

PROLOGUE

2759 A.D./P.E.D.

Second Earth, Atlantis Galaxy

The branches of the trees offered the old woman little shelter from the flakes of snow that swirled on the wind. Wrapped warmly, the bundle didn't understand the importance, or the urgency, with which the crone shuffled through the rising drifts. Belly full, held close to a beating heart, the male child, unaware of his significance, blinked up at the falling white.

Beneath the bell tower, three lights shone through the storm. The walls of the Monastery served not only to protect those within, but also to keep the depravity that had developed on that world out. If the joined races were to have any hope, this child would need to be hidden and given tutelage in the use of his gifts.

As the old woman approached the thick, wooden doors of the Sanctuary, she glanced back through the surrounding forest and along the stone wall that would protect the package she carried. If the child remained silent, then it would not draw the attention of predators before one of the Order roused himself from his threadbare bed to answer the bell. It seemed that nothing moved, yet she felt uneasy. Gently, reverently, the child was placed on the highest step, next to the juncture of wood and stone, protected from the wind and snow. Muttering a blessing and passing her hand over the head of the child, the old woman moved to the bell rope and pulled. The brass sent out the sound of help.

Once more the woman peered into the forest, then quickly moved back into the shelter of trees, her feet placing themselves in the footprints that were already marked by

the rising drifts. There she waited briefly, ensuring that the ringing of brass opened the door of the Sanctuary.

A cowed figure cracked open the door and stood momentarily, a light raised in one hand, the other clutching the front of his robes. The babbling of the child drew his attention. Crouching low for a better view, and holding the light aloft, the Anada glanced into the trees. His eyes fell on the single set of tracks in the gathering snow. Looking back at the child, he noticed the blue-green eyes and a wisdom that stared out of their depths. Gathering the bundle, the Anada retreated behind the door and shut the wood firmly against the elements.

Replacing the light in its bracket on the inside wall next to the door, he paused briefly as the moaning of the Glastons, signaling their pursuit of prey, reached his ears. Glancing over his shoulder at the door, he sent a prayer to Source on behalf of the one who would not return to the village, sacrificing their life for the safety of the infant. With a sigh, the Anada made his way to the chamber of the High Holy One.

From her hiding place in the trees, the woman was filled with relief that the trip was not wasted, that the Anadas had taken the child. Her hesitation, to ensure the child's safety, cost her time and distance. The moaning stilled her breath and chilled her blood. Turning away from the trunk of the tree in order to hurry to the familiarity of the village, she was stopped by the yellow glow of eyes in the dark and a voice from her past.

“You should not have done that. The child is mine. He belongs with me.”

So this would be how her life would end. There was no reason for regret. She had done all she could. The child was safe, though it was unfortunate that Kendal knew of the babe's location. They should have expected this from him.

“I have just offered an opportunity for the Prophecy to be fulfilled,” came her words.

“You are only delaying it by bringing my son here,” Kendal growled at her.

Her eyes narrowed. “He is Satiene’s child. Never yours.”

“Ah, but it is I who gave her the child.”

“Through force.”

“Through Prophecy. The child needs to know his place. To be taught.”

“To hate? To use his words to bring destruction? Satiene would die before she would allow you to have any part in her son’s life.”

“That has already been arranged.” He watched the understanding come quickly, followed by sorrow. “Did you not think I would know when she would deliver? Her powers are formidable. I took advantage of her . . . weakened state.”

Tears tracked silently down the wrinkled cheeks. Moving her hands, her lips forming nearly inaudible words, the cold began to form a solid wall between the remaining moments of her life, and Kendal, the sorcerer who’d raped Satiene in order to control the Prophecy.

With a wave of his hand, the wall of ice melted at her feet. “Old Woman, you are no match for me, and this is only an inconvenience.” He hesitated in his command to release the Glastons to hear her final words.

“They’ll come for him. He will forever be hidden from you. Kendal Shakara, you shall *never* control your son.” She paused to see the fury build in his eyes, then delivered the final blow, her words invoking the Dark One’s protection, an agreement that has been

upheld for millennia. It was the only, final act she could perform to ease Satiene's spirit.
"The Night will come, a storm will rage. The bond enforced, the agreement made."

