

THE CRYSTALS OF VUHRAN

THE ATHERANT



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I. THE ATHERANT

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THE CRYSTALS OF VUHRAN: I. THE ATHERANT

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WESTERN CONTINENT MAP



EASTERN CONTINENT MAP



I. THE CATACLYSM

Suddenly, a spiral of very intense and bright colors illuminated a wide region of space. After a moment, a colossal-sized ship emerged from its interior, advancing rapidly, trying erratically to dodge the powerful discharges of energy that another, a smaller one, fired at it. Both were moving with amazing speed toward the center of the planetary system, governed by a yellow star.

Even though the charges of the attacking ship directly impacted the largest, it withstood the continuous assault thanks to an energy shield.

The frantic chase continued, and having left a vast field of asteroids, the attacking spacecraft, a war cruiser, began firing a series of even more powerful missiles to strike the space freighter's defenses, producing explosions that caused it to shake vigorously.

The gigantic ship then activated a new type of protection. The ship fired small robot probes in coordination with the assailant's shots, intercepting the missiles and exploding them at a safe distance.

The shock waves produced by the explosions were huge, and although the probes seemed to work perfectly, the cargo ship would not be able to maintain its defenses indefinitely under such a fierce attack. Their shields seemed to finally begin to fail.

After having traveled most of that star system and finding itself close to the third planet, the destination that the freighter had set for itself in its attempt to escape, its enemy fired another swift projectile at it.

Both ships were circling the only natural satellite on the planet when a probe quickly attached itself to the missile, causing it to change trajectory and direct it toward the attacker.

The unexpected maneuver caught the attackers off guard, failing to deflect their course in time and thereby destroying themselves. Immediately after, there was an explosion on the planet's surface. A final missile launched by the warship had deviated from its course, reaching the ocean.

From a beautiful and magnificent city in the middle of a great island, thousands of people directed their gazes toward the sky, attracted by the brilliant flash that contrasted with the dim light of that autumn day.

A tremendous roar echoed to the south, seemingly emanating from the depths of the ocean. Only moments later, the earth began to shake strongly, until giving way to an earthquake of cataclysmic proportions.

The people fled in terror, unable to find a place to protect themselves from the onslaught of the ocean that overturned with all its fury on the entire island.

Finally, the intense light was decreasing, and thousands of people looked at each other with expressions of surprise, fear, and enormous excitement, without understanding at all what was happening. Only moments ago, they had almost died of the cataclysm, which destroyed their island by hiding it under the sea.

Through openings in the strange craft that carried them above the clouds, survivors were able to make out a strange new land before their eyes. Their excitement grew as they saw the details of the landscape, which were becoming increasingly precise. The vessel was descending.

They thought they were on their way to Antia, and that must be the work of the gods—that they were leading them to paradise and eternal happiness. They could see the vastness of the sea, a deep blue color, and, in the opposite direction, a vast elevated coastline where a waterfall protruded, spilling the waters of a mighty river from the mountains. The river wound through a fertile, lush valley.

The group of survivors consisted of men, women, and children. The smallest ones were still crying from the panic they felt moments before, when the city in which they lived was devastated by the force of the earthquake that killed thousands of people.

Although the adults could not explain where they were, a deep calm began to envelop them. However, no one dared to say a word. They soon discovered that the vessel carrying them had descended into the valley they had seen from above.

Everything darkened, and absolute silence enveloped them. Moments later, a kind of door opened and let in the daylight. Little by little they overcame the initial fear and descended, one by one, through the metal door now turned into a giant ramp. The vegetation of the place and the mountains in the distance made them remember their own land. Everything seemed familiar and new at the same time.

This place could not be Antia after all. It looked more like their precious island. The powerful god Athar had decided to return their home to them after that terrible destruction.

Gathered in the clearing of the valley, they noticed two luminous figures, very tall and bright, descending from the boat, seeming to float just above the ground.

The strange beings approached until stopping at a short distance from a particularly tall and strong man, dressed in beautiful silver armor. This was a splendid soldier, the maximum leader of the army, tesyan Utal, from the house of Lisen, who had returned from a terrible war in the days before the cataclysm.

One of the luminous figures approached the tesyan, thus revealing its imposing size, almost three heads taller than Utal-Lysen.

At that moment, a faint light began to envelop the general, who seemed to plunge into a deep state of trance. That being was communicating with him but without using any words or gestures. He seemed to have established a direct link with his mind.

The other survivors imagined that it was Aolys and Agyhn, two of the lesser gods, who had surely chosen Utal-Lysen as the bearer of a divine message. After a moment, the tesyan seemed to leave the trance state and was able to give his people a calm look.

