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The Bone House

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

Published by Lion Fiction

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BRIGHT EMPIRES **QUEST THE SECOND:**

THE BONE HOUSE

STEPHEN R. LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

What Readers Are Saying about The Bright Empires Series

"**His mastery of the art of description is beyond belief** (I had to stop several times to jump up and down because I loved his style so much, seriously). His level of attention to details like period mindset and speech is a delight to behold (especially for die-hard background-first novelists like me)."

Sir Emeth M.

"This is **a story that has it all**: mystery, history, damsels in distress, and a mind-bending meditation on the nature of reality. It is equal parts *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *National Treasure*, and *Jumper*. Highly recommended!"

Chad J.

"**Filled with descriptions that beguile all five senses** and all the beauty and charm of the language I have come to expect from Lawhead, this book is **a fascinating blend of fantasy and sci-fi**."

Jenelle S.

"… **a *hold-your-breath* beginning to a new series**. This novel mixes ancient history, time travel, alternate realities, mystery, physics, and fantasy, to create a story so compelling that **I find myself recommending it to any who will listen**."

Sheila P.

"[A] sure winner for eager sci-fi readers… The vivid imagery and witty lines help keep the reader on the edge of their seat."

Jerry P.

"**Time travel and high adventure abound** in this brand new title from veteran author Stephen R. Lawhead."

Ben H.

"**Imagine Narnia merged with *Hitchhiker's Guide***, and you have a starting point for the adventures of Kit Livingstone."

Rick M.

"Lawhead vividly describes the sights, sounds and smells of the markets in Prague, the streets of Restoration England, and even the dry heat of Ancient Egypt… **The premise of ley line travel is fascinating yet mysterious**, with scientific definitions that are detailed without becoming too technical. The characters are personable and complex, and **it's easy to get caught up in their search for that elusive map**."

Malinda D.

"… **an excellent, mysterious storyline** that draws the reader in."

Kieran

To find out more about Stephen R. Lawhead
visit: www.stephenlawhead.com
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For Suzie

"The distinction between past, present, and future is only an illusion – albeit a persistent one."

ALBERT EINSTEIN, PHYSICIST

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Important People

Anen – Friend of *Arthur Flinders-Petrie*, high priest of the temple of Amun in Egypt, Eighteenth dynasty.

Archelaeus Burleigh, Earl of Sutherland – Nemesis of *Flinders-Petrie, Cosimo, Kit*, and all right-thinking people.

Arthur Flinders-Petrie – Also known as *The Man Who Is Map*, patriarch of his line. Begat *Benedict*, who begat *Charles*, who begat *Douglas*.

Balthazar Bazalgette – The Lord High Alchemist at the Court of *Rudolf II* in Prague, friend and confidant of *Wilhelmina*.

Burley Men – *Con*, *Dex*, *Mal*, and *Tav*. Lord *Burleigh*'s henchmen. They keep a Stone Age cat called *Baby*.

Cosimo Christopher Livingstone, the Elder, aka **Cosimo** – a Victorian gentleman who seeks to reunite the Skin Map and understand the key to the future.

Cosimo Christopher Livingstone, the Younger, aka **Kit** – *Cosimo*'s great-grandson.

Emperor Rudolf – King of Bohemia and Hungary, Archduke of Austria and King of the Romans, he is also known as the Holy Roman Emperor and is quite mad.

Engelbert Stifflebeam – A baker from Rosenheim in Germany, affectionately known as **Etzel.**

Giles Standfast – *Sir Henry Fayth*'s coachman and *Kit*'s ally.

Gustavus Rosenkreuz – The Chief Assistant to the Lord High Alchemist and *Wilhelmina*'s ally.

Lady Haven Fayth – *Sir Henry*'s headstrong and mercurial niece.

Sir Henry Fayth, Lord Castlemain – member of the Royal Society, staunch friend and ally of *Cosimo*. *Haven*'s uncle.

Jakub Arnostovi – *Wilhelmina*'s landlord and business partner.

Snipe – Feral child, and malignant aide to *Douglas Flinders-Petrie*.

Wilhelmina Klug, aka **Mina** – In another life, a London baker and *Kit*'s girlfriend. In this life, owns Prague's Grand Imperial Kaffeehaus with *Etzel*.

