

Singel Uitgevers
1st edition

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Some characters in this work of fiction share traits and features with real people, but do not represent them in any way.

Echoes of the Past

Prologue

The high narrow windows allowed the light of day into the Hall of Kings. Brandon looked behind him. A guard in shiny steel-plated armour, holding a halberd in one hand and a tall rectangular blue shield in the other, was standing next to the door. There was another on the other side. The guard in this side nodded at the young prince.

“Come on, Brandon, pay attention! You have to know this if you hope to be king someday.”

The voice was strict, but the wrinkles in his father’s face showed friendliness.

“I’m sorry...” said the boy “But it’s so boring!”

King Graham smiled.

“When I was your age I found history-lessons boring as well.”

He ruffled his son’s hair.

“This is the last one for today, I promise. Now, who is this?”

The king pointed to the tapestry that hung from the wall. This side of the gallery was covered in them, one between every two columns, depicting the kings from ages past. The other side of the gallery was still empty, but one day it would be filled with portraits as well. Even his own picture would be up there in time.

There was a mounted knight on this one, wearing gilded armour and a blue cloak. A golden crown rested on his head. The horse was prancing as the knight pointed his sword forward, and a yellow lion with a crown on its head decorated the knight’s shield and the horse’s blanket.

“That’s King Edward Terrestan the Conqueror,” said prince Brandon “He was the founder of The Realm. He renamed Eastfall-by-the-Sea to Capitol City, where we are now, and united the Middle Lands and the North. And his last name is easy to remember because it’s the same as ours!”

Brandon laughed at that. He didn’t know why, it wasn’t even that funny.

“Very good,” said the king “And why did he call his kingdom The Realm?”

“Because he couldn’t think of a better name?”

The king laughed.

“Almost right. He chose this name because he felt it was neutral, so that no part of it would be more important than the other.”

“But Father, our city is the heart of The Realm. Why wouldn’t it be more important than the other cities?”

“Because a body needs more than just a heart, my boy. If Capitol City is the heart of The Realm, the cities of Westwall, Triton, and Vertigon are its bones, and the people its blood.”

The door at the far end of the corridor opened, and a knight rushed towards the king and his son. He wasn’t clad in armour like the guards by the door and King Edward on the tapestry; he was wearing a brown surcoat with a yellow diagonal stripe over chainmail armour, steel shoulder-guards held together by two leather straps that ran across his chest, and a longsword hung from his belt. There was a grey wolf’s head embroidered on the surcoat and his yellow cloak. The knight bowed before them. His golden hair covered his face as he raised his head again.

“Your Grace,” he started “A message from Vertigon just arrived.”

“Thank you, Sir Cedric,” said King Graham “Notify the master-at-arms that my son is done with his history-lessons and is ready for sword-practice.”

“As you will, Your Grace.”

The knight got back on his feet. Brandon and his father followed the knight past the tapestries and back to the door. The guards bowed their heads as they passed them by.

“I must attend to letters and messages now, Brandon,” said King Graham when they reached the throne room “Boring stuff.”

He smiled.

“Off with you.”

Prince Brandon wondered what the message from the floating city could be. It could be something very important, but it could also be something boring like dwindling stocks of grain... He crossed the throne-room to the armoury, which was on the other side of the Royal Palace. He saw Sir Cedric and the king disappear into the door at the far end of the throne-room, which lead to his father’s solar.

The master-at-arms was already waiting in the practice-yard when Brandon emerged from the armoury, wearing leather armour and armed with a wooden sword. He practiced until sunset; swinging the wooden sword at

dummies made of straw, thrusting and slashing as well, and deflecting blows from the master-at-arms with a shield.

Even in his dream he could still feel the pain in his arms from holding up the heavy wooden sword and shield. Brandon was awoken by the sound of bells tolling. He jumped out of bed, clothed himself and grabbed his sword. He had no idea what was going on, but something was amiss...

“What’s happening?”

Prince Brandon came running down the stairs, sword in hand. The wood had been replaced with steel.

“Why are the bells tolling?” he asked.

