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# **The Fatal Tree**

Written by Stephen Lawhead

Published by Lion Hudson

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A BRIGHT EMPIRES NOVEL **QUEST THE FIFTH:**

# THE FATAL TREE

STEPHEN R.  
LAWHEAD



LION FICTION

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For my mother, Lois  
It all started with those Little Golden Books

## 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.**

Oh, Thou! That dwellest wide diffus'd around,  
Where all creative energies abound;  
Omniscient Power! Eternal, Undefin'd,  
Productive Essence, and Mysterious Mind:  
What shall we call Thee?  
How Thy powers express?  
Or, how Thine awful majesty address?  
O'er earth we see Thee, and Thy footsteps trace  
Through the Bright Empires of unbounded space...

FROM *THE ACHILLEAD*  
BY WILLIAM JOHN THOMAS, 1830

# Contents

*Important People in the Bright Empires series* 10

*Previously in the Bright Empires series* 13

The Fatal Tree 17

*On What Happened Next: An Essay by Stephen R. Lawhead* 293

Acknowledgments 298

About the Author 299

# Important People

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

**Archelaus 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 *Emperor Rudolf II* in Prague, friend and confidant of *Wilhelmina*.

**Benedict Flinders-Petrie** – The son of *Arthur* and *Xian-Li* and father of *Charles*.

**Brendan Hanno** – Attached to the Zetetic Society in Damascus, an advisor to ley travellers.

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

**Cassandra Clarke** – A post-graduate palaeontologist who accidentally gets caught up in the quest for the Skin Map.

**Charles Flinders-Petrie** – Son of *Benedict* and father of *Douglas*, he is grandson of *Arthur*.

**Cosimo Christopher Livingstone, the Elder, aka Cosimo** – A Victorian gentleman and founding member of the Zetetic Society, which seeks to reunite the Skin Map and learn its secrets.

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

**Douglas Flinders-Petrie** – Son of *Charles* and great-grandson of



*Arthur*, he is quietly pursuing his own search for the Skin Map, one piece of which is in his possession.

**Emperor Rudolf II** – 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 Stiffelbeam** – A baker from Rosenheim in Germany, affectionately known as *Etzel*.

**En-Ul** – Elder statesman of River City Clan.

**Giambattista Becarria, Fra Becarria, aka Brother Lazarus** – A priest astronomer at the abbey observatory on Montserrat, and *Mina's* mentor.

**Gianni** – See *Giambattista Becarria*, above.

**Giles Standfast** – *Sir Henry Fayth's* coachman, *Kit's* ally, and erstwhile servant of *Lady Fayth*.

**Gustavus Rosenkreuz** – 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*, and *Haven's* uncle.

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

**J. Anthony Clarke III, aka Tony** – Renowned astrophysicist and Nobel nominee, he is *Cassandra's* concerned and protective father.

**Rosemary Peelstick** – Zetetic Society host, colleague of *Brendan Hanno*.

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

**Turms** – A king of Etruria, one of the Immortals, and a friend of *Arthur's*; he oversees the birth of *Benedict Flinders-Petrie* when *Xian-Li's* pregnancy becomes problematic.

**Wilhelmina Klug, aka Mina** – Formerly a London baker and *Kit's* girlfriend, she 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.

**Dr. Thomas Young** – Physician, scientist, and certified polymath with a keen interest in ancient Egypt, he is also referred to as *The Last Man in the World to Know Everything*.

# Previously

It appears that we left our questors in a bit of a cliff-hanger in Damascus, circa 1930, where they were gathered at the Zetetic Society headquarters on Hanania Street in the Old City. It should be recalled that the society and its offices function as the nexus point for all those of goodwill who seek to understand the phenomenon of ley travel and what can be learned from it. For example, we learned that certain cosmic events have been set in motion that now threaten to bring about the apocalypse of annihilation known as the End of Everything. This discovery impelled a conclave of questors to discuss the impending cataclysm – discussions that went precisely nowhere... until several small but significant events occurred in quick succession and changed everything.

