

# The Road of Past

Joel Perpétuo

# Technical Sheet

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## About the Author



Joel Filipe Nogueira Perpétuo was born in 1990 in the parish of Cova-Gala (now São Pedro), in Figueira da Foz, Portugal. A native of Portugal, he holds a Master's degree in Communication and Journalism, as well as a Master's in History Teaching, both from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Coimbra, where he also earned his undergraduate degree in History.

Currently, he works as a History teacher in both higher education and secondary schools. Before dedicating himself to teaching, he worked as a journalist and editor, with experience in local press and radio.

This is his first book.

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## Author's Note

*Rota do Passado* (The Road of the Past) is a journey through Portuguese history, memory, and imagination. Though it is a work of fiction, it draws heavily from real places, figures, and events — from the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 to the rich academic legacy of the University of Coimbra, and from the quiet mysteries of Figueira da Foz to the shadows of the French Invasions.

As a Portuguese author, I wrote this book with the hope of giving voice to my country's forgotten corners, silent ruins, and unspoken heroes. While many names and locations will be familiar to Portuguese readers, I have aimed to keep the story accessible to all — weaving history, mythology, and science fiction into a narrative where time itself becomes the ultimate territory to explore.

I invite you to enter this world with open eyes and a curious heart. Let yourself be guided by the unfamiliar. Trust the symbols, the silences, and the questions that echo through time.

Joel Filipe Nogueira Perpétuo

Figueira da Foz, Portugal

# Prologue

Dear reader,

Before you proceed, take a deep breath.

You are about to cross an invisible threshold — the one that separates the world as you know it... from the vastness of all that could have been. A journey where time melts away like mist in the sun, and reality is nothing more than a fragile agreement between what we remember and what we choose to forget.

Close your eyes, just for a moment. Imagine that the present, the past — the certainties that sustain your days — are nothing more than the reflection of an ancient mirror, cracked by hands that dared to touch the impossible.

Now, dare to go further: think of time not as a line, but as an ancestral fabric. An invisible cloak that can be folded, twisted... even torn. A primordial loom where each decision weaves a new pattern, and each silence hides a story yet to be told.

They say history is written by the victors. But... what if it could be rewritten? What if the great truths were nothing more than myths carefully planted? And what if, after all, the myths contained the forgotten truth? There are moments when time allows itself to be touched — moments when heroes hide under anonymity, and legends wait to be unearthed, not by archaeologists, but by hearts that still believe.

I ask you, then: if you could travel through time, where would you go? Which part of history would you like to see, alter, or even understand in a different way? These questions can shape our thoughts in ways we have yet to imagine.

With these questions as your compass, I invite you to embark. This is not a common journey. Here, the impossible is merely that which you have not yet dared to understand. The threads of destiny entangle in unpredictable patterns, creating a tapestry of possibilities. Here, the impossible and the possible coexist, and any resemblance to reality, dear reader, will always be... mere coincidence.

Safe travels.

## Chapter I

The sea breeze weaved through the streets of Figueira da Foz, bringing with it the salty scent of the waves and the sweet aroma of pastries from local bakeries, an irresistible invitation to nostalgia. The golden light of the late afternoon reflected off the cobblestones, giving the city a glow that seemed suspended in time.

Tomás, in his early twenties, exuded restlessness and curiosity — a combination mirrored in the gleam of his brown eyes, always watchful, always searching for something beyond the obvious. His short, brown hair was slightly tousled, betraying the frequent habit of running his fingers through it as he immersed himself in intense reading. He wore worn-out jeans and a light shirt, practical for everyday life. A backpack hung from one shoulder — marked by time, a faithful companion on his journeys between lectures and historical discoveries.

A Master's student in History in Lisbon, Tomás had returned to Figueira da Foz to visit his family for the weekend. He knew that his grandmother's house held traces of the past — memories and artefacts collected by his late grandfather throughout his life. It was the perfect place to lose himself among stories and mysteries.

In the attic, the fading light of dusk filtered through dusty windows, illuminating forgotten boxes and trunks. The wooden beams creaked softly under the touch of the wind, as Tomás carefully opened a small chest covered by a cloth embroidered with his grandfather's initials. Inside, he found two objects that took his breath away: an aged manuscript, with notes in Latin and complex diagrams, and a silver pocket watch with an intricate design. The latter was still, but the symbols engraved on the dial were unlike anything he had ever seen.

He sat in an old chair, holding the watch with one hand and leafing through the manuscript with the other. On the first page, his eyes fixed on the phrase *Tempus custodi est anima mundi*, the translation of which ran down his spine like a shiver: *The guardianship of time is the soul of the world*. The following pages revealed technical descriptions, sketches of a strange mechanism, and references to the 1755 earthquake in Lisbon. A note in the margin mentioned an underground tunnel between Figueira da Foz and Lisbon, destroyed by a collapse.

The manuscript told a fragmented but fascinating story. According to the notes, the watch had been created by a visionary inventor at the end of the 18th century — a man convinced he had discovered how to manipulate the forces of time.

Tomás furrowed his brow, running his fingers over the pages as if seeking a rational explanation. A tunnel of such magnitude, linking two such distant points, seemed impossible — both in that era and today. He had never heard of such a structure, neither in history books nor in the stories passed down. *This can only be fiction*, he thought, still incredulous.

But there was something in those words — the technical precision, the

solemnity with which they were written — that sowed doubt. What if it were true?

He examined the watch more closely, his fingers tracing the details etched into the silver metal. The notes also spoke of a rare magnetic anchor in the Figueira da Foz region, connected to the presence of specific minerals — a reference that piqued his curiosity even more. He flipped through a few more pages and slowly closed the manuscript, his eyes fixed on the artefact, now still in his hands. The watch seemed to be asleep — but not dead.

While his fingers traced the aged cover, the worn words on the margins of the pages seemed to whisper stories of guilt and regret.

The creator of the watch, mentioned time and again, appeared as a brilliant man, but one tormented by the weight of the consequences. A final note spoke of a mysterious disappearance, shortly after the activation of the mechanism.

And there was one last omen: the watch had been lost in the chaos, waiting for someone capable of understanding its true purpose. Tomás felt a shiver run through him. Time seemed to have stopped around him. He knew that this discovery was more than a curiosity. It was an invitation. Or perhaps a warning. Without hesitation, he grabbed his phone and, on impulse, called the only person who could help him unravel the mystery: Professor Valadares. Renowned for his extensive experience in History and Archaeology — and for his eccentric ideas that blended science, mythology, and philosophy — he was the only one Tomás trusted for something so extraordinary.

The familiar, deep voice of Valadares answered on the second ring — a voice that carried the weight of decades of study, passionate lectures, and memorable debates. Valadares was a singular figure, both in appearance and in his manner. Of average height and a slightly hunched posture — the result of years spent bending over ancient books and crumpled maps — he exuded the aura of a true scholar.

His greying hair, slightly disheveled, contrasted with his brown eyes, alert and almost always half-closed — as if seeing more than they revealed. He wore thin-framed glasses, which he adjusted frequently — a gesture so characteristic of him that it seemed part of his very identity. The wrinkles on his face, especially around the eyes, told stories of enthusiasm, perplexity, and irony.

Valadares preferred classic, thoughtfully comfortable clothing: tweed jackets with elbow patches, woolen sweaters in discreet tones, and timelessly cut trousers. A professor of another age — or of all ages. There was something about him that reminded Tomás of those rare teachers who leave a mark on a generation — the charisma, the warm tone, and above all, the ability to inspire others to think differently.

“Tomás? Don’t tell me this is another doubt about your thesis.”

The tone was half-joking, but the attentiveness behind the voice was clear — and it was that which Tomás had always admired.

“Professor, this isn’t about the thesis. I... I found something.”



Tomás hesitated for a moment, feeling the weight of what he was about to say.

“I found an old manuscript, and there was a watch with it. I don’t know how to explain, but it seems to be related to... time.”

There was a brief but dense silence on the other end of the line. Then, Valadares finally spoke.

“A watch? What kind of manuscript? Are we talking about ancient manuscripts or something more recent?”

Tomás took a deep breath, trying to organize his thoughts.

“It seems to be from the 18th or 19th century, I’m not sure. It has diagrams, annotations in Latin, and... Professor, it mentions the Lisbon earthquake and talks about a tunnel between Figueira da Foz and Lisbon.”

On the other end, the sound of papers being moved indicated that Valadares had stopped what he was doing.

His voice came through again, this time lower, almost as if speaking to himself:

“That’s impossible... but fascinating.”

The intensity of the words made Tomás grip the watch more firmly, as if fearing the object might disappear. Valadares broke the silence.

“Listen to me carefully, Tomás. We need to discuss this in person. Can you bring the manuscript and the watch to Lisbon?”

“Of course. When?” Tomás asked, already on his feet, as if the watch were weighing down his pocket.

“As soon as possible,” Valadares replied. “I’ll be at the university on Monday. And, Tomás... it’s important to keep this quiet until we understand what we’re dealing with.”

“Understood. I’ll be there,” Tomás replied, his voice firm, before hanging up.

When the call ended, the silence in the attic seemed even heavier. Tomás looked once more at the manuscript and the watch. Under the faint light streaming through the dusty windows, the symbols etched into the metal seemed to glow with an ethereal light, as if pulsing with an energy of their own. The feeling that there was something greater to be discovered overtook Tomás, but it was also frightening. As he descended the attic stairs, his heart still racing, he couldn’t stop imagining what else might be hidden there. And whether he was prepared for whatever it was. He searched the entire house, hoping to find another clue, but aside from the manuscript and the watch, he found nothing.

Still, the feeling that something was slipping past his eyes persisted, as if every corner of the house held a secret that refused to stay hidden.

During the bus ride to Lisbon, Tomás kept the backpack pressed tightly against his chest, his fingers gripping the straps tightly — without even realising it. The watch and the manuscript were tucked inside, but the thought that someone

might steal them wouldn't leave his mind. He glanced discreetly around at the other passengers, trying to push away the more paranoid thoughts. It was just a bus, like any other, filled with students, workers, and occasional travellers. No one seemed suspicious, yet Tomás still felt uneasy.

Beside him, Sofia sat by the window. It was common for them to be on the same bus whenever they travelled to Lisbon. Sofia, with her long brown hair tied in a ponytail, wore large headphones and was immersed in reading a book — a habit as much a part of her as the silence that surrounded her.

She was a Physics student at the same university, and they shared a special bond. Noticing Tomás's thoughtful expression, she took off her headphones.

"You look like you've seen a ghost. Is everything okay?"

Tomás hesitated for a moment, looking at the backpack as if he needed to decide whether to tell Sofia about his discovery. But then, remembering all the conversations they had had about science and history, he realised she could be a good ally.

"Sofia, I think I found... something strange. I'm not sure how to explain it, but..."

He paused, trying to choose the right words.

"It's an old manuscript, full of annotations in Latin, diagrams, and notes I can't understand. And there's also a watch. It's a... different object."

Sofia raised an eyebrow, clearly intrigued.

"A watch? Different how?"

Tomás opened the backpack just slightly, enough for Sofia to peek inside. She leaned in, seeing the silver gleam of the watch and the intricate symbols engraved on it. "It looks like something from a museum," she commented, fascinated. "Where did you find this?"

Tomás quickly told her about the attic at his grandmother's house, the chest, and the notes about the Lisbon earthquake and a mysterious tunnel between Figueira da Foz and the capital. As he spoke, Sofia alternated between expressions of scepticism and fascination.

"And you think it's real?" she asked, after a few seconds of silence.

"I mean, a tunnel like that, in the 18th century? It seems... unlikely, if not impossible."

Tomás shrugged, sighing.

"I don't know. But that's what I'm going to find out. Tomorrow, I'm going to the university to show all of this to Professor Valadares. He'll help me figure out what's true and what's not."

Sofia watched him carefully, as if contemplating something important.

“And what if it is real? Have you thought about what that means? Discoveries like that could change everything.” Her voice wavered between excitement and caution.

Tomás turned his gaze to the window, watching the fields pass by quickly.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that,” he confessed.

“But I can’t ignore it. It’s like... like something greater is pulling me to uncover the truth.”

Sofia smiled faintly and gave him a light tap on the arm.

“Well, I guess you’re not going to escape this adventure, Tomás. If you need help unraveling these mysteries, you know where to find me.”

He laughed, finally relaxing a little.

“Thanks, Sofia. I hope Valadares has some answers, because now I have more questions than ever.”

As they continued to talk, the bus slowly approached Lisbon. However, the feeling that something extraordinary was about to begin never left Tomás. And he felt that perhaps he wasn’t completely alone in this adventure that was about to start.

Sofia was more than just a travel companion. Since the first days at university, the two had formed a deep bond, nurtured by shared interests and easy camaraderie. Despite this, neither of them had dared to take a step beyond friendship. Perhaps out of fear of ruining what they had, or perhaps because they both believed the other didn’t feel the same.

But Sofia was the person Tomás trusted without reserve, and so it was no surprise that, after their conversation on the bus, he had invited her to join him the following day on the visit to Professor Valadares.

They were so close that even Tomás’s thesis advisor had crossed paths with Sofia on several occasions — in cafés and lunches that Tomás often invited her to join.

When they arrived at the university, Valadares was surrounded by piles of books and ancient manuscripts. As soon as he saw them, the professor looked up and smiled slightly upon recognising Sofia.

“Sofia, I see you’re joining Tomás on this adventure. Well, considering the lively discussions we’ve had, I’m not surprised.”

His deep, experienced voice had a welcoming tone, but his eyes quickly fixed on Tomás’s backpack.

Sofia smiled, leaning slightly forward as she took the headphones off her neck.

“Professor, I had to come. Tomás told me about this watch, and I was too curious to stay at home.”

As a Physics student, anything that challenged the laws of time fascinated Sofia. These unusual curiosities bridged the fields of both History and Physics, strengthening the bond they shared.

Valadares nodded, adjusting his glasses carefully before turning to Tomás.

“Very well, then. Let’s get to the point.”

Tomás took the manuscript and the watch out of the backpack and placed them on the table. As Valadares examined each detail, Sofia leaned in, her eyes fixed on the gleaming object. The professor opened the manuscript and began to leaf through it attentively, his expression shifting between fascination and concern.

“This is incredible, Tomás. This manuscript mentions theories about time that were impossible for the era.” Valadares turned a page and pointed to an underlined name: Sirius.

He furrowed his brow as if the words intrigued him deeply.

“It seems that this Sirius was more than just an inventor. His ideas went beyond anything we can understand about time. It could be key... A key to something... perhaps related to this watch.”

Valadares stared at the object in Tomás’s hands, his voice laced with hesitation: “It’s the other part of the puzzle. But how...? This is... too much to take in all at once.”

Tomás examined the watch, his eyes fixed on the intricate details, while his mind raced with doubts.

“In the manuscript, it mentions a *Custódia Temporal* and the French Invasions several times.

What does that mean?”