A guardsman was standing watch at the base of the stairs. He was wearing chainmail armour under a grey tabard with three white snowflakes on it, an iron half-helm and mailed gloves plus boots, and he was armed with a spear and shield. He was about to answer when a knight came running into the hall. It was Sir Cedric, who had travelled with him to Vertigon. He had taken off his helmet and his face was blackened where the holes in the visor had been. The once golden hair had already faded to grey, and was now littered with bits of charcoal. Bright orange and red light shone in from behind him. Brandon heard screams and cries and raging fire outside, but the sound was muffled when Sir Cedric closed the heavy wooden doors.

“By the gods! My Lord, winged demons are setting the city ablaze! You have to flee while you still can!”

“Gods...” said Brandon.

It was the middle of winter, and up here the cold could cut through to the bone even with a fire burning in the hearth, but it had never been hotter in the hall. He looked out the window at the far end. It had been snowing last night, now it was raining ashes.

“Your men are trying to hold them off, but they will reach the palace soon.”

The knight was trying to bar the doors by pushing a table in front of them.

“Stop that, Cedric! I have to go out there and help them!” Brandon cried.

He ran to the door and tried to move the table again, but the knight stopped him.

“My Lord, you have to leave! The city is lost!”

Sir Cedric struggled to keep the prince in restraint.

“Those are my people out there! That’s my city burning! Let me go, you fool!”

He wrestled himself from the knight’s grip, smashed the table with

his sword and stepped over it. He wanted to push the heavy wooden door open, but just as he moved to grab the door-handle, a soldier was thrown into the room through one of the windows in the hall. He crashed into a column and landed on his back with a thud. Brandon quickly forgot about the raging battle outside and went to him, dropping his sword. The man's face was burned horribly, but seeing the prince seemed to fill him with hope.

"We're fighting as hard as we can, M'Lord!" he whimpered
"They're just too strong!"

The prince heard the sound of wailing women and fighting soldiers from outside more clearly through the shattered window.

"I know you did."

The man was dressed the same as the guardsman at the stairs. The prince tried to lift the helm from the soldier's head, but the soldier stopped him.

"Leave it, M'Lord. I'm done for."

The man tried to adjust himself.

"It's a slaughter out there! Our swords break when we try to strike the beasts and the arrows bounce right off their scales!" Sir Cedric cried out "Whatever we manage to chop off their monstrous claws simply grows back! I've never seen anything like it!"

"I have to go join the others!" yelled the prince, picking up his sword again. He moved towards the door.

"You can't go back out there, My Lord," the knight replied "You'll be torn apart, I promised your father I'd let nothing happen to you. He made me promise the day you were born."

His voice was trembling

"Please, My Lord. If not for yourself, do it for your wife and your unborn child!"

'Katelyn...' Brandon thought.

That had been the message from Vertigon ten years ago: the Warden of Vertigon, Lord Rickard Swyft, had offered his daughter's hand in marriage to the prince. Father said she was a good match, and Brandon had always dreamt of living in the floating city. But he had only been twelve years old, and Lord Swyft's daughter eleven, so they had to wait until they were old enough to be married and bind the Terrestans and Swyfts together in matrimony.

Brandon was dragged back to reality; he heard a beastly roar from outside. He felt Sir Cedric had grabbed his arm.

"I beg of you," said the knight.

"Fine," said the prince finally, sheathing his sword again "Fetch the horses, I'll go get my wife."

"Yes, My Lord."

The knight disappeared through a door in the back of the hall, the prince ran up the stairs. His wife came to meet him in the hallway.

"What's going on, Brandon? I'm scared."

She had flung a fur cloak around her shoulders for warmth, but she was still wearing her night-gown.

"We have to leave, Katelyn."

The prince held her by the hand and took her back to their room. He kicked open the door and searched her dresser.

"What are you doing?" asked Katelyn.

Brandon pretended not to hear. He took out a fur-lined dress and handed it to her.

"Get dressed quickly. We have to go as fast as we can."

"Why?"

The colour had left her face.

"Brandon, what's happening?"

