Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Skin Map

Written by Stephen R. Lawhead

Published by Lion Fiction

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

BRIGHT EMPIRES **QUEST THE FIRST:**

THE SKIN MAP

STEPHEN R. LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

To find out more about Stephen R. Lawhead
visit: www.stephenlawhead.com
or: www.facebook.com/StephenRLawhead

Text copyright © Stephen R. Lawhead 2011
This edition © Lion Hudson 2013

The right of Stephen Lawhead to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

Published by Lion Fiction
an imprint of
Lion Hudson plc
Wilkinson House, Jordan Hill Road,
Oxford OX2 8DR, England
www.lionhudson.com/fiction

ISBN 978 1 78264 013 4
e-ISBN 978 1 78264 026 4

Acknowledgments
Cover design © 2010 Thomas Nelson, Inc.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound in the UK, February 2013, LH26

‘Why is the Universe so big?
Because we are here!’

JOHN WHEELER, PHYSICIST

Part I

The Old Straight Track

Chapter 1

In Which Old Ghosts Meet

Like most Londoners, Kit endured the daily travails of navigating a city whose complexities were legendary. And, like many of his fellow city dwellers, he did so with a fortitude and resilience the ancient Spartans would have admired. He knew well the dangers even the most inconsequential foray could involve; venturing out into the world beyond his doorstep was the urban equivalent of trial by combat, and he armed himself as best he could.

Kit had long ago learned his small patch of the great metropolitan sprawl; he knew where the things most needful for survival were to be found and how to get to them. He kept a ready-reference library of street maps, bus routes, and time schedules in his head. He had memorized the London Underground tube schematic; he knew the quickest ways to work, and from work to his favourite pubs, the grocer's, the cinema, the park.

Kit prided himself on his ability not only to weather the storms of chaos the Gods of Transport routinely hurled into his path, but to prevail, to conquer in the face of daunting adversity. Sadly, it was pride misplaced. His record of success was not good.

This morning was a perfect example: only minutes before, he had stepped out of the door of his flat in Hackney on a jaunt to accompany his girlfriend on a long-promised shopping trip. Full of optimism and brimming with confidence, he had proceeded to the nearest station, swiped his Oyster card at the turnstile, stormed onto the platform as the train came rattling in, and leaped aboard bare seconds before the doors closed. He counted off his three stops and then switched onto the Victoria line.

'All passengers must disembark,' rasped a voice through crackling loudspeakers. 'This train is terminated.' The line was closed ahead for routine maintenance.

Joining the grumbling pack, Kit was directed once again to street level where a special bus had been provided for Tube users to continue their journey. The fact that it was Sunday – and that Tottenham Hotspur was playing Arsenal – had completely slipped his mind. One look at the queue of Tottenham fans stretching halfway down the street, however, and he quickly came up with a better plan: just nip across the road and take the train one stop further, switch to the Piccadilly Line, then get off at Turnpike Lane; from there it would be a quick bus ride down West Green Road. A brisk walk through Chestnuts Park would bring him to Wilhelmina's place. *Easy peasy*, he thought as he dived back into the station.

Once again, Kit fished his Oyster card from his pocket and flapped it at the turnstile. This time, instead of the green arrow, the light on the pad flashed red. Aware of the foot traffic already piling up behind him, he swiped the travel card again and was awarded with the dreaded 'Seek Assistance' notice. *Terrific*, he sighed inwardly, and began backing through the queue to the scorn and muttered abuse of his fellow travellers, most of whom were dressed in football jerseys of one kind or another. 'Sorry,' he grumbled, fighting his way through the press. 'Excuse me. Terribly sorry.'

He hurried to the nearest ticket window only to find that it was closed; he saw another on the far side of the station and, after negotiating an obstacle course of barriers and hoardings, he arrived to discover there was no one around. He pounded on the window and after a minute or two managed to rouse the attendant.

'My Oyster card needs topping up,' Kit explained.

'You can do it online,' replied the agent.

'But I'm here now,' Kit pointed out, 'in person.'

'It's cheaper online.'

'That is as may be,' Kit agreed. 'But I have to travel now – today. Can't I just pay?'

'You can pay at a ticket window.'

'The ticket window is closed.'

The attendant gazed at him pityingly. 'It's Sunday.'

'What's that got to do with it?' enquired Kit.

'Early closing on Sunday.'

'It's barely nine o'clock in the morning!' cried Kit. 'How early do they close?'

