

# **The crystal skulls**

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## Chapter 1

It was close to midnight when Koomba left his house. He paused on his doorstep and glanced into the narrow street, his hands clutching a wooden bowl. The air around him filled with the salty aroma of freshly cooked seal meat.

Koomba's honeybrown eyes looked up at the cloudless sky, and he shivered—from fear as much as from the cold. It wasn't nearly as dark as he had hoped. The moon was almost full, its pale light transforming the tiny island into an eerie world of ghostly shadows. His heart raced. Although he had made the journey countless times the past couple of years, he had never gotten used to sneaking through the village like a criminal.

Inhaling deeply, Koomba glanced around once more, and with a look of determination he wrapped his sealskin cloak around his shoulders. His body rose up, his feet losing contact with the ground. Slowly, he started to hover in the direction of the graveyard.

Koomba glided through the shadows without a sound, floating above the cobblestones like a cloud of black smoke. Routinely, he checked the streets and alleys for signs of life, but the village looked as if it was deserted. He moved quickly until a noise startled him. Reflexively, he dropped to his knees. Crouching under his cloak, he appeared little more than a crumpled piece of cloth.

Despite the cold, sweat formed on his face as he waited, listening intently. A whisper came from his left. He tried to distinguish the words, but the voices were distant and faint. As he realized they didn't come any closer, he opened his cloak shelter to look around. The sound came from his left, from behind the stone brick wall surrounding Boolba's house.

He crept toward the wall and pushed himself up until his nose was level with the top layer of bricks, but he dropped back immediately, cursing through gritted teeth. Boolba and his wife, Aila, stood in their garden, less than twenty feet from where he crouched. And he was sure Boolba had been looking straight at him! Trembling, Koomba rested his forehead against the stones. For a while, he was almost too afraid to breathe. It would be disastrous if someone spotted him tonight.

He heard footsteps, fading away. A door was opened and closed. Pushing himself up, he peered over the wall again. Aila now sat on a stone bench facing away from him, talking to herself as she looked up at the stars. Boolba, he realized, was gone.

Koomba clenched his teeth. "Go inside, you stupid sea cow!" he muttered under his breath. He waited impatiently, but Aila didn't move.

The cold already started to bite its way into his flesh. The thought of strangling the woman popped up in his mind, and he imagined her face turning blue under the grip of his long, thin fingers. Breathing heavily, he peered into the street. It was about fifteen paces to the mortuary; a large building that dominated the west side of the graveyard. If he reached it, he would be out of sight. Nobody had the nerve to go there after sunset.

Koomba swallowed. He would have to run for it. He needed to stay low. Pressing the bowl against his chest, he pushed himself up, moaning softly from the effort. Then he started to sprint, his knees bent awkwardly and his body hunched in an attempt to stay as close to the ground as possible. But halfway he tripped on the seam of his mantle. He fell flat on his face, arms stretched forward to break the fall. The wooden bowl flew through the air and landed with a series of thumps.

Koomba looked up, wincing with pain. Pieces of meat lay scattered on the street. He crawled forward and quickly tossed them back into the bowl, his fingers trembling uncontrollably. Pulling the seam of his cloak up to his shins, he ran as fast as his weak legs could carry him, collapsing in the safety of the shadows.

Aila's puffy face appeared above the stone brick wall, her startled eyes peering left and right. "Is anybody there?"

Koomba held his breath. Cold sweat poured down his face and in his eyes, and he pulled the hood of his cloak back to wipe it away. He saw Aila move back into the dark and a moment later he heard a door close. Peering at the wall, he waited until he was convinced the woman was gone. Then he pulled the hood back over his head. Silently, he rose up from the ground.

Moving like a shadow, he hurried through the graveyard, halting in front of a large, flat boulder. He stared down, suddenly hesitant, as he had been so often lately. His chest heaved violently. The limestone boulder measured about four feet in diameter, its average thickness being

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at least a foot. It could only be lifted by those who wielded the power. And they...they had chosen to forget. Koomba was quite certain that besides himself nobody had been down there in years.

He swallowed. The stone looked so insignificant, just another flat rock, covering another grave. Its surface was lined with cracks, some of which were covered with moss. The only thing that distinguished it from the other boulders that scattered the graveyard was that it had no inscription.

With a final glance over his shoulder, Koomba waved his right hand. There was a rasping sound as the boulder started to slide sideways, uncovering a circular opening in the rock underneath.

He quickly jumped down, cupping the wooden bowl tightly to his chest. The jagged rock scraped his back, and he fell to his side, suppressing a scream, gasping for breath as he lay awkwardly on the cold rock floor. Moaning softly, he waved his hand again, and a cloud of dust came down as the stone moved back in place.

He was surrounded by darkness.

He rubbed his aching back and sighed. This day was cursed! Nothing seemed to go right. What was he doing here anyway? He knew he should stop coming to this damned place. This whole thing was turning into a nightmare. Here he was, one of the seven elders of Arrannak, one of the most powerful men on the island, behaving like a second-rate burglar! How could it have come to this? He shook his head. Placing the bowl between his legs, he stared into the dark, and a sudden feeling of intense fatigue came over him. *He should stop coming to this damned place....*

Small rocks fell down to his left. A sliver of moonlight entered through a crack overhead, forming a tiny white slit on his foot. In front of him the outline of the tunnel took shape.

With a sigh, Koomba rubbed his back once more, but the pain was already gone. He picked up the bowl and walked into the narrow cave, counting his paces, wincing at the disgusting smell of urine and defecation that attacked his senses. The smell made his eyes itch. It became increasingly intense, and he covered his face with his cloak.

After a hundred and twenty five paces Koomba halted. For a moment he stood motionless, staring into utter darkness. The silence was

overwhelming. He crouched down on his heels and put down the bowl, and his right hand fingered the floor until he found the edge of the pit.

“Orgol!” he called. “Wake up. I brought you some meat.”

Out of the deep came a weak voice, hoarse and hardly audible. “I missed you, father. Where were you yesterday?”

Koomba frowned. “Ah, I was kept by the council,” he replied, his voice dripping with frustration. “They found out about the missing crystal. And of course, Olbo, the rat, accused me again.” He paused, rubbing his itching eyes. The air seemed to prick his membranes like minuscule needles. The stench was almost unbearable. “They forced me to swear on the grave of Mother Arran Nak,” he continued, speaking softly. “Swear that I had nothing to do with it. Only then did they let me go.” He sighed. “But I’m worried. This may well be the last time I’ve been able to appease them. I hope you realize the risks I’m taking.”

There was no reply. Koomba leaned forward, trying to ignore the stench, and peered into the pitch-black hole. “What more can I do?” he muttered to himself.

A soft coughing rose up from the deep. “The crystals you bring are weak,” the voice rasped. “I don’t think I can survive another night, father.”

Koomba shrank back. The softly spoken words tore at his insides, and a sudden panic crept upon him. He had never accepted the possibility that his son would actually die. He had simply forced the thought out of his mind. But after three years in this filthy, stinking pit, it was a miracle Orgol was still alive.

He ran his fingers through the patch of gray hair on top of his head. “What do you expect from me?” he asked, his voice breaking with emotion. “You can’t expect me to bring you another healing crystal. They will find out. They will put me in there *with* you! And who will feed you, hmm? Who will feed you when I can’t?” He got up and started to pace around in the dark. “Well?” he asked.

There was a rattling breath, followed by more coughing. Koomba continued to walk back and forth at the edge of the pit, stopping every now and then to listen. The coughing weakened, and then there was silence.

“Orgol? Orgol!”

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Koomba leaned forward and peered into the pit again. Drops of sweat appeared on his forehead. He always felt watched in the presence of his son, as if someone stared at him intensely from behind. He fought a sudden urge to turn around and leave. Leave and never come back. Maybe it was for the best. But...no...the boy was still his son, despite what he had done. And the boy was dying. Koomba's mind raced. What could he do? He had to do *something*. He started to pace back and forth again, then stopped. Facing away from the pit he opened his cloak, and his right hand went to the sealskin pouch tied to his belt. He hesitated.

A soft, rasping sound rose up from the deep.

“Orgol?”

“Give me the skull, father,” the hoarse voice said.

Koomba took a startled step back. It was as if Orgol had read his mind. Frowning, he opened the pouch and touched the cool crystal of the skull inside. He ran his fingers over the brows, then gently stroked the row of teeth, polished to perfection. It was the purest crystal of all seven. So much power...so much energy! Carefully, he lifted the skull from the tightly fitting pouch.

“Give it to me, father,” the voice insisted. “You know I’m dying.”

The frown on Koomba's forehead deepened. Tears welled up in his eyes as he listened to his son's weakening voice.

“Please, father. I'm your *son*.”

Koomba pressed the skull to his chest. A wave of energy spread through his body, the energy, he realized, that could save his son's life. He swallowed, fighting his emotions, but tears flowed down his cheeks. Yes, the skull's energy could save his son's life, but by giving it to him he would endanger the lives of everyone else. He pressed his lips together in determination. *No!* Whatever happened, the skulls should never fall into Orgol's hands again. Never! With a sob he opened the sealskin pouch and started to fumble at the edges of the leather, forcing the crystal back in.