It began when Kit Livingstone innocently and inadvertently revealed that he had once, whilst “dreaming time” with the venerable En-Ul in the prehistoric Bone House, encountered the late, great Arthur Flinders-Petrie at the mythical location known as the Spirit Well. How did he know it was Flinders-Petrie? There could be no mistaking the man’s identity, because his torso was tattooed with the symbols representing his many and various journeys throughout time and space. When Kit saw him, Arthur was wading into the Well of Souls – another name for the Spirit Well – carrying the lifeless body of his beloved wife, Xian-Li. When he emerged from the well, Xian-Li had been miraculously restored to the land of the living.

This disclosure was overheard by Mrs. Rosemary Peelstick, formerly a ley traveller herself but latterly hostess-in-residence at the Zetetic Society headquarters. The venerable Mrs. P immediately grasped the significance of Arthur’s action, and, indeed, the shock of hearing it was such that she lost control of her tea tray and sent the entire assemblage crashing to the flagstone floor. No great catastrophe in itself, you might think; such messes are easily dealt

with. Cassandra Clarke was present at the scene and, in an effort to be helpful, reached into her pocket and drew out her handkerchief with the aim of mopping up the spilt tea.

Careful readers will remember that, whilst this particular handkerchief was nothing more than an ordinary square of white cotton cloth and one that Cass used in all sorts of ways, it had most recently been employed as a work surface in her attempt to reverse-engineer one of the Shadow Lamps. Those clever devices had been helping guide our questors through the maze of portals and pathways constituting the illimitable network of ley lines.

During her investigations, some of the rare earth contained within the Shadow Lamp spilled onto the surface of the handkerchief and caught in the fibres. Before Cass could deploy the handkerchief as a mop, Kit perceived a faint yet unmistakable image on the cloth: a spiral whorl with a straight line directly through the centre and three separate circular dots spaced evenly along the outer edge of the spiral curve. Kit intervened and, upon closer examination of the cloth, both he and Cass realized that all things are interconnected and there is neither chance nor coincidence: the cloth bore one of the designs that Kit had seen on Arthur Flinders-Petrie's chest in the form of a blue tattoo.

Meanwhile, others who had been somewhat sidelined in the pursuit of the Skin Map were advancing their own quests. Lady Haven Fayth and her faithful retainer, Giles Standfast, had made an unfortunate ley leap that landed them on the empty, windswept steppes in the time of Emperor Leo the Wise. Their attempts to locate a ley or portal that might take them out of their circumstances failed and, unable to orient or protect themselves, they were taken into the custody of the Bulgars, who were making their way through what we might now call Central Asia on their way to the great city of Constantinople. It began very much to look as if Lady Fayth and Giles's ley-travelling days were over.

And so we pick up the story of Wilhelmina Klug, Kit's former girlfriend and now co-owner of the Grand Imperial Kaffeehaus in Old Prague – and also of Fra Gianni Becarria and his new friend, the renowned astrophysicist Dr. Tony Clarke, aka Cass's father,

who tends to take a scientific view of all these events. And, last but not least, of the degenerate criminal Archelaus Burleigh and his nefarious Burley Men who are, at present, languishing in gaol below the Rathaus in Prague owing to their assault on the baker Engelbert Stiffelbeam, Wilhelmina's business partner.

As we proceed, the certainties on which our questors have come to rely seem to be very much in flux and, with them, we now enter a world in which everything we know is wrong.



Part I

# The Dissolution

## In Which the World Takes a Turn for the Weird

Gordon Seiferts looked out of the window of the operations module of Skybase Alpha. He blinked and looked again because he saw something that should not have been there: the moon.

Captain Seiferts was undertaking his daily background radiation reading and thermal image of earth, but the blue planet was nowhere to be seen in his field of vision. He swivelled the camera 230 degrees and was able to bring earth into view, but the metrics were all skewed. Fearing that the space station had somehow drifted out of orbit, he hurried down to the command module, where the mystery was compounded.

Instead of his colleagues and fellow scientists – men who had been working and sharing living space together for the last three months – he found a crew of extremely astonished Russian cosmonauts. Seiferts did not speak Russian, and the cosmonauts did not speak English, so it took some time to work out that Seiferts was not aboard Skybase Alpha as he supposed, but on Mir 2, which was on a survey expedition to map the moon. Following this revelation, Seiferts grew so agitated and incoherent he had to be sedated and bound to a hammock for the duration of the mission.