The second brought with it a dazzling object. It was a crystal that immediately began to reflect the light that it received from the sky in all directions, projecting in a large part of the valley beautiful flashes of different and vivid colors. That captivating light reached everyone gathered there, making them feel a deep sense of well-being.

Before handing the crystal over to Utal-Lysen, the strange entity instructed him on the care and purpose of the enigmatic artifact. The tesyan, already released from the initial trance, nodded his head, indicating that he was honored to receive the gift and that he had clearly understood the message.

The light beings looked closely at the survivors of the cataclysm in a farewell and returned to the interior of the flying boat. It rose silently and quickly to the clouds, losing sight in the vastness of the sky.

Behind the distant mountains and forests, other boats ascended and disappeared, like the one that brought them there.

They all stared at the general, anxiously waiting for what he was to say. Utal-Lysen gathered them together at the foot of a small hill.

He made sure everyone could hear him, communicating a message full of hope. "On this day, the gods have saved us from death and destruction," began the former leader of tens of thousands of soldiers, "and they have given us a new opportunity on this earth."

Everyone looked at him surprised and excited. Athar was speaking through Utal-Lysen, and they would listen and obey the divine designs. They still had images of the destruction caused by the cataclysm in their minds. Seeing themselves now in that beautiful and peaceful place, they were relieved; hope began to grow again in their hearts.

Then the tesyan announced, "Now we must rebuild our civilization on this fertile soil. The gods will protect us, and thanks to the power of this sacred crystal, we will reach Antia with our children, our children's children, and all our future descendants."

Although numerous people burst into glee, some seemed not to understand those words. These individuals were prisoners of war and slaves, unable to comprehend the language spoken by the Utal-Lysen people. The group consisted of men with long golden hair from the northern lands of the previous world, situated north of an inland sea, and others with dark complexions who had been captured in battles in the south, in territories characterized by perpetual sand.

The little more than thirty thousand men and women saved from death that day chose Utal-Lysen as their atlantur, or absolute sovereign. He accepted with honor and announced that in that place they would build Unthea, the capital of a new kingdom, on the banks of a river called Lehn.

II. A NEW KINGDOM

The newcomers would spend their first nights in that new world out in the open, marveling at the glow of not just one but two moons that appeared in the night sky: Dumia and Mosira. They would soon know their cycles and tours of the heavens. They called the big yellow balloon that lit up their days Milian.

A new time, the era of Utal-Lysen, had begun for that town of survivors: the Kingdom of Vuhran had been born.

People soon discovered that the fauna and flora of the place were similar, almost identical to those they had previously known. Such similarities helped them quickly adjust to their new home.

They also discovered herds of horses, which they quickly tamed. On their back, they could more easily explore those new and extensive territories. They cultivated with great skill the fertile land of the different valleys, obtaining a great diversity of foods: barley, wheat, and beans, which became an essential part of their diet. They also planted various fruits that made it possible to complement the food supply and raised sheep, chickens, and pigs, just as their ancestors had done for generations.

But over the years, something strange and surprising would happen: they forgot the details of their past life, thus losing their experiences prior to arrival on the shores of the Galor Sea to their new home. However, his artistic abilities, his technical and scientific knowledge, and his capacity for land management and animal husbandry remained intact. All these skills allowed them to develop a flourishing civilization.

Their creed would be based on the fundamental idea that the supreme god Athar had created them and had appointed Utal-Lysen to rule over them. The gods did not select the slaves and prisoners who arrived

with them in the flying boat, placing them on that land solely for their service.

For an inexplicable reason, the atlantur was the only one who kept his memories of the great cataclysm of the previous world.

During the first years, he ruled his people completely, but then he delegated part of the government to a council of priests, who would care for the crystal.

The council would consist of four men of immense wisdom, masters of writing and astrology. Utal-Lysen gave them the name of atlanat and once appointed by the atlantur, the people accepted them as enlightened men, also chosen by the gods.

Years after arrival in the new world, the city of Unthea became the maximum expression of power and beauty that these men could achieve.

Utal-Lysen's subjects had participated directly in the building of their city, as well as having a force of about 5,000 slaves. For more than fifteen years, the construction of the majestic capital of Vuhran demanded arduous work.

Three concentric rings, delimited by high walls, formed the base of the city, providing an effective defense against any aggressor. The walls of the first ring, or outer ring, of about nine lakets high were the tallest and protected the houses of artisans, artists, and merchants. The merchants were responsible for transporting the rich crops that the farmers had

produced in distant fields. Consequently, the markets and main businesses were in this ring.

Within the second, delimited by slightly lower walls, were the residences of the wealthiest nobles and families of Unthea. The high military leaders also lived in that sector of the city.

