



the Guardians of Time

BOOK I OF THE GUARDIANS SERIES

DAMIAN LAWRENCE

THE GUARDIANS OF TIME



A NOVEL BY

DAMIAN LAWRENCE



Princeton • Athens

The Guardians of Time

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To my wife and my son, the joy and the light of my life. The first is my balance, and the second is my inspiration. Together, they are the wings that have allowed me to take flight in pursuit of a lifelong dream. I love them both more than words can say.

Also by Damian Lawrence
The Sacred City (Book II of The Guardians series)

BOOK I

THE GUARDIANS OF TIME

*The distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion,
however persistent.*
—ALBERT EINSTEIN

Study the past, if you would divine the future.
—CONFUCIUS

PROLOGUE



SINAI DESERT, EGYPT—FRIDAY, AUGUST 6, 2032

The unexpected storm had already been raging for hours with no sign of letting up. Trekking across the desert wilderness, Mark Lawson tried his best to protect his face from the sharp sting of the tiny wind-driven granules that painfully bit into his flesh, and he began to worry.

Having been forced to abandon his jeep several kilometers back, it seemed that he had been walking for far too long, and what little remained of the day's light was quickly beginning to fade. He pushed onward, knowing that what he was looking for had to be nearby; but as he strained to see in the near-zero visibility, his anxiety was slowly beginning to feel more like fear.

He was about to try again to see if he could raise someone on his two-way radio, when suddenly a wave of exuberance swept over him. It was there in the distance, about a hundred fifty meters off—the shelter he had been looking for. It was a relatively small structure, and he had almost missed it under the nearly roof-level drifts that were piled high against its sides.

Immediately he began running towards it, his legs sinking into the fine knee-high granules that shifted all around him. Reaching the small concrete silo, he fell on his hands and knees before it and frantically began clearing an opening to the door. It took some time, but he was finally able to reach the control panel and, positioning his red and slightly swollen face before the retinal scanner, heard an electronic buzz.

Thank God it's still working! he thought as the door slid open.

Hurrying inside, he quickly closed it behind him. Even under normal circumstances, to have been stranded outside at night in a driving desert windstorm would have proven deadly; but these conditions were far from ordinary. For the shrapnel-like particles that had torn into his flesh, and the huge dunes he had waded across on his way down the mountain from the monastery he had been visiting, were not made of sand.

Looking back over the vast field of white that he had just traversed, Lawson shook the ice and snow off his heavy down jacket and breathed a sigh of relief. Who would have believed even just a few years before that there could have been a blizzard in the middle of the Sinai Desert in August? Yet in those days, such bizarre and unsettling occurrences had become eerily commonplace.

The vast and complex global storm system that had been named 'the Great Climate Crisis' was already in its third devastating year; and from all the data that had been analyzed, it seemed that, rather than dissipating, it was only getting stronger. Some credible models had even predicted that, analogous to the famed Great Red Spot of the planet Jupiter, it was potentially the beginning of a violent worldwide weather pattern that could easily last for many decades. And as if that news were not bad enough, there were the earthquakes and the volcanic activity.

One after another, major tremors had been felt all around the planet, and vast clouds of toxic ash and dust had been poured into the atmosphere at an alarming rate by a handful of large eruptions. Coupled with the quickly rising sea level and the unprecedented sudden mass extinction of a number of plant and animal species, it was no small wonder that the world's brightest scientific minds were predicting an imminent environmental cataclysm of global proportions.



It was to stave off just such an event that the installation in a massive natural cavern deep under the surface of the Sinai Desert had been constructed. He only hoped they were not too late.

After a moment, the double doors of the elevator slid open and Dr. Lawson stepped inside, waving his encrypted radio-frequency-emitting security badge in front of the panel. Immediately, the doors closed and the lift began to move in a long slow descent to its destination almost a hundred meters below ground. While he waited, Lawson looked at his distorted reflection in the stainless steel of the car's interior.

He was a young man, but the strain of the last three years was evident. His hair and the three days' worth of stubble that grew on his face were liberally sprinkled with specks of gray, and there were dark hollows under his brown eyes, making him appear older than his thirty-one years. Hoping he would have time for a hot shower and a shave before they were ready to start, he looked at his watch. It was just after six o'clock. He had less than an hour, but it would be enough.

Rushing to his quarters deep in the underground complex, the physicist hurriedly refreshed himself, changed clothes and then headed up to the observation deck in the control room. As he walked briskly through winding subterranean passageways, the lights dimmed threateningly for a moment. That was not good. If they lost power, they would have to recycle the accelerator from the beginning and would lose three months' worth of preparation. It would be a setback they could ill afford.

When he arrived at the control room, the senior project team members were already beginning to assemble. Most of them were colleagues from CERN in Geneva, Switzerland, where he had lived and worked since earning his doctorate in nuclear physics, but there were a few from as far away as the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory in his native United States.

About ten minutes to seven, the director general of the project—a Swiss physicist by the name of Schmidt, who had been his supervisor since his arrival at CERN six years before—entered the control room, and Lawson headed straight for him.

“Ah, there you are Mark—thank goodness you’re back,” Schmidt said, visibly relieved. “Of all times, I still can’t understand why you had to go for a retreat at that silly monastery of yours the last few days, but never mind. This is an exciting day, and you should be proud of yourself. Without your theoretical work, none of this would ever have been possible.”

“Thank you, sir. I appreciate the confidence and support you’ve always shown me, which is why I—,” Lawson started to say, before Schmidt abruptly cut him off.

“Oh, Mark, don’t tell me you’re going to start again with your metaphysical arguments? You know I don’t believe those things,” the director general said impatiently. “Besides, it’s too late for any of that now. Everything is ready to go—based on hard science. I don’t know why you of all people are so eager to contradict your own discovery!”

“It’s not that I’m contradicting it, Director,” Lawson retorted. “I’m simply stating what I have said many times before: that we cannot succeed based on the technology alone; there has to be a metaphysical element to it—and in the absence of it, I’m afraid we are about to make a grave mistake.”

Schmidt smiled indulgently. He then placed his hand on Lawson’s shoulder and said:

“Thank you for your concern, Mark. I know how difficult it can be to let go of something that is your brainchild, and that you have put so much of yourself into for such a long time. But let’s face it—it’s time to let go. The child must take its first step.

“Besides, even if I wanted to listen to you, at this point I cannot. The UN Security Council has approved the activation of



Project Prometheus, which they funded as you well know, and we cannot stop it now. And more to the point, we are out of time. If we do not do something quickly, I'm afraid—"

Shrugging his shoulders and with an expression of somber resignation on his heavily creased face, the director general walked to the center of the control room, calling everyone to gather around him.

"Esteemed colleagues," he began. "A little less than three years ago, we started working towards the achievement of a single goal—the development of a capability we all hoped it would never be necessary to put to use. Unfortunately, as you are all aware, the circumstances are dire.

"The present crisis we find ourselves in has already had the effect of destroying a large part of the world's productive capacity, and at the rate at which the system is growing, the consequences of inaction are...frankly unthinkable. Fortunately, the human race has always been resourceful and tenacious in its determination to survive in the face of threats. And make no mistake—we *will* survive this latest threat, as well."

Then, looking at Mark, he continued: "Many of you know that I am somewhat of an agnostic when it comes to matters of faith. Some would say that, if ever there was a time for prayer, it is now. I do not say that—I only say that, if there is a God, may he not stand in the way of what we are about to do today. Everyone, to your stations please. It is time to make history."