Valadares sighed and placed the manuscript on the table. He slowly leafed through the pages, searching for something specific.

“According to the manuscript, it seems there was an event during the French Invasions, in which Napoleon sent one of his trusted generals to search for this watch.”

Professor Valadares had heard many stories and theories about a secret organisation known as the *Custódia Temporal* or *Custodie du Temps* — a group that supposedly dedicated itself to seeking out relics, jewels, and other valuable objects.

Even so, Valadares thought that it was nothing more than a myth. There was no solid foundation or reliable historical record to support these theories.

Tomás leaned forward, his curiosity growing.

“But what happened?”

Valadares turned the manuscript and showed him a note:

“According to what’s here, the general’s name was Lambert, and he found the watch in Figueira da Foz. He activated it in an attempt to test the artefact before returning to Paris.

But something went terribly wrong. The records indicate that he disappeared mysteriously.”

Tomás felt a shiver run through him, as if Lambert’s disappearance was just the beginning of something far more sinister, something that was now beginning to involve his own reality.

Sofia, who had been silent up until then, crossed her arms and looked at the watch on the table.

“And the watch? Did it stay here?”

Valadares nodded.

“Seems so. It was found some time later, but any attempt to use it since then has ended in failure. The mechanism is peculiar, and not just anyone knows how to make it work or activate it.”

Sofia leaned forward, examining the intricate symbols on the watch. “Maybe the watch chooses who can use it. Something only the creator would understand.”

Valadares looked at her with approval, adjusting his glasses.

“That’s a possibility, Sofia. We know Napoleon sought it out and that it was kept hidden. Perhaps that has some significance... but we still don’t know just how dangerous it could be.”

Sofia exchanged a look with Tomás, a mix of admiration and unease mirrored in her eyes.

“And now that it’s in your hands, Tomás? What are you going to do?”

Tomás hesitated for a moment, his gaze fixed on the watch.

“I’m going to find the truth.” His voice sounded firmer than he expected, as if he had already accepted the path he needed to walk.

Valadares placed a hand on his shoulder, a gesture that blended encouragement and caution.

“The truth is a heavy burden, Tomás. Make sure you’re ready for it.” The professor leaned slightly forward, his intense eyes reflecting the gravity of what he was about to say. As he studied the manuscript, he found a passage in Latin that he translated carefully: *Temporis custodia non solum servat tempus, sed etiam fatum.* — In other words, the Custódia doesn’t just guard time, but also fate.

He paused. The silence settled in the room like a heavy veil as Valadares carefully observed Tomás’s reaction.

“But there’s more. Lambert’s disappearance wasn’t accidental. His family

founded a secret organisation — the *Custódia Temporal* — with the purpose of recovering the watch and repairing what they had set in motion.”

Valadares’s eyes narrowed, as if each word spoken carried the weight of centuries of secrets.

“If what’s written in this manuscript is true, the watch isn’t just a historical relic. It’s the key to something that surpasses everything we’re capable of conceiving.”

Tomás leaned back in his chair, feeling crushed by the revelation. His mind was racing.

“So... they’re not protecting time. They’re trying to control it.”

Valadares nodded gravely, his gaze fixed on the artefact as if, at any moment, it could reveal more than what was visible.

“If that’s the case, this becomes very dangerous.”

Tomás ran a hand through his hair, shaking his head.

“This can’t be true... It must be a fantasy, a science fiction book, right?” he said, turning to

Sofia, almost pleading for confirmation.

Sofia gave a slight nod, agreeing.

“Maybe that’s it, Tomás...” she replied, her tone hesitant, but without the conviction he had hoped to hear.

Valadares, on the other hand, did not share the same scepticism. The man of science, a respected professor used to deconstructing myths with evidence, leaned slightly forward, as if pondering to plunge into an abyss.

“I’d like to think that too, but I fear there may be some truth to this.”

He said, in a grave and controlled tone.

“Let’s, for a moment, assume it’s real. We need to keep an open mind. Otherwise, we risk ignoring something we don’t understand... until it’s too late.”

Tomás shifted his gaze between Sofia and Valadares. He felt doubt slowly, but relentlessly, transforming into possibility. A possibility that weighed heavily. The silence in the room settled like a thick curtain. Outside, the whisper of the wind insinuated itself through the cracks, as if the world itself were listening in suspense.

Valadares resumed leafing through the manuscript with an almost religious reverence. The pages unfolded beneath his experienced fingers, revealing a mixture of archaic Portuguese, Latin, Old French, and symbols that defied any immediate deciphering.

Suddenly, the professor froze. He straightened in his chair, his eyes locking onto a specific point.

“Here it is...” he murmured, as if revealing an ancient secret, “...a truth that may

illuminate what has remained hidden until now.”

He raised the watch, the faint light of the room reflecting off the intricate silver symbols.

His voice carried a gravity that made both Tomás and Sofia lean forward, attentive.

“The watch isn’t just an artefact. It’s a temporal anchor. It connects whoever holds it to the flow of time, preventing us from drifting.”

Sofia straightened, a shiver running down her spine as she heard those words.

Her gaze was fixed on the watch, as if trying to decipher its secret.

“So, according to what’s written here... it’s possible to travel through time, but you can never let go of the watch? You have to maintain contact with it, is that it?”

Valadares adjusted his glasses and looked back at the manuscript, as if trying to confirm the interpretation before responding.

“Yes, exactly. According to what’s written here, it’s necessary to maintain contact with the watch. It can be a direct or indirect touch.”

Tomás furrowed his brow slightly, not understanding.

“Indirect?”

The professor nodded, pointing to a passage in the manuscript.

“I deduce that it’s enough to touch the person holding the watch. That would allow several people to travel at the same time. But... I must stress, this is only an interpretation of what’s written here.”

A dense silence settled. The three of them were suspended in that moment, as the weight of the revelation began to sink in. Sofia exchanged a look with Tomás — a mixture of admiration and unease danced in her eyes. The idea of an artefact capable of connecting and transporting humans through time seemed to shatter everything she knew.

It was Sofia who broke the silence, her voice soft, almost a whisper, cutting through the air like a forbidden question.

“So... if someone travels through time without touching the watch, do they get trapped in another time?”

Valadares hesitated, adjusting his glasses with a tense movement. His tone hardened, deep and filled with uncertainty.

“I don’t know. There are too many variables we don’t understand. They could die... or be stuck forever in another time.”

Sofia and Tomás exchanged an alarmed glance, while the professor, absorbed in

his reflections, continued in a more restrained tone.

“Everything depends on the proximity to the watch. If someone is close enough, but without touching it, they might be pulled into the phenomenon... or even destroyed by the impact. On the other hand, if they’re too far away, they’ll probably remain stuck in another time — disconnected from the main flow of time, like an anchor fallen out of the sea of time.”

Tomás broke the silence, his voice vibrating with a mix of nervousness and excitement.

“I’ve got an idea. Let’s try the watch. See if it works.” He took the artefact, turning it carefully in his hands. “If we turn this piece, it should activate. We’ll travel.”

Sofia’s eyes widened, crossing her arms defensively.

“Hold on! Wouldn’t it be better to understand how this works first? Know exactly where we’re going — the era, the city, those things? I’ve seen plenty of time travel movies, and it never goes well like this! It could be dangerous, Tomás.”

Professor Valadares, however, seemed increasingly absorbed by the idea. His eyes gleamed with enthusiasm, as if the mere possibility of such an experience dispelled all doubts.

“The truth is, we should try it. As Camões said: *‘Experience, which is the mother of all things, teaches us everything’*... And if the poet said it, who are we to doubt?”

Sofia still hesitated, but Valadares’s gaze conveyed a contagious energy. Tomás exchanged a look with her, feeling the adrenaline rise as the moment became inevitable. He took a deep breath, trying to gather his courage.

“Alright. Let’s do this.”

The silence that followed was dense, laden with the expectation of something that could change everything.

Sofia approached reluctantly, while Valadares and Tomás prepared as if about to leap into the abyss of the unknown.

Tomás turned the piece of the pocket watch.

In that instant, the world seemed to fade away. A deep hum filled the air, and a blinding light enveloped them completely. The ground disappeared beneath their feet, and vertigo took hold of them — as if they were falling into an endless pit.

The light intensified, enveloping them in an explosion of impossible colours. They were all the colours of the spectrum — and others that the human eye should not see — dancing in disordered harmony.

For an eternal moment, time seemed suspended. The world dissolved into a deep, resonating sound, like the echo of thunder mixed with voices that seemed to come from forgotten centuries.

It was an ancient, primitive, imposing symphony — as if the very universe was



adjusting itself to welcome them, altering, for them, the sacred order of things.

Suddenly, they felt themselves pushed by a colossal force. The ground fled from beneath their feet, and a biting cold pierced their bones. The space around them turned into a spiral of shadows and lights — a tunnel of living, uncertain energy.

In the midst of the chaos, a voice tore through the roar:

“Wait!”

It was Sofia. She had fallen behind. She was struggling to reach them as the ground beneath her feet cracked open in deep fissures — endless chasms threatening to swallow her. Tomás turned, his eyes wide at seeing her in danger.

“Sofia! Hold on!” he shouted, desperately reaching out his hand.

Valadares, already further ahead, was trying to maintain his balance on what remained of solid ground.

“She has to get here! We’re losing contact with the ground!” he yelled, his voice tense, his eyes wide.

Sofia stretched her arm out, fighting against the invisible force that was pulling her backward. With a final surge, she threw herself forward. Tomás grabbed her hand — and for a moment, her weight almost pulled him into the void. Valadares extended his hand as well. Together, they pulled Sofia back into the stable zone. With one last effort, the three of them tumbled to the ground with a dull thud, as the space around them finally stabilized.

They lay there, panting, their bodies heavy from the impact and the forces that had passed through them. No words were spoken. Only the sound of their breathing — harsh, rapid — filled the silence that had settled, like the last echo of a storm.

“That was...” Sofia began, but couldn’t finish the sentence, still panting.

“Intense?” Tomás completed, with a tired smile.

Valadares crossed his arms, absorbing what he saw with the eyes of someone who had finally witnessed a myth come to life.

Tomás placed his hands on his knees, trying to calm his heart, which was pounding like a drum about to burst. As the panic subsided, an unexpected euphoria began to take its place. An involuntary smile spread across his lips, like a ray of sunshine after the storm.

“We actually did it...” he murmured. “We traveled through time.”

The light around them faded, and in an instant, everything had changed. The air was fresher, cleaner — with a subtle scent of salt and wet earth. Distant sounds cut through the silence: indistinct voices, the rhythmic turning of wooden wheels on packed earth, and the gentle clip-clop of horses’ hooves.

Tomás lifted his gaze. His eyes, still adjusting to the new reality, fixed on a point on the horizon. And suddenly, recognition emerged, as clear as a flash of

memory.

“We’re in Figueira da Foz!” he exclaimed, his eyes shining. “I recognize the Forte de Santa

Catarina! It’s right there!” He pointed eagerly at the imposing structure, silhouetted against the sky — a stone sentinel that had withstood centuries, now a silent witness to the impossible.

Sofia looked in the direction he indicated and nodded, beginning to recognize the landscape as well.

“And this is the seafront, but... look at it! It’s completely different. No cars, just dirt and carriages.”

In the distance, the main square was bustling with activity. Gentlemen in frock coats, some with ornate canes, exchanged words in the shade of trees, while ladies in long dresses, embroidered with lace and adorned with elegant hats, moved with an almost dance-like grace. Horse-drawn carriages made their way through the dirt streets, completing the picture of a time that seemed suspended.

Professor Valadares observed it all attentively, his eyes analyzing each detail of the landscape with almost scientific precision.

“This isn’t just Figueira da Foz. It’s Figueira at the end of the 19th century,” he stated, more to himself than to the others.

Approaching a nearby tree, the professor touched its rough bark with an expression of fascination.

“By the type of movement in the square, the clothing, the carriages... I’d say we’re between 1880 and 1900.”

Professor Valadares, still observing the scene around them, responded with a tone of admiration:

“It’s impressive how, besides traveling through time, we’ve ended up in another city.”

Sofia exchanged a look with Tomás, her heart racing. The gleam of fear and excitement in her eyes showed that she was still processing the magnitude of what they were experiencing.

“And now? What do we do?”

Tomás looked at the watch and replied with determination.

“We’ll find out why we’re here.”

Valadares nodded, but his eyes remained fixed on the landscape, as if he wanted to imprint it in his memory forever. The Forte de Santa Catarina stood there, a

stone guardian before the vastness of the Atlantic. The square, full of life, seemed to whisper stories forgotten by time.

The air was thick with the scent of the sea, interwoven with a faint odor of coal from the steamships anchored in the port. In the streets, paved with irregular stones, the clapping of hooves and the wheels of carriages formed a symphony that blended with the calls of the market vendors in the open-air market.

Tomás and Sofia walked side by side, their eyes absorbing every detail as if they were living pages of a forgotten book. The sky seemed clearer, the air lighter — as if time itself breathed differently here.

“Look over there,” Sofia murmured, pointing to an elegant café with a crowded terrace.

The sign read *Grande Café do Mondego* in golden letters, and the customers, wrapped in fine fabrics, sipped tea from delicate cups, exchanging restrained smiles and murmurs from another time.

Valadares adjusted his glasses, as if he wanted to capture every detail in his memory.

“It’s fascinating... the architecture, the expressions, even the smells. Everything feels more authentic,” he said, pausing to observe a small carriage passing by, the driver in a spotless uniform.

Tomás, however, couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched. He turned discreetly and saw a group of children whispering and pointing in their direction. An elderly lady widened her eyes, clearly intrigued by their clothes.

“I think we’re attracting more attention than we thought,” Tomás whispered. Sofia laughed, trying to mask her nervousness.

“With these clothes, it’s like we’ve stepped out of a futuristic play.”

Valadares couldn’t help but smile, but soon became serious.

“We need to maintain discretion. Any further interference... could alter everything.”

Tomás nodded, but the gleam in his eyes revealed that he was too fascinated to hold back.

He moved closer to an open-air market where vendors were calling out about fresh fruits, hand-painted ceramics, and local handicrafts. He picked up a piece of pottery, a small vase painted with vibrant blue floral details.

“This feels so... new,” he murmured, admiring the shine of the glaze.

Sofia stood beside him, watching people pass by.

“Imagine... these people have no idea they’re living what, for us, is history. For them, this is just the present.”

Tomás nodded slowly, his eyes fixed on a couple haggling over the price of an apple.

“For them, it’s the present. For us, the past. And if they knew where we came from... maybe they’d see us as coming from the future.”

The sound of bells echoed in the distance, interrupting the moment. A horse-drawn carriage appeared around the corner, the hooves resounding on the uneven cobblestone, while the driver shouted something that the travelers couldn’t fully understand. It was as strange as it was hypnotizing.

Sofia grabbed Tomás’s arm, her voice vibrating with excitement.

“We have to ride in one of those.”

Valadares sighed, shaking his head with mild reproach.

