

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JAMES ROLLINS



THE EYE OF GOD

A SIGMA FORCE NOVEL

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JAMES
ROLLINS

wm
WILLIAM MORROW
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DEDICATION

To Dad

Who gave us the wings . . . and all the sky to fly high

EPIGRAPH

The distinction between the past, present and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion.

— ALBERT EINSTEIN

CONTENTS

Dedication

Epigraph

Notes from the Historical Record

Notes from the Scientific Record

Prologue

First: Crash & Burn

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Second: Saints & Sinners

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Third: Hide & Seek

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-one

Chapter Twenty-two

Chapter Twenty-three

Chapter Twenty-four

Fourth: Fire & Ice

[Chapter Twenty-five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Chapter Thirty-one](#)

[Chapter Thirty-two](#)

[Chapter Thirty-three](#)

[Chapter Thirty-four](#)

Tails

[Author's Note to Readers: Truth of Fiction](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by James Rollins](#)

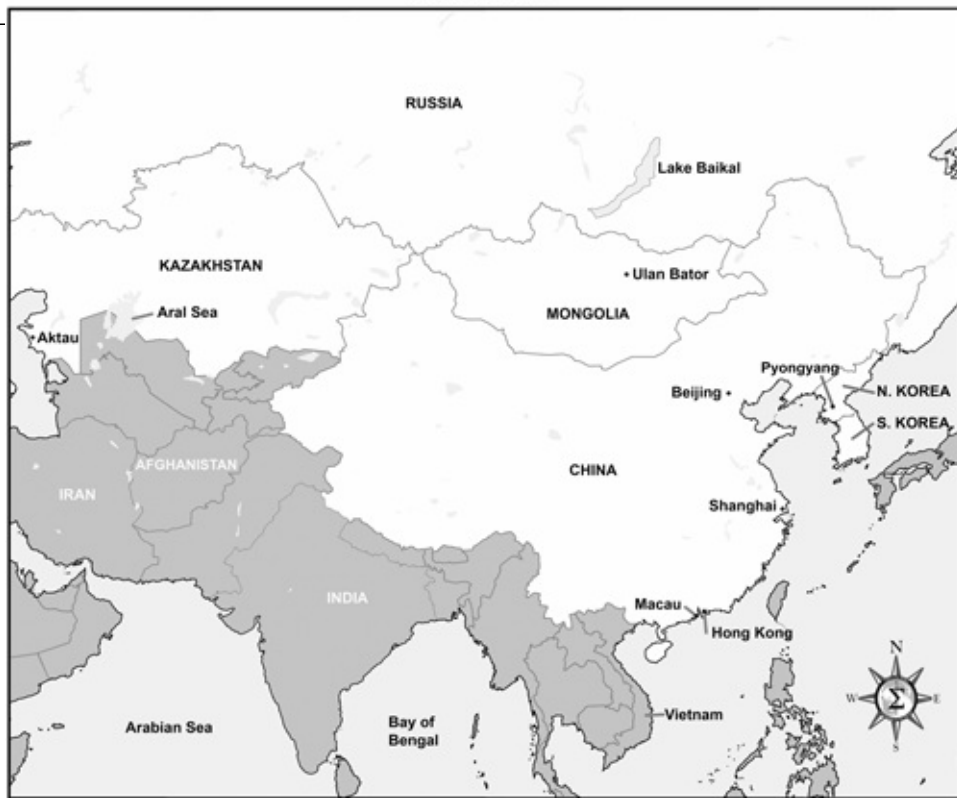
[Praise for James Rollins and the Sigma Force Novels](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

EURASIA



NOTES FROM THE HISTORICAL RECORD

WHAT IS THE TRUTH? When it comes to the *past*, that's a difficult question to answer. Winston Churchill once stated that *History is written by the victors*. If he's right, then what historical documents can truly be trusted? What has been written down only goes back some six thousand years, tracking only the briefest steps of humans on this planet. And even that record is full of gaps turning history into a frayed and moth-eaten tapestry. Most remarkable of all, down those ragged holes many of history's greatest mysteries have been lost, waiting to be rediscovered—including events that mark pivotal shifts in history, those rare moments that change civilizations.

One such moment occurred in AD 452, when the ravaging forces of Attila the Hun swept through northern Italy, destroying all in their wake. Ahead of his barbarian horde, Rome was all but defenseless, sure to fall. Pope Leo I rode out of Rome and met Attila along the banks of Lake Garda. They spoke in private, in secret, with no written record of what transpired. After that meeting, Attila turned away from certain victory, from the very sacking of Rome by his barbarians, and promptly left Italy.

Why? What had transpired at that conclave to turn Attila away from certain victory? History holds no answer.

Turn this page to discover how close we came to destroying ourselves, a lost moment in time when Western civilization itself came close to shattering upon the point of a sword—a blade known as the Sword of God.