As the team of scientists, engineers and technicians went through their final systems checks and worked through their pre-mission control sequences, Lawson sat in the observation deck with the rest of the senior project team leaders and quietly began to pray. After a little while, the military commanders arrived with the mission team—twelve specially trained navy divers from several countries—who began suiting up in

preparation for the dive. It was then that Lawson, as if suddenly snapping out of a trance, rushed over to the director general.

“*Herr Dr. Schmidt*,” he said breathlessly, “I know this is going to sound completely off the wall, but you’ve got to arrange for me to go with them.”

“Are you mad, Lawson?” replied Schmidt with a look of disbelief, stunned at the suggestion. “Don’t be ridiculous! Not only are these men seasoned special operations divers, but they have trained for months for this very moment. You may be a brilliant scientist, but you have no qualifications whatsoever to undertake such a mission. And why would you even think about such a thing? Now please, don’t cause a distraction—we have a lot of work to do.”

“Forgive me, sir,” Lawson protested, “but you know as well as I do that we have no idea what these divers will experience once we pull the trigger, and therefore we have no way of knowing if their training will be of any use or not. And even if they do get through, they can only deliver static technical specifications without having the slightest idea of what they actually mean. It will take the engineers they encounter years to understand what I could teach them about quantum energy systems in a few months. Besides, what if our calculations are off, and they end up surfacing somewhere we don’t expect? Someone who will know what to do from a scientific point of view has to be with them.”

Schmidt frowned, knowing that his protégé was speaking the truth. Thinking for a moment, he said: “Still, Mark, I can’t allow it. It’s much too great a risk.”

“*Herr Dr. Schmidt—Reiner*,” Lawson pleaded in a voice that was at once plaintive yet firm, the unprecedented use of his supervisor’s first name betraying his near desperation. “If this



mission fails, there will be nothing left to live for. That's an even greater risk."

Closing his eyes, Schmidt nodded his head and then said: "Wait here—I'll go and discuss it with the liaison officer."

A few minutes later, Lawson was racing along the subterranean corridors towards the operations area, where he suited up and joined the divers waiting in the hot zone. The first pair of divers had already taken up their position in the chamber which held their 'diving bells'—those highly secretive devices that, when triggered by the split second high-energy beam from the particle accelerator, would create the tiny black-holes that would warp the space-time continuum.

The plan was to propel the divers some thirty years into the past, where they would deliver the knowledge related to future technological breakthroughs that would allow the human race to leapfrog three decades of clean-energy research. Along with it, they would issue a dire warning about what the future held if that technology was not put to good use.

In truth, even if the plan succeeded, no one knew if the results would stop the Great Climate Crisis from occurring altogether, but the consensus was that it might attenuate its effects enough to buy the world some time. Besides, it had to work. They were out of all other options.

Taking up his position in the chamber next to the first dive team, Lawson took a deep breath and waited. And as he waited, he meditated, slowly descending with his mind into his heart and feeling a familiar warmth filling him from the inside out. The moment of truth had finally arrived, and at last he would find out firsthand whether or not his theory was correct.

He should have been terrified, he realized, but instead a strange tranquility enveloped him. It was not unlike the peace he had felt while standing in prayer several hours before in the

church of his beloved monastery of St. Catherine's. For a brief moment he even thought that he detected the faintest fragrance of sweet incense, and he was immediately seized by a powerful feeling of compunction as he inwardly prayed.

Standing solemnly in position, the director general and the military leaders nodded to one another, and Schmidt gave the signal. As the technicians called out the energy readings recorded on their instrument panels, the two dive chambers suddenly lit up with a blinding flash and then went dark. The divers were gone.

EVEN BEFORE HEARING the sudden shout of jubilation that erupted from the engineering station when the technicians picked up the signal from Lawson's marker beacon, Director General Dr. Reiner Gerhardt Schmidt knew that, of the three divers who had been sent, only the young physicist had made it through. For he suddenly remembered very clearly the day he had met Mark Lawson for the first time.

The year was 2007, and he was a young physicist just out of graduate school, working in his laboratory at CERN late one afternoon, when a strange young man—austere-looking, with long and prematurely gray hair, who looked to be in his late thirties—entered the room and addressed him by name.

"I'm sorry, but have we met before?" Schmidt had asked.

Without introducing himself, the other man had simply said:

"Yes, in a manner of speaking, we have. But don't worry—we'll meet again in about twenty years when I come to work for you. I only wanted to say hello."

Then, as he was leaving the room, he turned again and said cryptically:

"Just remember, while you seek to understand the laws of nature, do not be too eager to dismiss that which is beyond

nature. You never know when the fate of the world might depend on it.”

Briefly taken aback, he watched the door close behind the stranger. It was not the actual words that had intrigued Schmidt as much as it was the way in which he had spoken them. After a moment his curiosity got the better of him, and he went out into the hall intending to speak with him. But looking up and down the corridor he realized to his surprise that, as mysteriously as the man had appeared, he was already gone.

CHAPTER 1



MONEMVASIA, GREECE—SATURDAY, MAY 19, 1778

The elderly priest calmly arranged the holy implements on a table next to the large copper vessel that stood in the center of the nave: a small silver-covered gospel; an earthenware jug of purest, dark-green olive oil; a wooden box inlaid with mother-of-pearl in a fine floral motif, containing a small pair of scissors, a tiny silver-gripped paintbrush, and a bottle of precious holy *chrism*. Laid out before him were all the tools of his trade that would be used in the ancient rite about to take place in the centuries-old church of the *Panagia Chrysaphitissa*.

It was to be a passage from death to life, presaged thousands of years before by the crossing of twelve beleaguered tribes of awed Israelite refugees over dry land through the midst of a raging sea; the grafting into the body of Christ of its newest member, who would enter into the joy of the manifest kingdom of heaven on earth. In all his fifty years as a cleric, it was still the most soul-stirring and sacred act he could perform as an archpriest of the Greek Orthodox Church: the baptism and *chrismation* of a precious young child—the restoration to its original grace of a new Christian soul.

At last the preparations were complete and the wizened priest in his long black robes cast his eye around the ancient temple in a final inspection. The worn marble floor had been swept clean; the flowers that had been brought earlier in the morning by the soon-to-be godparents were arranged; and the three candles—a numerical representation of the Holy Trinity in

whose name the newly illumined was to be baptized—were in place in their holder on the rim of the baptismal font. Everything was ready.

The old priest was especially moved, because the infant to be christened that day was his first-born great-grandson and would be given his own name, Charalambos—‘one who shines with joy’. On the opposite side of the baptismal font from the little table was a wooden stand on which an old icon of the holy priest-martyr—his patron saint, Charalambos—had been reverently placed. Grasping it now in his liver-spotted hands, the white-bearded old priest made the most ancient of Christian gestures, the sign of the cross, and leaned forward and kissed it, asking the saint’s blessing that all would go well.

Father Charalambos had just gone back into the sanctuary to light a piece of charcoal and prepare the incense with which everyone in the church would be blessed—from the saints depicted in the holy icons adorning the walls, to the witnesses of the sacred rite who would shortly be arriving—when he heard voices outside that seemed to be coming from behind the church building. Wondering who it could be, the old priest peeked through a small window niche behind the altar table, which opened out onto the rocky field stretching between the church and the ancient fortification wall of Monemvasia’s Lower Town.

There, standing about a dozen meters from the back of the church, he recognized a small group of five or six young local men holding digging tools, and in their midst two strangers. One of the two, a well-dressed gentleman—who from his clothing and jewelry appeared to be a Turk, but who seemed to the priest to be much fairer than usual for one of his race—was giving some kind of instructions, while the other translated his words into Greek. Concerned, the priest immediately left the piece of charcoal

burning in the old tarnished incenser and rushed outside to see what the commotion was all about.

