

WANDERERS IN TIME, BOOK THREE

CONQUERORS & KINGS



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PROLOGUE

The king was dead.
“What did you say?” The thane leveled his gaze at the messenger before him, a young man drowning in the heavy chainmail he wore. The man’s breath came ragged and thick, even though he must have ridden a horse into the thane’s territory. He couldn’t have been more than eighteen years old, summoned into serving his country, joining his local fyrd and marching out to fight the invaders, and never imagining he’d be facing the thane with this dread message.

“The k-king is dead. He took an arrow in his chest, and William’s men hacked him to death after that.”

When the news sunk in, the thane grew angry — his anger an ember that quickly blossomed into a raging firestorm. He jolted out of his chair and nearly caused the young messenger to faint. Curses spilled from his lips and he shook his fist at the heavens.

He had assembled his own fyrd too late to make it to the decisive battle. Without further details, he couldn't know if his men would have made a difference in the outcome, couldn't know if they would have prevented Duke William from landing in England and killing the king.

The thane dismissed the shaking messenger, banishing him from his thoughts as well as from his presence. The empty hall echoed the messenger's footfalls and then fell silent. All of his men, his gathered army, were out exercising their mounts, or more likely, drinking far too much of his mead. His men knew nothing of the weight that had just fallen on his shoulders. He frowned and thought about the king.

King Harold, even though he had been chosen by the witen-moot, the council of elder thanes, was never the best choice for king. Edward the Confessor had ruled more wisely and had better relations with the nations surrounding England. But near the end of his life, he had relinquished many of his decisions to his chief advisor, Harold. When Edward died, Harold seemed the best candidate to the other thanes, despite rumors that Edward had promised the throne to William.

But the elders hadn't met *him* — Tristan, Thane of Blackhall, an iron-fisted ruler of lands far to the north. His people feared and respected him. Both he and his people showed themselves to have good mettle and a spark of ferocity at the battle of Stamford bridge. They fought alongside the king against the wild Vikings and

the king's own brother who sought to take England for himself.

Tristan pulled the sword from his hip and examined the blade. Its edge was razor sharp from long hours of honing by his smith. He had killed a dozen or more of the burly, axe-wielding Vikings at Stamford. He would do so again when the need arose, whether to protect his own territory or to defend the new king, whoever that might be.

Would the witen-moot have time to choose a king before William stormed through the countryside and took London? Would the other thanes finally see Tristan's potential and elect him as their king? That would never happen if William held London. There was only one thing for him to do: take his men and march south to the great city. Defend it at all cost.

Tristan slammed the sword back into its wooden scabbard, prepared to call out and give the orders. But he hesitated. It was foolishness, he knew, but there was something that bothered him about his plan, something that troubled him about going to London. He had dreamed of it.

In the dream, there were two people standing in the streets of London. They had been running — escaping from him, he realized — but now they had stopped and they faced him. Suddenly he was afraid and he didn't understand why. When he studied them, he found them barely older than children, and yet when the girl and the

boy faced him, an unnamed terror crept into his heart. Maybe it wasn't them. Maybe it was the other one that was with them — an inexplicable presence, an invisible third — that frightened him the most.

Other times, he dreamed of having only three fingers on his right hand. He dreamed of fire and smoke that mushroomed into the sky. Sometimes he dreamed of nooses, empty and dangling but threatening nonetheless. But they were only dreams.

In the waking world, he feared no one. He clutched his talisman for confirmation of this. The charm hung loosely around his wrist, all silver and light, and holding it reminded him that he had power and a purpose.

He sniffed the air, as if he were a bloodhound searching for the scent of a long lost trail. There were no smells other than the dusty dry scent of the hall, but a deep hidden part of his consciousness knew the truth. He could sense a change coming, like an approaching storm felt in the crisp air. *They are coming*, his deep thoughts whispered to him.

Tristan barked a command to his second, a one-eyed man named Randulf, and was pleased to see the man had been standing by, waiting for orders. “The king is dead,” he told Randulf, “and we must fly to London to hold the city and stop William.”

