



Prologue

Euruasol, Eartadyna 30—Feriatava desi Saldinis (Festival of the Muses) Shedara, Annara 1066

Kryjei, Rakendo grunted to himself as he tossed his rucksack onto his bed. He and his friends needed more time, time to search for clues as to the identity of the missing clans, time to study the Arkola's glyphs. They'd worked together every sol following the mourning period for Dunae Gearhi, and still had no notion as to what any of the mysterious clan emblems meant, or whether the glyphs were important to their quest or merely a distraction.

Had it really been more than two Dynas, two whole months since Gearhi—his great-grandfather's lead associate in Aresti's archaeology program—was murdered by the Chinda clan representative's deranged, elderly mother?

Summer was nearly over; only thirteen sols remained until classes resumed. And with the Festival starting after eveningmeal, Rake and his friends had to clear out their gear to make room for new students who would arrive on the morrow for orientation. All too soon the team would

be involved in registration and textbook exchanges, and what had they accomplished? Nothing more than working theories.

As he'd done for the past sol, Rake recalled the kraters, kalyx, and shields with the unknown emblems and ran through the seven words that kept him and the others of his team scouring the Archives for meaning—Hwartei, Qadifursha, Saklaina, Dalesthai, Regiu, Botu, Latra—Arestian terms for guardian, crossroads, sacrifice, demon, crown, anchor, and coyote. These seemingly unconnected words appeared in all his grandfather's charts and for some reason repeatedly played across his thoughts, an unbroken chain of whispered images. How—if at all—were the words and the mystery emblems related?

His sister Salenkee had worked with the team whenever possible, in between reworking her dissertation, and her background in ancient languages became a key factor in helping Rake develop the theory that each word was linked with individuals, places, and circumstances the group had encountered from the moment they were charged with the task of locating Lana, Laki, and Trino.

Trino... another victim of that crazy old woman with a fondness for poison.

Rakendo rubbed the space between his eyebrows. At least Laki survived the ordeal. Now if they could only figure out what happened to Lana; two Dynas and nothing, no clue—it was as if she had vanished. If she were another sacrifice, why hadn't her body been located? It wasn't like the murderer had wished to remain anonymous. Or was there a link between her and the repeating words?

He had to get moving, push aside his gloominess, if he wanted to join the others for the opening ceremonies. Of course, if he were completely honest with himself, his ruminations were

less an indication of any unsolved mystery than the result of an underlying desire to extend his involvement with the Lysian team, even if it meant skipping a semester of school to do so.

A smile tugged at the corner of his thoughts. Wouldn't his cousin Bish be annoyed if Rake decided to study more of the strange disappearing and reappearing glyphs covering the interior of the Arkola's frame in lieu of attending classes! After all, they had had little time to spend on the rubbings they had collected, mostly because they'd focused on trying to find the source of the mysterious clan emblems.

Rake grinned. After a moment or two of groans and mumbles, Bish would sigh heavily and join him in the escapade.

At least they had learned the secret of what made the glyphs seem to vanish. The entire structure was coated with an electromagnetic element specially designed to alter the way light waves resonated off objects near one another. Although Rake was familiar with the theory of cloaking, he hadn't worked enough with the technology for creating invisibility to understand how manipulating light could make an object physically in his presence appear to disappear.

It was obvious the Ancients knew how to use this technology to their advantage, hence the glyphs hidden inside the pylons of the Arkola, the arch leading to Hekatei's Temple. Hekatei, the Essence of Death and Resurrection, whose legendary scrim was said to allow the wearer to move unseen amidst a crowd of people... was cloaking technology behind the legend?

Rake grunted. More questions, and the more he and his friends delved into his grandfather's papers, the more it seemed like the answers were in hiding. Still, this was not the time to wallow in frustration, and after a few quick but deep breaths, he felt his muscles relax.

Bish poked his head into the room. "Hey—aren't you packed yet?"

"I've decided to stay."

“You’ll miss your date with Mara for the opening of the festival.”

Rake flinched. “It’s not really a date—”

“Have you told *her*?” Bish grinned. “She, Angea, and Ali have been discussing what to wear since first light.”

“Girls are always doing that.” Rake glanced at his cousin’s scrubbed face and new togs, and smirked. “Speaking of dates—”

It was Bishtaro’s turn to cringe. “No way; Angea’s a friend, like the others.”

“Which is why you’re all fancied up.”

Bish held up his hands in mock submission. “Okay, we’re even. Seriously, though,” he gestured at Rakendo’s rucksack, “it’s not like we can skip registration or class—”

“Why not?”

“If you want to spend the entire semester in detention—”

Rake rolled his eyes. “Been there; think I’ll pass.”

Mara, Angea, and Ali, each dressed in a silky, shimmering seafoam-green tunic and matching smile, joined the two boys, and Rakendo felt himself slip towards brain-damage mode. It didn’t help that Mara, a Sensitive like him, knew his thoughts before they registered as thoughts.

Slipping an arm around Rake’s waist, Mara leaned over and nodded at his incomplete packing.

“I don’t think your great-grandfather or your father will allow you to hang out here when you’re supposed to be at the Escolu on the first.” Her eyes danced mischievously, and Rake swallowed a sudden urge to kiss her. “Besides, I won’t be here. I’ll be at the Akademeia in Samaterra up to my eyelashes in clay and paint.”

Angea cleared her throat and gently extracted Mara's arm. "So," she turned to Bishtaro, "how long before the two of you will be ready?"

Before either boy could respond, Ali added, "Jamo wants us to meet him outside his dorm; he has a new transport his parents gave him to celebrate passing his sixteenth summer."

Rakendo finally found his voice, and despite the distinct (to him) waver as his tongue refused to work, he managed to blurt out, "Five more Tuisis, okay?"

Mara grinned. "We'll wait in the hallway."

With the door closed, Rake flopped onto his bed and moaned. "She's just too..."

"Distracting?" Bish offered. "Impossible?"

"Both." Rake leaned up on his elbow. "I can't figure her out."

Bish shrugged. "What's to figure? You like her, and she likes you."

"But, she's—"

"—older? Three summers isn't old, Rake."

"It's not—"

Bish picked up his cousin's rucksack. "Pack. Now. You have two Tuisis. I'll be in the hall with the girls."

Rakendo ambled from the bed to the closet. Without much thought, he tossed and stuffed clothes, papers, and books into his bag. The last item—his grandfather's Irdora, the divining crystal that had been both a blessing and a weight all summer—he held briefly, wondering what secrets still lay beneath the dormant prisms. Maybe he'd have a chance to work with it again during the semester break. With a sigh, he shoved it inside his rucksack, taking care to bury it among his thickest socks.

Eyeing the room where he'd spent the past two Dynas, Rake flung his bag over his shoulder and opened the door. Deep inside, the Irdora began to glow, its pulses reaching through the layers of clothing in an attempt to connect with Rake's fingertips. But the bulky prison dulled the effort, resulting in no more than a shuddering twinge, one Rakendo easily dismissed as his general state of uneasiness around Mara.

It would be many more Dynas before he remembered the twinge and wondered if he should have paid attention rather than ignore the unease. Would it have changed anything? Perhaps; perhaps not... a moot point, certainly, since he would be unable to go back in time. He would have to let it go, move forward, use his newfound realization as he fought through the nightmare he faced.

For now, however, he remained blissfully unaware of the forces at work neath a masked marriage of leadership and fanaticism. His only goal? Get through the semester until he and his friends found the time to revisit their quest. With a smile, he exited the room, excited to spend the festival opening with the others—especially Mara—and not a little curious as to what sort of fancy transport Jamo had that would cart the lot of them to the Tempula.