



the  
**Sacred City**

BOOK II OF THE GUARDIANS SERIES

**DAMIAN LAWRENCE**

# THE SACRED CITY



A NOVEL BY

**DAMIAN LAWRENCE**

SPECIAL EDITION



Princeton • Athens

The Sacred City

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*To the eternal memory of those who have loved the true freedom of the human soul more than their own lives, wherever and whenever they have lived and died—and been made free. They are indeed citizens of the Sacred City.*

Also by Damian Lawrence  
*The Guardians of Time (Book I of The Guardians Series)*

Book II

THE SACRED CITY

*A man who was completely innocent offered himself as a sacrifice for the good of others, including his enemies, and became the ransom of the world. It was a perfect act.*

—MOHANDAS K. GANDHI

*Hence we will not say that Greeks fight like heroes, but we will say that heroes fight like Greeks.*

—SIR WINSTON CHURCHILL

## PROLOGUE



SINAI DESERT, EGYPT—SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 3, 2007

Standing high above the cavernous operations area, where the engineering crews were putting the final touches on the new particle accelerator assembly and the massive magnetic field generators below, Mark Lawson looked out through the thick safety-glass enclosure of the control room and felt a twinge of regret.

It had been nearly seven long years since his arrival, and now after innumerable trials and hardships, it was almost time to go home. The construction teams would be finishing their work in a couple of days, and then would come the first of a series of operational and safety tests before they would finally be able to fire up the accelerator to full power. Assuming all went well, he should be home by Easter.

*The Resurrection—how fitting*, he thought full of hope, yet not without feeling a vague sense of inchoate melancholy.

It was not that he did not want to go back—far from it. God only knew how much he had been yearning to return to his own life for a very long time. His mind turned immediately to his parents, who would now be in their late seventies. Remembering how he had suddenly disappeared without telling them anything, he experienced that same flutter of anxiety he always felt whenever he thought about what he might find upon his homecoming.

At the same time, after seven years and all he had been through, it was also not so easy to leave. He had made some good



friends and grown to care about people here almost as much as he cared for those of his own home. In fact, the two places were not completely dissimilar—both fraught with so many challenges and so much uncertainty; both standing at the very edge of a steep precipice without a full comprehension of the gravity of their respective situations.

The stakes here were incalculably high, and there was so much that remained undone—so much, he worried, that could still go wrong once he was no longer there to help guide them through it all. And yet he must leave. It was absolutely necessary. He had accomplished a great deal, but his presence there had also done more damage already than anyone had anticipated.

As he stood looking through the glass in somber contemplation, he saw the reflection of a familiar figure coming up behind him, and heard a hearty yet mellow voice calling out to him:

“There you are, old man! Things are really taking shape down there—looking quite good, I must say.”

Turning around, Lawson warmly greeted his friend of the last six years, and his partner in this daunting challenge they had undertaken, Sir Richard Vanderberg.

“Hello, Richard! Just couldn’t keep away, could you?” he smiled. “You’re like a bad penny, you know?”

“You don’t say!” Sir Richard chuckled. “Mind you, I don’t believe there is any such thing as a ‘bad’ penny. If I thought that way, I’d never have amassed the means to be able to finance this little project of ours.”

He was right. If not for the vast personal wealth, the commercial resources and the access to the right people which the sandy-haired and idealistic British entrepreneur had so generously provided, Lawson never would have been able to achieve what he had come here to do—and he knew it.

LAWSON HAD ARRIVED in Egypt in April of the year 2000, alone and with only the basic resources he needed to get through the first few weeks: a respectable sum of money in a variety of major currencies, some forged identity documents, and a list of potential contacts at various governmental agencies and academic institutions. Somewhere among them, it was hoped he would find the backing for what needed to be done.

Of course, he also had with him the most precious piece of cargo of all—the digital archive containing plans and technical specifications for what would become the basis for an entirely new way of life. It was the foundation for a whole new global energy and industrial infrastructure, and it was the only thing that could save the future of civilization as he knew it. Now he just had to get them to listen.

After a few prayerful days at his beloved monastery of St. Catherine's, high on the rocky mountaintop where it was said that the great Moses had once beheld the burning bush, he had set out on his mission, determined to succeed. Istanbul, Rome, Geneva, London, New York, Washington, DC and even Kyoto, Japan—he had tried to contact influential environmental advocates, policymakers and academics in major centers around the world, and had gone through a good portion of his funds flying to various meetings, conferences and appointments. But after more than six frustrating months, he was beginning to despair.

For one thing, he realized that there were just too many entrenched interests. Those environmental advocates, and the activists and academicians who were most receptive to his message, were actually in no position to do much about it from outside of the system. It seemed to him that all they could really accomplish was to try and raise awareness, while tinkering around at the political margins. Indeed, even to him, his was

beginning to sound like just another voice in an already large chorus of backup singers, whose refrain was hauntingly familiar yet easily overlooked.

Meanwhile, the so-called ‘establishment’ politicians and policymakers who perhaps *could* do something to change things were often among the very same people benefitting from the status quo—or at least so inextricably linked to it as to render them almost incapable of making truly transformational decisions. That certain international protocols had been agreed to, and that government agencies had been established in various countries for the purpose of protecting the environment, was, as he now understood it, something of a *façade*.

The protocols and the agencies themselves were real enough, but they had no inherent authority or mandate to actually protect the environment. In reality, all they could do was to regulate according to agreed-upon standards—measures which had never been formulated to be radically transformational in the first place—and attempt to monitor and enforce compliance with them on a case-by-case basis. It was hardly the kind of fundamental change that was needed now.

For another thing, he was in a place where he had absolutely no credentials. He could not substantiate his affiliation with any university or think tank or research institute, and had no published papers or research results to which he could refer. In fact, despite being considered a brilliant and ground-breaking scientist back home, he was not even in possession of a simple high school diploma that would be recognized here. The bitter irony of the situation had been brought home to him all too clearly one overcast and blustery October day in New York, several months into his trip.

He was returning, rather dejected, from a fruitless meeting that he had at long last managed to secure with some mid-level

officer at the United Nations Environment Programme, and had caught a yellow cab heading back downtown towards his cheap hotel in Chelsea. It had just begun to rain, and as they sat in traffic near the Midtown Tunnel, the Russian cab driver had struck up a conversation with him.

It turned out that he, too, had been a PhD physicist in his own country; but lacking the right credentials, connections and resources in America, he had ended up driving a taxi for the last six years just to earn his daily bread.

For Lawson, that chance meeting had been a defining moment. Having made agonizingly little progress and rapidly running out of time, money and options, he finally decided that, for the sake of his mission, he was going to have to risk everything and go public. He was going to have to reveal the truth of his origins.

He had been looking through a major New York newspaper one day, preparing to do just that—skimming the articles in search of the name of a reporter whom he thought would be best placed to break the story—when he saw it. It was just a small piece in the paper’s regular Tuesday ‘Science and Technology’ section, but he was immediately riveted.

According to the article, it seemed that the famed British industrialist, sportsman and aviation enthusiast, Sir Richard Vanderberg—who just a year before had founded a company aimed at commercializing space flight—had announced an open international design competition. The objective was to develop a radically new, environmentally friendly propulsion system for his planned experimental low-earth-orbit spacecraft; and the prize money—not to mention the international recognition that would go along with it—was substantial.

Lawson had wasted no time. Within a month, he was back in London and had been invited to meet with the panel of scientists

and engineers responsible for evaluating the design submissions. The competition's deadline was not for another several months, but the judges had been so captivated by his advanced design concept and the astounding level of expertise he had demonstrated that they later arranged for him to meet unofficially with Vanderberg himself.

It was not a moment too soon. By that time, he was low on money and realized that this was probably his very last and best chance to accomplish that which had come for—and he did not intend to fail.

That first encounter with Vanderberg had been brief. Sir Richard was due to travel to South Africa in a few days for a board meeting of an economic development foundation he chaired, and had very little time to spare. But what the meeting lacked in its duration, it more than made up for in its intensity.

The two men had an instant personal chemistry and hit it off extremely well from the start. Far from being the egg-headed and self-absorbed scientist that Vanderberg had expected, he found Lawson to be visionary yet focused, and able to break down highly complex ideas into simple terms that were fairly easy for a layperson to understand. Indeed, he was a man after his own heart—passionate about his work, with a clear goal and the drive never to give up until he had attained it.