“I can't, Orgol,” he muttered, shaking his head. “I just can't.”

But all of a sudden his body became rigid. His hands refused to obey his will, and his arms started to move as if they had a mind of their own. Holding the skull, they moved forward until they had reached the edge of the pit.

“The skull, father,” the voice whispered.

Horrified, Koomba looked at his hands, which were cupped around the crystal now, shrouded by an orb of blue light. He desperately tried to pull them back, but it was as if they were no longer part of his body.

“No!” he cried.

His hands parted. He took a sharp breath as he saw the skull fall into the pit, the blue glow fading until it was swallowed by darkness. From the deep came a short cry of excitement.

Petrified, Koomba stared down into the dark. Panic took hold of him. This was a disaster! He had to warn the council at once. He struggled to regain control over his body, trying to get away from the pit, when he heard the soft rustle of movement. He held his breath, staring down in terror. For a moment it was dead quiet in the cave, then a terrible roar rose up from the deep. Blue flashes shot up against the ceiling. The blue light reappeared, slowly rising up until Koomba could distinguish the shadow of a figure in the glow. He watched, speechless, as the hideous creature floated past him and stopped at his left. Feverish eyes, their color a light shade of honey, stared at him, their gaze rooting him to the floor. He forced himself to look back, and his breathing stopped when he recognized the facial features of his son.

“Orgol,” he managed to whisper.

“Father,” the creature said, the voice now clear and strong. “Again, you let me down.”

“You tricked me,” Koomba said. “I thought you were weak. I...I thought you were dying.”

Orgol’s lips curled in a wry smile.

“Why?” Koomba cried. “After everything I’ve done for you.”

Orgol’s eyes flashed. His shape rose up from the floor. “Everything you’ve done for me?” he roared. “*You* are the reason they put me here! You! Don’t you understand?”

“No,” Koomba whispered, frantically shaking his head. “No.”

“Why?” Orgol cried, his face now twisted with rage. “Why, father?”

Koomba struggled to get away, but it was as if his feet were nailed to the floor. He desperately tried to move. Suddenly, his left foot sprang loose. He started to fall toward the pit, flailing his arms to regain his balance. Then his right foot came loose as well. Screaming, he fell into

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the abyss. The scream ended abruptly with a dull thud, but the piercing sound seemed to echo for an eternity.

Finally, silence reigned again.

“Father?”

There was no reply.

“Father...”

With a sob, Orgol fell to his knees. He started to moan, the sound growing louder with every breath until it turned into an unnatural, ear-splitting cry that sent a shiver through the cave. Then he fell silent. The cry ebbed away, leaving only the sound of small pieces of rock loosened by the vibrations. Slowly, Orgol rose. The blue glow faded, casting a final, formless shadow as he hovered toward the entrance of the cave.

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Varga slid to a halt when Olik pulled the reins. The proud mare snorted and shook her heavily built head. Her black eyes bulged and her tail swished with anger. Varga was the quickest horse in all of Attaria, and she seemed keenly aware of it, acting like a spoiled child when she wasn't allowed to show off her impressive speed.

Olik shook his long, blond hair out of his eyes and wiped the mixture of rain and sweat from his face. He stroked Varga's flank, talking to her softly as his green eyes scanned the surroundings. For a moment, he had been sure he had heard the battle-cry of the Kuhndars. But how could they be this close to Mensis? They would have been spotted long before they could reach the Larxwoods, let alone make it to the western edge of the forest.

“What do you think?” he muttered. “Was it a mountain bear? Or a white lion? Maybe an olg deer in heat?”

Varga whinnied softly.

Olik chuckled. “Sometimes, I wish you could talk,” he said. “I bet there's a lot of animal wisdom in that head of yours.” She pounded the mud and chewed the iron bit, looking at him sideways with her dark, liquid eyes.

Olik looked to the west, where the sun was slowly sinking below the hilltops. Daylight was changing to a soft orange, and the Tarkhills

seemed to burn. The shadow of his tall figure stretched almost to the edge of the forest. Soon, twilight would set in. If he wanted to reach Mensis before dusk, he would have to hurry.

It had rained most of the day—large, heavy drops in the morning, followed by a soft drizzle in the afternoon. Now, as the skies were finally opening up for the sun to warm the soil, thin clouds rose up from the grass. The land was slowly being covered in a milky white veil of mist.

Olik took a deep breath. He felt hot under the layers of clothing and opened the top buttons of his long, leather coat. How he hated being on the road in the rain! The path had turned into a slippery pool of mud. He jumped out of the saddle, his boots hitting the dirt with a splash, and Varga snorted and jerked at the reins.

“Whoa, Varga, whoa. Easy, girl.”

He pulled her head toward him and patted her left cheek. “Easy, girl.”

Varga shook her stubby mane and whinnied. Olik kissed her on her muzzle and steered her toward the edge of the forest, where he tied the reins to the stem of a young silveroak. He turned toward the trees and emptied his bladder.

Close by, larks were singing. At his left he could hear the soft chatter of a wild chipmunk. He closed his eyes and sighed. He felt oppressed, a peculiar feeling he had had for several days now. The air seemed thick, as if a violent storm was building up, sucking all energy out of his body. But the storm never came. He hoped he wasn't getting sick, not with the championship coming up tomorrow.

Thick drops fell down on him from the branches of a tree, and he shook his head and wiped the water out of his eyes. He started to turn around, reaching for the reins, but a roar from within the forest froze him halfway. He held his breath. The sound was closer now. Close enough to be sure. “Kuhndars,” he muttered.

Varga moved nervously, tugging at the reins. Olik pulled her toward him to calm her, but she jerked her head back violently as a chilling cry ripped through the forest.

Olik jumped at the sound. He started to untie the reins, planning to go and raise the alarm, but hesitated. He had an odd feeling that something wasn't right. The cry had sounded strangely alien, almost unnatural.

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Clenching his jaws, he let go of the reins and ran in the direction of the sounds.

Savage cries echoed through the forest, followed by an inhuman howl that made the hair in Olik's neck stand on end. He could distinguish voices. Someone shouted orders. He spotted human figures and dropped to the forest floor, wet branches scratching his face. He hurriedly crawled behind a large silveroak.

At a distance of about twenty paces a group of heavily armed Kuhndar warriors stood rallied around their leader, a colossal man, with a bearded face and a long, wild mane. The man's upper arms bulged with thick muscles. He brandished a heavy battle ax while his left fist made pounding movements in the air, trying to intimidate an enemy Olik couldn't see.

"Ugu dur!" the giant roared, and the forest filled with a deafening "Ur-ur-ur-ur" from dozens of voices. Swinging the ax over his head, the man charged, but before he could take more than three or four steps, he was swept aside by an invisible force. His massive body smashed into a tree close to where Olik was hiding. The body slid down, limp, the hairy face contorted in a grimace that expressed both pain and astonishment.

Bewildered, Olik scanned the area for the source of the blow, but he found nothing that could have swept the Kuhndar leader off his feet. He crept closer and ducked behind a fallen gincotree. As he peered over the rotting trunk, a shiver went down his spine. Facing the Kuhndars was a monstrous creature, vaguely human in appearance, but with a skin that was a dark shade of gray. Its mouth was so wide it almost seemed as if its head consisted of two separate halves. The eyes were small and had the color of honey. The creature slowly waved a long stick, muttering dark words in an unfamiliar language.

The Kuhndars moved uneasily, seemingly confused by the loss of their leader. One of them took a hesitant step forward and moved his arm back to throw his spear. In a quick response, the creature raised the stick, and Olik saw a faint, blue flash emanate from its tip. The Kuhndar was thrown back with incredible force. There was a sound of splintering branches as his body ripped through the undergrowth.

Some of the Kuhndar warriors started to panic, and one of them ran off, followed quickly by several others. The few who remained shouted

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at the deserters in frustration, watching helplessly as they disappeared among the trees.

Terrified, Olik gazed at the strange, gray creature. It grinned widely, showing pointed teeth that ranged in color from light yellow to dark brown. Then it made an odd, rotating gesture with its head and started to produce an eerie, whinnying kind of laughter. The few remaining Kuhndars fled in horror.

The terrible, whinnying noise stopped abruptly. Slowly, the creature scanned the area. The tiny eyes moved in Olik's direction, and for a moment they seemed to focus on his position. Olik panicked. He wanted to duck behind the tree trunk but he was unable to move. His heart raced. Just when he was sure he was doomed, the creature turned and disappeared into the woods.

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Olik remained in hiding until he was convinced the creature was gone. Then he stood up and examined his surroundings. The sunlight had already been replaced by the soft glimmer of a full moon, and rays of silky white light found their way to the forest floor, dispersed by the canopy overhead. Carefully, he stepped over the trunk of the decaying gincotree.

There were two bodies close by, their outlines barely visible in the gloomy light. He scanned the undergrowth and spotted two more. Their eyes were frozen, staring up at the trees.