Finally, after the third ring, with walls of six lakets—the height of six men—two main buildings rose majestically. The first of these, the atlantur palace, was a masterpiece of architecture: a hexagonal-shaped building surrounded by beautiful and extensive gardens. During the brightest days, the color of its walls radiated brightly, making it stand out from a great distance like a small white hill. On the main wall of the Utal-Lysen home, massive flags with the kingdom's coat of arms fluttered in the wind.

The second building was the sacred atlanat chamber, a superb construction erected at the opposite end of the central circle of the city as a magnificent counterpart to the royal palace. It rose far above the rest of the buildings, twenty lakets high, and consisted of an octagonal base structure that ascended with a slight inclination until reaching an elevated plane, also octagonal but with a smaller surface area, crowned by a dome. Inside reposed the crystal, resting on a solid stone pedestal.

Four very tall stone obelisks guarded the chamber day and night, challenging even the building that served as a dwelling for the atlantur. At night, big fires at the top of those towers reminded everyone who observed them that they were there to care for the legacy of Utal-Lysen.

The cupola on which the sacred crystal rested was even higher than the main roof of the atlantur palace. In this way, everyone in Unthea could receive his divine rays every time daylight hit it. When this happened, the crystal began to float, and around noon, when Milian reached its highest

point, it projected a beautiful light that reached a distance equivalent to one thousand nine hundred and forty-four lakets. This length, called gurla, would soon become the basis for establishing the distances of the vast territories of the kingdom.

Part of the waters of the Lehn River crossed the entire city. The water was brought through an extensive underground tunnel, and after filling the channels and pools of the central ring, it descended until reaching each corner of a complex network of aqueducts that allowed the inhabitants of Unthea to have permanent access to the water that passed through the gates of their houses.

The entire city displayed in each building, large or small, the superb ability of those diligent people for construction and the arts.

The prisoners and slaves did not belong to the lineage of those chosen by the gods. The interior of those walls did not admit them; they received their freedom in exchange. The only condition was that they move eastward, leaving the shores of the Galor Sea forever.

Thus, thousands of souls, hoping for the freedom granted, traveled for various days until they reached a place where two large, forested regions were. At that location, they chose to split into two groups. The first and most numerous, made up of men with fair skin and long blond hair, headed north. After skirting an inland sea along its western shore, they reached an extensive region covered by lush forests, which would be known as Kanisga.

It was not long before they found clearings and nature trails that allowed them to cross it, and, with the firm idea of continuing to advance, those men and women of great strength finally arrived, in the middle of the year 18 of the Utal-Lysen era, on a great plain in the one that decided to settle. They soon adapted to the climate and geography of the place,

taking advantage of the fruits of fishing, hunting, and agriculture and adopting a semi-nomadic lifestyle.

Years later, it was common to find groups of animal-skin tents arranged around well-distributed bonfires in those lands, forming prosperous camps and even villages of considerable size. Each village represented a clan, and each clan had a leader who administered local justice and decided whether to go to war or maintain peace with neighboring clans.

With the help of a magnificent breed of horse, larger and stronger than their cousins on the rest of the continent, they managed to dominate the vast and rugged steppe territories that stretched between the Mansalia mountain range, the Cosigor Mountains west of the Inland Sea of Usen, and the northern limits of the Kanisga forests. They perfected a wandering, savage life compared to that of their previous masters of Unthea and were known as the nomadic horse riders of Mulst.

First, they used the short bow, from which they developed a rudimentary crossbow that fired arrows at a much greater distance and speed. Arrows, back then, used bronze points and, thanks to the greater power and precision with which crossbows could fire them, became lethal weapons. In time, the Mulst region would become known as the birthplace of the best archers.

The second group of exiles from Unthea proceeded toward the east—dark-skinned men with curly black hair. They reached a pass between a group of mountains and that same inland sea. They soon found

themselves traveling across a steep plateau where the wind never seemed to stop and brought an unmistakable scent of the sea.

After a long and hard march, they reached a point where only two roads opened: to the East, where the terrain was even more difficult, or to the South, where the landscape seemed more welcoming. Preferring the latter, they traveled on a higher plateau but less rugged than the previous one. They called that land Lahir and settled at its southernmost tip, founding a town they called Lont.

On the shores of the Galor Sea, the inhabitants of Unthea lived proud of their city, which shone majestically in that impressive geography. The fifty-lakets waterfall, from which the waters of the Lehn River plunged into the sea, raised clouds of steam visible from more than four gurlas away.

Despite the steep cliffs that abruptly met the sea along a vast portion of the coastline, the construction of a port just over half a gurla south of the waterfall was not hindered. The piers were connected to the top of the cliff by stairs carved out of the rock itself and an arch bridge that rose forty-five lakets above the sea.

When the first ships that left the port of Athisus ventured west, entering the Galor Sea, they found that the calm ocean had no end. They believed it was the gods' will that they live in a peaceful land without enemies.

