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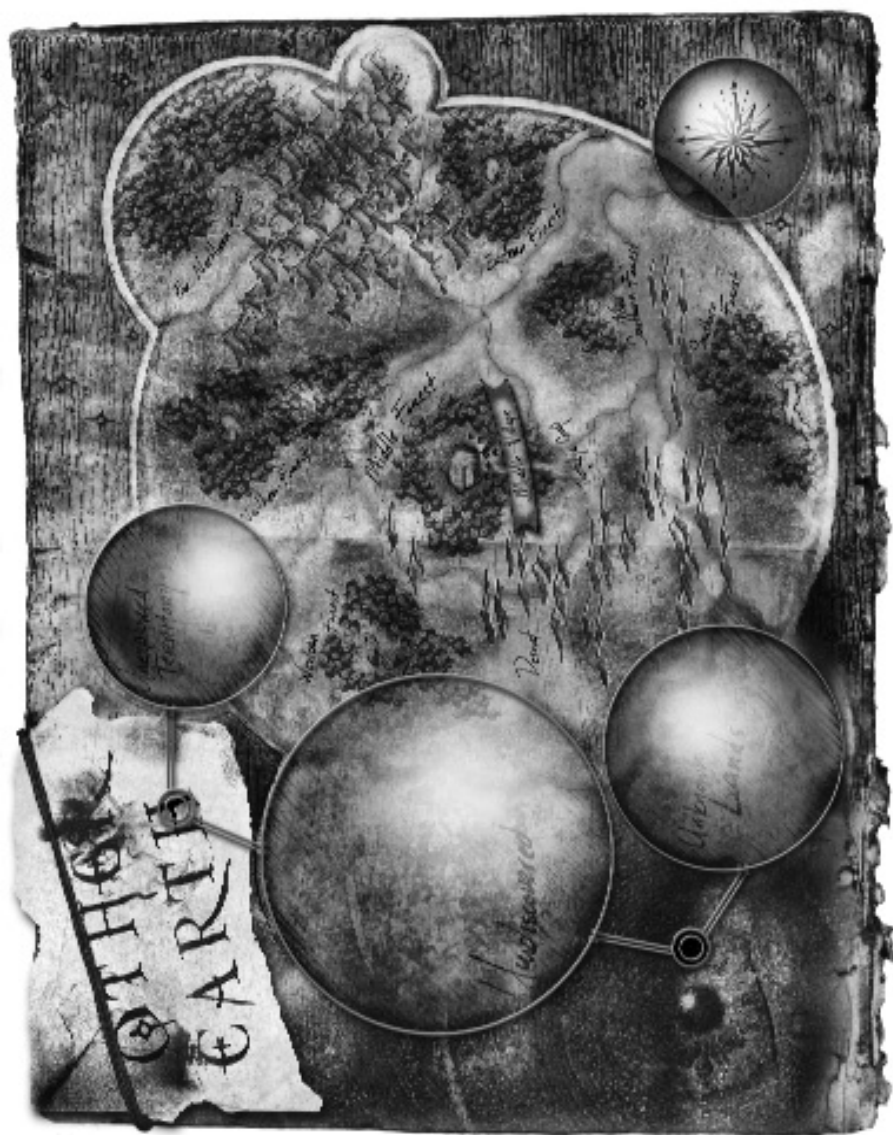
TED DEKKER

THE LOST BOOKS ♦ 1

CHOSEN



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CHEVROLET TED DEKKER THOMAS NELSON
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HEROES WANTED

Secret society requests help in locating ancient book with the power to destroy life as we know it. Immediate openings available. Applicants must possess exceptional treasure hunting skills, a hunger for adventure and the ability to work under pressure. A strong desire to save the world is also required.

REWARDS INCLUDE:

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------|
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contest ends May 14, 2008



COMMITTED TO THE ENVIRONMENT

GOING GREEN

Factories need a lot of energy to run. They need electricity to run machines and light the buildings and natural gas to heat the buildings. Fossil fuels, which are burned to make electricity, and natural gas are considered non-renewable natural resources. This means that once they are used up, they are gone forever.