"NO!!" Kendal screamed, signaling the release of the Glastons. They set upon the old woman, who uttered not a sound as the beasts tore at her throat, her belly, drenching the white with crimson.

Kendal looked skyward and gritted his teeth. He wasn't quick enough. The old woman had invoked the Protectors. A shower of sparks fell amongst the snowflakes on the roof of the Monastery. They would be able to find the child and dedicate their life to the sole protection of his son, keeping Kendal from meddling with the Prophecy. There must be a way to end the contract, to get to his son. Kendal glared at the remains of the old woman, mounted his casp, and signaled to the hired Tamplians to return to the city, which lay beyond the village in which Satiene thought to hide herself. Once he was aboard the T-37 starship, he'd discover a way to undo the words that had been spoken.

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2769 A.D./P.E.D.

Ten Years Later, Alliance High Council Chambers, Apollo Galaxy

She had never seen the monsters, except in her mind, but knew they would come. Always looking to the sky, waiting for the fire, the metal, the end. Only having the love of her mother and father, then to have that love ripped from her breast as she witnessed her mother's body crushed beneath the glass, her father's cut down by the monsters. Her voice left as her world ended.

The Princess with the red hair was not afraid of the monsters. Neither were the three men who protected the Princess. Kiersten was kind and brave and had lots of room

in her heart to love the last child of the Future-Fae. And there was space for Aiden, too. He was strong and smart and had given her a home. Proud and grateful he was of her when something in her blood saved Kiersten. They had protected her, loved her, given her what she wanted and needed most, the time to heal.

She'd practiced what the instructors had taught her on Windmere. How to control and direct her thoughts, to read them in others, and a method to construct a wall so that none could 'know' what she was thinking, unless she wanted them to see or hear. Everything was comfortable in her new home. There were caring people in her life to teach her about Dulsar, the planet where they lived, as well as Kiersten's planet of birth, Suma. She believed that as long as her voice remained silent, the monsters would stay away. But they came to Windmere. And now they were here.

Feeling ill and not particularly wanting to be held, yet not willing to be let down to wander among the beings that held such importance, she attempted to touch Aiden and Kiersten with her thoughts, in the way they'd devised to communicate with her, but there were too many beings and emotions swirling around and she couldn't focus enough to help them understand. When they left the room with the transparent ceiling, similar to the one on Windmere, she saw it. The monster. That was the source of her tummy ache. A small sound pushed its way past her lips, drawing Aiden's attention.

Aiden set her feet on the floor and squatted down so he was eye level with the child that had been agitated all morning. "What is it, Sweetheart?"

She pointed at Zondinal, the Vancurelian who was recently declared the High Leader of their race, standing some distance away and speaking with a Council member. Skyler spoke for the first time, and the words chilled Aiden's blood.

“Monster has the sickness.”

Aiden nodded, scooped her up and held her with one arm, placing the other around Kiersten, as he led them away from all the beings and their thoughts, and the one with the sickness.

The other half of the Prophecy had found her voice.

PART I

CHAPTER 1

2769 A.D./P.E.D.

Second Earth

The children arose at the same time as those of the Order. There were chores to be completed, such as gathering greens and roots from the garden, collecting eggs from the birdhouse, and compiling whatever needed to be laundered that day. At the second tolling of the bell, all met in the Prayer Room. There were a few wooden benches for those whose bodies no longer allowed them to be seated on the floor. Two hours were spent here in meditation and prayer. It was not uncommon for mala bracelets and necklaces to be used as mantras were repeated, scriptures memorized, or hymns sung quietly. The last few minutes were reserved for the High Holy One to address those present, as some had duties elsewhere, an interpretation of an entry from a sacred text in which they would contemplate throughout the day, then discuss at the evening prayer session.

The colors denoted their vows, and thus their position in the hierarchy of the Order. The High Holy One wore white robes, and was considered an enlightened being, one that communed constantly with Source. Those who served the Holy One wore red, next came orange, then yellow. Some Anadas stayed at a level for years, others not as

long. It was the decision of the High Holy One when an Anada was to receive the invitation to the next level. They served the villagers, those in yellow trading for what could not be made or grown inside the walls of the Sanctuary. Blessings and raw food, natural body cleansers, fermented grains and fruit, and wic-and-wax were what the Anadas had to offer. The trade depended on the individual's needs, whether a grasping at salvation from Source or a meal that was not contrived from a machine. The Order also received information during their time spent in the village that they brought back and shared with the others.