During the day, the brilliance of the sacred crystal illuminated the plain that surrounded Unthea, filling the courageous people with hope.

People fervently believed that if that light shone on their heads, they would count on the permanent blessing of the gods.

At night, shortly after sunset on the clearest days, the crystal gave off beautiful flashes that briefly illuminated the entire city with an intensity even greater than that of the Mosira and Dumia moons.

The weather and harvests had been very favorable since the crystal rested on the atlanat chamber. The inhabitants of the kingdom lived convinced that their success was due to the divine light that it radiated.

Utal-Lysen had known how to exalt the spirit of his people by keeping alive the promise of achieving a later life in Antia. He ruled with a firm but fair hand, and it was during the year 21 of that era that he entrusted the atlanat priests to record on stone tablets a list of laws or precepts that would constitute the fundamental code of all the inhabitants of the kingdom:

1. You will swear obedience to the atlantur.
2. You will always honor the atlanat council.
3. You will defend with your life the kingdom and the sacred heritage of Utal-Lysen.
4. You will give the city a fifth of your grains, your animals, and all your wealth.
5. You will respect the lives of all subjects of the atlantur.
6. You will not take possessions from others.

It became known as the Lysenic Code, contained in the sacred tablets of the same name. Since the gods had entrusted the crystal to Utal-Lysen, the laws decreed by him were equally sacred and absolute, becoming one of the pillars of the flourishing civilization.

After years of prosperity and harmony, the first atlantur gave the throne to his son Uten, of the house of Lurian, at the beginning of the year 36. His main heir had passed away from a rare disease long before he reached adulthood, and the queen had been unable to conceive another offspring. Uten-Lurian was the son of the atlantur with a secondary wife, and for that reason he could not bear the name of the royal house.

On his deathbed, Utal-Lysen would called his successor, "My son, today I give you the young Kingdom of Vuhran, called to be the greatest under heaven."

"I welcome you with an open heart, father."

"The gods gave us a new opportunity in this blessed land, and I leave for Antia confident that you will know how to be worthy of the sacred heritage. Never forget that you must be fair and firm with your people." With his final breath, the atlantur declared, "We are a people of survivors who need a monarch worthy of the gods."

Uten-Lurian was holding her father's hand firmly as he listened to those words that he did not seem to fully understand.

"Leave in peace for your meeting with Athar. I will know how to perpetuate your legacy."

On the day that the first great atlantur of Vuhran died, his people honored his departure with celebrations that lasted about three months and ended on an Aedlet night, when the two moons that shone in the sky became one.

Uten-Lurian soon launched a vigorous expansion of the kingdom, sending hundreds of settlers to the vast territories bathed by the Galor Sea. The first caravans followed the coastline north of Unthea, reaching, years later, the northernmost regions of the continent. In the middle of the first century, after almost two decades of constant migration, the construction of the city of Verynt began at the tip of a narrow peninsula, behind the last mountains of the Mansalia Range.

But contrary to his father's original will, the ruler of Vuhran had attempted to conquer the territories of the nomadic horse riders of Mulst. Failing to subdue the strong and irreducible people of the North, he decided to build a city that would serve as a strategic place to keep him under surveillance.

Verynt stood on the top of a hill. In this way, guards could spot anyone approaching, friend or enemy, in a timely manner. As one of the main cities of Vuhran, it was built based on circular sectors.

Although it covered a much smaller area than the capital of the kingdom, it had imposing walls that surrounded it. It reached the sea through two well-demarcated roads that ended up in ports located on each side of the peninsula: Western Lod and Eastern Lod.

The Dainon River flowed slowly between the city and the eastern port, forming a small delta to empty into the Kuhr Sea to the northeast. The land located between the river and the western coast was very fertile and allowed the inhabitants of Verynt to develop the necessary crops for their sustenance.

Near the northern end of the peninsula, a couple hundred lakets from the coast, a solitary rock rose in the middle of the sea. A tower, crowned by a permanently lit fire, would serve as a guide for the ships that began to navigate those waters: Kuhr Lighthouse.

The climate of the region was quite mild during a good part of the year, but winters became freezing. The last foothills of the colossal range of northern Mansalia, with mountains extending south of the city, brought powerful icy fronts during those months.

Although Verynt managed himself completely independently for domestic affairs, the atlantur maintained another type of control over his distant subjects: they could not form a fleet of warships. Therefore, the northernmost city on the continent maintained its hegemony over the territories of its influence north of Mulst's steppes, but the Lord of Unthea controlled the kingdom from the seas.

Despite this restriction, the inhabitants of Verynt lived proudly as part of the Kingdom of Vuhran, always ready to serve the Atlantur and confident of one day sharing the legacy of Utal-Lysen and earning a place in Antia.