For his part moreover, Sir Richard was an astute businessman, if nothing else. He immediately saw the wider potential of Lawson's revolutionary design concept across a range of industries and applications, and was determined not to let it slip through his fingers. Within a few days, the physicist had received an invitation for a follow-up meeting over lunch at the wealthy industrialist's country estate. The wheels had been set in motion, and Lawson could finally breathe a sigh of relief. There was yet hope.

Over the subsequent months, the two men met several more times—along with an entourage of the entrepreneur’s scientific and engineering experts and ubiquitous businesspeople—to discuss a variety of potential commercial ventures based on Lawson’s technology, and their acquaintance gradually blossomed into a genuine friendship.

It was after one of those meetings, late on a clear afternoon in March of 2001, when the others had already left and Vanderberg and Lawson were alone together having a beer on the terrace of the industrialist’s plush office tower, watching the sun set over the city of London, when the Englishman had asked him a point-blank question. Why had no one ever developed such technological applications before?

Startled at first, Lawson had finally decided to take his chances and tell Sir Richard the truth. No one had ever developed the technology before because, in the year 2001, it did not yet exist. Lawson had brought it with him from thirty years in the future.

Expecting Vanderberg to think that he was joking—or worse yet, that he was delusional—Lawson was completely unprepared for the other man’s response. For instead of laughter or outrage or some other such predictable reaction, he saw something akin to a look of genuine realization wash over his face. Then Sir Richard had looked him straight in the eyes in all seriousness and said:

“I always knew there was something very different about you. Now it’s all beginning to make sense.”

Thanking God for his good fortune, Lawson had told Vanderberg everything. The real reason for his mission, he disclosed with an intensity bordering on desperation, was to share important breakthroughs in advanced clean-energy technology with the people of this time, so that an ecological

cataclysm of unthinkable proportions some twenty-eight years hence could be prevented—or at least diminished in magnitude.

Much to Lawson's relief, Sir Richard had immediately taken the message to heart. Within weeks, he arranged a secretive meeting with a half dozen of the world's wealthiest and most influential men and women—those who, like himself, considered themselves to be not only entrepreneurs, but philanthropists and agents of change. Together with a few highly placed and discreet political figures who shared their trust, this small group—which, for lack of a better name, informally referred to itself as 'The Vanderberg Club', or 'the VC'—set out to formulate a strategy by which to carry out Lawson's vision.

By early that summer, the VC had developed its detailed plan—the Vanderberg Club Future Initiative, as they called it. Its stated aim was to seed and support both the public and private-enterprise development of clean and environmentally friendly energy technologies globally. Its true intention, however, was rather different.

In reality, it was designed to become a powerful behind-the-scenes clearinghouse—a secret multinational regulator of sorts—for clean-energy research and development. Thus the VC would ensure that academic, business and governmental resources were all constantly monitored and diverted as necessary to projects utilizing Lawson's technology, thereby preventing precious time from being wasted. And of course, the opportunity to make money from the industries that would be spawned while helping to save the world was not lost on any of them.

To spearhead the execution of their initiative, the billionaire participants in the unprecedented undertaking created and funded an international philanthropic institution known as the VCFI Foundation. Naturally, the Vanderberg Club members themselves served as the organization's very first board of

trustees. Over time, however, as the foundation grew and new people were brought onboard, the old awkward moniker of ‘VC’ was destined to fall into increasing disuse among all but the original core group of participants. Instead, those at the helm of the secretive organization would eventually come to be known simply as ‘the Trustees’.

IN THE SUMMER of 2001, things seemed to have been going as well as could have been expected. The VCFI Foundation was staffing up and offices had already been opened in New York, London, and Singapore. However, Mark Lawson’s euphoria over the seeming success of his mission was short-lived. On the eleventh day of September, the unthinkable had happened and the entire world had been changed forever.

The horrific events of that clear and fateful Tuesday—the terrorist attacks on New York’s Twin Towers and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the destruction of Flight 93 over a field in western Pennsylvania—caused universal shock and unspeakable grief the world over. They were also the beginning of a period of global turmoil and insecurity that would have lasting repercussions. For Lawson, however, in addition to the horror of the events themselves, there was a secondary source of distress.

It was a feeling somewhere between disbelief and despair; for he was cursed with the inescapable knowledge that, in the history of his own time period, those terrible events had never even occurred. Somehow, as an unintentional result of his having opened the gateway to the past, history had already begun to change.

The implications were devastatingly clear. Each and every minute he spent in that time period carried with it the risk that he might unknowingly trigger another change event. It was a risk that had to be mitigated as soon as possible.



Thus, as he worked feverishly to ensure that the primary goal of his mission was accomplished, he tried his best to isolate himself from all but the most essential of human contacts. At the same time, the secondary objective that had always been in the back of his mind took on an even greater sense of urgency. He had to leave as soon as possible; and in order for that to happen, a new dive facility had to be built.

NOW FIVE AND A HALF years later, standing in the newly completed control room of the secret installation deep below the surface of the Sinai Desert and talking to his friend and financier partner, Mark Lawson suddenly felt a lump rising in his throat and struggled to maintain his composure.

“Richard, I just want you to know—,” he started to say to the older man, his voice cracking slightly before he cleared his throat and continued. “I just want you to know how grateful I am for all you’ve done...and most of all for your friendship. It’s been a difficult seven years for me in ways I can’t even begin to describe, and aside from all this,” he said, sweeping his arm around the control room, “I don’t know if personally I could have handled it without the support of a friend like you.”

“Come on now, old man,” Vanderberg replied, smiling ruefully and giving him a rough slap on the shoulder. “You’re not going to go all ‘*crackers and cheese*’ on us now, are you? There are several more weeks yet before the good-byes. If you become like this now, what are you going to do for an encore?”

The two friends laughed and then immediately turned the conversation to a discussion of some outstanding technical issues. The moment had passed, and it was one that had meant a great deal to both of them. But for now there was still much work ahead of them, and neither man was the type to stand idly by when there was a job to be done.

## **CHAPTER 1**



MYSTRAS, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1825

**I**t was the second morning since the squadron of Egyptian cavalymen had marched their Tsitzinan captives into Ibrahim Pasha's vast army camp in the plain between ancient Sparta and the medieval fortress-town of Mystras, and Paladin Vice Admiral Alexandros Ephraimoglou felt like death warmed over.

He had been tied up—more or less tightly, depending on the hour of the day—for roughly three days, and was experiencing the ill effects of his confinement. His arms and legs were stiff and cramped, and there were painful sores around his wrists from the chafing of the ropes.

He had eaten little, since the small supply of dry provisions he had brought with him—and which had originally been meant to sustain only him after his former colleague, and now captor, Commodore Mina Ghabry's planned infiltration of the Egyptian camp—now had to suffice for both of them. His head had been pounding constantly since the previous day, and he felt weak and feverish.

Even worse than his physical ailments, however, was the onset of a creeping sense of despair. He had tried to fight it off for a couple of days already and had held his ground bravely—even after Ghabry had suddenly and inexplicably destroyed his dive computer and other equipment, in a sure sign that he did not intend for them to go back to their own century. But ever since the previous evening, when he had seen the yellow glow of the flames devouring what remained of the lofty spires of medieval

Mystras in the distance, his spirits had flagged and hope seemed more elusive with each passing hour.

As for Ghabry, from the time of the hasty memorial service the two Paladins had held for the victims of the Tsitizina massacre three days before, he had spoken very little. He seemed to be distracted and irritable one moment, and withdrawn and sullen the next. Even his physical appearance had changed. He had become pale and wan, with a waxy pallor, and often seemed to be sweating profusely, which was unusual for him.

But even if he had been willing to talk, what could he possibly have said? *'I'm sorry, Alex, for betraying you and committing high treason; for ambushing you and tying you up like an animal'*? No, it was unlikely. Besides, they had already discussed everything, and there was nothing left to say. Their already divergent views, which had been a source of disagreement between them over the last years, had all at once become absolutely irreconcilable at the point of a gun.

And so in silence they had wandered about for the last couple of days, almost aimlessly it seemed to the vice admiral—out of the foothills of the Parnonas range and into those of the Taygetos range—making a great loop around the northern part of the plain between Sparta and Mystras. For a time Ephraimoglou wondered if Ghabry, having already accomplished his purpose of disrupting their mission, actually even had a plan.

Perhaps, he thought, his erstwhile friend was trying to make up his mind what to do with him. Or worse yet, he might already have decided and was only trying to work up the nerve to kill him. But then, seeing the concentration with which the Copt kept watch over the Egyptian camp day and night, sleeping very little, he abandoned that notion. Indeed, it seemed increasingly clear that Ghabry was waiting for something—but for what?

