

AUTHOR *of the* BEST-SELLING NOVEL *BLACK*

TED DEKKER

RED

THE CIRCLE | BOOK TWO

THE HEROIC RESCUE

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For my children.
May they always remember
what lies behind the veil.

Dear Reader,

Thomas Hunter's story begins in *Black*, Book One of The Circle Trilogy. If you've yet to read *Black*, I strongly encourage you to start there. *Red* is far richer once you've fully experienced Thomas's initial journey into two realities. There are numerous plot twists that deserve grounding before you plunge into the pages ahead.

Once you've read *Black*, you're ready to step into *Red*. But be fore-warned, nothing will prepare you—or Thomas—for what awaits him in this second book of the epic trilogy.

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Bangkok

KARA GOT halfway to her door and stopped. She and Thomas were in a large hotel suite with two bedrooms. Beyond her bedroom door was a short hall that ran to the living room and, in the other direction, to the adjoining suite. Across that hall—her brother's room, where he lay dead to this world, dreaming, oblivious to the news she'd just heard from Deputy Secretary Merton Gains.

The virus had been released exactly as Thomas had predicted just last evening.

Half an hour, Secretary Gains had said. *Bring him down in half an hour*. If she woke Thomas now, he'd demand to go down immediately. Every minute of sleep—for that matter every second—could be the equivalent of hours or days or even weeks in his dream world. A lot could hap-pen. Answers could come. She should let him sleep.

Then again, Svensson had released the virus. She should wake her brother now.

Right after she used the bathroom.

Kara hurried to the side room, flipped the light switch, turned on the water. Closed the door.

"We've stepped off the cliff and are falling into madness," she said. Then again, perhaps the fall to madness had started when Thomas had tried to jump off the balcony in Denver. He'd dragged her to Bangkok, kidnapped Monique de Raison, and survived two separate encounters with a killer named Carlos, who was undoubtedly still after them. All this because of his dreams of another reality.

Would Thomas wake with any new information? *The power was gone from the colored forest*, he'd said. The colored forest itself was gone, which meant that his power might be gone as well. If that was the case, Tom's dreams might be useless except as fantasies in which he was falling in love and learning to do backflips off a pinhead.

The water felt cool and refreshing on her face.

She flung the water from her hands and stepped to the toilet.

1

THOMAS URGED the sweating black steed into a full gallop through the sandy valley and up the gentle slope. He shoved his bloody sword into his scabbard, gripped the reins with both hands, and leaned over the horse's neck. Twenty fighters rode in a long line to his right and left, slightly behind. They were unquestionably the greatest warriors in all the earth, and they pounded for the crest directly ahead, one question drumming through each one's mind.

How many?

The Horde's attack had come from the canyon lands, through the Natalga Gap. This was not so unusual. The Desert Dwellers' armies had attacked from the east a dozen times over the last fifteen years. What was unusual, however, was the size of the party his men had just cut to ribbons less than a mile to the south. No more than a hundred.

Too few. Far too few.

The Horde never attacked in small numbers. Where Thomas and his army depended on superior speed and skill, the Horde had always depended on sheer numbers. They'd developed a kind of natural balance. One of his men could take out five of the Horde on any bad day, an advantage mitigated only by the fact that the Horde's army approached five hundred thousand strong. His own army numbered fewer than thirty thousand including the apprentices. None of this was lost on the enemy. And yet they'd sent only this small band of hooded warriors up the Gap to their deaths.

Why?

They rode without a word. Hoofs thundered like war drums, an oddly comforting sound. Their horses were all stallions. Each fighter was dressed in the same hardened-leather breastplate with forearm and thigh guards. These left their joints free for the movement required in hand-to-hand combat. They strapped their knives to calves and whips to hips, and carried their swords on their horses. These three weapons, a good horse, and a leather bottle full of water were all any of the Forest Guard required to survive a week and to kill a hundred. And the regular fighting force wasn't far behind.

Thomas flew over the hill's crest, leaned back, and pulled the stallion to a stamping halt. The others fell in along the ridge. Still not a word.

What they saw could not easily be put into words.

The sky was turning red, blood red, as it always did over the desert in the afternoons. To their right stretched the canyon lands, ten square miles of cliffs and boulders that acted as a natural barrier between the red deserts and the first of seven forests. Thomas's forest. Beyond the canyon's cliffs, red-tinged sand flowed into an endless sea of desert. This landscape was as familiar to Thomas as his own forest.

What he saw now was not.

At first glance, even to a trained eye, the subtle movement on the desert floor might have been mistaken for shimmering heat waves. It was hardly more than a beige discoloration rippling across the vast section of flat sand that fed into the canyons. But this was nothing so innocuous as desert heat.