Xian-Li – Wife of *Arthur Flinders-Petrie* and mother of *Benedict*. Daughter of the tattooist *Wu Chen Hu* of Macao.

Previously

Our story thus far concerns an underemployed but agreeable young fellow named Cosimo Christopher Livingstone, who much prefers to go by the name of Kit. He is related by birth to an anachronistic old gentleman named Cosimo, who is in fact his long-lost great-grandfather: long lost in that, owing to circumstances arising from the phenomenon known as ley travel (about which, more later), he disappeared more than a hundred years or so ago while on a routine visit to the local shops.

Cosimo's return was greeted by Kit with disbelief, astonishment, and chagrin. The elder relation's insistence that Kit should accompany him on a quest of great significance was rebuffed and, after a fleeting taste of this heretofore unheard of ley travel, Kit retreated to the arms of his unpleasant girlfriend, Wilhelmina Klug. Due to the time drift involved in ley journeys, he arrived quite late for a long-promised shopping excursion.

When the explanation for his tardiness failed to convince this young woman, Kit endeavoured to provide her with a practical demonstration. Owing to his inexperience, the demo went horribly wrong and poor Wilhelmina was lost in the transition. However, Kit was found once more by Cosimo, who introduced him to a stalwart colleague by the name of Sir Henry Fayth. Together the three of them set out to find Wilhelmina and return her to her proper place and time.

Laudable as their concern may have been, it ultimately proved misplaced. Wilhelmina landed on her feet in seventeenth-century Prague, where she was befriended by a kindly soul named Engelbert "Etzel" Stiffelbeam, a baker from Rosenheim who had travelled to Bohemia to seek his fortune. The two joined forces and opened a bakery, the success of which remained elusive until they introduced an as-yet-unheard-of commodity to the capital: coffee. The Grand Imperial Kaffeehaus was an immediate success, and soon all of Old Prague was abuzz over the latest sensation.

The coffee house brought Wilhelmina into contact with members of the court of Emperor Rudolf II, and among these a coterie of alchemists who were dutifully employed in the pursuit of arcane studies in what is to this day known as the Magick Court.

Now we come to the concept of ley travel, or ley leaping as Lady Fayth, Sir Henry's mercurial niece, is wont to call it. Ley travel consists of utilizing, or manipulating, lines of electromagnetic force that are to be found embedded in the earth, thereby employing these lines of force by methods yet to be described by science to effect great leaps in not only distance but dimensional reality and, consequently, time as well. The reader is asked to bear in mind that *ley* travel is not the same as *time* travel, strictly speaking. Although it must be admitted that, owing to the fact that time is relative to the reality being visited, ley travellers do come unstuck in time, which leads to a sort of chronological dislocation – an unavoidable side effect of ley leaping. It would be pleasant to report that all times everywhere in the universe are the same and that each reality links up perfectly end-to-end, but that is not the case. For reasons described below, each separate reality has its own history and progression in its own time. Thus, travelling to a different dimension involves a sideways slip in time as well as place, but that is not the same as travelling backwards or forwards along a single timeline in a discrete reality.

How many ley lines there are and where they lead, nobody really knows. Nor is it known how they are produced, or why. But one man knew more than most: the explorer Arthur Flinders-Petrie, an intrepid soul who made countless trips to other worlds and meticulously recorded his discoveries on a map. So that he could always find his way home again and so that he could never be separated from his map, he had it tattooed onto his torso in the form of coded symbols – not the most original plan, of course, but highly effective and productive too, in that it allowed him to meet and marry his Chinese tattooist's charming daughter, Xian-Li. Arthur shared with his new wife his passion for exploration, introducing her to the arcane secrets of ley travel. On one such early trip to Egypt, tragedy struck in the form of Nile fever, and the stricken Xian-Li succumbed and died.

At some later time, Arthur died also, and in order that his discoveries should not die with him the map was removed and carefully preserved; for among the many wonders he encountered in his travels there was one that was so amazing, so staggeringly important, that Arthur kept it a close-guarded secret from all but his nearest and dearest kin. Through circumstances yet to be explained, the map was divided into sections, and those sections scattered across the multi-verse. Happily, the Skin Map and its tantalizing secret endure.