“This isn’t a tourist excursion. We’re here for a reason.”

Tomás furrowed his brow, pointing at the watch.

“And the watch? Won’t it tell us why we’re here?”

Valadares consulted the manuscript, flipping through until he found a page where familiar symbols danced among lines of aged text. The professor pressed his lips together, trying to organise his thoughts.

Sofia looked around, furrowing her brow.

“Maybe we should follow the flow of people.”

Valadares hesitated but nodded.

“Let’s do that. But with discretion. The last thing we need is to draw attention.” He had no time to say more. A man with a well-groomed moustache and military uniform approached with a firm step, eyeing them up and down with barely concealed curiosity.

“Can I help you?” he asked in a polite tone, but marked by a polite distrust.

Sofia stammered, trying to come up with a convincing excuse.

“We... we’re visitors from Lisbon. Just... admiring your beautiful village.”

The man raised an eyebrow but seemed to accept the explanation. Before walking away, he left them with a warning in a grave tone.

“I suggest you stay away from the port. The presence of French vessels has caused some tension around here. It’s not safe to go there.”

Valadares remained still, his eyes following the military figure until he disappeared into the crowd. He scratched his head, visibly intrigued, before turning to Tomás and Sofia.

“How strange...” he murmured, furrowing his brow as if trying to fit a misplaced piece into an old puzzle.

“At the end of the 19th century, I can’t find any record of French vessels in Figueira da Foz’s port that would justify local tension. There’s something off

here.”

Tomás furrowed his brow as well, also confused.

“Maybe it’s a commercial issue? Or something like that?”

Valadares shook his head, not taking his eyes off the port, which sparkled in the distance under the sun.

“It’s possible... but I don’t remember any significant tension between Portugal and France at this time. Nothing that would justify this kind of warning.”

As the three of them headed towards the busy Picadeiro area — known for its cultural events and the social buzz of late 19th-century Figueira da Foz — Valadares’s unease didn’t subside.

“It still doesn’t make sense...” he murmured, casting one last glance at the port, as if expecting to see the answer there.

Sofia, distracted by the elegant shops and cafés lining the adjacent streets, commented.

“Maybe it was something that was never documented. There are always things that escape history.”

The buzz in the Picadeiro grew louder, and among the moving crowd, a figure stood out.

A distinguished man emerged from the hustle and bustle and advanced towards them. The gesture he made — discreet, but firm — indicated they should follow him. His posture, confident and assured, didn’t go unnoticed by Valadares.

He introduced himself as Daniel. He had a robust build and appeared to be about forty years old. His dark brown hair, carefully combed back, and his short, well-groomed beard gave him a sober appearance. But it was his brown, deep eyes that truly stood out — filled with ancient wisdom, as if they had seen more than was humanly possible. He was dressed with practical elegance: a long coat made of thick fabric, worn from use, and worn leather boots that hinted at a life spent in constant motion.

“It’s not safe to talk about this here,” Daniel said, his voice low but firm.

“Come with me, we need to discuss what brought you here, and keep the watch well hidden.”

Intrigued and still cautious, the three of them followed him through the streets of the Picadeiro, where the movement intensified with the lights from a nearby location, the *Casino Peninsular*. Daniel paused as they passed the casino, briefly observing the bustling entrance, where elegantly dressed people came and went. The group continued to follow Daniel, who seemed to know every street and shortcut in Figueira da Foz like the back of his hand. Daniel’s face conveyed a calculated calmness.

Tomás narrowed his eyes, visibly intrigued.

“Why did you tell us to hide the watch?”

Daniel gave a subtle smile.

“With those clothes, it’s not hard to see you’re from another time. The watch could attract the attention of curious onlookers. It’s better to keep it well hidden. But don’t worry, I’m here to help.”

He paused, pointing at the watch.

“Listen to me carefully. The artefact that brought you here is not just a historical object. It’s a key, capable of shaping the flow of time. But when it was reactivated, it did more than just transport you. It attracted attention... attention you don’t want.”

Tomás didn’t look away from Daniel.

“What kind of attention? What kind of groups?”

Daniel crossed his arms, staring at each of them with intensity, as if measuring the weight of what he was about to reveal.

“The *Custódia Temporal*. A secret, ancient... and relentless organisation. With roots that go back to revolutionary France.”

Sofia leaned slightly forward, her eyes narrowing.

“And what do they want with the watch?”

Daniel sighed, his gaze fixed on the artefact, as if it carried the weight of centuries of history.

“They believe the watch should be under their control. I don’t know the exact reasons, but it’s safe to say it’s not to protect time.”

The silence that followed was palpable — the revelation hung in the air like an impending threat. The faint glow of the symbols on the watch seemed to intensify, as if silently responding to the danger Daniel had just announced.

Sofia crossed her arms, visibly suspicious.

“And you? How do we know you’re on our side?”

Daniel slightly lifted the corner of his lips in a serene smile.

“Because, if I wanted the watch, I would have taken it already.”

Valadares then asked:

“So why do you know so much and want to help us?”

Daniel looked at them seriously and replied:

“Because I’m a Guardian. I’m part of a group whose mission is to protect the watch, time... and history itself. We are scattered across different eras, always

with a single purpose: to ensure that time follows its natural course.”

He paused, staring at the trio, as if waiting for a reaction.

“Now, you need to understand that by activating the watch, you’ve become part of this.”

Before any of them could respond, a sharp sound caught their attention. An elderly lady, wearing an ornate hat and a long cream silk dress, was watching them with disdain. Her pince-nez glasses perched on the tip of her sharp nose as she pursed her lips in a disapproving expression. Beside her, a white poodle, with blue ribbons in its fur, barked incessantly, as if echoing its owner’s opinion.

“People with such a poor appearance... Where is this world heading?” the lady commented, adjusting her hat.

Sofia stifled a laugh, but Tomás simply looked away, unsettled. The poodle continued to bark, almost in tune with the woman’s indignation.

Daniel subtly leaned toward the group, his eyes fixed on the crowd around them, as if searching for something or someone.

“We’d better continue this conversation somewhere else. We’re drawing too much attention here.”

He led them to a quieter side street, where the noise of carts and conversations seemed to diminish. The space was bordered by worn stone façades, with windows decorated with thick lace curtains and traditional embroidered fabrics of the time. In the air, the scent of fresh bread mingled with the faint aroma of French perfume that wafted from a nearby shop, capturing the essence of the Belle Époque.

Daniel stopped next to a small café with a wrought-iron balcony, decorated with pots of colourful flowers. With a serious expression, he pointed to the area near the Forte de Santa Catarina, where the soft afternoon light reflected off the Mondego River.

“There, there’s a place where we can talk more safely. It’s a Nexus, a fixed point in time.”

Tomás furrowed his brow, confused.

“A Nexus? What exactly is that?”

Daniel looked at him with a serious expression, choosing his words carefully.

“It’s a unique place, where time is stable. The time travellers I’ve met used it for their journeys, because it’s safe and special.”

Valadares nodded slowly, absorbing the explanation as he adjusted his glasses. Daniel signalled for them to follow.

“Let’s go. We don’t have much time.”

Walking through the streets of Figueira da Foz, their eyes were captured by architectural details that evoked the splendour of another era.

Buildings decorated with elements of the Art Nouveau style stood out among the façades, with wrought-iron balconies shaping arabesques and sinuous forms inspired by nature. Stained glass windows reflected the sunlight, projecting patterns of flowers and organic curves onto the cobblestone streets. Doors with carved wooden details and ornate cornices seemed to tell stories of a time when art and elegance blended harmoniously into everyday life.

The streets of Figueira da Foz enveloped them in an almost magical fascination. Walking through such a distant era awakened in them a mixture of awe and reverence — as if every detail held a secret from the past.

Valadares adjusted his glasses, still intrigued, thinking about the Nexus.

“A Nexus...” he murmured, more to himself than to the others. “None of this makes sense. Time travel, changing cities in the process... and now being led to a place like this.”

Daniel let out a smile, choosing not to reveal more than necessary at that moment.

“Many of the theories we study are different from our reality. In the Nexus, you’ll be able to get answers about the functioning of time and the watch. Now, come. We don’t have time to waste.”

Turning, Daniel crossed his arms and faced the group.

“We’re in the year 1893. Figueira da Foz at this time is a city in full transformation, full of encounters between ideas and influences.”

Sofia tilted her head slightly, intrigued.

“There’s one thing I still don’t understand... well, many things. But why this year and this city? Why did the watch bring us exactly here?”

Daniel sighed, as if he had been expecting this question.

“The watch didn’t bring you here by chance. It was programmed to return to the last temporal point where it was activated. It hasn’t been updated since. The last journey happened in this time and this place.”

Tomás examined the watch more closely, his eyes attentive to every symbol and intricate mechanism, as if trying to uncover its secret in that moment.

“And how do we change that? Choose another time, another city?”

Daniel stepped forward and pointed to the engravings on the artefact.

“These marks indicate the adjustment points. Turning this wheel sets the city. This smaller ring, here, adjusts the year. It requires precision, and it’s essential that everyone be in contact with the watch at the moment of activation.”

Daniel paused as if wanting to ensure they understood.

“To return to the present, you’ll need to mark the city you want to go to and the date on the lower part. And when you start the next journey, you must change



the year on this upper part. If you don't, the last year will remain stored, and by activating the watch without changes, you'll return exactly to the point you left."

Sofia crossed her arms, looking at the artefact with a mixture of fascination and concern.

"And what if we get the settings wrong?"

Daniel shrugged, but the seriousness on his face left no room for doubt.

"You could end up in a completely wrong era."

Tomás, still absorbing the idea that they had traveled to another era, asked hesitantly:

"Can we... travel anywhere and anytime?"

Daniel nodded with a slight smile.

"Yes, to any era. But some eras are more dangerous than others. It's important to be cautious when choosing. Every trip can disturb the balance of time."

Valadares, thoughtful, touched his chin as he pondered.

"When we arrived, a soldier mentioned tensions with the French near the port. What does that mean? What are the French doing here?"

Daniel raised his eyebrows slightly, his expression hardening.

"Those French... they're not exactly from this time. They're following your steps — and they won't stop until they recover the watch."

Sofia widened her eyes, crossing her arms as she tried to comprehend the gravity of the situation.

"Wait... they can track us? How?"

Daniel pointed to the watch, still resting in Tomás's hand.

"I don't know the details, but the truth is they have technology capable of detecting when the watch is being used. Every time it's activated, it leaves a trace. They use that trace to find whoever is using it. That's why we need to be quick and discreet."

Tomás felt a chill run down his spine.

"So we're being hunted?"

Daniel nodded gravely.

"Most likely. But don't worry. When we get to the Nexus, we'll be protected."

Daniel made a discreet gesture, inviting the group to approach a modest door,

almost invisible, embedded in the side of an old building. He pushed it firmly. Beyond the aged wood, a narrow corridor stretched out, lit by torches whose flames danced in the draft of ancient currents of air. The walls, made of roughly hewn stone, displayed inscriptions that Valadares recognized immediately — archaic Latin intertwined with symbols from long-forgotten cultures

“This tunnel,” Daniel began, his voice resonating like an ancient whisper between the stones, “was, as the story goes, built by the Romans. But that’s only part of the truth. This place... is a creation of Sirius.”

Valadares stopped in front of an inscription, his eyes lighting up with the spark of discovery.

“These marks... they’re formulas. They describe the manipulation of magnetic fields and temporal lines. How did this Sirius do this?”

Daniel smiled faintly, but his tone was enigmatic.

“That’s the big question. Sirius knew things we still don’t fully understand today. All we know is that this Nexus and the watch are connected.”

Sofia ran her fingers over the rough walls, feeling the almost palpable energy surrounding her.

“It’s... as if time is alive in this place.”

When they reached the end of the tunnel, a large chamber opened up before them. In the centre, a mirror of water reflected the dim light of the torches, casting an ethereal glow on the walls. Above the mirror, geometric symbols floated like holograms, constantly shifting.

“This is the Nexus,” Daniel announced.

Valadares approached the mirror of water, mesmerized by the constantly moving patterns.

“This is... extraordinary. I never imagined something like this.”

The lights of the Nexus pulsed with an uneasy rhythm, almost organic, as if the space itself were breathing. Each flicker resonated like a cosmic heartbeat, reverberating through the liquid marble walls that undulated gently, reflecting distorted fragments of forgotten eras.

In the heart of that timeless place, a figure began to emerge from the light — a tall, slender woman, wrapped in an ethereal cloak that flowed like enchanted mist. She walked barefoot, and her steps seemed not to touch the ground, merging with the harmony of the environment. Around her, the lights turned to deep gold and celestial blue, dancing in tune with her presence.

Her eyes, vast and silver, reflected a universe of ages — not as mirrors, but as portals. On her serene face, no trace of emotion, only the stillness of one who has witnessed the birth and fall of countless civilizations.

The figure stopped before the group, her upright posture radiating a silent

authority, as ancient as time itself. When she spoke, her voice echoed like a whisper of wind between the columns of a sacred temple — low, soft, yet filled with a force that transcends flesh.

“Welcome to the Nexus. I am the Guardian of Time.

She took a step back, and her voice became deeper, as if echoing through the very fabric of time.

“This place is outside of time; it’s a point of balance where all the temporal lines converge. It’s neutral, protected by forces that transcend human comprehension, a refuge where the laws of time are preserved, an anchor that connects this place to different points in the temporal flow.”

Tomás swallowed hard and gripped the watch tightly between his hands. He felt the weight of the words like an invisible chain wrapping around him, binding him to the fate he now carried. Valadares, intrigued and clearly impressed, approached the woman, adjusting his glasses as he watched the lights that danced in spirals around them.

“These lines...” he murmured, pointing to the beams of light that intertwined through the space. “They are moments in time, aren’t they? Representations of events?”

The Guardian turned her gaze to Valadares, and for a moment, it seemed as if her eyes reflected not only his figure but all the knowledge he sought.

“They are fragments. They echo every decision, every action that shapes the flow. This is the place where time gathers to heal its wounds, here, there is no forward or backward — only balance. As long as you are in this space, you are safe.”

Sofia, skeptical, stepped forward.

“And what happens if the watch falls into the wrong hands?”

The Guardian didn’t answer immediately. Instead, she moved slowly, her barefoot steps leaving behind ephemeral marks of light on the ground, like scars in time. When she finally spoke, her voice was almost a whisper.

“If the watch is used by someone who doesn’t understand it, it won’t just be the past that suffers... the present and the future may also be erased.”

The Guardian took another step and continued in a grave tone. “Without time, there is no life. Everything that exists is sustained by the temporal flow.

Without it, chaos and emptiness would take its place.”

The words hung in the air, laden with a weight that none of them could ignore. The silence that followed was only broken by the rhythmic pulse of the lights around them, as if time itself were holding its breath along with them.

The Guardian nodded, her eyes fixed on a golden sphere that pulsed slowly.