\*\*\*

Near Tacoma, Washington, fourteen vehicles plunged into Puget Sound when the highway bridge on which they were travelling disappeared



beneath them. In all, thirty-two people were killed. However, local fishermen passing through the sound on their way out to sea were able to pull three extremely confused survivors from the water – none of whom could give a credible account of what had happened.

Able Seaman Mike Taylor of the *Orca IV* expressed utter incomprehension of the event. He was quoted in the *Tacoma Times*, saying: “It was the craziest thing I’ve ever seen. I mean, those cars came from nowhere – it was like they just fell out of the sky. I still can’t figure what happened. Those poor people...” The accident occurred in the area of the newly proposed Tacoma Narrows Bridge – a fact that was not lost on the Puget Port Authority, whose public relations office commented, “Obviously, a disaster like this is tragic for those involved. But whatever the explanation turns out to be, it does raise serious questions about whether that is the best place for a bridge at all.”

The incident was put down to a severe weather inversion resulting in a freak tornado. Such extreme weather conditions, although rare, are not unknown. In the Midwest, tornados have been known to pluck objects from the ground and transport them over many miles before depositing them in unlikely places.

★ ★ ★

Howard Smith went to sleep in his bed in Carol Stream, Illinois, and woke up on a floating agricultural island on the edge of Lake Texacoco in Mexico.

After kissing Julie – his wife of thirty-five years – good night, he closed his eyes in the bedroom of his suburban Chicago home, slept soundly, and awoke the next morning to find himself surrounded by wary Aztec farmers discussing the baffling presence of this pale-skinned alien who had appeared in their midst. They decided he was a sky god and, despite his strong protests – uttered in a language they could not understand – the farmers took him to the priest, who gave him a collar of gold and established him in the temple at Tenochtitlan.

★ ★ ★

In the Laxmi Nagar district of Mumbai, India, Sireena Shah prepared breakfast for her three children who were getting ready for school. She fed them and sent them out of the door with their lunch boxes – only to return to the kitchen to find them still dawdling over their food. She assumed they were playing a trick on her and was giving them a good scolding when her husband appeared on the scene, wanting *his* breakfast. She would have gladly given him something to eat, except for the fact that he had eaten and departed for the office forty minutes previously; his dirty dishes were still in the sink.

★ ★ ★

The entire R&D team of Arcosoft Games of Cupertino, California, disappeared while on a conference call with executives at Gyrotek, a marketing firm in San Francisco. When repeated attempts to reestablish contact failed, a secretary sent to the boardroom reported that the team had apparently staged a walkout as some kind of protest and left the building.

From the team members' point of view, however, the boardroom simply vanished – to be instantly replaced by a battlefield occupied by two opposing forces during what would later be called the Battle of Balaclava in the second month of the Crimean War. All eight men and five women of the Arcosoft team were slaughtered during a cavalry charge when British troops failed to identify them as noncombatants.

★ ★ ★

In Damascus, Rosemary Peelstick stood in front of a greengrocer with a sack of oranges in her hand. *What am I doing here?* she wondered. She looked down at the net bag, but had no memory of purchasing the oranges. The grocer smiled and offered his familiar greeting; she gave him an embarrassed wave, then walked home. It was, she decided, a sign of age, what was called a senior moment. She had another such moment later that day when, on the way to the

genizah to join the discussion there, she turned into the hallway and found herself in the front room, again wondering why she was there.

Later, when talking to Tess Tildy, she suddenly heard herself saying the same words in the same conversation they had exchanged not an hour before. When she mentioned this to Tess, the elder woman confessed to having similar memory lapses. “It happens when you get older, dear,” she said. “I don’t think there’s anything worth worrying about.”

But when Mrs. Peelstick saw Gianni Becarria in the courtyard talking to Brendan Hanno and then, not three seconds later, turned around and saw him sitting in the front room reading a book, she knew there was something very much worth worrying about. The sight of the Italian priest nonchalantly thumbing the pages of the *History of the Ottoman Empire* sent her running back to the courtyard to find another Gianni and Brendan still immersed in conversation. She grabbed Cassandra Clarke, who happened to be passing by, and instructed her to look in the courtyard. “What did you see?”