Flinders-Petrie has a nemesis – Archelaeus Burleigh, the Earl of Sutherland – an unscrupulous dastard who is wholly obsessed with possessing the map and learning its secrets. He and his nefarious crew will stop at nothing to discover the treasure.

At the end of our first instalment of this tale, Kit and his companion Giles were facing eminent demise in the tomb of Anen at the hands of Lord Burleigh – the same tomb that had already claimed the lives of dear old Cosimo and Sir Henry. Wilhelmina, whose presence in the chase had been understated up to that point, made a sudden and welcome appearance – all the more so because Lady Fayth had proved too fickle. Loyalty, it seems, is a rare and precious commodity in whichever reality one occupies.

With those things remembered, we return to our story, in which some things are best forgotten.

Part I

The Book of Forbidden Secrets

In Which Some Things are Best Forgotten

From a snug in the corner of the Museum Tavern, Douglas Flinders-Petrie dipped a sop of bread into the gravy of his steak and kidney pudding and watched the entrance to the British Museum across the street. The great edifice was dark, the building closed to the public for over three hours. The employees had gone home, the charwomen had finished their cleaning, and the high iron gates were locked behind them. The courtyard was empty and, outside the gates, there were fewer people on the street now than an hour ago. He felt no sense of urgency: only keen anticipation, which he savoured as he took another draught of London Pride. He had spent most of the afternoon in the museum, once more marking the doors and exits, the blind spots, the rooms where a person might hide and remain unseen by the night watchmen, of which there were but three to cover the entire acreage of the sprawling institution.

Douglas knew from his researches that at eleven each night the head watchman retired to his office on the ground floor to make tea. He would be duly joined by his two underling guards, and the three would enter their observations in the logbook and then spend an enjoyable thirty minutes drinking their tea, eating pies, and exchanging gossip.

While they were thus occupied, he would strike.

The pub was quiet tonight, even for a damp Thursday in late November. There were only five other patrons in the place: three

at the rail and two at tables. He would have preferred more people – if only so his own presence would not be as noticeable – but he doubted it would make much difference. In any event, there was nothing he could do about it.

"Everything all right, sir?"

Douglas turned from the window and looked up. The landlord, having little to do this evening, was making the rounds and chatting with his customers.

"Never better," replied Douglas in a tone he hoped would dismiss further intrusion. But the man remained hovering over the table.

"Mr Flinders-Petrie, is it not, sir?"

"Indeed so." He offered a bland smile to cover his annoyance at being recognized on this night of all nights. "I fear you have me at a disadvantage. I was not aware that my name would be common knowledge."

The landlord chuckled. "No, I suppose not. But do you not recognize me, sir?"

Douglas looked more closely at him. There was a vague familiarity about the fellow, but… no, he could not place him.

"Cumberbatch, sir," the landlord volunteered. "I worked for your father, I did. Oh, quite a few years ago." At Douglas's dubious expression, he said, "I was his footman – Silas."

"Silas! Certainly, I remember you," Douglas lied. "Do forgive me. Yes, of course, now that you remind me."

" 'Course, I was younger then, and you were away at school and university and whatnot." The landlord wiped his hands on the towel around his waist and smoothed it out as if this put the matter to rest. "Happy days they were."

"Yes, yes," agreed Douglas amiably. He was aware that the other patrons were watching them, and actually relieved now that the place was not more crowded. "Happy times, indeed."

"Pardon my asking, sir," said Cumberbatch, leaning nearer the table. He lowered his voice. "If you don't mind, there's something that I've always wanted to know. I'd be most obliged."

"I'd be happy to help if I can, Silas. What is it?"

"Did they ever find the man who killed your father?"

To buy himself a little space to think, Douglas took a drink of his ale, then, placing the glass carefully on the table, said, "I am sorry to say they never did."

"Oh dear, oh dear." Cumberbatch shook his head. "That's a right pity. Did they never have a suspicion, then?"

"Suspicions, yes," replied Douglas, "but nothing more. The coroner's verdict at the time of the inquest reads 'unlawful killing by person or persons unknown'. At this late date, I fear it is likely to remain a mystery."