Besides the Anadas, there were several children living at the Monastery. They were clothed in brown robes. All had shorn heads, like the Anadas, regardless of the sex of the child. They were educated in all the traditional curriculums, as well as the scriptures. The one of the Order that first touches a child is the one charged with that child's growth. Moral teachings were often taught on a one to one basis, while academic and religious content were delivered in the Learning Room adjacent to the Prayer Room. All the children had duties, and it was through these that their character was developed.

Oftentimes, one raised in the Monastery becomes unfit for life outside. The technology, the chaos, the myriad sights, smells, and sounds of the village beyond the walls of the Sanctuary were more than they were accustomed to. Those that left the confines of the Monastery, rarely returned, either because they had lost their way spiritually, or had been swallowed whole by the universe.

Gage St. Veritas had been at the Monastery for all of his ten years. He found the learning of curriculum fascinating, and knew his ability to complete calculations, to read text with comprehension, and to communicate his ideas orally and in text, were a source

of silent joy for Anada Bosley. Though Bosley didn't outwardly express his pride, Gage knew he was at the top of his studies. Bosley said it was better to be grateful to Source for the gifts bestowed, than to fall into competition and try to outdo one's neighbors.

Anada Bosley had answered the bell that stormy night ten years earlier. He enjoyed being with the children too much to work his way through the vows to achieve the High Holy One's status, or at least engage in the desire to climb the ranks within the Order. The High Holy One realized the gift Bosley had with the children, and was satisfied to leave the Anada in the orphanage, administering to those who were placed in Anada's care.

Because Bosley knew each of the children well, and especially Gage, he was aware of each one's natural talent. What he saw in Gage, he had only read about. The boy was intelligent, inquisitive, often studying on his own once his chores and other curriculum were completed. The boy had a way with plants, could be found talking with them, knowing when they needed water or fertilizer from the birdhouse or casp corral, and they bloomed for him in a matter of moments rather than days. When one of the Order from another Monastery arrived to visit the High Holy One, he and his companions increased the number for the morning meal by twenty. When Gage returned from the birdhouse, there were twice as many eggs as what were usually given. After a soaking rain the previous evening, Gage was the only one to complete his outside work and return to the Prayer Room devoid of mud.

It was due to Gage's insatiable desire for knowledge, and Bosley's love for the boy, that he allowed Gage to accompany the other Anadas who were to travel to the

village for trading. Since Gage had never been to the village, and rarely outside the Monastery walls, it was sure to be an experience.

Two casps, beasts as tall as a man's head, with four legs and a wide, muscular body, were set before the wheeled conveyance. Harnesses were used to attach the wooden wagon to the animals. Barrels of ale, fresh vegetables, extra eggs, crates of wic-and-wax, containers of cleansers, and prayer necklaces were loaded. Two Anadas and Gage set off early in the morning, and were due to return at nightfall.

The scenery slowly shifted from the forest that surrounded the Sanctuary, to savanna. The breeze gently pushed the grasses over and Gage stared at the effect. He tried to look everywhere at once, the sky, the road ahead and behind him, the hills in the distance, the changing flora. His excitement grew as they encountered more beings on the roadway as they neared the village. Gage's mind had just begun to feel comfortable with the nature that surrounded him, when he looked up to see a large starship approach the far side of the village. He was staring, open-mouthed, when they topped the final rise of a hill before descending to the village. It was here that Gage stopped.

The village where the Anadas would partake in the trading was comprised of a few dirt roadways, an equal number intersecting and parallel to each other. Buildings made mostly from the wood of trees found in the higher elevations of the Monastery's grounds were set next to each other, seemingly carefully planned. Various modes of transportation were scattered in the roadways, some moving, some stationary in front of a building. Between the simple structures and the Dolan River were the dwellings of those who called the village home. Most had animal pens, transportation, and at least one other

smaller building that stood close to the abodes. Gage passed his glance over the village, then stared at what stood beyond it.

