

This novel is the sequel to The Crystal Skulls and part two of The Revelations Saga. As the kingdom of Attaria struggles to survive, an ancient scroll surfaces, predicting a disaster of epic proportions. Can the approaching darkness be stopped?

The Revelations of Arran Nak

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# **The Revelations of Arran Nak**

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**The Revelations of Arran Nak**  
Part II of The Revelations Saga

**Jan Visser**

## Prologue

### The prophecy

The moon was full and pale as milk, the Northwoods eerily quiet. Mist crept across the forest floor, hugging the scarred stems of the naked trees. The still air smelled of mud and decay. In a small cave under a rocky outcrop Estarta sat motionless in front of a crackling fire, the shadow of her scrawny frame dancing wildly on the wall of rock. The oracle's eyes were closed, her head sunken between her shoulders. Her lips moved silently to the rhythm of an ancient chant, while the light of the flames played with the folds and grooves in her parchment face.

Time passed unnoticed. The fire slowly faded. But although the air in the cave grew increasingly cold, the old woman remained as still as a column of stone. Then the muscles at the corner of her mouth twitched, and with a start, she woke up from her state of trance.

Estarta blinked. Her eyes moved wildly behind their milky white veil, as if to follow the visions that were unfolding in her mind, and a flash of fear registered on her face.

"Let him come to me then," she muttered.

She started to rekindle the fire, using brushwood from a small pile to her left, and a warm glow spread through the cave. She resumed her chant, her words whispering through the gloom, until her head sank to her bony chest and her eyelids dropped.

It was close to dawn when the dying fire was disturbed by a draft. Estarta lifted her head, facing the shadow that had materialized in front of her. She inhaled deeply, tasting the air.

"I was expecting you, Ghulut," she croaked. Her mouth widened in a forced grin that showed her toothless gums. "Sit down. You must be tired. You're a long way from home."

The shadow didn't move. A voice spoke to her in broken Attarian. "You are the wise one?"

Estarta's grin disappeared. "I would hardly call myself wise, shaman," she said grimly. "But in a world of fools even a halfwit stands out, I guess."

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Ghulut leaned forward until his ashen face hovered over the glow of the fire. “Your eyes are clouded with age,” he said. “Yet you are said to see more than anyone.”

She moved back, grimacing at the acrid odor that surrounded him. She knew its source all too well. It was the *dead man’s root*, a highly poisonous plant that could only be found in the Moaning Forest and was prized by those who wished to enter the spirit world. “Why don’t you sit down,” she insisted, gesturing with her arm.

Ghulut continued to stare. Then he squatted. His eyes rested on the objects that lay by her side: a small pouch filled with dried meat; a wooden bowl; and a spoon. He glanced around, looking for herbs or potions, but could find nothing else. He frowned. “You can see without the root that unveils?”

Estarta chose to ignore the question. “What brings you here, Ghulut?” she asked. “What can an old woman do for a mighty shaman like you?”

Ghulut’s gaze intensified, and the black depths in his eyes pulsed in the glow of the embers. “A great darkness is coming,” he said, his voice barely a whisper. “Many visions I have seen, but their meaning escapes me. It is said you are the oracle. Tell me what you know.”

Estarta sighed. She lifted her head, her eyes now looking straight into his. “Yes, I have the gift of second sight,” she said, nodding slowly. “But so do you. You, of all men, should know that nobody can see the future exactly as it will unfold.”

His eyes flashed. “Do not try to fool me, woman. What did you see?”

She couldn’t help flinching at the controlled anger in his voice. Yet her words remained defiant. “Our peoples have been enemies since before I was born,” she said. “Why would I tell you my darkest secrets?”

For a brief moment, pure hatred emanated from Ghulut’s eyes. Then he moved back from the flames, and his ashen face dissolved in the dark. Estarta sat motionless, sensing his presence and trying to suppress the fear that was building up inside of her. It was a strange, intense feeling, something long forgotten.

“I’m not afraid of death, Ghulut,” she said. “My time has passed. It passed a long time ago.”

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A soft chuckle came from across the fire, followed by a peculiar hissing sound. A hand lunged out from the dark, grabbing her by the throat, and her old joints popped as he lifted her up. He stared at her, the black depths in his eyes throbbing like a beating heart.

“Death is not what scares us most,” he whispered. “It is suffering.”

Something cold slid across Estarta’s face, and a white gash appeared on her left cheek. Blood started dripping down the wound, sizzling as it hit the glowing embers. Ghulut tightened his grasp, and she gasped for air, her eyes growing wide. Just before she passed out, he put her down.

“Speak to me,” he said.

Estarta coughed. Red marks appeared on her throat. She swallowed hard and took a few gasping breaths, and as she recovered, her milky white gaze turned back to Ghulut.

She started to giggle.

For a moment the shaman seemed taken aback. Then he grabbed the thin strands of hair that covered her scalp and jerked her head back. Estarta yelped, her face drawn back into a wrinkled grimace of agony. “It will do you little good, holy man,” she wheezed, her voice soft and hoarse. “I will tell you what I know. But it will do you little good.”

He looked down at her with contempt. Then he let go of her. “Tell me about the darkness,” he demanded.

Estarta picked up her flask and took a few sips, wincing at the pain in her throat as she swallowed. She wiped her mouth with a dirty hand. “Most of what I know has been prophesied,” she started. “By the giants who came down from the heavens. It is ancient knowledge, and much of it was lost in time because people prefer to be ignorant. But the words were passed on to me by my mother, as they were passed on to each of the women in my bloodline, an unbroken line of oracles that stretches back to—”

“The prophecy, woman,” Ghulut snapped.

