

THE MARKED ONE

**Book of the Veil
Volume One**

by

Bob Rhodes

**On Bargainday in the Month of Frost,
Mangan knew the Price, but not the Cost.**

From Pyronite Children's Poem

Prologue

"My father feeds his garden with such as this," a broad-shouldered youth called out as he stepped fully into the light of the dying fire. None of the other children said anything, either too shocked or too embarrassed to object.

The storyteller sat slowly upright on the wobbly log that served as a makeshift stool and gazed over the fire's waning flames at the young audience before him. He held up his oddly marked hands, partly in way of apology, partly as an appeal to the doubters in the crowd. He did, however, sympathize with his young audience. The concept of planets as gods was a difficult one.

"Was Annaber a world like ours?" a young girl asked.

The storyteller nodded, grateful for the question. "Yes, but more beautiful. She possessed sparkling blue oceans, lush forests and endless fields of flowers in every imaginable color. But the same could not be said for her companion, Mangan. He was dismally plain, consisting of nothing more than mountains of dull red rock." Doubtful expressions remained on the children's faces.

"Now, Mangan was the restless sort," the storyteller said, dropping his foot hard upon the damp ground. The children closest to him flinched. "He loved to travel about the cold heavens, all the while searching for jewels and gems. He justified these endless treks by telling Annaber the gems were for her. But he kept most for himself, decorating his dull red mountains with sapphires, emeralds, rubies, and all manner of colored stones."

Before continuing, the storyteller paused, sizing up his audience, making eye contact with some and smiling at others who needed encouragement. "Annaber truly cared for Mangan, and although she liked the pretty stones well enough, she was bored with their endless journey. And so, one day after a particularly long and cold passage across sunless skies, Annaber and Mangan found themselves in a distant part of the universe that was occupied by two suns."

"Were the suns also gods?" a pimply-faced youth asked, his eyes and tone suspicious.

"Why, yes," the storyteller said, surprised that one so young had discerned the direction of the story. "Well, in truth, only one of the suns was a god. His name was Pyre - and a powerful god he was, too." The storyteller spoke the Sun God's name in a deep, ominous voice, causing the children to look at one another before inching nearer to the fire. Even the older boys who were lurking at the edge of the firelight and feigning disinterest moved closer.

"Annaber blossomed as never before in the suns' warmth and light. She shed her thick coat of moss and fern and used it to create lush forests and meadows. She then produced creatures of every description, some for the air, and others for the sea. But her

favorite creatures were those she named after her mate, Mangan. These she called Man and the goddess gave them dominion over all her lands."

The storyteller's audience sat in rapt attention. They were his now.

"Mangan cared nothing for forests or creatures or even for his offspring. His nature was like that of the cold, red rock of which he was formed. His only passion was for gems and jewels. So it is not surprising that Mangan soon tired of circling the same sun year after year. He left Annaber in search of more treasure. During his absence, however, it did not take long for the Sun God, Pyre, to appreciate Annaber's beauty. He moved closer to Annaber and, in his warmth and light, the goddess bloomed like never before. And when Mangan did not return..." The storyteller let the sentence hang, prompting the desired question.

"Did Annaber follow Mangan?"

The storyteller shook his head. "No. After a time, she became lonely and surrendered to the Sun God's advances. Eventually she and Pyre became lovers."

The children issued a collective gasp upon hearing the forbidden.

"She broke her *marriage* oath?" one of the children asked in disbelief.

"Perhaps, or perhaps Mangan broke his," he said. "It is hard to say, for remember, these are gods and their ways are not for us to judge."

The children's faces appeared troubled. The idea that oath breaking could not be wrong disturbed them. This was good. In this village, at least, the old beliefs held strong - even if little else of their history remained.

The bard leaned forward once more, peering over the fire at his listeners. "And sometime afterward, Annaber bore Pyre's children, but the creatures were begot from a union not meant to be. Pyre's offspring were fierce, dragon-like creatures. Their skin was black as night. They possessed eyes the color of fire and they preyed viciously upon man."

"What did Annaber do?"

"Appalled by the carnage, Annaber raised a giant mountain range to separate and protect her and Mangan's children from the savage creatures."

The storyteller paused, expecting another question, but the children were quiet. "Everything was fine for a time - until Mangan returned."

"What did he do?" a young boy asked. A half-dozen heads nodded urgently, echoing the question.

"Why, he and the Sun God fought. The Sun God's fire pitted against Mangan's cold, impervious stone. A terrible battle raged for eons with neither god gaining enough advantage to destroy the other. Pyre found his fires dimmed and Mangan's dull red rock was rendered porous and brittle by the Sun God's fierce attacks. Finally, a battle-weary Pyre slipped away."

"Good," one of the older boys said, shaking his fist before him. "Annaber was Mangan's mate. She should not have consorted with Pyre."

The storyteller nodded. "This was certainly Mangan's belief. Annaber pleaded with him to allow Pyre to return. She now

needed Sun God's warmth and light in order for her creatures to survive, but Mangan refused to listen. Furious at her infidelity, he left Annaber once more. Deprived of Pyre's energy, Annaber slowly became a world of snow and ice."

The storyteller stared silently at his audience for a time. Sadness marred every face. "In time, Mangan became lonely and grew to accept his responsibility for Annaber's indiscretion. When he returned, however, he found his mate near death, buried beneath a mile-thick blanket of snow and ice. Unable to rouse her, Mangan sought out Pyre and begged the Sun God's forgiveness. He pleaded with Pyre to return his warmth to Annaber. Pyre agreed to do so provided Mangan would locate and return the children Pyre had sired with Annaber. Mangan agreed and raced back to his mate. He searched in vain for the dark children of the sun."

"Unfortunately, in a desperate attempt to keep warm, the Sun God's children had bored deep beneath Annaber's surface and could not be found. Mangan reluctantly returned to Pyre, informed the Sun God, and begged him to punish Annaber no further. Pyre relented. He agreed to restore his radiance to the Goddess provided Mangan would grant him a tribute of precious gems. Without hesitation, Mangan began stripping away the millions of jewels decorating his dull red mountains, but Pyre stopped him. Pyre declared the tribute insufficient and demanded Mangan collect even more treasure from the heavens."

"Distraught at the unexpected turn of events, but seeing no other way, Mangan set out upon his quest. He scoured a hundred galaxies and collected all of the gems within them - the most precious of which was a trio of very special gemstones."

"What did they look like?" a boy asked. "Were they rubies, emeralds?"

"Alas," the bard sighed, "no one knows for sure exactly what the jewels looked like, save that they were unlike anything ever seen before, and were beautiful beyond belief. Mangan named them Starstones for it is said that they sparkled and glowed like distant suns even on the darkest of nights."

"Instead of delivering the vast treasure of precious gems he had collected to the Sun God, Mangan conspired with a tribe of men to conceal the precious jewels so that he might present them to Annaber as gifts. But Pyre learned of Mangan's deception and named him an Oath Breaker." A collective gasp rose from the children, but the storyteller did not pause. "Mangan implored the Sun God to reconsider, but Pyre refused."

"The Stone God returned to recover the Starstones, but could not find them or the men who had agreed to hold them in secret. Helpless and disheartened, Mangan tried once more to wake his mate. At first, he thought her dead and he wept. His hot tears formed steaming rivers and seas upon her frozen surface. After a time, Mangan observed a bit of Annaber's warm, fog-laced breath rising from the earth into the frigid air. Unable to revive her, he ripped apart his own body and wove a cloak of protective mountains that he draped gently about Annaber to keep her warm. The massive collection of jewels he had gathered during countless centuries of wandering rained down upon her surface."

"Did Mangan die?"

The storyteller did not answer for a moment, instead glancing up at the sky overhead. "Mangan set himself in a close orbit around Annaber so that he could be near her."

The children, almost in unison, followed the storyteller's gaze to the russet moon overhead. They looked first at the moon and then at the storyteller, their faces a mixture of confusion and disbelief.

"And then what happened?" a soft voice asked, the speaker wiping angrily at the tears upon her tiny face. Hers were not the only tears. Most of the children now wept openly.

"Without the protective warmth of his dense mountains, Mangan perished and became Annaber's only moon."

"And Annaber - she died, too?"

The storyteller dropped his head slightly. "It is said she still lives, sheltered beneath a ring of dull red mountains. It is also rumored that, at the top of a mountain ring, men thrive in a city built entirely of Mangan's jewels."

"Where is this city?" one of the older boys demanded in a confrontational tone.

"Why, there," the storyteller pointed into the night, "just beyond that mountain range." Some looked about at the distant shadow peaks illuminated by the moon overhead.

"There is nothing beyond those mountains but more ice," the boy shot back. "Everyone knows that."

"Do they?" the storyteller asked.

"Like I said," the youth who had interrupted earlier said, "this is crap."

"Of course," the storyteller said, spreading his arms before him in a gesture of peace. "It is only a story; not something to pay heed to at all. But what I've told you tonight is only part of Annaber's story. You can return tomorrow night and I will tell you more - if you wish."

Thunder rumbled across the narrow valley as lightning crisscrossed the sky. Large drops of warm rain began to fall. At first, only a few random drops fell, then they came faster, harder. The fire hissed at the pelting rain. Acrid steam rose from its embers as the children, one by one, began racing for their homes. The storyteller pulled his russet cloak more tightly about him and watched his audience abandon him. It rarely rained here, and never at this time of year.

The storyteller looked up and scanned the heavens, ignoring the drops of rain. He was startled by the sound of an unexpected voice. He dropped his gaze from the sky. It was the youngest of his audience, a girl of no more than six.

"I did not like your story," she said. Her face and hair were slick from the rain. "I did not like it at all." She then turned and ran toward the dim beacon of village lights as thunder rumbled overhead.

"But the story is not yet over, child," the storyteller whispered after her.

**He Shall Reveal Those
Marked by the Light
Beware the Dark Ones
And Blood in the Night**

1st Stanza
Eighteenth Key
Andesine Translation

Chapter 1

Tearsday, 8th Day in the Second Month of Ice

"You're going to be late," Faya called up from the bottom of the stairs.

Pella frowned at the news, but succeeded in threading the thick horsehair rope through the last hole in the heavy bed frame. He tied the rope off with a large knot before using a paring knife to sever the extra length. He then sealed the end of the rope with a dozen or so drops of wax from a burning candle before finishing the end with a length of flaxen thread.

"That should hold," he said to himself, pleased with the workmanship.

"Pella!" Trona, the master of the Dancing Table Inn, called in his booming voice.

Pella could hear Faya telling the tavern master she'd already warned him, but Trona must have known that. Scooping up the mattress, he tossed it onto the bed and gave the narrow bunk a quick test. Satisfied, he picked up the half-dozen or so metal slats he had removed from the frame, blew out the candle, shoved it and the knife into his pocket, and strode hurriedly from the room. He had told Trona the flat staves would not work.

"Pella!" This time it was Faya once more urging him to hurry.

"I'm coming, I'm coming," he called down as he hit the first stair. The aroma of grilled ham, freshly baked bread and hot spiced wine tormented his growling stomach. Because Trona had been in such a hurry to get the bunk fixed, Pella had missed his breakfast.

"The bell just tolled six," Trona said, as Pella reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I know, I know," Pella said as he carefully stood the staves on end in an out-of-the-way corner. He reached into his pocket, retrieved the candle and knife, and handed them to Trona.

"Well, did you get it fixed?" Trona asked, wiping his hands amid the folds of the stained apron that encircled his considerable waist.

"Good as new," Pella replied, snagging a muffin from a tray as Faya walked by. She paused, glared at him briefly before rearranging the muffins on the tray so they would appear as if none

were missing. Wiping a strand of sandy-gray hair from one eye, she put on a practiced smile and glided into the crowded inn's great room.

"I should have known better," Trona said, giving the metal an accusatory glare.

Pella considered reminding Trona of his earlier advice, but thought better of it.

Faya shouldered her way between them as she returned to the kitchen. "Of course," Trona said in a voice pitched so Faya would overhear, "I'd have really been in trouble if old Gabbo had managed to convince Faya to join him upstairs." Trona presented Pella with a familiar gapped-tooth grin, clearly pleased with himself. "They'd both have ended up on the floor."