The man nodded, a grim look fixed to his face. He must have overheard the messenger.

“Prepare the fryd for travel at the earliest opportunity. And send in Cavion and his men.” With a wave,

Tristan dismissed his second. He slouched in his backless chair and contemplated the future as he waited for his least favored followers to show. Cavion, Barkley, and Malmedon — three men who skulked in the shadows and performed the most horrendous of deeds for Tristan. He tolerated them only for this kind of work, and he couldn't stand them otherwise.

Perhaps he would dispose of them once he was king. Or perhaps he would need them more.

With one last sniff at the air, Tristan's thoughts returned to dreams and visions. *They are coming.* He wished he knew who they were and why he feared them so in his dreams, but he knew without a doubt they would be arriving soon.

CHAPTER ONE

Ben Matthews felt like David facing the giant Goliath. He had already thrown the stone — not meaning to hit the soldier at all, but to provide a distraction so he and Amy could get away. That plan failed miserably. The stone hit the burly soldier smack in the middle of his chainmail armor and made the man mad.

The soldier was part of a group of hairy and armored men wading through the tall grass toward London a half mile away. One of the group, a redheaded and red-bearded man with a caved in helmet, had paused to relieve himself at a nearby tree.

In their hiding place behind a thorny bush, Ben had worried about their scant cover. He couldn't believe they hadn't been discovered yet. Someone was bound to stumble across them and start asking difficult questions, like where did they come from and why were they dressed as they were? Without consulting his sister, Ben thought

he would create some noise, something to occupy the redheaded soldier's attention while he and Amy slipped away.

He didn't know that a Goliath-sized soldier, burly and bristle-faced, had turned around to see where his red-headed comrade had gone, and at that moment the carefully-selected stone Ben had thrown smashed him in the chest.

"What did you just do?" Amy's voice was a fierce whisper, but still too loud.

"Quiet! They'll hear us." But it was too late. Goliath marched toward them, and both Ben and Amy stood and backed away. As he rose, Ben grabbed another baseball sized stone and hid it behind his back. Just in case.

"Woofan hither hie?" The man shook his fist at them.

"Great, what's he saying?" Ben peered around him to the other soldier, Redhead. He was just finishing up his business at the tree.

"I don't know, but he's clearly blaming us for the rock."

"It's not my fault. I didn't mean to hit him—I just wanted to distract that guy." Ben pointed over to Redhead.

Goliath turned and studied the other man, calling to him in the same strange language he'd used before. Redhead frowned and held up his hands, clearly protesting his innocence.

"Now you've done it." Amy's eyes were wide.

As several more words flew back and forth between the two men, Ben thought of a plan — albeit an ill-formed and not-ready-for-the-light-of-day sort of plan.

“Get ready to run for it,” he said to his sister.

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m not sure yet, but I just hope it works.”

She saw the stone in his hand. “Don’t you dare . . .”

Someone in the larger group of soldiers yelled back to the two stragglers, and they both turned toward their departing fellows. This was the moment. Ben launched the other stone toward Redhead. The stone missed, but the man immediately spun back toward Goliath and accused him of retaliating. Now it was Goliath’s turn to play innocent, but Redhead wasn’t buying it. As soon as Goliath took a step toward Redhead, Ben grabbed Amy’s hand.

“Let’s go!” He didn’t want to wait around for the trouble that was sure to follow, even if he was responsible for it.

“What? This is your plan?”

“Just go with it, okay? Run!”

They cut through the dry grass and ran toward the distant forest. Amy shook her hand out of his. “We’re not going to make it all the way to the trees. We’re going to have to find another place to hide soon.”

She was right. There wasn’t a lot of cover in this terrain except for the occasional rock fence, where soldiers tended to congregate. Ben glanced back and saw the two soldiers shoving each other and swinging fists. He

laughed. "I think we've got more time than you think." The fight would keep the soldiers busy.

