

GREEN

THE CIRCLE SERIES | BOOK ZERO

BY

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THOMAS HUNTER STOOD next to his wife, Chelise, facing the shallow canyon lined by three thousand of Elyon's lovers, who'd drowned in the red lakes to rid their bodies of the scabbing disease that covered the skin of all Horde.

The reenactment of The Great Wedding had taken an hour, and the final salute, which would usher the Gathering into a wild night of celebration, was upon them.

As was customary, both he and Chelise were dressed in white, because Elyon would come in white. She with lilies in her hair and long flowing gown spun from silk; he in a bleached tunic, dyed red around the collar to remind them of the blood that had paid for this wedding.

This was their great romance, and there could not possibly be a dry eye in the valley.

Six maidens also in white faced Chelise and Thomas on their knees and sang The Great Wedding's song. Their sweet, yearning voices filled the valley as they cried the refrain in melodic unison, faces bright with an eager desperation.

You are Beautiful . . . so Beautiful . . . Beautiful . . . Beautiful . .

The drums lifted the cry to a crescendo. Milus, one of the older children, had recounted their history earlier in the night to thundering applause. Now Thomas retraced from his own vantage all that had brought them here.

Ten years ago, most of these people had been Horde, enslaved by Teeleh's disease. The rest were Forest Dwellers who had kept the disease at bay by washing in Elyon's lakes once every day as he'd directed.

Then the Horde, led by Qurong, had invaded the forests and defiled the lakes. All had succumbed to the scabbing disease, which deceived the mind and cracked the skin.

But Elyon made a new way to defeat the evil disease: Any Horde simply had to drown in one of the red pools, and the disease would be washed away, never to return. Those who chose to drown and find new life were called albinos by the Horde, because their skin, whether dark or light, was smooth.

The albinos formed a Circle of trust and followed their leader, Thomas of Hunter.

The Horde, however, divided into two races: Purebred Horde, who'd always had the scabbing disease, and half-breeds, who'd been Forest Dwellers but turned Horde after Qurong's invasion of the forests. The full-breed Horde despised and persecuted the half-breeds because they'd once been Forest Dwellers.

Eram, a half-breed, had fled Qurong's persecution and welcomed all half-breeds to join him in the deep northern desert, where they thrived as Horde and enemies of Qurong. Nearly half a million, rumor had it.

They called the faction who followed Eram *Eramites*, remnants of the faithful who were as diseased as any other Scab. All suffered from the sickly, smelly disease that covered the skin and clouded the mind.

Thomas glanced at his bride. To look at Chelise's smooth, bronzed jaw now . . . her bright emerald eyes had once been gray. Her long blond hair had once been tangled dreadlocks smothered in morst paste to fight the stench of the scabbing disease.

Chelise, who'd given birth to one of his three children, was a vision of perfect beauty. And in so many ways they were all perfectly beautiful, as Elyon was beautiful. *Beautiful, Beautiful, Beautiful.*

They had all once denied Elyon, their maker, their lover, the author of the Great Romance. Now they were the Circle, roughly twelve thousand who lived in nomadic tribes, fugitives from the Horde hunters who sought their death.

Three thousand had come together northwest of Qurongi City in a remote, shallow canyon called Paradosse. They did this every year to express their solidarity and celebrate their passion for Elyon.

The Gathering, they called it. This year four Gatherings would take place near four forests, one north, one south, one east, one west. The danger of all twelve thousand crossing the desert from where they had scattered and coming to one location was simply too great.

Thomas scanned the three thousand strewn along the rocks and on the earth in a huge semicircle before him. After three days of late nights and long days filled with laughter and dancing and innumerable embraces of affection, they now stared at him in wide-eyed silence.

A large bonfire raged to his left, casting shifting shadows over their intent gazes. To his right, the red pool glistened, black in the night, one of seventy-seven they'd found throughout the land. Cliffs surrounded the hidden canyon, broken only by two gaps wide enough for four horses abreast. Guards lined the top of the cliffs, keeping a keen eye on the desert beyond for any sign of Horde.

How many times over the past ten years had members of the Circle been found and slaughtered wholesale? Too many to count. But they had learned well, gone deep, tracked the Horde's movements, become invisible in the desert canyons. So invisible that the Scabs now often referred to the Circle as ghosts.

But Thomas now knew that the greatest danger no longer came from the Horde.

Treachery was brewing inside the Circle.

A horse snorted from the corrals around the bend behind Thomas. The fire popped and crackled as hungry flames lapped at the shimmering waves of heat they chased into the cool night air. The breathing of several thousand bodies steadied in the magic of the maiden's song.

Still no sign of his elder son, Samuel.

An echo followed the last note and silence fell upon the Gathering as the maidens backed slowly into the crowd. Thomas lifted his gray chalice, filled to the brim with Elyon's red healing waters from the pool.