Faya stuck her tongue out at Trona and pitched a dirty table towel at his face. The tavern master caught it easily and swatted his helper's backside as she moved once more into the great room with yet another breakfast tray.

Pausing, Faya looked back over her shoulder and said, "You should be ashamed of yourself, Master Trona." Trona merely grinned. On her next pass, Faya said, "You know, it wouldn't hurt you two to do some work around here," she said, retrieving her towel from Trona.

Trona barked a short laugh, "Gettin' you to take care of my customers is work enough for me."

Faya scowled, leaned closer to Pella and said, "He didn't complain so much when I was younger and the men would come all the way up here from the docks to see me and buy his cheap ale. No, didn't have no complaints then. But just let ol' Faya get a few years on her and his manners are all forgotten."

"Hmmp," Trona snorted. "My ale's not cheap."

Faya smiled. "True enough, considerin' it's half water."

"Bah! Back to work with you," Trona said, clearly the loser in the exchange. "Pella, I want you to return that worthless stack of metal to Master Liam and get my money back. And don't talk to young Tom, neither, you hear? He'll just talk you into some stupid scheme of his."

"Yes, sir," Pella said, thinking that he was not the one who had succumbed to young Tom's foolish idea in the first place. He had the feeling that in another couple of days Trona would convince himself that it had been Pella's idea all along.

Pella freed his faded brown long-coat from the wall hook and struggled into it, not bothering to fasten the bottom three buttons. It was tighter in the shoulders than he liked, but it would have to do for at least another year. He'd grown taller over the past two years; the coat now barely reached below his knees. He would have liked it better had it touched the ground as it did when he was younger. To compensate, he wore his wool trousers long, their bottoms permanently stained and frayed. Faya scolded him for it and offered to hem them, but Pella refused.

"Get movin', Shortleg," Trona said, clapping Pella on the shoulder affectionately.

Pella nodded, shouldered his pack, and scooped up the staves with one arm while successfully managing to capture a second apple muffin from Faya's tray even as she attempted to dodge his reach.

"Stop that," she scolded.

"And don't let young Tom talk you into anything," Trona boomed after him as Pella stepped into Annaber's dim morning light.

"I'll try to remember," Pella called back over his shoulder. He walked down the narrow stone alley bordering the tavern, licking the sticky remains of the muffin from his fingers. Sounds of the awakening city reached him even before he stepped into the open street. Next door a shopkeeper was raising his shutters. Two horse-drawn carts filled with fodder trundled past on the icy cobblestone street.

Across the way, a crowd was gathered at Annaber's fountain which occupied the center of a nexus of five streets spilling onto a large quadrangle. The fountain, a mixture of marble and variegated jade, was almost twice as tall as a man. The carved statue rising from the catch basin depicted the Goddess in human form - a beautiful pale green woman emerging from a pillar of ice. Some said the fountain was the oldest object in Sunhaven, or at least the Andesine quarter of the city. Frankly, Pella was amazed the jade had not shattered and turned to dust years ago, yet another victim of Annaber's brutal winters. Even though Sunhaven experienced milder snow seasons than the rest of the kingdom, ice still covered the ground much of the year, though he did not recall ever seeing snow or ice near the fountain.

No one paid any attention to him as he edged near the small crowd. Everyone seemed focused on the pale-skinned babes splashing in the fountain's warm shallow water.

A group of mothers stood nearby awaiting an opportunity to bathe their children in the warm artesian water that rose naturally from Annaber's depths. Each hoped the Goddess would send a message in the form of their child's first words. Pella pulled the hood of his coat forward to conceal his coal-black hair and edged closer, bowing his head in brief silent prayer to the Goddess.

"Can you say something? Are you ready to talk to me?" a young mother said, tickling her child's milk-white belly. "Do you hear the Goddess? What does she say to you?" The baby boy giggled and swatted clumsily at its mother's hands. "What does Annaber say?" The child's cloudy breath joined the light fog rising from the fountain waters.

"Hungry," the child said softly. "Hungry," the child repeated, only this time more loudly. The small crowd emitted a rousing cheer.

"By Mangan's Frozen Balls, did you hear that?" a tall, gangly merchant said while slapping a man on the back who, Pella assumed, was the child's father.

"The Goddess is talking to your boy. It's gonna be another good growing season. The Goddess is going to feed this hungry boy of yours."

The merchant continued to laugh while the child's father looked on with uncertainty. "I think it's time to go," he said to his wife. "Let someone else have their turn." The woman nodded, pulled her son from of the fountain and began toweling the toddler dry.

Another child was placed in the fountain's crescent pool. Unsteady on its feet, its mother helped the child keep its balance.

"Hold him against the rock," someone urged. The mother complied, placing the baby against the carved white marble that formed the back of the fountain.

"Talk to me, Jer," the mother said in an encouraging tone. The child wriggled and tried to move away from the stone's cold surface. "Come on, what does the Goddess say to you?"

The child stopped squirming and stared fixedly at his mother. Pella knew the word the child would speak before it was uttered. It was the one that haunted his dreams.

"Hungry," he and the child said in unison.

This time the crowd remained silent.

"I've never heard of such a thing," someone said.

"Your baby has talked before." It was the spindly merchant who spoke. No one else said a word as he shoved his way through the milling spectators toward the woman. She shook her head frantically, but otherwise did not speak.

"No two babes have ever repeated the same word. You planned this, didn't you?" the merchant accused, looking around the crowd seeking support. A few murmured their agreement.

"No!" she cried. Tears slid down her cheeks. Pella scanned the crowd to see if someone would come to the woman's rescue.

"Leave the poor thing be," the old crone said, wagging a scolding finger at the young merchant and stepping between him and the crying mother. "You've no right to accuse her so." To the mother she said, "You should consult with the Andesines, dear," the last spoken in a comforting voice.

"You might ask the Weavers," someone else suggested in a helpful voice. "I bet they'd know what all this means."

Fascinated, Pella tried to balance the increasingly heavy and awkward load of metal slats. He was anxious to see how events would unfold. One of the staves slipped from his grasp and crashed onto the cobblestones. For a moment, all eyes turned toward him, but thankfully there was no sign of recognition. At first he thought he might get away without being recognized, but his luck did not hold.

"You, there!"

Pella recognized the disdainful voice of the merchant who had spoken earlier. No doubt he'd found another quarry. Pella felt a cold lump settle into his stomach.

"Look, it's that cripple boy!" someone else cried out.

"What are you trying to do, spoil things for these people?" the merchant demanded.

Pella looked up and shook his head in response to the question.

"The Goddess speaks here today," the merchant said in an imperious voice. "This is a holy place, certainly no place for the likes of you. Get out of here." The last rebuke was delivered with all the frustrated arrogance of a second merchant who would never rise from the Andesine Quarter to the elegant shops along Regent Street.

"Go on," the man said, this time thumping Pella firmly in the chest. "Get out of here."

Pella smothered his boiling anger, picked up the errant staff, balanced his load and turned about. Squaring his shoulders, he walked deliberately up the street, refusing to be harried along any faster by the abusive taunts.

Had the street been crowded, no one would have noticed his uneven gait. Or, if he lived anywhere but Sunhaven, doubtless few would have cared. But this was Sunhaven, a city obsessed with perfection, and he was not perfect. A clump of ice struck him in the

back. Pella resisted the urge to turn and fight. There were too many of them and, as he'd learned over the years, it was a fight he could never win.



Abbot Mylon Euclase sat atop the upper-most floor of the Crystal Cathedral's tallest spire. He stared unseeing at the city below while Pyre completed the last of its journey across the dark afternoon sky, little more than a pale amber glow behind the Veil. The cathedral's vantage point afforded an unobstructed view of the city and its surrounding ring of mountains. From where he sat, the Abbot could see everything: Crystal Bay, the Falls, Blood Lake, and the channels that shunted the red-stained, mountain snowmelt away from the clear waters of Crystal Bay and into the Well of Tears. On clear winter days when the Veil lay high in the sky, he could see all the way across the bay. Once, he'd even seen the Lord God Pyre's lightning strikes atop Sungate Pass.

It was indeed a majestic view. There was no need for windows. The oversized crystal blocks from which the eight-story cathedral was constructed were nearly as transparent as glass. The building was a marvel of architectural engineering. Everyone said nothing could ever rival its beauty and grandeur. This was the finest tribute that would ever be built to the Lord God Pyre. That's what people said and for the last ten years, he had labored to prove them wrong.

A torch flared in the distance. The light came from the direction of the Andesine Quarter of the city. No doubt a brothel or tavern owner was setting out brands to illuminate the entrance of his wretched establishment. Soon, he thought. Soon such sights would be no more.

The Abbot swiveled his chair to face the opposite direction toward the dim outline of the immense octagonal Pyramid that had consumed much of the last decade of his life. It was almost finished. Once complete, his temple would surpass all other tributes built in honor of the Lord God Pyre - even the five-hundred-year-old Crystal Cathedral. Soon, he would take his place in history, and the temple would be just the least of his accomplishments. He would succeed. He, Abbot Mylon Euclase, would return the light of the One True God, Pyre, to this world.

The Abbot struggled to control his rising anger. Like many within the city, the Abbot, too, of late, had difficulty mastering his emotions. Some thought a strange malaise had descended upon the city. More likely, the Abbot thought, it was those damned Andesines and their blasphemous faith in the long-dead goddess that plagued him. He reached instinctively for the thorn staff, removed it from the holder affixed to the side of the Sun Throne, and held it upright before him. He stared at the luminescent Sunstone atop the staff. Its beauty never failed to calm him. A pair of the staff's thorns pierced his hand. The porous wood wicked away the blood and soon the stone began to glow brightly. He hardly noticed the pain.

The Abbot rotated the staff and gazed at the fist-sized jewel's flawless facets. As it turned, the Sunstone flashed every color imaginable. Brilliant blues, greens, reds, oranges and gold. No color repeated itself. He sighed, the gem's perfection reminding him

of his duty. Parting Day approached and he still had not been able to obtain all the emerald required to complete two of the immense stone murals on the southern faces of the Pyramid. His new temple must be completed! Then the Lord God Pyre would once again bless them with his light. And with that done, the Andesines must be utterly destroyed. First one, then the other.

A series of heavy raps upon the chamber's immense door interrupted the Abbot's musings. Over three times the height of a man, the door required a great deal of effort to open and close. The acolyte in attendance, a small lad, labored to push it partway open so that he might slide through. He entered, and hastily prostrated himself before the Abbot, his orange robes spilling out over the polished floor.

"Yes, what is it?" the Abbot demanded, not bothering to keep the irritation from his voice. The attendant did not rise or look up, but kept his jewel-studded forehead pressed against the clear stone floor.

"Your Eminence, Assessor Rodin to see you."

Abbot Euclase felt his pleasant mood dissipate, partly because of the interruption, but mostly at the thought of Rodin. *By the One True God, how he hated the priest.* No doubt his spymaster and chief of assassins would attempt to goad him as usual. Rodin performed his duties well. That was what mattered. *Besides, the Abbot reminded himself, one did not necessarily have to like a tool to appreciate its uses.*

"Send him in," the Abbot said in a dismissive tone.

The acolyte raised his head, nodded once, returned his forehead to the floor and crabbed backwards from the room. A tall man with close-cropped yellow hair strode into the room, stopping only a few steps away from the Sun Throne.

"Good evening, Eminence," Rodin said, bowing slightly. The Abbot frowned at the obvious slight, but chose to ignore it for the moment. "You wish to bring something to the Light, Assessor?" The priest bowed once more, this time from the waist, presenting the Abbot a full view of his thick golden hair. *How did it remain that color after all these years? It should be shot through with gray by now - or missing altogether.* In that moment he hated the man even more.

"Yes, Eminence," Rodin said in a smooth voice. "You asked to be informed immediately of Brother Marcas's newest selection."

"He has made his choice, then?" the Abbot asked, involuntarily gripping the Sunstone staff more firmly. The staff drank deeply and the Sunstone flared to life, causing Rodin to hesitate momentarily before continuing. *Good, the Abbot thought. It is good to remind him of who I am.*

"Yes," Rodin said. "He has chosen the cripple boy. The boy's name is Pella Sparpoint."