Then early that morning, in the bright rays of the rising sun, the rogue Paladin had brusquely awakened the sleeping Ephraimoglou and resolutely set out from their position high up in the hills towards the direction of Ibrahim's army. After covering about half the distance that separated them from the camp, they had settled down again for another vigil—closer this time, on the craggy slopes just a few kilometers to the northwest of their destination.

Ill as he was, the vice admiral spent the next few hours drifting in and out of consciousness, his mind being tossed by turbulent and vaguely remembered dreams. Before he knew it, the morning sun was already high and well on the way toward its meridian. Ghabry's concentration on the Egyptian campsite was now total. He seemed to be looking for something specific, though what it might be, Ephraimoglou could not tell.

At last, some time before noon, he abruptly broke off his surveillance and got up. Roughly tying a gag around the other Paladin's mouth, he only said with an uncharacteristic hoarseness to his voice:

“It's time. Let's go.”

Perhaps it was due to the strange preoccupation that distracted him, but as they mounted their animals and Ghabry bent to give the still-bound Ephraimoglou a boost onto the back of his mule, he stooped a little lower than on previous occasions. As coincidence would have it, at that very moment, he suddenly went into a coughing spasm and appeared to lose his balance slightly. It was just for an instant, but it was long enough for the Paladin vice admiral to seize his first and only opportunity.

Acting almost out of reflex, he swung out hard with his right foot and caught a surprised Ghabry on the side of his jaw, knocking him down and drawing a flow of bright red blood from the corner of his mouth. Immediately Ephraimoglou realized the

futility of his action. He was in an extremely weakened condition, his hands were tied behind his back and he was gagged. Even if he had managed to escape, where would he have been able to run?

He was kilometers away from the nearest inhabited village, with the entire Egyptian army just a short distance away; and dressed as he was, he would easily have been taken for a Greek Orthodox monk—under constant suspicion by the Ottomans for aiding and abetting the revolutionaries—and would most probably have been summarily executed. Still, that small spontaneous act of defiance did more to shake him out of his malaise and shore up his courage than anything he could have planned.

As Ghabry rose from the ground, his fingers pressed against his bloodied mouth, Ephraimoglou mentally prepared himself for the worst, expecting him to be enraged and retaliate in anger. But instead, the former Paladin simply snorted as if amused, coughed and spat out a mouthful of blood. He then pulled the antique pistol out of its holster on his belt and cocked it, and before cautiously helping Ephraimoglou mount his mule, said to him almost matter-of-factly: “If you try that again, I will be forced to kill you, Alex.”

Having worked their way down the steep southward facing slope, the two men began a brisk canter across dry fields of mixed wheat and thistle—evidence of the sad neglect with which the once fertile land was treated during those harrowing wartime years—in the direction of the Egyptian camp. Unable to fathom what his former friend and comrade could be planning, Ephraimoglou murmured through his gag as they rode, looking for some kind of explanation. But Ghabry only replied:

“Just keep quiet and don’t do anything foolish, Alex, and you may yet live to see another day.”

As they neared the perimeter of the Egyptian camp, Ephraimoglou noticed for the first time the extensive double-ringed structure of earthen bulwarks. The outer line of defense was a long embankment over a meter high, composed of a combination of loose dirt and stones. Apparently this obstacle was not intended to stop potential attackers, but to slow them down enough so as to make them easier targets for Ibrahim's gunners.

Some fifty meters beyond this first barrier, there was a second rampart—higher still, and with a deep trench immediately in front of it—consisting of packed earth and stone, with niches mounted with heavy cannons every several meters. The encampment may have been only a temporary one, but it was clearly meant to be well defended nonetheless.

Under normal circumstances, the sight of the antique network of fortifications would have been of great historical interest to the vice admiral—but his situation was anything but routine. Instead, his mind raced, trying to figure out what was going on and looking for even the smallest opportunity to escape. As bewildered as he already was, however, once the two men reached the entrance gate on the camp's western flank, something happened that confounded him even more.

Disguised as an Ottoman cavalry officer, Ghabry had easily made it through the outer perimeter without incident, leading the bound and gagged Ephraimoglou behind him. Once they arrived at the gated sentry post, however, the story changed. The guards eyed Ghabry and his prisoner suspiciously and demanded to see his orders. It was then that the former Paladin commodore began to act aggressively, feigning impatience and insisting on being let into the camp, replying to the sentries in a loud and excited tone.

“Listen, I’m on urgent business from Reshid Pasha,” he lied, referring to the commander of the Ottoman Turkish forces fighting in central Greece almost two hundred kilometers away. “My captain had the orders, but we were attacked by rebels several days ago and he and the rest of the squadron were killed. Only I made it through, *n’shallah*, with this prisoner. You must let us through to see His Excellency, Ibrahim Pasha. It’s an emergency I tell you!”

“Nevertheless, I tell you,” said one of the guards firmly, “no one gets in or out of the camp without orders. No orders, no entry.”

“Look, there’s no time for that—it’s a matter of life or death!” Ghabry nearly shouted. “A plot has been uncovered against the life of His Excellency! We were sure that this monk had detailed information about it, but we weren’t able to get it out of him. That’s why we were attacked—so his compatriots could rescue him and prevent us from learning their plans! He must be interrogated by His Excellency!”

The words left Ephraimoglou thunderstruck. Exhausted and weakened, his head pounding and beginning to spin, he struggled to put the strands together and to figure out what it was that Ghabry was trying to accomplish. Then all at once it came to him. He was planning to kill Ibrahim Pasha.

His reaction was immediate. Realizing the incalculable effects such a second-order historical change event could have on the future, he pulled violently against his restraints and desperately tried to shout through the gag: *It’s a trap, don’t believe him!* But his muffled voice could not be understood, and Ghabry quickly snatched his carbine out of its saddle holster and struck him hard in the gut with its butt end, causing him to double over in pain. The Copt then continued haranguing the sentries threateningly, berating them for their stupidity.

“Fine! Have it your way! But as *Allah* is my witness, if anything should happen to His Excellency, I will make sure it is known as far as *Topkapi*,” he shouted, referring to Sultan Mahmud II’s palace in Constantinople, “that it could have been prevented except for two imbecilic soldiers who kept one of *Papaflessas*’s closest co-conspirators from being interrogated!”

Ghabry immediately fell silent. A satisfied and cunning glint shone in his eyes as he watched the two sentries look at each other uneasily, already knowing that his ploy had worked. The name of *Papaflessas*—the Greek Orthodox priest turned freedom-fighter—was almost legendary among the Ottoman troops, as much for his passion in stoking the flames of revolution as for his famed physical strength and the gallantry and fearlessness of his recent death in battle. What was more, it was well known that he had been highly respected by *Ibrahim Pasha*.

In fact, so much had the supreme commander of the Egyptian army revered him that, it was said, he had ordered the deceased hero’s body—freshly recovered from the battlefield—to be washed and dressed, and fastened to a tree in a lifelike standing position. After gazing at him for some time in silent contemplation, *Ibrahim* had then approached *Papaflessas*’s corpse, kissed him on both cheeks in a sign of admiration, and declared: “If the Greeks had just ten more like him, I would never be able to take the *Morea*!”

On hearing of the supposed association between the captive monk and the fallen war hero of legend, the two sentries reluctantly relented and, calling over a cavalryman, allowed *Ghabry* and his charge to be escorted through to the camp. The men trotted through a labyrinth of tents, open squares and parade grounds, and after several minutes ended up in front of a large pavilion deep inside the encampment. It was *Ibrahim Pasha*’s headquarters.



Ghabry and the cavalryman dismounted their chargers, and as a couple of young grooms—mere boys in worn-out uniforms that were much too big for them—ran up to take care of the animals, the Copt ordered Ephraimoglou down from his mule. Rather than cooperate, however, the vice admiral once again began to shout through his gag, trying to warn the guards around the pavilion that it was a plot. Immediately, Ghabry pulled out his flintlock pistol and pointed it at Ephraimoglou, dragging him roughly down from his mount.

“Do you want to die now, monk?” he snarled with exaggerated vehemence.

The cavalryman then went over to the soldiers standing guard at the entrance to Ibrahim’s outer tent and relayed the information Ghabry had given at the gate. Coming back over to the two Paladins, he said:

“They say you’ll have to wait. His Excellency is not seeing anyone right now, and he has quite a number of appointments scheduled.”

“Wait?” snapped Ghabry irritably. “Don’t they understand the urgency?”