It was strange — an hour ago, none of these men were here outside of London. When he and Amy first arrived, after they fled through the Egyptian arch and travelled back in time again, the hillside was quiet and empty of life except for a few sheep.

The air was crisp and clean, with the dry grass and fallen leaves suggesting it was late autumn, the end of harvest. A cool wind blew from the east, bringing the unmistakable river smell with it — dank mud and slimy fish. Things were calm and settled.

And then the army arrived. They didn't seem much like an army, though. More like a band of Vikings that decided to take a ride together. Ben wouldn't have even recognized them as soldiers, except all of them had swords strapped to their hips or carried large and wicked-looking axes over their shoulders. Not many boasted armor, but all wore a kind of padded tunic and a rounded helmet. Some held poles draped with shirts of chainmail, carrying them like banners, not willing to put on the heavy mail until it was needed.

Then there were the random groups wandering the hills like lost sheep, fully clothed in armor and trudging cross-country, perhaps on patrol. That's who Ben ended up throwing rocks at.

Who were these men, and what were they up to? Were they Vikings, coming to sack London? Exactly how far back in time had they travelled?

Amy found a depression behind a lump of ground and pulled on Ben's arm to show him. Ben nodded and they collapsed in the hole and waited for their breathing to return to normal. With their backs to the lump, they were hidden from the city and from most of the patrols, including the men who surely must be looking for them now. Clustered near an outcropping of rocks to the right, a herd of sheep milled around, clearly uncomfortable with the soldiers trampling through their pastureland. A shepherd, dirty and patched, lounged by the rocks and ignored them.

Once she settled into the dry grass, Amy gave Ben an earful. "What were you thinking?"

"What do you mean?"

"Did you intend to start a fight?"

"Of course not. I didn't think I'd hit anyone with the rock. It was only supposed to roll down the hill."

"Hmph. Well at least we're out of that bush and away from the soldiers."

Ben nodded, but his mind was elsewhere. Yes, they had escaped these soldiers, but the reality was they were still lost and stuck in the past. Without meaning to, he found himself cataloguing everything that had gone wrong since they arrived in London. Their parents had vanished while working in the lab, and Ben and Amy had gone to investigate. That was where they first encountered the Egyptian arch, the blocky and strange artifact that somehow opened a doorway through time. But so far, only backward in time and only in London.

They had gone through the arch and ended up in the Victorian era. They did their best to fit in, making friends and finding jobs and searching for their parents. Along the way, they also made an enemy — Tristan, calling himself Lord Prospero. But they weren't alone in their troubles. Help came from a boy calling himself a prophet of the Most High, Ethan, who later suffered a beating so Ben and Amy could escape Tristan and his gang of ruffians. They located the Egyptian arch, activated it and went through to the 1660s, not long after the restoration of Charles II to the throne.

Inexplicably, they met up with their enemy again. Tristan, calling himself Lord Blackhall and claiming to be from Scotland, had been living in the past for years before Ben and Amy showed up. He had somehow gone through the arch after them and arrived earlier than they had. Ben couldn't wrap his mind around it. It just didn't make any sense.

Once again, they had fit in and made friends during the 1660s. Ben joined a group of actors staging a play, encouraged by a girl near his own age named Hope. In her life, she had suffered much and wanted nothing more than to go with Ben and Amy through the arch. Hope thought it was a gateway to heaven, and that Ben and Amy were angels sent to rescue her.

And then Lord Blackhall had trapped them in the burning theater. The arch was there as well and Amy had activated it somehow. He, Amy and Hope held hands and stepped through the arch, but when they awoke on

the hillside, Hope was not with them. She had vanished, or maybe she never went through at all and had been left behind in the burning theater.

Ben felt an invisible hand squeeze his chest. He couldn't bear to think of those last moments with Hope anymore. The urge to stand and pace or at least move around nearly overwhelmed him, but the thought of exposing himself to the soldiers kept him down. He rolled to his front and peeked over the mound, catching sight of the men wandering through the grass, patrolling, looking for food, or perhaps looking for troublemakers like him.