The Abbot leaned forward from the throne. "You're certain?" The Abbot noted with pleasure the briefest flicker of annoyance that flashed in Rodin's eyes. He knew, of course, that his spymaster's report would be correct. The man was thorough to the point of distraction.

"I'm certain, Eminence. Do you wish me to kill the boy?"

"No, no, no. This is too, too perfect," the Abbot replied, emitting a coarse laugh.

"If the boy is what you suspect, better to get him out of the way," Rodin said.

A faithful follower of Pyre, Rodin possessed a brilliant mind, but little imagination. This one flaw had allowed the Abbot to rise above him and assume leadership of the Pyronite Order, not that the old priest harbored such aspirations any longer. The yellow sapphire jewel in his forehead would never be replaced with one closer in color to the sun. The man had risen as high as he would go within the Order.

"I wish to make the final journey this year," Rodin said.

The Abbot frowned. *How predictable. The man had just identified the perfect opportunity to destroy the Andesines and the fool could not see it.*

"Not this year, my dear Rodin. There is much to do before we can bask in the Lord God Pyre's radiance."

Rodin looked back toward the Abbot, a pained expression on his face. "Eminence..." Rodin looked away briefly before continuing. "Eminence, my mind leaves me. Do not hold me here any longer. I beg you." The last words were barely a whisper.

The Abbot relished the moment. How that last must have cost the old priest. "Nonsense," the Abbot said. "Granted, your mind is not as sharp as it once was, but that is to be expected. No. You shall serve me this year and perhaps the next." Rodin's look of amazement at the Abbot's decision added even more pleasure to the moment.

The priest shook his head violently. "You must reconsider Your Eminence..."

"I must do no such thing," the Abbot snapped. "You have my decision."

Rodin half-ran, half-leaped to the dais and gripped the Sunstone staff. "I wish to make the final journey," he demanded, his voice hoarse. "I cannot continue like this for another year."

The Abbot was unmoved by the look of anguish in Rodin's eyes. "You will do as I say," the Abbot said, rising to his full height, but still a head shorter than the old priest. He tried to wrench the staff free of the priest's grip, but was unable to do so. A fiery pain shot through his hand as the staff's thorns bit deep.

"No," Rodin said. "I have served you long enough. I will not befoul myself and my God because of your pride. You must let me go."

Both men gripped the thorn staff with all their strength, heedless of the thorns piercing their flesh. Their blood mixed and flowed down its length, pooling upon the translucent floor.

"You serve the Lord God Pyre and you serve him through me," the Abbot said. Sunfire leapt high from the staff and danced along the ceiling of the cathedral. The Abbot wrestled for mental control over the flame, even as Rodin did the same. For several long seconds, neither said anything as the flame swayed first toward one man and then the other. Finally, the flame shot out and seared the right side of Rodin's face. The golden-haired priest screamed, releasing his grip upon the staff, both hands flying to his face.

The Abbot struggled to catch his breath before collapsing onto the throne. The smell of burned flesh and his own fear filled his nostrils. He had underestimated Rodin's strength and desperation. The mistake could have cost him his life. For several moments the only sounds filling the chamber were of ragged breaths.

"Very well," the Abbot said, "I will consider your request to cross Crystal Bay." Rodin looked up at him, the side of his face a seared mass of flesh. "But first, Brother Marcas needs to be reminded what happens when one comes too close to fire." He hoped the old priest's brain was not too addled to appreciate the teaching lesson.

"Yes, Master," Rodin replied while managing to climb to his knees and press his head to the floor beneath the Abbot's feet.

"Good," the Abbot said. "First, you will use your contacts to enhance the belief that the Goddess Annaber is awakening." A look of astonishment managed to briefly replace the pain evident on Rodin's face. "As for the cripple... What is his name? I cannot remember?"

"Sparpoint, Your Eminence. Pella Sparpoint."

"By the light, I cannot believe Marcas would attempt to use a defective against me. It just goes to show how far the Andesines have descended." The Abbot paused, considering his words carefully. "I have two things in mind. Let us show Brother Marcas the future that awaits him. And let us make sure Sparpoint runs afoul of the Crystal Guild." The Abbot smiled. "This is just too perfect. Too perfect."

"I do not ... understand," Rodin said, struggling to make his mouth work while the side of his face leaked a steady stream of blood and yellow fluid onto his orange robe.

"No, I do not expect you do. You may go," the Abbot said, feeling better than he had in months.

**Mangan Shall be its Mother
Annaber the Helpless Sire
Rouse ye Holy Defenders
And Blood upon the Briar**

Third Key
Andesine Translation

Chapter 2

Veilday, 11th Day in the Second Month of Ice

Pella fought to catch his wind and steady his labored breathing. He waited silently, crouched amid a cascade of immense Pyrite cubes littering the hillside. He listened for the sound of his pursuers, but heard nothing. For the moment, all was quiet except for the steady rush of the stream below. His troubled face, reflected dozens of times in the jumble of golden surfaces, stared back at him. His warm breath clouded the mirror-like finish of the cube nearest him. He wiped the mist away and stared absently at his sweaty reflection. It wasn't a bad face, although the coal-black hair and the beginnings of a beard made him appear older than his seventeen years.

A noise in the woods below jerked him from his contemplation. When he looked back at the mirror-like surface nearest him, his face appeared more worried, as well it should. *They were out there; he was sure of it. And this time they meant to kill.* How he knew this exactly, he was unsure; but know it he did.

Raising his head slightly, Pella peered out from his hiding place. Ghostly outlines of slender white birch trees randomly appeared and vanished in the swirling mist. He could see nothing.

He returned his attention to the discarded squares lying about him. To him, the stones appeared flawless, but no doubt they contained some slight imperfection that made them unsuitable as tribute to the Lord God Pyre. Even the largest and most valuable stones had to be perfect. The city of Sunhaven, and those who ruled her, cared nothing at all for that which nature had not perfectly formed - and this attitude extended to more than precious stone.

The sound of running footfalls and branches hastily pushed aside rose from the wood below. They must have discovered his tracks in the dusting of snow. *Damn. They were getting closer.* This group was more determined than the others. Pella suppressed a shudder not borne of the cold. He could almost feel their hatred emanating from within the milky haze. Few dared pursue him this close to Digger Town, much less to the edge of Pyre's Veil. Not that he considered the murk to actually be part of the Veil. Brother Marcas said it was lake fog, nothing more. The monk's reassurance and necessity had convinced him not fear it.

The wind shifted once more, sending a moist wind into his face and brushing aside the mist. It was almost warm. There should be several inches of snow at this time of year. Sometimes he wondered if the world were going mad. Another wave of hatred emanating from the rocky forest below washed over him. He tried to repress the resulting shiver but failed.

"Perhaps it is you who's going mad, Pella boy," he muttered to himself. The noise from the lower wood increased. There were at least three of them, judging by the noise of their reckless pursuit. Maybe more. It was hard to tell since sounds tended to echo amid the rocky ravines. In any event, he could no longer afford to remain in his present hiding place.

Climbing atop a pyrite spire that jutted from the hillside, he stepped out over the stream below and balanced momentarily before grasping an outstretched limb of a budding birch tree. He glanced at the blood-red stream and swung twice before releasing his grip. He almost made it. He landed hard, one foot planted solidly upon the gravel bank, the other knee-deep in the rushing water.

"Bloody Ice!" Pella cursed as he struggled to free his leg from the stream's grip. Something darted within the crimson water and struck hard against his leg before disappearing down stream. He wondered what it was. It couldn't have been a fish, not this far up the mountain ridge. More likely it had been a submerged limb being carried along just below the water's surface.

Icy water flooded into his boot, instantly numbing his leg. He jerked his foot free from the brook's clinging bottom. The act sent a stabbing pain into his already aching hip. He climbed up the bank and waited briefly for the pain to subside before beginning to jog along the stream's edge. An uneven carpet of wet, year-old rotting leaves muffled his footsteps. He silently thanked the Goddess for his good fortune and made a mental note to light a special prayer fire to her at the first opportunity.

A hint of movement appeared on the left and Pella fell to his haunches. At least one of his would-be attackers was very close now. He shifted to ease the throbbing in his hip. Reaching through a thin patch of snow and rotting leaves, his fingers located three egg-sized stones. Rising cautiously, he tried in vain to see further into the fog in order to catch another glimpse of his assailants. A sudden, foul-air breeze from the direction of the Miners' village pushed another cloud of mist up the hill, further obscuring his vision. No matter. Closing his eyes, he hurled each of the rocks into the murky air in rapid succession. A yelp of pain followed by a string of angry curses left him with a minor feeling of victory.

"Stinking Mank! I'll kill you."

Pella wasn't a Mank, but knew that now was a poor time to debate the point. His olive skin bore little resemblance to the deep red complexion of the Miners. Why the waters, stained red from crossing Mangan's porous stone, only affected those from Miner's village, he was unsure. Perhaps it was because so little fresh water made it into the old salt quarry. Bad enough that those who lived there had to endure the constant foul, sulfurous stench of the quarry, but to be marked so seemed equally unfair.

Even without a target in sight, Pella found and hurled two more stones. The cursing from within the mist became even more furious. Luck was with his aim, it seemed. *Holy Mother, it felt good to strike back.*

He's here!" an angry voice shouted from within the mist. "The whoreson's over here!"

Not so easy a prey as I used to be, Pella thought before feeling a sharp twinge of guilt. The Goddess would hardly condone his taking pleasure in revenge.

Rapid footfalls crashing through the forest reminded him he should make good his escape while the mist held. He began to climb the rugged path up the hillside. The concealing mist lessened as he made his ascent. His lungs ached, so he rested for a moment, crouched in a shallow crevasse, and waited for his ragged breathing to ease. He scanned the haze below for signs of his pursuers, but found none. After a moment of rest, Pella decided to make an all-out run for it.

By the time he reached the fork in the road, his right leg and hip felt as if they were afire. Brother Enar was already mounted in the wagon. Two of his classmates frowned in obvious displeasure at having been forced to wait for him to arrive.

"Let's go, Pella," Brother Enar said, as Pella leaned forward, hands upon his knees and tried to catch his breath. "We don't want to be late. Brother Marcas is conducting today's classes."

The diminutive monk, his plump cheeks red from the morning chill, smiled patiently and waited for Pella to climb aboard. As expected, the other students ignored him. He hoisted himself into the straw-covered wagon bed and took a seat at the back. He closed his eyes and relaxed as best he could while the wagon began its winding ascent to the top of the Andesine Mesa. It rocked sharply from side to side; the wooden wheels providing no cushion against the road's craggy surface. He took care not to jostle the other students. They wouldn't like that. The Andesine prohibition against violence extended to their wagon, but it wouldn't protect him on his way home.

"Let's go, Stib," Enar said, clucking encouragement to the charcoal-colored mule. Pella allowed himself a small smile when the old mule failed to hasten its pace. It seemed there were some things even monks could not control.

The road smoothed somewhat and Pella took the opportunity to remove his flooded boot. He poured its contents onto the road below. It was then that he noticed the hole. About three inches above the ankle, the coin-sized hole was perfectly round, as if it had been cut with a sharp knife. Puzzled, he stuck a finger into the hole, just to prove to himself it wasn't his imagination. It wasn't a stone tear. But what else could it have been? He recalled the movement in the stream just before something had struck his leg. He considered whether one of the sharp-toothed eels might have somehow managed to travel up the stream from the bay - but that made no sense. Perhaps Brother Marcas would know what could have caused the hole.

Setting the boot aside, Pella removed his sock and rung it dry. He tucked it into an outside pocket of his pack before removing a dry pair of stockings from his jacket pocket. He rubbed his bare foot with his hands in an effort to return warmth and circulation. His classmates stared at him, their eyes vacant, uncaring. Knowing the inside of the boot would still be wet, he put both socks on the same foot and somehow managed to force his foot back into the boot.

Stib came to an abrupt halt atop the small snow-covered mesa upon which the monastery was constructed. Pella slid off the back of the wagon and dropped to the ground. He busied himself with the straps of his pack until all of the other students had departed. He didn't like people walking behind him and avoided the situation whenever he could. Some people interpreted his desire to remain at the rear of any group as a mark of arrogance. The privilege of entering last was normally reserved for nobility and other ranking members of

Sunhaven society. In truth, he simply felt more comfortable remaining out of people's view. It was a difficult battle to win.