The attendant shrugged. 'There's a ticket machine. You can use that.'

'Okay, okay,' said Kit, accepting this set-back. Down on the platform below, he could hear the train clattering in, and hurried to the ticket machine – which, after repeated attempts, refused to accept his five pound note, spitting it out each time. The next machine along was out of change, and the next was out of service. Kit ran back to the ticket window. 'I don't have any change,' he said, sliding the fiver through the gap in the window. 'And the ticket machine won't take my money.'

The attendant regarded the crumpled note. 'This isn't a ticket window.'

'I know that,' replied Kit. 'I just need change for the machine.'

'We're not allowed to give change.'

'Why not?'

'This is an information window. We only give out information.'

'You're kidding.'

The attendant shrugged. Directing his gaze past Kit, he called, 'Next!' – although there was no one in line.

Admitting temporary defeat, Kit made his way back to the street. There were numerous shops where he might have changed a five pound note – if not for the fact that it was Sunday and all were either observing weekend hours, or closed for the day. 'Typical,' huffed Kit, and decided that it would be easier and no doubt faster just to walk the three miles. With this thought in mind, he sailed off, dodging traffic and Sunday-morning pedestrians in the sincere belief that he could still reach Mina's on time. He proceeded along Grafton Street, mapping out a route in his head as he went. He had gone but half a mile when he hit upon a short-cut that would shave a good twenty minutes off his route. All he

had to do was work his way across Islington through the back streets. He turned onto the first street east, tooled along splendidly, quickly reaching the next street north which took him to a main east–west thoroughfare which he followed until he came to an odd little street called Stane Way.

So far, so good, he thought as he charged down the narrow walkway that was really nothing more than an alley providing service access for the shops on the parallel streets. After walking for two minutes, he started looking for the crossing street at the end. Two more minutes passed… he should have reached the end by now, shouldn't he?

Then it started to rain.

Kit picked up his speed as the rain poured into the alley from low, swirling clouds overhead. He hunched his shoulders, put his head down, and ran. A wind rose out of nowhere and whipped down the length of the blank brick canyon, driving the rain into his eyes.

He stopped.

Pulling his phone from his pocket, he flipped open the screen. No signal.

'Bloody useless,' he muttered.

Drenched to the skin, water dripping from the ends of his hair and tip of his nose, he shoved the phone back into his pocket. Enough of this, he decided. Abort mission. He made a swift about-face and, shoes squelching with every step, headed back the way he had come. Good news: the wind ceased almost at once and the rain dwindled away; the storm diminished as quickly as it had arisen.

Dodging one oily puddle after another, he jogged along and had almost regained the alley entrance at Grafton Street when he heard someone calling him – at least, he thought that was what he had heard. But, with the spatter of rain from the eaves of the buildings round about, he could not be sure.

He slowed momentarily and, a few steps later, he heard the call again – unmistakable this time: 'Hello!' came the cry. 'Wait!'

Keep moving, said the voice inside his head. As a general rule it kept him from getting tangled in the craziness of London's vagrant

community. He glanced over his shoulder to see a white-haired man stumbling towards him out of the damp urban canyon. Where had he come from? Most likely a drunk who had been sleeping it off in a doorway. Roused by the storm, he had seen Kit and recognized an easy mark. Such was life; he prepared to be accosted.

'Sorry, mate,' Kit called back over his shoulder as he turned away. 'I'm skint.'

'No! Wait!'

'No change. Sorry. Got to run.'

'Cosimo, please.'

That was all the vagrant said, but it welded Kit to the spot.

He turned and looked again at the beggar. Tall, and with a full head of thick silvery hair and a neatly trimmed goatee, he was dressed in charity-shop style: simple white shirt, dark twill trousers, both sturdy, but well worn. The fact that he stuffed the cuffs of his trousers into his high-top shoes, and wore one of those old-timey greatcoats that had a little cape attached to the shoulders made him look like a character out of Sherlock Holmes.

'Look, do I know you?' asked Kit as the fellow hastened nearer.

'I should hope so, my boy,' replied the stranger. 'One would think a fellow would know his own great-grandfather.'

Kit backed away a step.

'Sorry I'm late,' continued the old man. 'I had to make certain I wasn't followed. It took rather longer than I anticipated. I was beginning to fear I'd missed you altogether.'

'Excuse me?'

'So, here we are. All's well that ends well, what?'