He flinched as he heard voices behind him.

“He’s over there!” someone whispered.

Olik drew a sharp breath and stepped back into the shadows, staring at the edge of the forest. Shapes came running in his direction. Then they were gone, swallowed by the vegetation. There was a cracking sound of branches being splintered by trampling feet.

“Come on, Yari,” the voice of a young girl rang out. “You’re going the wrong way.”

Olik let out his breath and relaxed. The shapes reappeared, lit by a beam of moonlight, and he looked into the heated faces of his younger brother, Yari, and his niece, Foca.

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“There you are,” the girl said, breathing heavily. Her bright blue eyes sparkled as she looked up at Olik. She ran her fingers through her curly, blond hair and smiled widely, but the smile faded quickly as she saw the expression on his face.

“What do you think you’re doing here?” Olik snapped, turning from Foca to Yari, and back. His voice, though hardly more than a whisper, was stern. “Go back to Mensis! Go on, go back!”

For a moment, the children were puzzled, staring at Olik questioningly. Then Yari breathed, “That’s a really nice way to welcome us.” His curious, green eyes scanned the forest. “Especially when you haven’t seen us in nearly fifty days,” he added.

“You didn’t show up for dinner,” Foca said. “So Yoni told us to go and meet you. We saw Varga and—”

“Get your horses and ride back to Mensis,” Olik interrupted her. “Don’t stop. You hear me? Leave the woods and don’t stop. I’ll be there shortly.” He turned away and took a couple of steps, but halted when he noticed they weren’t moving.

“What did I tell you?” he snapped. “Go back and wait for me in Mensis.”

But Yari had already discovered the bodies. “Great mercy!” he cried out. “What happened? Did *you* do this? All by yourself?”

Olik cast an angry look at his younger brother, his eyes squinting. “Keep your voice down!” he whispered.

“Are they dead?” Foca asked timidly, taking a careful step closer and peeking apprehensively at the body of the Kuhndar leader.

Yari seemed less intimidated. His eyes had a glimmer of excitement. “Did you kill all of them?” he wanted to know.

Olik gave Yari a long stare. Then he shook his head and sighed in resignation. “They’re probably dead,” he said. “We’ll see. But stay close to me, alright?”

Yari and Foca nodded in unison. Olik eyed them for a moment, and his face slowly lit up. “Oh, come here,” he said. He firmly pressed both of them to his chest and rubbed Yari’s head with his knuckles.

“Stop that!” Yari said, his voice muffled. “It hurts!”

They laughed until Olik pressed a finger to his lips. His face became stern again. "Listen," he said, "you have to promise me to stay close to me, alright? It may not be safe."

They nodded again.

"Good," Olik said, smiling at them. "Come on then." He led them to the body of the leader and squatted down to examine the enormous torso, poking at it with his fingers. "Strange," he muttered. "It's as if all his bones are broken. The force must have been incredible."

After a while, he stood up and turned to the body he had seen being smashed into the undergrowth. From the corner of his eye he saw Yari and Foca prod the torso of the Kuhndar leader with sticks. They took a startled step back when the man's massive right arm slid from his chest to the forest floor. They laughed nervously.

Olik grinned, shaking his head. He sat down and started to examine the broken body at his feet. The warrior's face was frozen in an expression of terrible pain. The wide-open eyes reflected the moonlight, glimmering like fireflies. It was a disturbing sight. He averted his gaze, wondering what unknown power could have had such devastating effects.

Then, something else caught his attention. A few feet to his left, an object was struck by a tiny ray of light, reflecting it in all directions in a bluish glow. It softly lit the surrounding forest floor.

He pushed away some branches and made his way toward the mysterious artifact, blinking in surprise as he recognized its shape. It was a small skull. A skull made of glass. He picked it up to examine it, but as he held it up to the light, a bright flash blinded his eyes. He shrank back, reflexively moving his hand back into the dark. The skull was now shrouded in a bluish light that slowly faded away.

Olik stroked the skull's surface with his fingertips. Then something strange happened. Although the glass was cool, he felt an eerie warmth flow through his hand, creeping up his arm and spreading over his entire body. It filled his muscles with energy.

"May the Sun God take me and burn me alive," he muttered. "What is this?" His senses seemed to sharpen, and it was as if the forest gave up her deepest secrets. He heard animals crawl underneath the forest floor. He noticed the lingering, sweet smell of night flowers blooming in the

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treetops. His thoughts seemed to be faster than ever before. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, relishing the sensations.

A sharp pain in his head made him wince, and, suddenly, he felt surrounded by utter darkness. A miserable feeling of loneliness overcame him, a feeling more intense than anything he had ever experienced before. It was worse than anything he could imagine. Horrified, he opened his eyes.

The pain was gone. He looked around, unsure how long he had stood there holding the peculiar skull. To his left Yari and Foca stood hunched over a pile of weapons they had gathered in a small clearing.

Instinctively, Olik slipped the skull into his pouch, and without a word he started walking toward the edge of the forest.

“What are you doing?” Foca called. She pointed at the weapons. “Shouldn't we take these to the king?” She caught up with Olik and cast a curious glance at the disturbed look in his eyes.

Olik avoided her gaze. “Come,” he said. “We're leaving.”

“Olik!” Foca cried out, stopping in her tracks. “What's wrong with you?”

Olik halted. He took a deep breath, then turned toward her. “I'm sorry for the way I acted,” he said, his face slowly relaxing. “Something happened here tonight. Something I can't talk about until I have informed the king. Alright?”

Foca gave him a blank stare.

“Forget about it,” Olik said. “Let's go home.”

They collected their horses and mounted silently, each of them pondering the things they had seen in the forest.

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They rode hard, and soon they had reached the foot of the Tarkhills. From there, the road to Mensis was easier, paved with large flag-stones, all the way up to the east gate. In the distance, they could see the castle, soaring above the city, its five towers contrasting sharply against the moonlit sky. The city walls were speckled with the lights of torches. Since Mensis couldn't harbor the large crowds that were attracted to the annual pogobo championship, people were allowed to camp outside the

gates, and hundreds of tents had been erected in the fields. Large campfires were burning everywhere.

“How’s mother Yoni?” Olik asked as they slowed down to a trot and he could finally hear his own voice over the rumble of the hooves.

“She’s fine,” Yari replied. “She misses you.”

Olik nodded. “I missed your birthday,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s alright,” Yari said. “It’s not your fault.”

“You’re eleven now,” Olik muttered, staring ahead absentmindedly.

Yari noticed the sad look in his brother’s eyes. “Mother told me you were eleven when father died,” he said.

Olik’s face tensed. “Yes. I guess I was.”

Yari frowned. He had never known their father, being only an infant when the man had died, but he could imagine how hard it must be to lose your father when you were only eleven years old. He wanted to say something comforting, but he couldn’t find the right words. So, he said nothing.

They approached the east gate, and Yari pointed at a large, blue flag hanging from the arch of the entrance. The flag, bearing the white lion—the emblem of the city—hung limp in the still night.

“It’s a sign of bad luck,” Yari said. “You’re going to lose tomorrow.” He grinned.

Olik glanced at his younger brother with a feigned frown. “I didn’t know you were superstitious,” he said. “You know it’s nonsense, don’t you? Just like horned, black toads signaling the coming of war. Or crows being a forewarning of a terrible disaster,” he added with a snort.

As he said it, six or seven crows flew up from the naked branches of a dead tree on the right side of the road. The birds cawed aggressively, circling around them before they dispersed. Olik watched them as they flew toward the city, and, for a moment, the feeling of uneasiness swept over him again, like a brief glimpse of doom. He forced it from his mind.

His face lit up, and he punched Yari playfully in the side. “Anyway,” he said, “do you think I came all the way from Partis to get a beating? This year, the golden boster is mine.”

“Loky told me pogobo is mostly a game of chance,” Foca called from behind. “If that’s true, you should win eventually, shouldn’t you?”

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Olik smiled. He turned in the saddle. "If pogobo is a game of chance, how could Yanos win the golden boster five years in a row?" He shrugged. "Sure, everybody has a chance to win the championship. But some people have a better chance than others."

"I don't understand how you can lose," Yari said with a wicked grin. "With a horse like Varga, even *I* would beat Yanos."

"Well, then maybe you should start competing," Olik replied. "Then we'll see how long you'll stay in the saddle." He grinned back at Yari, and Foca chuckled.

"You know I can't compete," Yari said. "I'm too young."

"Nonsense," Olik said. "You're scared."

"I'm not!" Yari replied.

"Yes, you are," Olik said. He kicked Varga in the flanks. "I'll race you to the gate."

"Very funny," Yari muttered as he watched Olik speed away.

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Olik slowly wove his way through the mass of people. The torch-lit street was packed, from the east gate all the way up to the canal that circled the city center. Many of the people were merchants, coming into the city to take advantage of the large crowds that were attracted to the pogobo championship. Their carts, pulled by domesticated tarim, clogged the streets.