Estarta winced. She leaned closer to the fire, her face now shrouded in a curtain of smoke. “After the giants had landed their silver bird on our lands, king Homekh tried to drive them away,” she continued. “But it was, of course, in vain; it is said that they could control the elements, sending out thunder and lightning at will. Homekh went into hiding, hoping that the intruders would eventually go back to where they came

from, but they didn't leave. Growing desperate, he decided to visit them and offer them his allegiance in order to save his people. It was a huge risk. Everyone expected him to be killed as soon as he showed his face, but curiously enough, the giants welcomed him instead. They even made a pact with him, speaking to him and no one else."

Estarta sighed. "But they spoke only in riddles. Unable to make sense of what they said, Homekh wrote down their words so that those who came after him might understand."

Her gaze sharpened, and her face grew dark. "Listen carefully, holy man," she said. "For the prophecy is about to be fulfilled." Then she closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, and when she spoke again, the words came out like a chant.

*"Beware of the dark one that lurks in the void, for when he returns, the heavens will burn. Fiery rain will fall from the skies, covering man and beast in boils, and blood will fill the rivers and lakes. For twelve years his powers will grow until the sign is three sixes. And when he is born, it will be as if the night will never end. It is then that the sea will rise and the mountains tremble. It is then that the earth itself will be torn apart and the sun driven from its rightful place in the skies. And it is then that the world of mankind will cease to exist. There can be no escape. For this has happened before, and it will happen again, and there is nothing you can do to stop your fate."*

She paused to catch her breath, her eyes resting on the shadow in front of her. "No escape, holy man," she said softly. "No escape." Then her shoulders drooped, and she fell silent, staring into the glowing embers. She suddenly looked terribly frail.

Ghulut bent down, bringing his face in front of hers. "What does it mean?" he said.

Estarta shook her head. "I don't know."

"Has it happened? Did the dark one cause the flood?"

She grinned, but her face was drained of all color and nearly as white as his. "Child's play," she whispered. "It is only child's play compared to what will come. And there is nothing you can do, holy man. Nothing."

She looked up at him and suddenly started to giggle again, her eyes rolling madly as if she had gone insane.

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He grabbed her throat and pulled her closer. “The dark one! What is it?”

“I told you,” Estarta wheezed. “I don’t know.” She clawed at his arm, but she was helpless under his grip. Ghulut squeezed harder, nearly crushing her gullet, but then he released his grasp.

“Tell me what you have seen,” he said softly.

She swallowed hard. Somehow, the calmness of his voice was even more frightening than the pulsating glow in his eyes. “It’s a blackness that cannot be perceived,” she gasped. “Not even by those who have the second sight. Some would call it evil, but I...I don’t know *what* to call it. There is no name for it. It is nothing.”

Ghulut reached out and took an ember from the fire, seemingly oblivious to its heat. He placed the glowing coal into the palm of her hand. Then he closed her hand into a fist, holding it tightly. The smell of burning flesh spread through the cave.

“Tell me what you have seen.”

Estarta clenched her jaws, refusing to scream, but the pain was too much to bear. She shrieked, nodding fiercely. He let go of her hand, and the ember dropped to the floor, leaving a fiery mark on her skin.

She gasped for breath, clutching her wrist. Her body trembled uncontrollably. “The Arrannak,” she breathed. “The Arrannak is the key. It’s all I can tell you.” She sensed Ghulut moving behind her, and she stiffened. “No, please! It’s all I know. Please! It’s all I know!”

His hand moved across her face, and her shrieks turned into a muffled groan. She tensed. Then she sagged, and her limp body fell sideways to the ground.

Ghulut inhaled deeply, his nostrils quivering. His face betrayed no emotion as he looked down upon the oracle’s lifeless form.

“You were wise not to lie,” he said as he turned and left the cave.



## Chapter 1

Olik spurred his mare and galloped up a shallow hill. As he crested it, the old city of Persis came into view, and he pulled the reins and came to a halt. He looked over his shoulder. "I never realized it was so beautiful," he breathed as Atrana pulled up beside him.

"Maybe it's just because you've never been so glad to see it," she said.

Olik grinned.

They sipped water from their flasks, waiting for the other riders to catch up. The horses were gleaming with sweat from the long ride, their breath steaming in the cold winter air.

Ahead of them, Persis seemed to float on the early-morning mist, its old, grey walls rising up into the skies like a testimony of strength. Encircled by those protective walls, the houses that were built on the hills formed an undulating sea of orange-brown roofs. Wisps of smoke rose up here and there, dissipating in the barely noticeable breeze.

Olik's gaze rested on the western edge of the city, where Petraeus castle stood out like a massive crown of stone. The citadel was the oldest in Attaria and was known throughout the kingdom for the wealth of its interior. Situated on a two-hundred-feet-high rock and accessible only via a narrow, winding road, it had been the seat of the governor of Persis for more than three hundred years. He was glad he had sent his mother here, with Yari and Foca. With the destruction of Mensis, the rebellion in Gulis, and the rumored sacking of Partis by the Kuhndars, Persis had become the kingdom's only remaining center of power. They were safe here, safer than anywhere else, at least.

His gaze turned to the east. He wondered whether Pykon and Omakan were back yet, whether they had been able to save any of the villagers from the Kuhndar hordes that were swarming the Plains of Calur. It had been a dangerous mission. He realized they might well be dead.

He sighed and drew a hand over his face. He would give a fortune to know what was going on in the rest of the kingdom. Had Subor really proclaimed himself king of Gulis, as rumors suggested? Had Partis really fallen? And were Hansur and Mansur still alive?

There was a rumble of approaching horses, and the ground vibrated as the riders galloped up the slope. The horses snorted and whinnied,

sending white froth flying. Grass and soil were thrown up by their hooves as they came to a halt.

Olik looked at his men. Their faces were drawn with fatigue and covered in sweat and dirt, but there was a glimmer in their eyes that showed how thrilled they were to see the city. He found Schlemba at the rear, hunched in the saddle and clearly exhausted from the ride. As they caught each other's eye, he gave the Arrannak an approving nod.