This was the Horde army.

They wore beige hooded tunics to cover their gray scabbed flesh and rode light tan horses bred to disappear against the sand. Thomas had once ridden past fifty without distinguishing them from the sandstone.

"How many, Mikil?"

His second in command searched the horizon to the south. He followed her eyes. A dozen smaller contingents were heading up the Gap, armies of a few hundred each, not so much larger than the one they'd torn apart thirty minutes ago.

"Hundred thousand," she said. A strip of leather held her dark hair back from a tanned forehead. A small white scar on her right cheek marred an otherwise smooth, milky complexion. The cut had been inflicted not by the Horde, but by her own brother, who'd fought her to assert his strength just a year ago. She'd left him unscathed, underfoot, soundly defeated.

He'd died in a skirmish six months after.

Mikil's green eyes skirted the desert. "This will be a challenge." Thomas grunted at the understatement. They'd all been hardened by dozens of battles, but never had they faced an army so large. "The main body is moving south, along the southern cliffs." She was right. This was a new tactic for the Horde.

"They're trying to engage us in the Natalga Gap while the main force flanks us," Thomas said.

"And they look to succeed," his lieutenant William said. No one disagreed. No one spoke. No one moved.

Thomas scanned the horizon again and reviewed their bearings. To the west the desert ended in the same forested valley he'd protected from the Horde threat for the past fifteen years, ever since the boy had led them to the small paradise in the middle of the desert.

To the north and the south lay six other similar forests, inhabited by roughly a hundred thousand Forest People.

Thomas and Rachele had not met their first forest dweller until nearly a full year after finding the lake. His name was Ciphus of Southern, for he came from the great Southern Forest. That was the year they gave birth to their first child, a daughter they named Marie. Marie of Thomas. Those who'd originally come from the colored forest took designation according to which forests they lived in, thus Ciphus of Southern. The children who were born after the Great Deception took the names of their fathers. Marie of Thomas.

Three years later, Rachele and Thomas had a son, Samuel, a strong lad, nearly twelve now. He was wielding a sword already, and Thomas had to speak loudly to keep him from joining the battles.

Each forest had its own lake, and Elyon's faithful bathed each day to keep the painful skin disease from overtaking their bodies. This ritual cleansing was what separated them from the Scabs.

Each night, after bathing, the Forest People danced and sang in celebration of the Great Romance, as they called it. And each year the people of all seven forests, roughly a hundred thousand now, made the pilgrim-age to the largest forest, called the Middle Forest—Thomas's forest. The annual Gathering was to be held seven days from today. How many Forest People were now making the exposed trek across the desert, Thomas hated to imagine.

Scabs could become Forest People, of course—a simple bathing in the lake would cleanse their skin and wash away their disgusting stench. A small number of Scabs had become Forest People over the years, but it was the unspoken practice of the Forest Guard to discourage Horde defections.

There simply weren't enough lakes to accommodate all of them.

In fact, Ciphus of Southern, the Council elder, had calculated that the lakes could function adequately for only three hundred thousand. There simply wasn't enough water for the Horde, who already numbered well over a million. The lakes were clearly a gift from Elyon to the Forest People alone.

Discouraging the Horde from bathing was not difficult. The intense pain of moisture on their diseased flesh was enough to fill the Scabs with a deep revulsion for the lakes, and Qurong, their leader, had sworn to destroy the waters when he conquered the much-coveted resources of the forest lands.

The Desert Dwellers had first attacked thirteen years ago, descending on a small forest two hundred miles to the southwest. Although the clumsy attackers had been beaten back with rocks and clubs, over a hundred of Elyon's followers, mostly women and children, had been slaughtered.

Despite his preference for peace, Thomas had determined then that the only way to secure peace for the Forest People was to establish an army. With the help of Johan, Rachele's brother, Thomas went in hunt of metal, drawing upon his recollection of the histories. He needed copper and tin, which when mixed would form bronze, a metal strong enough for swords. They'd built a furnace and then heated rocks of all varieties until they found the kind that leaked the telltale ore. As it turned out, the canyon lands were full of ore. He still wasn't sure if the material from which he'd fashioned the first sword was actually bronze, but it was soft enough to sharpen and hard enough to cut off a man's head with a single blow.

The Horde came again, this time with a larger force. Armed with swords and knives, Thomas and a hundred fighters, his first Forest Guard, cut the attacking Desert Dwellers to shreds.

Word of a mighty warrior named Thomas of Hunter spread through-out the desert and forests alike. For three years after, the Horde braved only the occasional skirmish, always to their own terrible demise.