"Get dressed quickly, the city is being attacked!"

Brandon looked out the window. He saw a huge dark shape flying over the city, spewing vile flames from its mouth. Katelyn frantically put on the dress. Brandon took her by the hand again and they ran back through the corridor and down the stairs. Sir Cedric was waiting for them.

"My Lady."

The knight made a quick bow.

"This way."

He held the door for them.

"The horses are waiting outside."

Brandon and Katelyn had just stepped through the door when something started pounding the front-doors of the hall.

"Leave now, My Lord!"

The knight wanted to close the door behind them, but Katelyn stopped him.

"Aren't you coming with us?" she asked.

The very foundation of the hall was shaking, and specks of dust fluttered down from the roof with every blow.

"I'll buy you some time, My Lady. Go now."

“Thank you, Cedric,” said Brandon “I’ll tell Father of your deeds. You have kept your promise to him.”

He put his hand on the knight’s shoulder. Sir Cedric nodded.

“It has been an honour to serve you and your family, My Lord.”

The knight closed the door behind him and Brandon heard him bar the door from the other side in a desperate attempt to keep the beast at bay.

The prince looked at his wife with worry.

“Before we leave, I have to tell you something.” he said.

“What is it?” Katelyn replied.

“Should I not make it...”

“Don’t say that!” Katelyn interrupted him.

“Should I not make it,” Brandon repeated “You have to make sure you get back to Capitol City and warn them.”

“But Brandon...”

“Just promise me, okay?”

Katelyn nodded.

Brandon helped her on her horse and then mounted the other one himself. The backyard had all but turned to ashes and everything around them was burning. They rode through the gardens, around the hall and past the mighty beast that had just managed to break in. It pulverized the stone with its claw and spew foul flames from its mouth, through the gaping hole in the wall where the heavy wooden doors had been. The windows on all floors of the Warden’s palace shattered as fire burst through them. The streets were littered with burning bodies and smouldering debris.

“What are those things?!”

Brandon could hear the terror in Katelyn’s voice. He looked up and saw a shape similar to the one they had just escaped; the same he had seen when he looked out the window, flapping ebon wings through the sky.

“We have to keep going!”

Brandon looked back at his wife. He could see the fear in her crystalline grey eyes. The same eyes he had fallen in love with the moment he first saw her, six years ago.

“We are going to make it!” he said “I’ll protect you!”

They sped up their horses. One of the beasts roared again, and they heard the steps of some giant creature behind them. The winged demon was chasing the prince and his wife now. The city Brandon had always dreamt of had seemed so untouchable, so peaceful. Floating high above the Granite

Peaks, the city of Vertigon had always been a safe haven for everyone. Now it was burning. His dream had turned into a nightmare.

Brandon and Katelyn had reached the city's gates. The beast drew a big breath and spew its fire in a cone in front of him. Lady Katelyn barely escaped a fiery death. Then it took off again.

'He's left us alone for now,' Brandon thought 'This is our chance!'

The causeway to the floating city was a mere wooden bridge, but the wizard's magic had always kept it safe. The prince looked behind him and saw the flying demon land on top of the dome, the pride of the city.

The Wizard's College lay at the centre of the floating haven. The beast smashed it in with its claws and set the ruin ablaze. Brandon heard the screams from inside echo through the city. The horses were slightly frightened by the height of the bridge, but luckily they didn't refuse to go over it. The other beast had also taken to the air and started to flap its wings at them. The wind that came from under the demon's wings caused the bridge to move to and fro.

"Hold on!" yelled Brandon.

"I'm trying to!" Katelyn replied.

They rode as fast they could, the beast still behind them. Katelyn's young mare was lighter and faster than Brandon's elderly stallion. She was riding in front of Brandon now, nearly at the end of the bridge.

'She is almost safe,' he thought 'Once we reach the mountain-road we will be able to make it back the Capitol City.'