As one, the followers of Elyon lifted their chalices out to him, level with their steady gazes. The Salute. Their eyes held his, some defiant in their determination to stay true, many wet with tears of gratitude for the great sacrifice that had first turned the pools red.

The leaders stood to his left. Mikil and Jamous, her husband, side by side, goblets raised, staring forward, waiting for Thomas. Suzan, one of the many colored albinos and her lover, Johan, who had been a mighty warrior—was a mighty warrior—gripped each other's hands and watched Thomas.

Marie, his daughter from his first wife, who was now with Elyon, stood next to his youngest child, Jake, who was five years old one month ago. Where had all the years gone? The last time he'd taken a breath, Marie had been sixteen; now she was twenty-

five. A hundred boys would have wed her years ago if Thomas hadn't been so stuffy, as she put it. At eighteen Marie had lost interest in boys and taken up scouting with Samuel. Her betrothal to Vadal, the dark-skinned man next to her, had occurred only after she abandoned her old passions.

Samuel, on the other hand, still pursued his, with enough eagerness to keep Thomas pacing late into the night on occasion.

And still, no sign of the boy. He'd been gone for a day.

The Circle waited, and he let the moment stretch to the snapping point. A presence here warmed the back of his neck with anticipation. They couldn't see him, hadn't seen him for many years, but Elyon was near.

Elyon—as the boy, as the warrior, as the lion, the lamb, the giver of life and the lover of all. Their Great Romance was for him. He'd given his life for them and they for him.

They all wore the symbol that represented their own history, a medallion or a tattoo shaped like a circle, with an outer ring in green to signify the beginning, the life of Elyon. Then a black circle to remember evil's crushing blow. Two straps of red crossed the black circle, the death that brought life in the red waters.

And at the center, a white circle, for it was prophesied that Elyon would come again on a white horse and rescue his bride from the dragon Teeleh, who pursued her day and night.

Soon, Thomas thought. Elyon had to come soon. If he did not, they would fall apart. They'd been wandering in the desert for ten years, like lost Israelites without a home. At celebrations like this, surrounded by song and dance, they all knew the truth. But when the singing was over . . . how quickly they could forget.

Still he held them, three minutes now, and not a man, woman, or child over the age of two spoke. Even the infants seemed to understand that they had reached the climax of the three-day celebration. Later they would feast on the fifty boar they'd slaughtered and set over fires at the back of the canyon. They would dance and sing and boast of all things worthy and some not.

But they all knew that every pleasure they tasted, every hope that filled their chests, every moment of peace and love rested firmly on the meaning behind the words that Thomas would now speak.

His low voice flooded the canyon with an assurance that brought a tremble to their limbs.

“Lovers of Elyon who have drowned in the lakes and been given life, this is our hope, our passion, our only true reason to live.”

“It is as he says,” Chelise said in a light voice choked with emotion.

Together the three thousand responded, “He speaks the truth.” Their soft voices rumbled through the valley.

They knew Elyon by many names: The Creator, who'd fashioned them; the Warrior, who'd once rescued them; the Giver of gifts, who gave them the fruit that healed and sustained them. But they'd agreed to simply call him Elyon several years earlier, when a heretic from a southern tribe began to teach that Thomas himself was their savior.

Thomas spoke with more intensity. "He has rescued us. He has wooed us. He has lavished us with more pleasures than we can contain in this life."

"It is as he says," Chelise said.

Their reply washed over Thomas like a wave, gaining volume. "He speaks the truth."

"Now we wait for the return of our king, the prince warrior who loved us while we were yet Horde."

"It is as he says!"

"He speaks the truth!"

"Our lives are his, born in his waters, made pure by the very blood we now raise to the sky!" Thomas thundered each word.

And Chelise cried her agreement. "It is as he says!"

"He speaks the truth." Their voices spilled over the canyon walls for any within a mile on this still night to hear.

"Remember Elyon, brothers and sisters of the Circle! Live for him! Ready the bride, make a celebration ready for he is among us!"

“It is as he says!”

The volume rose to a crushing roar. “He speaks the truth.”

“I speak the truth.”

“He speaks the truth!”

“I speak the truth!”

“He speaks the truth!”

Silence.

“Drink to remember. To the Great Romance. To Elyon!”

This time their response was whispered in utmost reverence, as if each syllable was something as precious as the red water in their hands.

“To Elyon.”

Thomas closed his eyes, brought the chalice to his lips, tilted it back, and let the cool water flow into his mouth. The red liquid swirled around his tongue then seeped down his throat, leaving a lingering copper taste. He let the gentle effects of the first few drops warm his belly for a second, then swallowed deep, flooding his mouth and throat with the healing waters.

They weren't nearly as strong as the green lake waters that had once flowed with Elyon's presence. And they didn't contain the same medicinal qualities of the fruit that hung from the trees around the pools, but they lifted spirits and brought simple pleasure.