NOTES FROM THE SCIENTIFIC RECORD

WHAT IS REALITY? It's both the simplest question to answer—and the hardest. Over the ages, it has baffled both philosophers and physicists. In *The Republic*, Plato described the *true* world as nothing more than a flickering shadow on a cave wall. Oddly enough, millennia later, scientists have come full circle to a similar conclusion.

The very page this is written upon (or the e-reader in hand) is made mostly of *nothing*. Stare more deeply at what appears solid, and you discover a reality made up of masses of atoms. Tease apart those atoms, and you find a tiny hard nucleus of protons and neutrons, encircled by empty shells that hold a few orbiting electrons. But even those fundamental particles can be split tinier: into quarks, neutrinos, bosons, and so on. Venture deeper yet, and you enter a bizarre world occupied only by vibrating strings of energy, which perhaps may be the true source of the *fire* that casts Plato's shivering shadows.

The same strangeness occurs if you stare *outward*, into the night sky, into a vastness beyond comprehension, a boundless void dotted by billions of galaxies. And even that enormity may just be *one* universe among many, expanding ever outward into a multiverse. And what of our own universe? The newest conjecture is that all that we experience—from the tiniest vibrating string of energy to the massive galaxy spinning around a maelstrom of reality-ripping black holes—may be nothing more than a *hologram*, a three-dimensional illusion that, in fact, we may all be living in a created simulation.

Could that be possible? Could Plato have been right all along: *that we are blind to the true reality around us, that all we know is nothing more than the flickering shadow on a cave wall?*

Turn this page (if it is a *page*) and discover the frightening truth.

PROLOGUE

Summer, AD 453 Central Hungary

The king died too slowly atop his wedding bed.

The assassin knelt over him. The daughter of a Burgundy prince, she was the king's seventh wife, newly wed the night prior, bound to this barbarian lord by force of marriage and intrigue. Her name, Ildiko, meant *fierce warrior* in her native tongue. But she did not feel fierce as she quailed beside the dying man, a bloody tyrant who had earned the name *Flagellum Dei*, the *Scourge of God*, a living legend who was said to wield the very sword borne by the Scythian god of war.

His name alone—*Attila*—could open city gates and break sieges, so mightily was he feared. But now, naked and dying, he seemed no more fearsome than any other man. He stood little taller than her, though he was weighted down with thick muscle and the heavy bones of his nomadic people. His eyes—wide parted and deep set—reminded her of a pig's, especially as he had stared blearily upon her, rutting into her during the night, his eyes stitched red from the many cups of wine he had consumed at their wedding feast.

Now it was her turn to stare down upon him, measuring each gurgling gasp, trying to judge how long until death claimed him. She knew now she had been too sparing with the poison given to her by the bishop of Valence, passed through him by the archbishop of Vienne, all with the approval of King Gondioc de Burgondie. Fearing the tyrant might taste the bitterness of the poison in his bridal cup, she had been too timid.

She clutched the glass vial, half empty now, sensing other hands, higher even than King Gondioc, in this plot. She cursed that such a burden should come to rest in her small palms. How could the very fate of the world—both now and in the future—fall to her, a woman of only fourteen summers?

Still, she had been told of the necessity for this dark action by a cloaked figure who had appeared at her father's door a half-moon ago. She had already been pledged to the barbarian king, but that night she was brought before this stranger. She caught the glimpse of a cardinal's gold ring on his left hand before it was hidden away. He had told her the story then—only a year past—of Attila's barbarian horde routing the northern Italian cities of Padua and Milan, slaughtering all in their path. Men, women, children. Only those who fled into the mountains or coastal swamps survived to tell the tale of his brutality.

"Rome was doomed to fall under his ungodly sword," the cardinal had explained to her beside her family's cold hearth. "Knowing this sure fate as the barbarians approached, His Holiness Pope Leo I rode out from his earthly throne to meet the tyrant on the banks of Lake Garda. And upon the strength

of his ecclesiastical might, the pontiff drove the merciless Hun away.”

But Ildiko knew it wasn't *ecclesiastical might* alone that had turned the barbarians aside—but also the superstitious terror of their king.

Full of fear herself now, she glanced over to the box resting atop a dais at the foot of the bed. The small chest was both a gift and a threat from the pontiff that day. It stretched no longer than her forearm and no higher, but she knew it held the fate of the world inside. She feared touching it—opening it—but she would, once her new husband was truly dead.

She could handle only one terror at a time.

Fearful, her gaze flickered over to the closed door to the royal wedding chamber. Through the window, the skies to the east paled with the promise of a new day. With dawn, his men would soon arrive at the bedchamber. Their king must be dead before then.

She watched the blood bubbling out of his nostrils with each labored breath. She listened to the harsh gurgle in his chest as he lay on his back. A weak cough brought more blood to his lips, where it flowed through his forked beard and pooled into the hollow of his throat. The beating of his heart could be seen there, shimmering that dark pool with each fading thud.