The beast drew closer and Brandon felt its hot breath in his neck. He saw Katelyn had crossed the bridge and turned her horse around. He was almost at the end of the bridge as well, but then the beast swooped down and grabbed man and horse with its black claws. Brandon heard Katelyn screaming below. He slashed at the beast's claw with his sword until it got stuck. The beast roared in pain and let go of the prince. Brandon fell into nothingness, and smacked unto the ground. He saw Katelyn dismount her mare and run towards him. She kneeled next to his body and stroked his hair.

"Please live," she said "I love you."

The tears rolled down her cheek, into Brandon's face, and he faintly opened his eyes.

"I love you too," he said "But you have to leave me here."

He wanted to adjust himself, and groaned as he tried to move his broken spine.

"The beast is still there and you are carrying our child. He will be the heir to

the throne someday.”

With the last bit of his might he ran his fingers through her soft long hair. It was the colour of the chestnut in the woods he used to climb as a child. It was the tallest tree in the forest, from there Brandon could see everything.

“I can’t leave you here!” she sobbed “I won’t.”

“You have to!”

He started coughing up blood, leaving red spatters around his mouth. The beast had recovered from its wound now, although the sword was still stuck, and turned his attention to the prince and his wife again.

“Go to the capital, to my father. He will keep you safe.”

He coughed again, and a small trickle of blood starting flowing over his chin.

“Argus might know of a way to slay those monsters. Tell him what you saw.”

Brandon tried to wipe the tears from Katelyn’s face.

“Go!”

The last thing Brandon Terrestan saw was his wife, Katelyn Swyft, running back to her horse, crying, and looking back at him one last time.

When he looked up, he saw the black demon trying to land. He closed his eyes, felt a light pressure on his chest for a moment, and then nothing.

1. Orphans in the Woods

Jonathan let the horses slow down a little. He couldn't hear the shouts from the men anymore.

"I think we've lost them," said Jonathan "Can you see them anywhere?"

"No, I think they're gone." said Nathaniel.

Jonathan was driving the carriage and Nathaniel was sitting next to him. His brother looked back over his shoulder one more time.

"It's a miracle this cursed thing survived that." said Jonathan.

"Thank the gods it did, though." Nathaniel replied.

The carriage from the castle was an old piece of junk, but it was all they had for now.

"You should rest now, brother. I'll take the reins." said Nathaniel.

Jonathan climbed onto the back of the carriage and wrapped his arms around his legs. He threw back his head and started at the sky. Spring was around the corner (it would be March soon), so he didn't have to wear his winter-cloak anymore. The wind blew through the still mostly leafless branches of the trees, and the wheels of the carriage made a rattling sound. It was hard for Jonathan to keep his eyes open so he closed them. For a brief moment he didn't know where he was, and why he was so tired, but then it all came back to him. They had been driving since last night, and every time they thought to have escaped the men in red and grey cloaks, the chase started all over again.

They thought they were safe with Lord Barkton; he had been so nice to them. The good Lord had taken him and his siblings into his home when Mother and Father had died, and had treated them like his own children. Father used to be the castle's carpenter, and Lord Barkton knew Father well. They had been staying at the castle for close to four years. But Jonathan felt it couldn't last forever, it was too good to be true. And he was right. The attack on the castle had come so unexpected. What were those raiders looking for anyway?

The rattling of the wheels continued. He opened one eye and still saw the treetops gliding past him, struggling not to fall asleep.

“Are we nearly there yet?” he asked as he rubbed his eyes.

“No, not yet,” said Nathaniel “We only just switched places a half hour ago. Besides, it will take at least another day or three to reach Westwall. You should get some sleep, big brother. You have been driving since the attack.”

Nathaniel was right; Jonathan hadn’t slept at all since they had to flee the Lord’s castle. He lay down on his back and stared at the trees as they went past them. Between the treetops he could see the stars. They lit up the night-sky like thousands of candles. The distant sound of the wolves howling at the full moon sent a shiver down his spine. He heard Nathaniel let the horses speed up, and one of the animals started whinnying. The wobbling carriage made Jonathan feel a bit nauseous.

“You can’t go much faster, the carriage will break if you do,” he said “Remember?”

“I know what I’m doing, alright?” said Nathaniel.