“Yes. Each light is a fragment of the temporal flow. Some are crumbling, and that’s why you are here. The watch serves to stabilize those moments.”

Sofia, still skeptical, moved forward again, crossing her arms.

“But who decides which moments to save? And what if we interfere with the wrong moment?”

The Guardian smiled faintly, but the smile was tinged with sadness.

“Time doesn’t give clear answers. It offers choices. And every choice has a cost.”

Tomás felt a shiver run down his spine. The silence that followed was almost tangible, interrupted only by the soft sound of water rippling in the mirror.

Daniel looked at the Guardian, then at the group, and completed the thought.

“But it is here that you will learn to decipher those signals. Only in the Nexus can you understand what is crumbling.”

The Guardian paused, the gravity of the situation filling the space.

“Time is resilient, but not indestructible. A change in the wrong line can create a rupture. And once that rupture is opened, there is no turning back.”

Daniel intervened, looking at the water mirror with a serious expression. “Time is not a straight line. It’s circular... full of fissures. And those fissures are increasing.”

Valadares thought for a moment, reflecting on Daniel’s words, then asked. “And what should we do now?”

Daniel took a deep breath.

“When you return to your time, begin the journey at this location in Figueira da Foz. The Nexus is here, and over time, it has become more discreet. However, the place will always be the same. Let’s go outside, and I’ll explain how to recognize it.”

Daniel led the group outside, heading towards a spot near the Forte de Santa Catarina. Pointing to a specific location, he carefully explained how to identify the Nexus in their era.

As they absorbed Daniel’s instructions, the sound of hurried footsteps echoed off the stone sidewalks, breaking the tranquility of the moment. Suddenly, shots were fired, forcing them to seek shelter quickly. A man approached with a weapon in hand, wearing a long white linen coat, a vest, and classic-cut trousers typical of 19th-century fashion. The wide-brimmed hat partially obscured his face, but his eyes shone with a determined and threatening expression.

A metallic hum cut through the air, followed by the unmistakable sound of a gun being loaded.

“Get back!” Daniel shouted, his face hardening as he sensed the imminent danger.

A shot pierced the silence, hitting the wall beside them and scattering shards. Tomás and Sofia instinctively threw themselves to the ground, while Valadares shielded himself behind a pillar.

"They've found us!" Sofia exclaimed, her heart pounding uncontrollably. Daniel pulled out his own weapon and fired towards the attacker, forcing him to retreat momentarily.

"Run! Back to the Nexus! Now!" Daniel ordered, pointing towards the disguised entrance they had passed earlier.

"And you?" Tomás asked, hesitating.

"I'll hold him off. Don't worry about me! Protect the watch and time. That's the most important thing!" Daniel locked eyes with them for a brief moment, his gaze determined. Another shot flew through the air, hitting a nearby carriage, causing shards to fly in all directions.

Daniel remained calm, but his eyes reflected the gravity of the situation. With an urgent gesture, he pointed to the entrance of the Nexus.

"Go! Don't look back!" he commanded firmly.

Tomás, Sofia, and Valadares hesitated for a moment, but Daniel took a step towards them and smiled, a brief but meaningful smile.

"Take care of the watch... and protect time. Now go!"

The group couldn't respond, swallowed by the weight of the implicit farewell in his words. Reluctantly, they stood up and began to run through the deserted streets, their steps echoing like a drumbeat, driven by adrenaline.

Sofia, however, couldn't help but look back one last time. In that moment, she saw Daniel hit by a precise shot. His body faltered, life slipping from his eyes, but still, in one final act of courage, he raised his arm and shot at his attacker. Both bodies fell almost simultaneously, like tragic shadows swallowed by the night.

"Daniel..." Sofia whispered, her face pale with shock.

Valadares grabbed her arm, pulling her forward to keep going. A flash briefly lit up the sky above them, as if time itself were recording that sacrifice. Finally, they crossed the entrance of the Nexus. As they reached the mirrored corridor, they stopped, trying to catch their breath. The walls pulsed with a soft light, reflecting distorted images.

Sofia stood motionless, her empty gaze fixed on the direction they had come from. Tears streamed down her face as she tried to process what she had just witnessed. Valadares approached, placing a hand on her shoulder, equally shaken by what he had seen. Tomás lowered his gaze, clenching his fists tightly, unable to find words. The tragedy of the moment hung over them all, like a shadow impossible to ignore.

## The Road of Past

Tomás leaned against the wall, running a hand over his face in a gesture of frustration and sorrow.

“We barely had time to get to know him... and he gave his life for us...”

Without saying a word, the Guardian approached and gently placed her hand on Sofia’s shoulder. The touch conveyed a serene comfort, almost as if a soothing energy flowed from her. Sofia couldn’t hold back the tears that began to slide down her face. The pain was palpable, and Daniel’s sacrifice hung over them all like a heavy shadow.

“He saved us... and now we don’t know what to do without him,” Sofia whispered, her voice choked with emotion.

The Guardian remained silent, her gaze full of understanding and empathy, allowing Sofia to find solace in that moment of grief.

“His sacrifice has opened a new path before you. Time may reveal the way, but the decision to walk it will always be yours. Destiny is not written — only you can choose how to cross that door.”

She swallowed hard, feeling the weight of responsibility increase.

“And if we choose wrong?” she asked, breaking the silence.

The Guardian gave a small, enigmatic smile.

“Choices are made with both the heart and the mind. Don’t fear the mistake. Time offers new opportunities... make every moment count.”

The group remained silent, absorbing the words. Daniel’s sacrifice still weighed heavily on them, but now they felt a new determination. Sofia wiped a tear and nodded, the pain still present but now transformed into purpose.

“We’ll continue. We’ll protect the watch. And we’ll protect time,” she murmured firmly.

The Guardian nodded slightly, and before them, the walls of the Nexus shimmered with golden reflections.

A passage began to form, as if the ages themselves were opening the way for them.

“Then go, time waits for no one,” she said, her tone serene but authoritative.

The group stood still for a moment, until Sofia took a step forward. The sadness on her face mixed with a contained anger.

“Why so much sacrifice? How many lives will still be needed to protect this balance?”

The Guardian looked at her with empathy, her eyes glowing with a melancholic light.

“I cannot prevent these losses. I am time. I do not interfere, I only observe. I see the cycles that repeat... the same mistakes, the same sacrifices, and lost loves. I cannot change destiny.”

Valadares crossed his arms, his face hardening.

“So, you’re just a witness?”

The Guardian tilted her head slightly.

“I am the timeline. And time does not judge, does not punish, does not reward. It simply exists.”

Sofia lowered her head, the emptiness left by Daniel’s death squeezing her chest. After a moment, she lifted her gaze and asked in a whisper.

“So... why are we here?”

The Guardian remained serene, but the tone of her voice took on a slight urgency.

“Because you have a choice. And that is something time does not have.”

With a gesture, the walls of the Nexus began to pulse. Mirrored surfaces transformed into living windows, showing fragments of different eras, the past, the future, and the present intertwined like currents in an infinite river.

“Throughout the centuries, interference in the temporal flow has caused fissures. Whenever one of them is ignored, it grows and threatens to destroy the balance.”

Sofia crossed her arms, intrigued.

“So, our role is to correct these fissures?”

The Guardian nodded.

“Yes. You can use the watch to travel to any point in history. Here, in the Nexus, you can see where these disturbances arise and travel to them to correct them.”

Sofia crossed her arms, visibly concerned.

“And now?”

The Guardian looked at Sofia with serenity.

“A critical point is emerging at the end of the 14th century. But before facing that challenge, you must return to your time. The first journey may have some unwanted physical consequences.”

Sofia took a step forward, but hesitated for a moment.

“If you are the timeline, why can’t you stop these fissures from happening?”  
The Guardian looked at her with a sad expression.

“Because I can interfere. Time needs someone with the power to choose to shape it. The watch gives you that power, but the responsibility is yours.”

Valadares asked: “And did the creator of the watch make the same mistakes of the past by using it?”

The Guardian nodded.

“He knew. But he believed the watch could correct the mistakes of the past. It was his greatest triumph... and his greatest failure.”

It was time to return. The group said their goodbyes to the Guardian, and Tomás, holding the watch, took a deep breath before adjusting the hands to the current date. With a decisive click, the mechanism activated. As they crossed the passage, the group felt a slight tug, as if time were adjusting its position in the world. The golden light of the Nexus enveloped them, gradually dissipating as the environment around them transformed. In an instant, they were back.

Sofia blinked, trying to adjust to the familiar dimness of Professor Valadares’s office. The austere furniture, piles of old books, and the wall clock now seemed so mundane, almost unreal, compared to the ethereal glow of the Nexus of Time.

Valadares looked around, visibly relieved.

“We made it...” he murmured, as if he couldn’t fully believe it.

Tomás ran a hand over his forehead, trying to process everything they had lived through.

“We’re back... But what happens now?”

Sofia was still absorbing the contrast between the two realities. The sound of the wall clock filled the silence, marking time as if it were just another ordinary day.

Valadares slowly sat in his chair, as if needing a fixed point in the middle of the storm of thoughts.

“We’re back,” he murmured, more to himself than to the others.

Tomás placed the watch on the table, staring at it as if it carried all the weight of Daniel’s sacrifice. Crossing his arms while looking at the floor, clearly disturbed. The silence between them was dense, weighed down by the recent memory of the Nexus and the responsibility they now carried. It was Professor Valadares who finally broke the silence: “It’s best if we don’t do anything for now. Let’s wait a few days. We need to investigate more about the watch, the Nexus... and the Custódia Temporal. It’s too much information to digest all at once.”

He then said his goodbyes, and each went their own way. The following days passed as if under a fog. They all retreated into their own thoughts, trying to process what they had witnessed — and the true weight of this new mission.

The next weekend, Sofia and Tomás returned to Figueira da Foz. Sofia went to Tomás’s house for dinner, taking advantage of his parents’ absence, as they were away on a trip. Later, she sat on the balcony, where the rhythmic sound of the waves crashing against the rocks offered an illusory tranquility. The golden sky, blending with the Atlantic, reflected an apparent calm — but in her mind, a whirlwind of ideas and concerns reigned.

Tomás appeared with two cappuccinos and approached, sitting beside her.



“It seems... unreal, doesn’t it?” he said, handing her one of the mugs. Sofia let out a soft sigh before replying, a melancholic smile curling her lips slightly.

“More real than I’d like. I can’t stop thinking about what the Guardian said... and about Daniel.”

Her eyes wandered to the horizon, while the sea breeze played with her hair and brought the salty scent. The cappuccino cooled in her hands, ignored. The silence between them stretched, filled only by the whisper of the waves and the whistle of the wind. Sofia kept her gaze fixed on the sea.

Minutes later, inside the house, Tomás was gathering the dishes from dinner. The cozy atmosphere, however, seemed tinged with a silent unease — as if every corner held the words they both avoided saying. The ticking of the wall clock could be heard in the background, marking each second like a silent reminder that, in the end, time never stops.

Suddenly, the doorbell rang, echoing through the house and breaking the serenity. Tomás stood up, still somewhat absorbed, and headed for the door.

“Miguel?” he exclaimed, surprised.

At the door stood Miguel, with his usual smile and a bag of pastries from a local bakery in his hand. Tall, sturdy, with a round face and always cheerful expression, Miguel held a brown paper bag as if it were a gift.

“I brought food. From the look on your face, I thought you might need it,” he joked, entering with the same natural ease as always.

Tomás let out a small smile, though the unease was still visible.

“Make yourself at home, Miguel.”

His friend raised the bag like a trophy. A sweet aroma began to fill the room, announcing his arrival before he said anything else. Tomás smiled, feeling a momentary relief settle in.

“Miguel, pastries? Are you trying to bribe us with sugar? Well... bribe accepted!” Tomás joked.

Miguel entered with a loud laugh, placing the paper bag on the table with a theatrical gesture.

“You’re lucky to have me as a friend. Not just anyone goes through the trouble of being a historian, amateur cook, and superhero for moments of boredom,” he said, before noticing Sofia’s presence, who was watching him with a subtle smile, evaluating his grand entrance.

“I hope I’m not interrupting,” Miguel said, turning to Tomás with a mischievous grin.

Sofia crossed her arms, raising an eyebrow, a mix of skepticism and curiosity.

“Miguel... what are you doing here?”

## The Road of Past

Miguel sighed before falling into a chair next to the table. He grabbed one of the pastries from the bag and took a generous bite, savoring the taste before replying.

“Tomás called me. He told me that... you traveled through time,” he said, placing the pastry on the plate with a slow gesture. Then, he turned to Tomás.

“I’ve been thinking about everything you told me... about the watch, the Nexus... and

Daniel. I know it sounds crazy, but I couldn’t get it out of my head.”

Tomás nodded silently.

“It’s not something you can easily forget.”

Miguel ran a hand through his hair, his eyes fixed on his friend.

“Ever since you told me... it’s like the time around me has changed. Like everything else stopped mattering.”

Sofia, still cautious but now less tense, softened her gaze.

“So... you’re here to help?” she asked, her voice quieter, almost hopeful.

Miguel nodded with a faint smile before finally taking a bite of the pastry.

“I don’t know exactly how I can help, but I know I can’t just sit back. If the watch and the

Nexus are this important, then I want to be part of it.”

Tomás took the floor and motioned for everyone to go to the living room.

“Well, since you’re here and want to help, I think we can start by bringing you up to speed... with more details.”

They sat in the living room, where the watch and the manuscript rested on the coffee table — still, but almost vigilant, like silent witnesses to what was to come. Sofia and Tomás alternated speaking, explaining to Miguel the details he didn’t yet know: the critical point in the 14th century, the words of the Guardian in the Nexus, and the mission that now connected them — a mission that could alter the course of History itself.

Miguel kept his eyes fixed on the watch, as if trying to unravel its hidden secrets. When Tomás finished explaining, he frowned.

“So, the next step is to travel in time again?”

Sofia nodded, her face tense.

“Yes. But we need to be prepared. We have no idea what awaits us or how it might affect us.”

Miguel leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

“Well, it looks like we’re entering a war against time itself.”

Silence fell for a few seconds, until Miguel tried to break the tension.

“But I’m still a bit lost. Who is this Guardian you’ve been talking about?”

Tomás exchanged a glance with Sofia before responding, hesitant.

“You’ll know when the time comes, Miguel.”

Sofia leaned slightly forward, her gaze fixed on the watch.

“We need to decide what the next step is. Time doesn’t wait, and the Guardian’s words made that clear.”

Tomás stood up and looked at his friends with determination.

“Then let’s start planning. If we’ve learned anything recently, it’s that time doesn’t wait. But that doesn’t mean we can’t fight for it.”

The room plunged into a cozy twilight, the walls lined with old books like silent sentinels.

The smell of aged paper mingled with the warm aroma of freshly brewed coffee, creating an almost timeless atmosphere. However, despite the deceptive serenity, Miguel couldn’t shake the strange feeling that something — or someone — was watching them.

