

The Last Oracle

James Rollins

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THE LAST ORACLE

A Σ Sigma Force novel

JAMES ROLLINS



Man, know thyself, and thou wilt know the
universe and the gods.

– INSCRIPTION AT THE
TEMPLE OF DELPHI

A.D. 398

Mount Parnassus

Greece

They had come to slay her.

The woman stood at the temple's portico. She shivered in her thin garment, a simple shift of white linen belted at the waist, but it was not the cold of predawn that iced her bones.

Below, a torchlight procession flowed up the slopes of Mount Parnassus like a river of fire. It followed the stone-paved road of the Sacred Way, climbing in switchbacks up toward the temple of Apollo. The beat of sword on shield accompanied their progress, a full cohort of the Roman legion, five hundred strong. The road wound through broken monuments and long-ransacked treasuries. Whatever could burn had been set to torch.

As the firelight danced over the ruins, the flames cast a shimmering illusion of better times, a fiery restoration of former glory: treasuries overflowing with gold and jewels, legions of statues carved by the finest artisans, milling crowds gathered to hear the prophetic words of the Oracle.

But no more.

Over the past century, Delphi had been brought low by invading Gauls, by plundering Thracians, but most of all,

by neglect. Few now came to seek the words of the Oracle: a goat herder questioning a wife's fidelity, or a sailor seeking good omens for a voyage across the Gulf of Corinth.

It was the end of times, the end of the Oracle of Delphi. After prophesying for thirty years, she would be the last to bear the name Pythia.

The last Oracle of Delphi.

But with this burden came one final challenge.

Pythia turned toward the east, where the sky had begun to lighten.

Oh, that rosy Eos, goddess of dawn, would hurry Apollo to tether his four horses to his Sun chariot.

One of Pythia's sisters, a young acolyte, stepped out of the temple behind her. 'Mistress, come away with us,' the younger woman begged. 'It is not too late. We can still escape with the others to the high caves.'

Pythia placed a reassuring hand on the woman's shoulder. Over the past night, the other women had fled to the rugged heights where the caves of Dionysus would keep them safe. But Pythia had a final duty here.

'Mistress, surely there is no time to perform this last prophecy.'

'I must.'

'Then do it now. Before it is too late.'

Pythia turned away. 'We must wait for dawn of the seventh day. That is our way.'

As the sun had set last night, Pythia had begun her preparations. She had bathed in Castilia's silver spring, drank from the Kassotis spring, and burned bay leaves on an altar of black marble outside the temple. She had followed the ritual precisely, the same as the first Pythia thousands of years ago.

Only this time, the Oracle had not been alone in her purifications.

At her side had been a girl, barely past her twelfth summer.

Such a small creature and of such strange manner.

The child had simply stood naked in the spring waters while the older woman had washed and anointed her. She'd said not a word, merely stood with an arm out, opening and closing her fingers, as if grasping for something only she could see. What god so suffered the child, yet blessed her just the same? Surely not even Apollo. Yet the child's words thirty days ago could come only from the gods. Words that had plainly spread and stoked the fires that now climbed toward Delphi.

Oh, that the child had never been brought here.

Pythia had been content to allow Delphi to fade into obscurity. She remembered the words spoken by one of her predecessors, long dead for centuries, an ominous portent.

Emperor Augustus had asked of her dead sister, 'Why has the Oracle grown so silent?'

Her sister had responded, 'A Hebrew boy, a god who rules among the blessed, bids me leave this house . . .'

Those words proved to be a true prophecy. The cult of Christ rose to consume the empire and destroyed any hope for a return to the old ways.

Then a moon ago, the strange girl had been brought to her steps.

Pythia glanced away from the flames and toward the adytum, the inner sanctum of Apollo's temple. The girl waited inside.

She was an orphan from the distant township of Chios. Over the ages, many had hauled such children here, seeking to abandon such burdens upon the sisterhood. Most were turned away. Only the most ideal girls were allowed to stay: straight of limb, clear of eye, and unspoiled. Apollo would never accept a vessel of lesser quality for his prophetic spirit.