She prayed for him to die—and quickly.

Burn in the flames of hell where you belong . . .

As if heaven heard her plea, one last rough breath escaped the man's flooded throat, pushing more blood to his lips—then his rib cage sagged a final time and rose no more.

Ildiko cried softly in relief, tears springing to her eyes. The deed was done. The Scourge of God was at last gone, unable to wreak more ruin upon the world. And not a moment too soon.

Back at her father's house, the cardinal had related Attila's plan to turn his forces once again toward Italy. She had heard similar rumblings at the wedding feast, raucous claims of the coming sack of Rome, of their plans to raze the city to the ground and slaughter all. The bright beacon of civilization risked going forever dark under the barbarians' swords.

But with her one bloody act, the *present* was saved.

Still, she was not done.

The *future* remained at risk.

She shimmied on her bare knees off the bed and moved to its foot. She approached the small chest with more fear than she had when she slipped the poison into her husband's drink.

The outer box was made of black iron, flat on all sides with a hinged top. It was unadorned, except for an inscribed pair of symbols on its surface. The writing was unknown to her, but the cardinal had told her what to expect. It was said to be the language of Attila's distant ancestors, those nomadic tribes far to the east.

She touched one of the inscriptions, made of simple straight lines.



“Tree,” she whispered to herself, trying to gain strength. The symbol even looked somewhat like a tree. She touched its matching neighbor—a *second* tree—with great reverence.

Only then did she find the strength to bring her fingers to the chest's lid and swing it open. Inside she discovered a second box, this one of the brightest silver. The inscription on top was similar, crude, but clearly done with great purpose.



The simple strokes meant *command* or *instruction*.

Sensing the press of time, she steadied her shaking fingers and lifted the silver box's lid to reveal a *third* coffer inside, this one of gold. Its surface shimmered, appearing fluid in the torchlight. The symbol carved here looked like a union of the earlier characters found inscribed in iron and silver, one stacked atop the other, forming a new word.



The cardinal had warned her of the meaning of this last mark.

"Forbidden," she repeated breathlessly.

With great care, she opened the innermost box. She knew what she would find, but the sight still shivered the small hairs along her arms.

From the heart of the gold box, the yellowed bone of a skull glowed out at her. It was missing its lower jaw, its empty eye staring blindly upward, as if to heaven. But like the boxes themselves, the bone was also adorned with script. Lines of writing descended down from the crown of the skull in a tight spiral. The language was not the same as atop the triple boxes, but instead it was the ancient script of the Jews—or so the cardinal had told her. Likewise, he had instructed her on the purpose of such a relic.

The skull was an ancient object of Jewish incantation, an invocation to God for mercy and salvation.

Pope Leo had offered up this treasure to Attila with a plea for *Rome's* salvation. Additionally, the pontiff had warned Attila that this potent talisman was but one of many that were secured in Rome and protected by God's wrath, that any who dared breach its walls were doomed to die. To press his point, the pope offered up the story of the leader of the Visigoths, King Alaric I, who had sacked Rome forty years prior and died upon leaving the city.

Leery of this curse, Attila took heed and fled out of Italy with this precious treasure. But as in all things, it seemed time had finally tempered those fears, stoking the Hun's desire to once again lay siege to Rome, to test his legend against God's wrath.

Ildiko stared across his prostrate body.

It appeared he had already failed that trial.

Ultimately, even the mighty could not escape death.

Knowing what she had to do, she reached for the skull. Still, her eyes fell upon the scratches at the center of the spiral. The skull's invocation was a plea for salvation against what was written there.

It marked the date of the end of the world.

The key to that fate lay beneath the skull—hidden by iron, silver, gold, and bone. Its significance only came to light a moon ago, following the arrival of a Nestorian priest from Persia to the gates of Rome. He had heard of the gift given to Attila from the treasure vaults of the Church, a gift once passed to Rome by Nestorius himself, the patriarch of Constantinople. The priest told Pope Leo the truth behind the nest of boxes and bone, how it had come from much farther east than Constantinople and sent forward to the Eternal City for safekeeping.

In the end, he had informed the pope of the box's *true* treasure—along with sharing the name of the man who had once borne this skull in life.

Ildiko's fingers touched that relic now and trembled anew. The empty eyes seemed to stare into her, judging her worth, the same eyes that, if the Nestorian spoke truthfully, had once looked upon her as Lord in life, upon Jesus Christ.

She hesitated at moving the holy relic—only to be punished for her reluctance with a knock on the chamber door. A guttural call followed. She did not understand the tongue of the Huns, but she knew that Attila's men, failing to gain a response from their king, would soon be inside.

She had delayed too long.