Structures of every size and shape, some taller, some spread wide, some made of stone, others of glass, sprawled in a chaotic pattern. Lights flashed, and could be seen at this distance, even in the daylight. Numerous transpo filled the air above the metropolis. The waves of noise from everything and everyone in the city reached Gage's ears, and he cringed.

Anada Dal placed a reassuring hand on Gage's shoulder. "The texts can't keep up with the growth of Malhinda, the capitol city of Second Earth. We're unsure of all that occurs in such a place. Since few seek refuge behind our walls, we can assume that there are few interested in spiritual pursuits. Come, Gage, we won't be going to Malhinda today." Anada Dal began walking, leading the casps and loaded wagon down the hill to the village.

Gage stood another moment, staring with awe at all he had not seen in his sheltered life behind the walls of the Sanctuary. There were only two computers in the Monastery, one was used to connect the High Holy One to other sanctuaries on Second Earth, and the other was used mostly by Bosley for curriculum. The texts and information they learned from were as current as one could get without access to various databases. Gage felt drawn to the city. Maybe because it was unknown, forbidden, full of those so unlike the Anadas he was surrounded by at the Monastery. He, and all the orphans raised with the Anadas, were happy with their lives, as they knew nothing else. Most aspired to become an Anada. Bosley had never discussed the issue with Gage. *He must have known I'd be drawn to this*, Gage thought. Even though he was as disciplined with his scriptures

as with his curriculum, his heart told him that would not be his path. But what else was there? In a city like Malhinda, Gage was sure he could find what called to him. He trotted down the hill to catch up with the Anadas.

CHAPTER 2

The casps were led to the front of one of the buildings towards the far end of town. A robust shopkeeper, and his equally rotund wife, met the Anadas on the road where the steps from their shop were designed to encourage the passerby to wander in and trade. The wife went directly to the wagon and began to poke around at what the Anadas had brought. The shopkeeper smiled at the Anadas and offered them entrance to his store where there was refreshment.

Anada Dal handed the casps' leads to Gage, and the Anadas entered the store. The wife, seemingly satisfied with the cargo, walked up the steps and into the store, leaving Gage alone on the roadway with the casps. He gently stroked the face of one and the neck of the other as his gaze traced the building front, and those of the structures they had passed. Turning to look behind him, he began to read the signs above the doors of the shops, when four children caught his attention.

They were dressed in trousers that didn't reach their shoes, loose shirts, and a type of cloth hat on their heads. Calling to each other as they darted between two buildings, Gage watched until they disappeared. He stepped back in an attempt to follow their movements, but the leads were not long enough, and he was told to stay with the casps.

Though all of the Anadas, and children, in the Monastery were human, their studies discussed other beings that inhabited the universe. Remembering the picture in one of his texts, Gage was able to identify the pair of beings walking in front of the line

of buildings on the other side of the roadway as Vancurelians. Eyes openly staring, Gage memorized their dress of long grey coats over gray, tough skin. Hairless and earless heads with black eyes, the Vancurelians observed each being they passed, noticing and then dismissing the being's importance. They paused at the narrowed path between the buildings where the children had disappeared. After a moment, they too, turned the corner and were lost to Gage's sight.

Under his breath, Gage whispered words that he wanted to hear what was occurring out of his line of vision, what it was that seemed to attract the attention of the children and the Vancurelians. As soon as the words left his lips, the wind swirled in the roadway, bringing the voices from between the buildings to his ears. It was a cacophony of sound. Voices, accents, the native language of the Vancurelians. Gage was stunned, and placed both hands over his ears. The noise stopped. He removed his hands, and again the voices came to him. Staring at the space in front of him, he saw the air vibrate. Clamping his hands again over his ears, he was met with silence. In excited awe, he whispered for the voices to be softer, clearer, then slowly removed his hands. The vibrating air seems to calm itself, and this time Gage could discern the children's voices, the Vancurelians', laughter, and a scraping sound.

The opening of the door of the shop where the Anadas had gone with the store owners startled Gage. With his broken concentration, the sound waves dissipated, and his ears were filled with the ramblings of the shopkeeper and his wife.

“Gage, lead the casps to the side of the store. We'll need your assistance to unload and then load the trade,” Anada Dal instructed.