There was an invisible energy emanating from the small silver artifact on the table, a silent presence that weighed in the air. Miguel broke the silence with a comment he intended to be lighthearted, but the tension in his voice betrayed the attempt at relaxation.

“It seems like this conversation is getting serious.”

Tomás crossed his arms, shifting his gaze from the watch to Sofia and Miguel.

“True,” he said gravely. “A lot is at stake.”

Miguel felt the weight of the moment. The tension in the room seemed to condense time itself.

“You’re not alone in this.”

Sofia leaned forward, her gaze fixed on the watch.

“We need to adjust the starting point. The last trip had physical effects... nausea, pain. We can’t make the same mistakes.”

Tomás nodded, recalling the discomfort.

Miguel, holding a half-eaten pastry, looked at both of them.

“Right... what’s the plan?”

“Figueira da Foz,” Sofia replied. “That’s where it all began. The Nexus is here. It makes sense to start from here.”

Miguel leaned back on the sofa, processing it all.

“But... where and when?”

Sofia didn't hesitate. The answer came with the clarity of someone who had been silently mulling it over.

“To the 14th century. The Guardian showed us a critical point. A mistake we need to fix.”

Tomás stared at Miguel, resolute.

“And you're coming with us.”

Miguel raised an eyebrow, a mix of surprise and nervous laughter.

“Me?”

Tomás gave a faint smile, but his tone remained serious.

“We need someone we can trust.”

Miguel hesitated. For a moment, time seemed to stretch, as if the moment required more than just an answer. He found himself processing a thousand thoughts, but all it took was

Tomás's gaze — firm, loyal — to dissolve the doubt.

“Alright. Let's do this.”

Sofia leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees, her gaze fixed on the watch on the table.

“We're going to need to prepare. We don't know what we'll find this time, but we have to be ready.”

Miguel looked at her, realizing from her serious expression that the adventure awaiting him was far from simple.

“And what does it mean to be ready?” he asked, his voice softer than he intended.

Tomás answered, his tone heavier than before:

“It means that this time, courage alone won't be enough. We'll need strategy.”

They then began to plan. Words crossed between maps, dates, and possibilities. But behind every sentence, every suggestion, there was something deeper: a silent alliance that was strengthening. As if, even without saying it, they all knew they were about to become not just time travelers, but guardians of the very thread of history.

While they laughed and shared drinks, the tension that still lingered in the air began to dissipate, melting into the conspiratorial lightness of that moment. The laughter stretched out for a few more moments, until gradually, silence began to settle in. Tomás raised his glass, and a serene smile spread across his face.

“To Daniel. And to what still awaits us.”

The others nodded in silence, and for a brief moment, the atmosphere transformed — from fleeting joy to the gravity of what lay ahead. The faint glow of the watch, resting on the table, reflected in their faces like a silent omen of the mission that still awaited them.

Tomás placed the glass down firmly. His eyes, gleaming with determination, revealed that something had ignited within him.

“We can’t wait any longer. It’s now or never. We need to act immediately.”

Sofia looked up, her brow furrowed in surprise.

“Act now? But we were supposed to wait for Professor Valadares to understand better how the time travel works. That’s what we agreed on.”

Tomás leaned in, his voice heavy with urgency.

“Daniel showed us the exact location of the Nexus of Time. If we want to find the Guardian still there — like in 1893 — we need to go now. Every second counts.”

Miguel, who had been absentmindedly playing with his glass, raised an eyebrow.

“And the watch? Will we need it, or can we just go to this Nexus? Can we travel just by being there?”

Tomás nodded.

“Yes, we’ll need it. But we’ll only use it when we’re at the Nexus.”

Sofia took a deep breath, visibly reluctant.

“I understand your urgency, Tomás, but this is a risk. The professor asked us to wait. He’s trying to understand the manuscript, the watch... and the Custódia. We shouldn’t act on impulse.”

Tomás crossed his arms, firm.

“And what if we wait too long? What if it’s too late?”

A silence settled for a moment. Sofia shook her head, pondering.

“You’re right, to some extent. But if something goes wrong, Valadares won’t be there to save us.” She paused, looking them in the eyes.

“If we go, we need to do it cautiously. We can’t play with time.”

Miguel stood up.

“I think the decision is made. Let’s go.”

Tomás’s urgency won out over hesitation. In an instant, they gathered the essentials and left into the night. The full moon bathed Figueira da Foz in pale light, guiding them through the deserted streets. The wind carried the salt of the sea, and the distant sound of the waves seemed to accompany their steps.

They moved along the uneven stones until they reached the hidden trail between

the rocks — the one Daniel had shown them.

“Is this really it?” murmured Miguel, uneasy with the shadows around them. Tomás glanced over his shoulder, offering a half-confident smile.

“Some things never change. Daniel taught us well.”

They continued in silence until they arrived at a discreet nook. The water shimmered softly, reflecting the stars with a supernatural glow.

“It’s there,” Tomás said, nodding toward the spot. “Impossible to forget.”

The three of them approached cautiously. Miguel lingered behind for a moment, his eyes wide as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing.

“So, this is... the Nexus?”

“Not yet,” Sofia replied, adjusting her coat against the cold. “This is just the entrance. But get ready... the next part might be... disorienting.”

Tomás looked at the two of them.

“Are we ready?”

Sofia nodded, determined, while Miguel let out a deep sigh.

“Ready or not, we’re already here.”

They were once again in the shimmering corridor of the Nexus, with its solid stone walls and ancient inscriptions glowing as though they were alive. The energy of the place seemed to vibrate around them, filling them with a mix of awe and respect.

And there she was, the Guardian, waiting patiently, with a presence as imposing as it was serene. Her voice echoed with a supernatural calm.

“You’ve returned, and you’ve brought help.”

Sofia stepped forward without hesitation.

“Yes, we’ve returned, and we’ve brought Miguel. He’ll help us correct the fissures in time.” Miguel, a little shy, took a small step forward, his eyes observing everything around him with curiosity.

“Hello,” he murmured, almost whispering, while giving a discreet wave.

The Guardian turned to him and tilted her head slightly.

“Welcome, Miguel. The responsibility of caring for time is immense, but together you will be stronger. Time is always moving, but there are points where it bleeds. I can show you one of those points... but the decision of how to act will be entirely yours.”

The walls of the Nexus began to pulse gently, emitting a flickering light that filled the corridor with an almost palpable energy. Little by little, the reflective

surface transformed into a window to another time.

“This is the point where time cries out for repair,” the Guardian said, her words falling like stones into still water. “There is a fissure here, a dissonance threatening the stability of the timeline.”

Tomás swallowed, unable to take his eyes off the vision before him.

“How can we repair this?” he asked, his voice hesitant yet determined.

The Guardian extended her hand, and the image shifted to show the Sé Velha in Coimbra, bathed in a soft, almost divine light.

“The timeline can be corrected through a simple, yet essential act. At Sé Velha, you must place this stone from Cabo Mondego,” she said, revealing a small, seemingly ordinary stone in her palm.

Miguel furrowed his brow, observing the stone with skepticism.

“It seems... too simple for something so important.”

Sofia, still uncertain, leaned forward and asked,

“Why a stone from Cabo Mondego? What makes it so special?”

The Guardian fixed her gaze on her, her expression serious.

“The greatest changes begin with simple gestures, but the Pedra do Cabo Mondego has unique characteristics. It serves as a sort of temporal battery, helping to calm the flow of time and stabilize the fissures. But remember, you cannot interact with anyone. Every word, every gesture out of place, can create irreversible consequences.”

Sofia, Tomás, and Miguel nodded in silent understanding, sharing the certainty that no more words were needed.

“We’re ready,” Sofia said, her voice firm.

The Guardian smiled faintly.

“Then go. The next page is about to be written.”

And once again, they prepared to travel through time — Tomás and Sofia with the resolve of those who already knew the weight of the journey, and Miguel with the unease of someone stepping into the unknown for the first time.

Despite Valadares’s warnings not to travel through time before better understanding the implications, Tomás and Miguel were determined to move forward. Sofia’s hesitation contrasted with Miguel’s insatiable curiosity, which had been bubbling ever since he entered the Nexus of Time.

“Don’t you think Valadares is right?” Sofia asked, adjusting the cloak that covered her coat in an attempt to disguise the clothing from another era, while the Nexus’s atmosphere enveloped them.

Tomás hesitated for a moment, his gaze fixed on the horizon.

“Maybe. But he’s not here to stop us... And still, something inside me says we have to go.”

It was a journey to a city Miguel knew like the back of his hand. Before adjusting the watch, the three of them carefully prepared for the trip. They wore long cloaks designed to ensure discretion in any era, disguising their contemporary clothes and giving them a more authentic look, as if they were part of 14th-century Coimbra.

Tomás held the watch firmly, its dial already set for the destination. He felt a slight vibration, as if the artifact were responding to the decision made. Sofia and Miguel moved closer to him, each holding one of his arms. Their expressions, tense but resolute, said it all.

“We need to stick together, or we risk getting separated in time,” Tomás said, tightening his grip on the watch.

Sofia nodded, gripping Tomás’s arm even tighter.

“Don’t let go, whatever happens.”

Miguel, trying to hide his nervousness, forced a smile and grabbed onto Tomás’s other arm.

“Well, it’s too late to turn back now, right?”

The watch glowed intensely in response to the pressure applied. The portal began to form before them, waves of golden light expanding like a disturbed lake.

The watch glowed intensely, responding to the pressure exerted. The portal began to form before them, waves of golden light expanding like a disturbed lake, filling the space with a vibrant, life-filled glow. They passed through the luminous barrier, feeling an irresistible force enveloping their bodies.

The sensation was both strange and familiar, as if every particle of their being was undone and then reconstructed, slightly altered, like a rewritten memory. As the light of the Nexus dissipated, a gust of cold wind surrounded the three of them.

Tomás, Miguel, and Sofia opened their eyes, finding themselves atop a hill that offered a stunning and unsettling view of Coimbra. The city before them seemed straight out of a medieval painting, with the serenity and mystery of the past hanging in the air.

The city below them was both familiar and strange. The silhouette of the Sé Velha rose imposingly against a grey sky, shrouded in heavy clouds. There were no signs of modernity, no cars, paved streets, or contemporary structures. Only a labyrinth of stone buildings, tiled roofs, and narrow alleys crisscrossing like veins in a living city.

The sound of distant bells echoed through the air, blending with the murmur of voices and the neighing of horses. Miguel was the first to break the silence:

“This... is this really real?” His voice trembled, his eyes fixed on the city



stretching below.

Sofia instinctively wrapped herself against the cold wind, her eyes scanning every detail.

“It’s real. We’re here... in the 14th century.”

Tomás took a deep breath, feeling the weight of the watch in his pocket like an anchor between times.

“We’ll go down. We have work to do.”

Miguel placed his hands on his head, his eyes shining with a mix of euphoria and disbelief.

“This is... Coimbra! But this... this is medieval Coimbra! I live here, I know every street, I’ve studied so much about its history... but now... I’m in the past! Seeing it all with my own eyes!”

For Miguel, who knew the modern city like the contours of his own home, what he saw now was almost unreal. The stones he walked on in the 21st century were now before him — alive, raw, heavy with a past that had only existed in books.

Sofia smiled, sharing Miguel’s excitement, although the acrid smell in the air began to churn her stomach. It was as if every breath carried with it a mixture of burned wood, soaked earth, and something denser and more putrid, making the air almost tangible.

“It’s unbelievable. It feels... like another world,” she murmured, instinctively tightening the cloak around her, as if the thick fabric could protect her from the hostile environment.

Tomás, torn between fascination and discomfort, pointed to a group of people descending a muddy road.

“Look at their clothes. They’re so different... and so worn.”

The garments, made of rough fabrics, were patched in several places. Some wore hoods to protect themselves from the cold, others wrapped themselves in tattered rags that barely covered their bodies. They walked with heavy steps, their faces pale, their eyes deep-set — as if they carried the fate of a life too hard. And it was clear, in the way they moved, that the hardships they faced went far beyond the physical.

The Black Plague seemed to creep into every corner of the city, like an invisible, oppressive cloak.

Miguel approached the edge of the hill, his eyes fixed on the city stretching before them.

“The colors are so different... There are no signs, no plaques, just flags and rags hanging.

Everything is... more organic, more raw.”

## The Road of Past

In the distance, black flags with red crosses — symbols of faith and protection against the scourge — waved slowly in the wind. It was impossible to ignore the contrast between the dark fabrics and the ochre tones of the city's stones, which seemed to absorb and return the very melancholy of time.

Sofia pointed to an improvised market, leaning against the walls. Some wooden stalls stood precariously, protected by patched tarps.

"Look over there... it seems like the market. But there's almost nothing for sale." Indeed, the stalls were almost empty. A few merchants offered bundles of herbs, firewood, or small baskets of hardened bread. Hunger was etched into the faces of the few who wandered there, gesturing slowly, as if even the act of bargaining drained them of strength.

"There's not even joy to be found," murmured Tomás, wrinkling his nose. "And the smell... it's horrible."

The odor was unmistakable: death and decomposition mixed with the smoke of firewood, the acrid stench of animal dung, and the open sewage that snaked through the alleys. Sofia covered her nose, trying to block out the stench that seemed to permeate each breath. In the distance, the bell of the Torre de Almedina began to toll. Its deep sound echoed through the hills, a funeral warning that another day of misery had begun.

"Do you think the bell rings for the dead?" Miguel asked, his voice quieter than usual.

"Or for those who are still alive but don't know if they'll survive to the next day," Sofia replied, her eyes fixed on the streets leading to the Sé Velha.

Tomás, more pragmatic, took the watch from his pocket and looked at the others.

"Let's go. We can't waste time. The sooner we do what we came to do, the sooner we can leave."

"This is how they lived... It's nothing like we imagined in books," Sofia said. Miguel looked at his friends, trying to maintain a positive tone.

"True, it's hard, but this is real history. This... is living what we studied."

Tomás widened his eyes, staring at the narrow alleys that grew denser as they neared the historic center, each turn suggesting secrets buried in time.

"Still, we can't let history distract us. We have a mission."

Sofia nodded, clutching the small stone from Cabo Mondego in her hands.

"Right. We place the stone at Sé Velha and leave without speaking to anyone."

The trio descended the hill and approached the city walls. The sound of wooden carriages, hoarse voices, and the cries of children echoed in the distance. Near the entrance, guards armed with spears watched those entering, but their attention seemed distracted, more focused on their own aches and discomforts.

As they crossed the gates, Miguel couldn't hold back a sigh of admiration.

"The walls... They're much more impressive than I imagined. And those towers!"

Tomás nudged Miguel lightly.

"Focus. We're not here as tourists."

"I know, I know..." murmured Miguel, still unable to tear his eyes away from the architecture and the life swirling around them.

As they moved through the streets, the weight of the era began to fall on them like a dense fog. The ground was covered in mud mixed with straw, and the pungent odor of decaying meat grew stronger.