To help conserve our natural resources, GM has turned to renewable resources and alternative technologies for more efficient and environmentally friendly ways of producing and consuming energy. In fact, GM has reduced its energy use in its North American facilities by 25 percent over the past five years. It has done this by using landfill gas and solar power, but most of all by being efficient and conserving energy.

LANDFILL GAS

The rotting garbage in landfills generates gas. If unused, the gas is released into the atmosphere, contributing to greenhouse gas emissions. Instead, GM captures this gas to be used as a renewable energy source.

At GM facilities, the landfill gas is piped to the plant and burned in boilers for heat. Using renewable resources such as landfill gas reduces the plant's reliance on fossil fuels such as coal and oil.

The amount of landfill gas currently used at seven GM plants is equivalent to the energy needed to heat more than 25,000 households per year. Landfill gas use by GM generates annual savings of about \$5 million Solar Power

Solar power is another way in which GM is using renewable resources. At GM's Service Parts Operations Parts Distribution Center in Rancho Cucamonga, Calif., solar panels on the roof help keep costs down and reduce the facility's environmental impact. Solar panels take sunlight

and turn it into electricity by using photovoltaic modules. The solar panels at the Cucamonga plant produce 50 percent of the electricity used at the facility. From 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., solar panels power the warehouse, where 215 employees ship nearly 76,000 customer orders to GM car dealerships across California and Arizona.

Using the power of the sun replaces 675 tons of coal each year. The electricity that is not consumed is fed back into the grid. For example, in September 2006, GM was able to power this facility and also provide energy back to the grid sufficient to power 210 homes.

EFFICIENCY

GM is also committed to finding more efficient ways for using natural resources at its plant facilities. For example, GM's new Lansing Delta Township Assembly Plant in Michigan is expected to save more than 40 million gallons of water and 30 million kilowatt-hours of electricity during the next 10 years by implementing innovative energy conservation techniques.

Some of the environmental highlights of the Lansing Delta Township plant include:

- A 1.5-million-square-foot roof is made of a special white polymer that reduces heat absorption, resulting in reduced costs to cool the building in the summer.
- A drain system on the roof that collects rainwater and stores it in cisterns above rest rooms. The rainwater is used instead of drinking water to flush toilets.
- Waterless urinals that use a filter-based technology save more than 1 million gallons of water annually.
- 75 acres, half of the land at the site, has been set aside to preserve plant and wildlife habitat.

A GREENER ENVIRONMENT

By continuing to reduce its energy consumption when it builds cars and trucks, GM is demonstrating its commitment to reducing the environmental impact of manufacturing.

www.gm.com/explore/education

Find the Book Win the Chevy Sweepstakes Official Rules

NO PURCHASE, TEST DRIVE OR SUBMISSION TO SALES PRESENTATION NECESSARY TO ENTER OR WIN. PURCHASE DOES NOT INCREASE CHANCES OF WINNING. VOID WHERE PROHIBITED BY LAW.

Sweepstakes Dates: The Find the Book Win the Chevy Sweepstakes ("Sweepstakes") begins on 1/15/2008 at 12:01 a.m. Eastern Time ("ET") and ends on 5/14/2008 at 11:59 p.m. ET (the "Promotion Period").

Who is Eligible: To enter, you must be a legal resident of the 50 United States or District of Columbia and be age 16 or older. An eligible minor should have parental consent to enter. Employees, officers, directors and agents of Circle Media, LLC, Thomas Nelson, brandWAVES, BuzzPlant, Ground Force Network, Creative Trust (collectively, "Sponsors"), American Hole 'n One ("Administrator"), Chevrolet Motor Division, General Motors Corporation, eChomusic and each of their respective parents, affiliated companies, subsidiaries, distributors, dealers, retailers, printers, advertising and promotion agencies and any and all other companies associated the design or execution of this Sweepstakes (collectively, the "Promotion Parties"), and the members of the immediate families (spouse, parent, child, sibling and their respective spouses, regardless of where they reside) or households, whether or not related, of any of the above, are not eligible to enter or win. The Sweepstakes is subject to all applicable federal, state and local laws and regulations. Void where prohibited by law.