'Listen, mate,' protested Kit. 'I think you've got the wrong guy.'

'What a joy it is to meet you at long last, my son,' replied the old gentleman, offering his hand. 'Pure joy. But of course, we haven't properly met. May I introduce myself? I am Cosimo Livingstone.' He made a very slight bow.

'Okay, so what's the joke?' demanded Kit.

'Oh, it is no joke,' the old man assured him. 'It's quite true.'

'No – you're mistaken. *I* am Cosimo Livingstone,' he insisted. 'And anyway, how do you know my name?'

'Would you mind very much if we discussed this walking? We really should be moving along.'

'This is nuts. I'm not going anywhere with you.'

'Ah, well, I think you'll find that you don't have much choice.'

'Not true.'

'Sorry?'

'Listen, mate, I don't know how you got hold of my name, but you must have me mixed up with someone else,' Kit said, hoping to sound far more composed than he actually felt at that moment. 'I don't mean to be rude, but I don't know you and I'm not going anywhere with you.'

'Fair enough,' replied the stranger. 'What would it take to change your mind?'

'Forget it,' said Kit, turning away. 'I'm out of here.'

'What sort of proof would you like? Names, birthdates, family connections – that sort of thing?'

He started off. 'I'm not listening.'

'Your father is John. Your mother is Harriet. You were born in Weston-super-Mare, but your family soon moved to Manchester where your father worked as a managerial something or other in the insurance trade and your mother was a school administrator. When you were twelve your family upped sticks again and resettled in London…'

Kit halted. He stood in the middle of the alley wrestling with the twin sensations of alarm and disbelief. He turned around slowly.

The old man stood smiling at him. 'How am I doing so far?'

Even in the uncertain light of the alley, the family resemblance was unmistakable – the strong nose, the heavy jaw and broad brow, the hair that rippled like waves from the forehead, the broad lips and dark eyes – just like his father and obnoxious Uncle Leonard – it was all of a basic design that Kit had seen repeated with greater or lesser variation in family members all his life.

'Since university – Manchester, Media Studies, whatever *that* is – you have been working here and there, doing nothing of any real value –'

'Who are you?' demanded Kit. 'How do you know these things?'

'But I've already told you,' chuckled the old gentleman. 'I am your great-grandfather.'

'Oh, yeah? Would this be the great-grandfather who went down to the shops for a loaf of bread one morning and never came back? The same one who abandoned a wife and three kids in Marylebone in 1893?'

'Dear me, you know about that, do you? Well, lamentably, yes. But it wasn't a loaf of bread, it was milk and sausages.' The old man's gaze grew keen. 'Tell me, what did *you* go out for this morning?'

Kit's mouth went dry.

'Hmm?' replied the stranger. 'What was it? Tin of beans? Daily paper? This is how it always happens, don't you see?'

'No…' said Kit feeling more unhinged by the second.

'It's a family proclivity, you might say. A talent.' The older man took a step nearer. 'Come with me.'

'Why, in the name of everything that's holy, would I go anywhere with you?'

'Because, my dear boy, you are a lonely 27-year-old bachelor with a worthless education, a boring no-hope job, a stalled love life, and very few prospects for the improvement of your sad lot.'

'How dare you! You don't know anything about me.'

'But I know *everything* about you, old chap.' The old man took another step closer. 'I thought we had already established that.'

'Yeah? What else?'

The elder gentleman sighed. 'I know that you are an overworked drone in a soul-destroying cube farm where you have been passed over for promotion two times in the last nine months. The last time you don't know about, because they didn't even bother telling you.'

'I don't believe this.'

'You spend too much time alone, too much time watching television, and too little time cultivating the inner man. You live in a squalid little flat in what is referred to as a no-go zone from which your friends, of whom you see less and less, have all fled for the suburbs long ago with wives and sprogs in tow. You are exceedingly unlucky in love, having invested years in a romantic relationship

which, as you know only too well, is neither romantic nor much of a relationship. In short, you have all the social prospects of a garden gnome.'

Kit gaped in amazement. Except for the low crack about his love life, the old geezer was remarkably close to the mark.

'Is that enough?'

'Who *are* you?'

'I'm the man who has come to rescue you from a life of quiet desperation and regret.' He smiled again. 'Come, my boy, let's sit down over a cup of coffee and discuss the matter like gentlemen. I've gone to a very great deal of trouble to find you. At the very least, you could spare me a few minutes out of your busy life.'