"Ah, dear me," sighed Cumberbatch. "That is a shame, that is. He was a good man, your father – a very decent chap, if you don't mind my saying. A solid and upright fellow – always treated me well, and that's a fact, that is."

"Yes, well, as you say it was all a long time ago. Perhaps it is best forgotten."

"No doubt, sir. I'm with you there." Cumberbatch brightened once more. "But it is good to see you, Mr Flinders-Petrie. Here, now, can I get you another pint?"

"Thank you, but no, I –"

"On the house, sir – for old time's sake. It would please me no end."

"Very well, then. Thank you, Silas. I would enjoy that."

"Coming right up, sir."

The landlord beetled off to pull the pint. Douglas drew his pocket-watch from his waistcoat and flipped it open. It was half past nine. In another hour he would make his move. Until then, he had a warm place to wait and watch. The landlord returned with his pint and, after another brief exchange, he was left alone to finish it and his meal in peace.

It was after ten thirty when he finally rose and, promising to return for another visit next time he was in the neighbourhood, retrieved his black cape from the coat-rack and went out into the mist and drizzle. The weather was perfect for his purposes – a miserable night meant fewer folk around to notice any peculiar comings and goings. The gas lamps hissed and fluttered, pale orbs that did little to cut the all-pervading fog. Perfect.

He smiled to himself as he walked to the corner of Montague Street, turned, and proceeded along the side of the museum to where the service alley joined the street at the rear of the building. There he paused to observe the street one last time; a lone hansom cab rattled away in the opposite direction, and two men in top hats staggered along – one in the gutter, the other on the pavement – oblivious to their surroundings, singing their way home from an evening's celebration.

Satisfied, he ducked into the alleyway and hurried quickly and unerringly in the dark to the back of a town house opposite the rear of the museum. There, lying in the lane beside the house, was the wooden ladder. With swift efficiency, he placed it against the high iron railing, climbed to the top of the fence, balanced on the upper bar while he pulled over the ladder, then climbed down. Once on the ground, he hurried to a window near the corner of the enormous building where even the lowest windows were eight feet off the ground. Positioning the ladder, he climbed up and rapped on the glass, counted to ten, and then rapped again.

As he finished the second tap, the window slid open from inside and a pale face, round like a solemn little moon, appeared in the darkness of the opening.

"Well done, Snipe," said Douglas. "Hand me in."

The stocky boy reached out and, with strong arms, pulled his master through the open window.

"Now then," said Douglas, drawing a small tin from his pocket. He flipped open the lid and shook out a few congreves, selected one, and swiped the head against the roughened top of the tin. The slender stick of soft pine erupted with a pop and spluttering red flame. "The lantern, Snipe."

The youth held up a small paraffin lamp; Douglas raised the glass and touched the match to the wick, then lowered the glass and waved the spent stick in the air to cool it before placing it back in the tin. "Let us be about our business."

By lantern's glow they made their way through the darkened stacks of the Smirke Bequest – a small, shelf-lined chamber off the great cavernous hall of the Reading Room. This cosy enclave was given to certain exceptional volumes from the libraries of wealthy patrons

who had donated or bequeathed their collections to the national archive for the general benefit of their fellow men. This ever-growing collection housed a particular volume that had long eluded Douglas Flinders-Petrie. It was this book he had come to acquire.

The Rare Books Room, as it was more commonly known, was strictly forbidden to all but the most eminent scholars, and then entry was granted only in the company of the Keeper of Antiquities or one of his assistants, who would unlock the chain at the doorway – there was no door, so that the books could be viewed from a distance even if they could not be perused – and usher the chosen one into the inner sanctum. White cotton gloves were to be worn at all times in the room, and no one was permitted to remain alone in the stacks at any time whatsoever. Douglas, having observed this exacting protocol on his survey trips to the museum, decided to forego the formalities and visit the room outside of public hours.

It had then been a matter of finding a place for Snipe to hide until well after closing: a storage cupboard in Room 55 on the upper floor was adequate to the purpose, and so, during a late-afternoon viewing of the Nineveh alabasters, Douglas had deposited his able servant in the closet with a cold pie and an apple to wait until the clock in Saint Bartholomew's chimed eleven. At the appointed hour, Snipe had crawled out and made his way down to the Rare Books Room to let Douglas in through the window.