He sounded a little frustrated. Jonathan felt bad, he should have some faith in his little brother, he was fifteen already and had grown much since Mother and Father died. He was even growing a thick black beard. It was still very patchy, but Jonathan couldn’t get him to shave. Nathaniel could be very stubborn if he wanted to be, and there was no changing his mind this time either.

‘The daily struggles of a family...’ Jonathan thought, smiling.

“I can’t sleep.” said a little girl’s voice.

The child was awoken by the wobbling of the carriage.

“It’s okay, Elizabeth,” said Jonathan “We are safe now, remember?”

His little sister crawled on his lap.

“Why did we have to leave the castle?”

She held her stuffed teddy-bear tight.

“I liked it there.”

“We all did.”

Jonathan tried to comfort her and wrapped a blanket around her.

“Go back to sleep, sweetie.”

“Okay.”

The girl pulled the blanket up to her chin and fell asleep in her brother’s arms. The wolves howled again. They seemed to be much closer now, and Jonathan could swear he heard them panting. He unsheathed the

dull blade he was able to take from the armoury.

‘It won’t help much but it’s better than nothing,’ Jonathan reflected ‘It’s probably sharp enough to kill wolves.’

“What’s wrong?” asked Nathaniel.

“I don’t trust these wolves,” Jonathan replied “They’re getting closer.”

“We are nearly out of the forest. Let’s hope the wolves don’t follow us onto the fields ahead.”

The road split up in two different directions a couple of yards ahead. It didn’t really matter which path you took, because they joined again after little over a mile. There was a lake in the way so the road had been built around it.

Jonathan remembered his father explaining him about yards and miles when he was little, even younger than Elizabeth was now. The cities of The Realm had agreed to use the same unit for measuring distance. The scholars tasked with finding one such unit used the average speed of a horse to calculate how long it would take to travel from one place to another. Eventually they came up with the ‘mile’. On horseback, one can travel four miles in an hour. A mile consist of fifteen-hundred yards, and a yard is about as much as a big step for a grown man.

When they were about to choose the right path, the cart suddenly stopped and the left side crashed onto the road.

“Did we just lose a wheel?”

Jonathan sprang up. He joined his brother next to the cart and saw the wheel was completely shattered.

“Damn it...” he said “I don’t think I’ll be able to fix that.”

“There’s nothing left to fix.” said Nathaniel.

It’s tradition in The Realm for boys to start learning a craft or trade when they turn fifteen. When Jonathan had reached the appropriate age, his father had started teaching him the carpenter’s craft. It didn’t last long though, Father had fallen ill pretty soon after.

Jonathan pondered for a while. He had to find a way to get Nathaniel and Elizabeth out of here. It was too dangerous out here, with the wolves closing in.

“Take Elizabeth and ride to Westwall,” he said finally “I will take the other horse and try to distract the wolves. It’s important that Elizabeth is safe.”

“But I can’t just leave you here,” said Nathaniel.

At that moment the wolves howled again, they sounded close.

“There’s no time, Nate!” said Jonathan.

Elizabeth tugged at his jacket.

“What is it?”

The girl was holding her stuffed teddy-bear with one hand, but pointed down the road with the other.

“Wolves!” she yelled.

A pack of wolves came running towards them. The beasts were panting loudly and their tongues were hanging out of their mouths.

“Nathaniel, go!” said Jonathan.

He lifted up his little sister and put her on the horse. Nathaniel climbed the horse too and kicked its flank. The horse ran off in the direction they were headed. Jonathan saw Elizabeth looking back, scared. He mounted the other horse and started shouting to get the wolves’ attention. When the wolves were close he kicked the horse’s flank as well and took the left path. The wolves seemed to be panting right into his ear. He looked back to see if they were gaining on him, but the horse was faster than the wolves.

When he looked back in front of him, he saw a branch sticking out. It was too late to evade and it knocked him off his horse. The animal halted after taking a couple more steps, wondering where its rider had went. Jonathan quickly jumped back on his feet and pulled the old sword from its sheath.