There was some commotion as a large, agitated bull tarim started to swing its head at passersby, shoving them aside with its four gigantic horns. It was common knowledge that a bull tarim could easily throw a grown man ten feet in the air, so it took only a few swings before the crowd began to split in front of the massive animal, as by an unseen hand.

Olik looked up at the ochre-colored, two-story buildings that lined the street. People were hanging out of the windows, singing and shouting at the crowd below. Many were drunk. The atmosphere was typical of the night before the championship. Normally, he enjoyed it, but now the crowds annoyed him. He looked beyond the buildings, and his gaze rose to the castle.

As he approached the bridge that crossed the canal, he saw the road was blocked by a large cart. Merchants were not allowed on the narrow, steeply winding streets beyond the canal, and it seemed they had been trying to turn the cart around in the middle of the bridge when it got stuck. From the two towers on the other side of the bridge guards were shouting down at the merchants, urging them to clear the way.

Forced to wait, Olik turned in the saddle and searched the crowd behind him. He had lost sight of Yari and Foca shortly after they had entered the city, forced apart by the crowds. But he knew they were safe behind the city walls.

Alone with his thoughts, he pondered what he was going to say to king Borkas. He realized his story would probably sound pretty far fetched. In fact, he could still hardly believe what he had seen.

As he turned to face the bridge again, the cart was finally moving. Two elderly men looked up at him, greeting him respectfully when they caught a glimpse of the blue and white tunic under his coat. He returned the greeting, somewhat surprised that the people here recognized the uniform of the head of the Partian guard. With a light prod of his heels he spurred Varga and started to move through the masses again, saluting the soldiers guarding the bridge.

Beyond the canal, the street was much quieter, and Varga went into a trot, the clacking sound of her hooves echoing between the buildings. Soon, the street started to slope upwards. There were fewer houses here, all large and surrounded by beautiful gardens. This was where most of the nobles lived. Farther up, the road became even steeper. It started to wind up between clusters of flowering shrubs and lush green trees until it abruptly ended at a large, iron gate. Three guardsmen stood outside, huddled around a small fire, while two more walked back and forth at the other side.

Olik dismounted and handed the reins to one of the guards. The man threw a quick look at Olik's tunic and saluted, bringing his right fist to his heart. Then he disappeared through the gate, taking Varga to the stables. The other guards glanced at Olik uneasily, then looked away. Olik observed them for a moment. They were young, maybe sixteen winters or less and didn't seem to recognize him. Before he could introduce himself, a familiar voice came from the other side of the gate.

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“Well, well...look who’s here,” the voice said. The gate opened again, and a slender young man stepped outside, grinning broadly. The man was handsome, with brown eyes and hair as dark as a starless night. As he approached, he opened his arms and grabbed Olik in a tight embrace.

“Loky, my friend,” Olik said with a smile. He grasped his friend by the shoulders. “It’s good to see you again. But I didn’t expect to see you *here*.” He stepped back and looked Loky in the eyes, adding jokingly, “When did they appoint you to the castle guard?”

Loky grinned. “Don’t worry,” he said. “They didn’t. I was just visiting a mutual friend.”

“So how *is* Yanos?” Olik asked.

“He looks forward to seeing you. You look good, Olik. I’m glad you’re back. And I wish I could stay longer and talk, but...” He spread his arms. “I’m afraid I don’t have time.” He nodded in the direction of the stables, from where another guard appeared, leading a beautiful, pale-gray mare in their direction.

“Don’t apologize,” Olik said. “I’m in somewhat of a hurry myself.” He smiled. “And we’ll see enough of each other in the arena tomorrow.”

“True,” Loky answered. “I suggest you get some rest, my friend. You will need it. I’m in the form of my life.”

Olik laughed. “I’ll be ready,” he replied. “Don’t worry. I’ll see you at the championship.”

Loky bowed dramatically. “Today,” he said, “we are friends. “Tomorrow...” He smashed his right hand in the palm of his left. “Bam!” He grinned.

Olik laughed. “Bam!” he said, mimicking the gesture.

Loky turned to one of the guards. “Sulman, take this man to the king,” he ordered. Then he mounted and galloped away into the night.

Olik watched him go, then turned to the guard.

“Follow me,” the man said. He led Olik through the gate and into the giant hall at the east entrance of the castle. Their footsteps echoed through the largely empty space. The guard opened a door to a smaller room, and Olik followed him inside.

Across the room, king Borkas sat at a fire, running his fingers through his graying beard as he read a text scribbled on a long roll of parchment.

A servant stood by holding a bottle of mead. The guard left the room, and Olik made a coughing sound.

The king looked up. "Olik, my boy! I'm so delighted to see you again." He rose from his chair. "How are you? Soaking wet, I see. Take off your coat, so I can give you a proper welcome." He held out his arms.

Olik handed his coat to the servant and embraced the king.

"It's good to be back, Sire," he said. "Ever since you appointed me as commander of the garrison in Partis, I hardly see you anymore."

"You're not holding it against me, are you?" the king joked.

Olik laughed. "No, Sire. I'm very grateful."

"You must be looking forward to seeing your mother, Yoni," the king said, steering Olik in the direction of the fire.

"Yes," Olik replied. "And the prince and princess, of course. Are they here?"

"They should be upstairs," king Borkas replied. "But your mother is busy with preparations for the championship, I'm afraid. She expected you to show up at dinner. What kept you so long?"

Before Olik could answer, the doors opened, and Yari rushed inside. Running toward the king, he took off his coat and threw it to the floor. The king frowned, but his face lit up when he saw the enthusiasm in Yari's eyes.

"Sire," Yari breathed, "we found five dead warriors in the Larxwoods. We took all their weapons, but we couldn't get them—"

The king raised his hands to silence him. "Now slow down, boy," he said. "One thing at a time." He put a hand on Yari's shoulder, looking at him intently. "What's this talk about warriors in the woods? Are you talking about Kuhndar warriors?" He turned to face Olik.

"I'm afraid it's true, Sire," Olik said. "It was a small group of about twenty, thirty men. Heavily armed. But..." He turned away from Yari, leaned forward, and lowered his voice to a whisper. "But they fled from something...I don't really know how to describe it."

"What do you mean?" the king asked, narrowing his eyes.

"I've never seen anything like it," Olik said, shaking his head. "It was...it was some kind of man-like creature with incredible powers."

*The crystal skulls*

The king stared at Olik for a moment, then turned to address Yari. “Why don’t you go see your mother, eh?” he said with a smile. “Go on. I’m sure she could use some help.”

Yari cast Olik a curious glance.

“Go on,” the king repeated, still smiling, but waving his hands impatiently.

“Yes, Sire,” Yari muttered, clearly disappointed. He picked up his coat and left the room, and as the doors closed it was quiet.

For several moments, the king looked down at the floor, lost in thought. “This is bad timing,” he grunted. “Bad timing indeed. We can’t have any trouble tomorrow.” He sighed and waved a hand in the direction of what seemed to be a statue standing in the shadows in front of a large tapestry. “Tork!” he called.

The statue came to life, and a huge man marched in their direction. The giant was almost one-and-a-half feet taller than the king, with a massive body that seemed to be cut from a solid piece of granite. Green eyes sparkled like emeralds in his rough, bearded face. His voice thundered through the room. “Yes, Sire?”

“Take fifty men,” the king ordered, “and search the woods. There seems to be a gang of Kuhndars rooming about and....” He hesitated. “What did you say that creature looked like, Olik?”

“He had a dark gray skin,” Olik replied. “His eyes were the color of honey. And he had a wide mouth, from here to here.” He moved his hand across his face. “He wore a dark cloak with a hood, and carried a stick that sent out some kind of blue lightning.”

Tork raised an eyebrow and turned toward the king, but the king avoided his gaze.

“Search the area and report whatever you find,” the king ordered. “Be sure to be back before midnight. Oh, and double the guards.”

“Yes, Sire,” Tork said, bringing his fist to his heart. Then the giant turned and headed toward the soldiers’ quarters. Olik and the king watched him as he left the room.

“Are you sure about what you saw, Olik?” the king asked after Tork had closed the doors behind him. “I know it can be rather dark in those woods. And the scarce light that *does* enter can play strange tricks with your eyes.”

*Jan Visser*

“I told you what I saw, Sire, although I can hardly believe it myself. It must have been a creature from the inlands. Something unknown to us.”

“An unknown creature,” the king muttered, smiling uneasily. He stared into the fire, plucking at his beard. “You know you’re like a son to me,” he said. “I believe you, no matter what you say. But if this had come from anyone else....”

Olik nodded. “Sire, with all respect...you know I’m not the gullible type. I believe only what I see. But I swear that what I told you happened in those woods.”

The king sighed. He produced a faint smile. “Go now,” he said. “Go see your mother. I need time to think.” He put a hand on Olik’s shoulder, then turned away and faced the fire.

“Sire,” Olik said. His right hand went to his pouch, but he hesitated. He had wanted to show the king what he had found, but now something stopped him. He realized he didn’t want to part with his mysterious find. If he could conceal it and keep it to himself, he would be able to study it. He would be able to experience its power again. He put a finger underneath the leather of the pouch and touched the surface of the crystal, and a warm glow spread through his arm. His eyes grew hazy. *Later*, he thought.