"Well, there it is," Olik said, nodding at the grey walls. "The old city of Persis. I'm sure you're desperate for a bath and a decent meal, but before we go in, I need to warn those of you who have never been to Persis before. You may find that the citizens of Persis can be quite arrogant. Some of them are even hostile to outsiders. And the nobles are probably the worst. Don't let yourself be provoked by their behavior, though. I don't want any difficulties. We'll have to get used to each other, since we might be here for a while."

"Are you saying you're planning to stay here?" one of the riders grunted.

Olik threw a quick glance at the man. He was heavily built and had a rough voice that reminded him of Mansur. "The Kuhndars are moving to the west," he said. "If Terrek Kuhn cuts us off, we'll be trapped. I intend to drive them back, but if we can't form an army strong enough to fight them, we may have to lay low for a while until we get help from outside."

"Help from where?" the man said. "Gulis?" He snorted. "Subor hates the nobles of Persis. He won't spill a drop of blood for them."

"Or us," someone else said. "You know what they say, *once a traitor, always a traitor.*"

There was a soft murmur of consent.

"Maybe you're right," Olik said. "But don't forget that Subor hates Terrek Kuhn more than any of us. I can't believe he would sit by idly and watch us fight this war all by ourselves. Besides, he may have betrayed us, but he's still an Attarian."

The men fell silent, glancing at each other. Olik could tell by the look on their faces that the prospect of being imprisoned within the city walls made them very uneasy.

"What about food and water?" someone asked.

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“There’s a passage to the harbor in Lower Persis that is protected by the cliffs,” Atrana said. “Even if the city is cut off from the woods and farmlands, we can still get in supplies. We can hold out for years, if necessary.”

Olik nodded to show his agreement, although he realized her evaluation was exceedingly optimistic. In reality, the fleet wasn’t nearly big enough to provide the people with sufficient food and water, particularly if the city was flooded with thousands of refugees. Unless they could get into the woods to hunt, the supplies would run out sooner or later. And then there would be hunger. Hunger and disease.

“They say Persis is the only city that has never seen battle,” a boy named Jarud said. “Is that true?”

Olik turned to face the boy. He was barely fifteen winters old, but already his face was marked by deep scars that would forever characterize his appearance. Olik knew very well what had caused these terrible wounds; he had sat by Jarud’s side when the boy had fought for his life after being attacked by the smeksmeks. The cuts in his face had become infected. It had seemed certain he would die, and yet he had survived and turned out to be one of the bravest men Olik had ever known. He wondered whether Jarud’s apparent lack of fear could be explained by what he had endured. The boy had stared death in the eye and defeated it.

“Persis has always been well protected because of its location,” he said, answering Jarud’s question. “The Kuhndars have never made it this far into the kingdom, not even when they laid siege to Mensis.”

“How do we know if their garrison is any good then?” someone said.

Olik turned toward the city again, giving himself time to formulate a reply. He realized the man had touched upon a delicate issue. The Persian garrison had never been involved in any kind of battle, and it was unclear how they would hold up when their lives were at stake. Besides, he had heard reports about a serious lack of discipline. He was well aware that there was a lot of work to do, and there was little time.

“They are well-trained,” he said, avoiding a more straightforward answer. Forcing a grin, he added, “But that doesn’t mean we can’t teach them a thing or two.”

Some of the men chuckled.

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Olik straightened his back, and his face relaxed. “Are you hungry?” he said.

The men came to life, grunting that they were starving.

“Let’s not waste any more time, then,” he said. “Let’s see if the Persian cooks are as good as they proclaim to be.”

The riders responded with cheers. They spurred their horses, racing for the gate, and before long they were eating warmed-up stew and drinking large jugs of ale, nestled in the comfortable warmth of a giant hearth.

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After having enjoyed their first decent meal in days, Olik and Atrana left the men at the inn to meet with governor Belcko. The governor had become the de facto ruler of the kingdom after the death of the king, and he would remain in power until Atrana was crowned as successor to the throne. It was important for her inauguration to take place as soon as possible, because this would show the people that the kingdom was still alive. But according to the law, a crowning could take place only after Atrana had married. And such a marriage would have to be approved by the nobility. It was Belcko’s task to organize a meeting of the nobles in Persis.

Belcko was known to be a man who enjoyed power and wealth. He would not welcome a sudden end to his newly acquired status, although he would be reluctant to openly voice this dissent. It was no surprise, therefore, that he was somewhat stiff and aloof as he entertained Olik and Atrana in one of his luxurious rooms in the main tower of Petraeus castle.

The governor, a heavysset man with puffy cheeks and a bald head, could not hide being ill at ease with the presence of his impending successor. He pretended to be immensely distracted by his daily affairs, welcoming every intrusion by his servants with unmistakable enthusiasm. As noon approached, he suddenly called an end to the meeting, promising he would discuss the matter with the other Persian nobles and inform Atrana as soon as they had reached a decision.

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Frustrated, Olik and Atrana left the room, and a servant led them to the southeast tower, where they would be quartered for the duration of their stay. Olik was already hoping it would be a very short time.

Belcko did not show his face again, nor did he invite them for dinner. They ate a small meal in one of their rooms, their anger at the governor's arrogant disrespect for protocol rising by the moment. Although the food was better than anything they had had in a long time, they didn't seem able to appreciate the taste.

The night had just entered its second quarter as Yoni, Yari, and Foca returned from the soldiers' barracks, where they had been providing aid to incoming refugees. There was a moment of pleasant chaos when an excited Yari jumped on Olik's back and nearly choked him. Olik managed to peel the boy off his shoulders and grabbed him by the ankles, holding him above the floor.

"I'm glad to see you too, little brother," he laughed.