Spurred now, she lifted the skull to reveal what lay below—but found *nothing*. The bottom of the box held only a golden imprint, in the shape of what had once rested here, an ancient cross—a relic said to have fallen from the very heavens.

But it was gone, stolen away.

Ildiko stared over at her dead husband, a man known as much for his keen strategies as for his brutalities. It was also said he had ears under every table. Had the king of the Huns learned of the mysteries shared by the Nestorian priest in Rome? Had he taken the celestial cross for his own and hidden it away? Was that the true source of his sudden renewed confidence in sacking Rome?

The shouting grew louder outside, the pounding more urgent.

Despairing, Ildiko returned the skull to its cradle and closed the boxes. Only then did she sink to her knees and cover her face. Sobs shook through her as the planks of the doors shattered behind her.

Tears choked her throat as thoroughly as blood had her husband's.

Men shoved into the room. Their cries grew sharper upon seeing their king upon his deathbed. Wailing soon followed.

But none dared touch her, the grieving new wife, as she rocked on her knees beside the bed. They believed her tears were for her fallen husband, for her dead king, but they were wrong.

She wept for the world.

A world now doomed to burn.

Present Day

November 17, 4:33 P.M. CET

Rome, Italy

It seemed even the stars were aligned against him.

Bundled against the winter's bite, Monsignor Vigor Verona crossed through the shadows of Piazza della Pilotta. Despite his heavy woolen sweater and coat, he shivered—not from the cold but from a growing sense of dread as he stared across the city.

A blazing comet shone in the twilight sky, hovering above the dome of St. Peter's, the highest point in all of Rome. The celestial visitor—the brightest in centuries—outshone the newly risen moon, casting a long, scintillating tail across the stars. Such sights were often historically viewed as harbingers of misfortune.

He prayed that wasn't the case here.

Vigor clutched the package more tightly in his arms. He had rewrapped it clumsily in its original parcel paper, but his destination was not far. The towering façade of the Pontifical Gregorian University rose before him, flanked by wings and outbuildings. Though Vigor was still a member of the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology, he only taught the occasional class as a guest lecturer. He now served the Holy See as the prefect of the Archivio Segreto Vaticano, the Vatican's secret archives. But the burden he carried now came to him not in his role as professor or prefect, but as friend.

A gift from a dead colleague.

He reached the main door to the university and marched across the white marble atrium. He still kept an office at the school, as was his right. In fact, he often came here to catalog and cross-reference the university's vast book depository. Rivaling even the city's National Library, it held over a million volumes, housed in the adjacent six-story tower, including a large reserve of ancient texts and rare editions.

But nothing here or at the Vatican's Archives compared to the volume Vigor carried now—nor who had accompanied it in the parcel. It was why he had sought the counsel of the only person he truly trusted in Rome.

As Vigor maneuvered stairs and narrow halls, his knees began to complain. In his midsixties, he was still fit from decades of archaeological fieldwork, but over the past few years, he had been too long buried in the archives, imprisoned behind desks and stacks of books, shackled by paper responsibility.

Am I up for this task, my Lord?

He must be.

At last, Vigor reached the university's faculty wing and spotted a familiar figure leaning against his office door. His niece had beaten him here. She must have come straight from work. She still wore her Carabinieri uniform of dark navy slacks and jacket, both piped in scarlet, with silver epaulettes on her shoulders. Not yet thirty, she was already a lieutenant for the Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale, the Cultural Heritage Police, who oversaw the trafficking of stolen art and relics.

Pride swelled through him at the sight of her. He had summoned her as much out of love as for his expertise in such matters. He trusted no one more than her.

“Uncle Vigor.” Rachel gave him a quick hug. She then leaned back, finger-combing her dark hair back over one ear and appraising him with those sharp caramel eyes. “What was so urgent?”

He glanced up and down the hall, but at this hour on a Sunday, no one was about, and all of the offices appeared dark. “Come inside and I’ll explain.”

Unlocking the door, he ushered her across the threshold. Despite his esteemed position, his office was little more than a cramped cell, lined by towering cases overflowing with books and stacks of magazines. His small desk rested against the wall under a window as thin as a castle’s arrow slit. The newly risen moon cast a silver shaft into the chaos found here.

Only after they were both inside and the door closed did he risk clicking on a lamp. He let out a small sigh of relief, reassured and comforted by the familiar.

“Help me clear a space on my desk.”

Once that was done, Vigor placed his burden down and folded back the brown parcel wrapping, revealing a small wooden crate.

“This arrived for me earlier today. With no return address, only the name of the sender.”

He turned back a corner of the wrapping to show her.

Fr. Josip Tarasco

“Father Josip Tarasco,” Rachel read aloud. “Am I supposed to know who that is?”

“No, nor should you.” He stared over at her. “He was declared dead over a decade ago.”