Pella shouldered his pack and plodded through the boot-high snow toward the monastery. Brother Enar had already reached the outer wall and was waiting for all of the students to gather. The short monk's russet cassock blended perfectly with the wall's dull red stone. The Pyronites called it Bloodstone - stone from the dead mountain god, Mangan. Their scriptures banned its use, but the Andesines had no such prohibitions and found suitable uses for the ubiquitous rock. It was everywhere on the mesa and provided brick for buildings and walls. When crushed, its powder formed the main ingredient for the dye used to color the reddish-brown robes worn by the clerics.

The students huddled about Brother Enar, stamping their feet and waiting impatiently for him to grant permission to enter the monastery. Although only a six hundred or so paces higher than the city below, the temperature here was noticeably cooler. Enar turned and faced the group, hands clasped before him and well hidden within the large, bell-shaped sleeves of his cassock. He waited until everyone, including Pella, had gathered around.

"I don't think we shall wait for the others," the monk said, smiling as the students rubbed their hands together and shifted from foot to foot in an effort to keep warm. Few of Annaber's warm air vents reached the Andesine Mesa. It was cold, even on the warmest of days, and the bitter wind sweeping across the plateau did not help matters.

"This is a house of peace," Enar said, ringing his bell once and then muffling the sound with his sleeve. "Say what you leave behind."

"Blessed is the house of peace, for violence may not enter," Pella chanted in unison with the others.

"This is a house of peace," Brother Enar continued, "What violence do you abandon here?"

"Violence of the heart, violence of the voice and mind," the group replied.

"Blessed is the house of peace. And what is the price of violence within these walls?"

"Death of the heart," said the students.

"Blessed is the house of peace," Brother Enar intoned. "Say the price."

"Stilling the voice."

"Blessed is the house of peace. What is the sanction?"

"Death of the mind."

"Blessed is the house of peace. I give you leave to enter," the monk concluded, bowing toward the students.

The sound of approaching carriages caused several members of the class to pause before stepping onto the monastery grounds. Pella knew without looking that one would be an expensive coach bearing the red and black emblem of the Crystal Guild. The other carriage would carry the colors and crest of House Vanadine, the noble house laying claim to Sunhaven.

Sunhaven's allegiance to House Vanadine was more form than reality. The thermal vents in the bowl-shaped valley below supported crops throughout half the year. The steep, easily defended cliff walls surrounding the city and adjacent valley rendered Sunhaven virtually

impenetrable. The warm temperatures and arable farm lands within the valley had made it possible for the city to withstand decades of siege. Only after the growth of the merchant guilds did the Pyronites relent and open the city. Their surrender, if properly called that, was borne of religious imperative and economic need, not military necessity. Strict limits were placed upon the number of royal soldiers garrisoned in the valley. The number was so small that Prince Vanadine rarely visited his richest holding. And, by treaty, the King could never visit at all.

The driver of the Guild coach battled to keep the spirited team under control. The horses bucked and fought against their reins as if impatient to be moving again. Their rich black coats shone, even in the dim, Veil-filtered light of early morning.

Ebon Melanos and two other sons of ranking Crystal Guild members dismounted from the coach. Ebon wore an ornate, jewel-encrusted short sword, a sign he had already been accepted into the guild and granted citizen status. Only citizens were allowed to bear arms within the borders of the city. That he wore a sword to the monastery signaled his contempt of the Andesines.

The heir-apparent of the powerful Crystal Guild made an exaggerated display of unstrapping the sword and tossing it into the cab of the coach. His companions took up flanking positions slightly ahead of Ebon as they marched toward the monastery. Pella felt a tug at the sleeve of his tunic and turned to see Brother Enar motioning him to follow. Reluctantly, Pella turned to comply. He just had time to catch a glimpse of the Regent's daughter as she was assisted from her coach by a liveried footman.

Brother Enar whispered, "Let's go, Pella. You don't want to enter after Ebon."

"It might be worth it, if he decided to take a swing at..." Pella stopped, realizing his thoughts, if repeated aloud inside the gate, would violate his peace oath. Thankfully, Enar pretended not to hear.

A sense of peace and belonging flowed over him as he stepped onto the monastery's ordered grounds. It was, in fact, the only place he felt truly safe and at home. Frowning, he forced the thought from his mind and reached into the tattered basket located just inside the monastery gate and retrieved a piece of dry kindling. He placed the small branch into the ceremonial fire adjacent to the stone walk leading to their classroom building.

"Mother, thank you for my life. May it serve you well. Accept this flame, may it alight your awakening." Pella enjoyed speaking to the Goddess. Perhaps it was foolish, but her peaceful presence always seemed stronger at the monastery.

"A nice prayer, Pella," Enar said, nodding his approval.

"Thank you, Brother Enar," Pella said. He stole a glance behind him. Ebon and his friends had just reached the monastery's entrance gate. One of the boys bore an angry bruise upon his cheek. Pella could not help staring, thus earning angry glares from the three boys. Another walked with a noticeable limp. Although he wasn't quite sure how he knew, Pella knew these were the ones who had pursued him in the wood near his home. *Why? Why would the Crystal Guild pursue him?* He had done nothing to the Crystal Guild, and least of all to Ebon Melanos.

Pella hurried into the classroom and found his usual spot on the smallest bench located at the front of the classroom. The few females who attended the Andesine classes had already found seats on the left side of the room, separated from the boys as was the custom. Bits and pieces of whispered conversations between friends made its way to him. He removed several items from his pack and set them on the bench. He did not worry about someone joining him. The adjacent seat would stay empty. It always did.

The remaining boys in the class took their places and waited for Ebon and the Regent's daughter, Beryl, to enter. Brother Marcas, the recognized head of the Andesine Order, sat before them in silent prayer. After everyone was seated, he lifted his head and smiled at the students.

"Classes end within a few more days," Brother Marcas said. "I suspect many of you will not return next year as is your right. I do hope, however, that some of you will prove me wrong."

"What would you like to discuss today?" Marcas asked. "Today is your day to choose. What will it be? Philosophy? History? The Sciences?" The cleric called on several students, asking their choices. Each demurred, requesting instead that Brother Marcas choose for them.

"What about you, Pella? What would you like to talk about today?" The big monk smiled.

Pella started at the question. "Can we talk about the Keys?" he asked, referring to the ancient stone carvings that had been discovered in the valley. His response evoked a chorus of groans from several members of the class and Marcas shook his head. Annaberian history and the prophecies to which they gave rise was an emotional subject. Only a few dozen of the original Keys were known to have survived the Destruction. The history and legends surrounding his world never ceased to fascinate him, and none more so than the prophecies that some said predicted their world's end.

"I think we'll leave that topic for another day," Brother Marcas replied after the displeased rumblings from the other members of the class subsided. "Did you have a second suggestion?"

Pella said nothing, recalling that whenever the Keys were in discussion at the Dancing Table, there was an even chance a fight would break out. Upon reflection, he had to agree with his classmates. His suggested topic was not a good one, especially on Andesine ground.

"No," Pella said.

Ebon Melanos tugged at the front of his elaborately embroidered tunic and sniffed loudly. "And for that we truly give thanks." His smooth, rich voice carried easily throughout the room, earning an appreciative laugh from the class. Pella felt his face flush as Ebon inclined his head to the class.

"Master Melanos," Brother Marcas said, addressing Ebon with the honorific of an accepted guild member. "Since you seem to think so little of Freeman Sparpoint's topic, perhaps you would care to put forth one of your own."

"I have nothing to say," Ebon said in an icy tone. "All this is a waste of time."

"Then why are you here?" Marcas asked, gesturing with both hands to indicate the classroom.

Pella became instantly alert. Something in Marcos's voice hinted at a trap being set and he was anxious to see how the exchange would play out.

"Not by my choice, I can tell you that," Ebon replied, making no effort to disguise his contempt.

"Let me guess," Brother Marcos said while scratching at the closely cropped beard covering most of his face. "Your father thinks you should attend because it is wise to know one's enemy."

"Something like that," Ebon replied, his voice wary.

"And what have you learned about us?" Again, Marcos's deep baritone voice was relaxed.

"I'm not going to let you trick me into one of your drowning pools. I know what you're trying to do," Ebon said.

"I detect no violence in your words or actions," Brother Marcos said. "We prohibit violence and discourage hatred, but not debate. Carefully considered words will not place you at risk here. So, what have you learned about us?" Marcos and the class waited for Ebon to respond to the challenge.

"You're weak," Ebon said, smiling.

"I see," said Marcos, absently raking first one thumb and then the other across the cords encircling his waist four times and securing his heavy cassock. Each of the cord loops about his waist signified the Four Vows of the Andesines. The first, the Oath of Truth, or *Treowo*, represented the duty to always speak the truth. The Andesines believed that without truth, there could be no service to the Goddess. The second vow was *Cearu*, the duty to serve Annaber and care for her creatures until her awakening. The third vow was *Hilig*, the duty to tolerate no violence on holy ground, and the fourth vow was that of *Betera*, the obligation of an Andesine to leave each person they met richer, not necessarily in terms of wealth, but somehow better for the experience.

Marcos said nothing for a long minute while tracing his thumb along the streak of white hair running from his right ear to his chin. The bolt of white looked out of place in the dark beard. After a few more moments, he turned about, removed several logs from a neat stack by the hearth and placed one in each of the classroom's four fireplaces. His lips moved in silent prayer as he walked to the far wall and tugged on the pair of ropes that controlled the shutters located just below the roof. A dim shaft of light from Annaber's Veil-covered sky fell across Ebon.

"Since we're weak," Brother Marcos said abruptly, "we can't pose much of a threat to you or the Crystal Guild then, can we?" The words sounded like the rapid strike of hammer on iron, and anything but weak.

"Your beliefs are like a slow poison," Ebon replied, undaunted by the challenge in Brother Marcos's voice. "In quantity, you're dangerous."

"How so?" Marcos asked, appearing genuinely interested.

"You prop up those who drain our society. You encourage them. They consume resources that could otherwise be used in building tribute to our Lord God, Pyre."

"I see," Marcos said, beginning to pace in front of Ebon.

Pella now knew for sure a trap awaited Ebon, but he could not yet discern its form. He wasn't sure who Ebon was referring to, maybe the Manks. Or maybe those like himself who were poor in

comparison to guild members or those descended from the wealthier merchant families.

"So," Marcas asked, "if you could make us go away, would you do so?"

Ebon hesitated before responding. "No," he said at last.

"Come, come, Master Melanos. You've just said we're weak and the kingdom would be better off without us. Are we not like the snow-moth caterpillar which strips fruit trees of their leaves? Our foresters dispose of these. Why not do the same with us?"

"The *Book of the Veil* marks the Andesines' place. I will not go against its teachings," Ebon replied, appearing uncomfortable.

"Ah, tradition. That which guides us, is that it? Can you think of nothing good about us? Nothing at all?"

Pella was surprised when Ebon's gaze moved from Brother Marcas to him. He tried not to flinch under the guildsman's cold stare.

"Yes," Ebon replied in an acid tone. "You do serve a purpose, along with the parasites that flock to you. You're a warning of what we guard against. Through you, we'll know who our enemies are when the time comes."

Pella was surprised that Brother Marcas remained unfazed by the words. He would have thought that Ebon had crossed the line and half expected a throng of russet-robed Andesines to descend upon him at any moment. It didn't happen. Pella wondered where Ebon's hatred came from and he wondered why so much of it seemed directed at him.

"And what is your basis for these conclusions?"

Ebon smiled, "Why, your words, Brother." He said the word *brother* as if it were a curse. "The Andesine translation of the First Key says:

*Marked Ones Shall Return
Dark Ones Before the Light
Ruin Finds Mangan's Own
Seeking Darkness and Night"*

Ebon continued, "And the Pyronite scripture also says Pyre's children shall bear his mark."

Again, Pella felt Ebon's eyes upon him. The hard gaze was disconcerting and it took him a moment to realize Ebon was speaking once more.