They passed figures bent by disease, with open wounds on their arms and disfigured faces. Some protected themselves with cloths tied around their mouths and noses, while others coughed freely, releasing invisible, threatening particles into the air.

Sofia felt a lump tighten in her throat as she saw a woman carrying a child in her arms — the small body motionless, the eyes closed in irreversible silence.

The woman's face was marked by pain and exhaustion, but it was the vacant look that, for a fleeting moment, met Sofia's gaze, making her shudder. A chill ran down her spine, forcing her to quickly look away — as if she feared facing, for too long, the rawness of that reality.

"This is... unbearable," she murmured, her voice trembling, almost inaudible.

Tomás placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, leaning slightly to look at his pale friend's face.

"We're here to help. Don't forget that."

Sofia nodded slowly, but his words didn't dissipate the turmoil rising in her mind. She was a woman of science — of Physics — someone who had always believed in the rational, the measurable, the intrinsic order of the universe. Yet here... nothing seemed to obey any logic.

"It's like we're interfering with a complex equation... but without knowing all the variables,"

Sofia murmured, almost to herself.

She raised her hand to her forehead, feeling the cold sweat build up. The nauseating odor

— a mix of decay, smoke, and misery — seemed to intensify with every word she spoke.

"Sofia, are you okay?" Tomás asked, concerned.

Before she could answer, the logic of physics gave way to human reaction. The

nausea became unbearable. She staggered, and then bent to the side, overwhelmed by the queasiness, her body rejecting the world around her.

Tomás quickly approached, placing a hand on her back to support her.

"Breathe deeply. Just breathe."

Miguel watched the scene from a short distance, visibly uncomfortable, unsure of how to act.

Sofia straightened herself with effort. Tomás handed her a handkerchief, which she used to wipe her mouth, her movements tense but controlled.

"Sorry," she murmured, her voice weak, trying to regain her composure.

"I just... I just need a moment."

Tomás shook his head, a reassuring gesture.

"You don't have to apologize. This place... it's not easy for anyone."

Sofia looked at him. In her eyes, there was a spark of vulnerability... and something more — a quiet firmness.

"We can't give in. What's happening here... it's bigger than us." Tomás exchanged a glance with Miguel before turning his gaze back to Sofia.

"That's why we have to keep going."

Sofia took a deep breath, trying to push aside the weight that was suffocating her. Finally, she nodded, placing her hands on her knees as she tried to regain her balance.

"Alright. Let's keep going."

Sofia tightened her grip on the stone in her hands, as if seeking strength.

"We'll finish this as quickly as possible. The Sé Velha is right there."

They continued walking toward the old church, blending in with the passersby, trying not to attract attention or raise suspicion. The mission was simple — place the stone and leave before anything could go wrong — but the world around them seemed to conspire against the simplicity of the act. They spotted the Sé Velha from a distance, imposing and silent, its austere facade rising against the gray sky. There hadn't been any indication that it was here, no map or marking to point to this exact place. And yet, something drew them to it — as if this ancient stone house, steeped in centuries of history, was calling for silence and redemption.

Tomás slowed his pace, feeling the weight of the decision growing within him.

"It's there," he murmured. "Not because it has to be... but because it makes sense."

Sofia nodded, as if his words resonated with a thought already born in her. Miguel observed the temple in silence, letting instinct speak louder than reason.

None of them could explain why. But there, in that church, was an echo of time — an ancient vibration, almost invisible, that seemed to intertwine with the mission they held in their hands. And so, as if following an invisible thread woven by the Guardian, they moved forward. Each alley they passed whispered stories of pain, faith, and resistance. The gazes of the people, pale and enigmatic, seemed to carry centuries of suffering on their shoulders. Even the wind, which blew through the stone houses, seemed to carry ancient secrets, whispering warnings that no one dared to interpret. In the distance, the bells of Sé Velha rang with a solemn weight, as if calling to them — or warning them. Each toll resonated with the strength of centuries, reminding them that time, as much as it seemed suspended, never stopped.

As they advanced through the narrow, dark streets of Coimbra, the scene around them turned into a strange mosaic of life and death — shadows that breathed, footsteps echoing like memories, and faces that seemed to emerge from a dream or a forgotten prayer. A priest with a grave expression stood at the entrance of a small makeshift chapel. He recited fervent prayers with a hoarse, tired voice while sprinkling holy water over a small group of people kneeling before him.

"May the Lord have mercy on your souls and deliver you from this plague," he said, his eyes half-closed in deep devotion.

Tomás paused for a moment to observe the scene, but Sofia gave him a gentle nudge on the arm.

"We can't waste time," she whispered, trying to keep her focus on the mission. Further ahead, the sound of hurried footsteps caught their attention. A burly man, wearing torn and stained clothes, was running wildly after a pig that had escaped from its makeshift pen.

"Come back here, you wretched thing!" he shouted, but the agile pig darted into a narrow alley, disappearing in an instant.

Miguel, who was following closely behind, let out a laugh, unable to contain the joy he felt witnessing the comical scene.

"This is surreal. A mix of tragedy and comedy..."

"It's not so funny when you smell it," murmured Tomás, wrinkling his nose as they passed a pile of garbage thrown in the street, mixed with food scraps and other debris.

Sofia glanced at Miguel, who was still radiating with enthusiasm — the stone from Cabo Mondego safely tucked in his pocket — as if the symbolic weight of their mission hadn't touched him. On the contrary, he seemed enchanted by everything around him.

"Are you sure he should be the one carrying the stone?" Sofia murmured to Tomás, subtly pointing at Miguel, who was admiring the mossy facade of a stone house.

"He's committed," Tomás replied with a slight smile. "Besides, I've never seen him this happy. This is the greatest adventure of his life."

Turning a corner, they encountered something that almost made them forget the misery around them. Two children, dressed in patched-up clothes, were playing in the mud with a cloth ball.

Their laughter echoed through the street, a pure and sincere joy that seemed to defy the grim atmosphere they lived in. One of the children, a girl with disheveled hair, stopped playing and looked directly at the trio. She waved shyly and flashed a smile, missing a few teeth here and there.

Sofia smiled back, almost forgetting for a moment the stench, the chaos, and the urgency of their mission.

"Even here, children still find a reason to laugh."

Miguel leaned slightly in her direction, whispering:

"I think that's what keeps us alive, isn't it? The ability to find light, even in the darkness."

Tomás nodded silently, while the bells of Sé Velha rang again, bringing them back to reality.

"We're almost there," he said, looking up, where the church loomed like a sentinel of time.

With each step toward the Sé Velha, the weight of their mission grew, blending with the silent fascination that the place imposed upon them. It was more than just an ancient building — it was a living symbol, immersed in time, carrying echoes and silences that seemed to whisper in their ears. They knew they could not fail. The balance of time depended on that moment.

When they reached the church, its imposing austerity loomed before them. The heavy wooden doors stood ajar, and a distant chant echoed from within, merging with the deep toll of the bells hanging high above.

"This is it," Sofia said, her voice firm, her gaze fixed on the entrance.

Miguel, enchanted, examined every detail of the sculpted facade, his eyes shining as though he were contemplating a painting brought to life. Tomás, no less fascinated, turned to her with a mischievous smile.

"Since we're here... shouldn't we explore a little? It's not every day you visit medieval Coimbra."

Sofia crossed her arms, unyielding.

"We're here to complete a mission, not for sightseeing."

"But..." Miguel began, subtly pointing to a side street that led down to the market.

"No 'buts'," Sofia cut in, her gaze never wavering. "The Guardiã was clear. No

interactions. No detours. Quick and discreet."

They entered the church with measured steps. The sound of their boots echoed on the cold stone floor, and the interior enveloped them in sacred gloom, where light filtered through stained-glass windows, dancing between shadows. Candles flickered in small side altars, casting reflections over absent faces. Sofia scanned the space with her eyes, seeking a point that spoke to her with the same certainty she'd felt in the Nexus.

"Let's place the stone near the main altar."

Miguel, with almost reverent gestures, took the stone from his pocket and handed it to Sofia.

"Are you really sure this will work?"

"We have to trust," she replied, cradling the stone in her hands as if it were a relic.

They moved forward together, silently navigating around a small group of worshippers on their knees. Their faces were pale, some marked by illness, but there was a quiet, ancient faith in them, as if their souls had learned to live between suffering and hope.

Sofia knelt by the altar, placing the stone into a small recess in the stone that seemed to have been carved specifically for it. She stayed motionless for a moment, waiting for something — a sign, a light, a mystical sound. Anything that would confirm the action.

But there were no flashes. No vibrations. No celestial choirs. Only the distant sound of footsteps and the thick silence of the church nave. Doubtful, she adjusted the stone slightly, as if questioning its position. Nothing changed. And then she understood: the absence of fanfare was, in fact, the confirmation.

"It's done," she murmured, rising with a suppressed sigh of relief.

Tomás and Miguel looked at the stone, visibly intrigued.

"Is that it?" Miguel asked, slightly disappointed.

"I thought there'd be... I don't know, something more dramatic."

Sofia shot him an impatient glance.

"I thought there'd be some kind of sign too, but apparently time doesn't work like a spectacle. Now, let's get out of here before we draw any more attention."

Despite some grumbling and curious looks from Tomás and Miguel, Sofia kept the group focused as they left the Sé Velha and headed toward a more discreet part of the city. Miguel couldn't hide his desire to continue exploring.

"Seriously, Sofia, just a small detour. I want to see the Mondego up close."

Sofia stopped and turned to him, hands on her hips.

"Miguel, no. We've done what we came to do. If we stay any longer, we just

increase the risk of making a mistake.”

Tomás tried to intervene, but Sofia was even more direct.

“That’s enough. We’re not here to play. Now, move.”

Despite some discontented expressions, the two followed Sofia in silence until they reached the edge of the city. Sofia turned to them, a little calmer.

“Any unnecessary interference could set off a domino effect. We’re here to correct, not to disturb.”

The group walked quickly through the city streets, keeping out of sight of curious onlookers. After finding a discreet spot, Tomás began adjusting the watch to bring them back to the present.

“Ready?” Tomás asked, looking at the two of them.

“Yes,” they replied in unison.

Tomás activated the watch, and immediately, the glow around them began to intensify, enveloping them in a brilliant light that seemed to vibrate with its own energy. The sensation was of being pulled into a place beyond time and space, as if reality itself were disintegrating around them.

The air thickened, as though the world had sunk into a viscous silence. The movement slowed, distorted, as if time itself had compressed into an invisible dimension. But then something went wrong.

Distracted by the medieval city, Miguel instinctively let go of Tomás’s arm — a small, unconscious gesture. And that was enough. In an instant, an invisible force yanked him out of the transition. He tried to scream, but the sound was swallowed by the energy that surrounded him. His body was thrown against a stone wall with a dull thud, crashing to the ground like a marionette without strings. Sofia and Tomás disappeared into the light, helpless, watching as Miguel was left behind.

When they emerged in the Nexus, the corridor glowed with the same serene calm as always. But their eyes were fixed on the empty space around them. They waited. A second. Then two. Three. Nothing.

“Where’s Miguel?” Tomás whispered, his voice caught in a thread.

Sofia looked around, desperate, her eyes wide, her fingers digging into Tomás’s arm.

“He should be here! He was with us when we activated the watch!” she said, her voice choking with anguish.

Tomás, still kneeling, held the watch tightly against his chest, as if pressing it in the hope of extracting an answer.

“Something went wrong. We saw him get pulled... before the activation. It can only have been that.”



The Nexus remained indifferent. The walls pulsed with the same calm light as always, as if time, in its vastness, had no sympathy for the pain of those who passed through it.

Then, a soft glow announced the arrival of the Guardiã. She appeared before them with her usual fluidity, as though the very fabric of time moulded itself to her presence.

Her calm, deep gaze settled on the two young people.

"Where is Miguel?!" Sofia exploded, taking rapid, uneven steps forward.

The Guardiã tilted her head, her eyes shimmering with serene empathy.

"He's not here."

Sofia stopped, as if struck by an invisible blow.

"Not here?!" she cried, her voice breaking into sobs. "He was with us when we travelled!"

The Guardiã remained still, and her silence seemed even crueler.

— Something in the flow kept him back. Time is unstable. He was left behind.

Tomás stepped forward, his face twisted with frustration.

"Didn't he warn us this could happen?! He could be dead!"

The Guardiã replied with her usual calm, but her words landed like stones.

"You were told that each journey leaves its marks. Time is not linear. Every choice creates ripples—and some are more dangerous than others."

With her eyes welling up, Sofia took a step forward, as if she wanted to grab hold of that ethereal figure and force an answer from her.

"And now? How do we bring him back?"

The Guardiã sighed, knowing the weight of the answer she would have to give.

"He doesn't emit any signal. Miguel is not in any timeline. It's as if time... has erased him."

Her words fell like invisible blades. Sofia staggered, her body rejecting the logic of those sentences. She clung to Tomás, as if only human contact could prevent her from collapsing.

"No..." she whispered, her voice fading, swallowed by the vastness of the Nexus.

Tomás looked at the Guardiã, his face hardening with contained fury.

"I won't accept that. Miguel is out there, and we're going to find him. No matter what it takes."

The Guardiã remained silent for a moment before nodding gravely.

"Every attempt to fix an error generates new ripples. Be prepared for the consequences.

The patch is not always smaller than the crack."

"But... is he dead?" Sofia murmured, her voice caught between hope and despair.

The Guardiã hesitated, and in that brief silence, time seemed to stop, as if it too was waiting for an answer.

"Time has not yet revealed his fate."

Tomás and Sofia exchanged a look filled with panic and helplessness. Miguel was lost—perhaps dead—and time, that relentless judge, refused to pass judgment.

"We can't leave him like this. We can't!" Tomás shouted, his voice trembling with emotion.

Sofia, tears running down her face, fixed her gaze on the Guardiã as if searching for a miracle.

"Help us. Tell us where he is. Do something!"

The Guardiã kept her calm gaze, but her silver eyes reflected something deeper—a sorrow, as if she had witnessed too many losses.

"Miguel no longer emits any energy, at any time."

"What does that mean? That he's disappeared? That... he's dead?" Tomás asked, his voice heavy with disbelief.

"I don't know." The Guardiã replied after a long, tense silence. "All I know is... he's nowhere in time."

Sofia fell to her knees, gripping the watch tightly, as if the pain could tear answers from the silence.

"This can't be happening... He was with us... he was with us..."

Tomás knelt beside her, gripping her shoulders firmly.

"We need to talk to Valadares. Now."

With trembling hands, he pulled out his phone and dialed the professor's number.

Valadares' voice answered on the other end, serene but alert.

"Tomás? Is everything alright?"

"No... it's not," he replied, his voice breaking. "We used the watch and Miguel... disappeared."

There was silence. Then the tense sound of a sigh.

"Disappeared? Are you telling me that... you travelled alone?"