But the need to conquer the fertile forest land proved too strong for the swelling Horde. They brought their first major campaign up the Natalga Gap armed with new weapons, bronze weapons: long swords and sharp sickles and large balls swinging from chains. Though defeated then, their strength had continued to grow since.

It was during the Winter Campaign three years ago that Johan went missing. The Forest People had mourned his loss at the Gathering that year. Some had begged Elyon to remember his promise to deliver them from the heart of evil, from the Horde's curse, in one stunning blow. That day would surely come, Thomas believed, because the boy had spoken it before disappearing into the lake.

It would be best for Thomas and his Guard if today was that day.

"They'll be at our catapults along the southern cliffs in three marks on the dial," Mikil said, referring to the sundials Thomas had introduced to keep time. Then she added, "Three hours."

Thomas faced the desert. The diseased Horde army was pouring into the canyons like whipped honey. By nightfall the sands would be black with blood. And this time it would be as much their blood as the Horde's.

An image of Rachelle and young Marie and his son, Samuel, filled his mind. A knot swelled in his throat. The rest had children too, many children, in part to even odds with the Horde. How many children in the forests now? Nearly half the population. Fifty thousand.

They had to find a way to beat back this army, if only for the children. Thomas glanced down the line of his lieutenants, masters in combat, each one. He secretly believed any of them could capably lead this war, but he never doubted their loyalty to him, the Guard, and the forests. Even William, who was more than willing to point out Thomas's faults and challenge his judgment, would give his life. In matters of ultimate loyalty, Thomas had set the standard. He would rather lose a leg than a single one of them, and they all knew it.

They also knew that, of them all, Thomas was the least likely to lose a leg or any other body part in any fight. This even though he was forty and many of them in their twenties. What they knew, they'd learned mostly from him.

Although he'd not once dreamed of the histories for the past fifteen years, he did remember some things—his last recollection of Bangkok, for example. He remembered falling asleep in a hotel room after failing to convince key government officials that the Raison Strain was on their doorstep.

He could also recall bits and pieces of the histories, and he drew on his lingering if fading knowledge of its wars and technology, an ability that gave him considerable advantage over the others. For in large part, memory of the histories had been all but wiped out when the black-winged Shataiki had overtaken the colored forest. Thomas suspected that now only the Roush, who had disappeared after the Great Deception, truly remembered any of the histories.

Thomas transferred the reins to his left hand and stretched his fingers. "William, you have the fastest horse. Take the canyon back to the forest and bring the reinforcements at the perimeter forward."

It would leave the forest exposed, but they had little choice. "Forgive me for pointing out the obvious," William objected, "but taking them here will end badly."

"The high ground at the Gap favors us," Thomas said. "We hit them there."

"Then you'll engage them before the reinforcements arrive." "We can hold them. We have no choice."

"We always have a choice," William said. This was how it was with him, always challenging. Thomas had anticipated his argument and, in this case, agreed.

"Tell Ciphus to prepare the tribe for evacuation to one of the northern villages. He will object because he isn't used to the prospect of losing a battle. And with the Gathering only a week away, he will scream sacrilege, so I want you to tell him with Rachelle present. She'll make sure that he listens."

William faced him. "Me, to the village? Send another runner. I can't miss this battle!"

"You'll be back in time for plenty of battle. I depend on you, William."

Both missions are critical. You have the fastest horse and you're best suited to travel alone."

Although William needed no praise, it shut him up in front of the others.

Thomas faced Suzan, his most trusted scout, a young woman of twenty who could hold her own against ten untrained men. Her skin was dark, as was the skin of nearly half of the Forest

People. Their varying shades of skin tone also distinguished them from the Horde, who were all white from the disease.

"Take two of our best scouts and run the southern cliffs. We will join you with the main force in two hours. I want positions and pace when I arrive. I want to know who leads that army if you have to go down and rip his hood off yourself. In particular I want to know if it's the druid Martyn. I want to know when they last fed and when they expect to feed again. Everything, Suzan. I depend on you."

"Yes sir." She whipped her horse around. "Hiyaaa!" The stallion bolted down the hill with William in fast pursuit.

Thomas stared out at the Horde. "Well, my friends, we've always known this was coming. You signed on to fight. It looks like Elyon has brought us our fight."

Someone humphed. All here would die for the forests. Not all would die for Elyon.

"How many men in this theater?" Thomas asked Mikil.

"With the escorts out to bring the other tribes in *for* the Gathering, only ten thousand, but five thousand of those are at the forest perimeter," Mikil said. "We have fewer than five thousand to join a battle at the southern cliffs."

"And how many to intercept these smaller bands of Horde that intend to distract us?"