“What’s going on here?” the old presbyter called out as he closed the distance between the back of the church and the group of men.

“Stavro! Panayioti!” he addressed by name two of the young men whom he had baptized eighteen and sixteen years before respectively, and who had been altar boys in his parish. “What’s happening?”

Seeing Father Charalambos coming over in a brisk stride, the boys sheepishly fell back in an open half circle around the strangers, who turned to face the approaching priest.

“Ah, this must be the priest Charalambos,” said the better dressed of the two strangers in Turkish, speaking to the man standing beside him. “Tell him that this plot has been ceded to us by the governor and that we will be doing some building work here for the next several months. We will expect his full cooperation, as I am sure he also will appreciate having everything go as smoothly and quickly as possible so as not to disturb his peace and quiet any more than necessary.”

The second stranger, a Greek from somewhere in Asia Minor, who was fluent in Turkish and was working in the stranger’s service as an interpreter and general facilitator known as a *dragoman*, dutifully passed the message on to the old priest, who promptly became outraged.

“What do you mean, ‘This plot has been ceded by the governor’?” he snapped back angrily, annoyed at the intrusion, and instinctively feeling a deep revulsion for the Turk. “By what right? This land belongs to the Church! Now just clear out of here, the lot of you! I have a baptism going on here in just a half hour, and I don’t even want the smell of this bloody Turk here spoiling the atmosphere!”

The interpreter loosely translated the angry old priest's comments, leaving out the less than savory bits, and adding a few obsequious flourishes of his own to show proper deference to the foreign gentleman. The stranger then drew a small scroll from the fold of his robes, handed it to the interpreter and commanded him to read it out loud.

"In the name of *Allah* the most merciful, and by order of the Supreme Governor of the fortress of Monemvasia and its surrounding territory," the man began to quote to the gathered assembly.

As he continued to read, it became apparent that the Turkish governor of the area had indeed ceded a small plot of land measuring five hundred square meters in the field behind the church, stretching down to the sea wall, to the gentleman. The document was signed and sealed by the governor, and countersigned by the bishop of the local diocese, who had undoubtedly been coerced into agreeing to the transaction.

As an important regional trading center for centuries, Monemvasia had traditionally benefited from special rights and privileges under a succession of occupying powers—from Venetians to Ottoman Turks—including a relatively broad autonomy over the commercial, civil and ecclesiastical affairs of the native Greeks within its territory. A decade ago, such an affront as a Turkish governor forcing the Church to sell a parcel of its land to a foreigner would never even have been contemplated. But ever since the 'Orlov events' of 1770, the situation had changed.

That was the year in which—for reasons of political intrigue in the escalating struggle between imperial Russia and the Ottoman Empire—a certain Russian nobleman had convinced a militant faction of Greek patriots to instigate an uprising. Finding that the mere insinuation of the imperial Russian Crown's

support for the revolutionaries was enough of a bargaining chip with which to extract valuable concessions from the Turks, the Russians had reached a temporary diplomatic accommodation with their fractious southern neighbors and had subsequently failed to support the fledgling revolt.

As brutal as the initial Ottoman military reprisals against the citizens of the Peloponnese peninsula had been in the aftermath of the events the Greeks bitterly referred to as *'ta Orlofiká'*, the ongoing commercial and administrative punishment was perhaps worse. Monemvasia, one of the eastern Mediterranean's most important port cities for nearly half a millennium, was quickly being reduced to the status of a third-class backwater town, and it seemed that no justification was too small to transfer its remaining wealth and property into Turkish hands.

As the Greek interpreter finished reading the scroll, the stranger looked at Father Charalambos beneficently and said in mellifluous sounding Turkish:

"I hope we now understand one another, as it seems we are to be neighbors. But be assured, your master," he said referring to the local bishop, "has been compensated extremely generously for such a paltry lot as this. And now," he continued, "to show a gesture of good will so that we might start our neighborly association on the right foot, I would like to present you with this small token—a donation to your church, if you will."

When the translator had conveyed the stranger's message, his master reached into the folds of his robe and drew out a small pouch, shaking it to demonstrate the jingle of the coins within. He held it out generously to Father Charalambos, with a friendly grin straining his curved and mustached lips.

The old priest hesitated for a moment, seething inside with bitterness over the situation, but ultimately he knew there was nothing he could do. Besides, he was an old man and the time was

not far off when he would no longer be able to serve in his present capacity as parish priest. It would be foolish of him not to put a little something away for his retirement. Reaching out, he accepted the ‘donation’, even as a mixed sense of shame, frustration and anger enveloped him.

“But what about the baptism?” he ventured weakly, addressing the Greek interpreter with a pleading look. “Surely the *effendi* can wait an hour or two before the work begins?”

The man explained the situation to the stranger, who graciously agreed to forestall the work until after noon, and furthermore to refrain from having the men work on Sundays or other important Church holidays, so as not to disturb the religious life of the surrounding community. Satisfied with the stranger’s concession, though still filled with a palpable sense of remorse at the loss of the land, Father Charalambos made his way back to the church. There, in a narrow alcove adjacent to the holy altar, he opened up the small purse given to him by the stranger and emptied its contents out onto a little table.

The old priest was at first filled with delight as he took in the sight of a large number of Turkish *piasters* spread out on the table before him; but as he counted, his delight soon turned to dread. At the final count, the tally was thirty silver coins—the same in number as the price paid to that former disciple of the Lord, turned traitor, Judas Iscariot.

Trembling with fear, Father Charalambos quickly returned the cursed coins to their pouch and left them there on the little table in the alcove next to the sanctuary. There they remained untouched, serving as a constant and scathing reminder of the temptation of greed into which he had nearly fallen, until well after the old priest had completed his lengthy sojourn on God’s good earth.



The work down at the Turk's Plot—as the little parcel of land between the church and the sea wall came to be called by the locals—had been progressing steadily for months, when one day the Greek interpreter suddenly summoned the workers together and paid them all off, saying their job was done. The group of men was taken by complete surprise.

Given the lack of groundwater in Monemvasia, it was not unusual for a property owner to have a cistern for collecting rainwater dug out before proceeding with the construction of a new house. Thus the workers had assumed that a structure would eventually be built over the large hole they had just completed, ensuring plenty of labor for them for the foreseeable future.

They had all thought strange, of course, the length, width and depth to which the new owner of the land had wanted the bottom of the cistern to be hollowed out—dimensions the locals considered to be preposterously large for a property of its size. They had also found ridiculous the fact that its floor and walls were not to be dressed with the customary layer upon layer of waterproof mortar coating. And they were more than a little perplexed that dozens of large wooden barrels of the type normally used to keep wine or olive oil had been commissioned to be filled with ordinary sea water and stored in the large chamber freshly dug below the surface.

Their surprise and curiosity were further intensified when dozens of barrels of what was rumored to be gunpowder were brought up from the jetty down by the *Portello* gate and stored there, along with loads of long wooden planks and other building materials, copious amounts of various dry provisions and fresh water, and a shipment of heavy wooden crates that had arrived from Constantinople on a merchant vessel.

But as long as they had the expectation of steady work on the construction of a house for the next several months, once the

excavation of the cistern was finished, the folly of the foreigner's building method had really been of no concern to them—at least not until they met with the shock and disappointment of the sudden reversal of their fortunes.