“Well, Gianni and Brendan are talking physics, from what I can gather. Why?”

“That’s what I thought. Now,” said Mrs. Peelstick, “go and look in the front room and meet me in the kitchen. But don’t say anything to anyone before you speak to me.”

Cass regarded her curiously. “You’re as white as a sheet, Mrs. P. What’s up?”

“Just do as I ask, please. There’s a good girl.”

Cass moved through the hallway and put her head through the door into the front reception room. There she saw Gianni reading his book; she did a double take and ran back to where Mrs. Peelstick was waiting in the kitchen. “Okay, what’s going on?” she demanded.

“Shh! Keep your voice down,” warned Mrs. Peelstick. “You saw them too?”

“I saw two Giannis, yes,” Cass confirmed in a harsh whisper. “Why? What’s happening?”

“I think we have a problem,” she said.

“I’ll say. This is deeply weird.” Cass turned her wide-eyed stare towards the hallway as if fearing what would come through the door next. “We’ve got to tell somebody.”

A hasty kitchen summit was convened – to which neither Gianni was invited – where Mrs. Peelstick informed certain key members of the Zetetics of her alarming observations. “I don’t want to start a panic,” she told them, “but we have a situation.” It quickly transpired that she was not alone in noticing a range of small but significant anomalies: “odd little wrinkles in reality” was how Tess put it. When those wrinkles began to proliferate, the company knew that the dimensional reality they presently inhabited was growing increasingly unstable. The instability, Tony Clarke informed them, would only increase as the underlying structure of reality grew ever more volatile.

“Worst case?” said Tony. “When the anomalies accumulate to a level that can no longer be sustained, the dimension will collapse.”

“Collapse,” mouthed Brendan. “By that you mean be destroyed.”

“Not destroyed, per se – more like *extinguished*. It would be as if this reality had never existed.”

“What would happen to us?” asked Wilhelmina Klug.

“You, me, and everyone else who happened to inhabit this dimensional reality would simply cease to exist too.”

The temperature in the room seemed to plummet. Kit Livingstone gazed around at his fellow questors. “Is this it?” he wondered. “Is this the End of Everything?”

“Merely the first wave, I would say,” replied Tony. “Towards the end, the destruction will be far more devastating.”

His words were still hanging in the air when the first of three explosions rocked the building, breaking glass in the windows, rattling the furniture, and sending stucco from the ceiling crashing to the floor. Kit was struck by a chunk of falling plaster. “What the –” he sputtered, shaking white rubble out of his hair. He jumped up and ran down the hall.

“Kit!” shouted Cass as the second explosion sent dishes from the cupboards crashing to the floor.

“Stay back!” cried Kit. “I’m going to check it out.”

He raced to the reception room. Gianni was gone. Pausing at the front door, Kit pressed his ear to the wood and listened, then opened the door a crack and peered out. He saw nothing unusual, so he stepped out onto the threshold and looked down the smoke-filled street, where he saw something that had not been seen in Syria in two hundred years: a horse-drawn caisson pulling a cannon into position. Soldiers in tall, black square-topped hats, blue coats, and white trousers accompanied the cannon; they wore black boots and carried muskets fitted with bayonets. An officer with a red cockade and white ostrich plume on his bicorne hat observed the operation from the saddle of a brown horse. The officer carried a naked sabre and shouted orders in French to a company of soldiers who appeared to be moving house-to-house and pulling out residents. The air reverberated with the screams and cries of frightened citizens and the shouts of the soldiers.

Kit had seen enough. He darted back inside, almost colliding with Cass as he turned around. "Don't go out there!" he shouted. Grabbing her arm, he slammed the door.

"What is it? What's out there?"

"I think Napoleon has invaded Syria."

She gave him a blank look, shook off his hand, opened the door, and looked cautiously outside. "You must be –"

"Back to the kitchen," Kit told her, pulling her away with him.

They rushed back to the dust-filled room, where more Zetetics had crowded in – Richard, Robert, and Muriel among them. Tess was sitting in a chair and Mrs. Peelstick was dabbing at a cut to the old woman's head. Wilhelmina was picking up broken crockery; Tony and Brendan were assessing the damage.