Mikil shrugged. "Three thousand. A thousand at each pass."

"We'll send a thousand, three hundred for each pass. The rest go with us to the cliffs."

For a moment all sat quietly. What strategy could possibly overturn such impossible odds? What words of wisdom could even Elyon himself offer in a moment of such gravity?

"We have six hours before the sun sets," Thomas said, pulling his horse around. "Let's ride."

"I'm not sure we *will* see the sun set," one of them said.

No voice argued.

2

CARLOS MISSIRIAN stared at Thomas Hunter.

The man lay on his back, sleeping in a tangle of sheets, naked except for boxer shorts. Sweat soaked the sheets. Sweat and blood. Blood? So much blood, smeared over the sheets, some dried and some still wet.

The man had bled in his sleep? *Was* bleeding in his sleep. Dead? Carlos stepped closer. No. Hunter's chest rose and fell steadily. There were scars on his chest and abdomen that Carlos couldn't remember, but no evidence of the slugs Carlos was sure he'd put into this same man in the last week.

He brought his gun to Hunter's temple and tightened his finger on the trigger.

3

A FLASH from the cliff. Two flashes.

Thomas, crouched behind a wide rock, raised the crude scope to his eye and scanned the hooded Scabs along the floor of the canyon. He'd fashioned the spyglass from his memory of the histories, using a resin from the pine trees, and although it hardly functioned as he suspected it should, it did give him a slight advantage over the naked eye. Mikil kneeled beside him.

The signal had come from the top of the cliffs, where he'd positioned two hundred archers each with five hundred arrows. They'd learned long ago that their odds were determined by the supply of munitions almost as much as by the number of men.

Their strategy was a simple, proven one. Thomas would lead a thousand warriors in a frontal assault that would choke the enemy along its front line. When the battlefield was sufficiently cluttered with dead Scabs, he would beat a hasty retreat while the archers rained thousands of arrows down on the crowded field. If all went well, they could at least slow the enemy down by clogging the wide canyon with the dead.

Two hundred cavalry waited with Thomas behind a long row of boulders. They kept their horses seated on the ground with gentle persuasion.

They'd done this once before. It was a wonder that the Horde was subjecting itself to "Sir!" A runner slid in from behind him, panting. "We have a report from the Southern Forest." Mikil shifted next to him.

"Go on. Quietly please."

"The Horde is attacking."

Thomas pulled the scope from his eye, then peered through it again.

He lifted his left hand, ready to signal his men's charge. The runner's report meant what?

That the Horde now had a new strategy.

That the situation had just gone from terrible to impossible. That the end was near.

"Give me the rest. Quickly."

"It's said to be the work of Martyn."

Again he pulled the glass from his eye. Returned it. Then this army wasn't being led by their new general, as he'd suspected. They'd been tracking the one called Martyn for a year now. He was a younger man; they'd forced that much out of a prisoner once. He was also a good tactician; they knew that much from the shifting engagements. And they suspected that he was a druid as well as a general. The Desert Dwellers had no declared religion, but *they* paid homage to the Shataiki in ways that were slowly but surely formalizing their worship of the serpentine bat on their crest. Teeleh. Some said that Martyn practiced the black arts; others said he was guided by Teeleh himself. Either way, his army seemed to be advancing in skill quickly.

If the Scab called Martyn led his army against the Southern Forest, could this army be a diversion? Or was the attack on the Southern Forest the diversion?

"On my signal, Mikil."

"Ready," she replied. She slipped into the saddle of her seated horse. "How many?" Thomas asked the runner.

"I don't know. We have fewer than a thousand, but they are in retreat."

"Who's in charge?"

"Jamous."

He jerked the lens from his face and looked at the man. "Jamous? Jamous is in retreat?"

"According to the report, yes."

If such a headstrong fighter as Jamous had fallen back, then the engaging force was stronger than any he'd fought before.

"There is also the warrior named Justin there."

"Sir?" It was Mikil.

He turned back, saw movement cresting the swell a hundred yards ahead, and took a deep breath. He lifted his hand and held it steady, waiting. Closer. The stench from their flaking skin reached his nostrils. Then their crest, the bronzed serpentine bat.

The Horde army rose into view, five hundred abreast at least, mounted on horses as pale as the desert sands. The warriors rode hooded and cloaked, grasping tall sicldes that rose nearly as high as their serpent.

Thomas slowed his breathing. His only task was to turn this army back. Diversion or not, if he failed here, it made no difference what happened at the Southern Forest.

Thomas could hear Mikil breathing steadily through her nose. *I will beg Elyon for your safety today, Mikil. I will beg Elyon for the safety of us all. If any should die, let it be that traitor, Justin.*

"Now!" He dropped his hand.