“Bring it on...” he said.

The wolves ran at him and the horse whinnied nervously. He braced himself, took a deep breath and cleared his mind.

‘At least the wolves won’t eat them...’ he thought.

But he chickened out the last second. He closed his eyes, expecting to be torn to bloody shreds. A few moments passed and he opened his eyes again. He didn’t see the wolves anywhere, safe for one. A black wolf was sitting right in front of him. Eyes, pale as ice, stared at him from the animal’s eye-sockets. Jonathan was still quenching the blade in his hands. He couldn’t let his guard down, the animal could still attack him at any moment. He took a couple of steps backwards, the wolf didn’t move.

“Why are you looking at me like that?!” he yelled.

The wolf pricked up its ears and slightly tilted its head to the left. Jonathan heard a cracking sound behind him. He turned around and saw the other wolves eagerly chewing the horse’s legs and ribs. They were wagging their tails and snarled at each other every now and then.

‘Poor horse,’ he thought ‘I hope they killed it quickly...’

Now he had also lost his only means of getting away fast, so he had to figure something out to get the wolves to remain peaceful.

Jonathan approached the black wolf. He held his hand out in front of it, but kept the dull sword in his other hand. Just in case. He drew closer and closer to the animal, until he could hold his hand right in front of the animal’s nose. The wolf sniffed it a couple of times. It licked its lips, and for a while Jonathan thought he was about to lose his hand, but the wolf did nothing. Jonathan carefully tried to pet the wolf. Slowly, he reached out to the wolf’s head with a trembling hand. But the wolf responded well to Jonathan gently ruffling its black fur. The animal looked up and the icy eyes stared at the boy again.

The other wolves slowly walked towards Jonathan and sat and lay down next to the other wolf.

‘Maybe it’s the pack’s leader,’ he said to himself “They didn’t attack me but I’d better leave before they change their minds...”

He slowly backed away and then turned around and started walking. He heard paws moving behind him. The animals were following him, the black wolf up front, all wagging their tails. Jonathan rubbed his eyes. Was he dreaming this?

He had always been able to connect with animals when he was still a little boy. He remembered that time during the summer, when Mother and Father were still alive. It was the summer Elizabeth was born, seven years ago. He was out in the woods with Nathaniel climbing trees and playing at being knights. They would look for wooden sticks and use them as swords. A bitter-sweet smile formed around his lips. The memory was a happy one, and he missed those days. One time they went too deep into the woods and they encountered a bear. Father had warned them, but boys will be boys. Nathaniel wanted to attack the animal, but Jonathan stopped him. It would only have made the bear angry. He had used the same calm he had just approached the wolf with to approach the bear, and it left them alone and walked away. They had run home as fast as they could. They had been so terrified and Mother had comforted them. Father wasn’t mad at them, he was just happy they were unharmed.

Jonathan sighed. He wished he could go back to those days, when everything was still all right. But somehow he had lost that touch with animals, until now apparently. Then he thought of Nathaniel and Elizabeth. ‘I hope they’ll arrive safely.’

He was still somewhat uneasy. Why were these wolves following him? Are they saving him for dessert?

“Shoo!” he said “Go away. You can’t come with me.”

But the wolves didn’t seem to care much. They kept on following him. He could feel the icy eyes of the black wolf staring at him. He looked back, they were still all there.

The night seemed to darken with every step. The sky was still clear when he had sent his brother and sister off, but it wasn’t anymore. The clouds seemed to be slowly devouring the night sky and after a couple more steps it started to drizzle. The pack of wolves was getting nervous. Jonathan quickened his pace.

The drizzle turned into rain, and Jonathan wished he had his winter-cloak after all. The rain was freezing cold and the sky was now completely covered in pitch-black clouds. The candles in the night-sky had been snuffed out. It was raining so hard that he was already soaking in mere minutes. Rumbling sounds in the sky made the wolves walk closer to Jonathan, almost brushing against his legs. The animals were also soaking and the smell was quite bad.