"What are they here for? I wish we could find out."

"I don't know." Amy stretched out her hands and picked bits of dirt from her palm. It looked like there was blood there as well.

"Did you hurt yourself?" That's all they needed — some random infection or injury that would kill them because they didn't have access to modern medical help.

"They're just raw from when I was pounding on the arch. That's how I got it open last time — hitting it in frustration."

"Oh." He risked another glance toward the city. "Do you think they're here to invade London?" He couldn't dredge up any specific facts about the history of London and whether the city had suffered a siege or been overrun by an invading army. On the other hand, he hadn't paid as much attention to his history class as he should

have. It would be extremely bad luck, in any case, arriving at London just as it was about to be conquered. Then again, the last time they found themselves in London right before the outbreak of the Great Fire. It wouldn't surprise him if they hadn't stumbled upon some other momentous occasion of history.

"I can't really tell." Amy sounded exhausted. "Didn't they look more like Vikings? They certainly can't be knights or soldiers in some national army."

Ben cut the speculating short, wanting to get to business. "What do we do, then? It looks like they're making a big camp just outside the city. Maybe we could sneak up and scout out what they're doing."

"I don't want to get any closer, that's for sure."

"Well then, why don't we just go into London?"

Amy looked up from her hands. "Are you really that brainless? The countryside is full of guys with swords, we don't know what's going on, and you just want to... what? Pretend like they don't exist and stroll right into the city?"

"I'm not scared of the soldiers. We can just make up some story about who we are and where we're going. Who knows? They may not even ask."

"No. We won't be making up any more stories." During the 1660s, it was Amy's idea to pretend to be a Spanish noble with Ben as her servant. That didn't work out so well. "Plus we don't even know if the soldiers are here to attack the city or defend it. So, no, we're not going to London."

Heat rose in his cheeks. “Why not? That’s exactly where we have to go! We have to look for Mom and Dad, or some kind of clue that they were here. We have to find the arch.” And, Ben thought, they had to find Hope. Even if he wasn’t sure she had gone through the arch, he had to look for her. She deserved that much at least. “Did you forget what we’re here for?”

“No, I didn’t forget, but there’s no way we’re getting near the city. An invading army wouldn’t let anyone in or out. The soldiers would stop us and want to know what we’re doing there. And did you hear them speak? I can’t understand a word of it, and I’m sure they wouldn’t understand us either. That certainly suggests a foreign army, doesn’t it?” She pulled some grass from the ground and rubbed it in her hands. “Plus, I’m starting to agree with Ethan. He thought using the arch was a bad idea, that there was something wrong with it. I think he was onto something.”

“Exactly what was he onto? The arch got us here, didn’t it? It took us away from the fire and the collapsing theater.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t take us home, did it? Instead of where we want to go, it just keeps taking us further and further away from our own time. I don’t want to go through again and find out we’ve landed in the Stone Age.”

“But the answer is down there.” Ben jabbed his finger toward the walled city. “Out here is nothing — no people, no arches, no way home.” And no Hope either. He was sure of that.

“I won’t go.” She crossed her arms, looking just like a petulant four-year-old instead of a girl of sixteen.

Ben dropped to the ground across from Amy. Now what? They shouldn’t be arguing about whether or not they should go into London. They should be figuring out plans, a way to sneak past the soldiers and get through the walls. Maybe they could find someone who spoke English and talk them into helping out.

But who would help them and how on earth could they blend in? He considered the black dress Amy was wearing. He couldn’t recall where she had picked up her outfit, whether in the Victorian era or the 1660s. It was plain enough to have come from almost any time.

His clothes were another matter. His brown coat and brown breeches made him feel like a fool. The hose didn’t help either. At least he was warm enough. He hadn’t seen any normal people about, farmers or merchants or craftsmen, so he couldn’t compare his outfit with what they wore. All he had seen so far were the soldiers. Which brought Ben right back around to wondering why the soldiers were here, protecting the city or invading it?