"The Guardiã warned there might be risks, but we thought..." Tomás tried to justify himself, only to be interrupted by the sharp sound of a fist hitting a surface.

"I told you not to try travelling without support!" Valadares roared. "And you took your friend with you? The kid from Coimbra you told me about?!"

Tomás hesitated, then exploded in stumbling words:

"We completed the mission. We were about to leave... but Miguel let go of my arm at the last moment. Something pulled him back. He was thrown against a wall and... he couldn't come with us."

On the other end of the line, Valadares sank into his chair.

"This is exactly what I feared..." he murmured. "You did everything I asked you to avoid."

Sofia grabbed the phone, tears falling down her face.

"Please... help us, professor. He's lost. We don't know where, or when." There was a thick pause. Then, the response.

"I'm on my way. I'll meet you in Figueira. Don't touch anything until I get there."

The call ended. Still shaken, they said their goodbyes to the Guardiã.

Tomás and Sofia, consumed by anxiety, headed to a small local bar. They knew Valadares would take time to get from Lisbon—and until then, time, more than ever, was a silent enemy.

In the bar, they sat in silence, exchanging anxious glances but not engaging in much conversation. The anxiety and the weight of responsibility hung in the air. Time seemed to drag until, finally, the familiar sound of a car parking broke the silence. Valadares entered quickly, his expression tense, and approached Tomás and Sofia, who were waiting, still reeling from the situation.

"Sorry for the delay, I came as fast as I could," Valadares said, trying to mask the fatigue from his journey.

Tomás, with a tired expression, explained the situation as best he could. Sofia, still visibly shaken, was waiting for more answers. The weight of Miguel's loss and the fear of the consequences of their choices weighed heavily on them. Valadares listened intently, his expression growing darker by the moment.

"This is serious," he finally said.

"If Miguel has stopped emitting energy, as the Guardiã mentioned, it means he's either out of time or completely erased from the timeline."

"But is that reversible?" Sofia asked, her voice trembling.

Valadares sighed deeply.

"I don't know. That depends on where he is, or... if he still is."

## The Road of Past

The silence that followed was thick, almost tangible—only broken by the muffled clinking of glasses and the distant murmur of voices in the bar. Every second dragged on like an eternity. Tomás sat still, but his nerves betrayed his unease.

He rubbed his hands on his trousers in short, mechanical gestures, his gaze lost on the floor, as though he were searching for an explanation for what they had lost in the wooden lines beneath him.

"Dead... in the fourteenth century. How are we going to explain this to his family?" Tomás asked, turning to Valadares, his eyes filled with desperation.

"What will we say? That he travelled through time with us and died on a mission in medieval Coimbra? They'll think we're mad!"

Valadares rubbed his face with his hands, visibly exhausted. The tension in his gaze was evident.

"There's no explanation. Not to the police, not to his family, to no one. If we tell the truth, we'll end up in a psychiatric hospital."

Sofia shook her head, tears streaming down her face.

"But we can't just... ignore this. He has a family. They'll look for him, they'll want answers!"

Tomás stopped, fists clenched, frustration visible.

"They can't know the truth. No one can. We need to think of something else."

"Like what, Tomás? Do we make up a story or say he ran away? That's worse than saying nothing." Sofia said, her voice heavy with pain and frustration.

Valadares raised a hand, the gesture firm but restrained.

"Lower your voices," he warned, his tone grave and controlled, his eyes scanning the surrounding space. "We're in a bar. It's not wise to raise suspicions."

He paused briefly, leaning slightly over the table.

"We need to think clearly. This situation requires more caution than you're applying."

Tomás and Sofia remained silent, attentive.

"Listen carefully: there are no easy solutions. But if you go to the police... or contact

Miguel's family, you'll condemn not only your lives, but any hope of understanding what really happened."

Sofia wiped her eyes, but panic was evident in her expression.

"So, what do we do?"

Tomás ran his hands forcefully across his face, as though trying to scrape the guilt off his skin. He then collapsed into the chair, defeated, but not beaten.

“I won’t give up on him.”

Valadares looked at him, his eyes hard but full of understanding.

“No one is giving up,” he replied firmly, directing his gaze first at Tomás, then at Sofia, as if calling them back to lucidity.

With a contained sigh, he adjusted his glasses and lowered his voice slightly:

“But for now, we need discretion. Continue your lives as if nothing happened. Behave as you always have, avoid raising suspicions.”

He paused briefly.

“In the meantime, I’ll try to understand what caused the failure. What made Miguel disappear... and if there’s still a way to find him.”

Sofia and Tomás exchanged glances, the pain evident on both their faces. None of the options seemed fair, but reality was cruel. They were trapped in an impossible situation where the truth was unbelievable and the lies insufficient.

After the tense conversation in the café, Tomás, Sofia, and Valadares made an inevitable decision: to return to the Nexus. The Guardiã had been clear—Miguel no longer existed on any timeline, but they refused to accept that absence as final. They needed to try once more.

They entered the luminous corridor with quiet steps, Valadares now leading the way. As soon as their feet touched the ground of that timeless space, the professor stopped, his eyes fixed on the unchanging grandeur surrounding them. There was a dissonance between the serenity of the place and the turmoil they carried in their chests. The pulsing light of the Nexus seemed indifferent to the human urgency driving them.

The Guardiã appeared in silence, like an ethereal apparition. Her presence radiated serene authority, but her eyes betrayed an ancient sadness. Valadares adjusted his glasses with a nervous gesture, feeling the weight of responsibility more than ever.

“We’ll return to the same time,” he said, in a resolute but tired tone. “Perhaps we’ll find something... a clue, a trace.”

The Guardiã looked at him for a long moment before answering, her voice serene as it echoed through the space.

“Miguel is not here. There is nothing more to be done. I understand your will... but meddling with time again may bring consequences you don’t understand. You should not continue.”

Despite the warning, Tomás moved forward. He didn’t hesitate. His thumb pressed the clock’s mechanism with the firmness of someone who had already accepted the weight of what was to come. The Guardiã watched in silence, her

eyes filled with centuries. When she finally spoke, it wasn't to stop them—but to remind:

“Be careful. Not everyone who travels finds what they seek.”

The journey took them back to the fourteenth century, to a Coimbra immersed in fog and decay. The streets were covered in heavy dampness, the smell of death permeated the air. Eyes avoided each other, and those who walked seemed like shadows of themselves.

Valadares, despite the visible suffering around them, could not hide his astonishment. That living city—once only in books, in lessons, in memories—now unfolded before him with brutal clarity. History, now, was flesh, bone, and misery.

For hours, they searched streets, alleys, and gazes. Nothing. No sign of Miguel. When they returned to the Nexus, they were exhausted—physically and emotionally.

The Guardiã was waiting for them, motionless, like a marble sentry. She asked no questions. She didn't need to.

“Time is not easily changed,” she said. “But every change can trigger repercussions that even the wisest cannot foresee.”

She paused, her silver eyes diving into theirs.

“Miguel has disappeared from all timelines. Now, I ask you: what will you choose? The Miguel you knew... or the world you can still save?”

The silence that followed was thick, as if it were the very fog of Coimbra itself. No response came. Perhaps because none would suffice.

When they left the Nexus, they were no longer the same. Miguel remained lost—perhaps irretrievable—and despite the pain, they knew that time did not stop. There were still missions to be fulfilled, responsibilities to be taken. And while they could not change the past, they still had the courage to protect the future.

The days that followed were marked by a heavy silence. Within each of them, the real noise was something else: the sound of guilt, mourning, and uncertainty, echoing like a silent thunder in the heart of each one. First, the pain and anguish of seeing the unknown Daniel, who had been such an important help in their lives, sacrificing himself to save the group. And before they could fully process that moment, Miguel had also been swept away by the flow of time. In just two journeys, two lives had been devastated.

Tomás and Sofia carried the weight of what they considered their own failures, although both dealt with guilt in different ways.

Tomás felt like the epicenter of it all. It was his grandfather's clock and the manuscript that had led them into these time-travel adventures. Each decision seemed to crash down on his shoulders, turning every second into an exercise in self-questioning.

Sofia, on the other hand, drowned herself in rationalisations. As a woman of physics and rationality, she tried to find logical explanations for everything they had faced, but the loss of Miguel shredded any theory she could devise. “If we had waited,” she thought. “If I had insisted more, he’d be here.”

Meanwhile, Professor Valadares felt his responsibility was even greater. He believed he was the only one capable of foreseeing the dangers, of guiding the young ones through these webs of time. But he hadn’t been present when they needed him most. After the 1893 trip, he’d given them space to process the experience, a mistake that now seemed irreparable.

Guilt was a thread that connected the three of them, but it manifested differently. While Tomás and Sofia isolated themselves in their own thoughts, Valadares threw himself into work. He spent nights on end translating, deciphering, and researching, sleeping only two or three hours a day. The obsession to find answers and perhaps a way to correct the mistakes was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

It was during one of those endless nights—amid stacks of dusty books and sheets of notes scattered across the floor of his tiny office—that Valadares had the breakthrough. Guilt and fatigue had clouded his vision for weeks, but now, as he leafed through the notebook found at Tomás’s grandfather’s house, he suddenly understood: these weren’t just records.

They were meticulous notes from the *Arcana Temporis*, a legendary manuscript, allegedly kept for centuries by a Franciscan order in Évora. Hand-copied with monastic rigor, the work had been described in ancient chronicles as a compendium of forbidden knowledge—though the monks themselves, in marginal notes, confessed they didn’t understand its true purpose. The original, however, had been lost forever in a fire that consumed the chapel where it had been hidden.

Valadares placed the pen he had been holding down, his eyes fixed on the page before him. The revelation was overwhelming: the *Arcana Temporis* might contain vital answers about time travel—perhaps even the secrets of the Nexus, the clock, and, most importantly, a possible way to rescue Miguel.

He leaned back in his chair, his fingers drumming nervously on the manuscript. The answer had always been there, as obvious as the hum of the portal: if the original *Arcana Temporis* had been destroyed in Évora, in the great fire of 1851, all they had to do was travel to the city before the tragedy and recover the manuscript—perhaps, with that, uncover the mechanisms of time.

The next morning, Valadares woke Tomás at seven. He hadn’t slept. The pages remained open on the table, and the symbols of the *Arcana Temporis* spun in his mind like constellations to decipher. When Tomás and Sofia entered the office, still rubbing their eyes, they found the professor already standing—determined, though visibly exhausted.

“If the *Arcana Temporis* explains how the clock distorts the flow of time... maybe it reveals a flaw. An interval. A gap that will allow us to bring Miguel back,” he murmured, almost to himself.

He stood abruptly, the chair creaking under the weight of the decision. There was no more time for hesitation.

“The manuscript Tomás found, which we thought was just a compilation of notes... they are fragments of the *Arcana Temporis*. The original is—was—at the Church of São Francisco in Évora. If we recover it before the fire of 1851, we may finally understand how the clock works.”

He looked them in the eyes, an unshakable gleam in his expression.

“We’re not here to save the past. We’re here to secure the future. And, with luck, to save Miguel.”

The silence that followed was thick. Tomás and Sofia absorbed every word, while a new weight settled in their thoughts—made of hope and uncertainty.

Sofia, true to her rationality, was the first to speak:

“To recover it... we have to travel in time again.”

Valadares nodded slowly, his shoulders hunched from the fatigue of carrying so much.

“Precisely. Before the fire. Before everything is lost forever. This may be our last opportunity.”

Tomás stood up, and on his face, there was no trace of hesitation—only conviction.

“Then, what are we waiting for? Let’s go to Évora.”

Sofia hesitated, a shadow of concern crossing her face.

“Wait... shouldn’t we think this through better? What if we create more fissures trying to save the manuscript?”

Valadares looked directly at her, the seriousness of his words almost overwhelming.

— Sofia, this may be our only chance to understand how the clock and time travel work.

The doubt lingered in the room, but the consensus seemed inevitable. With their eyes on the clock resting on the table—the same one that had so often led them to unimaginable places—Tomás responded firmly.

— But don’t we need the Cabo Mondego stone to stabilise the flow of time? — Sofia questioned, still visibly unsure.

Valadares sighed, adjusting his glasses with a slow movement, as if searching for the right words.

— No, Sofia. The Guardiã only referred to the stone when there are fissures in time. In this case, we are the ones travelling, so in principle, it shouldn’t be necessary to use it.



Sofia furrowed her brow, a new doubt emerging.

— And didn't Daniel explain to us that travellers usually depart from Figueira? I experienced horrible side effects on the last trip, leaving Lisbon. Shouldn't we be mindful of that?

Tomás, trying to ease the tension, intervened quickly.

— Oh, you also threw up in Coimbra, didn't you?

Sofia, not allowing herself to be distracted, responded firmly.

— Yes, but that wasn't caused by time travel, Tomás. It was the environment itself, the conditions and the smells of Coimbra at that time that caused it.

Valadares, who had been silent until then, looked at them with a serious and direct expression.

— Even if there are side effects, this journey cannot wait. We need to act quickly. Every minute we spend debating could be crucial to saving Miguel.

— We're going to recover the manuscript.

The group prepared for another time journey. This time, they were heading to Évora, in 1850, in a race against time to save the *Arcana Temporis* from being forgotten. The atmosphere in the room became even heavier. The prospect of yet another journey—with all the risks it entailed—was both terrifying and inevitable. But, for the first time in days, a spark of purpose began to glow between them.

Sofia crossed her arms, trying to process the urgency implied in Valadares' words.

— So, the only chance is to find it before the fire destroys it?

Valadares nodded, his tone grave.

— Exactly. We know the exact location and moment of the fire. If we act swiftly and precisely, we can locate the manuscript and bring it back to the present before it is lost forever.

Tomás cast a brief glance at Sofia, then at Valadares. The hesitation still shadowing his eyes faded, replaced by firm determination.

— We have no choice. Let's go to Évora.

The decision was made.

But this time, the preparations required a different kind of caution—more calculated, more sober. Valadares' office, now converted into an impromptu headquarters, overflowed with unfolded maps, leather-bound books, and scientific instruments, as if it were a tangible extension of the professor's

meticulous mind. The air was thick with the smell of old paper, dust—and urgency.

Modern clothes were carefully folded and replaced by period-appropriate attire, sourced from the university's collection. Tomás adjusted the collar of his waistcoat with calm, while Sofia furrowed her brow, struggling with the many layers of fabric from her long dress.

— I'll never get used to this, — she grumbled, adjusting her skirt with an irritated gesture.

Valadares, already wearing an old-fashioned coat that gave him the discreet air of a nineteenth-century merchant, approached the table where the clock rested.

— We're going a year before the fire. Évora, 1850, — said Tomás, carefully adjusting the dial.

Sofia took a deep breath. The nervousness, though contained, was evident in her eyes.

— This time, we know where we're going. That should help.

Valadares adjusted his glasses, his eyes fixed on the clock.

— The goal is clear: recover the *Arca Temporis* and leave before anyone notices us.

Tomás held the clock with both hands. The silence in the room was dense, like the moment before a dive.