Gage nodded and followed the directions. He stopped the wagon at the side door. There were wide steps leading to a storage room that he could see was stacked with crates and barrels. Tying the leads securely to the post in front of the casps, he made his way to the rear of the wagon. From this position, he had a clear view of the action that attracted the beings between the buildings. It appeared that an old man was playing a type of game with inverted cups on the top of a crate. He would move the cups this way and that, then switch them around, finally lifting one, which caused cheers or groans from the small crowd. Everything clamored in his brain for attention. The game, the beings, the sound that danced on the wind. So consumed in his own thoughts, Anada Dal had to call his name three times before he was able to bring his attention to the task at hand.

The exchange of cargo commenced, and between the shop owner, one of their employees, both Anadas, and Gage, with the wife directing, it still took a few hours. Because of his smaller, thinner stature, Gage was relegated to shifting the cargo to the rear of the wagon to be unloaded. Once the wagon was empty, everyone took a break. The wife provided a simple meal and cups of water, as that would be all the Anadas would accept.

Gage found himself unusually hungry. In the few minutes he was left alone, he thought to attempt what had occurred earlier. Instead of asking the wind to bring the sounds from down the road, he mouthed words to bring the smells from the sweet shop they had passed when they entered the village. Being careful with the urgency and strength with which he wanted to smell the scent of baking treats, it wafted to him. He closed his eyes briefly in his excitement, considering his ability to call to the wind to bring him what he wanted.

Just then, the wife stepped out of the storeroom. “That’s odd. The wind rarely blows from the north. And a good thing, too, or I would be at Taylor’s Sweets more often than I am already.”

Gage snapped open his eyes at her voice. He hadn’t thought that what he was doing would be noticed by others. It was something to remember.

Anada Dal stepped outside next to the wife. “Gage, are you ready to begin loading the wagon?”

Eager to do what was asked of him, he hopped off the back of the convenience and made his way up the steps to the storeroom.

“When we’re through with the cargo, you can visit Taylor’s at the end of this row of buildings. He’s usually amenable to a trade. Be sure to take something with you from the wagon that you think he will consider valuable. Otherwise, no trade.”

Gage smiled and nodded, then concentrated on carrying the smaller crates and barrels to the wagon, where Anada Jai rearranged them for transport back to the Monastery. As soon as the last crate was loaded, Gage approached Anada Dal.

“Benevolent One, may I take a kilogram of sugar to trade with Master Taylor?” Gage asked, hands held still at his sides.

“Yes. Be cautious. With the coming of darkness, beings from Malhinda begin to walk the village, and not all are kind. Anada Jai and I will be here, settling the contract. Return soon, as we must begin the journey to the Sanctuary.” Anada Dal gently touched Gage’s head in a blessing.

Gage brought his hands, palms pressed together, in front of his heart, and bowed his head. Turning toward the wagon, he collected the sack of sugar and made his way to the main road of the village.

The darkening sky did bring beings from the city. Gage attempted to keep his eyes from staring at some of the races he had the opportunity to view in person instead of from a text. As he approached a perpendicular roadway, a shadow emerged. Gage stopped, eyes wide, at the feral beast. The hair was long, shaggy, and matted. It limped on one of its front legs, its long tail hung to the ground and was dragged through the dirt that covered the space between the buildings. Each of the three eyes showed hunger and an emptiness that caused a tightening in Gage's chest. The lips peeled back showing yellowed teeth, and a rumble emitted from the beast's throat.

Gage's initial reaction to offer the beast friendship, sympathy, changed to fear. Mumbling that the beast had nothing to be scared of with Gage, he encouraged it to turn around and travel the way it had come. As he watched, the three eyes blinked, then it lifted its head into the air, as if catching the scent of Gage. Again he mumbled, and this time made a slight gesture that the beast leave. A moment later, with tail dragging in the dirt, the beast moved back into the shadow cast by the building.

Sighing, Gage continued on his way to Taylor's Sweets. Looking in the window, his eyes grew round at the delicacies laid out for those strolling the walkway along the side of the road. He knew he couldn't return to the Monastery without treats for the rest of the children. But how much would Master Taylor be willing to trade for the single kilogram of sugar?

