

Young Adult Fiction
Science Fiction/Fantasy/Adventure
Ages 13 +

ARESTI: PLANET OF THE RED GOD

Volume One: FOOTHILLS OF THE GODS

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From Chapter 1: Lines in the Sand

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Once the Elders cleared the courtroom, Rakendo moved to join his mother and his sister Salenkee, but before he could step outside the circle, Council Leader Neen blocked him.

Tall for an Arestian—more than seven Rans—the Leader perched on the edge of the circle like some giant Salley: slim, plumage sleek and silky, malachite eyes absorbing everything within a parsec.

“I have a proposal, Blaas,” she fixed him with a creepy smile.

Rakendo pushed his hair back from face, his fingers clammy. “Before the vote?”

Maldaree leaned closer, her posture conspiratorial. “I won’t file official charges against you if you give me the contents of your treasure box, including those secret reports you boasted your grandfather gave you.”

“Why would you want a bunch of papers and worthless artifacts?”

The Leader shrugged. “If they’re originals, they belong in the Archives.”

“Then I’ll submit them to Superior Mees—”

“No!” Maldaree hissed, then softened her tone. Another half-smile flitted across her face, and Rakendo’s stomach roiled.

“What I have to say may shock, perhaps dismay you, young Blaas. About three sol-cycles ago, your grandfather Doloro came into possession of top secret documents. How is unclear, but when I ordered him to turn them over to me, he refused.”

Rakendo stared into the calculating eyes that seemed to pierce through him. “But you weren’t Leader at the time—”

“I was, however, a representative and he an ambassador; as my request was official, he was bound by the Vandas to comply.”

Could this be true? Rakendo recalled his celebration and the moment when his grandfather gave him the treasure box. Nothing seemed out of place, unless... when Rakendo tried to open the box? His grandfather had held up a key and told him he would have to solve a puzzle in order to earn the means to unlock his gift. Fond of puzzles like the older man, Rakendo grinned and nodded, then moved to the next gift in front of him. But was it possible his grandfather had arranged the puzzle as a ruse?

“There are no official papers, Leader Neen, only journals and notes, a few books, and a bunch of images, plus the relics.” He cocked his head to the side. “But why wait until now to ask me?”

Maldaree scowled. “Enough, Blaas; either you give me the papers and everything else Dooloro gave you or you’ll be detained indefinitely. And,” she smirked, “I’ll bring formal charges of treason against your grandfather and *take* what I want in evidence.” She whirled around and clomped in the direction of the conference room.

Rakendo exited the circle and slid next to his sister. His brain felt like it was about to burst. Something was very wrong with the Leader; not for one moment would he consider his grandfather capable of treason. If he had refused to comply with her request as the Leader said, there was a logical reason. Rakendo would have to reread the papers; perhaps there was something he missed.

“What did Leader Neen have to say?” his mother asked.

“Nothing much,” Rakendo hedged, unsure whether or not to share this latest twist, “except she’d withdraw the charge of theft if I, uh, give her everything my grandfather gave me.”

Salenkee huffed. “That makes no sense.”

“I’m out of luck no matter what I do,” Rakendo muttered.

The banter behind the smooth, molded Kastanea door to the conference room became heated. The Arestian Unity emblem—three birds enclosed by an ouroboros—loomed at Rakendo from above. He imagined the Leader in search of an obscure Vanda that would keep him locked away until he reached his majority in seven summers.

But I did nothing wrong! Rakendo seethed to the Ancients. Their music filtered towards him, surrounded him in silent sympathy. Perhaps they felt his pain.

Council Leader Neen hates me, he decided. There *had* to be a way out of this. It almost seemed like the hearing was nothing but a pretense, a way for her to enact revenge on his grandfather, but why?

“Have either of you, uh, spoken with Dakta?” Rakendo asked.

His mother’s eyes flashed. “Your father knows only that you were detained for questioning.”

Maybe I should take Maldaree’s offer... The lump of bismuth lying in the pit of Rakendo’s stomach churned. *NARA! NOTRAY!* the voice inside his head bellowed, and he stopped short. But what if the Council Leader made good on her threat? Just to be charged with treason would make his clan outcast, even if the accused was deceased.

The conference room door opened and Superior Mees reentered the courtroom, followed by Leader Neen and the Elders. Rakendo stood with his mother and sister until the Superior and the Elders were seated, then moved back to the circle, flinching when the gate fastened in place, its resonant click more like the clang of a cell door than a simple lock mechanism.

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