His warriors were moving already. From the left, a long row of foot soldiers, silent and low, crept like spiders over the sand.

Two hundred horses bearing riders rolled to their feet. Thomas whirled to the runner. "Word to William and Ciphus! Send a thousand warriors to the Southern Forest. If we are overtaken here, we will meet in the third forest to the north. Go!"

His main force was already ten yards ahead of him, flying for the

Horde, and Thomas wouldn't allow them to reach the battle first. Never. He swung into his saddle and kicked the stallion into a gallop. The black leaped over the boulders and raced for the long line of surprised Desert Dwellers, who'd stopped cold.

For a long moment the pounding of hooves was the only sound in the air. The sea of Scab warriors flowed down into the canyon and disappeared behind the cliffs. A hundred thousand sets of eyes peered out from the shadows of their hoods. These were the very ones who despised Elyon and hated his water. Theirs was a nomadic world of shallow, muddy wells and filthy, stinking flesh. They were hardly fit for life, much less the forests. And yet they would likely defile the lakes, ravage the forests, and plant their desert wheat.

These were the people of the colored *forest* gone amuck. The walkingdead. Better buried at the base of a cliff than allowed to roam like an unchecked plague.

These were also warriors. Men only, strong, and not as ignorant as they had once been. But they were slower than the Forest Guard. Their debilitating skin condition reached down into their joints and made dexterity a difficult prospect.

Thomas pounded past his warriors. Now he was in the lead, where he belonged. He rested his hand on the hilt of his sword.

Forty yards.

His sword came free of its scabbard with the loud scraping of metal against metal.

Immediately a roar ascended from the Horde, as if the drawn sword confirmed Thomas's otherwise dubious intentions. A thousand horses snorted and reared in objection to the heavy hands that jerked them back in fear. Those in the front line would surely know that although victory was ultimately ensured today, they would be among the first to die.

The Forest Guard rode hard, jaws clenched, swords still lowered by their legs, easy in their hands.

Thomas veered to the right, transferred his sword to his left hand, and raked it along the breasts of three Scabs before blocking the first sickle that compensated for his sudden change in direction.

The lines of horses collided. His fighters screamed, thrusting and parrying and beheading with a practiced frenzy. A pale horse fell directly in front of Thomas, and he glanced over to see that Mikil had lost her sword in its rider's side.

"Mikil!" With her forearm, she blocked a nasty swipe from a monstrous Scab sword and twisted in her saddle. Thomas ripped at the cords that held his second scabbard and hurled it to her, sword and all. She caught it, whipped the blade out, twirled it once through the air and swung downward at a charging foot soldier.

Thomas deflected a swinging sickle as it sliced for his head, jumped his stallion over the dying horse, and whirled to meet the attacker.

The battle found its rhythm. On every side blades broad and narrow, short and long, swung, parried, blocked, swiped, sliced. Blood and sweat soaked man and beast. The terrible din of battle filled the canyon. Wails and cries and snorts and moans of death rose to the sky.

So did the battle cries of one thousand highly trained warriors facing an endless reservoir of skillful Scabs.

Not three years ago, under the guidance of Qurong, the Horde's cavalry never failed to suffer huge losses. Now, under the direct command of their young general, Martyn, they weren't dying without a fight.

A tall Scab whose hood had slipped off his head snarled and lunged his mount directly into Thomas's path. The horses collided and reared, kicking at the air. With a flip of his wrist, Thomas unleashed his whip and cracked it against the Scab's head. The man screamed and threw an arm up. Thomas thrust his sword at the man's exposed side, felt it sink deep, then wrenched it free just as a foot soldier swung a club at him from behind. He leaned far to his right and slashed backward with his sword. The warrior crumpled, headless.

The battle raged for ten minutes in the Forest Guard's unquestioned favor. But with so many blades swinging through the air, some were bound to find the exposed flesh of Thomas's men or the flanks of their horses.

The Forest Guard began to fall.

Thomas sensed it as much as saw it. Two. Four. Then ten, twenty, forty. More.

Thomas broke form and galloped down the line. The obstruction from fallen horses and men was enough. To his alarm he saw that more of his men had fallen than he'd first thought. He had to get them back!

He snatched up the horn at his belt and blasted the signal for retreat. Immediately his men fled, on horse, on foot, sprinting past him as if they'd been firmly defeated.

Thomas held his horse steady for a moment. The Scabs, hardly used to such wholesale retreat, paused, apparently confused by the sudden turn of events.

As planned.

The number of his men among the dead, however, was not planned. Maybe two hundred!