"And the *Book of the Veil*," Ebon said, "tells us the weight of Mangan's mountains crippled many of Pyre's children."

"And you think you have all of this in context?" Brother Marcas asked.

"Yes, I do. And so do the Pyronites."

"Ah," Marcas said, smiling for the first time. "I was wondering how long it would take you to invoke the teaching of our Luminist friends," referring to the more common name by which the Pyronite Order was known. "I take it from your glances at Pella that you have somehow linked him to this bit of prophecy."

"He is a Dark One," Ebon said. "And he has Mangan's mark upon him." A collective gasp rose from the class.

"Pella? One of Pyre's misbegotten?" Marcas asked, making no attempt to conceal his disbelief.

Pella heard the shout of protest before he realized it was he who had spoken. "No. That's a lie," he repeated.

Brother Marcas held up a hand to Pella, signaling him to remain silent. Pella did so. "Tell me, Master Melanos, just how did you arrive at this conclusion?"

"His hair and eyes are black," Ebon replied, appearing more sure of himself.

"So are mine. Am I a Dark One, too?"

Ebon shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly. "Not my place to say, but Sparpoint's marked. Everyone can see that. Call him what you will. He has the mark of the Unholy Union upon him."

"The fact that Pella is crippled, you mean?" Brother Marcas asked.

"I am not a bloody cripple!" Pella shouted, rising from his seat. "I can walk. I can work. I'm not crippled," he said, clenching his fists at his side. "I'm not."

"Sit down, Pella," Marcas said, "and unclench your fists. Your anger tempts violence and offends our Mother." The words were spoken softly, but it did not lessen the rebuke.

"Of course you're a cripple," Ebon said in a scornful tone. "Even your own parents refused you."

"That's not true!" Pella shouted, so shocked by the viciousness of the attack that he failed to notice the look of pain that crossed Marcas's face. "My mother's dead." Everyone's eyes were upon him, especially those of the Regent's daughter.

"So you say," Ebon said. "Your father, what about him?"

"Setting Pella's affliction aside for the moment," Marcas said, cutting off their argument and once more resuming control of the discussion, "if I understand you correctly, Master Melanos, you believe the Keys warn of the Dark Ones returning. Is that correct?"

"Yes," Ebon said.

"And we shall know them by their markings, is that correct?"

"Yes," Ebon said, smiling smugly, sensing victory at hand.

"And what should we do with those we suspect to be Pyre's children?"

Ebon said nothing for a moment, glancing down at his shoulder and flicking an offending piece of dust from the elegant red and black cape. "The oath taken prior to entering your grounds prevents me from answering that question."

"It's of no matter, anyway. Tell me, Ebon. Are you familiar with your family name?"

"Of course," Ebon said. "It's the oldest family name in Sunhaven," he said with pride.

"One of the oldest," Marcas corrected. "It dates back to before the Destruction, I believe. One of the old tongues, isn't that true?"

"Yes," Ebon replied, a hint of suspicion returning once again to his voice.

"Do you know what the name signifies?"

"It means color," Ebon replied, taking that moment to examine the nails of either hand.

"Not exactly," Marcas replied. His words caused Ebon to become fully alert. "Its literal translation is *black*. Did you know that?"

"That's not true!" Ebon shot up from his seat, his hand reaching for the short sword no longer strapped to his side.

"Oh, yes it is. You can verify what I tell you easily enough. Most of those in our order are familiar with the old language. So are the Pyronites for that matter. It is easy enough to check."

"You lie, Priest!"

"Brother," Marcas corrected, ignoring Ebon's accusation, an amused glint in his dark eyes. "Perhaps you have confused us with that *other* order."

Several students chuckled until Ebon's cold gaze silenced them.

"My point is," Marcas continued in a more serious tone, "a person possessing this limited bit of information might associate your name with darkness. Perhaps they might even think your name marks you as a dark one. Do you see my point?"

Ebon did, his face contorting in anger. "You go too far," Ebon said.

"No," Marcas said. "I think it is you who goes too far in your interpretation of the Keys. They must be read in context and, since not all of the Keys have been rediscovered, any understanding we gain from them must be considered incomplete. Don't you agree?"

Ebon never got a chance to reply when Brother Enar swept into classroom. He bowed once to Brother Marcas before approaching and whispering in his ear. Brother Marcas frowned at the news, clutched the cincture at his waist and asked a question which Pella could not overhear.

Turning to face the class, Marcas said, "I'm afraid I must leave you now. Something has come up that requires my attention. I compliment each of you on your studies. We hope our teachings and peace will guide your lives. Those who wish to leave may catch a ride with Brother Enar. You may, of course, stay for lunch and enjoy the grounds and the baths. No work will be required of you today. We remain your servants," Marcas said, bowing deeply. "May Annaber guide and protect you."

Pella felt disappointed. The notion of a long soak in one of the monastery's heated pools was attractive, but the idea of an even longer walk back down the mountain was not. He began collecting his things and returning them to his pack.

"Pella, Ebon," Brother Marcas said. "Would you both please remain for a moment?"

Pella looked up, startled by the request. Ebon also seemed surprised and unhappy at having his name and Pella's spoken in the same breath.

"Well, this day did not go as I had planned." Marcas paused as if considering his words. "Ebon, the Andesines are not your enemy. You are destined to be a powerful man. With our Mother's help, you may even be our Regent one day. You will certainly be Guild Master. With leadership comes responsibility. Wisdom, unfortunately, does not come automatically with rank."

Ebon stiffened at the last remark, causing Brother Marcas to shake his head.

"I mean you no insult, Master Melanos. The Andesine vow of *Betera* requires me to leave each man I meet somehow better for the experience. My words are offered with this oath in mind. Put aside your distrust long enough to consider them. Come back and finish your studies with us. We bear you no ill will and can do you no harm. I suspect you will have long spring and summer seasons to consider my

request." With more grace than Pella thought possible, Ebon bowed respectfully to Brother Marcas.

"Will that be all?" Ebon asked in a cold, formal voice.

Brother Marcas sighed. "Brother Enar has signaled for your coach. May our Holy Mother smile upon you, Master Melanos."

"May Pyre keep you warm, Brother Marcas."

With their words of parting, both men exposed the gulf separating them. Pella watched as Ebon hastened from the room, his expensive black and red cape billowing behind him as he strode through the door.

"Pella."

"Yes," drawing his attention from Ebon's departure and back to Brother Marcas. The gentle cleric no longer seemed calm and Pella wondered if he were in trouble for his previous outbursts.

Marcas said, "I must go over to the chapter house. Would you mind waiting a bit longer? There is something I need to discuss with you."

Pella studied Marcas's face before answering. His eyes looked weary. While he did not want to miss his ride down the mountain, neither did he want to disappoint Brother Marcas.

"I'll wait," Pella said.

"Good," Marcas said. His voice sounded relieved.

Puzzling over the day's events, Pella followed Marcas from the classroom out the side door through which his teachers had always entered and departed. It led to a courtyard surrounded by buildings on all four sides. Sheltered from the wind, the small enclave was protected against most of the mesa's chill air. He gazed upward and checked the sun's progress across the winter sky. Only a faint lightening in the Veil marked its position. He was deep in thought when he felt someone touched his sleeve.

"Brother Marcas," he said without turning. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"I'm not Brother Marcas," a feminine voice replied with just a hint of amusement.

Startled, Pella spun about, lost his balance and nearly fell. "Mistress Beryl," he said, dropping so quickly to one knee that he almost lost his balance once more. "Forgive me, Mistress. I did not hear you approach," he said, head bowed. Embarrassment at his awkwardness warmed his face.

"Oh, get up, Pella," Beryl said sternly, pulling at his coat collar. "I get enough of that sort of thing in the city."

Pella looked up cautiously. Beryl's smile softened the harshness of her tone. He rose slowly, willing both knees to hold firm and not shame him further. He glanced nervously about the courtyard while contemplating the consequences of being found alone with the Regent's daughter.

"Relax, Pella. I'm not going to bite you." Brushing a few strands of auburn hair from azure eyes, Beryl added, "Unless you want me to." A mischievous smile crossed her face, whether at her joke or at his obvious distress, Pella did not know. Although only a year his senior, Beryl had always seemed older, much more adult than he.

"You don't want me to bite you, do you?" she asked.

"Uh, no, Mistress," he stammered, regretting having said anything at all. He felt his face flush even more.

"And stop calling me Mistress. You make me sound like my mother. My name is Beryl."

"Yes, M . . . , Uh . . . Beryl," he said fumbling for words. His tongue felt thick and dry. "Was there something you needed from me . . . , Beryl?" Her name sounded odd on his lips, but beautiful just the same. Almost as lovely as the young woman standing before him. She wore a topaz blue dress with matching cape, but none of the jewelry that was so prominent among the royal and wealthy classes except for a single gold chain that bound her cloak about her shoulders. Her eyes were decoration enough Pella decided.

"I wanted to talk to you . . . to apologize for Ebon."

It took a moment for him to realize Beryl was speaking. He found it difficult to see or hear anything while staring into her deep blue, almond-shaped eyes. "There is no need. About Ebon, I mean. You aren't responsible for his words." *A man could drown in those eyes.*

If Beryl heard his reply, she gave no indication. "Besides, my skin is not much lighter than yours and I have dark hair," she said, presenting a lock of her hair for his inspection. "You would have thought the big ox might have noticed after all these years. The next thing you know, he'll be saying I'm..."

Beryl failed to finish her statement, but Pella knew what she meant. "I'm sure he wouldn't say such a thing." There was that disconcerting smile again. He couldn't decide which he enjoyed more, her smile or those wonderful, azurite-colored eyes.

"You're sweet, Pella," Beryl said. "Even when people are mean to you."

Pella didn't trust himself to respond so he chose instead to find something near his feet to occupy his attention. The sight of one foot planted solidly on the ground and the other resting awkwardly on its toes shattered the pleasant fantasy forming in his mind.

"Thank you for your concern, Mistress. Is there anything else you require?" Pella mentally rebuked himself upon hearing the chill in his voice.

Beryl's smile vanished as she released a large sigh. "No. I guess not. Well there is one thing I..."

Pella watched as Beryl hesitated and appeared to war within herself. He had difficulty reading her expressions. "Yes, Mistress?" he said, curious as to the nature of her dilemma.

"Oh, hang it," Beryl said. "One of the girls in class told me one of the other boys saw some sketches of me in your pack. I was wondering if I could see them."

A sense of panic clutched at him. His heart leaped to his throat even as it thundered in his chest. "I'm sorry, Mistress. I do some sketching . . . as a hobby. I'm really not very good."

"Are any of your sketches of me?" Beryl asked, smoothing her skirt with one hand and placing the other on his arm. The steady drumming in Pella's ears increased as he realized she was not going to be deterred.

"The drawings are in my pack," he said. "In the classroom."

Upon returning to the classroom, Pella found his pack where he had left it. His silent prayers to Annaber to somehow make it vanish had apparently gone unheeded. His hands trembled lightly as he picked it up, unbuttoned the flap and withdrew the roll of sketch papers. He flipped through the sheaf looking for the sketch he wanted to show her. He rifled through the sheaf again, frustrated that he had

missed it the first time. Nothing. It was gone, but that couldn't be. He began yet another search, but Beryl gripped his hand with hers and, with the other, withdrew a single sketch.

Holding it up to the light, she said, "Why, this is beautiful, Pella. You really are very good."

"Thank you, Mistress. I had a better one, but I..." Pella did not finish the sentence, wondering if someone had told Ebon about the sketch. He suppressed a groan. If so, no wonder the young guildsman was angry with him. Drawing sketches of his betrothed wasn't just stupid; it might very well prove fatal.

Beryl examined each of his other sketches, pausing at the portraits, but lingering just a few seconds with the landscapes. "These are excellent. You should enter one in this year's art contest."

"I don't . . . think so," Pella said.

The Weavers Guild held the contest each year during the Parting Day Faire. But as far as he was concerned, he had enough problems. No need inviting any more by mixing with the Weavers. To mask his nervousness, he brushed absently at the charcoal marks and smudges the sheet had collected while inside his pack.