They sat down by the fire to exchange stories and share anecdotes about the haughtiness of the Persian nobles, but as soon as Yari and Foca had left the room, the tone grew serious. Yoni listened attentively as Olik told her about their meeting with the governor.

"Belcko will do anything he can to prevent your marriage," she said. "You realize that, don't you?"

"But what can he do?" Atrana said. "The decision is up to the nobility. His vote is worth no more than anyone else's."

Yoni's eyes rested on her. "You forget, Atrana, that Belcko *owns* the nobles. Most of them, anyway. They owe him. They will do whatever he tells them to do."

Olik shook his head in irritation. "But even Belcko has to realize that the kingdom needs to be restored. The people are fearful and uncertain. They need a sign that there is still some form of stability."

Yoni nodded. "Of course. Belcko is no fool. He knows that there will be a riot if he doesn't accept Atrana's rights to the throne. The problem is that he will not accept *you*, Olik."

Olik gave her a confused look. "What do you mean?"

Yoni looked from Olik to Atrana and back. "You both know Belcko's son, Sindokan."

“What?” Olik cried. He pushed his chair back with force and rose. “Are you saying he wants Sindokan to—”

“Yes,” Yoni interrupted. “That’s precisely what he wants. Belcko has been pushing this issue for days now, and most of the Persian nobles seem to be on his side. If it’s up to them, Sindokan will be our new king.”

“The bastard!” Atrana spat. “The arrogant bastard!”

“What does Sindokan have to say about this?” Olik wanted to know.

Yoni brushed her plate aside and stood, struggling to maintain her normal composure. She slowly walked to one of the windows and looked out over the courtyard below. “Sindokan has had his eye on Atrana for years,” she said. “Not that this has anything to do with his father’s plans, by the way,” she added, looking over her shoulder. “That’s a separate issue. Belcko cares little for his son. All *he* cares for is power.”

“But Sindokan will never agree to marry me if he knows I’m against it,” Atrana said. “I know him. He’s nothing like Belcko.”

“Oh, he would marry you either way,” Yoni said, smiling bitterly. “He may not be as scheming and untrustworthy as his father, but apparently his infatuation with you runs very deep. Someone that blinded by love can easily fool himself into believing the feeling is mutual. And I don’t think there’s anything you could say or do to make him think otherwise.”

“How do you know all this?” Olik said.

Yoni looked at him. “You forget that your uncle Saludin, Foca’s father, had very close ties with Belcko’s family. He knew as much about what goes on under these roofs as anyone.” She sighed and looked away. “I know you didn’t like your uncle, Olik. I wasn’t particularly fond of him either. But he has always been very helpful in deciphering the intricacies of Belcko’s court.”

Olik nodded. He sighed and sank back into his chair.

“Saludin’s body has never been found,” Yoni said. “And neither has Aaida’s. We’re fairly certain they were on the plains north of Mensis when the wave hit. They could never have survived.”

“How does Foca handle it?” Atrana asked.

Yoni looked at her. “Surprisingly well, I have to say.”

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“That’s because she hardly knew them anyway,” Olik sneered. “You practically raised her.” He stabbed at a piece of quail with his fork. “So what do you suggest we do?”

“Nothing for now,” Yoni said. “I will try to sway some of the nobles to our side, but it will be difficult at best. Even Omakan might vote against you.”

Olik looked up. “Omakan? So he’s here! And Pykon?”

“They arrived yesterday, with several hundred survivors from the Plains of Calur,” Yoni said. “But most of the villages were destroyed, Olik. Those still out there are defenseless against the Kuhndars.”

Olik moved a hand over his face. He suddenly looked very tired. “With all this misery, how can the nobles sink so low as to play political games?”

“Power is a corrupting force,” Yoni sighed. “It consumes those who are weak.”

“So it seems,” Olik said bitterly. He dropped his fork and rose. “Well, I guess there’s little we can do for now. I will leave it to you to talk to the nobles, mother. In the meantime, we will work on the city’s defenses.” He froze as a disturbing thought struck him. “That is, if Belcko will let me take charge of the troops,” he said, looking at her.

“Your own men, yes,” Yoni said. “Not the Persian guard. Belcko will never allow it.”

Olik cursed. “This is unbelievable!” he spat. “If I *do* become king, I’ll make sure Belcko pays for his treachery.”

Yoni frowned at him. “If you *do* become king, Olik, I hope you will never abuse your power the way he does.”

He opened his mouth to object, then swallowed his anger. “I guess you’re right,” he muttered, avoiding her gaze.

Her face relaxed. “Of course I’m right,” she said with a hint of humor. “I’m your mother.”

Olik managed a grin.

She headed for the door. “It’s late. I’m staying in the northeastern tower, overlooking the cliffs. You should come visit me in the morning. The view is quite nice.”

“We will,” Atrana said.

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Olik embraced his mother. “At least we’re all together again,” he said. “I guess things could have been a lot worse.”

Yoni smiled. She kissed him on the cheek, then walked off into the night, and he stood in the doorway, watching her until she disappeared behind the stables that lined the castle wall. His gaze was drawn to a swarm of shooting stars that traced the skies to the west. He admired them quietly until Atrana took his arm and pulled him back inside.

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The Kuhndars moved west like Olik had expected, and three days after his arrival, Persis was already under siege. Numerous small encampments dotted the hills to the south, while rows of sharpened poles were erected in front of the south gate to preventing an outbreak of the Attarian cavalry. Already the enemy force was estimated at more than five thousand men, and a constant stream of reinforcements came in from the east.

The population of Persis had almost doubled in just a few days. Most of the riders that had accompanied Olik and Atrana on their quest were now inside the city walls, working with the Persian guard to strengthen the defenses. A few hundred peasants had been brought in from villages on the Plains of Calur, while thousands more had come from the south on their own. Scores of hunters had started to pour out of the woods. The stream of refugees had swollen to barely manageable proportions, then suddenly slowed down to a trickle, as the noose around the city was being tightened.

