"Put those stupid things down and get me a drink, for God's sake. You know you can kill someone if you overuse those."

Nate sighed, relaxed, and walked to the kitchen to pour his brother a Jack Daniel's on the rocks. As he returned to the table, he saw Linda hugging Leo and helping him to the bench.

"Here you go," he said.

"Thanks, bro," Leo said.

His brother reached for the glass, tipped it back, and cringed as he swallowed the whiskey.

"What happened?" Nate asked.

"The hot swap went perfect," he said. "But either something took me and Rex over as a third mind after we were joined, or it was a hidden mind that waited to spring on us."

Nate's doctoral research in cybernetic animal control had started with the peaceful intent of using falcons for search and rescue missions. Be he had felt it change him when he started using larger predators to kill humans. He relished the power, but at dark moments he wished he could undo his work.

For the first time he could recall, Nate saw fear in his brother's eyes. He had thought him invincible until this moment, a dark moment, a moment when he knew he had pushed too far.

"You know who it was, don't you?" he asked. "The third presence with you and Rex?"

"Yeah," Leo said. "It was our dear little brother Joey."

Bile rose in Nate. He had been a bastion of kindness to their troubled third brother even when Leo had threatened to kill him. Now he felt betrayed.

"Joey attacked you? Why? How?"

Nate glanced at the wives across the table. They were quiet and mesmerized.

“I don’t know what it was exactly,” Leo said. “But I know what it felt like. I know what I believe, and you and I need to figure out what this really means. We’re in deeper shit than we ever dreamed of.”

“What did it feel like?”

“Like he was crying for help.”

“You sent him to the CIA,” Nate said. “You realized that whatever power it is that we have, it gets stronger in you and even stronger in Joey. He’s the most powerful, and he’s getting top-rate government training. How could he possibly need our help?”

“I don’t know yet,” Leo said. “But I felt it. Really felt it. He’s in agony. He’s trapped somewhere, and the CIA either won’t help him or can’t help him. He’s calling out to us for a reason.”

“To save him?”

Leo slammed back the remaining whiskey and plopped the glass onto the table.

“No,” he said. “To kill him. He’s gone insane and has given up hope. He’s trapped in a place so horrible, he’s begging for death.”

A pit formed in Nate’s stomach.

“How are supposed to do that, even if we wanted to?”

“No idea,” Leo said. “I just know he wants to be dead versus having to spend another minute where he is. He’s been trapped in his personal hell for over a year.”

“That explains why we haven’t heard from him,” Nate said. “But why only ask for help now?”

Linda brought her husband another whiskey. Nate hadn’t noticed that she’d left the table.

“My best guess is that it was the hot swap with Rex,” Leo said. “We thought that keeping a channel open to an animal under control was a slick trick to assure continuous control. But I think you slipping out of the link while keeping the channel open was a sort of beacon for him.”

“So we got lucky, and he found us.”

Leo sipped his drink.

“No, he got lucky and found us. We’re in trouble, and he just dragged us into it. I don’t know why you’d be surprised, but any time he walks back into our lives, he brings trouble. Starting with my backlash.”

“That’s what your tantrum was about?”

“I knew what I was doing the whole time,” Leo said. “But I couldn’t stop. The agony he feels was like an imprinted echo in my soul. I was helpless. I was so relieved when you finally put me to sleep down there.”

“What’s going on? I thought we were dealing with just control of animals, and now you say your little brother is a human victim,” Christina said.

“It’s my fault,” Leo said. “I encouraged Nate to push his research, and I all but threw Joey headfirst into the CIA. I was arrogant enough to think that the Clark brothers could handle it. Others had these sorts of powers, too, but I just knew we’d be the best and the unbeatable ones. I’m a dumbass, and because of me we just opened Pandora’s Box.”

“Can we help him?” Nate asked.

“We have to,” Leo said. “Because he also sent a warning. Whoever has him trapped has also heard his cry for help. They’ll be coming for us.”

A sickening awareness washed over Nate.

“We’ve only begun to understand the human-to-human world of cybernetic interaction,” he said. “We’ve been restricting ourselves to animals, thinking we could hide from the bigger game. But now it’s found us, and we can’t hide from it.”

“I have to admit, bro,” Leo said. “I don’t know what to do next. I’m still just learning to tinker in this shit. But I’ll stick with you, whatever you want to do.”

Nate accepted his role as pioneer-leader.

“I started this research because it’s been my passion since college. This is what my life’s work is about, and if the next step is going places we’re afraid of, well, then that’s where we’re going.”

“I’m not used to taking orders anymore,” Leo said. “And I thought I never would, least of all from you, bro. You were always so quiet and reserved. But now I see who you are. This is your world, and I can’t protect you. You need to guide me.”

“I don’t know if I’m up to this.”

“You are,” Leo said. “When I was still feeling afraid a minute ago, you looked like the king of courage. Like I imagine how I look when I’m doing my thing. But I now see my courage in you.”

“I’m glad you do. I’m not sure what I feel.”

“That’s it, exactly. Perfect. You feel afraid and you don’t know how you’re going to win, but you take on the challenge. You’ve got the courage. You have my courage. You came here for a hot swap – and you got it.”

Ideas flooded Nate’s mind. Training scenarios between him and Leo to develop mind-on-mind skills, reconnaissance missions to study Joey’s predicament, setting traps through animal links to lure in and trap humans who would be spying on him. All possibilities, all uncertainties.

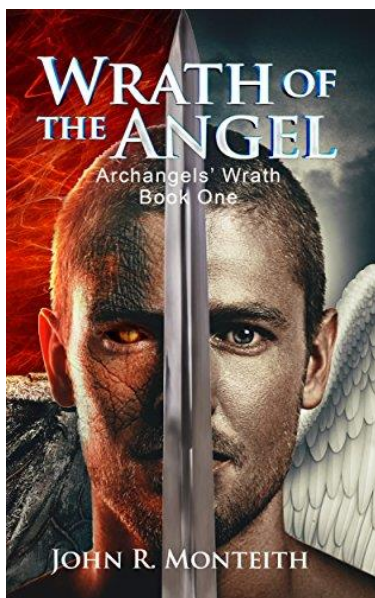
For the first time since planning his doctoral work, Nate felt unsure of his next steps. He had been safe in his cocoon of experimental control, but now he felt exposed and needing to rely upon his wits to survive.

He glanced at his death-defying, adrenaline-junky brother and realized, for the first time, that he was made of the same mettle.

THE END

If you enjoyed this story...

... you're in luck! Flash Visions is one of nine short stories feeding the Archangels' Wrath novel series, beginning with:



Wrath of the Angel

Warriors who take cybernetic control of predatory animals. A wounded soldier-turned alcoholic exorcist. A child who attacks with his mind. As Nate Clark leads his brothers out of a broken childhood, he discovers his supernatural ability to wield eagles, wolves, and leopards as weapons. His journey to establish his self-worth by protecting good people from evil attracts Father Lewis Bannen, who suspects demonic manipulation as the source of Nate's apparently benevolent powers.

Questioning if his ends justify his means, Nate must decide if he can marry the woman he loves, draw vengeful blood, and protect his life's work from the exorcist who threatens to expel its source.

The occult clashes with Christianity; a priest battles demons; and an epic journey of dark versus light explores the limits of mankind's understanding of nature's conflicting forces.