Kit hesitated.

'Cup of coffee – thirty minutes. What could it hurt?'

Trepidation and curiosity wrestled one another for a moment. Curiosity won. 'Okay,' he relented. 'Twenty minutes.'

The two started walking towards the street. 'I've got to call my girlfriend and tell her I'll be a little late,' Kit said, pulling out his phone. He flipped it open and pressed the speed-dial key for Mina's number. When nothing happened, he glanced at the screen to see the 'Network Not Connected' message blinking at him. He waved the phone in the air, then looked again. Still no tiny bars indicating a signal.

'Not working?' asked the older man, watching him with a bemused expression.

'Must be the buildings,' mumbled Kit, indicating the close brick walls on either side. 'Blocking the signal.'

'No doubt.'

They continued on and, upon approaching the end of the alley, Kit thought he heard a sound at once so familiar and yet so strange, it took him a full two seconds to place it. Children laughing? No, not children. Seagulls.

He had little time to wonder about this for, at that moment, they stepped from the dim alleyway and into the most dazzling and unusual landscape Kit had ever seen.

Chapter 2

In Which Lines are Drawn, and Crossed

Before his bewildered eyes spread a scene he had only ever glimpsed in movies: a busy wharf with a three-masted schooner moored to the dock and, beyond it, the grand sweep of a sparkling, blue-green bay. The brilliant, sun-washed air was loud with the cackle of seagulls hovering and diving for scraps of fish and refuse as fishermen in the smaller boats hefted wicker baskets full of silver fish to women in blue bonnets and grey shawls over long calico dresses. Broad black headlands rose on either side of the wide scoop of the bay and, between these craggy promontories, a tidy town of small white houses climbed the slopes. Stocky men in short, baggy trousers and droopy shirts, with straw hats on their heads, pushed hand carts and drove mule teams along the seafront, helping to unload hessian-wrapped bundles from the tall ship.

Kit could only stand in stark-staring disbelief while astonishment whelmed over him in great, rolling waves.

Gone were the Islington streets with their office blocks and narrow roads clogged with cars and double-decker buses, the innumerable coffee shops and take-aways, betting shops, and newsagents, the Belgrave Arms, the Post Office, the community college. No more the world-beating urban sprawl of metropolitan London with its dense clusters of neighbourhoods and shopping districts connected with traffic-bound streets and four-lane carriageways.

Everything familiar that Kit had known with the solid certainty of concrete had vanished utterly – and with it his own concrete certainty in bricks-and-mortar reality. It had all been replaced with a seaside

vista at once so charming, so evocative, so quaint and winsome it could have been a painting in the National Gallery. And then the stench hit him – a stringent pong of fish guts, rotting vegetables, and tar. He felt woozy and his stomach squirmed with a queasy feeling.

Turning hastily back to the alleyway, he saw that it was still there, still straight and narrow, its length deeply shadowed as if to shield a dreadful secret. 'Where…?' he said, gulping air. 'Where are we?'

'No need to speak until you're ready.'

Kit turned his wondering eyes to the bustling panorama before him – the tall ship, the muscled stevedores, the fishermen in their floppy felt hats, the fishwives in their wooden clogs and headscarves – and tried to make sense of what he was seeing and remain calm in the face of what he considered a shocking dislocation. 'What happened to Islington?'

'All in good time, dear boy. Can you walk? Perhaps we can forget the coffee – have a drink instead. Fancy a pint?' Kit nodded. 'It isn't far,' the old gentleman informed him. 'This way.'

Dragging his rattled self together, Kit followed his guide out onto the waterfront. It felt as if he were walking on borrowed legs. The boardwalk seemed to lurch and shift with every awkward step.

'You are doing marvellously well. When it first happened to me, I couldn't even stand up.'

They passed along a row of tiny shops and boat houses and simple dwellings, Kit's mind reeling as he tried to take in everything at once. Away from the fetid alley, the air was cleaner, though still filled with the scent of the sea: fish and seaweed, wet hemp, salt and rocks.

'In answer to your previous question,' the old man said, 'this place is called Sefton-on-Sea.'

Judging from what he could observe, the town appeared to be one of those forgotten coastal villages that had been frozen in time by a local council intent on capitalizing on the tourist trade; a settlement that time forgot. Sefton-on-Sea was more authentically old-fashioned and picturesque than any West Country fishing village Kit had ever seen. As a re-enactment theme park, the place put all others in the shade.