Amy stood. “I’m not waiting any more. Let’s head toward the woods. We can hide out there and search for some food.”

“When did you all of a sudden become Survivorman? Can you now skin a snake, pick nuts and mushrooms, and live off the land?”

She shook her head. “We’re still in danger here. I don’t

want to find out what that army is here for, and neither do you. Let's go."

Ben crossed his arms. "No."

"What? Come on, we need to stick together. We're going into the woods."

"No, we need to get into London and fix this somehow." He didn't know what, but he was convinced that *something* they were doing was sending them backward in time. If they found the arch and experimented with it more, they could figure it out and make sense of how it worked. And if they knew how it worked, then they could fix it and go home.

Her mouth set in a straight line, Amy shook her head. "If you're not coming with me, then stay here for all I care. I'm leaving."

"You wouldn't dare! You were the one who didn't want to split up."

But his sister walked steadily up the gentle slope, and in less than fifteen minutes she disappeared into the woods.

CHAPTER TWO

Elliot Matthews woke with a stiff back. After sleeping on the hard ground for several weeks now, he thought his body would adjust. It hadn't happened yet. Luxury sleeping accommodations had been left far behind in 1666. Or perhaps, he thought, they'd been left further ahead. He nearly chuckled at his own joke, but instead rolled to his feet, ignoring his protesting back, and shook Sheryl awake.

"What's wrong?" she croaked, her eyes cracking open a sliver.

"Nothing. It's just morning." He stepped out the front door of their humble hut and took a large clay jar down to the community well.

As the bronze ewer dropped to the bottom of the well, Elliot thought about the past. Not some distant, theoretical past, enjoyed mostly through books whilst ensconced in a comfortable leather chair in the library, but this past

they were living in. This past with its disregard of cleanliness, its preponderance of alien people, customs and smells, its thumb-of-the-nose at modern convenience and efficiency.

To retrieve water, for example, required an inordinate amount of effort in the past. Not just digging the well and praying you hit the right spot, but also tugging at the rope and lifting the jar from the bottom of the well while it's full of water. In the twenty-first century, people simply had to turn the tap and they had water, as long as you had paid your water bill and as long as you lived in a developed country.

After exercising his arms and lifting the ewer from the depths, he poured the water into his clay jar and hefted the jar to his shoulder. This was not work he'd ever thought he'd be doing as an applied physics professor. Not that he was above the work — it simply wasn't in the job description when he first started. Oh well, he thought, life does have its twists and turns.

Sheryl was busy in the hut, sorting through their meager food stores and stretching the limits of her creativity trying to make something for breakfast.

“Here you are, dear. Fresh water from the well. Service with a smile!”

His cheerfulness didn't make a dent in her expression. She simply nodded. “I'm glad neither one of us is a biologist. I'd hate to know what kind of microscopic organisms lived in that 'fresh' water.”

“Don’t think about it, then.” He handed her the jar. “But do boil it thoroughly and roast those critters, okay?”

“As always.” She added more wood to the fire and went to find the big bronze kettle.

Elliot decided it was a good time to check his contraptions. He stepped back outside and wound past his workshop and onto the killing fields. An area measuring a hundred square feet housed his fancy game traps, snares constructed from scraps of leather, bits of metal and cords wound from nearby grasses. Very Swiss Family Robinson, he thought. Results were mixed, though. In two weeks he had captured three rabbits and one squirrel. The squirrel was surprisingly tasty.

As he replenished the bait, one of his ever-curious neighbors ambled over and stood a respectful distance away. “Salvé,” the man called out. Most of the people living nearby spoke enough Latin for Elliot to have a decent conversation with them. Despite how little he found out during these communications, he decided the neighbors were decent enough people. They knew him as a tinkerer with clever fingers.

“Greetings,” he answered in the same language. “How fares the morning?”

“Not good, if you heard the news from the north. The barbarians are out raiding again. My cousin thinks they will be here before the first chill.”

“Will there be trouble?”