The Greek *dragoman* was sympathetic to their protests and complaints, but there was nothing he could do. His master had ordered a stop to the work, and as if to emphasize the finality of the decision, a stone mason and a blacksmith soon arrived from a village across the narrow strait separating Monemvasia from the Peloponnesian mainland—even though men with those skills were readily available locally. On the stranger's orders, they constructed a marble well head with a round metal cover fitted with a specially made two-way lock, which could be opened from both the inside and outside of the cistern. Then something even more astonishing occurred.

Soon after the tradesmen had finished their work and the stranger had inspected it, he gave the interpreter a supply of funds and instructions to hire watchmen to guard the cistern day and night. He then climbed down into the opening using the iron rung ladder that had been set up for the workers, locked the metal cover from the inside, and never reemerged.

Weeks passed with no sign of the stranger, and the only indication that any interest remained in the small plot was the fact that the interpreter would dutifully appear each Saturday to disburse the watchmen's weekly pay. It was then that the rumblings started to be heard.

At first it was hardly noticeable, somehow blending in with the sound of the surf crashing against the rocks at the base of Monemvasia's sea wall, about forty meters away from the well head. But day by day, the noise became louder and more distinctive, resembling sudden peals of thunder or the muffled report of distant canon fire, and was accompanied by the acrid

smell of sulfur and saltpeter. Occasionally, late at night, a resident of the community surrounding the church of the Panagia Chrysaphitissa would observe something like strange flashes of light seeming to come from underneath the cover of the sealed cistern.

As time went by, rumors began to spread. Many of the townspeople became convinced that some form of witchcraft or black magic was being practiced below the earth near their beloved church, and they began to complain to the local bishop, who in turn took his concerns to the governor. But the governor had been well paid by the stranger and refused to take action, claiming that whatever happened on private land, unless proven to be unlawful, was none of his concern.

After nearly four months of increasing tension, during which the disturbing sights and sounds became almost constant, the matter finally came to a head the day after New Year's. A group of angry local residents decided to break into the cistern, and pressuring the guards—their neighbors and kinsmen—to look the other way, planned to attack the following night, so as to rid the town of whatever ill was being conceived down at the Turk's Plot before the celebration of the feast of the *Theophany*.

The act was on the verge of being carried out when, as suddenly as it had all started, the strange noises and flashes of light abruptly ceased and all became quiet. Not knowing what to make of it, the townsfolk were hesitant and the hired watchmen, concerned about their jobs, used the opportunity to prevail on them to wait a little longer to see what would happen before attempting to break into the cistern.

They waited—first a day, then two, then a week—until it soon became apparent that the strange events were not likely to recur. After several more weeks of quiet, the *dragoman* eventually stopped coming around to pay the watchmen, who angrily

abandoned their posts. But by that time, the disturbances which had caused so much vexation among the local residents had been relegated to the realm of rumor, speculation, curiosity and even jest. After a long time, the whole unpleasant episode was forgotten, except for the occasional joke that lingered on in the community for years about the mad Turkish stranger who had paid a small fortune to dig a hole in the ground and then had disappeared into it.



Below the sea wall, where the winter waves constantly crashed against the rocks jutting out into the gulf in the deepest part of a moonless and rain-swept night, a cloaked and hooded stranger stood for a moment on the stony outcropping looking out towards the dark and churning sea. After more than a year of meticulous planning and strenuous labor, his work was finally complete, and a smile of cruel satisfaction momentarily erupted onto his otherwise grim and implacable face.

A happy new year indeed, he thought.

It was now time to go home. Pulling the hood down closer over his face against the spray of the salt water, he turned toward the rock wall and began to feel along its surface in search of something. After a moment, he found what he was looking for: a small, unobtrusive notch carved into the stone, well above eye level, and just large enough to accommodate two fingers.

Standing on tiptoe and placing his fingers deep into the hole, he tripped a small switch and then leaned against the rock with his full weight. Silently, a small section of wall gave way and swung inward, exposing a dark cavernous opening.

Quickly, the hooded figure disappeared within, sealing the opening up again behind him and leaving no trace of the carefully concealed door. Inside, enveloped in a cocoon of cold

and inky darkness, the stranger reached into the folds of his robe and pulled out a small but intensely bright, white light illuminating the rock-strewn pathway of a freshly excavated tunnel.

Holding onto the damp rocky wall with one hand, he began his careful ascent leading up to a hidden terminus somewhere just below the surface of the Lower Town above. Outside, only the appearance of an ancient rock sea wall remained, undisturbed by anything except for the battering of the wind, the rain and the inexorable passage of time.

A minute later, the stranger arrived at a doorway at the end of his path. Reaching above the lintel, he pulled a concealed latch and it silently opened towards him, revealing a wide, low-ceilinged underground chamber.

Large areas of the room's walls were lined with sets of shelves, made from the leftover wooden planks that had already served their purpose of supporting the tunnel's ceiling during its excavation. They were now filled with hundreds of new, intricately bound Turkish books, which had been shipped from Constantinople months before in order to enhance the ruse. Some extra planks were stacked neatly against the walls, and dozens of wooden barrels that had previously held the sea water that had been used in the excavation process stood empty in one spot.

Stepping into the underground chamber and pulling the concealed door closed behind him, the stranger admired the results of his work. In the event that anyone were somehow to gain access to it, the cistern's chamber would appear oddly like some kind of secret library, but its true purpose would be almost impossible to detect.

Taking one last look around the room, the stranger walked to the center of the chamber and drew a small, faintly

luminescent orb about the size of an orange out of the satchel concealed under his cloak. Clutching it tightly between both hands, he held it out in front of him with outstretched arms, and began to whisper a mysterious incantation.

As his eyes closed and his body relaxed into what seemed to be a deep meditative state, he began to walk around in a circle—slowly at first, then ever more quickly, still grasping the orb which appeared to be rotating around a fixed point, like a miniature planet spinning on its axis. The stranger gradually began to walk faster and faster, and after a minute he began to trot, and then to run.

After several seconds, the orb was spinning so fast that he could no longer keep up with it and began to stumble; but rather than falling to the ground, his body continued spinning around its axis, while his legs alternately bounced and dragged roughly along the ground. Soon even they began to lose contact with the earth as he was lifted up, twirled around at great speed by the centripetal force of the gyrating orb.

Spinning ever faster until his entire body was lifted up in the air, parallel to the floor, the stranger's hood was forced back, revealing his dread countenance. His normally pale face was red from the strain of his strange ride, while his cheeks and lips were pushed back exposing his clenched teeth in a horrifying grin, and his eyes bulged wildly in the center of his sweat-drenched visage. As the spinning force pulled him closer to the epicenter of what seemed to be a miniature cyclone, the veins of his arms and neck bulged from the strain, and his face turned deathly pale as the blood drained away towards his outstretched lower extremities.

Just as he could no longer endure the wrenching forces that punished every cell of his body, and was about to let out a terrifying howl of pain, a brilliant flash—like that of lightning—erupted in the chamber around him. In an unbelievable

distortion of nature, the wild-eyed dark-robed stranger suddenly appeared to be sucked into the compact volume of the spinning orb as if into a powerful vacuum and, together with it, vanished in an instant, leaving the chamber quiet, dark and still behind him.

Nearly fifty years would pass before another human being would set eyes on the secrets that lay there below the ground of Monemvasia's Lower Town.

CHAPTER 2



PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY, USA—WEDNESDAY, JULY 8, 2009

When Mark Lawson woke up and began to rub the sleep from his eyes, before he even sat up and got out of bed, he knew something was different that morning.

