

# THE EYE OF GOD

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ROLLINS



First published in Great Britain in 2013 by Orion Books,  
an imprint of The Orion Publishing Group Ltd  
Orion House, 5 Upper Saint Martin's Lane  
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (Hardback) 978 1 4091 1390 4

ISBN (Export Trade Paperback) 978 1 4091 1391 1

ISBN (Ebook) 978 1 4091 1392 8

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

# 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 gur-

gling 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 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 a 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.

木木

"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 similarly crude, but clearly done with great purpose.

示

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.

禁

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, 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 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 re-wrapped 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 Segretto 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 what 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 papal 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 her 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 wrap, 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 a 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. He 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 tooth 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 in 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 out 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.*"