King Borkas looked over his shoulder. “Is something wrong, Olik?”

“No, Sire,” Olik said quickly. “Nothing.” He put his right fist to his heart and bowed slightly. “I will inform Tork where the bodies are.” Then he turned and started to walk away.

“Are you sure you’re alright?” the king called after him.

Olik froze. “I’m just tired,” he said. He felt beads of sweat start to form on his forehead and hoped he could get away before the king noticed.

“Alright. Get some rest,” the king said, waving his arm in dismissal. Olik nodded and quickly disappeared from the room.

## Chapter 2

Chaos reigned in the council-hall on the island Arrannak. The anxious crowd of more than two hundred Arrannaks that had gathered under the enormous dome grew increasingly restless. Olbo the Wise, oldest of the seven elders, stood on the speakers' platform, his hands on his hips, and watched the scene with disgust. He was tall for an Arrannak, one of the tallest in the tiny island community, and, standing alone on the raised platform in the center of the hall, he towered over the crowd. Olbo sighed and shook his large, balding head. His gaze wandered through the hall. Moonlight entered through the narrow, rectangular windows and formed a regular pattern of stripes on the opposite wall. He stared at it for a moment, lost in thought. Then he raised his long, thin arms.

"People of Arrannak, listen," he cried, his high-pitched voice lost in the noise around him. Nobody reacted. He looked around, irritated, and cried even louder. "Listen, Arrannaks!" Here and there, someone looked up at him, but the chaos continued. Olbo's eyes flickered, and his face became twisted with anger. "Silence!" he roared. A flash of blue light shot from the end of his staff, and a narrow bundle of energy exploded against the ceiling. Pieces of rock rained down, hitting some of those below. There were screams of fear. The air smelled of lightning. Finally, everything quieted down, and the Arrannaks looked up at Olbo in shock.

Slowly, the anger disappeared from Olbo's face. He managed to force a smile. "Listen, Arrannaks," he continued in a normal tone of voice, "I understand your panic, but all is not lost. I will do everything I can to stop Orgol."

"But how?" a desperate voice squeaked. "We don't even know where he is. Who can stop him now that he's got access to the skulls?"

Olbo's eyes narrowed. He raised a long, thin finger. "Have I not always warned you how dangerous it was to spare Orgol's life?" he said menacingly. "Yes...yes, I know, it is the first commandment of Mother Arran Nak. *'Never shall an Arrannak raise a fist against another Arrannak.'* But that all changed when the foundling came, did it not? I warned you...but would you listen?"

He turned to face the crowd behind him. “And have I not always urged you to put a stop to Koomba’s treachery?” he continued. “For three years Koomba kept that miserable son of his alive. We knew it, we all did. But did we do anything about it?” There was renewed anger in his face, but for the moment, his voice remained calm. “Did anyone listen to me?”

He let his gaze wander over the frightened Arrannaks in front of him. They looked back passively, and a wave of contempt welled up in him. All of a sudden, his anger exploded. “And now you have to pay for your own stupidity!” he roared. A fierce fire raged in his eyes, and the crowd moved back in fear.

Olbo took a deep breath. “Our situation is grim,” he continued. “Six of our elders are dead. But still it is not too late. I can only hope that you finally realize your mistakes. That you realize that without *my* intervention the entire island would already have been lost.” He folded his arms in front of his chest and looked down at the crowd.

For a moment there was complete silence. Then someone cried, “Tell us what to do.”

“Yes, guide us,” another voice called out, and suddenly the council-hall buzzed again. Dozens of Arrannaks were shouting, begging Olbo to lead them.

The corner of Olbo’s mouth twitched in a hint of a smile. “Very well then,” his voice echoed through the building, “I will lead you. But things will have to change. You will have to grant me the power to do whatever is necessary to retrieve the skulls. And *when* we get them back, *I* will be the one to control them. I alone.” His eyes scanned the crowd. “Is that understood?”

Somewhere in the back of the council-hall someone whispered disapprovingly. Olbo’s eyes focused on the source, and his eyelids closed until they formed tiny slits. The whispering stopped immediately.

“Well?” Olbo asked. “Do I get permission to solve this problem *my* way? Or are we going to continue as usual? Doing *nothing*.”

“What are you planning to do?” Boolba asked. “How are you going to solve this?”

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Olbo's eyes rested on Boolba for a moment. Then he smiled and looked about triumphantly. "I have access to one of the skulls," he said. "It was found by one of those peasants from Attaria."

"What?" Boolba cried. "But then Orgol will...I thought the whole plan was—"

"*Your* plan, yes," Olbo snarled. "I have said, right from the start, that it was madness, but I had to obey the decision of the council. And now the plan has failed, as I had foreseen."

"What has happened?" someone asked. "How can the skull have ended up in Attaria?"

Olbo ignored the question. "Do not worry," he said. "It seems we are lucky for once."

"Lucky? What do you mean?" Boolba demanded.

"What do I mean?" Olbo repeated in a mocking tone. "Let me tell you what I mean. We are lucky because the skull I am talking about happens to be the very skull I have had in my keeping for the past three years."

Boolba looked around, frustrated, seeking support. "But the Attarian will be under Orgol's influence," he objected.

"He will not," Olbo said smugly. "Because only *I* can gain access to this particular skull. And as long as I can keep it hidden from Orgol..." His lips parted in an arrogant smile.

The council-hall buzzed again. "What do we do?" someone called. "Shouldn't we bring the skull back here?"

Olbo shook his large head in irritation. "We will use the Attarian," he said.

Screams of indignation filled the hall. An older woman, dressed in long, turquoise robes, stepped forward. "Are you mad?" she cried. "Orgol will take control of the skull. It is *he* who will use the Attarians. Against *us!*"

"We will use the Attarian!" Olbo repeated. With a loud bang his staff landed on the stone floor, the sound resonating through the building. The woman who had dared to raise her voice stepped back in fright, tripped over her own feet, and fell to the floor.

"Anyone else who does not like the way I handle things?" Olbo threatened. The Arrannaks looked up at him with resignation. Boolba's eyes flashed, but he didn't say a word.

*Jan Visser*

“Very well then,” Olbo said. He wrapped his cloak around his body, stepped down the platform, and left the building.

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A loud cawing announced the break of dawn over Mensis. Since a couple of days thousands of crows infested the city. They covered the rooftops and walls and circled the five towers of the castle, pestering the other birds. Apart from the crows, most of the city was still at rest. A couple of steppehounds wandered through the deserted streets. Fishing boats bobbed unmanned in the canal, their owners still snoring after a night of heavy drinking. Today was a day of celebration, and only the city guards and those who were directly involved in the preparations for the championship were required to work.

As the sun warmed the streets, Mensis slowly came to life. Around the castle, servants started to carry large tables to the fields and squares where the festivities would be held. Crowds gathered and streamed toward the stadium, just south of the castle, entering in disciplined rows. The people took their seats and watched as dozens of men prepared the arena for the championship.

The arena consisted of a circular area, set up as a smaller version of the country. There was a short canal, five feet deep and eight feet wide, which represented the Tark, the country's main river. A small, wooden bridge, consisting of loosely tied planks, formed the canal's only crossing. There were two shallow pools, representing Baltlake and Heronlake, and four clusters of tree trunks for the four major forests. Two piles of boulders represented the Snowmountains and the Thundermountains. The cities, finally, Mensis in the west, Persis in the north, Gulis in the east, and Partis in the far southeastern corner of the country, were represented by four enormous pillars of white stone.

As the stadium filled, the stands slowly turned into a colorful display. The west part of the stadium was almost entirely blue, as were several patches scattered across the rest of the stands. It was the color of the city of Mensis, a bright blue, like the lakes on a beautiful summer day. The citizens of Persis, dressed mostly in red, grouped together in a section on the north side of the stadium, chanting “Persis, Persis” and hitting giant

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drums in a slow, steady rhythm. Their chant was answered by howls coming from the east side, where a black cluster was forming, slowly swelling into a respectable crowd. They were the citizens of Gulis, infamous for their heavy drinking. Many of them would be passed out long before the games had started. Concentrated in the south part of the stadium, finally, was a small patch of yellow. They were the citizens of Partis, most of whom had traveled several days to cheer on their local hero.

The Attarians loved games, particularly rough ones like pogobo, and the giant stadium quickly filled. Soon, several thousand people had gathered under the sun's increasing heat. A loud chanting and singing welled up from the black, yellow, and red colored sections, each trying to outperform the others. It had been many years since a contestant from Partis, Persis, or Gulis had won the championship, and this had generated a fierce rivalry between the three cities. Although they would fanatically support their own heroes, they seemed content as long as none of the other two cities won.

Suddenly, the crowd hushed, and then applauded, as king Borkas, queen Saba, and their counselors, Yoni and Omakan, appeared from a small opening in the blue section of the stadium. The royal couple waved to the people and walked to a platform halfway up the stands, where they sat down on their gold adorned thrones.