Storming over to the guards, he tried to force his way past them into the pavilion, but the two massive sentries blocked the entrance and threatened to have him thrown into prison. Meanwhile, a number of other soldiers, who appeared to belong to some sort of honor guard, and who had been standing idly by, rushed over to see what the commotion was all about.

Surrounded by six or seven men, Ghabry suddenly looked uncharacteristically weak and tired, and was seized by another strange coughing fit. Deciding that it was not worth the risk of trying to fight through the crowd, he stood down and came back over towards Ephraimoglou. When he arrived, the Egyptian

cavalryman spoke to him, nodding towards the Paladin vice admiral and saying:

“The priest here has been causing a ruckus the whole time you were over there. Why don’t we have him taken to the detention area, and you and I can have some tea while you’re waiting? It’ll be good for that nasty cough of yours. Besides, I wouldn’t mind hearing about what’s going on up north.”

Then, before Ghabry had a chance to respond, the man clapped his hands together twice, calling over one of the guards.

“Soldier,” he commanded, “we don’t want this prisoner causing any problems for His Excellency’s visitors. Take him over to the detention area and make sure he is properly secured and kept alive. He is needed for questioning.”

Ghabry tried to protest, but the cavalryman, anxious to hear about the progress of the war in Central Greece, would have nothing of it. As the guard seized Ephraimoglou by the upper arm to take him away, the Copt looked at his former friend with something resembling remorse and said:

“Yes, it’s probably much better this way, after all. We don’t need him here causing problems.”

As he was being dragged away, Ephraimoglou turned and looked back at Ghabry with a pained expression. He once again tried to protest through his gag, but the guard roughly yanked him back around and pushed him onward, nearly causing him to stumble.

Ghabry watched him go in silence, embittered that, after a lifetime of friendship, their last good-bye should take place under such circumstances. It pained him to know that Alex would never be able to understand or to forgive him, but it was too late. The time was now at hand, and no matter what the cost, he had to carry through with what he had already made up his mind to do.

He had not intended for it to end this way of course, but the unfortunate decision had been forced upon him. It was the only practical alternative that had been left to him, once he realized that—during his brief rendezvous with Crowe in the forest outside of Tsitizina, while he had supposedly been scouting for a way down the cliff—he had somehow been poisoned and was slowly dying.

Calling over one of the young grooms, the cavalryman sent the boy to fetch some tea from the mess tent. He then started peppering Ghabry with questions about Reshid Pasha's campaign against the town of Messolonghi, and about the quality of life in the Ottoman Turkish Army compared with that in the Egyptian Army. But the Copt answered evasively, waiting impatiently for his opportunity to get inside the command tent.

They had been standing thus for several minutes, talking and sipping tea, when the cavalryman smiled and gestured towards the direction from which they had ridden in a little while before.

"Ah, look, some more of your colleagues have arrived!"

Taken aback, Ghabry turned to look and froze in his tracks. The Egyptian was right. About seventy-five meters away and riding towards Ibrahim Pasha's command tent was a small group of Ottoman officers, a couple of whom wore cavalry uniforms identical to his own. It was a delegation from Reshid Pasha which, at the behest of the *sultan*, had come to entreat Ibrahim Pasha to march with his army up to Messolonghi and help the Turks with their protracted siege of that city.

Commodore Ghabry's heart began to race and a surge of near panic swept over him. Surely these officers would contradict his story and then all would be lost. As he racked his brain, looking for a way out of the seemingly intractable dilemma, his opportunity unexpectedly came.

The honor guard that had gathered earlier at the entrance to Ibrahim Pasha's outer tent moved out to flank the sides of the thoroughfare. They stood there at attention with a fanfare of drums and bugles, presenting the Ottoman colors in an official welcome of the arriving officers. And as they did so, the two sentries at the entrance to the pavilion were left alone and distracted.

Seizing his only chance, Ghabry pulled out his and Ephraimoglou's diving bells, which he had kept stashed inside his uniform, and made a sudden dash for the pavilion, arming the devices as he ran. He crippled one of the sentries with a powerful stomp to the kneecap as he pushed his way through the entrance, and then burst into the tent, surprising several officers who had been waiting inside for their turn to see the *pasha*.

Instantly, the second sentry rushed into the pavilion's antechamber behind him with his musket leveled, ready to fire. As he screamed at the intruder to halt, Ghabry quickly spun around on his heel.

The explosions were almost instantaneous. They ripped through the tent in a powerful blast with a radius of more than thirty meters, disintegrating everything in their path and sending a storm of earth and debris flying at high velocity a further sixty meters beyond that.

An avalanche of dirt and rocks, chunks of burning wood, fragments of bone and twisted pieces of hot metal came showering down for several seconds. When the deadly rain had stopped, there was nothing left except for a still-smoking crater almost two meters deep, in the center of a charred and flattened circle where the command tent of Ibrahim Pasha's fifteen-thousand-strong army of Egyptian regulars had previously stood.

## CHAPTER 2



MYSTRAS, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1825

**I**t took well over a second for the thunderous clap of the deadly explosions to reach the column of soldiers marching towards the Evrotas River. When it did, every man abruptly stopped in his tracks and turned around.

A little over one and a half kilometers behind them, in the center of the camp, they could see a large black mushroom-shaped cloud rising to over thirty meters in the air. A shocked murmur ran through the company as the men wondered aloud what had happened. Rumors instantly abounded: the Greeks had attacked; an artillery accident had occurred; all kinds of improbable scenarios were imagined and nervously debated.

John Crowe looked back at the Egyptian camp with a deep sense of suspicion and foreboding. There was nothing he knew of in that era which could have produced such a compact yet powerful explosion, and his mind immediately turned to the firepower of a Paladin diving bell triggered outside of a hot zone—and to Ghabry.

He was already behind schedule and could not afford a further delay, but he could not leave the area without finding out if the incident in the camp had the potential to derail his carefully planned mission. Speaking gruffly to the three lieutenants with him—two of whom thought that the entire expeditionary force should return to the encampment in case of an enemy attack—he prevailed upon them to agree that the company would stay put. Meanwhile, two of the fastest horsemen

would ride back to find out what was going on and bring their report.

“Moroccan!” shouted Lieutenant Al-Haweeny, calling for Rashid. “You’re with me—come on!” Then slapping his charger hard with his reins, he galloped off in the direction of the camp with the Paladin ensign close behind him.

Within minutes the two riders had reached the eastern edge of the camp and disappeared inside, while the rest of the company waited anxiously to hear the news. After about fifteen minutes they returned, approaching the column at a steady canter. Crowe and the other lieutenants rode out to meet them, and the small group of men stood on the plain, still astride their mounts, talking for several minutes. They soon rode back to the company’s formation and the command was given to resume marching.

Still speculating as they marched, those at the back of the column began to demand the soldiers in front of them to inquire up the line for some word about what had happened. Eventually, the news began to spread: there had been an assassination attempt on His Excellency Ibrahim Pasha. Someone had set off a powerful bomb in the headquarters tent and there were several dead and many injured. But Ibrahim Pasha was alive!

He had been with Suleiman Pasha—the French colonel turned Muslim convert—on a surprise inspection of some new artillery pieces in another part of the camp when the explosion occurred, and had not even been near the command pavilion. It seemed that some Greeks had been implicated in the plot and, at that very moment, one of them—reportedly a co-conspirator of Papaflessas—was about to be interrogated. The other assassin, it was said, had even posed as a Turkish cavalryman, but he had been killed in the attempt.

As the men talked animatedly about the affair, the officers became annoyed at the breakdown of discipline in the ranks and began to berate them, stepping up the pace of the march to a jog that cut off all further conversation. Only Crowe stopped riding for a moment to look back towards the camp with his face set in an expression of mordant irritation. He was not one to believe in coincidence, and, with Ghabry out of the picture, the most important part of his plan was now in jeopardy.

Perhaps, he contemplated grimly, it was a good thing he had not acted hastily and given in to his temptation to finish off the young Moroccan the night before, when he had caught him peering into his tent. As much of a nuisance as his presence was sure to be, he might just come in handy after all.



The explosion still ringing in his ears, Lord Admiral Rizopoulos stared for several seconds, stunned, at the holographic overlay image from his dive computer, which floated in front of his field of vision. Not trusting the information that was being beamed wirelessly to the contact lens-like optical interfaces he wore, he yanked the device out of its holster and smacked it a couple of times, as if that would change the reading. Instantly, however, he realized the folly of his action. He could clearly see the signal of his ensign, Rashid—who even at that moment was a couple of kilometers away, outside of the eastern flank of the camp—and he could also make out the faint intermittent ghost signal belonging to the former Paladin, Crowe. There was nothing wrong with the instrument.