Her brows pinched, and her posture stiffened. “But the package is too pristine to have been lost in the mail for that long.” She turned that discerning gaze back on him. “Could someone have forged his name as some cruel hoax?”

“I don’t see why. In fact, I think that’s why the sender addressed this package by hand. So I could verify it came from Father Tarasco. We were dear friends. I compared the writing on the parcel to the smattering of old letters still in my possession. The handwriting matched.”

“So if he’s still alive, why was he declared dead?”

Vigor sighed. “Father Tarasco vanished during a research trip to Hungary. He was preparing a comprehensive paper on the witch hunts there during the early eighteenth century.”

“Witch hunts?”

Vigor nodded. “Back in the early 1700s, Hungary was beset by a decade-long drought, accompanied by famine and plague. A scapegoat was needed, someone to blame. Over four hundred accused witches were killed in a span of five years.”

“And what about your friend? What became of him?”

“You must understand, when Josip left for Hungary, the country had only recently shaken free of Soviet control. It was still a volatile time there, a dangerous place to be asking too many questions, especially in rural areas. The last I heard from him was a message left on my machine. He said he was on to something disturbing concerning a group of twelve witches—six women and six men—burned in a small town in southern Hungary. He sounded both scared and excited. Then nothing after that. I

was never heard from again. Police and Interpol investigated for a full year. After an additional four years of silence, he was finally declared dead.”

“So then he must have gone into hiding. But why do that? And more important, *why* surface a decade later, why now?”

With his back to his niece, Vigor hid a smile of pride, appreciating Rachel’s ability to get to the heart of the matter so quickly.

“The answer to your last question seems evident from what he sent,” he said. “Come see.”

Vigor took a deep breath and opened the hinged lid of the crate. He carefully removed the first of the package’s two objects and placed it in the shaft of moonlight atop his desk.

Rachel took an involuntary step backward. “Is that a skull? A *human* skull?”

“It is.”

She moved past her initial surprise to step closer. She quickly noted the hen-scratched inscription across the bone of the cranium, following the spiral of its course with a fingertip without touching.

“And this writing?” she asked.

“Jewish Aramaic. I believe this relic is an example of early Talmudic magic practiced by Babylonian Jews.”

“Magic? Like witchcraft?”

“In a way. Such spells were wards against demons or entreaties for help. Over the years, archaeologists have unearthed thousands of such artifacts—mostly incantation bowls, but also a handful of skulls like this. The Berlin museum holds two such relics. Others are in private hands.”

“And this one? You said Father Tarasco had an interest in witches, which I assume extended to an interest in occult objects.”

“Perhaps. But I don’t think this one is *authentic*. The practice of Talmudic magic started in the third century and died out by the seventh.” Vigor waved his hand over the skull as if casting his own spell.

“I suspect this artifact is not that old. Maybe thirteenth or fourteenth century at best. I’ve sent a tool to the university lab to confirm my estimate.”

She slowly nodded, contemplating in silence.

“But I also studied the writing here,” he continued. “I’m well familiar with this form of Aramaic. I found many blatant mistakes in the transcription—reversed diacritics, wrong or missing accent marks—as if someone made a poor copy of the original inscription, someone who had no true understanding of this ancient language.”

“So the skull is a forgery then?”

“In truth, I suspect there was no foul intent in its crafting. I think its forging was less about *deception* than it was about *preservation*. Someone feared the knowledge found here might be lost, so he or she hand made copies, trying to preserve something more ancient.”

“What knowledge?”

“I’ll get to that in a moment.”

He reached into the crate and removed the second object and placed it beside the skull on the table. It was an ancient book, as wide as his outstretched hand and twice as tall. It was bound in rough leather, the pages secured by crude stitches of thick cord.

“This is an example of *anthropodermic bibliopegy*,” he explained.

Rachel screwed up her face. “And that means . . . ?”

“The book is bound in *human* skin and sewn with sinew of the same.”

Rachel took a step away again, only this time she didn't return to the desk. “How can you know that?”

“I can't. But I forwarded a sample of the leather to the same lab as the skull, both to test its age and its DNA.” Vigor picked up the macabre volume. “But I'm sure I'm correct. I examined this under a dissection microscope. Human pores are distinctly different in size and even shape from that found on pigskin or calfskin. And if you look closer, in the center of the cover—”

He drew a fingernail along what appeared to be a deep crease in the center of the cover.

“Under proper magnification, you can still make out the follicles of eyelashes.”

Rachel paled. “Lashes?”

“On the cover is a human eye, sewn shut with finer threads of sinew.”

Visibly swallowing, his niece asked, “So what is this? Some text of the occult?”

“I thought as much, especially considering Josip's interest in the witches of Hungary. But no, it's not some demonic manuscript. Though in some circles, the text is considered blasphemous.”

He carefully parted the cover, cautious not to overly stress the binding. He revealed pages written in Latin. “It's actually a Gnostic book of the Bible.”