'Here we are,' said the elder man. 'Come in, we'll have a drink and get to know one another better.'

Kit looked around to see that they were standing at the door of a substantial brick house with a painted wooden sign that said Old Ship Inn. He allowed himself to be led through the door and stepped into a dark room with low ceilings, a few tables and benches, and a tin-topped bar. A few snugs lined the perimeter of the pub which was presided over by a broad-beamed young woman convincingly costumed in a cap of plain linen and long white ale-stained apron. She greeted them with a smile. There was no one else in the place.

'Two pints of your best, Molly,' called the old man, leading his docile companion to a stool in the corner. 'Sit yourself down, my boy. We'll get some ale in you and you'll begin to feel more yourself.'

'You come here often?' Kit asked, trying to force some lightness into his voice.

'Whenever I'm in the neighbourhood, so to speak.'

'Which is where, exactly? Cornwall? Pembrokeshire?'

'So to speak.'

The barmaid appeared bearing two overflowing pewter tankards which she deposited on the table. 'Thank you, Molly,' said the old man. 'Do you have anything to eat? A little bread and cheese perhaps?'

'There's cheese in t'back, an' I can go down t'bakery for a loaf if you like.'

'Would you, please? There will be an extra penny in it for you. There's a good girl.'

The young lady shuffled off, and the white-haired gentleman took up his tankard, saying, 'Here's to dodgy adventures with disreputable relatives!'

Kit failed to see the humour of that sentiment, but was glad for the drink. He took a deep draught, allowing the flowery sweet ale to fill his mouth and slide down his throat. The taste was reassuringly familiar and after another swallow he felt better for it.

'Let's start at the beginning, shall we?' said the old man, putting down his tankard. 'Now then.' He drew an invisible square on the

tabletop with his forefingers. 'What do you know about the Old Straight Track?'

'I think I'd know one if I saw one.'

'Good,' replied his great-grandfather. 'Perhaps your education wasn't entirely wasted.' He redrew the square. 'These trackways form what might be called intersections between worlds, and as such –'

'Hold on,' interrupted Kit. 'Intersections between *worlds*… we *are* talking about trains?'

'Trains!' The old man reared back. 'Great heavens, it's nothing to do with *those* smoke-belching monstrosities.'

'Oh.'

'I'm talking about the Old Straight Track – Neolithic pathways. In short, I am talking about ley lines.' He studied the younger man's expression. 'Am I to take it you've never heard of them?'

'Once or twice,' hedged Kit.

'Not even that.'

'No,' he confessed.

'Oh dear. Oh dear.' The old man regarded him with a glance of rank disapproval. 'You really ought to have applied yourself to your studies, young Cosimo.'

Kit drank some more, reviving a little more with every sip. 'So, what are these lay lines, then?'

Into the invisible square the old man drew a straight diagonal line. 'A *ley* line,' he said, speaking slowly – as one might to a dog or dull-witted child, 'is what might be called a field of force, a trail of telluric energy. There are hundreds of them, perhaps thousands, all over Britain, and they've been around since the Stone Age. I thought you might have stumbled across them before.'

Kit shook his head.

'Early man recognized these lines of force, and marked them out on the landscape with, well, any old thing, really – standing stones, ditches, mounds, tumps, sacred wells, and that sort of thing. And, later on, with churches, market crosses, crossroads, and what not.'

'Hey, hold on,' said Kit, breaking in. 'I think I know what you're talking about – New Agers out in Wiltshire on Bank Holidays traipsing around the standing stones with witching sticks and

tambourines, chanting to the Earth Goddess and –' he looked at the frown on the old man's face. 'No?'

'Not by a long chalk. Those poor deluded dupes, spouting all that neopagan poppycock, are to be pitied. No,' he shook his head firmly, 'we're not talking New Age nonsense, we're talking *science* – as in "There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy", et cetera.' His eyes took on a slightly manic light. 'Truth, dear boy. Sci-ence!'

'R-right,' said Kit warily. 'I thought you said they were some kind of intersection between worlds.'

'Precisely,' replied his great-grandfather. 'You see, this universe we inhabit is made up of billions of galaxies – literally beyond counting – and this is only one universe.'

'There are others?'

'Oh, yes – possibly. Maybe. We're not sure.'

'We?'

'The Questors – but never mind, I'll come to that later.' The old man brushed the word aside with a stroke of his hand. 'Now then, where were we?'