So when this willow branch of a girl had been presented naked to the steps of Apollo's temple, Pythia

had given her hardly a glance. The child was unkempt, her dark hair knotted and tangled, her skin marked with pox scars. But deeper, Pythia had sensed something *wrong* with the child. The way she rocked back and forth. Even her eyes stared without truly seeing.

Her patrons had claimed the child was touched by the gods. That she could tell the number of olives in a tree with merely a glance, that she could declare when a sheep would lamb with but a touch of her hand.

Upon hearing such stories, Pythia's interest had stirred. She called the girl to join her at the entrance to the temple. The child obeyed, but she moved as if disconnected, as if the winds themselves propelled her upward. Pythia had to draw her by hand to sit on the top step.

'Can you tell me your name?' she asked the thin child.

'Her name is Anthea,' one of her patrons declared from below.

Pythia kept her gaze focused on the child. 'Anthea, do you know why you've been brought here?'

'Your house is empty,' the child finally mumbled to the floor.

So at least she can speak. Pythia glanced to the temple's interior. The hearth fire burned in the center of the main hall. It was indeed empty at the moment, but the child's words seemed to whisper at something more.

Maybe it was her manner. So strange, so *distant*, as if she stood with one leg in this world and the other beyond this realm.

The child glanced up with those clear blue eyes, so full of innocence, so in contrast with what spilled next from her lips.

'You are old. You will die soon.'

From below, her patron attempted to scold her, but Pythia kept her words soft. 'We all die eventually, Anthea. It is the order of the world.'

She shook her head. 'Not the Hebrew boy.'

Those strange eyes bored into her. The hairs along Pythia's arms shivered. Plainly the girl had been taught the catechism of the cult of Christ and his bloody cross. But her words again. Such strange cadence.

The Hebrew boy . . .

It reminded her of her ancestor's prophecy of doom.

'But another will come,' the girl continued. 'Another boy.'

'Another boy?' Pythia leaned closer. 'Who? From where?'

'From my dreams.' The girl rubbed the heel of one hand at her ear.

Sensing there were depths to the girl that remained untapped, Pythia plumbed them. 'This boy?' she asked. 'Who is he?'

What the child said next drew a gasp from the gathered crowd – even they recognized blasphemy when they heard it.

'He is the brother of the Hebrew boy.' The child then clasped tight to the hem of Pythia's skirt. 'He burns in my dreams . . . and he will burn everything. Nothing will last. Not even Rome.'

For the past month, Pythia had attempted to learn more of this doom, even taking the girl into the sisterhood's fold. But the child had seemed only to retreat into herself, going mute. Still, there was one way to learn more.

If the girl were truly blessed, the power of Apollo's breath – his prophetic vapors – might burn free what was locked within the girl's strangeness.

But was there enough time?

A touch to her elbow interrupted her reverie and drew her back to the present. 'Mistress, the sun . . .,' her younger sister urged.

Pythia focused to the east. The eastern skies blazed, heralding the coming sunrise. Below, shouts rose from the

Roman legion. Word of the girl had spread. Prophecies of doom had traveled far . . . even to the ears of the emperor. An Imperial courier had demanded the child be delivered to Rome, declaring her demon-plagued.

Pythia had refused. The gods had sent this child to her threshold, to Apollo's temple. Pythia would not relinquish the girl without first testing her, putting her to the question.

To the east, the first rays of the sun etched the morning skies.

The seventh day of the seventh month dawned.

They had waited long enough.

Pythia turned her back on the fiery legion. 'Come. We must hurry.'

She swept into the temple's interior. Flames greeted her here, too, but they were the welcoming warmth from the temple's sacred hearth. Two of her elder sisters still tended the flames, too old to make the harsh climb up to the caves.

She nodded her gratitude to each in turn, then hurried past the hearth.