Rachel tilted her head, well versed in Latin, and translated the opening words “ ‘*These are the secret sayings which the living Jesus spoke . . .*’ ” She glanced over at him, recognizing those words. “It's the Gospel of Thomas.”

He nodded. “The saint who doubted Christ's resurrection.”

“But why is it wrapped in human skin?” she said with disgust. “Why would your missing colleague send you such ghoulish items?”

“As a warning.”

“A warning against what?”

Vigor returned his attention to the skull. “The incantation written here is a plea to God to keep the world from ending.”

“While I certainly appreciate that plea, what does—?”

He cut his niece off. “The prophetic date for that coming apocalypse is also written atop the skull in the center of the spiraling inscription. I converted that figure from the ancient Jewish calendar to today's modern accounting.” He touched the center of the spiral. “This is why Father Josip came of hiding and sent these items to me.”

Rachel waited for him to explain.

Vigor glanced out the window to the comet glowing in the night sky, bright enough to shame the moon. With that portent of doom hanging there, a shiver of certainty rang through him. “The date for the end of the world . . . *it's in four days.*”

FIRST

CRASH & BURN

Σ

November 17, 7:45 A.M. PST

Los Angeles AFB

El Segundo, California

Panic had already begun to set in.

From the observation deck above the control room, Painter Crowe read the distress in the sudden cessation of idle chatter among the technicians in the room. Nervous glances spread up the chain of command and across the floor of the Space and Missile Systems Center. Only the base's top brass were in attendance at this early hour, along with a few heads of the Defense Department's research divisions.

The floor below them looked like a scaled-down version of NASA's flight control room. Rows of computer consoles and satellite control desks spread outward from a trio of giant LCD screens affixed to the back wall. The centermost screen showed a map of the world, traced with glowing lines that tracked the trajectories of a pair of military satellites and the path of the neighboring comet.

The two flanking screens showed live feed from the satellites' cameras. To the *left*, a curve of the earth slowly churned against the backdrop of space. To the *right*, the glowing blaze of the comet's tail filled the screen, casting a veil over the stars beyond it.

"Something's gone wrong," Painter whispered.

"What do you mean?" His boss stood beside him atop the observation deck.

General Gregory Metcalf was the head of DARPA, the Defense Department's research-and-development agency. Dressed in full uniform, Metcalf was in his fifties, African-American, and a West Point grad.

In contrast, Painter simply sported a black suit, made more casual with a pair of cowboy boots. They were a gift from Lisa, who was on a research trip in New Mexico. Half Native American, he probably should have balked at wearing the boots, but he liked them, especially as they reminded him of his fiancée, gone now a full month.

"Something's got the OSO spooked," Painter explained, pointing to the operations support officer at the second row of consoles down below.

The lead mission specialist moved over to join his colleague at that station.

Metcalf waved dismissively. "They'll handle it. It's their job. They know what they're doing."

The general promptly returned to his conversation with the commander of the 50th Space Wing of Colorado Springs.

Still concerned, Painter kept a keen eye on the growing anxiety below. He had been invited here to observe this code-black military mission not only because he was the director of Sigma, which operated under the aegis of DARPA, but also because he had personally engineered a piece of hardware aboard one of the two military satellites.

The pair of satellites—*IoG-1* and *IoG-2*—had been sent into space four months ago. The acronym for the satellites—*IoG*—stood for Interpolation of the Geodetic Effect, a name originally coined by

the military physicist who had engineered this project for a gravitational study. He had intended to do a complete analysis of the space-time curvature around the earth to aid in satellite and missile trajectory.

While already an ambitious undertaking, the discovery of the comet by a pair of amateur astronomers two years ago quickly shifted the project's focus—especially after an anomalous energy signature had been detected out there.

Painter glanced sidelong to his neighbor on his left, noting the lithe form of the researcher from the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory.

Only twenty-three, Dr. Jada Shaw was tall, with a runner's lean physique. Her skin was a flawless dark mocha, her black hair trimmed short, highlighting the long curve of her neck. She stood in a white lab coat and jeans, with her arms crossed, nervously chewing the edge of her thumbnail.

The young astrophysicist had been whisked from Harvard seventeen months ago and ensconced in this code-black military venture. Clearly she still felt out of her league, though she was doing her best to hide it.

It was unfortunate. She had no reason to be so nervous. She had already won international recognition for her work. Using quantum equations—calculations well above Painter's intellectual pay grade—she had crafted an unusual theory concerning *dark energy*, the mysterious force that made up three-quarters of the universe and was responsible for its accelerating cosmic expansion.

Further proving her prowess, she had been the only physicist to note the small anomalies in the approach of this celestial visitor blazing in the night sky—a comet designated as IKON.