Taking a deep breath and shoring himself up, he decided that there was only one thing left to do. He had to steal his way into the camp and check for survivors. He could not leave his men for dead based only on the lack of an EDT signal.

Goaded his large bay mule onward, he headed for the camp at a brisk canter, arriving at the outer embankment within a couple of minutes. He slowly walked the mule over the loose dirt and stones, and then trotted the remainder of the way to the western gate. The sentries were on full alert now, and despite the fact that he was invisibly shielded, he would have to be careful, as any number of things could still go wrong.

Due to a phenomenon related to Doppler shift, even an electromagnetically cloaked object created a small visible distortion when it moved—like heat waves rising through the air—and the effect applied to the audible spectrum as well. If the mule brayed or whinnied while they were moving, some muffled sound could still reach the guards' ears and—as nervous as they already were—cause them to react unexpectedly. And if the sentries moved suddenly, the animal might rear up or kick, setting off a chain reaction of uncontrollable events.

Moreover, with the effective range of his SHIELD device set to an area large enough to cover the mule, its signal strength—and therefore its cloaking capacity—was proportionally weaker. Thus he would have to move that much more slowly and quietly to avoid detection.

However that was not even Rizopoulos's primary concern. He knew from long experience that, when confronted with a shielded object in close proximity, sentient beings often had a very keen sixth sense of the invisible presence of another. In other words, they were sometimes able to *feel* the aura of someone shielded nearby, even when they could not see or hear the person, as had happened with the horses in the Egyptian cavalry squadron's camp a few nights before. And in the close quarters of a crowded and panic-stricken army camp on high alert, the last thing he could afford was for one of the guards to



take a step towards that invisible presence and make physical contact with him or the mule.

Waiting for what seemed like an eternity for an opportunity to slip through the gate, the lord admiral soon saw a squadron of soldiers arrive at the guard post and relieve the sentries on duty in what appeared to be a rather unexpected and irregular procedure. Nevertheless, it was just the chance he needed. As the gate was closing, he slipped through and guided his animal into the camp as calmly and quietly as possible.

Once inside, he quickly moved off the main thoroughfare onto a smaller pathway, where he could travel with relatively less risk of someone running into him. He also wanted a quieter spot from which to scan for residual energy patterns. The plume of smoke from the explosion had already begun to dissipate and he needed a more precise reading from his dive computer in order to pinpoint the exact location of the event.

Removing the slender device from its holster, his eyes opened wide in amazement at what he saw. There on the screen was the EDT signal of Vice Admiral Ephraimoglou.

For a moment Rizopoulos stared at the marker incredulously, searching for an explanation, and then it came to him. More than likely, the powerful electromagnetic pulse from the diving bells' matter-antimatter explosion had temporarily overloaded the EDT, knocking out its ability to respond to his 'friendly challenge'. It must now have recovered and come back online.

The lord admiral was immediately overjoyed. That tiny signal meant there was hope that Ephraimoglou might yet be alive. At the same time, however, he was gripped with alarm; for if he were indeed still alive, even at that moment he would be in the gravest peril. The timing of the explosion, coincident with the arrival of the Paladins in the camp, would not have been lost

on the Egyptians, and even now they might be preparing to execute his second-in-command.

Mentally calling up his holographic overlay, he put his dive computer into tracking mode. Then, moving just as quickly as he dared, he guided the electromagnetically shielded mule through the buzzing encampment's narrow and overcrowded byways, hastening to find his friend and colleague, Paladin Vice Admiral Alexandros Ephraimoglou.



EGYPTIAN ARMY FIELD HEADQUARTERS—FORTY-FIVE MINUTES EARLIER

It was only eleven thirty, and Ibrahim Pasha had already grown weary of the steady stream of appointments he had to deal with all morning. He had always preferred the excitement of the charge into battle over the dull routine of sitting behind a desk, listening to reports and issuing orders from early morning until late at night. But he was the supreme commander of an army of over fifteen thousand infantry and six thousand cavalry; and much to his frustration it often seemed that he could not trust even the slightest move to be made properly without his personal supervision. He was therefore becoming irritated and was longing for a respite, when one of his top military advisers, Suleiman Pasha, quite suddenly barged into his inner tent between two appointments, unannounced.

If anyone else had dared interrupt him thus, he would have had the man flogged mercilessly in front of all the troops, no matter what his rank. But he had a special fondness for the convert colonel. Indeed, it was he who had helped him enormously in modernizing his country's military forces along the French model—thereby advancing the political agenda of his adoptive father, Mohammed Ali, the *Wali* of All Egypt, and

helping to solidify his own position within the competitive Ottoman military hierarchy.

“Your Excellency,” the Frenchman—a seasoned veteran of the Napoleonic wars, whose real name was Joseph Sève—exclaimed in his native tongue, “I ‘ave wonderful news!”

Pushing back from his desk inundated with piles of reports and maps, Ibrahim Pasha folded his arms across his expansive chest and replied with a slightly sarcastic tone: “Well, it’s about time that I received good news from some quarter, *Mon Colonel*—what is it?”

“Ah, *zis is somesing I sink Your Excellency will really enjoy!*” Sève replied with a smile, clapping his hands and rubbing them together like a child in a toy shop. “*Zey ‘ave arrived—ze new field-artillery pieces we ordered from France! Ze new twelve- and six-pound cannons, ze five-inch mountain ‘owitzers, ze new carriage system—zey ‘ave all been brought up early zis morning!*”

“Now that is something to be excited about, indeed!” proclaimed Ibrahim with evident delight. “Have you inspected them yet?”

“I was just on my way to do it, when I *sought* you could also use a break,” replied Sève. “You ‘ave been shut up in ‘ere for days, and even in *ze* wartime we must eventually take a break and ‘ave some diversion, or we run *ze* risk of exhausting ourselves—and *zat* cannot ‘elp to bring *ze* victory.”

Ibrahim Pasha frowned and thought about it for a moment, looking at the pile of work on his desk and remembering the crowd of officers outside in the tent’s antechamber waiting to see him for decisions large and small. He was about to order Sève to go on without him, but then, rubbing his eyes and suddenly feeling fatigued, he realized that a walk through the camp might do him some good after all.

“Allah be praised! I do believe you are right, *Mon Colonel*. As a matter of fact, I will go with you. But come—let’s leave from the back exit. Not everyone needs to know when I decide to take a break, or for how long.”

Motioning for his personal guard—a permanent fixture standing at silent attention wherever the *pasha* went—to follow, Ibrahim Pasha and Suleiman Pasha exited through a secret entrance concealed beneath the folds at the back of the pavilion. The two men walked through the camp chatting amiably about the various new, highly mobile field-artillery pieces and how and where they could be deployed, finally arriving at a parade ground where the equipment was being removed from the packing crates. They inspected the heavy guns carefully, and looked on as the artillery unit attached them to their carriages and prepared to hitch them to the horse train that would pull them for a test run.

As they waited for a demonstration, Ibrahim Pasha wiped his perspiring face with a handkerchief and, shielding his eyes with his hand, looked up at the midday sky. It was already near noon and he realized that he had been away from his desk for almost a half hour. He would watch the artillerymen do one test run of the carriage system around the parade ground, he thought, and then get back to his appointments. The men were just making some final adjustments to the harnesses, when a sudden deafening blast rang out, shaking the ground beneath them.

“*Mon Dieu!* What *wath zat?*” exclaimed Sève, as he and the *pasha* instantly turned in the direction of the noise.

Seeing a thick mushroom-like cloud rising into the air over the camp, Ibrahim immediately went into action.

“A horse!” he commanded the artillerymen. “Unhitch the horses!”

Within seconds the men had unhitched two of the horses and the supreme commander, with Colonel Sève at his side, was racing in the direction of the explosion. Meanwhile, the members of Ibrahim's personal guard ran behind in a vain effort to catch up to their master.

Ibrahim and Sève arrived back at the spot where the *pasha's* pavilion had stood to find a grisly scene of near chaos. A vast blackened ring showed where the blast had scorched the ground and everything around it—tents, men and animals included. Charred and smoking corpses and body parts lay all around, and it was almost impossible to distinguish man from beast in the aftermath of the inferno that had been unleashed.

Outside of the immediate blast radius, dozens of wounded men lay on the ground moaning in agony, while those able to walk limped around in a daze trying to help their fallen comrades, their uniforms torn and their faces and clothing covered in soot. In the meantime, those who had been too far from the center of the blast to be wounded ran around in panic, searching for buckets of water to put out a number of secondary fires that had started and shouting out conflicting orders.