So far so good.

"Go to the door and keep watch," Douglas commanded, directing the glow of the lantern towards the nearer stacks. As the servant moved to the doorway, Douglas began scanning the shelves. The books, he quickly discovered, were arranged in a loose chronological order – no doubt owing to their primary interest as artefacts rather than for the value of their contents. He found the proper historical period and started working down the line book by book. What should have been a task of moments, however, dragged on far longer than he planned, owing to the fact that many of the older books had no titles on their spines or covers and had to be drawn out, opened, and thumbed to their title pages before being placed back on the shelf.

He was only partway through the 1500s when he heard a sibilant hiss – like that of gas escaping from a leaky pipe. He stopped, held his breath… waited. The sound came again and was repeated. He quickly turned down the lantern wick and put the lamp on the floor, then hurried to the doorway, where Snipe stood behind the doorpost, peering out into the great hall of the main reading room.

"Someone coming?" Douglas whispered.

Snipe nodded and held up two fingers.

"Two of them. Right." Douglas turned and retreated into the stacks. "Follow me."

They crept off to the furthest corner of the room, placing the main body of stacks between themselves and the door.

"Get down," whispered Douglas.

The two pressed themselves flat to the floor and waited. Voices drifted into the room, and then footsteps could be heard as the watchmen made their rounds of the Reading Room. Shadows leapt from the stacks as one of the guards paused and shone his lantern into the room with a practised sweep. Then the footsteps receded and the voices resumed. The watchmen were moving off.

"That's better," sighed Douglas. "Back to work."

The two returned to their respective places and began again. Midway through the 1500s, Douglas found the book he was looking for – exactly as he had pictured it from his researches. One glimpse of the strange cipher writing and he knew he had it.

"Come to me, my pretty," he whispered, carefully placing the light on the shelf beside him. With trembling fingers, Douglas opened the book to reveal page after page of tightly ordered script in the most fanciful-looking letters he had ever seen. "You little beauty," he mused, brushing his fingertips lightly over the script. He might have spent a happy hour or so paging through the old curiosity – and he would – but now was not the time. He slipped the slim volume into an inner pocket of his cape, retrieved the lantern, and hurried to fetch Snipe.

"I've got it. Come away – time to make good our escape."

They climbed out the window, closing it carefully behind them, and retraced their inward journey, replacing the ladder at

the rear of the town house opposite before walking back down the alley to Montague Street. Douglas's mind was so filled with the book and the treasures it was certain to yield that he failed to see the policeman standing in the pool of light under the streetlamp. Emerging from the darkness of the alley like the guilty thieves they were, the pair naturally drew the interest of the policeman, who, raising his truncheon, called out, "Well, well, what have we here?"

"Oh!" gasped Douglas, spinning around to face the officer. "Good evening, constable. You quite gave me a start."

"Did I now!" He looked the pair up and down, his expression suggesting he did not care for what he saw. "Might I ask why you were lurking in that alley at this time of night?"

Douglas's hand went to the gun in his pocket. "Is it that late?" he asked affably. "I hadn't realized. Yes, I suppose it is." He glanced at Snipe beside him. The boy's lip was curled in a ferocious scowl. "It's the lad here," he offered. "He ran away earlier this evening, and I've been looking for him ever since – only just found him a few minutes ago."

The constable, frowning now, stepped closer. "That your son, then?"

"Good heavens, no," replied Douglas. "He's a servant. I'm taking him home with me." As if to underscore this fact, he put his hand to Snipe's collar.

The policeman's brow furrowed as he caught a glare of almost pure hatred playing over the boy's pallid features. Certainly, there was something odd about the youth that meant he could never have been mistaken for anyone's beloved son. "I see," concluded the police officer. "Does he run away often, then?"

"No, no, never before," Douglas hastily assured him. "There was a bit of a kerfuffle with the housekeeper, you see, and the lad took umbrage. A simple misunderstanding. I think I've straightened it out."

"Well," said the policeman, "these things happen, I suppose." He returned the truncheon to the hook on his belt. "You best get yourselves home. It's high time all respectable folk were abed."