Counselor Yoni, a woman of fifty winters who looked barely forty, sat down next to the queen. With delicate gestures she straightened her robe, then ran her fingers through her silver hair. Once, not too long ago, Yoni had been the most beautiful woman in the realm, and she continued to stun men by her appearance. She was a proud woman. Despite her responsibilities at the court, she had raised her two sons alone after her husband's early death. The king, admiring her calmness and wisdom, let her handle most of the domestic affairs.

Counselor Omakan, the king's sorcerer, was a short, skinny man with a sharp face and gray-green, staring eyes. Although he was one of the most powerful people in the realm, his influence remained largely unnoticed. The pogobo championship was one of the few public occasions he attended. He didn't like crowds. He didn't like people much for that matter. As he sat down next to the king he nervously fingered his

robe, whispering to the king about a matter that seemed to be of great concern.

The king seemed irritated. "Not now, Omakan. Later," he snapped, shifting his attention to the arena. Two men were busy marking the starting positions for the eight riders. The games were about to begin.

Yari and Foca had found a spot on one of the front rows, where they had a good view of the gate through which the contestants would enter the stadium. Yari sat hunched over a piece of parchment, trying to make out the names of the riders and some other information Olik had jotted down for him.

"Who do you think will win?" Foca asked, peering over his shoulder at the tiny scribbling. "Olik?"

"Nah," Yari answered. "I hope he will, of course," he added with a shrug. "But I think it's going to be Yanos again. Or maybe Subor."

"Subor? Is he competing again this year?"

Yari nodded fervently. "Hmhm. He's always very dangerous."

"Well, I think Olik will win," Foca said. "Or maybe princess Atrana."

"Atrana?" Yari cried out. "Are you joking?"

"I saw her at the midsummer's tournament," Foca said. "She was *really* good."

"The midsummer's tournament?" Yari laughed. "That's nothing compared to the championship. Today you're going to see the best riders in the country."

Foca frowned at him. "You've never even seen her compete," she said with an angry undertone. "You don't know a thing about pogobo anyway. Last year you said Yanos was out of shape."

"So?" Yari replied. "Yanos was lucky last year. But if Atrana wants to win, she will need much more than luck."

"You're a fool," Foca said. She looked away, deciding to ignore him.

Around noon the stadium was completely full. Tens of thousands of spectators lined the arena, where sand and dust had started to swirl. The king stood up and a soft murmur went through the stands. The sound of trumpets filled the air. The king took a large roll of parchment from the table in front of him, unrolled it, and addressed the crowd.

"People of Attaria...welcome to the national pogobo championship! Today, eight brave riders will compete for the golden boster." He

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gestured at the gilded club displayed over his head, glimmering in the afternoon sun, and the crowd cheered. The king held his arms up and waited until the noise had subsided.

“The contestants,” he cried, “are the four best riders of last year’s championship, plus the winners of the four local tournaments held in Mensis, Partis, Gulis, and Persis. And here they are. First...last year’s runner-up and one-time winner of the midsummer’s tournament...riding the beautiful, gray Sorda...slippery as an eel...the magnificent *Loky!*”

The crowd stood up and applauded as Loky entered the stadium on his pale-gray mare. Loky was one of the most popular contestants, admired for his agility and technique. He was beaten by prince Yanos the previous year, but only after a fierce fight. For many, Loky was the man to finally defeat the seemingly undefeatable prince.

Despite his lean figure, Loky looked somewhat plump in his tournament suit made of tarim leather. The hides of tarim were thick, and the suits were filled with wool to provide additional protection. Many riders complained that the stiff, heavy outfit limited their ability to maneuver, yet the suits were mandatory. So was the tournament helmet. This helmet, jokingly called ‘the jar,’ was created for pogobo and covered the entire face, down to the shoulders. As it didn’t have a visor, it left the riders completely blind. This was an essential element of the game.

Carrying his helmet under one arm, Loky led his horse to his starting position at the edge of the arena, where he handed his boster over for inspection. The boster was a tall club, the only weapon allowed in pogobo. It had a maximum length of three feet, and its front part had to be wrapped in at least two layers of tarim leather. As Loky’s boster was inspected, the crowd slowly sat down again.

“Next,” the king continued, “...this year’s champion of Partis...riding the spirited Orin...our new star Pykon!”

Shrill screams rose up from the stands. Pykon, an athletic, handsome teenager with long, blond hair and bright blue eyes, was very popular among the girls. As he entered the stadium, Pykon swung his boster over his head, waiving at the stands, eliciting even more screams. Then he made a light bow in the direction of the king and moved toward his starting position, some six hundred feet to Loky’s right. After a short nod

to his left, he rested his boster on the neck of his horse, waiting for the inspectors.

The king waited until the noise had settled and cried, “Our third contestant...back in the championship...the three-time champion of Gulis...riding Borya...the fearless Subor!”

A roar rose up from the black section in the east part of the stadium, but it was overshadowed by boos and howling. Subor, a large man, with long, dark hair and a wide, white scar that cut diagonally from his right brow to the corner of his mouth, always elicited extreme emotions in the crowd. To many he was a hero, on account of his courage during the battle of Mensis, where he had fought the feared Kuhndar commander Terrek Kuhn. Others hated him for his rudeness and bad temper. Easily enflamed, Subor had caused a serious incident at the championship two years ago. Knocked out of his saddle by Loky he had jumped back on his horse and refused to leave the arena. The crowd’s mocking reaction had infuriated him even more. Beside himself with anger he had thrown off his helmet and attacked Loky, breaking Loky's arm. It had cost Subor his place in the championship the following year. But this year the king had allowed him to compete again, after he had won the tournament in his hometown Gulis.

Ignoring the howls, Subor let his horse trot to the center of the arena where the animal pounded through one of the shallow pools. Subor cocked his head and looked up at the stands, smiling arrogantly. The howling grew even louder. Some of the spectators started throwing fruit, but none of it reached the center of the arena. With a mocking look on his face, Subor moved to his starting position, and, slowly, the jeering faded away.

“And our fourth contestant...” the king continued, “present for the ninth consecutive year...riding Ursu...the terrifying Tork the terrible!” The king joined in the applause when the giant entered the stadium on his gargantuan stallion. Tork was hugely popular, and every year he was one of the favorites to win the title. His sheer size and strength made it seem impossible to knock him from his mount. Still, he had never won. Sooner or later, his horse would trip over one of the obstacles or make a sudden unexpected movement, throwing him out of the saddle.

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With a stoic look, Tork moved to his position at the edge of the arena, waiving calmly at his fans, who chanted, “Tork-the-terrible, Tork-the-terrible.”

The king raised his hands to quiet the crowd and cried, “Our fifth rider is this year’s champion of Persis...another new star...riding Mosa...the courageous Mogol!”

Howls and laughter rolled down from the stands where the Gulians were gathered. A short man, particularly for pogobo, Mogol entered the stadium on a mare little bigger than a foal. The mocking didn’t seem to affect him at all. He looked up at the black-dressed crowd, smiling smugly and pointing a finger at his bright-red hair. The red-dressed Persians in the north part of the stadium stood up beating their drums and chanting, “Persis, Persis!”

Foca punched Yari in the side. “I thought you had to be fourteen to compete,” she said.

“He’s twenty four,” Yari responded, pointing at the parchment he still held in his hand. “I guess it’s not that bad, actually, being short,” he added. “Makes it harder for the others to hit him. He *did* win the tournament in Persis after all.”

The red-dressed fans kept cheering until their champion had found his place at the edge of the arena, where he rested his boster in front of him and closed his eyes in meditation.

“Our next contestant is the winner of this year’s midsummer’s tournament in Mensis,” the king cried, his voice breaking with enthusiasm. “She’s the first woman ever to reach the championship...riding Atlanta...the beautiful *princess Atrana!*”

A deafening roar rose up from the stands as the princess entered the arena. Atrana was extremely popular among the women, who all secretly hoped she would win. The enthusiasm among the men had a different reason. The dark-haired, athletically built Atrana was very attractive. Despite her heavy, leather tunic, she looked astonishingly elegant. Her hair was tied with a bright-blue band, and as she moved to her starting position, her long locks waved over her shoulders like a dark ocean in a summer storm. Her snow-white horse was the most beautiful animal in the king’s stables.

Watching proudly, the king waited until the cheering ebbed away. Then he cried, “And here he is...back in his hometown...third in last year's championship and one-time champion of Partis...riding the fastest horse in the country...the wonderfully talented *Olik!*”

Olik entered the stadium under enormous applause. He struggled to control Varga, her eyes bulging with aggression as she eyed the noisy crowd. The people screamed excitedly as she suddenly charged forward and galloped to the edge of the arena, where she slid to a halt. A cloud of dust rose up.

Born and raised in the city, Olik was still one of the local favorites, and it took some time before the cheering ebbed away.