About one hundred and twenty years after the city's foundation on the banks of the Dainon, the Veryntians built, at the request of the then-Atlantur, the Danir fortress on the Island of Adros, located between the Kuhr and Filart Seas. It was the most important prison in the entire kingdom.

The lineage of the atlanturs continued for decades. By 220, the kingdom had already spread across the central, eastern, and northern regions of the large continental island. East of Unthea rose Colsia, bathed by the waters of the Verul Inland Sea. This city had a strategic location, since from there it controlled access to the vast Plateau of Samat. The city was situated adjacent to the Port of Irteon, which welcomed ships from the farthest reaches of the kingdom.

At the eastern end of the continent, on the shores of the Ziahn Sea, there was a group of small towns, including the town of Lansi in the north and, further south, Lemas, adjacent to the Plains of Gusor. The ships that sailed between the Port of the Irteon and the city of Lemas never went out into the vast, unexplored Ziahn Sea. Since the time of the first atlantur, these men believed that leaving the land the gods had set aside for the Utal-Lysen heirs would punish them severely. This belief persisted because those waters claimed countless lives over time. The ships went astray forever when they ventured to explore beyond the Anab Archipelago, east of the Port of Abrias. No ship was more than two days away from the coast. The extensive body of water that delimited the mainland island to the east would remain as an impassable border for a long time.

To the south of Unthea, the kingdom extended as far as the Levut River, which was born in the western arm of the Pertegia mountain range and on whose banks the town of Ferlet rose. However, in the year 236 of the Utal-Lysen era, there was a significant migration to the southern tip of the continent. The atlantur wanted to strengthen his dominance in the region, and the town of Ferlet served as a bridge so that thousands of his

subjects moved to the end of the peninsula, near where the range was born.

It was in those lands—bathed, like Unthea, by the waters of the Galor Sea—that the settlers founded the largest city of Larynthea, on the banks of the Artise River, which flowed from the base of the mountain. The city shared many characteristics with Verynt. In the place where the river reached the sea stood the Port of Uthenis.

To the south stretched a volcanic strip in ceaseless activity, reaching the very source of the mountain range. Countless small volcanoes dotted that region, making it the most inhospitable in the entire kingdom. But even further south, in the middle of the sea, beyond the southern tip of the peninsula, a gigantic mountain of fire was rising, an active volcano that was hopelessly threatening the life of anyone who got too close.

It produced ash clouds that could reach tens of gurlas away. On clear days, one could distinguish its activity even from Larynthea. They named it Pelorus, fire spitter, and for fear of it, no one dared to go around the southern tip of the Pertegia Peninsula to cross from the Galor Sea to the Olt Sea.

The best gunsmiths of the time settled in the largest city on the banks of the Artise. For many years, a lineage of strong and very resolute men honed their skills until they mastered a superb metallurgical technique. At that time, weapons were made from bronze, but the inhabitants of Larynthea were the first to work with iron, a new and harder metal that could be molded thanks to the higher temperatures of natural furnaces that fed on the volcanic energy of the region: several gurlas to the south of the city, between two mountains, ran a permanent flow of magma that these men used for forging at temperatures never before reached. Iron was not an alloy, and it was more abundant than the

copper and tin necessary to obtain bronze. This, added to its greater resistance, made it the metal most used by the laryntheans to produce a wide diversity of swords and shields that increased the power of warriors in close combat.

The population of Larynthea, like its counterpart in the extreme north, and the inhabitants of Colsia revered the sacred crystal and respected the Lysenic Code. They also believed that by staying on the side of Utal-Lysen's heir, they would reach Antia. The best smiths of the time settled in the largest city on the banks of the Artise. For many years, a lineage of strong and very resolute men honed their skills until they mastered a superb metallurgical technique.

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Except in the case of local conflicts, the populations of the various regions of the kingdom had lived in peace, without real enemies to face and without really believing in the possibility of an attack by foreign

people. However, toward the middle of the 3rd century, predictions attributed to the oracle of the first atlanat began to run rapidly throughout the mainland island.

We had barely sailed the waters of the Ziahn Sea, and what lay on the other side remained a mystery. The prophecy foretold that Vuhran would have to defend himself in the distant future from an invasion from the East, from distant lands.

It was for this reason that in the year 256, with the full backing of the atlanat council, the 11th atlantur began to strengthen the army. Young men from every city and town in the kingdom were recruited to train and arm them with the best weapons the city of Larynthea could provide.

Thanks to the increased security provided by the new army, trade between different cities and towns intensified. Soon, the Colsia Route, on the shores of the Verul Inland Sea, or the Irteon Route, became the usual way for countless merchants and travelers from the four ends of the kingdom.