How to Enter: Visit the Official Ted Dekker Website (www.Teddekker.com) or (www.booksofhistory.com) and complete the online entry form in its entirety, according to the provided instructions. All entries must be received by 5/14/2008 at 11:59 PM ET to be eligible. A valid email address is required to enter and win online.

Limit one (1) entry per person and per email address and per household per week for the entire Promotion Period. Entries generated by script, macro or other automated means will be void. All entries become the property of the Administrator and will not be returned.

Weekly Winner Selection: A random drawing will be conducted by the Administrator on or about Monday following the end of each of the first nine (9) weeks of the sweepstakes starting on or about 3/10/2008 to select potential winners from among all eligible entries received for the week at issue in accordance with these rules. For the purpose of this Sweepstakes, a week will begin on Monday at 12:01 a.m. ET and end on the following Sunday at 11:59 p.m. ET, except for the first week which will begin on Tuesday, January 15, 2008 at 11:59 p.m. ET. Odds of winning depend on the number of eligible entries received for the week at issue. Nonwinning eligible entries from one week will carry over into subsequent weeks. Potential winners will be notified initially by mail, telephone and/or email and may be required to execute and return a W-9 form, an affidavit of eligibility and liability and, unless prohibited by law, publicity release within a time period specified by Administrator. If a potential winner is ineligible or otherwise fails to return such documents within the specified time period fully-executed, or if Administrator is unsuccessful after three (3) attempts to notify a potential winner, a potential winner cannot or does not wish to accept the prize or is not in compliance with these rules, such potential winner will be disqualified and, at Administrator's discretion, an alternate winner will be randomly selected for the drawing at issue and notified as per the procedures outlined above. Failure to collect or properly claim a prize in accordance with these rules will result in forfeiture of the prize. If forfeited for any reason, Administrator will have no further obligation to such winner and may, at its sole discretion, randomly select an alternate winner for the drawing at issue who will be notified as per the procedures outlined above. If any winner is a minor in his/her state of residence, prize may be awarded in the name of his/her parent or legal guardian who will be responsible for fulfilling all requirements imposed on winners set forth herein.

Weekly Prizes: Week One Prize (1): Apple iPod Touch (8GB) (Approximate Retail Value ("ARV"): \$299). Week Two Prize (5): \$100 Best Buy Gift Card (ARV: \$100 each). Week Three Prize (1): Apple iPod Touch (16GB) (ARV: \$399). Week Four Prize (1): Xbox 360 Game System (ARV: \$349.99). Week Five Prize (2) \$250 Amazon.com Gift Card (ARV: \$250 each.) Week Six Prize (5): One Year Netflix Membership [which level of membership?] (ARV: \$203.88 each). Week Seven Prize (1): Sony PS3 w/ Blu Ray (ARV: \$399.99). Week Eight Prize (1): \$1,000 Amazon.com Gift Card (ARV: \$1,000). Week Nine Prizes (1 of each prize): Canon Powershot Digital Camera (1) (ARV: \$199.99) and Sony 1Mp Handycam Video Camera (ARV: \$699.99) (exact models to be selected by Administrator). Limit one (1) Weekly Prize per household; however winners of Weekly Prizes are still eligible to win a Grand through Third Prize (as described below).