He took three full gulps of the precious water, allowing some to spill down his chin, then pulled the chalice away, cleared his throat with one final swallow, and gasped at the night sky.

“To Elyon!”

As one, the Circle pulled their goblets from their mouths like parched warriors satisfied by sweet ale and roared at the night sky.

“To Elyon!”

And with that cry, the spirit of celebration was released.

Thomas turned to Chelise, drew her to him with his free arm, and kissed her wet lips. A thousand voices cried their approval, chased by undulating calls from the unwed maidens and their hopeful suitors. Chelise’s laughter filled his mouth as he spun back to the crowd, goblet still raised.

He pulled her forward, so all could see his bride. “Is there anyone here who would dare not love as Elyon has loved us all? Can anyone not remember the disease that covered their flesh?” Thomas looked at Chelise and spoke his poetic offering around a subtle grin that undoubtedly failed to properly express his love for this woman.

“What beauty, what pleasure, what intoxicating love he has given me for my own ashes. In place of the stench that once filled my very own nostrils he has given me this fragrance. A princess whom I can serve. She numbs my mind with dizzying pictures of exquisite beauty.”

They all knew he was speaking of Chelise, who had been the princess of the Horde, Qurong's very own daughter. Now she was the bride of Elyon, Thomas's lover, the bearer of his youngest son, who stared up at them with wonder next to Marie.

"He speaks the truth," Johan said, grinning. He took a pull from his goblet and dipped his head.

"He speaks the truth," they returned, followed more calls and rounds of drinks.

Johan, too, had been Horde not so long ago, charged with killing hundreds—thousands by the time it was all over—of Elyon's followers.

Thomas thrust his goblet toward the Gathering, unmindful of the liquid that splashed out; there were seventy-seven pools filled with the red waters and not one had ever showed any sign of going dry.

"To the Horde."

"To the Horde!"

And they drank again, flooding themselves with the intoxicating waters in a start to what promised to be a night of serious, unrestricted celebration.

"Aye, Father." The male voice came from behind and to his right. The husky, unmistakable sound of Samuel. "To the Horde."

Thomas lowered his chalice and turned to see his son perched atop his horse, drilling him with his bright green eyes. He rode low

in the pale stallion's saddle and moved with the horse as if he'd been bred and born on the beast. His dark hair fell to his shoulders, blown by a hard ride. Sweat had mixed with the red mud that he and those of his band applied to their cheekbones; streaks etched his darkened face and neck. His leather chest guard was open, allowing the night air to cool his bared chest, still glistening in the moonlight.

He had his mother's nose and eyes.

A stab of pride sliced through Thomas's heart. Samuel might have gone astray, but this image of his boy could have been *him* fifteen years ago.

The stallion's clip-clopping hooves echoed as it stepped into the fire-light, followed by three, then five, then nine warriors who'd taken up arms with Samuel. All were dressed in the same battle dress of the Forest Guard, largely abandoned since the Circle had laid down arms eleven years ago. Only the guards and scouts wore the protective leathers to ward off arrows and blades.

But Samuel . . . no amount of reason seemed to jar good sense into his thick skull.

His son stilled his horse with a gentle tug on its reins. His followers stopped behind him in a loose formation that left them with no weak flank, standard Guard protocol by his own orders. Samuel and his band moved with the ease of seasoned warriors.

A few catcalls from different points in the crowd raised praise for the man who scanned them without a hint of acknowledgement.

“Hear, Samuel! Elyon’s strength, boy!” A pause. “Keep the boogers in their stink hole, Samuel!”

This remark was a departure from general sentiment, though not as distant from the heart of the Circle as it once had been. Thomas was all too aware of the rumblings among many clans.

“Nice of you to join us, Samuel,” Thomas said, tipping his chalice in the boy’s direction.

His son looked directly at Chelise, dipped his head, then looked back at the three thousand gathered in the natural amphitheater. “To the Horde,” he called.

“To the Horde.” But only half took up the cry. The rest, like Thomas, heard the bite in Samuel’s voice.

“To the stinking, bloody Horde who butcher our children and spread their filthy disease through our forests!” Samuel cried, voice now bitter with mockery.

Only a few took him up. “Stinking, bloody Horde.”

“Our friends, the Horde, have sent their apologies for taking the life of our own three days ago. They have sent us all a gift to express their remorse, and I have brought it to our Gathering.”

Samuel stuck his hand out, palm up. A dark object sailed forward, lobbed by Petrus, Son of Jeremiah, and Samuel snatched it out of the air as if it were a water bag needing to be refilled. He

tossed it onto the ground. The object bounced once and rolled to stop where fire-light illuminated the fine details of their prize.

This was a head. A human head. A Horde head with a mane of long dreadlocks, covered in disease

A chill snaked down Thomas's spine. This, he thought, was the beginning of the end.

TO BE CONTINUED IN

GREEN

COMING SEPTEMBER 2009