One of the last to reach the city had been Mansur, having fought his way through enemy lines with only a handful of men. With his friend’s arrival, Olik finally received a reliable report about what had happened in Partis. According to Mansur, the city was partly taken, but sections of it, including the castle, were still holding out against an overwhelming enemy force. In a desperate act, the governor of Partis had sent Mansur to Persis for help, unaware of the fact that Terrek Kuhn’s forces had already swept across the Plains of Calur and cut the kingdom in two. It had taken Mansur and his men five days to cross the plains, and it was

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impossible to tell what had happened since he had left. But if Partis had not been destroyed already, its fall would be only a matter of time.

Within Persis, thousands of men, women, and children had volunteered to help improve the city's defenses. Olik knew that if they were well-prepared, the walls would be quite difficult to breach. Any frontal assault would cost the Kuhndars dearly. Their siege towers, or *suracks*, were hard to maneuver on the steeply rising slopes, and their infantry would be exposed and vulnerable to archers.

Apart from the terrain, the city's defenses were quite impressive in and of themselves. The wall was more than eight feet thick with an average height of almost twenty-five feet. It had a well protected walkway that could only be taken if the defenders were seriously outnumbered. The doors of the southern gate—the only entrance from the plains—were made of solid oak reinforced with thick strips of bronze, and a rocky outcrop in front of the gate prevented the use of battering rams. The gate tower was a heavily fortified structure that rose more than forty feet. Smaller towers reinforced the wall at regular intervals, each of them stacked with barrels of flammable oil, thousands of arrows, and piles of rocks. It was enough to withstand a major onslaught.

But despite these impressive defenses, there was little hope the Attarians would survive a prolonged siege. They were trapped and abandoned, surrounded by an enemy that was steadily growing stronger. The people were restless and afraid.

It had been two days since the last wagonload of food had come in from the plains. The only lifeline left was the small corridor that connected the city with the harbor in Lower Persis. Fortunately, this corridor was well protected. The walls that angled down to the harbor below were built on a steep slope full of crevices and ravines, while the harbor itself was nested in rocky outcrops that provided a natural defense. There had been a few probing attacks by small bands of Kuhndar warriors, but nothing that posed a real threat. Judging by the troop movements, Terrek Kuhn had apparently set his sights on the more accessible south wall.

At daybreak on the second day of the siege, Olik and Atrana stood on the roof of the gate tower, observing the enemy encampments below.

Sleet had fallen that night, covering the roofs and walls with a layer of ice, and in the early morning light, the city behind them shone like multi-colored glass. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

Olik pulled his gaze away from the glimmering display to rest his hands on the stone parapet. “We’re running out of time,” he said. “Look.” He nodded toward a stretch of woodland where the enemy was building three large, wooden constructions. One of them stood over twenty feet tall, while the others had reached more than half that size. “They will soon finish building their suracks,” he said. “And we still haven’t trained most of our recruits.”

Atrana blinked against the sunlight. “According to Mansur, those suracks are useless on the slopes,” she said.

Olik glanced at her. “Is that what he said?” He shook his head. “Once they reach the wall, they’re as effective here as anywhere else. I guess what Mansur means is that it will take several hundred men to pull these hulks up the slopes. They will be easy targets for our archers. But that won’t stop them. Terrek doesn’t mind losing his army, as long as he wins the battle.”

He paused, rubbing his chin, his gaze drifting to the east. “We should send messengers to Gulis. Subor may not even know we’re under siege.”

Atrana smiled bitterly. “There are thousands of warriors here,” she said, nodding to the encampments. “Do you really think they could have gotten past Gulis unnoticed?” She shook her head. “You can’t wake a person who’s pretending to be asleep, Olik.”

Olik realized she was right. Yet he refused to give up on Subor yet. He simply could not accept the possibility that the man had turned his back on them for good. Not Subor. Granted, the man had been nothing but trouble at times, but in the end he had always done what he thought was best for the kingdom. What if—

He forced the thoughts out of his mind. It was useless contemplating things he could not control. “If only we had a little more time,” he said. “Mansur’s convinced Terrek will attack within two days. If he’s right, we won’t be ready.”

“Then we should attack first,” Atrana said.

“And give up the only advantage we have?” Olik shook his head. “These walls are the only chance we’ve got.”

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“I don’t see why we should sit and wait for them to strike, though,” she insisted. “If those suracks are such a threat, then maybe we should destroy them.”

“How? We’ll be slaughtered before we even get there.”

She gave him a shrewd look. “We could slip behind their lines after dark with a handful of men.”

Olik frowned. He shifted his gaze to the edge of the woods, contemplating the idea. It was an unusual suggestion, completely alien to the way they normally fought their battles. Yet he quickly saw it for what it was: a bold plan that might actually work.

“They fight like us,” she continued, as if she had read his thoughts. “Open battles in which they can see eye to eye with their opponents. They will never expect us to sneak up on them in the middle of the night.”

He licked his lips, scanning the terrain, trying to visualize the attack in his mind. Would they be able to get to the suracks unseen? He looked up at the skies. Scattered clouds were starting to drift inland from the sea, the cloud cover they would desperately need for such a raid to work. Leaving the city in anything but absolute darkness would be suicide. But given the right circumstances.... He was almost convinced it could work.

“How did you come up with this?” he said.

She grinned. “Remember when we were attacked by the Hekses?”

“Of course. The men were terrified.”

“Precisely.”

He rubbed the stubble on his chin, his eyes filling with sudden eagerness. “We could do this tonight,” he said. “If the weather is favorable, I will—”

She grabbed his arm. “Not you. Not this time. Remember, you will soon be king.”

He opened his mouth to argue but looked up distractedly at the distinct clang of swords coming from behind the wall.