At the back of the temple, stairs led down toward the private sanctum. Only those who served the Oracle were allowed to enter the subterranean adytum. As she descended, marble turned to raw limestone. The stairs emptied into a small cavern. The cave had been discovered ages ago by a goat herder, who upon nearing the cavern opening, fell under the sway of Apollo's sweet-smelling vapors and succumbed to strange visions.

Would that such gifts last one more sunrise.

Pythia found the child waiting inside the cave. The girl was dressed in an alb too large for her and sat cross-legged beside the bronze tripod that supported the sacred omphalos, a waist-high domed rock that represented the navel of the world, the center of the universe.

The only other decoration in the cave was a single raised seat, resting on three legs. It stood over a natural

crack in the floor. Pythia, long accustomed to Apollo's vapor, was still struck by the scent rising from below, smelling of almond blossoms.

The god's pneuma, his prophetic exhalation.

'It is time,' she said to the younger sister, who had followed her down. 'Bring the child to me.'

Pythia crossed to the tripod and mounted the seat. Positioned over the crack in the floor, the rising vapors bathed her in Apollo's breath. 'Hurry.'

The younger sister gathered up the child and placed the girl into her lap. Pythia cradled her gently, like a mother with a babe, but the child did not respond to such affection.

Pythia already felt the effect of the pneuma rising from the earth below her. A familiar tingle ran along her limbs. Her throat burned warmly as Apollo entered her. Her vision began to close.

But the child was smaller, more susceptible to the pneuma.

The girl's head rolled back; her eyelids drooped. Surely she would not survive Apollo's penetration for long. Still, if there was to be any hope, the girl had to be put to the question.

'Child,' Pythia rang out, 'tell us more of this boy and the doom he whispered to you. Where will he rise?'

The small lips moved in a whisper. 'From me. From my dreams.'

Small fingers found Pythia's hand and squeezed.

Words continued to spill from the girl's lips. 'Your house is empty . . . your springs have dried up. But a new spring of prophecy will flow.'

Pythia's arms tightened on the girl. For too long, ruin had lingered over the temple. 'A new spring.' Hope rang in her voice. 'Here at Delphi?'

'No . . .'

Pythia's breath grew more rapid. 'Then from where will it spring?'

The girl's lips moved, but no words came out.

She shook the girl. 'Where?'

The girl lifted a boneless arm and placed a hand on her own belly.

With that touch, a vision swelled through Pythia, of silver waters gushing from the girl's navel, from out of her womb. A new spring. But was it a vision from Apollo? Or was it born from her own hope?

A scream pierced her daze. Hard voices echoed down. From the stairs, a figure stumbled into view. It was one of the elders who had tended the fire. She clutched a hand to her shoulder. A crimson bloom spread from under her palm. The black head of an arrow protruded between her fingers.

'Too late,' the old woman cried out and collapsed to her knees. 'The Romans . . .'

Pythia heard the woman's words but remained lost in the vapors. Behind her eyes, she pictured the spring flowing from the girl, a new font of prophetic power. But Pythia also smelled the smoke from the Roman torches. Blood and smoke leaked into her vision. The silver spring now ran with a thin stream of black crimson and swept into the future.

The child suddenly sagged in her arms, completely lost to the pneuma's vapors. Still, as Pythia studied the vision, she watched the dark stream form a black figure . . . the shadow of a boy. Flames rose behind him.

The child's words from a moon ago echoed to her.

The brother of the Hebrew boy . . . he who would set fire to the world.

Pythia held the limp girl. The child's prophecy hinted at both doom and salvation. Perhaps it would be best to leave her to the Imperial legion, to end such an uncertain future here. From overhead, hard voices echoed down. There was already no escape. Except in death.

Still, the vision swelled in her.

Apollo had sent the child. To Pythia.

A new spring will flow.

She took a deep breath, drawing Apollo fully into her.

What must I do?

The Roman centurion crossed the hall. He had his orders. To slay the girl who spoke of the empire's doom. Last night, they had captured one of the temple's servants, a maid. Under the lash – and before he gave her to his men – she let it be known that the child still remained at the temple.