Grand Prize Drawing: A random drawing will be conducted by the Administrator on or about 5/15/2008 to select potential Grand through Third Prize winners from among all eligible entries received for the entire Sweepstakes. Odds of winning depend on the number of eligible entries received for the entire Sweepstakes. Potential Grand through Third Prize winners will be notified initially by phone and each will be asked to confirm his/her eligibility, and indicate his/her willingness to accept the applicable prize. Upon confirmation of his/her eligibility as well as his/her willingness to accept the applicable prize, such potential winner (or, if an eligible minor, his/her parent or legal guardian) will be required to execute and return a W-9 form, an affidavit of eligibility and liability and, unless prohibited by law, publicity release within a time period specified by Administrator. If a potential Grand through Third Prize winner is ineligible or otherwise fails to return such documents within the specified time period fully-executed, or if Administrator is unsuccessful after three (3) attempts to reach and speak directly with the potential Grand through Third Prize winner by phone over a 48-hour period, a potential Grand through Third Prize winner cannot or does not wish to accept the prize or is not in compliance with these rules, such potential Grand through Third Prize winner will be disqualified and, at Administrator's discretion, an alternate winner will be randomly selected for the prize at issue and notified as per the procedures outlined above. Failure to collect or properly claim a prize in accordance with these rules will result in forfeiture of the prize. If forfeited for any reason, Administrator will have no further obligation to such winner and may, at its sole discretion, randomly select an alternate winner for the prize at issue who will be notified as per the procedures outlined above. If any winner is a minor in his/her state of residence, prize may be awarded in the name of his/her parent or legal guardian who will be responsible for fulfilling all requirements imposed on winners set forth herein.

Grand Prize Drawing: One (1) Grand Prize: a 2008 Chevrolet Cobalt with Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price (MSRP) not to exceed \$19,000 (color and options to be determined solely by Administrator). Winner is solely responsible for any expenses in connection with the prize not expressly described herein as being awarded including, without limitation, the following: (i) income, federal, state or local taxes; (ii) insurance, registration fees, delivery charges, dealer preparation fees and/or additional options, additions or equipment; and (iii) any

additional expenses not described herein as being awarded. Grand Prize winner must have a valid U.S. driver's license issued in his/her state of residence and proof of insurance to take delivery, and the color, options, package, accessories, and other specifics will be at Administrator's sole discretion. Grand Prize winner must take delivery of vehicle at a dealership near winner's residence specified by Administrator. Second Prize: 42" Sony Aquos LCD HDTV (valued at \$1349.99), Sony Bravia Home Theater System (valued at \$449), and Sony Blu Ray Disc Player (valued at \$399.99) (ARV of Second Prize Package: \$2,198.98. Third Prize: Apple 13" MacBook (White) (valued at \$1,299.00) and an Apple iPod Touch (8GB) (valued at \$299) (ARV of Third Prize Package: \$1,598). Limit one (1) Grand through Third Prize per household.

General Prize Conditions and Restrictions: Gift cards are subject to terms and conditions specified by issuer. Prizes are non-transferable and no cash redemption or prize substitution allowed, except at Administrator's sole discretion. Administrator reserves the right to substitute a prize (or portion thereof) of comparable or greater value, at their sole discretion. Winners, if prize is valued at \$600 or more, will be issued an IRS Form 1099 reflecting the actual value of the prize. Winners will be responsible for paying all income, federal, state and local taxes on prizes as well as any other costs and expenses associated with prize acceptance and use not specified herein as being provided, including any costs of installation. Prizes are awarded "as is" with no warranty or guarantee, either express or implied by Administrator. All prize details, including exact models, are at Administrator's discretion. Total ARV of all prizes: \$28,165.33