“And, finally...,” the king continued, “...the undefeated and five-time winner of the golden boster...riding the amazing Atlantor...the unconquerable...the invincible...the unbeatable...*prince Yanos!*”

The king's last words were lost in an explosion of sound as the prince entered the stadium on his pitch-black stallion. The magnificent animal pounded the dusty floor of the arena, jerking its head violently as it galloped to the center. Then it reared. Yanos waved at the crowd, seemingly relaxed. His green eyes had the self-assured glimmer of someone accustomed to winning.

Being only twenty winters old, already Yanos was the most successful pogobo-player ever. At the tender age of fifteen he had been the youngest contestant to win the championship, and nobody had beaten him since. Like his twin-sister Atrana, he had learned the game when he was only five. From this early age both had been instructed by the best trainers in the country and provided with the best horses the king's stables produced.

Their privileges angered some of their opponents, but the crowds didn't care whether it was fair or not. They adored their prince and princess. And Yanos knew how to play the crowds. He circled the arena, bowing to every section of the stadium. Then he moved back to the centre, where his horse reared again. Finally, he trotted to his starting position, absorbing the roar that erupted from the stands.

A horn sounded, and, instantly, the stadium was quiet. The king cleared his throat. “And now...the rules of pogobo,” he spoke loudly. He paused, and his eyes wandered across the rows of spectators. Nobody

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made a sound. Traditionally, the announcement of the rules was one of the main events of the day, even though almost everyone new them by heart.

“The goal of pogobo,” the king continued, “is to remove your opponents from their horses using any means available. Winner of the golden boster is the rider who stays in the saddle.”

Three blond girls jumped up and yelled, “Come on, Pykon!” Their shrill voices echoed through the stadium, and people started laughing. The king waited until the noise had settled.

“Every rider,” he went on, “wears a leather tunic, filled with wool, and a helmet without a visor.” He grabbed a helmet from a low table in front of him and held it up. “The helmet *has* to be worn at all times. A rider who loses the helmet is considered eliminated and must leave the arena at once.”

He cleared his throat again and picked up a boster, holding it up for everyone to see. “The boster should be wrapped in at least two layers of tarim leather,” he continued. “Riders who cheat will be disqualified and excluded from all tournaments for a year.”

Putting the boster down again, he picked up a bronze bell that was the size of a big apple. He waved it, and a clear sound tinkled through the stadium. Small gates opened in the wall surrounding the arena, and eight men in white robes appeared, each carrying four bronze bells. They each moved to a different rider and started to tie the bells to the horses’ legs.

“Bells will be used to help the riders locate their opponents,” the king explained. “Each set of bells has a distinct pitch, so the riders can recognize each other by sound.”

He paused until the robed men had left the arena, then continued, “It is essential that all riders keep moving. Anyone who fails to comply will be eliminated by the slayer.”

A deafening roar broke out, and a rhythmic “slayer, slayer,” sounded from thousands of throats. The king urged the crowd to be silent. He picked up a large hourglass, lifting it to show it to the crowd. “If the hourglass empties before the game has finished,” he cried, “five chipas will be released in the arena.”

Cheers rose up, mixed with howls and laughter. The Attarian horses were dead-scared of the fierce but harmless chipas. Their panicky

attempts to get away from the little creatures had eliminated many excellent riders.

The king waited until the laughter subsided, then cried, “If the hourglass empties for a second time before the game has finished, I will send in...the slayer.”

The crowd cheered. The king placed the hourglass on a pole next to his throne, and trumpets sounded from all directions. The people stood up as one and applauded as the riders put on their helmets. The horses started to move nervously, scraping the dusty floor with their hooves. Olik struggled to keep Varga in check.

Counselor Omakan stood up from his chair and helped the king to turn the hourglass and place it back on the pole. Then the king cried, “Hereby, I declare the championship...open!”

As the last word left his lips, the stadium erupted in a roar. The riders spurred their horses. Loky and Pykon stormed forward as if they had been catapulted, charging toward the centre of the arena, a risky tactic used by some to win the favor of the crowd. People stood up, cheering as the two approached each other. Pykon slashed his boster at Loky, barely missing him and smashing the weapon into the pole that marked the center of the arena.

A wave of excitement went through the stadium as the crowd realized Pykon's boster was broken. The ends were still attached, held together by patches of leather, but as a weapon it was practically useless. Loky pulled the reins and turned, trying to pinpoint the sound of Pykon's bells, but Pykon galloped away, hanging from the side of his horse.

For a while, the riders had difficulty locating each other in the hurricane of sound, but as the noise subsided, the tinkling of the bells could clearly be heard. Loky spotted Mogol and immediately charged, taking the disoriented little Persian by surprise. His wild swing barely missed Mogol's head. Mogol was nearly thrown by his horse as the animal made a sharp turn around a cluster of tree trunks. But he managed to get away unharmed.

“See?” Yari shouted over the noise. “Being small can be an advantage, too.” Foca grinned, watching as he stood on his toes, trying to follow the game over the heads of the people in front of them.

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The people from Persis yelled fanatically to support their little favorite. Drums were beaten, and the red-dressed crowd started a chant. This brought up fierce reactions in the black section of the stadium where the Gulians started to howl. The horses became increasingly nervous, and the pace of the game intensified.

A loud cheering welled up from the stands as the crowd saw Yanos close in on Tork. The noise didn't seem to bother the prince at all. He quickly caught up with Tork, raising his boster to slash it in the giant's direction. People held their breath, waiting for the blow.

But, all of a sudden, Tork slumped aside. Swinging his boster to the left he hit Yanos on the chest. The force of the blow was enormous. Yanos was tossed out of the saddle, falling to the ground, where he lay motionless.

A sigh of surprise went through the stadium. King Borkas leaped forward from his throne, his face instantly white. The crowd fell silent, and for a moment time seemed to stand still. Then a small gate opened and five soldiers ran into the arena to carry Yanos' body away.

Yanos' name was whispered from the stands, clearly audible in the sudden silence. Atrana cocked her head, realizing something had happened to her brother. In her concern she lost track of the game, allowing Subor to sneak up on her and surprise her from behind. She ducked in a reflex as she heard him approach, but he hit her hard on the shoulder.

The crowd roared in frustration.

Moaning with pain, Atrana slumped to the side of her horse, barely holding on to her saddle. For a moment, she was too dazed to respond. Then she felt a tree trunk rub against her leg, and she managed to steer her horse among the cluster of stems, just as Subor charged again.

Subor's horse came to a sliding halt. Cursing, Subor grasped the animal's neck, barely avoiding being thrown over its head. With his left hand he grabbed at his helmet, catching it before it came off. But the helmet got stuck halfway his head. As he struggled to push it back in place, he was attacked by Pykon, who smacked him on the shoulder with his broken boster.

Subor screamed with rage. He swung his boster wildly, hitting only air, and Pykon hammered him on the head.

“I’m going to kill you!” Subor roared. But his wild blows lacked precision. Pykon circled around him, infuriating him even more.

As the two fought each other, they were surprised by Mogol, who hit Pykon in the back, then galloped away. Yelling with pain Pykon slumped forward, his helmet sliding from his head and landing in the sand. With a primitive roar Subor hit the defenseless Pykon on the shoulder.

Gasping for breath, Pykon pushed himself up. He was completely disoriented. His blue eyes had a dull expression, and his arms hung limp at his sides. Another blow hit him in the chest, and he fell to the ground, where he remained motionless.

Shouts of approval mixed with howls. The stadium seemed to boil with emotion. The blue-dressed spectators started to cheer Atrana, who was now holding her boster in her left hand, using the other to lead her horse through the arena. Handicapped by the blow to her shoulder, the princess was wise enough to stay away from her opponents, yet her fans encouraged her to fight on, hoping for a miracle.

Currents of movement rippled through the stands as the crowd shifted its attention. There was a wave of excitement as Loky and Olik, riding on opposite sides of the canal, spotted each other and charged. The crowd roared, thirsty for blood. The two riders reached the eight-foot-wide body of water almost simultaneously, and Varga jumped. But Loky’s mare jerked back in fear, catapulting her helpless rider over her head. With a splash, Loky landed in the murky water of the canal.

The crowd howled.

Olik held on to Varga’s neck as he landed safely on the other side. He pulled at the reins and turned back to the water. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Loky stood up. He pulled off his helmet and touched his painful back. “I think I am,” he muttered, wincing with pain. “Take out Subor for me, will you?”

Bells approached, and as Olik turned away from the canal, he realized he was trapped. Tork charged at him from the right, while Mogol rapidly closed in from the left, and in front of him, Subor moved in circles, blocking his way of escape. Instinctively, Olik waited until his attackers had almost reached him, then he sped away from the canal, making a sudden, sharp turn.

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The maneuver left Tork and Mogol facing each other. The little Persian slashed at the giant, but missed, and Tork mowed his boster over Mogol's head. The blow was so powerful that it could have beheaded Mogol.

Taking advantage of the confusion, Olik charged. He hit Mogol on the shoulder, ripping the helmet from his head. There was an expression of shock on the little Persian's face as Olik's boster swung in his direction again, the second blow landing on his chest and emptying his lungs. With a moan, he dropped from his horse, a trickle of blood running down from the corner of his mouth.