Pushing open the door, Gage stepped into the sweet shop, and immediately spotted Master Taylor. If he enjoyed many of his own goods, it didn't show in his body like it did on the store owner's wife. Gage moved to the case where desserts were displayed in rows and groupings. Some were big, some small, others tall, or flat and round. The colors were varied as well, as were the tiny signs displaying the number of credits that a patron would be charged.

Gage walked the length of the case, then returned to the flat, round sweets. Hefting the sack of sugar in one hand, he thought it would be a fair trade, one for each of the other children, and one for Bosley, too. His eyes shifted up to Master Taylor's and Gage smiled slightly. He was rewarded with an answering smile.

"I can tell by your dress that you are in the care of the Anadas. That means you have no credits and will wish to trade. Very well, what do you have to offer?" Master Taylor asked, his gaze steady on the boy's.

Gage, having rarely been outside the walls of the Sanctuary, never thought about what he wore. All the children were adorned in the same outfit. He glanced down at the covering of his body, then lifted the sack in his hand.

"Master Taylor, I wish to trade you this kilogram of sugar for twenty of these," Gage said, pointing at what he believed to be a fair trade.

Taylor raised a brow and shook his head. "Twenty is too many."

"Ten?"

"How many do you need?"

Gage swallowed. "Fourteen."

“Then offer for sixteen. If you ask for much more than what is essential, the being you are trading with will discern that you have little experience in commerce and you leave yourself open to be cheated. The Anadas have not raised you to be false with others. Therefore, I can tell you are asking for more than is needed, not purposely attempting to take advantage our trade, but alerting me to your naïveté.”

Gage nodded slightly. “Sixteen.”

“Alright. Now, convince me why I should trade my goods for your material, in this instance, sugar. I have plenty of my own. What is so special about yours?”

Gage thought a moment, then smiled. “It has been blessed by Anada Dal.” It wasn’t directly blessed, but Gage decided if Anada Dal blessed him, and he carried the sugar, that the sugar was blessed as well.

“Ah. Something a little unusual. Perhaps,” Taylor said and brought one hand to his chin, as if in contemplative thought. “But why would I care? What is in it for me? How will trading for this blessed sugar help me?”

Gage glanced at what he wanted inside the case, then explained, “Because, Master Taylor, the blessed sugar will create holy sweets, and draw more patrons to your store, increasing your sales.” Gage rested his gaze on Taylor’s and saw that he had offered the correct words to make the trade.

“Well done,” Taylor said with a smile.

Gage watched as the proprietor placed sixteen of the small, round sweets into their own sack. Gage set the kilogram of sugar on the counter. Taylor handed him the treats.

“A good trade. Just remember to not give away your goods too soon.”

Gage nodded and bowed slightly. “Thank you, Master Taylor. Both for the lesson, and the treats.”

He turned and left the sweet shop, heading towards the store and the wagon. As he approached the space between the two buildings where the small crowd had gathered earlier, he paused to see if the game continued. An audience stood, grouped around an old man that sat on one crate, with another crate in front of him. Gage glanced over his shoulder and noticed that the Anadas had yet to emerge from the shop. Looking back toward the group in the shadow of the buildings, Gage thought it wouldn't matter if he was a few minutes late returning to the wagon. He found his feet carrying him in the direction of the crowd.

There were approximately twenty beings standing around the elderly human. Gage saw the two Vancurelians, several humans, a Fostling, and four Tamplians. The Fostling, with his short stature, eyes set wide on an oval-shaped head, with thick whiskers constructed of skin at the edges of his mouth, made him more curious-looking than ferocious. Tamplians, which were the scariest, didn't have the height of the Vancurelians. Their shaggy hair growing away from their foreheads, being devoid of eyelids, and with two of their lower teeth protruding outside their mouths gave them the appearance of a perpetual snarl. The Vancurelians were tall, with grey, leathery skin, dressed in the uniform that identified them to be in the service of the High Leader. Their warship was probably in port in Malhinda. Gage scanned the humans and found most to be dressed similar, in plain trousers, high boots, and loose-fitting shirts made from various materials. A few wore coats, as the absence of light dipped the temperatures. Gage thought briefly about his robe and sandals and bare head, then moved closer to watch the game.