The atlantur was in complete control of the entire Galor Sea coastline. Now, part of a fleet made up of tens of war triremes traveled those waters from its northern end, on the banks of the Kuhr Sea, to the opposite extreme, south of the mouth of the Artise. The other half of that squadron concentrated in the waters of the Verul Inland Sea and patrolled the Filart Sea, the island of Adros, and the coasts of the Ziahn Sea to the Anab Archipelago.

The kingdom grew strong and vigorous under the protection of the sacred crystal, the legacy of the first atlantur. The Lysenic Tablets had become absolute law, obeyed by the inhabitants of all the cities, towns, and villages of the continent.

Although the subjects of Vuhran had completely forgotten their past over the centuries, in that mysterious time, before the Udal-Lysen era, they firmly believed that the power of the crystal would allow them to reach Antia, the paradise in which they would live forever as children of the chosen people.

III. THE AKRAMANT

Rulers would succeed each other since the reign of Utal-Lysen. During more than four hundred years of prosperity, the kingdom had grown strong and proud. Everything suggested that those people would live in undying peace and harmony. The atlanat council had served the interests of the people with justice and wisdom, so no one could have imagined that evil would germinate within it that would initiate one of the darkest and bloodiest chapters in the history of Vuhran.

In 427, the young heir Ethon, from the House of Ateles, came to power. The atlantur was weak in spirit and soon fell victim to the wickedness of one of the most perverse men of his time.

After years in the care of the sacred crystal, the atlanat Izhen-Nubih had fallen into an insatiable ambition for power. His soul transformed to such an extent that he lost all the vestiges of justice and nobility. He gradually poisoned the mind of the atlantur, coming to take full control of the sovereign's will.

The brilliance of the sacred crystal had been inexplicably fading in recent years, and the evil priest took advantage of the people's devotion to initiate a sinister ritual, devised in complicity with the other atlanat: the Akramant, a law that obliged younger women to see if they were fit to give birth to a son worthy of Utal-Lysen's heritage.

Izhen-Nubih led everyone to believe that what was happening to the crystal was a clear sign that the lineage of the sons of Vuhran was tainted after centuries of licentious procreation.

Through the imposed ritual, every two years, when the cycles of Dumia and Mosira coincided and both moons aligned perfectly, hundreds

of subjects from all over the kingdom moved to the nearest major city on journeys that could take weeks to complete.

During the days leading up to the alignment of the moons, from the observation posts of Unthea, Verynt, Larynthea, and Colsia, people could see long lines of young women arriving at their appointment with destiny, escorted by soldiers. Initially, the numbers were in the tens, but years later, hundreds of young girls would visit one of the Eletug or halls of purity.

Wealthy families who paid large tributes to the atlanat council managed to prevent their daughters from submitting to the Akramant. The law became a burden on the most impoverished.

The night before the grand alignment, one of the four atlanats would arrive at each of the cities. The scrilaks sounded, announcing that the gates were about to close and would not open all day and night.

They took the women in small groups into the Eletug when it was time for them to submit to the test. Naked, fearful, and expectant, they waited on two circular, concentric stone sectors, divided into twelve sections by means of small grooves or channels. All of them had had the opportunity to clean themselves carefully, seeking the acceptance of the gods by finding them pure and worthy—or their irremediable condemnation of death in the opposite case.

The disturbing sound of rocks sliding against each other filled the chamber. The weight of the young women on the circular sections activated the descent mechanism of three solid stone blocks that completely sealed the Eletug, trapping them inside.

In the dim light of torches, one by one they stand on a small circular base in the center of the room. The weight activated a second mechanism that finally determined its destiny. A gust of wind that seemed like a moan

of death extinguished the torches, and, in that total darkness, a liquid emerged from the upper level that fed the grooves of the circular stones.

If the liquid was water, the womb was fit for perpetuating the race chosen by the gods, and the lucky girl received a mark on her right shoulder, the mark of the atlanat. But, to the horror of others, if the water that filled the grooves contained blood, a sign of impurity, her fate was tragically sealed: she would fall into the void from the top of a mountain.

The Lysenic Tablets included the bloody ritual as its seventh law and since then would govern the inhabitants of the kingdom: You will faithfully accept and fulfill the Akramant's design.

During the reign of Ethon-Ateles, the atlanat had turned the people's devotion to the sacred crystal into permanent fear of meaningless human sacrifice. The subjects of Vuhran had to live resigned for fear that the priests of Unthea would condemn them for all eternity to the depths of the Uhrus, a dark destiny opposite to Antia, where eternal hunger and despair would reign.

Undercover, the atlanat began to be considered evil sorcerers rather than guardians of the Utal-Lysen legacy. Their hegemony came to affect the fate of everyone in the kingdom in a way that no one could have imagined. Over the years, the people would give them the nickname of Dark Council of the Four, and its power would surpass that of the atlantur itself.