Olik spun around to face Tork, but the giant galloped away, raising his arms in a gesture of victory. Tork's fans cheered and started another chant. They howled when Subor gestured them to shut up, but Subor responded by parading arrogantly in front of them, swaying his head left and right in a gesture of mockery.

The king stared at the spectacle below, a troubled look on his face. The games were extremely rough this year. The crowd obviously loved it, and he could see why. Right now, however, all he could think about were his children. He had sent someone to check on Yanos, but it was still unclear how badly the prince was hurt.

"I don't believe this!" he cried, referring to Yanos' defeat. "Normally Tork couldn't hit his opponents if they were tied to a tree!"

Omakan nodded. "A stroke of luck," he said with a shrug.

"What?" the king yelled over the roar of the crowd.

Omakan ignored the question. "Sire, the hourglass," he exclaimed, standing up from his chair.

Annoyed, the king looked at the hourglass next to his throne. The top half was empty, and from the stands close by people already started to scream for the chipas.

The king grunted. He gestured to a soldier standing at a small hatch at the edge of the arena, and the man pulled a rope, opening the hatch. A moment later five balls of fur ran into the arena, cheered on fanatically by the crowd. The little, wooly creatures were clearly confused by the noise and ran in all directions. One of them darted toward Subor, whose horse reared in panic. Cursing, Subor held on to his saddle. The

frightened chipa froze, baring its sharp teeth, and Subor's horse reared again, whinnying and kicking its front legs.

The Gulians stood up as one and started to chant Subor's name, cursing the chipa. Atrana cocked her head. She realized Subor was in trouble. She gritted her teeth, and, digging her heels in her horse's flanks, she charged. With a wide swing she landed her boster in Subor's neck.

Then her horse noticed the chipa. The frightened mare jumped to the left, launching Atrana's body to the right. Atrana reflexively grabbed for the pommel of her saddle, her right hand clawing at the air. She missed. Helplessly, she fell to the ground.

Meanwhile, Subor, though still in the saddle, seemed barely alive. The crowd held its breath as his horse reared again, jerking his limp body backwards. Slowly, Subor slid out of the saddle, landing heavily in the sand.

Howls came down from the stands where the Gulians were gathered. The stadium shook to its foundations with noise. Soldiers entered the arena to carry away Subor's motionless body, but as they approached, Subor stood up, pulled off his helmet, and tossed it aside. Blood ran from his right cheek, dripping in the sand.

Subor shook his head, then glanced around until he found the chipa. The little animal sat hunched against a boulder, watching him carefully. As he moved closer, the chipa rose up, showing its teeth. Then it tried to get away. But Subor blocked its way of escape and kicked it up into the air, watching as it landed 20 feet away. The animal didn't move. Ignoring the booing, Subor stormed out of the arena.

With only two riders left, Olik started to pursue Tork, following him from a distance. His fingers touched the skull he had hidden under his tunic, tucked away between clumps of wool. He still marveled at it. It was as if the thing sharpened his senses. It was almost like a third eye. Despite the noise in the stadium, despite the obstacles strewn around in the arena, he was able to follow Tork's movements with eerie precision. It was as if he could see him, smell him even.

The crowd cheered Olik on as he closed in on his last remaining opponent. He felt invincible. His fingers gripped tighter around his boster, and he pressed his heels in Varga's flanks. As she stormed forward, he sat up, raising his right arm.

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The sound of Tork's bells grew louder, and he was sure he could hear Tork's breathing. He could even smell the giant's sweat. With a forceful blow he landed his weapon, but as it came down Tork hit him on the arm. Olik's boster flew through the air. Racing away from his opponent, he heard the thud of his weapon landing on the dusty floor of the arena.

Tork's mount whinnied and reared, and Tork was nearly thrown. The animal pawed the floor with its powerful front legs. A cloud of dust rose up. "Whoa boy, whoa," Tork cried, stroking the animal's neck, where Olik's boster had hit. "Whoa, boy, easy."

Olik jerked the reins and made a sharp turn. He rubbed his arm and tried to ignore the pain. Again, his fingers touched the smooth surface of the skull underneath his tunic. He felt the warmth crawl up his arm. The pain quickly disappeared.

As the skull's energy spread through his body, he started to get a sense of his surroundings again. In his mind's eye he saw his boster, lying in the dust, a blurry stripe of black among a multitude of swirling grayish tones. Tork's massive form was circling it. He pursed his lips and took a deep breath. Then he charged. As he approached the cloud of dust, he slumped to his right, clinging to Varga's neck, and for a brief moment, he was invisible to the crowd.

Cries of disbelief rolled down from the stands, when Olik reappeared, holding his boster. Varga galloped away, sprinting through one of the pools and circling around a pile of boulders, slowing down to a trot when Olik pulled the reins. Olik rubbed his left leg, where Tork had hit him hard. His left foot slowly turned numb.

The crowd loved the spectacle, and the stadium was in a constant roar.

"Sire," Omakan cried over the deafening noise. The king looked up. Omakan nodded at the hourglass. "It is time to send in the slayer."

The king waited until the last grains of sand had poured down. Then he stood up. He gestured with his hand, and a trumpet sounded.

The crowd fell silent, facing the pole that marked the center of the arena. The ground beneath the pole started to move downward, and a rectangular opening, four feet wide and eight feet long, appeared as the pole slowly vanished into the caverns underneath the stadium. From

within the gaping hole, giant drums could be heard, beating in a slow, ominous rhythm.

The crowd held its breath, staring at the opening in eager anticipation, crying excitedly as a dark figure appeared from the deep. The figure wore a black cloak, the face hidden by a large, protruding hood. In his right hand, he held a black boster, ornamented with five small, shriveled skulls. Each of the skulls was attached with a thin rope, woven of human hair. The slayer rode a magnificent horse, its ink black skin shining with an oily gleam in the afternoon sun. More dried skulls hung from the reins, and in his left hand the slayer held a shield made of bones. Slowly, the menacing figure rose from the deep as the hatch on which he stood closed again.

“Who *is* he?” Foca asked.

Yari stared at the slayer as if he were in a trance. She prodded him.

“Who *is* it?” she repeated.

“I don't know,” Yari responded. “Nobody knows. Some say he's not human.”

Foca frowned. “You mean he's a ghost? You must be joking.”

Yari shrugged. “Olik says the slayer has been around for hundreds of years. Nobody lives that long.”

“It doesn't have to be the same person, you know,” Foca replied. “There could be someone else underneath all those clothes each time. How would you know?”

Yari shrugged again. “That's not what they say,” he replied.

A wave of excitement rolled through the stadium as the slayer started to move in the direction of the two remaining riders. The crowd started a slow chant, “Slaayer, slaayer.”

Olik turned as he sensed the slayer approach. He quickly moved away, Tork following, both yelling and spurring their mounts. But the slayer rapidly gained on them. Olik sensed the presence of the wooden bridge, a dark blur against a hazy background. He steered Varga toward it, still followed closely by Tork. He crossed the bridge, then turned, blocking the way. *This is it*, he thought. He tightly gripped his boster. His muscles tensed.

The hooves of Tork's mount pounded the thick, wooden planks, and the bridge shook and croaked as if it were going to collapse. The slayer

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had nearly caught up with him. Slowing down to a trot, Tork stayed at the left side of the bridge, forcing the slayer to pass him on his right. The crowd gasped as the dark figure lifted his weapon.

With surprising agility, Tork moved his body to the left, pulling at the reins to stop his horse. With a quick turn, he smashed his boster against the slayer's neck. The dark figure slumped forward, hanging over the head of his mount, and, blinded, the animal crashed into Varga. Both horses fell helplessly into the shallow water of the canal.

Olik was thrown out of the saddle. There was a flash of pain as he hit the bottom of the canal. But the pain was insignificant compared to his feeling of disbelief. For a moment, he was too stunned to react, lying motionlessly on his back. The murky water seeped into his helmet and soaked the wool underneath his leather tunic. Then he came to his senses. He rolled onto his stomach and pushed himself up, rising out of the water and pulling off his helmet. He gasped for breath.

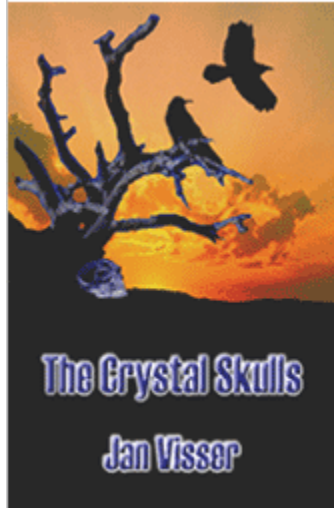
Around him it was as quiet as a graveyard. The crowd was in awe. Nobody had ever beaten the slayer. All eyes were fixed on Tork as the giant dropped his boster on the bridge and slowly lifted his arms until they were horizontal, the palms of his hands facing up to the skies. A woman's voice screeched, "Tork the terrible!" and then the stadium erupted with sound again.

Tork tore off his helmet and uttered a primitive cry.

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*Jan Visser*

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Enjoy!!