For the first time that day, Thomas felt the razored finger of panic slice across his chest. He whirled his horse and tore after his fighters. He cleared the line of boulders in one long bound, slipped from his

horse, and dropped to one knee in time to see the first barrage of arrows from the cliff arc silently into the Horde.

Now a new kind of chaos ensued. Horses reared and Scabs screamed and the dead piled high where they fell. The Horde army was temporarily trapped by a dam made of its own warriors.

"Our losses are high," Mikil said beside him, breathing hard. "Three hundred."

"Three hundred!" He looked at his second. Her face was red with blood and her eyes shone with an unusual glare of defiance. Fatalism.

"We'll need more than bodies and boulders to hold them back," she said. She spit to the side.

Thomas scanned the cliffs. The archers were still sending arrows down onto the trapped army. As soon as the enemy cleared the bodies and

marched fresh horses up, twenty catapults along each cliff would begin to shower the Horde with boulders.

Then it would begin again. Another head-on attack by Thomas, followed by more arrows, followed by more boulders. He quickly did the math. At this rate they might be able to hold off the army for five rounds.

Mikil voiced his thoughts. "Even if we hold them off until nightfall, they'll march over us tomorrow."

The sky cleared of arrows. Boulders began to fall. Thomas had been working on the counterweight catapults for years without perfecting them. They were still useless on flat ground, but they did heave big rocks far enough over a cliff to make good use of gravity. Two-foot boulders made terrible projectiles.

A dull thump preceded the ground's tremor.

"It won't be enough," Mikil said. "We'd have to bring the whole cliff down on them."

"We need to slow the pace!" Thomas said. "Next time on foot only, and draw the battle out by withdrawing quickly. Pass the word. Fight defensively!"

The boulders stopped falling and the Horde cleared more bodies. Thomas led his fighters in another frontal assault twenty minutes later.

This time they played with the enemy, using the Marduk fighting method that Rachele and Thomas had developed and perfected over the years. It was a refinement of the aerial combat that Tanis had practiced in the colored forest. The Forest Guard knew it well and could play with a dozen Scabs under the right circumstances.

But here in crowded quarters with so many bodies and blades, their mobility was limited. They fought hard for thirty minutes and killed nearly a thousand.

This time they lost half of their force.

At this rate the Horde would be through their lines in an hour. The Desert Dwellers would stop for the night as was their custom, but Mikil was right. Even if the Guard could hold them off that long, Thomas's warriors would be finished in the morning. The Horde would reach his undefended Middle Forest in under one day. Rachele. The children. Thirty thousand defenseless civilians would be slaughtered.

Thomas searched the cliffs. *Elyon, give me strength.* The chill he'd felt earlier was spreading to his shoulders.

"Bring up the reinforcements!" he snapped. "Gerard, your command. Keep them on that line, by whatever means. Watch the cliff for signals. Coordinate the attacks." He tossed the lieutenant the ram's horn. "Elyon's strength," he said, holding up his fist.

Gerard caught the horn. "Elyon's strength. Count on me, sir."

"I am. You have no idea how much I am." Thomas turned to Mikil. "With me." They swung into their horses and pounded down the canyon.

His second followed him without question. He led her up a small hill and then doubled back along the path toward an overlook near the top.

The battlefield stretched out to their right. His archers were raining arrows down on the Scabs again. The dead were piled high. To see the Horde's front lines, an observer might think that the Forest Guard was routing the enemy. But a quick look down the canyon told a different story.

Thousands upon thousands upon thousands of hooded warriors waited in an eerie silence. This was a battle of attrition.

This was a battle that could not be won.

"Any word from the three parties to the north?" Thomas asked. "No. Let's pray they haven't broken through."

"They won't."

Thomas dismounted and studied the cliffs.

Mikil nudged her horse forward, then brought it snorting around. "Yes, I know you're impatient, Mikil." There was something about the cliffs that bothered Thomas. "You're wondering if I've gone mad; is that it?"

"My men are dying in a final battle and I've dismounted to watch it all." "I'm worried about Jamous. What's your plan?"

"Jamous can take care of himself."

"Jamous is in retreat! He would never retreat. What's your plan?"

"I don't have a plan."

"If you don't come up with one soon, you may never plan again," she said.

"I know, Mikil." He paced.

Mikil spit again. "We can't just sit here—"

"I'm *not* just sitting here!" Thomas faced her, suddenly furious and knowing he had no right to be. Not at her.

"I am thinking! You should start thinking!" He thrust an arm out toward the Horde now being pounded by boulders again. "Look out there and tell me what could possibly stop such a monstrous army! Who do you think I am? Elyon? Can I clap my hands and make these cliffs crush—"

Thomas stopped.