— Ready?

Sofia and Valadares exchanged glances. Without words, they nodded.

The three of them formed a tight circle around the clock, their shoulders nearly touching. Tomás activated the mechanism, and immediately, the golden light began to pulse—warm, alive, vibrant, like the beat of a heart. The feeling of displacement was instantaneous: a soft yet inexorable pull, as though their bodies were briefly undone and then reconstructed in a new era.

When the light faded, they were standing in the bustling Praça do Giraldo, in the year 1850. Men with top hats and long coats haggled over oil prices at the corners, while women with black shawls and voluminous skirts bartered with fishmongers, whose calls in the Alentejo dialect echoed between the whitewashed façades. Carts creaked over the uneven cobblestones, drawn by weary mules that left behind a trail of hay and manure. The smell was unmistakably of the century: a dense mixture of hot olive oil, beeswax, and dry earth.

Sofia wrapped the old shawl tightly around her shoulders, trying to shield herself from the biting wind. Still uncomfortable with the layers of her period dress, she looked around, both fascinated and relieved to see that, despite the strangeness of their clothes, they weren't attracting unwanted attention.

— It's incredible... it's like we've stepped into a living painting.

Tomás, more at ease in his period waistcoat, casually smoothed his coat. His gaze immediately fixed on the Igreja de São Francisco, standing at the far end, like a silent sentinel, separated from the square by narrow, shaded streets.

— Let's go. What we're looking for is over there. — He gestured discreetly with his head.

Without wasting time, they began crossing the square, blending in with the ebb and flow of the city. Valadares, adjusting his coat and glasses, leaned slightly forward, as if preparing for a dive.

— Remember: absolute discretion. The *Arcana Temporis* is in the church. The sooner we find it, the sooner we get out of here.

Valadares cast one last glance at the church and adjusted his glasses before starting to walk. The three of them moved through the narrow streets of Évora, the muffled sound of their footsteps blending with the lively atmosphere of the city.

— The sacristy is the most likely place to find the manuscript. It's where old documents are usually kept, — Valadares said, not slowing his pace.

— And where the Custódia might be waiting for us. They've been following us, they know where we've been. We barely escaped in Figueira... if it wasn't for Daniel, they'd have caught us, — Sofia recalled, glancing around with renewed vigilance.

— It's a possibility. We need to stay alert, — Tomás agreed.

When they reached the church courtyard, the atmosphere shifted. The bustle of the square was left behind. The main entrance to the church loomed before them, imposing yet wrapped in a strange silence, as though the building itself was watching them.

Valadares paused for a moment, assessing the movement around them. Then, he gestured toward a side entrance, more discreet, half-hidden between shadows and ivy.

— This is the less obvious way. Let's go this way.

The door creaked open with a soft groan, revealing a dark and narrow corridor leading into the church. The sound of voices and footsteps outside faded, replaced by an almost oppressive silence.

The sacristy was a modest room, with sturdy wooden cabinets lined up against the walls. The smell of wax candles and old parchment hung in the air.

— Start searching. It should be in one of the cabinets, — Valadares said, already examining the carvings on the wooden doors.

Tomás and Sofia split up, rifling through drawers and shelves in search of the *Arcana Temporis*. Time seemed to stretch, each second heavy with the tension of

knowing they could be interrupted at any moment.

It was Sofia who found the box, hidden behind an icon of Saint Jerome in the dark sacristy.

— Here! — she called, keeping her voice low so as not to echo through the stone walls.

Valadares approached, his steps muffled by the ancient dust, and opened the box. Inside, wrapped in cracked leather, lay the *Arcana Temporis*. The pages, as fragile as butterfly wings, were covered in symbols.

— This is it, — murmured Valadares, his fingers hovering over the diagrams as though touching something sacred.

Tomás moved closer, the shadow almost swallowing him whole.

— Finally... but it's not safe yet.

Outside, the silence of the convent felt too heavy. Sofia was about to speak...

— We need to leave before...

A sharp crack interrupted her. Footsteps. Fast. And then, voices.

— Recherchez partout! Ils ne peuvent pas être loin! — "Search everywhere! They can't be far!" — echoed a command in French, followed by the unmistakable sound of a sword being drawn.

Valadares paled.

— They've found us. We need to run and protect the clock... and the *Arcana*.

Tomás swallowed hard.

— French? Here?

— Apparently, the Custódia operates in every year, — Valadares hissed, closing the box and pushing them toward a narrow door at the back of the sacristy.

— And they must know we've tampered with things we shouldn't have.

The tunnel behind the door was narrow, the air smelling of mildew and fear. They moved forward blindly, Sofia leading with the candle, until Tomás grabbed her arm.

— Wait... did you hear that?

Ici! Des traces sur la poussière! — "Here! Footprints in the dust!" — someone shouted in French, no more than ten metres behind them.

— Run! — Valadares ordered, his voice cracking.

The group sprinted down the tunnel, the *Arcana Temporis* box pounding against the professor's chest like a borrowed heart. When they finally emerged into the outer courtyard, the blinding sunlight hit them. Two horses neighed in the distance, tethered to an abandoned cart.

— Blend in with the pilgrims! — Sofia said, pointing to a group heading towards the cathedral. But even there, among the simple clothes of the villagers, one man stood out: a dark-coated figure, binoculars in hand, watching the courtyard.

The chase was intensifying. The echoes of the *Custódia Temporal*'s footsteps grew closer, reverberating through the tunnel's walls. When they turned a corner, they came face to face with a group of men dressed in black.

— You're trapped! — one of the *Custódia* members shouted in Portuguese, advancing with a relentless gaze. He raised a bayonet, the blade gleaming faintly in the dim light of the corridor. The long, sharp weapon radiated a silent threat, its imposing presence reflecting the imminent danger.

— You can't escape, — he said, his voice firm, full of authority.

The air grew tense, the silence broken only by the echoes of the approaching pursuit. Before the *Custódia* men could advance, a figure emerged from the shadows — as if the very darkness had created him to prevent the worst. A hooded man, cloaked in a brown robe that billowed solemnly, moved forward in silence. His presence absorbed the light around him, making him almost unreal.

In his raised hand, a simple wooden cross shimmered — not reflecting the weapons, but as if it recognised, by itself, the imminent threat.

— Not here, — he said, in a deep, measured voice, but one filled with absolute authority. The space around him seemed to shrink, vibrating with a silent energy, serene yet overpowering.

The *Custódia* men exchanged uncertain glances. The closest one took a hesitant step forward, his gaze fixed on the hooded figure. When he advanced, defiantly, the stranger slowly raised the cross — not as a weapon, but as a sacred wall. And none of them dared cross it.

— Someone protects this territory. Leave. — The man said, his voice unwavering, as powerful as the movement that accompanied it.

For a moment, the *Custódia* men remained still, studying the unknown figure. But, as if something within them had given way, they took a step back, and the group's leader gestured for his companions to withdraw.

— This is not over, — he muttered, casting a fierce look before disappearing into the shadows.

The figure did not move, keeping the cross raised as an unshakable symbol of resistance. Only then, in a low but urgent voice, did he speak.

— Follow me. It's not safe to stay here. — he said, his voice soft yet full of urgency.

Tomás hesitated, but it was Sofia who took the first step, exhausted and with no other choice. The group followed the mysterious man through narrow, winding streets, still recovering their breath from the escape. No one spoke; each stayed

alert, listening for any sound or shadow.

They finally reached a small, isolated chapel, shrouded in dimness. The man opened the heavy wooden door and gestured for them to enter.

— Quickly, — he said, his tone low but firm.

The inside of the chapel was simple, but welcoming. Old wooden pews lined up before a modest altar, lit only by candles and a simple cross. The smell of wax and damp stone filled the air, as soft shadows danced on the walls.

The man lowered his hood, revealing a round face marked with gentle wrinkles, like the bark of an ancient tree from the Alentejo. His short, grey beard, tinged with white streaks contrasting with the warm tone of his skin, framed a warm, almost paternal smile. His dark, small, penetrating eyes gleamed with sharp intelligence, as though he could read the hidden secrets in the spaces between souls.

His thick eyebrows almost met at the centre, accentuating a stern look that was contradicted by the sweetness in his gaze. He wore a worn Augustinian habit, cinched with an old leather belt, and his robust body betrayed years of working in the monastery gardens under the relentless Alentejo sun. In his large, calloused hands, he held a dark wooden rosary, which his fingers passed over automatically, as if praying to keep the world from falling apart. On his forehead, a birthmark shaped like a crescent moon — considered a divine sign by the villagers — completed his unusual figure.

— I am Brother Martinho, of the Augustinian Order. And you?

Valadares gave a slight nod of his head, his body still tense.

— I am Valadares. These are Sofia and Tomás. We're... passing through.

— Passing through? — Martinho repeated, intrigued. He observed each of them carefully, as though trying to see beyond the words.

Sofia hesitated, but finally spoke:

— We seek shelter. And perhaps some answers.

The friar tilted his head slightly, evaluating her sincerity.

— Answers, you say? This is not the place where they are usually found. But if you seek shelter, God does not close the door to those who knock with truth in their hearts.

Martinho crossed his arms, leaning slightly forward.

— But tell me, who were those men chasing you? They seemed determined to capture you.

Sofia and Valadares exchanged quick glances. Tomás tried to intervene but hesitated. It was Sofia who finally spoke, with a carefully controlled voice.

— They're treasure hunters. We're looking for an ancient artifact, and they want

to steal it.

Martinho furrowed his brow, clearly suspicious.

— An artifact, you say? And what kind of treasure justifies such violence?

Valadares adjusted his glasses, choosing his words carefully.

— It's an object of great cultural and spiritual value. Something that must be protected, not exploited.

The friar held their gaze for a few moments before slowly nodding his head.

— I understand. There are many who lose their soul for gold and power. I hope your intentions are different.

Sofia nodded, maintaining her composure.

— Believe that they are. We just want to do what's right.

Martinho studied them for another moment, as if pondering what he had just heard. Then, finally, he gave them a small smile and gestured towards the altar.

— Then, join me. You surely need more than answers right now.

The friar led them towards the altar, where several benches were arranged to resemble an improvised sitting room. He brought bread, cheese, and a jug of water from a side pantry, insisting that they sit down.

"Eat. You look like you've weathered a storm," he said with a welcoming smile.

The group accepted Friar Martinho's offer, though Valadares remained wary, carefully observing each of the friar's movements.

Friar Martinho looked at the group, visibly uncomfortable but with a serene expression, the kind of calm determination that comes from deep faith. In his hand, a candle flickered in the draft—a fragile light, yet constant, like a lighthouse in the midst of a storm.

"I know your purposes are greater than I can understand," he said with a calm voice.

"But I see the truth in your eyes, and truth is God's work. If I can help, I will do what is necessary."

Valadares leaned slightly forward, arms crossed, studying the friar intently. Martinho held his chin high, his eyes shining with the serene conviction of someone who has already chosen their path.

"God gives us life so that we may live it with purpose. If my role is to help you, so be it."

Valadares paused, watching the friar carefully. He felt that now was the time to speak the truth, no matter how difficult it was to share such an extraordinary revelation with a monk from the nineteenth century. With a deliberate gesture, Valadares pointed to the watch in Tomás's hand, motioning for him to show it

to Friar Martinho.

“What we are trying to do, Friar Martinho, is not simple. We’ve come from 2024, and this watch is the key to time travel. With it, we travel to different periods in history.

I am a History professor in 2024, and we’ve come here to recover a lost manuscript, the *Arcana Temporis*, in the hope of better understanding the workings of time, and perhaps, finding a way to save our friend Miguel, who disappeared on a time travel journey.”

Friar Martinho stared at the watch, his eyes gleaming with almost supernatural curiosity. Remarkably, he did not hesitate to believe them. After a brief silence, he spoke with firm resolve:

“I see the truth in your eyes. As Thomas Aquinas said: Truth cannot contradict reason. What you are telling me may seem impossible, but I believe in you and your mission. I will do whatever I can to help.”

Sofia smiled faintly, touched by the friar’s words.

“Thank you, Friar. It’s good to have someone on our side.”

Martinho nodded and pointed to a door at the back of the chapel.

“This way. It’s a discreet exit that leads to an alley. But be careful.”

The group followed him quickly through the sacristy, their footsteps muffled by the creaking wooden floorboards. They barely had time to react before a burst of an explosion hit the altar, spreading flames across the area.

The smell of burning wood mingled with the scent of melted wax, and Tomás cried out as he realised the thick-covered book they were carrying had begun to catch fire.

“The book!” Sofia exclaimed, trying unsuccessfully to smother the flames with her hands.

“It’s lost! We can’t stop now!” Valadares shouted, pulling them towards the exit.

When they reached the alley, the last pages of the book turned to ash, carried away by the wind.

After reaching a safe place, an uncomfortable silence fell over the group. Valadares was the first to break it, still panting:

“I can’t believe it...” He took off his glasses, rubbing his temples with trembling fingers, frustration clear on his face.

The group turned to the friar, who, adjusting the crucifix on his chest with an automatic gesture, declared:

“I know every alley in this city. It won’t be difficult to find you a hiding place to continue your journey.”

They arrived at an old wooden door. Martinho pushed it open with force,



revealing a narrow alley shrouded in darkness. The moon shone faintly, casting shadows that danced on the stone walls.

“We don’t have much time. Let’s go,” Martinho said.

The group followed in single file, moving quickly and silently. But the sound of voices and footsteps echoed through the streets, growing closer.

“They’re cornering us,” murmured Tomás, clutching the manuscript against his chest.

Tomás took the watch from his pocket, his fingers trembling as he adjusted the coordinates.

“If we open the portal now, we can escape before they find us.”

The footsteps grew louder, and the voices of the Custódia Temporal ripped through the silence of the alley:

“Search everywhere! They’re here!”

Friar Martinho remained still, holding a candle in his hand, which flickered slightly. With a serene smile that disarmed, he looked at Tomás and Sofia.

“Do not fear for me. My faith guides me. You have a greater purpose. Protect what is important.”

Tomás gripped the watch tightly, sweat running down his fingers.

“I think we should take him with us. If not, they’ll kill him,” Tomás said, his voice filled with urgency.

Friar Martinho raised his hand in a definitive gesture.

“Don’t worry about me. My place is here. My presence distracts them... Your mission is greater than my life.”

Tomás, fists clenched, turned to the friar, his voice breaking with anger.

“Not again! Daniel was left behind, and look what happened! I won’t repeat this!”

Sofia looked between the two, her eyes troubled.

“Tomás... he’s trying to help us!”

“Helping isn’t dying!” Tomás shouted, fear and rage mixing in his voice.

At that moment, a flash of light from a candle illuminated the entrance to the alley. Three figures in dark overcoats advanced, their bayonets gleaming under the moon like wolf’s teeth.

The tallest raised his blade towards Martinho, the smile distorted by the reflection of the cold steel.

“It’s over now. No one escapes the Custódia.”