"Well," Beryl demanded, evidently dissatisfied with his response. "Why not?"

"I just couldn't, that's all. Besides, I never understood why the Weavers care about art, anyway. Even the Artisans' Guild doesn't hold such contests. It's foolishness." Pella could tell his comments annoyed her. "I'm sorry," he added. "I shouldn't speak of things I don't know about."

Beryl presented him with a royal sniff. "We agree on that much, anyway. Well, if you aren't going to enter this one in the contest, let me purchase it from you," she said, gently removing the paper from his hand.

"If you like the sketch, take it as a..." Pella replied. He had started to say as a gift, but gifts were no small matter, and in and of themselves created a whole series of obligations until both parties deemed the scales balanced. Better that he keep his distance from her. That way, maybe Ebon would forget about things. "Just take it, please."

"There's no balance in that," Beryl said. "I'll pay you."

"No. I couldn't accept money for it," Pella stammered, searching furiously for a way out of his predicament.

Beryl's hands disappeared into the folds of her skirt and reappeared as she thrust several coins into his palm and folded his fingers into a fist. He started to protest, but she did not let go. The strength of her grip surprised him, but eased when he stopped struggling. The fact she didn't release his hand surprised him, too. She was looking at him intently now.

"I won't be coming back next year, Pella. Look after yourself and consider what I said about entering the art contest. It might be a way for you to earn extra money. Think about it."

"Get your filthy hands off her!" The harsh words echoed off the classroom's stone walls. A nesting pigeon, startled by the shout, took flight from the rafters above and disappeared through a smoke vent at the peak of the classroom's roof.

Pella also started. Jerking his head about, he saw an angry Ebon Melanos bearing down on them.

As Ebon approached, his hand groped instinctively for the hilt of the short sword. Anger blossomed anew in Ebon's handsome features when he realized the weapon was not there. Pella thanked Annaber he was on Andesine ground and attempted once more to retrieve his hand from Beryl's vice-like grip.

"Just who do you think you are, Ebon Melanos, ordering people about?" Beryl's icy tone fixed Ebon in his tracks.

"I'm just looking after you, Beryl," Ebon said. The anger and indignation over finding Pella holding her hand was replaced by confusion at her fierce reaction.

"I don't need you to look *after* me," she said. "Leave us."

"Beryl," Ebon said.

"I said, leave us."

"Our fathers are here. They're meeting with Brother Marcas."

"Perhaps I need to explain a few things to you, Master Melanos," Beryl said, dropping Pella's hand, her skirt flaring as she whirled about to face the guildsman. "First, you and your father may control all the crystal here in this city, but you don't control me. Second, when a member of House Vanadine requests your presence or your absence, you obey. Have I made myself clear?"

"Perfectly," Ebon said, his handsome face twisted by anger and humiliation.

"Good. You may leave us now," she said, turning her back upon him.

Even in the dim light, Pella could see Ebon's intense flush before the heir to the kingdom's powerful Crystal Guild spun about and stormed from the room. Beryl had shamed the guildsman, something he would likely never forget and certainly never forgive.

"Oh, Mother," Pella muttered.

A look of horror crossed Beryl's face. "I'm so sorry, Pella. I handled that badly," Beryl said, once more brushing aside a lock of auburn hair that had fallen across her face. "You're apt to pay the price for my tantrum. I just get so mad at him sometimes."

Pella shrugged. "I don't think Ebon likes me very much anyway." He offered a weak smile at his joke, and hoped his words conveyed more bravery than he felt. "Thank you for your commission, Mistress. I'll try to create something nice for you." Neither said anything further for a moment as they both listened to Ebon's coach being driven hard as it began its descent from the Andesine mount.

"That is not a commission," Beryl said firmly. "It is payment. The scales are balanced between us. But I'll be happy to look at more of your work." The latter words were softer. "I guess I'd better go, before Ebon has my father send in the palace guard. I'll try and undo what I've done, but be careful. Ebon enjoys hurting people."

A silence fell between them as Sunhaven's bell tower tolled the hour. Pella lost count. The day had certainly been one full of unexpected events. Just when he thought the day could not possibly present any more unexpected events, Beryl kissed him quickly on the corner of his mouth. She pulled back, stared at him for a moment, and then kissed him on the lips for several seconds. He had never been kissed before, except once or twice by his foster mother. This was different. Very different. It was also nicer. Much nicer.

Beryl glided from the room; the only sounds were those of her footsteps and the rustle of her skirt. Once more Pella found himself alone, amid the crackle of fires in the hearths. He was still pondering the day's many mysteries, such as how Beryl's hair managed to smell like summer roses, when Brother Marcas returned.

"Pella, there is a problem in the city which requires my attention," Brother Marcas said. "I'm afraid our visit must wait until another time."

"Oh," Pella said, disappointed. If there was anyone who knew how to bring order to his jumbled thoughts, it was Brother Marcas.

"I really need to talk with you," Pella said. "Can I go with you?"

Marcas did not reply, but rather appeared to consider the request.

"Brother Marcas, it's important." The monk stared at him for several seconds without really seeming to see. A scowl marked the normally serene face.

"Things might become unpleasant," Marcas said at last.

Pella could not halt the laugh. "Brother Marcas, most of my days are unpleasant... and my nights," he added, "and they've been getting worse. That's why I need to talk to you."

"Very well," Marcas said. "Send for me when Brother Enar returns with the wagon."

**When Mangan Turns Bitter
And Dreams Take Flight
To the Way with Haste
Or Accept Your Plight**

Second Disputed Key
Andesine Translation

Chapter 3

Brother Marcas guided the wagon down the rocky trail with an almost grim determination. He had said nothing after beginning their descent, other than a few gentle words to the mule. Pella enjoyed the large man's quiet companionship for several minutes, concentrating on keeping a steady pressure on the wagon's right-hand foot brake. He didn't have many friends, but he counted Brother Marcas first among them. He thought about bringing up the subject of his father's land, but was uncomfortable doing so. Uncharacteristic tension laced the large man's face. The monk clearly had problems of his own. But curiosity got the better of him.

"What did you want to talk to me about, Brother Marcas?" Pella asked as the trail leveled and the wagon's jostling ride smoothed. Marcas's gaze remained fixed on the road ahead.

"I would like for you to join our Order," Marcas said.

Pella's heart raced just as it had the first time Marcas had suggested Pella would be a welcome addition to the Andesines' dwindling ranks. This time it was neither hint nor suggestion, but a bold statement tinged with a degree of urgency that Pella found surprising.

"Brother Marcas..." Pella was unable to finish the sentence. He wanted to accept the offer. The Andesines appreciated his talents and seemed unconcerned about his handicap. And, he reminded himself, the few times he had slept at the monastery while working on art projects for Brother Enar or Brother Marcas, he had experienced none of the bloody nightmares that now so often haunted his dreams. He longed to say yes.

"I can't," Pella said, trying to keep his voice steady. "I have to become a citizen."

Marcas looked over at him and Pella glanced away. "As a member of our Order, you would automatically become a citizen."

"I need to hold my father's land," Pella said, staring unseeing at the sparse woods bordering both sides of the trail. "I can't do that as an Andesine. We've talked about this before."

"Pella, I do not wish to be unkind," Marcas said, "but there is little likelihood of your becoming a citizen outside of an Andesine robe."

"I've got to try," Pella said, fighting to keep his voice steady. "I gave my oath to my father."

"I know," Marcas said.

"You do?" Pella asked, surprised.

"I was there," Marcas replied.

"I'm sorry," Pella said, looking at the monk and trying to recall that day so many years ago. "I don't remember."

Just before his father departed, there had been words with a stranger. There were mounted men on horses. That much Pella recalled. He had always liked horses, his father having taught him to ride almost before he could walk. He reached back for the memory of that day, but nothing new came to mind. What he did remember was his oath, spoken with all the sincerity a seven-year-old could muster.

"You were just a child, then," Marcas said. "The oath is not binding by our laws."

"An oath is an oath," Pella said. "I was old enough to give it. Now I'm old enough to try and keep it." *Almost eighteen. Almost an Oath Breaker.* Pella turned his face into the chill wind in the hope that its sharp bite would force back the moisture welling in his eyes.

"You belong with us," Marcas said, his knuckles white against the black leather reins. "This is too important. The monastery is your only choice."

"There are the contests," Pella said. "The Regent's Hunt is coming up in a few eight-days. Failing that, I can always try my hand at diving for crystal."

Marcas reined Stib to a sudden stop and gripped Pella's arm in a vise-like hold. "Listen to me. You must stay out of Crystal Bay. I want your promise."

"I can't do that," Pella said, shocked at Monk's unusual behavior. He struggled unsuccessfully for several seconds to pry the large man's thick fingers from his arm. Marcas seemed not to notice.

"Brother Marcas..." Pella said at last, unable to break the big man's grip. "You're hurting my arm."

Marcas jerked his hand away. "Forgive me. Pella. I had no right to touch you like that."

Both men averted their gaze from the other and stared over the city toward the Crystal Bay's calm waters. Normally clear, today the water mirrored the Veil's dark cast. At the horizon, it was impossible to tell where the bay started and the Veil began. The only hints of a distant shore were the streaks of lightning that continually pounded the steep shore wall known as Breacher's Pass by the Andesines and Sungate by the Luminists. The cliff was not visible and the distance so great that the sound of thunder did not reach them.

It was said that Sungate was the warmest spot on Annaber, the rock continually heated by centuries of unrelenting lightning hammering the stone cliffs. You didn't even need a coat, it was said, but no one went there - except the Luminists. And they only went there to die. Pella had once seen a painting of Sungate in Marcas's library. The memory of the fear the painting evoked caused him to shudder involuntarily.

Marcas misinterpreted his reaction and said, "I'm sorry I upset you."

Rubbing his arm to restore circulation and ease the pain, Pella shrugged. "Forget it. What is so important about my staying out of the bay, anyway?"

"The waters are not good for you. They'll likely make your dreams worse. Promise me you will stay out of the bay."

"I can't promise that," Pella said. "And how did you know about my dreams? Brother Enar mentioned something about them the other day, too."

"I've said all I can," Marcas replied. "You belong with us. Reconsider your decision while you still have the opportunity."

Pella felt a twinge of anger, but said nothing further.

Marcas raised the reins and laid them gently upon the old mule's back, clucking softly as he did so. "Let's go, Stib."

"Where exactly are we headed?" Pella asked after the ride smoothed upon reaching the base of the mountain.

"The Pyronite Temple," Marcas replied, adding no further elaboration.

Without thinking, Pella jammed his foot on the wagon's brake. It caused the rear of the wagon to fishtail to the left. Marcas reined the mule to a halt.

"I think I should get out here," Pella said. He'd had enough adventure for one day and his presence at the religious heart of the kingdom would certainly cause more trouble. But, Marcas had to know that. He wondered why Marcas would even suggest such a thing.

"No one will bother you while you're with me," Marcas said, once more setting the wagon in motion.

This was true, Pella knew, but he also knew Marcas would not always be with him.

"Can you tell me what's going on?" Pella asked.

"The Abbot says a Miner from the village sneaked into one of the temple's outer gardens last night and destroyed several gem statues before the guards were able to subdue him."

"Oh, mercy," Pella said.

"I don't think mercy is what the good Abbot has in mind," Marcas said, his voice heavy with irony. "With Parting Day approaching, the Luminists are already claiming the man's actions may have doomed us to yet another year without the sun. The way they see it, the Lord God Pyre will reject this year's tribute. I doubt there will be much mercy in evidence today."

"Why are you involved?" Pella asked.

"The man's life is in the balance. Guild Master Melanos asked me to intercede."

"Ebon's father?" Marcas nodded and Pella's sense of foreboding grew. "Why would he care about a Mank?" Pella asked as Marcas steered the wagon onto a paved roadway.

"He doesn't," Marcas said, "but the Miners do not believe the Abbot's story and have threatened not to go back to work unless I intercede."

"Can you save him?" Pella asked.

Marcas's face darkened. "Perhaps. If he declares for Annaber, Canon Law grants me the right to offer him sanctuary."

"The Pyronites won't like that," Pella said, wondering for the first time in his life what faith the Miners followed.