Seeing the delegation of Reshid Pasha's officers, who had been on their way towards the headquarters pavilion when the explosion occurred, Ibrahim rushed over to them. One of their number had been struck by a sharp piece of flying wood and lay on the ground bleeding profusely, as the rest of the group crowded over him and called for medical attention. Pulling one of the men aside, Ibrahim and Sève demanded to know what had happened.

"In the name of *Allah* the All-Merciful," he replied in Turkish, his voice quivering, "no one knows. All I can say is that when we got to the camp's gate, the guards told us that another officer from His Excellency Reshid Pasha's cavalry had arrived shortly

before us—although in truth, we knew nothing of another delegation and were surprised.

“Then, just as we were riding towards Your Excellency’s pavilion and were still some distance away—just where we are standing now—we saw a man in a uniform like ours attack one of your guards and rush into the tent. The next thing we knew, all heaven and earth were turned upside down. We heard a sharp report and found ourselves on the ground. Praise be to *Allah* that the rest of us were not harmed, but our poor lieutenant here has suffered what I’m afraid is a mortal wound.”

Even as the officer spoke, the man lying on the ground in a pool of his own blood began to cough violently, splattering blood all over the other men, and then convulsed in a terrible seizure. The officer tried to turn back to his dying comrade, but Ibrahim seized him by the arm.

“From which gate did you enter?” he demanded. But as the man, distracted by the scene a few steps away, turned his head towards his fellow Turk, Ibrahim grabbed him roughly by the collar and forced him around. “Which gate?” he shouted again.

“The western gate! We came in from the west!” the man nearly whimpered, still in shock.

Letting him go, Ibrahim immediately called over an infantry captain who was in the area and ordered him to gather a guard and go to the west gate. There he was to arrest the guards on duty and replace them with a new watch, and then bring the men to him. Meanwhile, he and Sève quickly began to organize a work detail to put out the secondary fires, clear the area, and set up an emergency shelter for the wounded and a temporary command tent.

Several minutes had passed, when the captain returned with a small group of men surrounding the guards who had let Ghabry and Ephraimoglou into the camp just over half an hour before.

Under heavy threats, they were questioned on the spot and explained what they had seen—a Turkish cavalry officer, speaking Arabic like an Egyptian and holding as a prisoner a Greek monk whom he claimed to be one of Papaflessas’s men, going on about a plot on Ibrahim’s own life.

The Turkish officer to whom Ibrahim had spoken earlier had by that time regained his composure, and unable to do anything now that his comrade was dead, had come over to stand near the small circle of men. On hearing the arrested guards speak of the Greek, he interjected:

“Excuse me, Your Excellency, but the man we saw dressed as one of our own cavalry officers was alone. We saw no Greeks or monks anywhere in the area.”

“You are sure about *zis*?” demanded Sève.

“Yes,” replied the Turk, “quite sure. He was standing some distance away from the pavilion, drinking tea with an Egyptian cavalryman, and then he suddenly threw down his cup and ran into the tent when he saw us.”

“Captain,” Ibrahim commanded the officer who had arrested the guards, “confine these men to their tents. I will decide later what punishment they are to receive. But first I want you to have some men search the camp and find the Greek monk. And for his sake, I hope he has even a fraction of the courage of his comrade Papaflessas. He’s going to need it.”

## CHAPTER 3



MYSTRAS, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1825

When Vice Admiral Alexandros Ephraimoglou heard the sudden explosion, he knew instantly what it was. For him, it was as if the searing heat and the terrible percussion that tore apart everything in their path had been set off inside his very own chest. Despite what had happened over the last several days, he had been close friends with Mina Ghabry for almost two-thirds of his life, and the pain of that moment made everything else pale by comparison.

Indeed, he had known who Mina was when he was at his best, and in many ways Ephraimoglou himself had been made a better person through their friendship. But now he had seen the man he had known as a brother die—first spiritually, and now physically—while at his very worst, lost in a blinding vortex of hatred, and had been unable to do anything to prevent it.

In the condition he was in—weakened, dehydrated, exhausted and feverish—it was almost too much to bear. He found himself half wishing that the Egyptian guards who had taken him to the detention area, where hundreds of prisoners of war bound for a brutal life of slavery were being held, had killed him on the spot or left him to die in the matter-antimatter explosion, rather than leaving him as he was.

Just minutes before, they had dragged him roughly into the makeshift prison—an area of no more than five hundred square meters set apart from the rest of the camp by a number of sharply pointed *chevaux de frise* fencing barriers arranged



between several rows of large old olive trees—and had strung him up from a sturdy branch by his now raw and bleeding wrists, like some paschal lamb waiting for the slaughter. He twisted lazily around in a tight circle for a while—his head pounding, feeling nauseated, and with flies buzzing around his face and the sores on his wrists—while the ropes bit into his flesh and made his bones feel like they would break at any moment.

Gradually and almost imperceptibly, however, a gentle and soothing rain had begun to fall upon the parched and cracked field of his heart, and it gave him a strength that he knew was not his own. He could not remember the specific citation, but of one thing he was certain—the familiar words were from the Book of Psalms:

*But Thou, O Lord, deal with me for Thy Name's sake, for  
Thy mercy is good.*

*Deliver me, for I am a poor man and a pauper, and my  
heart is troubled within me.*

*Like a shadow when it declineth, I am taken away; I am  
shaken off as the locusts.*

*My knees are grown weak through fasting, and my flesh,  
it is changed for want of oil.*

*I have become a reproach unto them; they saw me and  
wagged their heads.*

*Help me, O Lord my God, and save me according to Thy  
mercy.*

*Let them know that this is from Thy hand, O Lord, and  
that Thou hast wrought it.*

*They will curse, and Thou wilt bless; but let them that  
rise up against me be shamed, and Thy servant shall  
be glad.*

As those prayerful words resonated deep in his heart, a peaceful certainty had filled him—a feeling that whatever befell

him, he would endure to the end. Little did he imagine at that moment just how his resolve was about to be tested.

Gently rotating as he hung from the thick bough overhead, he had been listening to the soft but persistent crying of some of the women and children, and the occasional moans of the wounded prisoners not far away, when the blast—and the violent shudder that came with it—was felt. The few frightened screams that had immediately erupted with the detonations quickly gave way to an unnerving silence. It seemed as if time itself had stopped in anticipation of what would come next.

At first, the desperate captives had held onto a fleeting hope that the noise was the first salvo of an attack by the Greek partisans, who they briefly imagined would storm the camp and rescue them. But, surrounded as they were by the full strength of Ibrahim Pasha's considerable armed forces, it was a vain wish. In fact, it was worse than vain; because as soon as the prisoners slowly began to realize that no further bombardment was forthcoming, they fell into an even greater state of hopelessness than before.

Even Ephraimoglou, who just moments earlier had felt a tranquil strength filling him, began to waver in the face of a new sense of despair that mercilessly besieged him. For, in addition to the knowledge of the sudden and irrevocable loss of his lifelong friend, he was also faced with another chilling realization: the diving bell that was his only means of returning to his own century was gone.

*Surely they will eventually send a search party*, Ephraimoglou thought, trying with logical reasoning to fend off the gloomy thoughts that stole into his mind. In the process, however, he unwittingly entered into a silent dialogue with the powers of despondency that assailed him.

*Provided that you survive that long, the suggestion infiltrated his mind. And even if you do survive this predicament, the thought came out of nowhere, what if you are sent off into slavery in Egypt or some other godforsaken corner of the Ottoman realm? The Paladins will never find you there.*

He exhaled in a heavy, shuddering sigh. It seemed that it was a debate he was destined to lose. But then, somewhere in the darkening recesses of his mind, a bright and vivifying light began to rise over the horizon. And in its noetic rays, he suddenly caught sight of his hidden spiritual assailant and recognized the true nature of his struggle.

Gathering his *nous* into his heart, he cried out with a defiant inner prayer: *Lord, have mercy!* And once again his soul was filled with sweet comfort from the words which came flooding across the embattled plain of his mind and washed away the dark assault against hope:

*Let them that slander me be cloaked with confusion, and  
let them be covered with shame as with a mantle.*

*I will greatly praise the Lord with my mouth, and in the  
midst of many will I praise Him.*

*For He hath stood at the right hand of the poor man, to  
save my soul from them that persecuted me...*

IT WAS NOT long—no more than twenty minutes after the explosion—before they came looking for him, just as he knew they would. A couple of Egyptian infantrymen walked briskly towards the detention area, and as soon as they saw him—a lone, black-clad figure hanging forlornly from the branch of a massive old plane tree—they said to each other loudly:

“There he is!” and “I’ll go and inform the captain!”