“Those must be the new recruits,” Atrana said. She walked over to the other side of the tower. “Look. They’ve started their training.”

Olik joined her at the parapet and looked down. On a grassy area at the foot of the wall, about fifty children were sparring with blunted swords, hacking at each other with clumsy movements. Some of them

had clearly never handled a weapon before, although their size suggested they were at least twelve winters old. It was common for children to start receiving combat training around their tenth birthday, but Persis was the exception to the rule; the city had always been relatively safe.

“Good,” Olik said, nodding appreciatively. “I see the girls are sparring as well.”

“It took some effort to convince the nobles it was necessary,” Atrana said. “They’ve got such strange customs here. Why would anyone want to prohibit girls from wearing arms?”

Olik shrugged. “I guess the Gulians would say the same about *our* customs. We don’t allow women to wear arms after their first childbirth, but one of the commanders of the Gulian guard is a woman of sixty winters who has raised nine children. That could never have happened in Mensis.”

“And yet they don’t let their women play pogobo,” Atrana snorted.

“That’s precisely what I mean,” Olik said. “Many customs make little sense. Not when you really think about it. Including ours.”

He nodded toward the stocky soldier walking back and forth among the young recruits. “I can’t say I envy Mansur,” he chuckled. “He still has a lot of work to do.”

Judging by his gestures, Mansur was clearly frustrated with the unskilled movements of his pupils. He soon put an end to the display and walked toward a group of boys who were sitting idly at the side of the field. He handed one of them a sword. The boy got to his feet.

“Isn’t that Yari?” Atrana asked. “What’s *he* doing here?”

Olik sighed. “He’s stubborn, that little brother of mine. He insisted on being trained with the other boys. He said they will later respect him more as a leader if he practices with them now.”

Atrana raised her eyebrows. “Really? That’s rather wise for someone his age.”

“Don’t give him too much credit,” Olik said with a grin. “I’m sure he picked it up from Subor.”

They watched as Mansur motioned Yari to attack him. Yari didn’t seem eager to comply, standing motionlessly, with the tip of his sword pointing to the ground. But then he suddenly lunged, taking Mansur by surprise. For a moment, the stocky commander was forced to defend, but

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with a few powerful blows he regained control. It didn't take long before Yari's sword flew through the air, landing in the dust. As he dived for it, Mansur stood on his arm, and Yari yelled with pain and frustration. When Mansur pulled him to his feet, he pushed the man's arm aside and stormed away.

Olik shook his head. "That boy is as hot-tempered as a cave bear waking from hibernation and realizing he has overslept."

Atrana laughed.

"Let's not waste any more time," Olik said, turning to climb down the stairs. "I need to find a few good men for the raid, and I think I know someone who could lead them. They say he has the eyes of a cat."

Atrana followed him down the stairs. "Let me guess. Mogol?"

Olik nodded. "And I know precisely where I can find him."

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Olik blinked as he entered the old tavern. The large, rectangular room was packed and shrouded in a veil of smoke. The air felt thick and sticky, and there was a pungent smell: a mixture of bacon, beer, and sweat. Over the constant buzz of voices he could hear the squeals of a pig coming from outside the farthest wall.

He looked around. A few farmers stood by the entrance, hardened men who, by the look of their wide leather belts, originated from the Plains of Calur. Several soldiers of the Persian garrison occupied the tables against the wall to his left, while five merchants sat to his right, staring at him with an air of superiority. Dressed in their finery, the merchants looked strangely out of place, and yet they acted as if they should be the only ones allowed inside.

Olik peered through the smoke, and he found Mogol at the other end of the room, his bright red hair standing out like a beacon in the fog. The little Persian was sharing a large table with half a dozen others, enjoying a breakfast of bread, bacon, and ale. Olik grinned as he picked up a familiar cackling voice. A lanky man, sitting opposite Mogol, was gesticulating wildly, his words eliciting broad grins from the others at the table. Apparently, the old tracker Timmo had once again found a willing audience for his infamously tall tales.

Olik weaved his way through the crowd, ignoring the stares. He heard the men at Mogol's table burst out laughing, and someone slapped Timmo on the shoulder and raised his drink with a cheer, at which everyone drained their goblets. Then several of the men stood and started to leave.

Mogol looked up from his food, and a smile spread across his face. "Olik!" he called. He gestured toward an empty chair. "Come sit, and let me buy you a drink."

Timmo looked over his shoulder at Olik and winked. "I suggest you take the offer," he cackled, showing his single tooth in a crooked grin. "It won't be long, it won't, before the only things we can get in this place are rats and lice."

Olik pulled the chair away from the table and sat down, patting Timmo on the shoulder. Mogol observed him from behind his goblet. "Any news from outside?" the little Persian asked.

"I'm afraid not," Olik said. He waved for the innkeeper, a round-bellied man with greasy hair and hands that seemed the size of shovels. The man ignored Olik at first, but then he suddenly changed his demeanor, apparently recognizing his guest. In his hasty attempts to reach the table, he roughly shoved aside some of his other customers. He apologized for the delay, grabbed an empty goblet from a nearby table and filled it with ale from a small barrel he held under his arm. Then he scurried off to get more bread.

Olik glanced at the dirty goblet and decided to pass on the ale. Turning to Timmo, he said, "How's my little friend, Chipa?"

Timmo's eyes lit up. "Not bad, given the circumstances." His hand disappeared under his tunic and brought out a ball of grey-white fur. Chipa purred loudly in his sleep, unperturbed by the noise around him, and when Olik ran a finger over his soft belly, the little tracker stretched his legs in delight.

"Keep that furry marmot away from my food, will you?" Mogol grunted. "I'm ready to spit a hairball."

Timmo scowled, shaking his head in mock anger. He turned to Olik, and his face assumed a conspiring grimace. "Do you know why everybody likes Chipa better than Mogol?" he said, just loud enough for Mogol to hear.