"What?" Mild! demanded. She glanced around for an enemy, sword in hand.

Thomas spun toward the valley. "What was it you said earlier?" "What? That you should be with your men?"

"No! The cliffs. You said we'd have to bring the whole cliff down on them."

"Yes, but we might as well try to bring the sun down on them."

It was an insane thought.

"What is it?" she demanded again.

"What if there *was* a way to bring the cliff

"There isn't."

He ran to the edge. "But *if*! If we could bring down the canyon walls near their rear, we could box them in, bring them down here, and we would trap them for an easy slaughter from above."

"What do you want to do, heat the whole cliff with a giant fire and empty the contents of the lake on it so that it cracks?"

He ignored her. It was reckless, but then so was doing nothing. "There's a fault along the cliff there. Do you see it?"

He pointed and she looked.

"So there's a fault. I still don't see how—"

"Of course you don't! But if we *could*, would it work?"

"If you could clap your hands and bring down the cliff on them, then I'd say we have a chance of sending every last one of the Scabs to the black forest where they belong."

A battle cry filled the canyon. Gerard was leading his newly reinforced ranks into the battle again.

"How long do you think we can hold them?" Thomas demanded. "Another hour. Maybe two."

Thomas paced and muttered under his breath. "That may not be enough!"

"Sir, please. You have to tell me what's going on. There's a reason I'm your second in command. If you can't, I am needed back on the battlefield."

"There was once a way to bring a cliff like this down. It was a long time ago, written about in the Books of Histories. Very few remember, but I do."

"And?"

Exactly. And what?

"I think it was called an explosion. A large ball of fire with tremendous strength. What if we could figure out how to cause an explosion?" She looked at him with a wrinkled brow.

"There was a time when I could get specific information about the histories. What if I could retrieve specific information on how to cause an explosion?"

"That's the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard! We're in the middle of a battle here. You expect to go on some kind of expedition to find information on the histories? You have battle fatigue!"

"No, not an expedition. I'm not sure it would even work. I've taken the fruit so long." The idea swelled in his mind and with it an excitement. "It would be the first time in fifteen years I haven't eaten the fruit. What if I can still dream?"

She stared at him as if he'd gone mad. Below them the battle still raged. "I would need to sleep; that's the only problem." He paced, eager for this idea now. "What if I can't sleep?"

"Sleep? You want to sleep? Now?"

"Dream!" he said, fist clenched. "I need to dream. I could dream as I used to and learn how to blow this cliff down!"

Mikil had been struck dumb.

"Do you have a better idea?" he asked forcefully.

"Not yet," she managed.

What if he couldn't dream? What if the rambutan required several days to wear off?

Thomas faced the canyon. He glanced at the far cliff, its fault line clear where the milky white rock turned red. In two hours all of his men would be dead.

But if he did have an explosive . . .

Thomas bounded for his horse and swung into the saddle. "Thomas!"

"Follow me!"

She followed at a gallop up the path to the cliff's lip. He swept past the first post and yelled at a full run.

"Delay them! Do whatever you must, but hold them until dark. I have a way."

"Thomas! What way?" came the cry. "Just hold them!" And then he was past. *Do you have a way, Thomas?*

He ran all the way down the line of archers and catapult teams, passing encouragement to each battery. "Hold them! Hold them till dark! Slow the pace. We have a way. If you hold them until dark, we have a way!"

Mikil said nothing.

When they passed the last catapult, Thomas pulled up.

"I'm with you only because you've saved my life a dozen times and I've sworn my own to you," Mikil said. "I hope you know that."

"Follow me."

He led her behind an outcropping of boulders and looked around. Good enough. He dismounted.

"What are we doing here?" she asked.

"We're dismounting." He found a rock the size of his fist and weighed it in one hand. As much as he disliked the thought of being hit in the head, he saw no alternative. There was no way he could fall asleep on his own. Not with so much adrenaline coursing through his veins.

"Here you go. I want you to knock me on the head. I need to sleep, but that's not going to happen, so you have to knock me unconscious." She looked around uncomfortably. "Sir—"

"Knock me out! That's an order. And hit me hard enough to do the job on the first try. Once I'm out, wake me up in ten minutes. Do you understand?"

"Ten minutes is enough to retrieve what you need?"

He stared at her, struck by the sound of the questions.

"Listen to me," she said. "You've turned me into a lunatic. The Horde's druids might practice their magic, but when have we ever? Never! This is like their magic."

True enough. The Horde druids were rumored to practice a magic that healed and deceived at once. Thomas had never seen either. Some said that Justin practiced the way of the druids.

"Ten minutes. Say it."

"Yes, of course. Ten minutes."