While one of the men ran off, the other spoke to the guard and accompanied him inside the enclosure, heading straight for

him. In what seemed like a dream to Ephraimoglou—who was by then only semiconscious—one of the two grabbed him around the waist and supported his weight, as the other cut him down from the tree.

“Now you’ll see what the Egyptian army is all about, monk!” the man who had held him up by his waist gloated into Ephraimoglou’s ear with a tone of contempt, imagining that he who was about to suffer cruelly was one of those who had aided and abetted the revolt, and who had now conspired against the life of the *pasha*.

Dragging him closer to the base of the tree, they turned him around facing the trunk and one of the soldiers bound him there around his legs and waist. Meanwhile, pulling his arms around the girth of the tree as far as they would go, the other man completed the circle with a length of the rope they had cut and tied his almost numb hands tightly together. After that, one of the two men cut his clothing open, exposing his back. He remained like that for what seemed a long time, his right cheek pressed hard against the peeling bark of the plane tree, drifting in and out of consciousness and waiting for the inevitable.



Finding his way through the Egyptian army camp in pursuit of Ephraimoglou’s EDT signal took Lord Admiral Rizopoulos longer than he had expected. The labyrinthine turns down little paths winding between haphazard rows of tents and small clearings—where the soldiers spent their evenings smoking *hookah* pipes and talking around campfires—led him more than once into areas that were impassable for the mule without too great a risk of detection.

Having to retrace his steps several times cost the Paladin leader valuable minutes, just when time was of the essence. At

last, however, he reached his destination—the detention area where, about fifty meters away, Ephraimoglou was being held.

He was tied up against a large old plane tree, with a group of Ibrahim’s soldiers standing around him menacingly; and his back was exposed and bleeding from what appeared to be numerous lashes from a bullwhip. Taking in the situation at a glance, Rizopoulos instantly realized that there was no time to lose. For having tired of their game with the whip, the soldiers were preparing to move on to something even more persuasive.

“So you won’t talk, eh monk?” the Egyptian captain snarled at the limp Ephraimoglou. “What is your precious religion doing for you now?”

Then he continued: “Listen, I’m giving you one more chance. Say you’ll become a Muslim, and tell us what we want to know—where the rebel leaders are hiding and what attacks they’re planning—and everything will be fine. His Excellency is prepared to reward you handsomely with anything you want: estates, riches—,” and then to the ribald laughter of his men, he concluded with: “Even a harem!”

As the Egyptians continued to harass the vice admiral, Rizopoulos dismounted and tethered the mule to a nearby tree trunk. He knew that as soon as he moved away from the animal it would no longer remain electromagnetically cloaked, but under the circumstances he had little choice. There was something he had to take care of first. In fact, he decided, he would even be able to turn the situation to his advantage.

In addition to the half dozen Egyptians standing around Ephraimoglou, there was a single guard at the detention area’s entrance about fifteen meters away. While Rizopoulos was sure he could handle them all, he would have to be careful. The last thing he wanted was to create a disturbance that would raise a general alarm—or worse still, cause one of the soldiers to start

shooting and risk that Ephraimoglou or some of the nearby captives might be injured or killed. Since the guard was some distance away from the others and would be the first to notice something amiss, the Lord Admiral decided to take him out of the equation before engaging the rest.

Mentally adjusting the range of his SHIELD's electromagnetic field into a tight circle around himself, Rizopoulos abruptly tugged hard on the mule's bridle, causing the animal to bray. The guard, who had been watching his fellow soldiers in amusement as they tormented Ephraimoglou, suddenly turned in his direction to see what the commotion was. Observing a mule hitched there, where no animal had been before, he took the bait and began walking over, full of curiosity.

As the man approached, the lord admiral heard the Egyptian captain who was tormenting Ephraimoglou bark out an ominous command to one of his men:

"It looks like he doesn't want to cooperate, boys. Let's see if we can't convince him otherwise. Safir, bring the torch!"

The detention area's guard was about eight meters away—still too close to the others for Rizopoulos to launch his attack without giving up the element of surprise. As the man slowly walked over, the Paladin lord admiral noticed another soldier—the one called Safir—who had been squatting down and stoking up a small campfire a few meters away from the tree where Ephraimoglou was being tortured. Hearing the captain's order, he had quickly stood up and was walking over to the others carrying a flaming wooden brand.

The lord admiral's heart raced in sudden apprehension. One of the soldiers cut loose the ropes that had secured his second-in-command's arms around the tree trunk, and as two of the men held the semiconscious Paladin fast, the soldier grabbed his right arm and stretched it out. Then, on the officer's command, Safir

held the fiery torch directly under Vice Admiral Ephraimoglou's outstretched right hand.

The scream was terrible. Instantly, the approaching guard turned to look back in Ephraimoglou's direction and, without hesitating, Rizopoulos seized his opportunity. Bounding silently as a cat across the distance that separated him from the guard, he quickly rendered him unconscious with a powerful blow to the base of his skull. Then, his blood running cold at the sound of Ephraimoglou's continued screams, he stepped on the crumpled form of the fallen guard and, using his body as a springboard, leaped over the spiked wooden barrier and headed as fast as he could towards the vice admiral.

By the time Rizopoulos reached Ephraimoglou, he could already see that his fellow Paladin's hand was roasted beyond saving—but there was no time to consider that. Still invisibly shielded and leaping to the attack, he immediately disabled Safir with a sharp strike to the windpipe, causing him to drop the torch and suddenly fall to his knees.

It seemed to the other Egyptians that their comrade was clutching at his throat for no apparent reason, and as they stared at him in confusion and watched him beginning to turn red, Rizopoulos disabled them one by one in rapid succession. He then enveloped the vice admiral within the field of his electromagnetic SHIELD and quickly cut off a piece of Ephraimoglou's cassock, wrapping it gently around his charred hand to provide whatever protection he could. All the while he spoke reassuringly to his comrade, who had obviously gone into shock.

"Alex, it's me, Leonidas—it's okay, you're going to be all right. I'm taking you home," he spoke breathlessly as he worked.

“Mina, is that you?” murmured Ephraimoglou absently, his eyes glazed over and his face waxen. “Mina, I thought...you were dead. I thought I...was going to die, too.”

“It’s all right,” Rizopoulos reassured him, as he cut the ropes that had secured Ephraimoglou to the tree. “Nobody else is going to die.”

Then, struggling to hold him up, he dragged his burned and bleeding comrade staggering out of the detention area.

The two men finally arrived at the place where Rizopoulos had left the mule tethered, and hoisting Ephraimoglou up across its back with some difficulty, he untied it and tried to saddle up behind the injured Paladin. The animal, however, brayed and backed away uncooperatively, resisting the heavy load. In the end, with his SHIELD already pushed to its limit, he decided to walk alongside the beast, rather than risk making so much noise.

Thus leading the bay mule on foot, he slowly and cautiously retraced the path he had taken a short time before, towards the western gate of the camp. As they walked, he held tightly onto his friend and comrade, Vice Admiral Ephraimoglou, while the latter moaned softly in his shock and agony, and quietly muttered half-intelligible words about ‘*confusion*’ and ‘*shame*’ and being ‘*covered with a mantle*’.

There was something about his words—as much as he could make out through Ephraimoglou’s feverish murmuring, at any rate—that was familiar to Lord Rizopoulos; but at the moment he had far too much to contend with to try and figure out what his second-in-command was saying. There would be time enough for that later on—if he survived.





## LACONIA, GREECE—WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 2, 1825

The orange-red disc of the sun was low in the western sky, reflecting a rosy tint on the highest peaks of Mount Taygetos to the southwest, as the company of Egyptian regulars headed for the high rock formation known as Lykovouni—Wolf Mountain.

Having started their expedition in the early afternoon, they had only marched for a little more than five hours, which was much less than their commanders were wont to drive them on a normal occasion. But having borne the brunt of the day's heat and having scrambled over fractured and rocky ground the last couple of hours before sunset, both men and beasts had been tired and in need of rest and refreshment. Thus the officers planned to camp for the night, before setting off again just after daybreak to continue their expedition.