Being out of school for the summer, he would normally wake up early in the morning to a house that was still and quiet, except for the sound of his father snoring in the bedroom across the hall, and he would tiptoe down to the living room and turn on the TV to watch his favorite cartoons for an hour or so before anyone else got up. But today, as he yawned and stretched, he could hear his mother and father talking and the sound of drawers opening and closing, and closet doors creaking. Mark thought about it for a minute and then it hit him.

Oh, no! he thought. *Don't tell me it's today!*

A grimace came over his usually cheerful face, as he suddenly remembered that today was the day they were going to leave for their family's annual summer trip to Greece. The last thing he wanted to do was to be stuck visiting a bunch of old relatives he hadn't seen in a year, being forced to speak Greek, eating 'healthy' Mediterranean cuisine, and dragging around on some island looking at churches and museums and souvenir shops. At just eight years old, he could not think of a worse way of spending a summer vacation, and wanted nothing more than to stay home to watch his favorite television shows or go out bike-riding or swimming with his friends.

Slowly, he walked towards his parents' room and leaned against the wall just outside the door, and stuck his head ever-so-slightly inside. His parents were already dressed, and he could see half-full suitcases laid out on the bed next to piles of clothing and assorted accessories. As he stood there looking in, his mother turned and saw him and said with a bright smile:

"There's my little angel! Are you ready to go on our trip?"

"Oh, Mama, do we really have to? I don't want to go!" he began to whine.

Instantly, Mark's father shot a stern look at him and spoke abruptly: "Well, you have to go," he said. "We go every year and you know it, so stop grouching and start getting ready. We have to leave for the airport in a few hours and we still have a lot to do."

Mark knew that tone in his father's voice. It was the one that meant he was stressed out about being late and there was no use arguing. But still he made a couple of halfhearted attempts to protest.

"But it's *gonna* be so boring!" he complained.

"How do you know it's going to be boring?" snapped back his father. "You say the same thing every year, and every year you don't want to leave when it's time to come home. Now come on, we're late!"

"Leave the child alone," interjected his mother. "Can't you see that he just woke up?"

Then turning back to him, she said more sweetly:

"Besides, Marky, it's going to be pretty dull around here anyway. Almost all your friends from school are going to be away for the summer with their families too, and you'll have no one to play with. Anyway, your cousin Dimitrios is waiting to see you. You know how much he loves you and how much fun the two of you used to have when you were little."

“Oh, great, that really helps,” Mark muttered under his breath. Then, snuggling up to his mother, he said:

“Yeah, but nowadays he always wants to just talk about *Kolokotronis* and *Karaiskakis* and the revolution of 1821 and all that stupid stuff. What’s the point of a summer vacation if it’s like being in *Greek School*?”

“Come on now,” his mother reassured him. “It’s not going to be that bad. I promise we’ll have fun. Besides, this year we’re going to spend some time in Monemvasia, where your great-grandfather was from. It’s a beautiful place with a castle, and there are lots of nice beaches around there we can go to. We haven’t been there since you were little, so you probably don’t remember it. But you’re going to enjoy it, you’ll see. Anyway, it’s only for one month. Now go get dressed and I’ll make you some breakfast before we have to go.”

With that, she turned and went back to her packing and left Mark to sulk on his own, thinking sarcastically as he went back to his room: *Perfect, it’s going to be the longest month of my life!*



ATHENS, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, JULY 8, 2009

The car had barely pulled up to the curb in front of the small house with the lemon tree in the northern suburb of Athens, when the back door opened and the figure of a child quickly dashed out and ran through the little garden gate.

“Dimitri!” his father called after him from the driver’s seat, “the door! Close the car door!”

But it was too late. Dimitrios was already rounding the corner of the house to the back door that opened on to the kitchen, as the garden gate banged shut behind him.

“*Yiyia, Yiyia!*—Grandma!” he shouted as he flung open the kitchen door, which he knew would be unlocked, and rushed inside.

Almost instantly, his grandmother was upon him with hugs and kisses, squeezing his cheeks and lovingly inspecting him all over in an instant, as a master jeweler inspects a diamond he has just cut and polished.

“Look at you, my boy! Look how much you’ve grown since Easter! And why are you so thin? Isn’t your mother feeding you?”

At that moment, his mother and father appeared in the doorway carrying flowers and several shopping bags containing presents of local honey, feta cheese, handmade pasta and other produce from the mountainous region where they lived, a couple of hundred kilometers away.

“What are you talking about, Ma? He’s like a little piglet,” joked his father, Andréas. “I’m the one you should be feeding! He eats all my food all the time and I can hardly get anything!”

“Fatsol!” smiled the grandmother, pulling her son into a tight hug and kissing his cheeks. “Look at that stomach of yours! Anyway, come on and sit down and I’ll give you all something to eat. Come on Maria,” she said to her daughter-in-law, hugging and kissing her warmly. “Let’s feed these two babies of yours! That’s how you can tell they’re Vasiliádeses, you know,” she said, making reference to their family name. “If you don’t feed them every two hours, they start crying.”

In an instant, the humble little kitchen table was laden with innumerable Constantinopolitan specialties already prepared for the occasion—each with its own distinctive aromatic flavor and texture more delicate than the next—which seemed to emerge from nowhere and pile up faster than they could eat them. But after only a few bites of his food, Dimitrios sat back, saying he was full.

He then leaned over to his grandmother full of excitement and whispered loudly in her ear, as if imparting some great secret to her: “*Yiayia*, my cousin Mark is coming tomorrow from America!”

“I know, I know!” she laughed. “What fun the two of you are going to have! Imagine how much you’ll have to talk about, since you haven’t seen each other in a whole year!”

Dimitrios, positively brimming with excitement, could hardly sit still, let alone eat. He began bouncing up and down in his seat impatiently, the way eight-year-olds often do, and after a minute bounded off and started dashing around the house looking for something to play with. Meanwhile, the adults sat in the kitchen and talked, catching each other up on all the latest happenings in their lives as if they had been apart for ages, even though they spoke on the telephone daily.

“How was the drive, Maria? Did you get dizzy from all the curves?” asked Mrs. Vasiliádes, referring to the steep and winding road they had to descend to get from their town, high up in the picturesque Peloponnese mountains, down to the highway.

“No, Mama, it was fine this time, thank God. It was a good trip, not much traffic. But you can’t imagine how excited Dimitrios is about seeing Marcus! He hardly stopped talking about it the whole two and a half hours in the car. You’d think he was the one getting on an airplane or something, as excited as he is.”

“Yes,” replied Mrs. Vasiliádes. “Isn’t it such a shame that they can’t spend more time together? They’re almost the same age and they get along so well. Of course, they have their other cousins too, but those two are the closest of all the children. It’s so nice that you came all this way just to be able to meet them at the airport tomorrow.”

“Are you kidding? We had to come,” said Andréas, who was constantly joking. “Your daughter became an American a long time ago and forgot all about this place. If we don’t go and get her from the airport, she’ll never find her way here!”

As they laughed and spoke, they could hear Dimitrios from the other room, playing and talking to an imaginary Mark and telling him all the things that they would do this summer. And so the evening passed, with other brothers and sisters showing up one by one or in pairs, some with children of assorted ages in tow. There they gathered in the small house where they had grown up and from which most of them had never strayed very far, sharing their news and telling the same stories over and over again just to be able to spend time in each others’ company, as they had done all their lives.



MONEMVASIA, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 1825

The night was calm and balmy as the two sentries stood guard outside of the massive citadel’s main iron-clad gate and chatted amicably, trading stories about their lives, their villages, their families and of course their favorite foods. It was well past midnight, and looking out to the southeast, they could see the light of the waning gibbous moon sporting a deep and fantastical reddish-orange hue and reflecting in a long shimmering pathway across the dark expanse of the tranquil sea.