"What did you find out?" asked Richard as Kit and Cass hurried back into the room. "Are we under attack?"

"Shh!" said Mrs. Peelstick. "Let him speak."

"We *are* under attack," Kit told them. "But" – he hesitated – "this is the weird part –"

"Yes?" said Mina. "Tell us!"

"It's the French. Napoleon, I think." He flung a hand in the direction of the street. "There are foot soldiers and men on

horseback, and there's a cannon at the end of the street. They're going door-to-door and rounding up the locals."

"Napoleon?" said Robert. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Do I look like I'm joking?" demanded Kit.

"It's true," said Cass. "I saw them too."

"How do you know they're French?" asked Mina.

"The bloody uniforms!" cried Kit. "That's not the point. Whoever they are, they'll be here any minute."

"Right," said Brendan. "We cannot stay here. We've got to get out while we can."

"What about the mission?" said Tony. "We cannot abandon the mission."

"It will have to continue elsewhere," said Brendan.

They quickly hashed out a plan. Tasks were assigned, times and meeting places agreed upon.

"I will inform the rest of the Zetetics," said Mrs. Peelstick. "We will migrate to safer places and continue to provide support for those of you in the field. Leave that to me. I'll see everyone safely away."

"Don't worry about us," said Tess. "We can take care of ourselves."

"That's it, then," said Brendan. "Use the ley line in the alley. That's the closest." He gazed around at the tight circle of anxious faces. "Just do your best and pray we are not too late."

"Tch! Listen to you," scolded Tess. She rose shakily from her chair, steadied herself, and said, "Too late? I don't believe it for a moment." She glanced defiantly around at her fellow Zetetics and threw out a challenge. "Does anyone here doubt that mitigating this catastrophe is the reason we have been brought to this place and time?"

When no one made bold to reply, she continued, "For this purpose we were formed, and to this place our steps have been directed. This is the battle to which we have been called, and we must trust in Him who has led us here to lead us on."

With those words still ringing in their ears, the questors fled Damascus.

## In Which a Lesson Is Learned the Hard Way

Kit Livingstone and Cassandra Clarke stared at one another over the breakfast table. “She should have been here by now – we both know it. I’m afraid something bad has happened to her. Something really bad.”

“You don’t know that,” Cass told him.

“You don’t know that it hasn’t.”

“Listen, you said yourself that Mina’s the most accomplished ley leaper among us. Whatever’s happened, she can handle it.”

They were sitting in a corner of the Grand Imperial Kaffeehaus eating *krapfen* and drinking coffee as the place filled up with its early clientele. “The question is, should we go on without her?” said Cass, taking a sip of coffee.

Kit stuffed the last of a doughnut into his mouth and chewed for a moment. The three of them were to have journeyed to Prague and met up before going on to Big Valley to see if they could discover a way to get back to the Spirit Well. The problem was that on their last visit to the portal, they found it guarded by an enormous yew tree that had grown up and blocked the way. Whatever else happened, they were going to have to find a way around that. “I hate to say it,” Kit said at last, “but I think we have to go without her. We’re sure not doing anything by cooling our heels here.”

“Then we’ll go.” Cass set down her cup. “We’ll write Mina a

note and leave it with Etzel. She can come on and join us at the tree when she gets here.”

“*If* she gets here,” added Kit gloomily.

“Just stop it, okay?” Cass gave him a stern look. “We’ve got to stay positive or we might as well give up right now. And you know what? We can’t give up.”

“You’re right,” sighed Kit. “All this sitting around waiting has got to me. We’ll leave this evening when the ley becomes active.” He pushed back his chair and stood up. “I’ll get our gear together. We’ll need a few bits and bobs to take with us because we might be there a few days.”

“Not so fast, Speedy. We’re not going anywhere until we finish this plate of lovely pastry and have at least one more cup of coffee. Sit down and eat – it’s the most important meal of the day.”

After breakfast, they assembled some basic items that Kit reckoned they would need to make life in camp a little less spartan: a flint and steel, two hand axes, water flasks, fishing line and a handful of hooks, a hank of hemp rope, an assortment of knives, a pound of almonds, and four rolls of fruit leather. They divided these items and a few others into two sturdy canvas rucksacks. The idea was to travel light, and anyway, Kit reasoned, this was a fact-finding mission and they did not plan to stay very long.