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Mogol leaned back and rolled his eyes. “Well, I’m sure you’re going to tell us, Timmo,” he sighed.

Timmo grinned. “Because he wags his tail instead of his tongue,” he cackled.

Olik burst out laughing. Mogol tried to look offended but couldn’t suppress a chuckle. “Very funny, Timmo,” he said. He pointed at Olik’s goblet and grunted, “You might as well enjoy the ale while you still can. This might be one of the last drinks you’ll ever have.”

“Stop being so pessimistic, Mogol,” Olik said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Subor showed up to chase Terrek back to Kuhndaria.”

Mogol snorted. “Subor has committed the worst form of treason. You can’t possibly expect him to suddenly pledge allegiance to the throne again.”

“Even so,” Olik replied, “He’s still holding out in Gulis, which means Terrek has to divide his forces. I think we should consider striking a deal with him if it means saving the kingdom. I’d be willing to forget the past.”

Mogol shook his head. “The nobles would never accept it.”

Olik shrugged. “Anyway, that’s not why I came to see you.” He leaned forward, resting an elbow on the table. “There may be a way to disrupt Terrek’s plans. Something that will buy us time. But I need your help.”

Mogol regarded him through narrowed eyes. “Help with what?”

“I want you to assemble a small group of men, the best you can find. Your goal will be to infiltrate the Kuhndar camps and destroy their suracks.”

He paused, gauging Mogol’s reaction. The little Persian thoughtfully rubbed his chin but avoided his gaze.

“You will leave the city at night, but only under cloud cover,” Olik continued. “It’s vital that you return from the raid without ever being seen.”

Mogol poked at his bread with a dirty finger. A cynical smile formed at the corner of his mouth. “You ask me to sneak behind Terrek Kuhn’s lines with a handful of men and come back unharmed?”

“Unseen,” Olik said.

“Unseen!” Mogol shook his head in disbelief. “Are you serious?”

Olik grinned. “I haven’t told you the best part yet.” As he leaned closer and conveyed the rest of the plan, Mogol started to chuckle, then laugh. Timmo, who had been trying to look away, couldn’t help throwing curious glances.

Olik sat back in his chair. “I think we can pull this off,” he said. “Terrek will expect us to either hide behind our walls or make an attempt to break out. He certainly isn’t expecting us to sneak behind his lines to harass him. And the slopes to the north and east are practically unguarded. Once you’re past their sentries, you’re basically free to move in and out of their camps.”

He regarded Mogol sharply. “Think about it, Mogol. It’s your call. If anyone can pull this off it’s you. But I don’t want you to do it if you think the risks are too high.”

Mogol finished his ale in a large gulp and waved his empty goblet at the innkeeper. “That’s quite a plan,” he said, staring at his plate. “As a matter of fact, it sounds insane.” Then a boyish look appeared on his speckled face. “Well, they say it takes a madman to ride a mad horse, so I guess you’ve come to the right person.” He laughed loudly and slammed his goblet on the table. “You’re crazy, Olik. But so am I. So let’s get to work.”

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Daylight waned as Olik and Mogol came to the well at the base of the wall. The western horizon was colored in bright streaks of orange and red, but the thickening cloud cover promised a starless night.

Mogol was dressed in black, his face darkened with coal and his flaming hair covered by a protruding hood. A rope hung from his left shoulder. On his back was a small sack, filled with bottles of highly flammable oil, and in his pockets he carried a set of flints. His only weapon was a dagger, stuck under his belt.

Olik gave the little Persian a quick glance. Now that the moment was near, he felt somewhat uneasy about sending Mogol on such a dangerous mission. He wished he could have gone instead, but it was too late to change that now. He would be ill-prepared.

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They did not talk. There was no need; they had discussed the raid at length. Instead, they waited for the darkness to set in, and then they got to their feet and embraced.

“Good luck, my friend,” Olik said softly.

Mogol grinned. “Wait for me in the tavern. Don’t let Timmo drink my ale!” Then he turned and his small form disappeared in a cluster of trees.

A few moments later, Olik saw several shadows on top of the wall, moving without a sound. Their dark clothing made the men all but invisible. He nodded appreciatively. Instead of soldiers, Mogol had selected hunters, men who knew how to dissolve into the night. If anyone could succeed, it would be them.

He looked up at the skies once more, watching the clouds drift to the east and hoping for the elements to remain on their side.

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Mogol climbed down the rope and landed softly on the other side of the wall. He hurried toward a large boulder and crouched, waiting for his men to signal that they had taken their positions. Then he started to trot in an eastern direction.

There was no hesitation in his movements as he hurried through the dark. He knew the area well and had spent most of the afternoon determining the safest way to get to his objective. He followed the creeks and gullies, rocks, and solitary trees he had marked out earlier, their outlines still vaguely visible in the gloomy twilight. Soon, the rock-strewn surface gave way to patches of grass. He could discern a dark band looming ahead: the edge of a small wooded area. He slowed his pace, then halted.

To his right, about a thousand feet to the southeast, was the nearest Kuhndar encampment. He would have to circle it and move through the woods to get to the suracks.

Fingering his flints, Mogol peered into the darkness. He wondered whether there would be any guards on this side of the camp. He did not expect any. The Kuhndars were known to neglect their defenses, and they would not anticipate being attacked anywhere but on the plains.

*Jan Visser*

He continued toward the forest but froze as a twig broke under his foot with a soft crack. For a moment he thought he saw movement to his right, but as he focused, there was only darkness. Ahead of him, the leaves rustled softly.

He flinched as a hand touched his shoulder. “Everything all right?” one of the hunters whispered.

Mogol tapped the man’s arm. “Yes. Let’s keep moving.”