He saw a flash of light piercing the sky in the distance, and a few seconds later came the rumble. No lightning without thunder. The pack of wolves was startled by the fury of Mother Nature and ran, safe for the one with the black fur and the pale eyes. He started to walk a little faster, running almost. The thunder was getting louder. Father had told him once that the faster the sound came after the flash, the closer it had struck.

‘I hope this storm will blow over soon.’ he thought.

And as he was thinking this, the lightning struck right in front of him. He didn’t feel safe on the road anymore. He saw a small cave up ahead and went inside. The cave was very narrow so he couldn’t stand up or even sit properly. Jonathan felt the cave was suffocating him, but it was his best option.

“What do you think about naming you?”

The wolf seemed to understand what he said, because it tilted its head again and started wagging its tail.

“Hmm, what about Frostbite? After those eyes you keep staring at me with.”

The wolf liked its name. At least it seemed to, since the animal wagged its tail even harder. Jonathan petted the animal on its head. Frostbite closed its eyes and started snoring.

The cave entrance pointed the way he was headed. The lightning struck again, this time at the very spot he would have been walking if he hadn't taken shelter inside the cave. He was frightened by the thought of being struck by lightning.

"I don't think the storm will calm down any time soon." he said.

He struggled to keep his eyes open, but he fell asleep anyway.

Then there was nothing around him, only a path in front of him. The path was covered in mist, but he instinctively knew where to place his feet. He started walking, but his feet felt light and he didn't feel any solid ground under his feet. He heard a girl's voice in the distance. As he advanced along the path, the voice became more clear. He still couldn't understand what she was saying, but the girl must have been around his own age.

He continued along the path, he couldn't look in any direction but straight ahead.

"Leave me alone!" said the girl's voice.

Jonathan could understand what she was saying now.

"I don't know where you are!" he yelled.

The soft crying continued.

"No, please don't!" she whimpered.

He woke up at the sound of another thunderbolt shooting into a tree just outside the cave. He was sweating and his breath was ragged and heavy. The rain was still pouring out of the dark clouds, and the thunder was still raging. The tree started to burn.

"Come on Frostbite, let's go. I don't feel safe here anymore." said Jonathan.

He crawled back out of the cave, the wolf behind him. When they were only barely out of the cave, the tree started to crack and it fell down, right on top of the cave, causing it to collapse.

"That was close." said Jonathan to himself.

The dream was still on his mind. Did it mean anything? He had no clue why he dreamt such a thing. He continued his journey again. After a while it started to dawn. The clouds were dark-blue and dark-grey rather than black, but there was still no daylight. The storm had finally quieted down, except for the rain.

"How long did we sleep?" he said to the animal that was walking alongside him.

The wolf didn't respond.

‘Of course you don’t know, what did I expect?’ he thought.

The roads joined again, that meant he was past the lake now. It wouldn’t be long before he was out of the forest. Nathaniel and Elizabeth were probably out already.

Suddenly, Frostbite started to growl and pricked up its ears.

“What is it?” asked Jonathan.

He heard voices; that of a man, and that of a girl. He recognized the second one. The girl’s voice belonged to the girl he heard in his dream. He couldn’t possibly have had a vision, could he? He ran towards the sounds with Frostbite right behind him. He could hear what she was saying now:

“No, please don’t!”

He ran as fast as he could, almost tripping over his own feet, until he saw a girl and a fat man standing in front of her with a spiked club.

“Come on, give me that necklace already!” said the man.

“No, it’s not yours!” said the girl.

“Hey you!” yelled Jonathan “Leave her alone!”

The man looked up, his face venomous.

“Stay out of this, pup!” he said.

He turned his attention back to the girl.

“Give me that necklace, bitch!”

He slapped her across the face and she fell over backwards in a puddle of water.

“I’ll just take it myself.” said the brute.

He stretched out his hand to take the necklace from the girl. She spat in his face.

“Argh! I’ll kill you for that!” he yelled, as he cleaned his face with his sleeve.