They napped in the afternoon, and as the shadows began to stretch across the Old Town Square, Kit thanked Etzel for taking care of them and, handing him the note to give to Mina, wished him farewell. Then he and Cass left the city and made their way at a leisurely pace along the river road to the shaded path containing the ley line that led to Big Valley. The leap went off without incident, but they landed hard – buffeted by a fierce wind and stinging sleet. Cass threw up and Kit, for the first time in a long time, felt queasy and disoriented. It took them both a few minutes to pull themselves together; when they did, they saw that it was late afternoon and the sun was already sinking below the rim of the great limestone canyon to the west.

The Big Valley Ley deposited the two travellers on the path leading down to the river at the bottom of the gorge and, at first



glance, everything seemed to be just as Kit remembered it, with no sign of the dimensional instability that had infected Damascus. Cass watched him for a moment, then asked, “Well? What do you think?”

“So far so good,” Kit replied. “All appears to be in order, but time will tell. I think we call it safe until we find out otherwise.” He glanced around. “I want to go to the tree, but we’ll have to hurry if we hope to get back to the gorge before dark.”

He led them back up the path to the canyon rim, where he paused a moment to get his bearings and take another reading of the sky before heading off across a plain of waist-high grass towards the woods in the near distance. “It’s this way. Stay close and keep an eye peeled for predators, okay?”

“What kind of predators?” asked Cass.

“All of them,” replied Kit. “Lions, bears, wolves, hyenas, tigers – you name it. They’re all here in abundance.”

An hour’s trek through dense woodland brought them to a copse of close-grown elder all spindly and sun-starved. “We’re almost there,” Kit announced. They pushed through the elder and came to what appeared to be a hedge of young beech trees. “The clearing is through here,” he said and pushed through the saplings. Cass followed on his heels and stepped into a clearing created by the outflung branches of the most massive, majestic yew tree she had ever seen.

The colossal trunk rose from an overlapping tangle of roots to form a veritable fortress, a round tower of wood as dense and heavy as iron from which hung the broad, spreading limbs that supported innumerable branches of dense, dark foliage – the soft-needled, green-black leaves spiked with blood-red poisonous berries characteristic of the species. The great heavy boughs rose rank on intertwining rank to a truly astonishing height before tapering off in a gently rounded crown that, viewed from below, seemed more like the domed crest of a looming mountain peak than a treetop. In among the thickly layered branches, the shadows deepened and multiplied. Whatever mysteries those dusky limbs concealed remained unseen and unknown, for no light penetrated

the substantial foliage beyond the first few inches. Nor was light allowed to infiltrate the area directly beneath the circle of those branches; that and the continual rain of spent needles kept the ground all around the tree devoid of any competing vegetation whatsoever. Thus, the titanic tree stood proud of its surroundings, dominating its place in the forest, suffering no rivals: an absolute monarch, a tyrant king without peer.

“Incredible!” gasped Cass as she tried to take in the towering bulk before her. “It is... humongous.”

“I think it’s even bigger now than the last time I saw it,” observed Kit. “Which means we’re probably a few hundred years adrift, more or less. It’s had more time to grow, that’s for sure.” He gazed up into the rising branches, dark against the pale blue sky, and it seemed as if he were looking into the shadowed obscurity of a mystery as deep and impenetrable as time itself.

The sky turned golden with the coming sunset as they stood marvelling at the mighty tree. The forest around them filled with an auditory tapestry of birdsong; every bush and branch sang with a feathered chorister, each staking a claim on its night territory and noisily telling the world to stay well away.

As they were standing there, a blackbird alighted on a branch of one of the young saplings ringing the clearing; its sudden movement attracted the eye, and both Kit and Cass saw the bird appear. It looked around curiously, then flitted to a nearby branch of the yew tree where it perched for a moment. The bird cocked its head from one side to the other, then stretched its neck up as if to utter a call. But before the first note could sound, the creature shivered all over as if in the grip of a violent seizure. The bird stretched out its wings and, beak gaping, toppled from the branch – dead before it hit the ground.