Initially, after the explosion in the camp, the men had been nervous and agitated, and the infantry officers—already somewhat leery of their *fustanella*-clad guide—were hesitant to follow Crowe's direction. They had demanded to wait and march along in the relative safety of the army's main body, which was preparing to quit their field camp near the smoldering remains of Mystras and to begin marching southwards towards the coast. They argued that once the rest of the army began heading west for the town of Kalamata, recaptured by Ibrahim earlier that spring, they could march along the coast eastwards towards their ultimate target.

Crowe, however, had remained adamant. Aside from the risk of being diverted to some other operation if they traveled with the rest of the army, waiting for such a large force to catch up would easily mean losing two days or more. Such a scenario was completely out of the question.

For one thing, it would have caused them to arrive at their final destination with an even less favorable phase of the moon

for their planned night operation than they were already bound to have. For another thing, his was a complex mission involving numerous assets, and there was little room for deviation from the plan. He had already been delayed far too many times as it was. Further interruptions simply could not be tolerated.

As the officers had continued to resist, Crowe offered a simple solution: they could leave the men with him and join up with the main body of the army to petition His Excellency the *pasha* directly for a change in orders. It did not take the Egyptians long to consider their alternatives. Ibrahim did not brook insubordination and was known to have put men to death for less. They also did not dare to annoy the supreme commander with such a trivial matter—especially after the day’s earlier assassination attempt. Thus they had quickly stifled their complaints and commanded the men to march in accordance with Crowe’s directions.

Throughout the course of the afternoon, the Trustee operative had led the company on a southeasterly course through the plain between Mystras and the remains of ancient Sparta, bordered immediately on the west by the forbidding mountains of the Taygetos range, and several kilometers to the east by the high rocky foothills of the Parnonas range. After about two hours, they had arrived at the western bank of the Evrotas River, roughly ten kilometers to the southeast of their starting point, opposite the old Turkish guard post at Skoúra. From there, the waters flowed southeast through a lush and boulder-strewn valley, winding their way down towards the sea roughly forty kilometers away.

Following along the bank, they had crossed over a ford about a half kilometer north of the junction of the Evrotas with one of its larger tributaries—a swiftly flowing stream that came down the eastern slopes of the Taygetos range from the region of

Potamiá—and by four o'clock had found themselves traversing an area of low rugged heights, with the river to their right, running through a rocky gorge at the upper extremity of Lykovouni. Slowly marching up a narrow path which skirted the Wolf Mountain's eastern shoulder, they stopped there to rest and water their animals at the top of a ridge with a natural spring, not far from the ruins of an old roadside church.

From the spectacular vantage point of the ridge, the wide plain of Élos could be seen spread out before them in slowly descending, rolling hills which stretched down to the marshes and lagoons bordering the Laconic Gulf. Almost directly to their east, several kilometers away on the rise of a high hill, was the town of Geráki, with the ruins of its ancient fortress standing out on the acropolis behind it. And far in the distance to the southeast, even the rugged northwestern shores of the island of Kythira were visible, rising out of the sea in a glint of fiery sunlight at the wane of the day.

Bathed in the warm golden light of the afternoon sun, the entire scene took on a pleasant atmosphere of bucolic serenity—oddly out of place with the martial character of the expedition. But as hungry as the men were, and with the supply wagons still far behind, no view of the surrounding area—no matter how breathtaking—could satisfy them.

Spying several villages in the plain below, the soldiers began to murmur about the potential spoils to be found there—the tasty victuals and the tender young women—and made such demands as they could on their officers to allow them to go on a raid. But Crowe refused to allow it. He had a mission to accomplish and did not want to waste time on distractions. Besides, having been granted fewer troops by Ibrahim than he had originally wanted, he could not afford to provoke unnecessary confrontations that could result in casualties.

Instead, after a short rest, he insisted that they descend into the plain below and begin looking for a suitable campsite. Lykovouni's foothills were no place for them to pass the night, as their ample crevices, boulders and outcroppings could easily provide a tactical advantage to roving bands of Greek rebels and leave them vulnerable to a sneak attack. It would be better to bivouac on a hill in the open plain, he maintained, where there were fewer places for guerilla fighters to hide; and the numerous ruins of the formerly Turkish towns the men had seen scattered throughout the hills—devastated by four years of the Greek's war for independence—provided sufficient evidence to convince them of the wisdom of his words.

Thus, tired and jittery, the company of infantrymen and their flanking cavalry made their way down into the hilly and gently sloping plain, and traveled a further three kilometers south. There they made camp in a wide meadow dotted with tall eucalyptus trees, within sight of the hilltop town of Vrontamás to the northeast.

The evening passed uneventfully enough. The supply wagons had eventually caught up, and while the soldiers had at first grumbled over their meager rations and lamented the fact that their officers had not allowed them to go out foraging, little by little they gathered in groups of five or six to talk and pass the time for a couple of hours before getting some much-needed sleep. Smoking, singing folk songs and reminiscing about their villages and loved ones back home, they slowly settled down for the night.

Meanwhile, the cavalymen, who were encamped near a stand of trees where they could hitch their animals some distance away from the foot soldiers—with whom, as their presumed inferiors, they refused to mingle—had already rubbed down their horses and were chatting amiably amongst

themselves. It was then that Rashid saw Lieutenant Al-Haweeny approaching him.

“There you are, Moroccan! How’s your cheek?” the officer inquired.

“It’s fine, Sir Lieutenant,” Rashid replied, casually brushing off the other man’s insult from early that morning.

“Good, very good,” continued Al-Haweeny, obviously trying to make amends but not deigning to apologize. “You know, I’ve been watching you, Moroccan. You’re not like the other soldiers.”

At those words, Rashid froze, fearing that somehow his cover had been exposed.

“You’re an excellent horseman, and I can see you have a lot of self-discipline. Has anyone ever told you that you would make very good officer material?”

Lowering his head to conceal his expression of relief, Rashid replied simply: “Sir Lieutenant flatters a poor Berber shepherd.”

“Listen,” Al-Haweeny insisted, “I know what I’m talking about. I don’t want to make any promises, but after this special mission is over, I’m thinking of putting in a request to have you assigned to my regular unit permanently.”

Immediately, Rashid saw the opening he had been looking for. Doing his best to appear grateful for the lieutenant’s compliment, he thanked him profusely and then asked:

“Forgive my curiosity, Sir Lieutenant,” he inquired, “but if it is not too bold of me to ask, what exactly is this special mission that we are on?”

Al-Haweeny frowned for a moment and wrinkled his brow, as if considering whether or not to tell the young cavalryman. Then, drawing closer to him, he began whispering in an air of conspiratorial confidence.

“We’re under orders not to say anything, so I can’t tell you the details—and even what I’m about to tell you, you must swear it to secrecy. We’re going to capture an important fortress on the coast! Believe me, whoever is involved in this mission will not regret it. If we are successful—and I’m sure we will be—there will be plenty of spoils to go around, and plenty of recognition from His Excellency, the *pasha!*”

“But how can a company as small as we are hope to take an entire fortress?” Rashid protested, trying to get the lieutenant to divulge more information.

“Don’t worry about that, Moroccan. Our guide, *Kara...kara...karakas*—those bloody Greek names are always so difficult to pronounce! Anyway, he has already taken care of everything. We’ll lay waste to the garrison stationed there before they even know we’re upon them! And now I’ve already said too much. Just stay close to me, and we’ll see some real adventure soon enough.”

Then, as he turned to go, Lieutenant Al-Haweeny made one last comment to the young Moroccan: “By the way,” he said, “starting tomorrow, you’ll ride up at the head of the column with me.”

As Al-Haweeny walked away, Rashid could not help but think that, despite all that morning’s harshness and bluster, the lieutenant was probably not a bad sort after all. He found himself wondering what kind of man he might have been under different circumstances, but then his thoughts soon gave way to weightier matters. Brief as it had been, the conversation was his first real break. At least now he had some inkling of what he should be looking for.

He was hardly familiar with the history and geography of nineteenth-century Greece, but from what he did know, there were any number of old fortresses along the extensive coastline

from the Mani peninsula all the way to the Argolic Gulf. Several of them might make attractive and strategically significant prizes for Ibrahim's forces. It was only a matter of figuring out which one was their ultimate target, planting his time capsule and getting the Guardians the information they needed in time for them to intercept the attack—that, and getting out alive, of course.

Watching the last of the evening's light fading over the rugged profile of the mountains to the west, the young Paladin thought: *How difficult a thing could that be?*

Yet somehow he already knew that the answer to his question was not the one he was hoping for.

END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**D**AMIAN 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 Sacred City* is his second 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. He is the author of the critically acclaimed first novel of *The Guardians* series, *The Guardians of Time*.



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