“A fisherman’s moon tonight,” remarked one of the young men casually, chewing on a small reed that hung from the corner of his mouth.

“Yes,” replied the other in agreement. “They should be able to get a good haul tonight. What I wouldn’t give right now for a nice plate of batter-fried silversides!”

“Come on now, enough with the food already! You’re making me hungry!” the other chided.

They continued talking, but after a short while they heard the sound of a rider approaching, briskly trotting up the narrow cobblestone road leading from the causeway up to the citadel. Quickly coming to attention, the men wondered aloud who could be riding in at such a late hour, and were soon rewarded with a pleasant surprise.

“Hey, is that you Christos? I can’t believe it!” called out one of the sentries cheerfully. “How in blazes did they ever let a good-for-nothing old farm boy like you up here?”

“Manolis? For heaven’s sake! What are you doing here?” the equally surprised rider replied, dismounting his horse and greeting the guard with a warm embrace. “I didn’t know you were here at Monemvasia! How have you been? How are your mother and your sister?”

The two men exchanged greetings enthusiastically, and then the one called Manolis introduced the rider to his fellow sentry.

“Panos, this is Christos—he’s from my village. I haven’t seen him since we left there to join the revolution!” Then turning again to the horseman, he beamed and grabbed him by the arm, saying: “My God, it’s been almost four years! Where have you been? What news do you have?”

The three young men began talking animatedly about the progress of the war against the Ottoman Empire, and the various intrigues that had taken place between the different Greek factions. The sentries learned from the third man that he had joined the army of the famous *klepht* commander, Theodore Kolokotronis, about three and a half years before, and had seen a great deal of action. He had even fought in the now almost legendary battle in which the thirty-thousand-strong army of

one of the Ottoman generals, Dramali Pasha, was ambushed and dealt a crushing blow at the mountainous Dervenaki Pass.

After infighting among the leaders of the revolution that had culminated in a short but bloody civil war, Kolokotronis had been arrested and imprisoned for several months at the hands of one of the factions. But the two guards now learned that he had been released some months before in order to counter yet another invasion by the Ottomans, and had even been named by the provisional government as supreme commander of the Greek forces in the Peloponnese.

He and his men had been active recently in the area from northern Arcadia down to Laconia, and it was for this reason that the rider was now in Monemvasia. It seemed that Kolokotronis himself was planning to inspect the fortress's defenses in the coming weeks, and Christos had been sent ahead with a message informing the garrison's captain to prepare for his visit.

The old friends continued to chat for several minutes, until the rider finally insisted on taking his leave to go and report to the officer in charge. After he had entered the fortress, the sentries continued their conversation outside the gates, this time entertaining each other with various stories they had heard about the personages leading the national uprising and speculation as to what would happen next. As they talked, they suddenly saw a bright flash momentarily light up the sky a short distance to the west.

"Did you see that?" exclaimed Manolis.

"Yes, what was it?" Panos responded in wonder, taking a couple of steps in the direction of the causeway. "It looked really close by, like it came from down there."

"It looked like lightning, didn't it?"

"Yes, but on a clear night like this, and without any thunder? That's very strange."

The two men felt uneasy, but deciding that it was just some unusual weather phenomenon, they stayed at their post and continued to talk. About four or five minutes had passed when suddenly they saw another blinding flash, more powerful than the first, and appearing to come from about the same location.

This time there was no doubt; they had to investigate. It was odd enough to think that lightning could strike on a perfectly calm and clear night, but it was nothing short of suspicious for it to happen twice in the space of five minutes, and in the same place no less.

“I’ll go and check it out,” Manolis told his fellow sentry. “You stay up here, and if anything happens, sound the alarm.”

Gathering up his musket and an oil lantern, he sauntered cautiously down the road towards the west. At the same time, his two fellow sentries who were stationed at the other end of the causeway across the narrow strait had also seen the second flash, and one of them was approaching from the opposite direction along the same narrow road heading up towards the citadel.

As both men closed in on the area where the strange lightning had occurred, about seven or eight minutes after the previous flash, they suddenly saw yet a third dazzling burst of light somewhere near ground level. Like a small sun, it shone so brightly for an instant that they had to turn their heads and cover their eyes.

Awestruck, the sentry from the causeway overcame his fear and sprinted towards the place where he thought the flash had occurred, only to find that his comrade, Manolis, had already arrived ahead of him. The latter was staring fixatedly at a spot on the ground a couple of meters away as if in a trance; but turning to see what his friend was looking at, the other sentry could not find anything unusual.

Manolis gradually came to his senses, and although he seemed uncharacteristically grave, the two guards immediately began to talk and compare notes on what they had seen—or thought they had seen. As they were speaking, they also noticed a peculiar odor, not unlike that of burnt hair, but much more subtle and with a slightly metallic quality to it.

“Do you smell that?” the guard from down at the causeway was the first to ask. “It reminds me of how it smells at a blacksmith’s shop when he’s banging out hot iron.”

“Yes, you’re right—but where’s it coming from?” replied Manolis, perplexed and feeling a strong sense of apprehension, which made the hairs on his arms and the back of his neck stand up and told him that something was very wrong.

The two sentries scoured the area for several minutes, but unable to find anything that appeared amiss—not even so much as a burned spot in the dry grass and shrubs that grew everywhere along the rocky sides of the path—they eventually gave up their search and made their way back to their positions.

Upon returning to the main gate, Manolis discovered that Panos was not alone. A group of a dozen or more curious people from inside the citadel—soldiers and townsfolk alike—had gathered outside the sentry’s post to find out what the mysterious occurrence they had also noticed was all about. Assuring them that the matter had been investigated thoroughly and that they had found nothing to worry about, Manolis encouraged all of them to go back to their homes.

It was only once the last of the crowd had disappeared inside the fortress, however, and the gates had again been secured, that he gave Panos a more detailed description of what he and the other sentry had observed. He then fell oddly silent, as if something were weighing considerably on his peace of mind, and he kept on staring back towards the area where the lightning

flashes had occurred with a distinct look of consternation on his face.

Seeing his friend's distress, Panos attempted to make light of the situation and brushed the incident off as just some odd weather. He began chatting away comically, trying to continue their lighthearted conversation from before, but his attempts were all in vain. Manolis's mood had changed completely and it did not look like he would be up to making jokes, or even talking, for a while. In fact, it seemed to Panos that perhaps his friend was not telling him everything.

Eventually tiring of trying to distract his comrade, he took up his lantern and musket and began to walk around the forecourt of the citadel's gate as if on patrol. But after just a few minutes of pacing back and forth and engaging in various stretching exercises, he came back to their post and began to stare silently into the distance in youthful contemplation of the infinite field of stars, and of the large, now slightly less-orange summer moon rising higher in the night sky above the seemingly endless sea.

Several moments passed quietly in that way, and then Manolis suddenly broke his silence. Turning to his friend, he spoke hesitantly, as if he were almost embarrassed to put the question to him.

"Panos," he inquired slowly, and with a voice that trembled slightly, full of a deep sense of foreboding, "do you believe in...spirits?"

CHAPTER 3



MONEMVASIA, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 26, 1825

As he experienced the terrifying sensation of freefall into absolute and soul-numbing blackness, the stranger took slow deep breaths and exerted all his powers of concentration, trying to keep his mind focused and struggling against the almost overpowering tendency of his thoughts to slip and slide, dream-like, from one vague and fleeting image to the next. Defeat in this battle would be fatal, he knew.