'Billions of galaxies,' said Kit, staring into his tankard. If he had for a moment allowed himself to feel that sitting in a friendly pub conversing with a genial old man who was, by any reckoning, well over 125 years old might be a reasonable activity… that feeling evaporated, replaced by a steadily mounting anxiety. And it was not only due to the outlandish nature of the old codger's demented ramblings. The thing that had him in a sweat was this: in spite of everything he had a sensation of being told a secret he knew to be true, but which would be far, far easier – and much safer – to ignore; all the more so since he strongly suspected that acknowledging the truth meant his life would change utterly.

Then again what Cosimo had said was true: he *was* nothing but an overworked drone in a cube farm, a minor cog in the dreary machinery of a third-rate mortgage mill, overlooked, unloved, a sidelined player in the big game, and – how did the old man put it? – a lonely bachelor with the love life of garden gnome. What then, really, did he have to lose?

'Look, no offence,' said Kit, rousing himself, 'but if you really *are* my great-grandfather, why aren't you dead?'

'I suppose the simplest explanation is that all the popping back and forth between one world and another does funny things to one's aging mechanism; ley travel seems to inhibit the process in some way.'

'Oh.'

'If we can continue?' The old man dipped his finger in a little puddle of ale and drew a large circle on the tabletop. 'The visible universe with its many galaxies occupies one dimension of our common reality, but there are other dimensions – many of them.'

'How many?'

'Impossible to say. But each dimension has its own worlds and galaxies and so forth. And we know that these dimensions impinge on one another. They touch. They interpenetrate. And where one dimension touches or passes through another, it forms a line of force on the landscape.' He glanced up and saw his explanation was falling short of total comprehension. 'Ever played with soap bubbles in the bath?'

'Maybe.'

'Well, you could think of these different dimensions as clusters of soap bubbles. Where one bubble touches another – or passes through another – it forms a line. It's true. Look the next time.'

'I'll try to remember to do that.'

'Now then, if each bubble were a different dimension you could move from one to the other along that line.'

'A ley line.'

'Precisely,' smiled his great-grandfather. 'I knew you'd understand.'

'I can't say I do.'

'By methods yet to be explained, we have travelled, you and I. Crossed from one world, one dimension, to another via a ley line.'

'Stane Way,' surmised Kit, beginning to grasp the smallest part of what the old fellow was telling him. 'The ley line was the alley?'

'Was and is.' The old man smiled triumphantly. 'Stane – from the old Saxon word for stone – is literally the Stone Way, named after the row of standing stones that in a former age marked out the path.

The stones are gone now, but the ley is still there.'

Kit took another swallow and, fortified by the ale, attempted a rejoinder. 'All right. Assuming for argument's sake that what you're saying is in some cock-eyed way *true*: how is it that such a monumental discovery has gone completely unnoticed by any reputable representatives of the scientific community?'

'But it isn't unnoticed at all,' replied the elder gentleman. 'People have known about this since –'

'The Stone Age, yes, so you said. But if it's been around so long, how has it been kept a secret?'

'It hasn't been kept a secret by anyone. It is so very ancient that man in his headlong rush to modernity and progress has simply forgotten. It passed from science into superstition, you might say, so now it is more a matter of belief. That is to say, some people believe in ley lines, and some don't.'

'I'm thinking most don't.'

'Quite.' The old man glanced up as Molly appeared with a wooden plate heaped with slices of brown bread and a few chunks of pale yellow cheese. 'Thank you, my dear.' He took the plate and offered it to his great-grandson. 'Here, get some of this down you. It will restore the inner man.'

'Ta,' said Kit, taking up a slice of bread and a chunk of crumbly cheese. 'You were saying?'

'Consider the pyramids, Cosimo. Marvellous achievement – one of the most impressive architectural feats in the history of the world. Have you seen them? No? You should one day. Stupendous accomplishment. It would be a heroic undertaking to build such structures with cranes, earth movers, and the kind of industrial hydraulics available today. To contemplate erecting them with the technology available to the ancient Egyptians would be impossible, would it not?'

'I suppose.' Kit shrugged. 'What's the point?'

'The point, dear boy, is that they are *there*! Though no one remembers how they were built, though the methods of their construction, once considered commonplace, have been lost to time, the pyramids exist for all the world to see. It's the same with

ley lines – completely dead and forgotten like the people who once marked them and used them – until they were rediscovered in the modern era. Although, strictly speaking, the leys have been rediscovered many times. The latest discoverer was Alfred Watkins.'