"Then hit me."

She stepped forward. "You really—"

"Hit me!"

Mikil swung the rock.

Thomas blocked the blow.

"What are you doing?" she demanded.

"Sorry. It was reflex. I'll close my eyes this time."

He closed his eyes.

His head exploded with light.

His world faded to black.

4

THOMAS HUNTER awoke in perfect stillness, and he knew three things before his heart had completed its first heavy beat.

One, he knew that he wasn't the same man who'd fallen asleep just nine hours ago. He'd lived fifteen years in another reality and had been transformed by new knowledge and skills.

Two, none of those skills, unfortunately, included surviving a bullet to the head, as was once the case.

Three, there was a bullet in the barrel of the gun that at this very moment pressed lightly against his head.

He kept his eyes shut and his body limp. His head throbbed from Mikil's blow. His mind raced. Panic.

No, not panic. How many times had he faced death over the last fifteen years? Even here, in this dream world, he'd been shot twice in the last week, and each time he'd been healed by Elyon's water.

But this time there was no healing water. It had disappeared with the colored forest fifteen years ago.

A soft, low whisper filled his ear. "Good-bye, Mr. Hunter."

CARLOS MISSIRIAN let the last satisfying moment linger. A line from a movie he'd once seen drummed through his mind.

Dodge this.

Yes, Mr. Hunter, just try to dodge this. He tightened his finger on the trigger.

Hunter's body jerked.

For a split second, Carlos thought he'd shot the gun and sent a bullet through the man's brain, which explained Hunter's sudden jerk. But there had been no detonation.

And his gun was flying across the room.

And his wrist stung.

In one horrifying moment of enlightenment, Carlos saw that Thomas Hunter had slapped the gun from his hand and was now rolling away from him, far too quickly for any ordinary man.

Nothing of this kind had ever happened to Carlos. It confused him. There was something very wrong about this man who seemed to retrieve information and skills from his dreams at

will. If Carlos were a mystic, as his mother was, he might be tempted to think Hunter was a demon.

The man came to his feet and faced Carlos on the opposite side of the bed. He had no weapon and wore only boxer shorts. He was bleeding from a fresh cut on his forearm that Carlos hadn't put there. Curious. Perhaps that explained the blood on the sheets.

Carlos withdrew his knife. Ordinarily his next course of action would be straightforward. He would either bear down on the unarmed man and slash his abdomen or neck, whichever presented itself, or he'd send the knife flying from where he stood. Despite the ease with which actors knocked aside hurling blades in the movies, deflecting a well-thrown stiletto in real combat wasn't an easy task.

But Hunter wasn't an ordinary man.

They faced off, both cautious.

It occurred to Carlos that Thomas had changed. Physically he was the same man with the same loose brown hair and green eyes, the same strong jaw and steady hands, the same muscled chest and abdomen. But he carried himself differently now, with a simple, unshakable confidence. He stood tall, hands loose at his sides. Hunter watched Carlos with unwavering eyes, the way a man might look at a challenging mathematics equation rather than a threatening foe.

Carlos knew that he should be diving for the gun on the floor to his left or throwing the knife he'd drawn. But his fascination with this man delayed his reactions. If Svensson knew the full extent of Hunter's capabilities, he might insist he be taken alive. Perhaps Carlos would take the matter up with Armand Fortier.

"What's your name?" Thomas asked. His eyes glanced sideways, to the gun and back.

Carlos eased to his left. "Carlos."

"Well, Carlos, it seems that we meet again."

They both went for the gun at the same time. Hunter reached it first. Kicked it under the bed. Sprang back.

"I never did like guns," Thomas said. "You wouldn't by any chance be interested in a fair fight, would you? Swords?"

"Swords would be fine," Carlos said. There was no way to get the gun now. "Unfortunately, we don't have time for games today."

The woman would be coming. At any moment she'd knock on the door and wake her brother as promised. If either of them raised an alarm . . .

Carlos lunged for Thomas.

The man sidestepped his thrusting blade, but not quickly enough to avoid it. The edge sliced into his shoulder.

Thomas ignored the cut and leaped toward the door.

You're fast, but not that fast. With two long steps to his right Carlos cut the man off.

"You've slipped through my fingers twice," he said. "Not today." He backed Thomas into the corner. Blood ran down his arm. How he'd once managed to survive a high-velocity slug to the head, Carlos had no clue, but the cut on his arm wasn't healing now. One well-directed slash, and Thomas Hunter's blood would turn the beige carpet red.

Hunter suddenly spread his mouth and yelled at the top of his lungs.

"Kaaaaa!"

KARA HAD just flushed the toilet when her brother's voice sounded through the walls.