The ones who tried to hide and defend their daughters and sisters would be punished: flogged, stripped of their belongings, and even locked

up in Danir prison, on the distant island of Adros, from which no one returned. The army patrolled the kingdom, applying the full rigor of the seventh law of the Lysenic Code to anyone who dared to rise against the atlanat. The rebellions were immediately quelled, and although Vuhran held together, it would never be the same place where hope filled the hearts of men and women.

The years passed slowly for many, and little by little, two factions were formed: one very large, made up of the subjects of the atlantur who resigned themselves to living under the law of the Akramant in silence, and a smaller one, which never stopped fighting to get rid of oppression.

After years of terror, some rebelled, and openly defying the Council of Four, they began a long and dangerous exodus to the East. At first it was the inhabitants of the eastern and central regions of the kingdom who left, looking for a future far from Akramant.

Despite the memory of the shipwrecked ships that attempted to cross the waters of Ziahn, a group of courageous sailors persevered, becoming the first to venture beyond Anab's Archipelago. Overcoming the deep-seated fear for centuries, they sailed to where Milian left each morning, reaching the shores of a new land.

The news spread quickly across the continent, and people from Colsia, Larynthia, Verynt, and even Unthea joined the exodus. Soon it became frequent to find long caravans traveling toward the eastern coasts of the kingdom. Only those who were condemned by the Akramant were tragically exempt from the fifth law of the Lysenic Code, which said that no Vuhran subject could be killed. This protected the self-exiles from the atlanat's anger.

After more than two decades of mass exodus, Izhen-Nubih decided to end the rebellion and sent an army to bring back or end the lives of all those who had crossed the sea in defiance of their authority.

When Vuhran's forces landed on the coast east of Anab, they found a prosperous city very well organized. It had hundreds of houses and buildings with impressive architecture, considering the brief time that had passed since the migrants settled on the new continent.

The soldiers soon realized that the city was empty. They carefully studied the footprints found in the surrounding terrain and were able to determine that twenty thousand men, women, and children had fled, separating into two groups.

The first one had left days ago, heading north, entering a plain that stretched until it was lost on the horizon. The second and smaller one had done so much earlier, heading southeast.

“We will chase those wretches to the end of the world!” the enraged nelibar in command of the invading army shouted. His men responded excitedly, raising their swords.

“Sir, we will not stop until we catch up with them and compel them to obey the law!” a kientil under his command added.

“Before leaving, send this message to our ships on the shore.”

The march began immediately. Around fifteen hundred soldiers entered the vast plain, following in the footsteps of the fugitives. The nelibar, aware that his persecutors were fleeing with children and the elderly, was confident that their progress would be slow. After more than two weeks of a strenuous forced march, he spotted a long caravan that had just crossed a narrow river. The caravan consisted of approximately twelve thousand men, women, and children. He quickly realized that the

strongest and youngest were closing the rear, with only about two hundred on horseback.

Seeing himself in evident numerical inferiority with respect to that immense crowd, the nelibar preferred to adopt a more cautious strategy. He approached carrying a flag of peace, but shortly before reaching the river, he met a messenger from the coast. A cold smile appeared on his face.

Out of the sea of fugitives, a tall, gray-haired, solemn-looking man emerged, projecting wisdom. That man was the elquidian, the title with which the first inhabitants of the territories east of the Ziahn Sea called their leader and spiritual guide and whose most appropriate meaning was that of a just and wise man. The elquidian crossed the waters of the river and went to meet the nelibar. The nelibar issued an ultimatum to the elquidian: if they abandoned their rebellion attempt and complied with the council's imposed laws, just like all other subjects of the kingdom, everyone would survive. If not, the children's lives would also be at risk.

Seeing the degree of determination with which this man threatened the lives of those whom he guided and protected, the elquidian requested two days to decide.

"I can grant you that request. But do not try to run away. Do not sacrifice these people in vain," the nelibar ill-concealed his malice.

The elquidian appreciated the short truce and left without imagining that time was playing against him.

The soldiers camped just under a gurla from the fugitive caravan on the southern bank of the river. During those two nights, they slept in the hope of not having to kill those they considered their brothers, descendants like them of the first children of Vuhran who appeared on the shores of the Galor Sea more than four hundred and fifty years ago.

The night before the deadline expired, the fugitives observed torches from the west that joined the ranks of their pursuers. The situation became even more complicated.

Shortly after dawn on the day he agreed to give his answer, the elquidian left to meet again with the envoy of Unthea. Neither his bravery nor his yearning for freedom stopped him from seeing what his eyes revealed when he reached the military camp. An army far larger than the one he had seen only two days ago waited in perfect formation in that meadow, ready to act at the first command of his nelibar.