His breathing was not actual, of course, but it was an illusory exercise of very real consequence. If he lost hold of the delicate and invisible mental thread that kept him tethered to his present reality, even for an instant, all his sense of self would disappear, merged into a cloud of otherness. Then he would have neither the strength of will nor the presence of mind to latch on to the sudden window of brilliant white light that would appear out of nowhere and, like a mighty parachute, stop his headlong plunge into the infinite depths of nothingness. In this game, there was no margin for error, and the consequences of failure were unthinkable.

Accelerating into the blackness of non-being, he fought desperately to remain aware and felt a rush of anxiety begin to well up somewhere—whether inside of himself or outside of himself, he could not tell—and he vaguely remembered that this was supposed to be something good.

Suddenly and without the slightest warning, he saw it—a small circle of blinding light rushing straight up at him from the

center of the utter and all-consuming blackness. It was moving, or rather he was moving, at lightning speed, and as it approached it became steadily larger and even more dazzlingly bright.

From somewhere far away, it seemed to him that it was supposed to be good for him to head for this light; that he should grab it and hold onto it with his mind. But his thoughts were sluggish and detached, and all he could manage was a mild apprehension as the light flared into an intense pool of searing white brilliance just below him. Then, just as the light was hurtling past him and nearly out of reach, his mind sharpened for an instant and a surge of will rose up within him, causing him to reach out with every ounce of mental and physical strength he had and plunge himself into it.

The change was instant. All at once, he felt himself wrenched sickeningly from his vector of plummeting acceleration through total blackness and thrown violently in the opposite direction, falling upwards at incomprehensible speed and surrounded by an all-enveloping whiteness. A wave of almost unbearable nausea engulfed him, and in contrast to his previous sense of hazy weightlessness, he abruptly felt the crushing drag of multiples of the force of gravity pressing upon him and squeezing him so that he could hardly breathe.

The intense discomfort and disorientation lasted only briefly, and then he suddenly felt himself slammed into something hard and dark, but not like the earlier darkness that was absolute and without end. The sense of falling had stopped, and now he only felt that everything around him was spinning wildly. Little by little his vision began to focus and he saw there were stars in a night sky twirling round above him.

Struggling into a sitting position, he saw cobblestones, snatches of grass illuminated by moonlight, and the edge of a steep embankment all rushing around him in gradually subsiding

circles. His head was pounding, and he felt sick to his stomach. Scrambling over to the edge of the embankment, he retched and vomited down onto the rocks far below.

It's not meant to be like this, he thought, vaguely annoyed, as he spat the bitter taste of bile out of his mouth.

At once the stranger pulled himself up quickly and made his way over to the cliff face that bordered the north side of the cobblestone path, concealing himself as best he could in the shadows. His head still ached and his legs felt weak and trembled slightly, but there was no time for self-indulgence. It would only be a matter of minutes before someone would be after him. Pulling his dark hooded cloak around himself and keeping close to the rock face to his right, he slowly made his way down the road towards the causeway that stretched over to the mainland.

After about five minutes, as he neared the lapping darkness of the narrow strait that stretched out ahead of him, he crossed over to the southern side of the road. The drop from that place down to the rocks below was not nearly as far or as steep as it had been further up the road, towards the ancient fortress that lay somewhere behind him. He had just started looking for a path down the side of the embankment when suddenly he caught a glimpse of a bright flash to his left, back in the direction from which he had just come. They were onto him.

There was no time to lose. The stranger jumped off the road and began a frantic descent down the side of the embankment, sliding part of the way to the bottom and scraping his hands against the numerous rocks and thistles that clung to the side of the steep hill.

He quickly reached the small strip of rocky beach below, and, shrouded in darkness, gradually made his way along the shoreline towards the causeway, some three hundred meters off. As he picked his way forward, he carefully listened for any signs

of pursuit over the splash of the gentle waves against the few patches of sand, the large boulders, and the countless small stones and pebbles that lay between him and the water.

He had covered a little less than half the distance to the causeway when, after a couple of minutes, he heard the sound of someone walking on the cobblestone path eight or ten meters above his head. Pressing against the rocky cliff side, he wedged himself tightly into a narrow crevice and waited for the footsteps to recede into the distance, and when they were gone he decided that it had been long enough.

Mentally visualizing the control menu of his electromagnetic *SHIELD* generator, he switched it on. He could now relax. For all intents and purposes, he was both inaudible and invisible to the naked eye. Even in the likely event that his pursuers were carrying their most sophisticated electronic tracking equipment with them, they still would not be able to pinpoint his exact location at this range, and he knew their methods well enough to be certain they would not waste their time trying to find a needle in a haystack.

The only way they could flush him out now was to fire a massive EMP blast and disrupt his *SHIELD* with the electromagnetic pulse; but that would leave them just as exposed as it left him. With so many locals around, they would never take the risk. From here on out it was smooth sailing.

The stranger casually walked down the beach for a few more minutes, reaching the foot of the ancient stone causeway at the point where the embankment was at its lowest. Easily climbing up its rocky slope, he reemerged onto the road, from where he could see a guard standing at the head of the causeway on the opposite shore less than two hundred meters away.

He seemed to be looking straight at him without the slightest reaction, but the stranger knew that he was actually gazing into

the distance towards the citadel behind him, trying to make out what was going on further up the road. Nonetheless, reaching beneath his cloak he unsheathed the dagger that hung on his belt. There was very little chance he would have to use it, and even then only as a last resort, but it was always better to be prepared.

Coming close to the sentinel, who nervously paced back and forth with an elaborately decorated musket in hand, he noticed the man's brow furrow in the moonlight as if perturbed by something and then saw him look around, sensing an invisible presence nearby. As many times as he had witnessed it, it never ceased both to amaze and to amuse the stranger how the mind—with its supersensitive receptive faculties—was capable of detecting so many unseen and unheard things, and yet how little of it was actually recognized or acted upon by most people.

There was so much information out there to be had, he thought; alas, it was all nothing but useless static unless one actually paid attention to one's intuition. But in this case, he thought as he gently caressed the hilt of his razor-sharp dagger, the sentry's ignorance truly was bliss.

Passing by the guard post, he had just stepped onto the mainland on the other side of the bridge, when a brilliant flash of light suddenly lit up the road to the east. The sentry stopped dead in his tracks and muttered something under his breath. He then took several long strides out onto the causeway and waited there, looking towards the citadel as if expecting something to happen and wondering what it could all signify. But the stranger immediately knew what it meant.

The action was over—at least for the time being—and everything had gone perfectly. Smiling with satisfaction, he unhurriedly crossed over to the other side of the wide dirt road

that ran along the coast past the sentry post, and disappeared into the surrounding darkness.

At length, the guard standing on the causeway saw someone coming towards him from the direction of the citadel. Still anxious, he raised his musket into position and, calling out for the person to identify himself, was relieved to hear the voice of his fellow sentry, who had gone to investigate the strange lights they had both seen several minutes before.

As soon as the approaching sentry reached his comrade, the two men began to talk animatedly about what had happened, as they returned to their post.

"I tell you, it was bloody strange," said one to the other, his voice strained with concern. "There was the most peculiar smell, like something burnt only...I don't know, somehow like hot iron and sulfur, but we didn't see anything!"

"Are you sure?" demanded the other.

"Of course I'm sure!" snapped back the first man, taken aback by the question and feeling anxious and irritable for reasons even he did not understand. "Why else would I say something like that?"