'Who?'

'Old Alf was a photographer back in the day – quite a good one, actually. Nice chap. Had an eye for landscape. Travelled around on horseback in the early days of the camera, taking photographs of the brooding moors and misty mountains, that sort of thing. Helped enormously with his discovery,' explained the old man, biting off a bit of cheese. 'He made a detailed survey of ley lines and published a book about them.'

'Okay. Whatever,' said Kit. 'But I fail to see what any of this has to do with me.'

'Ah, yes, I was coming to that, young Cosimo.'

'And that's another thing,' protested the younger man. 'You keep calling me *Cosimo*.'

'Cosimo Christopher Livingstone – isn't that your name?'

'As it happens. But I prefer to go by Kit.'

'Ah, yes, diminutive of Christopher. Of course.'

'I don't know about you, but where I went to school anybody walking around with a name like Cosimo was just asking to get his head dunked in the toilet.'

'Pity,' sniffed the elder gentleman. 'Sad, really. Names are very important.'

'It's merely a matter of taste, surely.'

'Nothing of the sort,' replied the elder Cosimo. 'People get named all sorts of things – *that* I will concede. Whimsy, ignorance, sudden inspiration – all play a part. But if anyone guessed how monumentally important it was, it would all be taken a lot more seriously. Did you know – there are tribes in the jungles of Borneo that refuse to name an infant until he or she is four years old? See, the child must develop enough to demonstrate the attributes they will carry into adulthood. The child is then named after those attributes. It's a way of reinforcing desirable qualities and making sure they don't disappear from the tribe.'

'But… *Cosimo*?'

'A fine name. Nothing wrong with it.' He gave his young relation a glance of stern appraisal. 'Well, I suppose you have a point.'

'I do?'

'We cannot both be called Cosimo, after all. As we will be spending a lot more time together from now on, it would make it far too tedious and confusing.' He tapped the table with his fingertips. 'Very well, then, Kit it shall be.'

Although he was unable to say why, Kit felt a slight uplift of relief at having won the point. 'You still haven't said what any of this has to do with me.'

'It's a family matter, you might say. Here I am, your dear grandpapa,' the old man winked at Kit and flashed a disarming smile, 'and I need your help with a project I've been working on for quite some considerable time. You're all the family I've got.'

Kit considered this, but in spite of everything, he could still scarcely credit that he had any residual familial ties to the relic sitting across the table from him. His expression betrayed his disbelief. The elder man leaned forward and grasped Kit's hands in his own.

Speaking in a hoarse and persistent whisper, he said earnestly, 'See here, young Cosimo – excuse me – *Kit*. It will be the adventure of a lifetime – of several lifetimes. In fact, it will change you forever.' The old gentleman paused, still holding the younger man's hands and fixing him with a mad stare. 'I need you, my boy, and I've gone to a very great deal of trouble to find you. What do you say?'

'No.' Kit shook his head, as if waking from a dream. He pulled his hands free, then ran them through his hair, then clutched his tankard. 'This is crazy. It's some kind of hallucination – that's what it is. Take me back. I want to go home.'

Cosimo the Elder sighed. 'All right,' he agreed, 'if that is what you wish.'

Kit sighed with relief. 'You mean it?'

'Of course, dear boy. I'll take you back.'

'Fine.'

'Only, funny thing – I think you'll find there *is* no going back. Still, if that's what you want. Drink up, and let's be off.'

Kit pushed aside his tankard and stood. 'I'm ready now.'

The old man rose and, digging two coins out of his coat pocket, flipped them to the serving girl and promised to come back next time he was passing through. They walked out onto the dockyards and returned to the narrow alley between two warehouses. 'Here you are. Just continue on the trackway and you'll be home in a trice.'

'Thanks.' Without a moment's hesitation, Kit started down the alley.

As he passed into the shadow between the two buildings, he heard the old gentleman call behind him, 'If you change your mind, you know where to find me.'

Fat chance, thought Kit, hurrying into the shadows. He cast a glance over his shoulder, but already the alleyway entrance was dim and far away. A wind gusted through the alley and the shadows deepened; clouds gathered overhead and it began to rain – sharp, stinging little pellets – and above the sound of the swiftly gathering storm, the clear, distant voice of his great-grandfather shouting, 'Farewell, my son. Until we meet again!'