The fugitives fell victim to a trap. Those unexpected reinforcements had landed much farther north from where the first army did. Now the forces that threatened them consisted of four thousand heavily armed men, including hundreds of archers.

The elquidian continued his way, trying to regain lost calm. When he reached the bank of the river that descended from the distant mountains, a powerful scrilak was heard, and from the main camp the nelibar proudly emerged, who, even knowing that the balance was tilting in his favor, was surprised to face the force of spirit and the determination of the man who led so many who sought their freedom.

“We have struggled for years to establish ourselves in this new land, demanding and wonderful at the same time. With tremendous effort we built our first city, Golast, which we abandoned to protect our children and our women. But we will no longer run away. My answer cannot be apart from the refusal to obey the tyrants of Unthea.”

“Then you have chosen death. The blood of your children will stain these fields by sunset.”

Noon was approaching, and being the year 469, a historic battle was about to begin.

Six thousand men with little combat experience faced four thousand well-trained soldiers at the foot of a hill near a lush forest rising in the west. Numerical superiority was on the side of the fugitives, but Vuhran's soldiers were much better armed.

Elquidian's hopes lowered as his men fell with alarming speed. When everything seemed to indicate that defeat was inevitable and imminent, the combatants could see, toward the south, a huge caravan that was rapidly approaching the battlefield. It was the other group that had fled Golast. After skirting a wooded area that gave way to a desert, those brave men decided to return to fight alongside their brothers.

Poorly armed but imbued with immense determination, four thousand arrived precisely at the right moment to shift the balance in favor of the rebels. The providential reinforcements lashed out decisively on a second flank, charging at Unthea's army, which was still barely out of their amazement at the unexpectedness of the attack.

The battle was long and bloody, and although thousands of men on both sides lost their lives, only a handful of soldiers would return to the western continent. The survivors of the invading army joined the ranks of the elquidian. Deep in their hearts, they also wanted to free themselves from the oppression of the atlanat. On that day, they achieved victory in a land known years later as the fields of Istalia.

After hearing the news of the defeat of his army, Izhen-Nubih, the true ruler of Vuhran, decided to leave self-exiled in peace. He had no time to mount a new offensive on the territories east of the Ziahn Sea because he was busy maintaining control over the atlantur and quelling rebellions in the farthest corners of the kingdom.

Long years passed. The heroic Battle of Istalia became a distant memory when news spread in the West about the creation of an autonomous province that encompassed the western and much of the northern region of what turned out to be a new island continent.

By then the descendants of the founders of the city of Golast had settled in the south to the ends of the peninsula that divided the Ziahn Sea from a new body of water, which they called Nosk. A long mountain range, which they named Eutogia, delimited the province from the east and climbed as far as the Vernal Knot, a hundred and forty gurlas from the fields of Istalia. From that point on, the Clundes Mountains began, to the north of which extended a great plateau, Isut, delimited by two other imposing ranges. As it moved north, the terrain became more arid until it reached the wastelands along the shores of the distant Hulmia Sea.

In the fertile central lands of the Isut Plateau, the city of Utaleris had risen around 481. The city became the capital, and its name honored the first atlantur of Vuhran, evoking times long forgotten of peace and prosperity. The Eryahn Province was born.

In exchange for living outside the Akramant, the province agreed to pay a tribute in gold and silver to the new atlantur, who knew how to recover much of the power lost by his predecessor. Thus, Eryahn secured freedom that Vuhran's military supremacy would otherwise threaten.

Another important group of colonizers had continued their exodus surrounding the Eutogia mountain range at its southern end. Leaving the Peninsula of Ehur, they reached the mouth of a mighty river that they called Pridon. Together with their delta, they founded the town of Thadian in the year 473. Not long after, they would venture even further, surrounding the extensive bay of Paledia, to settle on its eastern shores.

The city of Caliat would become the capital of the newly formed Province of Aher.

Its inhabitants would discover the largest forested area known until then on both continents. For years they explored the forests of Laforia, where gigantic trees grew with trunks that needed no less than twelve men to be surrounded and stretched endlessly until they reached the Clundes mountain range and the eastern barren fields on the shores of Hulmia.

Since their formation, elquidians have governed both provinces. Their people hold the belief that they have a destiny to uphold the legacy of Utal-Lysen for all its inhabitants. Unlike the neighboring Vuhran, Eryahn and Aher inhabitants were able to develop and grow in peace, reaching surprising prosperity after not many decades.

Those men loved horses, for it was with the help of those noble beasts that the first settlers to venture east of the Ziahn Sea managed to establish themselves in the various valleys, coasts, plateaus, and mountains of the new territories.

Around the year 600, the provinces already had tens of thousands of inhabitants. The political and military balance of the new world seemed destined to change in the not-too-distant future.