"Just what I was thinking, constable. A pot of cocoa and a biscuit wouldn't go amiss either, I daresay." Douglas released his hold on

the pistol, but maintained his grip on the boy's collar. "I will wish you good night." Douglas started away, pulling the glaring Snipe with him.

"G'night, sir." The policeman watched them as they moved away. "Mind how you go," he called. "There are thieves and such about. It's weather like this brings 'em out."

"You're not wrong there, matey," murmured Douglas under his breath. "Come away, Snipe. Tonight we let him live."

In Which a Wander in the Wilderness is Good for the Soul

Kit stood staring down the Avenue of Sphinxes feeling very much alone. It was early yet, and there was no one else around. He drew the clean, dry air into his lungs. Deeply relieved to have been rescued from looming death by Wilhelmina's unexpected yet timely intervention, he nevertheless could not help feeling slightly bruised by her brusque manner. In fact, she had socked him on the arm as soon as they were free of the wadi and the tomb that had held them captive to Lord Burleigh's whims.

"Ow!" Kit complained. He had not seen the smack coming. "What was that for?"

"That was for abandoning me in that alley back in London," she told him. "That dark, stinky alley in the rainstorm – remember?"

"I remember, but it wasn't entirely my fault."

She smacked him again. "It wasn't very nice."

"Sorry!" Kit rubbed his upper arm.

"I forgive you." She smiled, then hit him once more for good measure.

"Yikes! Now what?"

"That is so you remember never to do it again."

"Right. Okay. I get it. I'm sorry, and I won't desert you ever again, I promise."

"Good. Now pay attention. We've got some ground to cover, and we don't have much time."

She had then told him about Luxor and what he was to do there. He had been instructed to go to the Winter Palace Hotel and ask for a Mr Suleyman at the front desk. Upon presenting himself, he would be given a parcel and a letter with further instructions. Wilhelmina had been very precise: don't stop to think or look around, hit the ground running, get to the location, secure the parcel. "It is imperative that you retrieve the package and follow the instructions to the letter."

"Why can't I go with you?" Kit had asked.

"We have to split up," she told him. "The Burley Men will soon be on our trail, and they'll follow me. If you peel off now they won't know – they'll think we're all still together."

"What about Giles?"

"He's going with me. If they catch up with us, I'll need someone to help me fight them off."

"I could help," Kit insisted. "I don't think it's a good idea to get separated. Where are you going anyway?"

"It's best if you don't know."

"But if I –"

She had put a hand to his face. "Do you trust me, Kit?"

"Of course I trust you, Mina. It's just that – I mean, we've only just met up. I don't see why –"

"If you trust me, then believe me when I say" – she pinched his cheek between her thumb and finger – "we don't have time for this discussion. The ley is active now, and any minute Burleigh and his goons will learn of your escape. When they do we must be as far away from here as possible."

"But I'm not going very far," Kit pointed out. "You said I was just to go to Luxor – that's only a few miles away."

"If you do exactly what I told you, you'll soon be in a different time zone," she said, pinching his cheek harder. "Now, stop fussing and just do what I say."

"Ow! Okay, okay! I'll do it." He rubbed his cheek. "I don't like it, but I'll do it."

"Good." She released him and gave him a pat. "We can talk about all this once I've given them the slip and done what I have to do." She smiled. "Relax, it's going to be fine."

She started down the broken pavement towards Giles, who was standing guard at the end of the Avenue of Sphinxes. "Just pick up the package and do what you're told," she called, half turning back as she walked. "If all goes well, it'll only be a few days – your time. You'll be busy enough, don't worry."

"A few days," said Kit. "Right."

"No more than a week or two," she hedged.

"Weeks!" objected Kit. "Wait a minute."

"A month at most." Wilhelmina turned and hurried to join Giles. "I've got to go. I'll see you."

Kit had watched her retreating figure, feeling like a child abandoned in a car park. At the end of the paved walkway leading to the ruined temple, she gathered Giles, taking him by the arm. Sir Henry's former footman cast a quick glance behind to Kit, raised his hand in farewell, then fell into step beside Wilhelmina. The two proceeded down the centre of the avenue, passing between the double row of statues at a fair clip. There was a gust of wind, a swirl of dust; both figures turned fuzzy and indistinct – as if viewed through the combined haze of heat and dust – and then they vanished altogether.