“Yes, much trouble.” The man considered this for a moment. “Can you look at my buckle? The tongue is loose.”

Elliott waved the man over to his workbench, where he dug out a small hammer and tongs. With light and rapid taps, he pounded the brass buckle until the pivot part of the tongue fit snug against the rod it attached to. After a few minutes work, he handed the buckle back to its owner. The man thanked him and offered a small loaf of bread, hardly bigger than a dinner roll, which Elliott gratefully took.

Ecstatic over his wages, Elliott skipped back into the hut, only to find Sheryl crying over the pot of boiling water.

“Come on now, that’s not how we make fresh water.” When she didn’t laugh or even crack a smile, he put his arm around her. “What is it? Is it the food? The bed? The bugs in the bed?” He thought about the marauders coming from the north. “Is it the neighbors?”

She shook her head and sighed. “No. Just thinking of Amethyst and Bennett again. How did they get mixed up in this? How will they survive? I mean, look at us, with our advanced degrees and years of life experience, and we’re still just scraping by. I think about all the things we didn’t teach them. How will they blend in with the locals? Will they be picked up by the authorities and put in jail? Or in a madhouse?”

They had seen their children through the Egyptian arch, when he and Sheryl were in 1666. Just before they

went through, they glimpsed the Victorian warehouse where Elliott had built a replica of the apparatus that activated the arch. Amethyst and Bennett were there, and Elliott knew exactly what that meant. The children were in the same mess that their parents were. Somehow they had gone through the arch and fallen into the trap, a snare as devious as one of his own complex contraptions.

“Don’t worry,” he told her. “We’ll think of something. Maybe we’ll find them.”

“But how? Every time we use the arch, we keep getting further and further away from them. And what about the time periods they’re in? None of them are kid-friendly or safe.”

Elliott nodded. They had also seen Amethyst and Bennett through the arch when all they could make out were fuzzy glimpses of their children and lots of flames. He figured they must have been in the year 1666 at the theater where the Egyptian arch had ended up, but he didn’t know why the theater was on fire. If they were seeing the children through the arch, then there was a good chance they made it out safely.

“Our kids are tough.” He wanted to be optimistic for Sheryl’s sake. “You’ll see. They’ll be fine.”

She leaned heavily into him, and he decided not to mention the news he had learned from the neighbor. Men from the north were on their way to London. No need to worry his wife about things they had no control over.

But he understood her grief. There was a time, nearly twenty years ago, when they’d suffered a terrible loss

and Sheryl was inconsolable for months and months. She really didn't improve until she was pregnant with Amethyst. Elliott kept telling her things would work out, because the alternative was simply inconceivable. Twenty years ago they had lost a child — they would not survive the blow if they lost Amethyst and Bennett as well.

CHAPTER THREE

Amy fumed as she trudged through the grass and climbed over low stone fences. How could Ben refuse to see reason? She thought she had made her points very clear, and she certainly had more experience with the arch. After all, wasn't she the one who had activated the Egyptian relic in the burning theater? She even had an inkling of what triggered the portal to open, and like Ethan, she now saw the arch as a trap, a way that caused more problems than it solved. Why couldn't Ben see that?

She still blamed herself for the whole mess. Two weeks ago — or was it three? — she had prayed a prayer for something interesting to happen. And this is where that prayer took her. Both Ben and Ethan had reassured her that this thought was nonsense, but she couldn't help feeling responsible. She thrust her hand into her pocket

and clutched the small Bible there, the one Ethan had left for her.

Where was he now, that mysterious and intriguing boy? He had been stuck in the burning theater with them, but couldn't make it to the arch after Amy had opened it. Had he broken through the front door? Had he made it out of London before the city was reduced to ashes? Fingering the only gift he'd given her, she longed to see him again, despite his serious disposition and his annoying habit of asking difficult questions.

And what of Hope? Ben hadn't said much more about his friend since they discovered she hadn't come through the arch with them. Did he miss her as well? Most likely she'd been left behind in the theater, and in that case she was long dead. Amy hadn't known her all that well, but felt a stab of pity anyway. What a life.