He entered the woods, and soon he saw the glow of campfires ahead, then, as he cautiously moved ahead, the outlines of tents, erected along the edge of the forest. There were muffled voices, and he sank to his knees, scanning the encampment. The fires were deserted. The sound seemed to come from inside the tents.

He caught a glimpse of movement. A scrawny steppehound strolled through the encampment, sniffing the ground for scraps of food. The animal wandered toward one of the fires and picked up a stick that had probably been used as a spit, then lay down and started chewing the wood.

Mogol waited a moment longer, then started to rise, but he stiffened as the steppehound lifted its head and looked in his direction. Its yellow eyes glowed eerily in the light of the flames.

“Don’t you bark, you mongrel,” Mogol muttered under his breath.

It seemed unlikely that the steppehound could see him, but the animal clearly sensed that something was in the woods. Its strange eyes remained fixed on him for what seemed a very long time. Then it suddenly jumped up and ran off, its tail between its legs.

Cold sweat was pouring down Mogol’s face now. He needed to keep moving. The longer he stayed in one place, the greater the risk of being detected. Stretching his tensed muscles, he stalked further into the woods, away from the camp.

The light of the fires faded. After a while, the darkness around him became complete. He started to become afraid he would get lost, but then he saw small specks of light glimmering between the trunks of the trees.

“There!” he whispered to himself.

He moved back to the edge of the forest, straining to see the outlines of the suracks. He knew he had to be close now.

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There was laughter nearby. Men were talking, their voices carrying far in the stillness of the night. As Mogol focused on the source of the sound, he started to discern large shapes, looming ahead. At first he wasn't sure if he could trust his eyes—the forms seemed to dissolve, then reappear—but as he moved closer, the large outlines of the suracks took shape.

He sat down to wait, irritated. The guards would slow him down considerably, and their presence made the entire operation all the more risky. It was a good thing their closest encampment was several hundred feet away, he considered. If his men could get close enough to the suracks, they should be able to eliminate the guards without alarming the entire Kuhndar army. If only—

A voice whispered in his ear, and he almost jumped. “I thought there weren't supposed to be any guards.”

Mogol looked over his shoulder, silently cursing himself for being taken by surprise. Goobar, one of the hunters, sat behind him. The man had moved through the dense vegetation without a sound.

“Find out how many,” Mogol whispered.

He blinked, and Goobar was gone. He found it hard to believe how quickly and stealthily the man moved. Determined not to let himself be taken by surprise again, he strained his eyes and ears, but when Goobar returned, it was as if he had appeared out of nowhere.

“Two,” Goobar said.

Mogol nodded, relieved. This was something they could handle. “Take Yarno,” he whispered. “When you're done with them, use the signal. You know the rest of the plan.”

Goobar vanished again, and Mogol crawled back to where the others were waiting. “Keep your ears open,” he whispered. Then he took a deep breath and sat back to wait.

Ahead of him, the guards continued talking, unaware they were being stalked. Mogol fingered his flints again, growing increasingly restless as the moments went by. He flinched as a rhythmic drumbeat rose up from the plains, and for a moment, he thought his men had been discovered. But then he realized the noises came from too far away. He held his breath, trying to focus on other sounds, and then he finally heard the signal: the croak of a horned black toad.

He rose. "Go!"

He sprinted toward the first tower, grabbing a thick rope that hung down from one of the platforms. He was up in the blink of an eye, hoisting himself over the edge. The sharp end of a broken branch cut his hand as he pushed himself up, but he ignored it. There was no time for pain.

He took the bottles out of his bag and opened them quickly, then poured their contents on the wood. In his haste, he almost forgot to place them back in the bag. With trembling fingers he took the flints out of his pocket, and he struck one against the other.

The oil ignited with a single spark, the flames spreading instantly and licking at his face. Mogol fell back, cursing under his breath. Turning quickly, he grabbed the rope and let himself slide down to the ground, and without looking up, he started to run back to the edge of the forest.

A terrifying screech came from the dark ahead. Involuntarily, Mogol dropped to his knees. He looked up, bewildered, but then a surprised grin spread across his face.

"By the gods, Goobar," he muttered. "You could scare a grown man to death."

One of his men sped past him, disappearing among the trees, and Mogol looked over his shoulder to see the suracks engulfed in flames. The drums on the plains had stopped, or maybe the noise was simply drowned by the roar of the fire. Either way, he was sure this place would soon be crawling with Kuhndar warriors.

He got to his feet and started running again, his face glistening in the light of the flames. Another scream ripped through the night, and he moved toward the source of the sound, laughing to himself now, his face contorted in a grimace of mad excitement.

Suddenly, the forest opened up in front of him, and he stood at the edge of a small clearing. His chest heaved.

"Goobar?" he called out softly.

Shadows rose up, just ahead of him. "Over here!"

As he hurried toward them, they sank back into the grass. "May the sungod take me, Goobar!" Mogol said. "For a moment, you had me fooled."

"I guess his *mother* was a heks," one of the others joked.

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Goobar grinned. "Who knows? Maybe she was."

"Let's hope we've given them a good scare," Mogol said. He slapped Goobar on the back and looked around, counting heads. "Who's missing?"

"Yarno," Goobar said. "He's getting rid of the bodies."

"Should we wait?"

Goobar shook his head. "He'll be all right."

"Let's get out of here."

They hurried to the other side of the clearing, and Mogol watched as the hunters disappeared among the trees. He strained his eyes to see if he could make out the trail that would lead them back to Persis, but the darkness was almost complete. "And they say *I* have the eyes of a cat," he said with a grin. He threw a final glance across the clearing, and then he started to run.

This novel is the sequel to The Crystal Skulls and part two of The Revelations Saga. As the kingdom of Attaria struggles to survive, an ancient scroll surfaces, predicting a disaster of epic proportions. Can the approaching darkness be stopped?

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