Kit drew another breath and held it, listening for sounds of pursuit, but heard only the thin warble of a solitary bird on a distant cliff top. Satisfied that he was alone for the moment, he let out his breath again. Still raw and reeling from the loss of Cosimo and Sir Henry, and the prospect of his own demise narrowly averted, Kit stood contemplating his next leap and thinking that everything was happening way too fast. Off to the east, the sun was just breaching the ragged hill line. If he did not go soon, he would have to wait until evening, and that would very likely be an invitation to disaster. "Might as well get on with it," he muttered to himself.

Mina had told him to start his walk at the fifth sphinx from the end of the row, and to be at full stride by the eighth ram-headed statue – a distance of thirty or so paces. If he had not made the

crossing by the time he reached the eighth sphinx, he was to stop dead in his tracks, carefully retrace his steps, and try again. Wilhelmina had been most emphatic about that. Making the leap at the precise spot on the avenue would bring him to the predetermined time period – give or take a few hours, days, or perhaps weeks. Any more than that and he would be wildly off course in time, if not in place as well.

He paced back to the appropriate sphinx at the end of the avenue furthest from the temple, turned, and paused to locate the eighth statue in the long double rank. "Ready or not, here I come," he said, and started walking briskly.

He felt the air quiver around him and sensed a prickling on his skin. The wind gusted sharply as he approached the designated statue. Stepping up his pace, he drew abreast of the eighth ram-headed statue and braced himself for the transition.

Nothing happened.

Against all natural inclination, he forced himself to stop as instructed by Wilhelmina.

"Terrific." He turned, stepped off the ley, and hurried back to the starting place. "Second time lucky," he muttered, and strode off again. Once again he felt the now-familiar tingle on his skin, as when, just before a lightning strike, the air becomes electrically charged. The wind gusted, driving fine grit into his eyes, which instantly started watering so that he had difficulty seeing where he was going. He must have unconsciously slowed a step, because he reached the eighth sphinx and still had not made the leap.

"Bugger!" he muttered. Had he lost the knack?

The thought that he might be stuck in 1920s Egypt with the Burley Men on his tail did not bear thinking about, so he dashed back to the starting point and took his place, putting his toes to an imaginary line. Lowering his head like a sprinter awaiting the gun, he muttered, "Third time lucky!" and shot off.

This time, with a determination absent from the first two attempts, he willed himself to leap. Perhaps it was this heightened resolve that did the trick, for upon approaching the eighth sphinx he felt the air quiver; the ground beneath his feet trembled, and the

world around him grew dim and indistinct, but only for the briefest of instants – the merest blink of an eye. He lurched forward and, like a drunk who has misjudged his footing, tottered dizzily for a few steps before righting himself and stopping.

When his head cleared he found himself standing almost exactly where he had been standing before – in the centre of the avenue at the eighth sphinx. The temple at the end of the avenue was still a ruin and empty, the ragged hills just as arid and dusty as before, but the sun was now high overhead and blazing down on him with a ferocity that brought tears to his eyes.

The discomfort of the crossing quickly passed. He noted with satisfaction that with each jump he was a little less nauseated and disoriented. The first had left him dazed and confused and upchucking over his shoes; this last spate of dizziness was nothing compared to that.

Now to get himself to Luxor. Assuming that the leap had been successful, and that he was in the time zone anticipated by Wilhelmina, he knew in general what he had to do: get to the river and follow it downstream until he came to the town, which was ten miles or so as the crow flew – depending, of course, on the crow. Then he was to make his way to the hotel and collect the package. Simple. Mina's letter would tell him what to do next.

He set off. Reaching the river meant working his way up and over the hills – no easy task, as he soon discovered. Following a goat track, he slowly climbed the barren slopes and was soon panting with the exertion. The heat bounced off the pale rock all around, scorching through his clothing. Sweat ran down his face and neck, the fat drops raising little dust puffs with every step. Mina had given him a skin of water for the journey, but as the heat took hold he worried that it would not be enough, so he nursed it carefully, taking only tiny sips of the now-warm, slightly brackish liquid.