Those gloomy thoughts brought her to the edge of the forest, where thick and dark oaks hovered over her like dirty old men. She didn't break stride but let her determination carry her through the clinging branches. She would show Ben — she would gather food for them and make a shelter, and he would chase after her soon. They would live in this wilderness as long as they could.

But he was sure to keep nagging her about their parents. Would they ever find them? In coming to this time (whenever it was), had their parents disappeared into some other time? They always seem to be just out of reach, drawn to the arch and spirited away to another point in history.

They did catch sight of Mom and Dad once through the arch, when Amy and Ben were in the Victorian era. They had been dressed strangely, in an effort to fit in with the people of 1666, and standing in the theater. Then Amy and her brother had gone through the arch to 1666 and her parents had disappeared again, maybe to this time. When she activated the ancient artifact in the burning theater, she had seen nothing through the portal but more flames. What did that mean, and where had her parents gone now?

Around her, the forest was silent. She wondered if she were making too much noise tromping through the leaves. She stopped and listened for several minutes, expecting the creatures of the woods to resume their normal sounds at any time. Waiting and more waiting, but no sound came. Odd. Where were all the birds, squirrels and other things that lived in these parts?

The autumn sun washed the area ahead with weak light. The forest thinned and sparse grass waved in a slight breeze. Must be a meadow. She quickened her pace, anxious to leave the silent and chilly woods. Pulling her sleeves down as far as they would go, she wondered if her dress would keep her warm enough at night. What she wouldn't give for a coat or blanket.

When she got to the edge of the trees, she discovered it was not a meadow. An expanse of low rolling hills, segmented by roads and the ubiquitous stone fences, met her eyes. Brittle and brown grass stretched before her, underneath the gray sky she had not seen for an hour. To

her right wound a river, wide and slow, and on the largest bend was a city. Not just any city — London.

Fear blossoming inside her, she marched down the hill. From here, she had an excellent view of the men who had taken charge of the countryside, making camp to the left of the city. Tents sprouted out of the ground like mushrooms, while soldiers milled around like ants and stuck close to the cooking fires. So, the army was settling in but not preparing for battle yet. Interesting.

Amy pushed her way through the grass and found Ben sitting in the same hollow where she had left him.

He cracked a smile. “I knew you’d be back.”

She wanted to slap the grin off his face, but instead looked back toward the woods. “I certainly didn’t mean to.”

“You didn’t mean to come back?”

“No, I just walked straight into the woods, didn’t turn to the left or the right. When I came out the other side, I found myself walking toward London again.”

“You didn’t get turned around? Stop for a rest or anything?”

She shook her head. “I barely paused for breath. I did stop once when I noticed all the creatures were not making any noise. But I didn’t turn my body at all. Straight in, straight out.”

Ben nodded. “Remember your trip to Oxford?”

During their time in the Victorian era, Amy had caught a train for Oxford, following a tip that her parents may have gone there to consult with scholars at the

university. She boarded the train, rode it for thirty minutes and found herself in the same station she'd left from. The conductor assured her she had been to Oxford, but she suspected she'd never left London at all. A mystery they never solved.

"Do you think it's the same phenomenon? What about during 1666? Did you ever try to leave?"

Ben rubbed his head for a moment. "We went outside the city, but not beyond the London as it was in the Victorian era, or in our time. I never even made it to Islington, which is where we found the warehouse before."

"What's going on? Why can't we leave?"

Ben reached over and picked up a stick. He poked it into the soft soil in the depression as he spoke. "I think going back in time created a problem, an event that separated us from the rest of the world. When Mom and Dad — and you and I — went back in time, it only affected London. It's like the blast radius of a nuclear bomb. When we left, that part of the world got caught in the blast and came with us. That's why we can't leave, because only London exists in this past."