"No," Marcas agreed. "They won't. Guild Master Melanos pressured the Abbot into allowing my involvement. I trust I'll find the path Annaber wishes me to follow in this, but I doubt it will be an easy one."

"I see," Pella said, not understanding at all. "Which gate will we be entering?" Pella asked, referring to the eight distinct gates surrounding the temple.

Marcas stared at him for a few seconds before encouraging Stib to move along. "Consequence," he replied.

Consequence, indeed. Pella tried to suppress a rising sense of panic. What would be the consequence for his setting an *imperfect* foot upon the Pyronites' holiest ground?

"Maybe I should get out here," Pella said once more, shifting to the far side of the wagon seat. Marcas said nothing, nor did he slow the wagon.

"Will you join our order?" Brother Marcas asked.

"I can't," Pella said.

"Then I think you should continue on with me to the temple," Brother Marcas said. "Everything is happening more rapidly than I'd anticipated. There isn't much time."

"Time for what?" Pella asked. Marcas did not reply.

The canopy of tree branches lining the road contained spring growth which, by rights, should not have been there for another month. Whatever lesson Marcas had in mind, Pella was certain he would not like it. But at least he'd get to see the Well of Tears. This prospect failed, however, to lessen his sense of foreboding.

The wagon broke through the tree line and crested a small knoll looking over the Pyronite grounds. Not unexpectedly, the cobblestone road smoothed immediately. It was a well-known fact that the Pyronites built the best roads throughout the kingdom. Nothing could be allowed to hinder the transport of the gemstones selected as tribute to the Lord God Pyre.

Pella turned his attention from the precise craftsmanship of the thoroughfare to the temple itself and gasped. Even in Annaber's dim light, the massive, jewel-studded structure glimmered in the distance. The faceted gemstones along the mural wall captured and held what little light Pyre gave them. The color was amazing. Pella could not help but gawk.

"You've not seen the temple before?" Marcas asked. Pella indicated that he had not.

"Say what you will about the Followers of the Sun," Marcas continued, "but they build splendid temples and this one is the most magnificent of them all."

The main road descended and carried them between two exquisitely carved crystal spires. Taller than most of the city's buildings, the ornately carved columns captured the light from the fires that encircled their bases and trapped it within the thousands of facets etched into the crystal. The spectacular arches and the adjacent polished quartz barricade stood in stark contrast with the drab, unadorned walls of the Andesine compound. That such different faiths could emerge from the same history seemed almost incomprehensible.

"They're so beautiful," Pella said. "They have to be made of Starstones." He stared at the arches, amazed at the manner in which the crystal broke the light into a hundred colors.

"No," Marcas said, "They're not even close."

Puzzled by his companion's odd response, Pella examined the monk's face, but it revealed nothing. No one knew what Starstones looked like. He started to inquire further, but two more temple walls came into view. Sparkling blue diamonds blanketed the left-most wall of the temple, symbolizing Responsibility and the First Month of Ice. Breach Wall was made of immense white diamond crystals.

"I can't even begin to comprehend such wealth," Pella said, trying to memorize every detail of the tribute offered to the Pyre in the hope the Sun God would remove the Veil.

The big man shrugged. The gesture reminded Pella of a landslide he'd once seen. "How much for Mangan's children to once more walk in the light of the Sun? I'd think the Luminists would call any price cheap."

Brother Marcas steered the wagon onto the golden Pyrite roadway ringing the temple. Pella craned his neck to see the top of the temple which almost reached the bottom of the Veil. Each mural revealed a different lesson. Unlike the other walls, Breach Wall contained only one scene. A deceitful Mangan, depicted in human form, was shown concealing three luminous crystal gems from the Lord God Pyre. He wondered how the priests were able to make the imitation Starstone spires glow. He decided there must be illuminating fires inside the temple.

"This is amazing," Pella said. Marcas did not reply.

Pella recognized the lesson depicted upon the massive wall. It was the first lesson every child in the kingdom learned. The consequence of Mangan's broken bargain had left the Goddess Annaber in a frozen sleep and her children imprisoned between impassable mountains and trapped on a world of ice.

They rode in silence past the temple's Wall of Pride. A large crowd was visible on the other side of the clear quartz wall that encircled the temple. Throngs of people mingled in the interior garden among carved gem statues of various colors and shapes. Dozens of armed Pyronite priests stood guard atop the wall. The gemstones embedded in their foreheads gave Pella the uncomfortable impression the priests had three eyes. Past the guards, Pella could see several shattered sculptures lying upon the ground. He shook his head.

"What?" Marcas asked, having observed the gesture.

"Are there always this many guards?"

"Yes."

"And you say one man slipped into the garden and did all this damage before someone could stop him?"

Marcas's face tightened. "That is what the Abbot reports."

Shaking his head again, Pella said, "It hardly seems possible." He searched Marcas's face, but found no answers. Whatever the monk thought about the Pyronites' report of events, he was keeping it to himself.

Warm, moist air greeted them as they drew closer to the temple's outer wall and the sound of rushing water became steadily louder. Pella looked for and found the Well of Tears. It lay sheltered between two red vertical cliff walls on the left of the temple. Steam ascended into the crisp morning air as rivers of scalding white water jetted from the cliff walls, entering the Well from opposite directions. Eight large aqueducts captured the rivers of red-stained snow-melt coursing down the surrounding mountains toward Crystal Bay and channeled their burden into the Well, creating a violent, rose-colored vortex. The thundering water swirled as it plunged into Annaber's depths. A pink mist cloud rose from the Well and hovered over the garden.

"Mangan's Bloody Tears," Pella whispered in awe as Brother Marcas pulled back on the reins and brought the wagon to a halt. It was one thing to read about the Well of Tears, but quite another to

actually see it. The words of one of The Keys, Pella couldn't remember which one, came to mind.

*Tears He Shall Send You
Down a Bloody Well
With Light Comes Darkness
Freed from a Frozen Hell*

Pella was so absorbed trying to take in the many sights that he failed to notice one of the Luminist Warrior Priests approach their wagon.

"May Pyre's light shine upon you, Andesine," said a middle-aged priest. He bowed slightly and then touched the circular yellow gemstone embedded in his forehead. The arrival of the priest jerked Pella's attention away from the Well.

"Good day to you, Heulan," Marcas said.

Pella looked up at Marcas, surprised that he would know the priest's name.

Heulan, wearing nothing more than a filmy silk robe and sandals, grasped Stib's reins and waited for Pella and Marcas to dismount. Pella concluded that the thick leather scabbard holding the heavy broadsword upon the priest's back probably provided more warmth than the robes.

"Doesn't he get cold?" Pella whispered to Brother Marcas, trying not to stare at the coin-sized circular stone embedded in the priest's forehead. It looked to be yellow diamond, but he could not be sure at this distance and he did not relish the idea of moving nearer for a closer inspection.

"The cold is Pyre's punishment," Heulan said, apparently having overheard the question. "It is something the Faithful must endure."

Pella groaned inwardly and wondered why the priest kept staring at him. He decided it must be his heavy coat that attracted Heulan's frown.

"Say nothing further," Marcas cautioned, stepping from the wagon. Pella hastened to catch up with his companion, doing what he could to mask his awkward stride. A man Pella did not recognize broke away from a mixed group of priests, guildsmen and merchants, and walked toward them as they passed through the arch. The man grasped Marcas's arm and shook his hand in a friendly manner. He wore the same guild emblem as Ebon, a luminous crystal suspended within three gold rings. It was Ebon's father, Pella realized, noting the similar attractive features and blond hair shared by the elder Melanos and his son.

"Thanks for coming, Brother Marcas," the Guild Master said, smiling warmly.

Pella noticed the smile did not extend to him, but then he had not expected it would. The wind shifted and the red mist enveloped them. A vile, bitter taste filled Pella's throat. He was about to spit when Marcas clamped a hand over his mouth.

"Don't even think about it," Marcas said, bending down and hissing in Pella's ear. "Swallow it if you must, but do not give any here a reason to take off your head. I have troubles enough at the moment."

"But, Brother Marcas..." Pella said, after swallowing the foul spittle and wiping his mouth upon his sleeve. "Can't you taste it?" Marcas did not appear to have heard him. The cleric had an intense look in his eyes that Pella had not seen before.

"Brother Marcas," Pella insisted. "The mist is bitter; it might have something to do with the Key." *Which Key was it? Damn it all,* he could not remember. Pella tugged on the Marcas's cassock, but the monk ignored him. The words of the Key filled his mind.

*When Tears Turn Bitter
And Dreams Take Flight
Into the Way with Haste
Or Accept Your Plight*

"Brother Marcas," Pella said, his voice pleading.

"I have other matters to attend," Marcas said in a cold voice. "Now, be quiet."

The tone of the words hurt, but Pella remained silent, certain the bitter taste that filled his mouth might explain one of the disputed Keys.

"I'm sorry, Guild Master," Marcas said, turning back to Ebon's father. "What were you saying?"

The elder Melanos presented Marcas with a tolerant, but superior look. "I assume you would you like to..." He did not get to finish the sentence. An awful wail pierced through the steady roar of water cascading into the Well of Tears.

"They're coming!" a man screamed.

It took Pella several seconds to locate the source of the voice amid the crowd. When he finally spotted the man, he thought for a moment his knees would give way. The accused, barely older than himself, was bound upright in the center of a wagon-sized bronze tray, one of two such trays affixed to a giant scale that towered overhead. The heavy dish and its golden chain rested on the ground. Its mate was suspended overhead. Pella's attention was drawn once more to the prisoner. Rough-hewn iron chains secured the man's feet to the base of the dish. Another of the sharp-edged chains was looped about his neck, its opposite end securely affixed to the giant scale's overhead arm several meters above. Marcas had not lied. The young man's life was indeed literally in the balance.

"The Dark Ones!" the man screamed. He raised his bound hands in front of him, seemingly heedless of the additional cuts inflicted by the sharp chain that encircled his neck.

"This is close enough," Marcas said, gripping Pella's shoulder.

Pella was startled to realize he had been drawn to the man without being conscious of it.

"The Dark Ones!" the man screamed once more. "They're coming!"

Pella froze, suddenly afraid the young man's wild gaze would find him and reaffirm Ebon's earlier accusation. Much to his relief, the prisoner's unfocused eyes moved constantly about the crowd. The man was out of his mind; he was certain of it.

Struggling against his restraints, another scream pierced the damp air, "I didn't do it!" the man cried in a ragged, hoarse voice. Blood flowed from his mouth, further staining the tattered

tunic. Pella wondered if he had bitten his tongue or if the Luminists had beaten him. Unlike the Andesines, Followers of the Sun God had little aversion to violence on their holy ground, unless, of course, it was directed against their sacred temple.

The crowd parted and Pella stepped back as a group approached from the right. He recognized His Holy Eminence, Abbot Mylon Euclase, even without the Sunstone staff. The man carried himself with an aura of power that belied the simple golden robe, although the massive ruby embedded in Abbot's forehead was, to Pella's way of thinking, a bit much.

Marcas inclined his head and kneeled to the Abbot. The act surprised Pella. He considered imitating Marcas's actions, but decided to remain standing. The Abbot's entourage glowered at him. The Abbot glanced at him only once. *If looks could kill*, Pella thought. For just an instant, he thought the glowing gem atop the Abbot's staff seemed to grow brighter.

"Your Eminence." Marcas kissed the large fire opal ring on the Abbot's extended hand.

"My brother has been away from his home too long," the Abbot said in a formal voice. He grasped Marcas's hand and pulled the monk to his feet. "Do you prepare a path to the Sun?"

"We choose our paths, but not their routes," Marcas replied. The Abbot stared at Marcas for several seconds and then nodded. Had Pella not known better, he would have thought Brother Marcas and the Abbot were old friends.

"Our doors are always open to you," the Abbot said in a smooth voice.

"Thank you, Eminence. If you don't mind, I would like to visit with the accused and his family."

"Of course. Follow Pyre's servant here," the Abbot said, signaling one of his order. "Rodin shall take you to them."

One look at the priest and Pella's mouth fell open. The right side of the tall priest's face was horribly burned. Much of the man's golden hair had been seared away; that which remained was curled and discolored. His face was an oozing mass of cracks and blisters. Pella jumped involuntarily when the man caught him staring.