‘Bring the torches!’ he yelled. ‘Search every corner!’

Movement near the back of the hall drew his eye – and his sword.

A woman appeared from the shadows of a lower stair. She stumbled forward, weaving two steps into view, unsteady, dazed. Dressed all in white, she bore a crown of laurel branches.

He knew who stood before him.

The Oracle of Delphi.

The centurion fought back a tremble of fear. Like many of the legion, he still secretly practiced the old ways. Even slaughtered bulls to Mithra and bathed in their blood.

Still, a new sun was on the rise.

There was no stopping it.

‘Who dares violate Apollo's temple?’ she called out to them.

With the stony weight of his men's eyes upon him, the centurion marched to face the woman. ‘Bring forth the girl!’ he demanded.

‘She is gone. Beyond even your reach.’

The centurion knew that was impossible. The temple was surrounded.

Still, worry pushed him forward.

The Oracle stepped to block him from the stairs. She

held a palm against his breastplate. ‘The adytum below is forbidden to all men.’

‘But not to the emperor. And I am under his edict.’

She refused to move. ‘You will not pass.’

The centurion had his orders under the seal of Emperor Theodosius, handed to him personally by the emperor’s son Arcadius. The old gods were to be silenced, their old temples torn down. All across the empire, including Delphi. The centurion had been given one additional command.

He would obey.

He thrust his sword deep into the Oracle’s belly and drove it full to the hilt. A gasp escaped her. She fell against his shoulder, as in a lover’s embrace. He shouldered her away from him roughly.

Blood splashed across his armor, across the floor.

The Oracle slumped to the marble, then to her side. A trembling arm reached to the pool of her own blood. Her palm settled into it. ‘A new spring . . .,’ she whispered, as if it were a promise.

Then her body went slack with death.

The centurion stepped over her form and let his sword lead him down the stairs to a small blind cave. An old woman’s corpse, arrow-bit, lay in a black pool of blood. A three-legged chair lay toppled beside a riven crack in the floor. He searched the rest of the room and turned a full circle.

Impossible.

The chamber was empty.

March 1959

Carpathian Mountains

Romania

Major Yuri Raev climbed out of the Russian ZiS-151 truck and dropped to the rutted dirt road. His legs

trembled under him. To steady himself, he leaned a hand on the green steel door of the battered vehicle, both cursing it and thanking it. The rattle of the week-long trek up into the mountains still made his spine ache. Even his molars seemed loose in his skull. Still, it took such a rugged vehicle to climb the stony switchbacks and river-flooded roads to reach this isolated winter camp.

He glanced over his shoulder as the rear door to the truck's bed crashed down. Soldiers in black-and-white uniforms hopped out. Their winter garb blended with the snow and granite of the densely wooded highlands. Morning fog still hung in hollows like sullen ghosts.

The men swore and stamped their boots. Small flickers of fire sparked as cigarettes were dropped or ground out. With a clatter, the soldiers readied their Kalashnikov assault rifles. But they were only the rear guard, meant to keep all away.

Yuri faced forward as the second in command of this mission, Lieutenant Dobritsky, marched over. He was a blocky Ukrainian with a pocked face and broken nose, outfitted in winter camouflage. Red rings from his snow goggles still circled his eyes.

'Major, sir, the camp is secure.'

'Is it them? Who we seek?'

Dobritsky shrugged, leaving it for Yuri to decide. They'd already had one false alarm, raiding a winter camp of half-starved peasants, who'd been eking out a living by quarrying stone.

Yuri scowled. These mountains were from another era, Stone-Aged, backward, rife with superstition and poverty. Yet the craggy, forested highlands were also a perfect refuge for those who wished to remain hidden.

Yuri stepped to the side and studied the curve of the rutted track that served as a road. Mud and snow had been churned up by the lead vehicles. Through the trees, Yuri spotted a score of IMZ-Ural motorcycles, each

bearing an armed soldier in a sidecar. The heavy bikes had swept up in advance and secured the site, cutting off all means of escape.