He lifted the gruesome mace over his head to strike the girl with it. She closed her eyes and covered her face, but she opened them again when she heard the man screaming in pain as Frostbite leapt at him and starting tearing out his throat. The animal was faster than Jonathan. Before he could have done anything to help the girl, the wolf had done it for him. Frostbite dug its claws into the man’s chest, tearing open his gut, and continued to rip the man’s throat until he stopped struggling.

The girl looked up and Jonathan stretched out his hand to help her get up. She gave him a distrusting look.

“Take my hand, you can trust me.” said Jonathan.

“I don’t know who I can trust anymore,” said the girl “I trusted that pig too.

Look what that brought me!”

“I won’t hurt you,” he replied “My name is Jonathan.”

He still had his hand stretched out.

“My... my name is Sarah,” said the girl hesitantly.

Her hair was dark and heavy from the rain, and water was dripping from her long brown hair unto her already soaking dress. It was the colour of the sky on a clear summer’s day: bright blue. It was torn and covered in mud at her ankles. She hesitantly took Jonathan’s hand and he helped her get back on her feet.

“Did he hurt you?” he asked.

“Just some scratches.” said Sarah.

He wanted to brush the hair out of her face so he could see, but she pushed away his hand.

“I’m fine.”

She looked at him with a fierce look on her face. He looked into her beautiful grey eyes. They were like crystals. Sarah looked at Frostbite.

“Is... that... your wolf?”

The animal’s nose and mouth were covered with the brute’s blood. It was still sitting next to the man’s corpse that was lying on the road. It seemed strange to Jonathan that the wolf hadn’t started munching on the corpse, but then again, it didn’t attack him either.

“I’ll explain later.” said Jonathan.

He looked around and noticed the brute had tied his horse to a tree. The two teenagers approached the animal, and it started whinnying nervously and reared as the wolf drew close. Sarah stroked the mare’s face to calm it down.

“I think he won’t mind if we borrow his horse.” said Jonathan.

“He won’t be needing it anymore.” Sarah replied coolly.

Jonathan mounted the horse and motioned for Sarah to sit behind him.

“Oh no,” she said “I’ll hold the reins. I want to be in control this time.”

“Fair enough.” said Jonathan.

He dismounted, and helped Sarah get on the horse, but before he could climb on the horse behind her she spurred the horse and rode off.

“Hey!” he yelled after her “Nice way to say thank you!”

Jonathan wanted to run after her, but he figured that would only make things worse. Frostbite was sitting by his side and wagged its tail.

“Well, then it’s just you and me.” said Jonathan.

He knelt next to the animal and ruffled its black fur. The icy eyes had turned a little softer and the animal licked Jonathan’s face. There probably was a smear of blood on his cheek now. The corpse was starting to stink, so Jonathan told Frostbite to follow.

After a few steps, Jonathan heard the clattering of hooves drawing closer. He looked up and saw that it was Sarah.

“I’m sorry,” she said “That was a lousy way to say thanks.”

She got off the horse.

“So, thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” said Jonathan “I understand, though. That you don’t quite trust me. But you can really trust me, I swear.”

He made a little bow.

“Still need a ride?” she asked.

“I’ll just walk next to you,” he replied “That way you can still leave me behind if you still want to.”

He smiled at her.

“But please don’t.”

Sarah smiled back at him.

“Is the wolf coming with us?”

She approached the wolf and wanted to stroke its fur. Frostbite growled softly and Sarah pulled away her hand with a startled look on her face.

“It’s okay,” said Jonathan “She’s a friend.”

He knelt next to the animal and started petting its head. He ran his fingers between the ears and under the chin. The wolf turned its head and then it yawned.

“Go on,” he said “You can pet him.”

Sarah carefully held her hand in front of the wolf’s nose. Frostbite sniffed a couple of times, and then it licked her hand. She giggled.

“It kind of tickles.”

Sarah stroked the animal’s fur.

“Why did you name it Frostbite?” she asked.

“It’s the eyes,” Jonathan replied “They were pale like ice when I found him.”

He looked up at the rain that was still falling out of the sky.

“But I think we should go find some shelter.”

“I think that’s best,” said Sarah “I can barely feel my face.”