“Wow!” said Cass. “Did you see that?”

“Come on, let’s check it out.”

They proceeded around the clearing to where the bird fell – taking extreme care not to so much as brush up against a yew twig – and knelt to examine the feathered corpse. There was nothing to indicate the cause of death, and if they had not witnessed the

creature's demise with their own eyes, they would not have given the dead thing a second thought.

"Death by contact," observed Cass, bending over the tiny body. "Did you know that would happen?"

"I knew the tree was powerful," Kit told her. "It melted our ley lamps last time we were here." Indicating the dead bird, he said, "So that's one thing we've learned. Let's see if we can find out anything else."

They moved cautiously around the base of the tree, viewing it from every angle, then spent some time just sitting and observing. Aside from the birds flocking to their roosts for the night, the forest round about was silent – which Kit thought indicated an absence of wildlife in the nearby wood. Beyond that, nothing else happened, or seemed likely to, so he decided to conclude their first observation session. He climbed to his feet and found that his right leg had gone all numb and tingly. He took a step and stumbled back onto his hands and knees. "Ah! Ow!" he gasped.

Cass bent down beside him. "What's wrong?"

"My leg has gone to sleep." He tried to stand and grimaced. "Oh!"

"Here, let me help you," offered Cass. She stooped slightly to take Kit's hand and, unbalanced, raised her other arm. Kit reached for her hand, and at the instant of contact, a sizzling crack and a blinding flash – like the dazzling radiance of a photographer's flashgun – illuminated the entire clearing with a sudden, searing scintillation of bright blue light. Kit felt a jolt tear through him, and he was lifted off the ground and hurled onto his back. He felt this as a force, as if he had been knocked off his feet in a hard-charging rugby tackle – not like touching a live wire or being electrocuted; it was more like being slammed with a giant fist. Other than that first blinding flash, there was no spark, no zap, no smoke.

Dazed, Kit glanced around, trying to perceive what had happened. One instant he had been reaching for Cass's hand, and the next he was lying on his back, staring up at the sky and wondering why he could not breathe. Shaken in every bone of his body, he rolled onto his side and looked across to Cass, who was

lying in a heap ten feet or so away. On hands and knees he crawled to her side. “Cass? Are you okay?” He reached out to her.

“Don’t touch me!” Her eyes rolled in her head and she pushed herself up on her elbows.

“Any broken bones or burns or anything?”

She sat up and patted herself here and there. “Nothing broken,” she reported. “But I’ve got a terrific buzzing in my head. I think I’m deaf in one ear. What about you?”

“No buzzing, but I feel like a bug slammed into a windscreen. Ohhh... *man!*” He collapsed beside her. “That was extreme.”

“What *was* that?”

Kit thought for a moment. “The tree stands on a portal,” he explained. “Like a ley line, but more of a –”

“I *know* what a ley portal is, Einstein,” she told him, her tone sharp, almost accusing. “Did you know that was going to happen?”

“Obviously not,” Kit replied. “The only other portal I know is at Black Mixen Tump back in England. That one is activated by raising your arm in the air.” He turned his gaze to the tree and the place where they had been standing only moments ago. “Apparently so is this one.”

“Apparently,” Cass echoed. “You should have warned me.” She brushed herself off as if shedding a bad memory and gave a derisive sniff. “Smell that?”

Kit lifted his head and drew in a tentative whiff. “Yeah – it smells like electricity.”

“Ozone,” replied Cass. “Formed when high-energy electromagnetic radiation breaks the atomic structure of oxygen in the air. Electrical discharges make it – which is why you can often smell it in elevators, or after lightning storms.” She pushed herself upright. “I think we should move along – in case the charge or whatever builds up again.”

“Good plan,” Kit agreed. He levered himself up off the ground, and after shaking his arms and legs and rolling his head from side to side, he shouldered his pack. “Okay, important safety tip. Waving your arms around is not a good idea.”

“Seriously,” agreed Cass.

“Let’s go,” Kit said. “We don’t want to be caught in the forest after dark. We can come back tomorrow. With any luck, Mina will turn up.” He turned and pushed through the ring of saplings forming a hedge wall around the tree. “We need to get down to shelter before the bears come out.”