Rumor and tortured testimony had led to this remote place. And still it had required scouring the highlands and burning a few homesteads to warm the occasional frozen tongues. Few were willing to speak of the Carpathian Romani. Especially with the stories spoken about this isolated clan in particular, whispers of *strigoi* and *moroi*. Evil spirits and witches.

But had he found them at long last?

Lieutenant Dobritsky shifted his boots. ‘What now, Major?’

Yuri noted the sour turn to the Ukrainian’s lips. Though Yuri was a major in the Soviet army, he was no soldier. He stood a head shorter than Dobritsky, with a slight paunch to his belly and a doughy face. Recruited from Leningrad State University, he had risen to his position through the ranks of the military’s scientific branches. At the age of twenty-eight, he was already chief of the biophysics laboratory at the State Control Institute of Medical and Biological Research.

‘Where is Captain Martov?’ Yuri asked. The representative of Soviet Military Intelligence seldom left Dobritsky’s side and kept an officious eye on all matters.

‘Waiting for us at the camp’s entrance.’

Dobritsky slogged a straight path up the road’s center. Yuri sidestepped to the edge, where the ground was still frozen and the walking easier. Reaching the last switchback, the lieutenant pointed toward a camp sheltered in a cover of steep crags and surrounded by black woods.

‘Gypsies,’ Dobritsky grunted. ‘As you ordered, *da?*’

But is this the right Romani clan?

Ahead, the Gypsy wagons were painted in faded hues of green and black, with wheels as tall as Yuri. Some

paint had peeled and flaked to reveal bolder colors hidden beneath, peeks at happier times. The tall wooden wagons were piled with snow and fringed by icicles along the sides. Windows were etched with frost. Blackened pits marked old bonfires. Two fires were still lit deeper in the winter camp, casting flames as high as the tallest wagon. Another wagon stood shattered and burned to a husk.

To one side, a few swaybacked draft horses hung their heads dully from beneath a lean-to of salvaged wood planks and piled stones. Goats and a few sheep ambled through the camp.

The soldiers had the site surrounded. A few dead bodies in ragged clothes and furred jackets lay sprawled here and there. The living looked little better. The camp's residents had been hauled from their wagons and heavy tents.

Shouts rose from deeper in the camp as the last of the Gypsies were rounded up. A spatter of automatic gunfire sounded. Kalashnikovs. Yuri observed the grim-eyed crowd. Some of the women were on their knees, sobbing. The dark men were steely in their black regard of the intruders. Most were bloody, wounded, broken-limbed.

‘Where are all the children?’ Yuri asked.

The answer came from his other side, bright and brittle as the ice frosting these highlands. ‘Barricaded in the church.’

Yuri turned to face the speaker, Captain Savina Martov, the mission's intelligence officer. She was buried in a black overcoat with a fur-lined hood. Her black hair was a match to the hood's fringe of Russian wolf.

She lifted a slender arm toward a steeple rising beyond the wagons and tents. It appeared to be the only permanent structure here. Built all of local stone, the church blended into the surrounding crags.

‘The children were already assembled in the structure before our forces arrived,’ Savina recounted.

Dobritsky nodded. ‘Must have heard the motorcycles’ engines.’

Savina met Yuri’s eyes. Morning light danced in her green eyes. The intelligence officer had her own thoughts. It had been Savina who had delivered a cache of research papers to Yuri’s institute, notebooks and reams of data from Auschwitz-Birkenau, specifically the work of Dr. Josef Mengele, the concentration camp’s ‘Angel of Death.’

Yuri had many sweat-soaked nightmares after reading through the material. It was well known that Dr. Mengele had performed all manner of horrible experiments on the prisoners, but the monster bore a special fascination for Gypsies, especially their children. He would ply them with treats and chocolates. They came to call him ‘Uncle Pepe.’ This was all done just to get the children to better cooperate. Eventually he had them all slaughtered – but not before he discovered an especially unique pair of Gypsy twins.