A year and a half ago, Dr. Shaw had tapped into the digital feed of the new Dark Energy Camera, a 570-megapixel array engineered by the Fermilab here in the States and installed at a mountaintop observatory in Chile. Using that camera, Dr. Shaw had tracked the comet's passage. It was there that she had discovered anomalies that she believed might be proof that the comet was shedding disturbing dark energy in its wake.

Her work quickly became cloaked under the guise of national security. A new energy source such as this had vast and untapped potential—both economically and militarily.

From that moment forward, the ultrasecret *IoG* project was repurposed for one goal only: to study the potential dark energy of the comet. The plan was to fly *IoG-2* across the comet's blazing tail where it would attempt to absorb that anomalous energy detected by Dr. Shaw and transmit it back to its sister craft orbiting the earth.

Luckily, to accomplish this task, engineers had to only slightly modify the earlier mission satellite. A part of its original design included a perfect sphere of quartz buried in its heart. The plan had been to set that sphere to spinning once the satellite was in orbit, creating a gyroscopic effect that could be used to map the curve of space-time around the mass of Earth. If the experiment was successful, the beam of dark energy from one spacecraft to the other should cause a minute disturbance in that curve of space-time.

It was a bold experiment. Even the acronym *IoG* was now jokingly referred to as the *Eye of God*. Painter appreciated the new nickname, picturing that whirling perfect sphere as it waited to peer into the mysteries of the universe.

The lead specialist called out. "Spacecraft will be entering the tail in *ten!*"

As the final countdown began, Dr. Shaw's eyes remained fixed to the flow of data on the giant screen.

"I hope you were mistaken earlier, Director Crowe," she said. "About something going wrong here. Now is not the time for mistakes, not when we're tapping into energy connected to the birth of our universe."

Either way, Painter thought, there was no turning back now.

7:55 A.M.

Over the course of six painstaking minutes, the flight path of *IoG-2* slowly vanished deeper into the ionizing stream of gas and dust. The screen to the right—running live feed from the satellite's camera—was a complete whiteout. They were now flying blind, entirely reliant on telemetry data.

Painter tried taking in everything at once, catching the room's excitement, sensing the historic significance of this moment.

"I'm registering an energy spike in *IoG-2*!" the EECOM tech called from his station.

A smatter of small cheers broke out, but the pressure of the moment quickly quashed them. The reading could be an error.

All eyes swung to another console, to the aerospace engineer monitoring *IoG-1*. He shook his head. There seemed to be no evidence that the energy picked up by the first satellite had been transmitted to its Earth-orbiting twin—then suddenly the engineer jerked to his feet.

"Got something!" he yelled.

The SMC control officer hurried over to his side.

As everyone waited for confirmation, Dr. Shaw pointed to the world map, to the scroll of telemetry data. "So far it looks promising."

If you say so . . .

The crawl of incoming data was incomprehensible to him. And it only continued to flow faster. After another tense minute, the flood of data grew to a blur.

The EECOM tech popped to his feet. Warnings and error messages flashed on his screens as he continued to monitor *IoG-2*'s passage through the comet's tail. "Sir, energy levels here are off the map now, redlining across the board! What do you want me to do?"

"Shut it down!" the control officer commanded.

Still standing, the EECOM tech typed rapidly. "No can do, sir! Satellite navigation and control are not responding."

To the right, the giant screen suddenly went black.

"Lost camera feed now, too," the tech added.

Painter pictured *IoG-2* sailing from here out into space, a cold and dark chunk of space debris.

"Sir!" The engineer assigned to *IoG-1* waved the control officer to his side. "I've got new readings here. You'd better see this."

Dr. Shaw shifted to the rail of the observation deck, plainly wanting to catch a glimpse. Painter joined her, along with most of the brass gathered on the deck.

“The geodetic effect is altering,” the engineer explained, pointing to a monitor. “A point two percent deviation.”

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Dr. Shaw mumbled at Painter’s side. “Not unless space-time around the earth is starting to ripple.”

“And look!” the engineer continued. “The Eye’s gyroscopic momentum is growing stronger, faster than prelaunch estimates. I’m even getting a propulsive signature!”

Dr. Shaw gripped the rail harder, looking ready to leap below. “That can’t happen without an external source powering the Eye.”

Painter could tell she wanted to declare it *dark energy*, but she restrained herself from jumping to premature conclusions.

Another voice called out—this time from a station marked CONTROL. “We’re losing orbital stability of *IoG-1*!”

Painter turned to the big board in the center, the one showing the world map and the flight paths of the satellites. The sine wave of *IoG-1*’s trajectory was visibly flattening.

“The gyroscopic forces inside the satellite must be pushing it out of orbit,” Dr. Shaw explained, sounding both panicked and thrilled.

The screen to the left showed the profile of the earth growing larger, filling up the monitor and eclipsing the dark void of space. The satellite was falling out of orbit, starting its slow crash back into the gravity well from which it came.