Three inverted cups rested on the crate in front of the game runner. Wisps of long gray hair stuck out in every direction from the proprietor's head. His wrinkles were too many to count, and his watery blue eyes didn't see as well as they once did. The gnarled hands and twisted fingers still moved quickly enough to fool more than half the gamblers.

Gage watched as the old man lifted the middle cup, then stared as some in the crowd cheered, while others grumbled as credits and other valuables changed hands. Again the cup was replaced, the three cups moved once by the hand of the old man, then all three cups were raised. Beneath the cup on the old man's right was a piece of rope that had been tied in knot after knot to resemble a cloth ball. All three cups were lowered, voices were raised as wagers were given, then the shuffling began. Slowly at first, then faster. Gage thought he knew which cup hid the ball, but when the old man lifted the cup on the left, the ball was not there. Eyebrows drawn slightly together, Gage mumbled, asking the ball to reveal itself. The cup in the middle became clearer, brighter almost. He smiled slightly as the cup was lifted, revealing the small rope ball.

Again there were cheers and words of disbelief as wagers were exchanged. Once more the cups were shuffled, and just before the game runner lifted the first cup, Gage asked for the rope ball to show itself to him. The cup on the right became a bit brighter, and he became excited as the old man lifted the cup to reveal the ball. On the next round, Gage voiced his choice before the cup was lifted, and grinned even wider when he was proven accurate.

By the fourth round, those nearest to Gage heard him make correct guesses and began to place their wagers when he spoke which cup contained the marker. The old man

had heard as well, and knew that his customers would wander away if one in the crowd proved to be unusually lucky.

“Boy, it seems you’ve a knack for the cups. How ‘bout the cubes?”

When Gage remained silent, not knowing what ‘cubes’ were, the game runner commented to ease the awkwardness, “Perhaps Source speaks directly to you, whispers in your ear which cup hides the marker. Cubes require a bit more skill.” As the old man spoke, there was encouragement from the crowd to bring out the next game.

This was not the only obscure corner in which illegal gambling occurred. Malhinda was full of backroom games, some in posh buildings that rented rooms, others took place on the walkways next to the roads clogged with various transpo. Those who were generally not very lucky, yet were unable to stay away from the games, came to the village. The wagers were smaller, the game runners not as skilled, and there were few law enforcement present to uphold the rules of the games.

The game runner stacked the cups and hid them in the bag at his feet, where he then extracted five cubes. As he laid them out on the crate, he explained the pictures etched on each of the six sides. Gage watched and filed away the information. Each of the symbols represented a character, such as a queen, king, entertainer, pilot, anada, musician, soldier, trader, officer, gambler, and Source. The combination of characters that appeared on the top side of the cube determined the winner, or an extra roll. Gathering the pieces with one hand, the old man cupped his other hand on top of the cubes, then spilled them onto the crate.

Gage watched and listened. The cubes, made from the branch of a tree, danced again and again across the makeshift table. He found he could stop the roll of one cube

and ask another to show a particular character. Predicting what would turn up, Gage again drew the attention of those in the crowd, and two men in particular.

“Say, Boy, seems you’re fortunate today. How would you like to take that luck and earn some real credits?”

The man that spoke was tall and thin. He had a moustache that attempted to hide his thin lips. Eyes that were set close together bore into Gage. He was cleaner than some of the other humans. His companion was a much larger man, slightly shorter than the first, but with broad shoulders, which were easy to see since his shirt bore no arm coverings. They each carried weapons at their belts.

Gage looked from one to the other, and decided that now was the time to retreat to the store. “Thank you, kind Sirs for your offer, but I must return to the wagon. The Anadas will be wondering about my absence.” He nodded to both men, then to the old man who ran the games, and turned to push his way through the crowd to calls of disappointment that their ‘charm’ was returning to the Monastery.

Quite pleased with himself for having learned two games with which to teach the other children at the Sanctuary, Gage didn’t pay attention to the shadows that followed him through the darkness. Just before he reached the main roadway, he was grabbed from behind. He instinctively struggled, opening his mouth to call out to the Anadas he could see standing next to the wagon, when a cloth was placed over his nose and mouth. Held firmly against his attacker, Gage couldn’t fall or turn. His eyes drifted closed, the bag of sweets dropped to the dirt from his limp fingers.