Two identical girls. Sasha and Meena.

Yuri had read those notes with a mixture of fascination and horror.

Mengele had kept meticulous notes on the remarkable twins: age, family history, lineage. He tortured the twins’ family and relatives to uncover more details, verified by testing with the girls. Mengele accelerated his experiments. But as the war drew to a close, he was forced to prematurely terminate his tests. He killed the twins with injections of phenol into their hearts.

Mengele had scrawled his frustration near the end.

Wenn ich nur mehr Zeit gehabt hätte . . .

If only I’d had more time . . .

‘Are you ready?’ Savina asked Yuri.

He nodded.

Accompanied by Dobritsky and another soldier, the pair headed into the camp. He stepped around a corpse sprawled facedown in a pool of frozen blood.

The church appeared ahead. It was all stacked stones,

no windows. A single door stood closed, constructed of hewn beams of stout wood, banded and studded in copper. The building looked more like a fortress than a church.

Two soldiers flanked the doors with a steel battering ram.

Dobritsky glanced to Yuri.

He nodded.

‘Break it down!’ the lieutenant ordered sharply.

The men swung the ram and smashed the door. Wood splintered. It held for two more swings. Finally the door burst open with a crack of thunder.

Yuri shadowed Savina and stepped forward.

Small oil lamps lit the dark interior. Rows of pews lined either side, leading to a raised altar. Children of all ages cowered among the benches, strangely silent.

As Yuri continued toward the altar, he studied the children. Many bore disturbing deformities: pinheaded microcephaly, cleft lips, dwarfism. One child had no arms at all, only a torso. *Inbreeding*. Yuri’s skin pebbled with unease. No wonder the rural folk around here feared this Romani clan, told tales of spirits and monsters.

‘How will you know if these are the *right* children?’ Savina asked with clear disgust in her voice.

Yuri quoted from one of the tortured interviews recorded by Mengele. ‘The lair of the *chovihanis*.’ The place was where the twins had been born, a secret kept by the Gypsies going back to the founding of the clans.

‘Are these the ones?’ Savina pressed.

Yuri shook his head. ‘I don’t know.’

He continued toward a girl seated before the altar. She clutched a rag doll to her chest, though her own garb was little better than her doll’s. As Yuri neared, he noted the child seemed perfect, spared of any of the deformities. In the dim light, the pure crystal blue of her eyes shone brightly.

So rare among the Romani.

Like the twins, Sasha and Meena.

Yuri knelt in front of her. She seemed not to notice

him. Her gaze passed straight through him. He sensed there *was* something wrong with this child, possibly worse than any of the other deformities.

Though her eyes never seemed to focus any sharper, she lifted a hand toward him. '*Unchi Pepe,*' she lisped in a thin Romani voice.

A wash of fear swept through Yuri. *Uncle Pepe.* The pet name for Josef Mengele. It had been used by all the Gypsy children. But these children were too young to have ever seen the insides of a concentration camp.

Yuri stared into those vacant eyes. Did the child know what Yuri and his research team intended? How could she? Mengele's words haunted him:

If only I'd had more time . . .

That would not be Yuri's problem. His team would be granted all the time it needed. The facility was already under construction. Far from prying eyes.

Savina stepped closer. She needed an answer.

Yuri knew the truth; he'd known it the moment he stared into this girl's face. Still he hesitated.

Savina placed a hand on his elbow. 'Major?'

There could be no turning back, so Yuri nodded, acknowledging the horror to come. '*Da.* These are the *chovihanis.*'

'Are you certain?'

Yuri nodded again, but he kept his gaze fixed on the child's blue eyes. He barely heard Savina order Dobritsky: 'Collect all the children into the trucks. Eliminate everyone else.'

Yuri did not countermand those orders. He knew why they were here.

The child still held out her hand. '*Unchi Pepe,*' she repeated.

He took the tiny fingers into his own. There was no denying it, no turning back.

Yes, I am.