"Sometimes it is necessary for one to be brought close to the Lord God's fire before he can see the light," Rodin said. Pella suppressed a shudder. Whether the priest's injury was intended as punishment or worship he did not know, nor did he care to find out.

Marcas took out after the priest and Pella followed behind, trying to will himself invisible and mask his slight limp. It wasn't working. With all the things to attract the crowd's attention, the prisoner, the temple, the Well of Tears, too many pairs of eyes seemed focused only upon him. He voiced a silent prayer and quickened his pace in order to close the gap between him and Brother Marcas.

The scarred priest led them to a small group of men and one woman standing some distance away from the giant scale. All were Miners. Pella did not need to see the men's wine-colored skin to know this. Their ragged clothes and incessant coughs had revealed their identities almost immediately.

A young woman, more of a girl, really, broke from their ranks and rushed to the prisoner, grasping one of his bound hands. She had to be young, Pella realized, since her skin remained a pale white, unlike the weathered, ruddy faces of the men who followed after her.

The woman's presence seemed to calm the man bound to the scale. He stood mute, trembling, but no longer fighting against the chains. Marcas smiled at the woman who Pella assumed was the prisoner's wife. One of her eyes was blackened and swollen shut. A small child rushed from amid the score of surrounding legs and tugged insistently at the woman's soiled smock. Pella could not tell if it were a boy or a girl. The woman scooped the child up with one arm, balancing it upon her hip. She pulled her hand from her husband's and extended it toward Brother Marcas. The monk grasped her hand, smiling as he did so.

"Can you spare him?" the woman pleaded in an accented voice. "Can you?" she asked again.

"We shall see," Marcas said. "Will you accept my judgment in this?"

"This is not holy ground, at least not to us," one of the Miner's said. "No reason for a man to die for this rock," the Miner said, kicking a shattered piece of obsidian lying near his feet. It bounced along the ground and crashed against the bronze dish holding their prisoner. An orange-robed priest started and turned toward the Miner, but one look from Marcas halted his advance. "He'll die soon enough digging this damned stuff. We all will."

The prisoner looked up at Marcas. The fear and madness remained unabated. "It was the Weavers. The Weavers made me do it."

A sudden silence filled the crowd before being replaced by a rush of whispered voices. With the mention of the Weavers Guild, dozens of voices all began speaking at once. Pella wondered if it were true. Some said Weavers could read a man's mind. He did not know for certain, but only a madman would openly accuse them of a crime, true or not. It was said that the only thing longer than Annaber's winters was the Weavers' memory. They were not ones to leave a scale out of balance.

"He has been screaming such as that for an hour now," Pella heard someone say. For a few moments, the prisoner's eyes found Pella's.

"Marked One!" The prisoner raised his bound hands and pointed them at Pella. Pella turned about in an effort to flee the prisoner's accusations, but the eager crowd had filled in behind him. There was no escape.

"Marked One!" the young man screamed once more, struggling against the chains that bound him. "They're coming. He knows it. Ask him. He can hear them, too."

Pella shifted to his left so that Marcas's considerable size blocked him from the prisoner's view. The ranting ceased, but more and more people were looking at him. He never should have come here.

Pella turned his attention back toward Brother Marcas and the young woman.

"The Luminists have all the gem they need," the Miner woman said as she pulled at Marcas's arm. "Spare him. Please."

"I will do what I can," Marcas said, but Pella noted the monk's eyes were fixed on his. His expression was unreadable. "Will you accept my judgment?" Marcas asked the young woman. She stared silently at him for several seconds before finally nodding.

"The Weavers..." the man screamed, pulling fiercely at his restraints. The sharp chains cut deeply into his ankles and neck.

Rivulets of blood coursed down his chest. Pella glanced past the man at the eerily similar red streams flowing down the mountain and disappearing into the Well of Tears. He suppressed the urge to run as the prisoner continued to stare at him.

"The Dark Ones are coming," turned into an unintelligible wail.

Marcas ignored the man, facing each Miner in turn. One by one, they indicated their assent.

Marcas turned to a nearby Pyronite priest. "Is Guild Mistress Carnelia here?"

The priest's face remained impassive. "I do not know, Andesine. I will find out," the priest replied.

"Never mind," Marcas said without looking about. "She has just arrived. Bring her here at once."

Yes, Andesine," a ripple of emotion flitted across the man's rigid features before he disappeared into the crowd.

Pella looked around but could see nothing except the solid wall of spectators surrounding them. There was no Weaver, at least not one that he could see. "Who is Carnelia?" he asked. As with so many of his other questions, Brother Marcas did not reply. Pella found his eyes once more drawn back toward the prisoner. To his relief, the young man no longer took notice of him. There was something not right about the man.

It took several seconds for Pella to realize what it was that troubled him. The youth had no fingers on his right hand. Pella thought of his own handicap and felt an immediate sense of kinship and deepening pity. His thoughts were interrupted as a petite, but well-shaped woman, shouldered her way past him to stand in front of the prisoner. He did not need to see her face to tell she was angry.

"Strip him," the woman said.

"Carnelia," Marcas said. "There's no..."

"Shut up, Marcas. He accuses the Weavers. Strip him," she commanded.

Pella heard several gasps, including his own. He could not believe anyone would speak to Brother Marcas in that fashion, even a Weaver. And to address the monk as other than "Brother Marcas" was almost unimaginable.

Marcas, ignoring the woman's words and tone, nodded to one of the warrior priests guarding the captive. Within seconds, the remains of the man's garments were torn away.

"Our mark is not upon him," Carnelia said after circling the dish and its occupant.

Pella wondered how she could tell. Purple bruises and scores of cuts completely covered the man's upper body.

"What was done here last night was not done at our request," the Weaver said. She pulled at the sash of the light brown cloak that failed to conceal the close-fitting pale green dress underneath. "My oath to Annaber upon it. My oath to the Pyronites." With those words, she turned quickly to her right to make her exit. In so doing, she collided with Pella, sending him crashing to the soggy ground. A frown crossed her hardened face; nevertheless, she bent down and extended a hand toward him. He reached to accept, but she jerked her hand away as apparent recognition dawned. Pella saw a sudden look of shock cross her face, only to be replaced by rage. But it was not the woman's abrupt and inexplicable anger that captured his attention,

but rather the large, deadly-looking spider contained inside the crystal orb nestled at the top of her breasts. Black, with red banded legs, the spider crawled out of the orb. The creature, he decided, was like something from his nightmares.

Spinning about, the Guild Mistress faced Marcas who remained as still as the surrounding statues. She struck the monk with a powerful slap across the face. "In Annaber's name, why would you bring him here?" Carnelia demanded. "Are you mad?"

Pella glanced first at Carnelia and then at the monk. Brother Marcas simply looked away.

"Why would you do this to me?" Carnelia demanded, her fists shaking at her sides. A look of regret flashed across Marcas's face and then vanished as quickly as it had come.

Pella started to mention that he was the one on the ground, but thought better of it. He could hear pain in the woman's voice.

"Why?" Carnelia asked once more. The crack of another slap upon Marcas's face pierced the steady roar of the falls. Marcas made no move to dodge the blow. "Damn you, brother," her voice cold. "You and I will speak of this, Marcas," she said before hiking her filmy skirt and vanishing into the crowd.

Pella remained on the ground several seconds before rising. There had been something familiar about the woman. He had never seen her before, but still...

Marcas's face mirrored that of the surrounding stone work, cold and emotionless. "Pella, there is a piece of Andesine quartz in the wagon. Bring it."

Pella rose from the ground and moved to comply, brushing at the bits of mud and snow clinging to his cloak as he walked.

"Never mind," Marcas called after him.

Pella stopped and turned to watch as the monk searched amid the shattered gem and stone until he found a chunk of ruby about the size of a man's fist. Marcas touched the gemstone to the prisoner's hand for a few seconds. For just that brief amount of time, the feral look in the young man's eyes seemed to disappear.

"You!" A look of surprise registered, only to be replaced by a sad smile. "I should have heeded you." The man winced as if suddenly aware of his body's suffering.

Marcas said nothing, his face a mask of concentration and pain.

"There's nothing to be done, is there?" the prisoner asked.

Marcas shook his head. This time, Pella thought, even more pain showed.

"They're in my head," the Miner said in a violent whisper. "I can't take it anymore." He glanced at his wife. "I'm sorry, Cass." Turning his gaze back to Marcas, he said, "Take her away and get this over with," the man said. Marcas pulled the gem away from the man's hand and the madness once more filled his eyes.

The big monk's face became as hard as the gem he held in his hand. "I'm sorry," Marcas said to the man's wife, causing her to issue an agonizing wail. To the man he said, "May the Goddess receive your soul." The other Miners bowed toward Marcas and then escorted the man's sobbing wife from the courtyard.

The Abbot said, "I take it you are leaving this matter to our judgment." Pella had not even seen or heard the man approach. He spoke to Marcas, but his eyes remained locked on Pella.

"I am," Marcas replied without emotion.

"Very well," Abbot Euclase replied, giving Marcas a quick glance before signaling a cluster of orange-robed priests. "Let the scales decide."

Pella watched in horror as priests began lifting large chunks of shattered statues into the raised scale. "No!" Pella cried, the impact of the Abbot's words dawning upon him. "You can't. Brother Marcas, you can save him. You said you could."

"Be silent, Initiate," one of the priests said, gripping Pella's arm. It was Heulan.

"I'm not an Initiate," Pella said more loudly than he intended, shaking off the priest's grasp. "Brother Marcas, you can't let them do this," Pella said, pulling upon the large monk's arm even as the prisoner's feet were lifted from the dish. Pella's hands found the broken shard of gem filling the monk's hands. He tried to tear it free. A sudden numbing shock seized his body. For a brief moment, Marcas's face was replaced by that of an angry young man. His own face. And then, suddenly, Pella found himself once more hurled to the ground by an unseen force.

"Brother Marcas!" Pella cried, trying to comprehend what had happened. The Monk had not moved, yet it had felt to Pella as if a giant hand had struck him. He shook his head to clear the ringing from his ears. The shifting balance of the scales took up the slack in the chains securing the man's legs to the heavy tray. The sharp edges of the chains cut even further into the flesh around the man's neck. Blood pooled at the bottom of the dish beneath the man's feet.

"Brother Marcas," Pella pleaded, rising to his knees.

"Be quiet, Pella," Marcas said.

The rage boiling below the surface boiled up and burst forth. "You gave oaths!" Pella shouted, now standing upright. He struck at Marcas with his fists. The monk ignored him as the scale's massive pair of dishes struggled for balance. Seconds later the Miner's headless body crashed into the tray. A fountain of blood arced from the decapitated corpse. Something struck his leg. Pella looked down and saw that it was the prisoner's severed head, its vacant eyes staring up at him.

"All Hail, Pyre, God of Eternal Flame," the witnessing priests chanted in unison.

"All Hail, Pyre, Binder of our Shame," the crowd supplied the response.

Pella stared helplessly at his blood-spattered clothing. A sudden weakness took him and he collapsed to his knees.

"All Hail, Pyre, who blocks us from the light," a hundred voices picked up the chant.

"All Hail, Pyre, we accept your judgment right."

Head pounding, Pella tried to rise but could not. A wave of nausea struck him and he leaned forward and retched.

◆ ◆ ◆

Author's Note: I hope you have enjoyed these sample chapters of *The Marked One* and will join Pella as he completes his journey. The journey continues in Volume

Two of this series, *The Hand of Annaber*. If you care to write to me, you may do so via my website:

www.WritersPassage.com

If your fantasy novels are best enjoyed when accompanied by a glass of great wine, please visit my other website, www.TheGrapeEscapes.com and check out my guidebooks to Southern and Central California's wineries and tasting rooms.

About the Author: Bob Rhodes lives with his wife, Cindy, in a small town on Washington's Olympic Peninsula called Sequim. Sequim (pronounced Skwim) is bordered by the Strait of Juan de Fuca on one side and the Olympic Mountains on the other. When not busy writing or otherwise enjoying the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest, Bob can probably be found along a wine trail, enjoying another of nature's gifts.