The transmitted image quickly lost clarity as the satellite entered the upper atmosphere, showing streaks of data artifacts and ghost shadows, drunkenly doubling and tripling the picture.

Continents flashed by, swirls of clouds, bright blue expanses of ocean.

A moment later, the screen went dark like the other.

Silence settled heavily over the room.

On the world map, the satellite’s path split into a frayed end as the mission computer attempted to extrapolate various crash trajectories, taking into account a slew of variables: the roil of Earth’s upper atmosphere, the angle of entry, the rate at which the craft broke apart.

“Looks like debris will strike along the eastern border of Mongolia!” the telemetry specialist said. “Maybe even spilling into China.”

The commander of the 50th Space Wing groused under his breath. “You can bet Beijing will pick this up.”

Painter agreed. China would not miss a flaming piece of space garbage hurling toward them.

General Metcalf glanced hard at Painter. He understood that look. The advanced military technology aboard that satellite was classified. It couldn’t fall into foreign hands.

For a fraction of a second, the screen to the left flickered, then died again—a last hiccup of the dying satellite.

“Bird is gone!” the control officer finally declared. “All transmissions ceased. It’s a falling rock now.”

The telemetry data slowed to a crawl across the world map—then finally stopped.

Dr. Shaw’s hand suddenly clutched Painter’s forearm. “They need to bring up that last image,” she said. “The one before the satellite died.”

She must have noted something anomalous in the data, something that clearly had her scared.

Metcalf heard her, too.

Painter stared hard at his boss. "Do it. Make it happen."

The order passed along the chain of command to the floor. Engineers and technicians worked the magic. After several long minutes to redigitize, sharpen, and clean up that brief flicker, that final image bloomed again on the large screen.

Gasps spread across the room.

Metcalf leaned to Painter's ear. "If even a *sliver* of that satellite survived, it must be found. It must never reach our enemies."

Painter didn't argue, fully understanding. "I've got field operatives already in the region."

Metcalf gave him a quizzical stare, silently asking how that could be.

Just dumb luck.

Still, he would take that bit of good fortune and mobilize a recovery team immediately. But for that moment, he gaped at the screen, unable to look away.

It displayed a satellite view of the Eastern Seaboard of the United States, the photo taken as the satellite blazed a trail across the sky. It was detailed enough to make out the major coastal metropolises.

Boston, New York City, Washington, D.C.

Every city lay in smoldering ruin.

November 17, 11:58 P.M. CST

Macau, People's Republic of China

They had crossed half the world to hunt a ghost.

Commander Gray Pierce followed the midnight crowd off the boat and into the ferry terminal. The high-speed catamaran had made the passage from Hong Kong to the peninsula of Macau in a little over an hour. He stretched a kink from his back as he waited to clear passport control in the crowded terminal building.

People were pouring into the peninsula to celebrate a special Water Lantern Festival in honor of the comet in the sky. A large party was under way this night, where floating lanterns were set adrift in the lakes and rivers as offerings to the spirits of the deceased. Hundreds of lights even bobbed in the waters around the terminal, like a scatter of luminous flowers.

Ahead of him in line, a wizened old man cradled a reed cage with a live goose inside. Both looked equally sullen, matching Gray's mood after the seventeen-hour journey here.

"Why does that duck keep looking at me?" Kowalski asked.

"I don't think it's just the duck," Gray said.

The big man, wearing jeans and a long duster, stood a head taller than Gray, which meant he towered over everyone in the terminal. Several people took pictures of the American giant, as if some craggy-faced Godzilla with a crew cut had wandered into their midst.

Gray turned to his other traveling companion. "It's a long shot that we'll learn anything from our contact here. You understand that, right?"

Seichan shrugged, seemingly unperturbed, but he read the tension in the single crease between her eyebrows. They had traveled this far to question this man in person. The meeting was Seichan's last hope to discover the fate of her mother, a woman who had vanished twenty-two years ago, ripped from her home in Vietnam by armed men, leaving behind a nine-year-old daughter. Seichan had believed her mother was long dead—until new information had come to light four months ago, suggesting she might still be alive. It had taken all of Sigma's resources and connections in the intelligence communities to get them this far.

It was likely a dead end, but they had to pursue it.

Ahead, the line finally cleared, and Seichan stepped forward to the bored customs officer. She wore black jeans, hiking boots, and a loose emerald silk blouse that matched her eyes, along with a cashmere vest to hold back the night's chill.

At least she fit in here, where ninety-nine percent of the patronage was of Asian descent. In her case, with her mix of European blood, she struck a slightly more exotic pose. Her slim face and high cheekbones looked carved out of pale marble. Her almond-shaped eyes glinted like polished jade. The only softness to her was the loose cascade of her hair, the color of a raven's wing.

All this was not missed by the border agent.

The round man, his belly straining the buttons of his uniform, sat straighter as she stepped forward

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