"Okay, okay—calm down and listen, and I'll tell you why," said the other guard, patiently explaining his reasoning. "Back in Serres—my village in Macedonia—seven or eight years ago when I was a teenager, something similar happened. A few of us saw a bright flash one night that looked like it came from the forest outside of town. When we went to see what it was, we found a big rock that smelled something like sulfur and iron burning.

"One of the teachers in the village told us the next day that these things happen all the time—rocks that fall from the heavens—but we don't always see them because most of the time they are very small and burn up before they strike the ground.

What did he call it? Oh, yes—a meteorite. Do you think that’s what it could have been over there? Maybe it was a meteorite?”

“Yes, you’re right, that must be it—” exclaimed the first sentry with a palpable sense of relief, “a meteor shower! That would explain everything—the strange lights and the burning smell.”

“And it might also explain why all three flashes of light occurred in the same area,” added the second man, growing more excited and elaborating on his theory. “And why you and Manolis didn’t perceive anything out of the ordinary. I mean, why should you notice just another few rocks among so many that are lying around out there?”

Satisfied that they had solved the bizarre mystery of the lightning flashes, the two guards went back to their normal routine of talking, playing backgammon by lantern light and occasionally patrolling the perimeter of their post. Neither one of them had the slightest clue that in the sleeping fishing village across the road not far away, an enemy far more dangerous than any squadron of Ottoman soldiers they could have encountered was busily readying himself for action. For it was there that a stranger dressed in a black cloak was invisibly saddling up a horse that was not his own, and preparing for his long ride into the northern foothills of Mount Parnonas a few days’ journey to the north.



Plunging into the blinding whiteness that enveloped him, the dive team leader suddenly felt a deep and pervading sense of peace filling every part of his mind, body and soul. The most unpleasant part of the whole dive, he thought, was breaking through to the surface and leaving behind this exquisitely peaceful white light. But his thoughts lasted only an instant, as

he suddenly found himself touching down roughly onto the solid ground of some sort of cobblestone surface. Standing up quickly, he saw his wingman also rising from the ground and looking around.

“Make your mark,” the agent ordered the other man, springing into action and switching his dive computer’s powerful telescopic lens into night-vision mode. He then pulled up a holographic overlay menu, which—thanks to the contact lens-like wireless optical interfaces he wore—appeared to float in the air before him. Mentally selecting the settings he wanted for his electromagnetic cloaking device, he confirmed the results to his colleague, saying: “SHIELDS on extended range and synchronized.”

As he surveyed the area around them, looking for signs of the intruder, his comrade pulled his slender dive computer out of a holster at his waist and began to take various residual energy readings and measurements.

“Yeah, we’re in the right place. He came through here all right,” the wingman replied impassively, seeing the data from the computer displayed holographically before him. “Looks like only one guy.”

He then took another device from his pack and, pointing it at a spot on the bare earth nearby, fired a small metallic pellet deep into the ground.

“Position marked. Going into search mode,” he said flatly, mentally calling up the holographic overlay menu of his handheld dive computer and setting it to run an infrared energy scan. “Hang on—looks like I might have something here.”

“What have you got?” demanded the first man urgently. “Talk to me, buddy.”

“Wait a second, I’m still acquiring. It takes a little longer through the SHIELD, you know,” the wingman intoned patiently.

“Okay, here we go. I’m definitely picking up some heat readings. I’m seeing three targets—one moving west, about five hundred meters, coming from near the main gate,” he said after a few seconds, pointing in the direction of the citadel. “It’s probably a guard. Another one is—no, that can’t be him either. That one’s coming up from the direction of the causeway. Must be another sentry. Okay, this must be him. He’s moving west, heading towards the causeway, about four hundred meters that way.”

“Good work. Let’s go get the son of a bitch,” commanded the agent. Then he added: “Stay close so we can keep our SHIELDS in synch, but if for any reason we get separated, we’ll rendezvous at this position in five minutes on my mark—three, two, one, mark!”

The two men immediately ran in the direction of the causeway at a brisk trot, keeping within a few meters of each other so as not to disrupt the shielding that enveloped them. They were thus able to see and hear one another while remaining imperceptible to anyone outside the electromagnetic field that surrounded them. But even as they carefully searched out their quarry, they both knew that it was all but useless.

There were just too many places to take cover in this type of uneven terrain, and not enough time. The locals would definitely have seen their *splash patterns*, visible as bright flashes of light, and would likely be arriving to investigate within a few minutes. All they could afford to do at this point was to make a quick reconnaissance, take a few basic but valuable geodesic and astronomical readings, and, above all, avoid contact with the locals before pulling out. That would be the hard part.

They had only covered a few hundred meters, when after a couple of minutes, the wingman abruptly announced: “That’s it, I’ve lost him. He must have switched on his SHIELD.”

“Are you sure?” demanded the team leader, frustrated that the fugitive had slipped through their fingers.

“Yeah, he’s gone. I’ve got nothing here—just the two locals,” the wingman assured his commanding officer. “You want me to light him up?”

“At this distance—what’s the point? By the time we take out the local yokels, he’ll be long gone. Besides, I don’t know about you but dropping our SHIELDS in the middle of a war zone is not my idea of a joyride, even for a little while. No, let’s head on back. We’re just treading water here,” the agent concluded.

Then, as they returned to their initial point of entry, he asked his colleague: “How are we doing on time?”

“Not bad,” replied the other. “Just coming up on five minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll take lookout,” the first man advised. “Get whatever baseline data you can in the next two minutes, and then let’s get the hell out of here,” he said, beginning to scan up and down the length of the narrow cobblestone road with his night vision.

The wingman immediately busied himself with his dive computer, taking a series of magnetic field strength readings and geodesic measures in the surrounding area, as well as recording a few key astronomical positions. He had been working for less than a minute when the first agent suddenly spoke.

“Looks like we’ve got visitors,” he warned. “Let’s wrap it up, Cinderella—this ball’s over.”

From the direction of the citadel, about a hundred meters away, a man carrying a small lantern was approaching. The two divers quickly put away their instruments and moved to the spot where they had first touched down, standing a short distance apart from one another. Then, from pockets inside their dive

suits, they both took out small translucent spheres, illuminated from within by a silent and eerily seething plasma-like material.

Holding their arms outstretched in front of them, the commanding officer counted down and, on his mark, each man swung abruptly around in a tight counterclockwise circle, making a single complete revolution and simultaneously taking a short running hop. Instantly, the two spheres exploded in a blinding flash of white light, as if balls of lightning had just flared forth from each of them, and the divers vanished into thin air.

In the last instant before they disappeared, however, the energy surge disrupted their electromagnetic shielding so that—just before plunging into the deep lonely blackness of the initial freefall—the agent saw one last thing. It was the eerily distorted figure of a tall *evzonos* sentry named Manolis, dressed in traditional Greek nineteenth-century clothing and carrying an antique-looking musket, standing less than a hundred meters from them and staring in wide-eyed terror as the lantern he had been holding dropped from his hand.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



DAMIAN LAWRENCE is a graduate of Harvard University, with a bachelor's degree in Chemistry. He also holds a master's degree from the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University, where he concentrated in the field of Social Change and Development. Damian has worked in fields as diverse as government, biomedical research and the financial services industry, and has traveled extensively around the world. He currently lives in Greece with his wife and son. *The Guardians of Time* is his first novel.

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DAMIAN LAWRENCE holds a bachelor's degree in Chemistry from Harvard University and a master's degree from the School of Advanced International Studies of the Johns Hopkins University. He has worked in fields as diverse as government, biomedical research and the financial services industry, and currently lives in Greece.



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