To take his mind off his hike, he thought about where he was going and what he might find when he got there. He wondered what year it was, and why he had remained in Egypt when always before when using a ley, the traveller ended up in a startlingly different location. It probably had something to do with the length

of distance travelled along the ley, he decided – for lack of any better explanation. Maybe that was why Mina had been so adamant about making the leap between the fifth and eighth sphinxes. If he had missed that mark, where would he have ended up? More to the point, without a map, how would he have found his way back?

That was the question. Finally, if somewhat belatedly, he was beginning to gain a more fundamental appreciation of Arthur Flinders-Petrie's singular courage and the awful importance of his Skin Map. "Don't leave home without it," Kit mused aloud to himself.

Other questions bubbled to the surface: What era had he landed in now? There was no way to judge from his bleak surroundings – the desert had not changed in a few thousand years, as far as he could tell. What epoch was it? Here was another poser: How had Wilhelmina found her way to rescue him and Giles from pretty near certain death at the hands of Burleigh and his goons? She did not seem to have a map – even a paper one – or any other sort of guide. How had she accomplished this feat? More to the point, how had she become such an expert on ley travel? The last time Kit had seen his former girlfriend, she had been bawling in a London alley as a freak storm drenched her head to heel. They had been separated then: he went one place, and she ended up… who knew where? And Kit still didn't know, because she had not had time to tell him.

These and other questions occupied him to such an extent that he was surprised when he looked up and saw, shimmering like a mirage in the near distance, the Nile: a gently undulating line of silver nestled between two verdant strips and cradled by bone-coloured hills and desert highlands on either side. The sight was so arresting that he paused to treat himself to a long drink of water before starting the climb down. In the shade of a rock overhang, he sat and closed his sun-dazzled eyes.

Instantly the image of the corpses in High Priest Anen's tomb came winging back to him: the bodies of his poor dead great-grandfather and Sir Henry Fayth, laid top to tail in the lidless sarcophagus. Shocked by their deaths, and mindful of his own close call, he still felt a little stunned. In their haste to make a clean escape, he had not yet had time to mourn them properly. Instead, what he

felt was not grief exactly, but was closer to a churning animosity towards Burleigh at the wicked waste of those good men's lives. As far as Kit was concerned, the earl and his men were vile low-life scum, evil through and through. In his burgeoning fantasies of revenge, Kit concocted inventive and agonizing punishments for them all.

This was the first sign of the new attitude rapidly crystallizing in Kit's character: call it stalwart determination. Perhaps, at last, one could detect the vestiges of a sturdier, more robust backbone. Although it took little more than the form of a swiftly hardening resolve to discover the secret of the Skin Map, still, it was a beginning. Taking up the quest in dead earnest, he decided, would be the best tribute he could offer Cosimo and Sir Henry. They deserved that much, at least.

Whatever else could be said, they did not deserve to die like that: stricken down by the contagion of the tomb, some airborne plague germ or something – wasn't that what killed Howard Carter and those other archaeologists who opened King Tut's tomb? Whatever infested the tomb, dear old Cosimo and Sir Henry had succumbed to it, and if Wilhelmina had not turned up when she did, no doubt he and Giles would have suffered the very same fate. He wondered if he had caught the bug already. Truth to tell, he did not feel too strong just now. *What I need*, he breathed to himself, *is a good meal and a restful night's sleep to see me right. That's all.*

Was that too much to ask? Kit did not think so.

With this thought in mind, Kit roused himself and, fortifying himself with another swig of water, started down the long meandering path into the broad Nile valley. Upon rejoining the rock-strewn way, the heat hit him anew and he considered taking off his shirt and wrapping that around his head turban-style. But that would just be trading a present misery for the future one of sun-fried shoulders. He would get a good hat at the first opportunity.

Picking his way over the shattered landscape, he dropped lower into the valley; the air grew slightly more humid the closer he came to the river. His progress, though steady, was not as swift as he had hoped it would be. Distances could be deceiving in the desert, he

knew, and for all Kit's donkey-like progress he seemed to come no nearer his destination.

As the sun drifted lower and ever lower in the western sky, Kit watched his shadow stretch out before him over the rocky waste. Mesmerized by his ever-lengthening silhouette, he was brought once more to his senses when a chorus of barking dogs announced his arrival at a small riverside village.