Amy paced in small circles, wary of the men beyond their little hideout. "But that makes no sense. How can only part of the world exist in the past? What about all those people, or the soldiers? Where did they come from? If they follow the road and go toward Oxford, what happens to them?"

Ben simply shrugged. "Maybe it's just you and me that can't leave London."

It was too much for her. Their problems were much simpler before — their parents had gone missing and they followed them through the arch. In both the Victorian era and in 1666, their goal was to find Mom and Dad and let *them* figure out how to get home. But now? They didn't even know when or where they were, and wherever this place was, they couldn't leave it. Their situation made less sense to her than ever, and the weight of it pressed in on her. Even though she stood in a wide open field, she began to feel claustrophobic.

She crumpled to the ground and sat hunched over. Treacherous tears burst out and streaked her face. Great. What a marvelous time to lose her cool.

“Whoa, what’s wrong with you? Is it because we can’t go living in the woods like you wanted?” That was her caring brother for you. Clueless as ever.

She choked back a laugh. “No, don’t you see? We’re lost, even worse than before. We’ve no place to go. No clue where Mom and Dad are. We might as well be on another planet.”

“You’re just tired and hungry.”

“Maybe, but that doesn’t change the fact that we’re lost.”

A new voice joined their conversation. “No, you’re not lost.”

Amy had been so absorbed in her concerns and complaints, she had failed to notice a herd of sheep moving past the small rise they hid behind. A thin and dirty

shepherd led the animals, guiding them with a long crook, and had stopped near the rise. His beard stuck out in all directions and had blades of grass tucked in between, like he had been sleeping face down. He wore a simple robe, cinched at the waist, and sandals on his feet.

“What?” Ben said.

“You’re not lost. If I can see you and know you’re here, then you can’t be lost.”

Somehow, he reminded Amy of Ethan. She peered at the man, but it was not their friend in disguise. The face was too different, too careworn, and his accent was a little off, even though he spoke English.

Ben looked her way, puzzlement written on his face. “What?”

The man glanced toward London. “More soldiers are on their way. I’d suggest you find a new place to hide.”

With that, the dirty shepherd strode after his flock, his crook swinging with every stride. Well that was weird. Amy shook her head. Then again, nothing about this place was normal. If the man was right about the soldiers, though, she didn’t have a lot of time to think about it. They needed to move.

Ben was already ahead of her. He stood and surveyed the hills, pointing toward the city. “He’s right. Looks like a group of soldiers are heading this way, riding horses.”

They retreated to the nearest stone fence and crept along behind it until they spotted a large rock that looked promising. It was not a tall rock, but wide and

flat, and behind it was a deep depression, almost like someone had dug out a pit. More likely some floodwater had created a sink hole in that spot. The dry grass grew over it just the same as the rest of the area, so it was hard to tell what had made the depression.

“It this good enough?” Ben slid down into the hole.

With one last glance toward the men on horses, Amy climbed down as well. “For now. At least the patrol won’t find us until they get a whole lot closer.”

“Do you think they’re looking for us?”

“Not specifically. Maybe they’re just combing the area for any troublemakers. Or resistance fighters. They might want to make sure there isn’t an army waiting to attack from the rear when they’re capturing the city.”

“You still think they’re invaders?”

“I haven’t seen anything to suggest otherwise.”

Ben shrugged. “I don’t know what to think anymore. My brain is overloaded.” He pushed the grass around near the rock, maybe looking for a spot to make a bed. Suddenly he stood up straight. “Oh! Look at this. There’s like a little cave back here.”

She reached out and pulled him back. “Don’t—it might be an animal burrow. You wouldn’t want to disturb a badger or porcupine or something like that.”

Ben pulled out of her grip and knelt down in front of the opening, flattening the grass as he did so. “I don’t think it’s a burrow. What’s in the back there?”

She couldn’t resist taking a peek. Kneeling down, she

glanced into the dim space and caught sight of a bit of white. Bones? Maybe it was a fox or wolf den.

“Don’t you see?” Ben pointed at the largest of the bones. “Those are human. It’s a grave.”