Additional Rules & Restrictions: By participating in this Sweepstakes, entrants (and, if eligible minors, their parents or legal guardians) agree to abide by and be bound by these Official Rules and the decisions of the Administrator, which shall be final and binding in all matters relating to this Sweepstakes. In the event a winner is found to be in violation of any of these rules, he/she will be required to forfeit the prize or to reimburse the Administrator for the stated value of the prize if such violation is found after the prize has been used by winner. Acceptance of a prize constitutes permission for Sponsor and their designees to use each winner's name, city and state of residence and/or likeness for purposes of advertising and trade in any and all media now or hereafter known worldwide in perpetuity, without limitation or further compensation, notification or permission, unless prohibited by law. By participating, entrant (and, if an eligible minor, his/her parent or legal guardian) agrees to release and hold Promotion Parties harmless from and against any and all claims, damages and liability of any kind arising from or in connection with, in whole or in part, directly or indirectly, the acceptance, possession or use/misuse of any prize (including any injury or harm resulting from use of the Grand Prize), participation in the Sweepstakes or in any prize-related activities, and assumes all liability in connection therewith. CAUTION: ANY ATTEMPT BY AN INDIVIDUAL TO DELIBERATELY DAMAGE OR UNDERMINE THE LEGITIMATE OPERATION OF THIS PROMOTION MAY BE A VIOLATION OF CRIMINAL AND CIVIL LAWS, AND SHOULD SUCH AN ATTEMPT BE MADE, ADMINISTRATOR RESERVES THE RIGHT TO DISQUALIFY AND SEEK DAMAGES FROM ANY SUCH INDIVIDUAL TO THE FULLEST EXTENT PERMITTED BY LAW. Promotion Parties are not responsible for: (i) electronic transmissions or entries that are lost, late, stolen, incomplete, inaccurate, damaged, garbled, destroyed, misdirected, undelivered or delayed or not received by the Promotion Parties or their respective agents for any reason, or for any entries submitted in a manner that is not expressly allowed under these rules and all such entries will be disqualified; (ii) any problems or technical malfunctions, errors, omissions, interruptions, deletions, defects, delays in operation or transmission, communication failures or human error that may occur in the transmission, receipt or processing of entries, or for destruction of or unauthorized access to, or alteration of, entries, (iii) failed or unavailable hardware, network, software or telephone transmissions, damage to entrants' or any person's computer and/or its contents, or causes that jeopardize the administration, security, fairness, integrity or proper conduct of this Sweepstakes, or (iv) any other errors or problems relating to or in connection with this Sweepstakes, whether computer, network, technical, mechanical, printing, typographical, human or otherwise, including, without limitation, errors or problems which may occur in connection with the administration of the Sweepstakes, the processing of entries, the announcement of the prizes or in any Sweepstakes-related materials. All incomplete or non-conforming entries will be disqualified. Administrator reserves the right to cancel, modify or terminate any portion of the Sweepstakes if fraud, misconduct or technical failures destroy or threaten the integrity of any portion of the Sweepstakes, in the opinion of the Administrator, or if a computer virus, bug, or other technical problem corrupts the administration, security, or proper conduct of the Sweepstakes as determined by Administrator, in its sole discretion. In the event of early termination of any portion of the Sweepstakes, Administrator reserves the right to conduct the drawing at issue from among all eligible, non-suspect entries received for such drawing as of such termination. In the event of a dispute as to the identity of an entrant, entries will be deemed made by the authorized account holder of the e-mail address submitted at the time of entry, provided such person meets the eligibility requirements of these rules. "Authorized account holder" means the natural person who was assigned an e-mail address by an Internet access provider, service provider or other online organization that is responsible for assigning e-mail addresses for the domain associated with the submitted e-mail address. A potential winner may be requested to provide proof to the Promotion Parties that he/she is the authorized account holder. Any damage made to the website will also be the responsibility of the authorized e-mail account holder of the e-mail address submitted at the time of entry. Proof of sending entries will not be deemed to be proof of receipt by Administrator.

Winners List: For the names of the winners (available after 5/15/2008), send a self addressed, stamped envelope for receipt by 9/5/08 to: Find the Book Win the Chevy Sweepstakes Winners, PO Box 2227, Buford, GA 30515-9227.

Sponsors: This Sweepstakes is sponsored by Circle Media, LLC c/o Creative Trust, 5141 Virginia Way Suite 320, Brentwood, TN 37027, Thomas Nelson, PO Box 141000, Nashville, TN 37214, brandWAVES, LLC 6737 N Creekwood Drive, Brentwood, TN 37027, BuzzPlant, 709 W. Main Street, Franklin TN 37064, Ground Force Network, 709 W. Main Street, Franklin TN 37064, Creative Trust, 5141 Virginia Way Suite 320, Brentwood, TN 37027

Administrator: This Sweepstakes is being administered by American Hole 'n One, Inc., 55 Scott Street, Buford, GA 30518.

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CHOSEN

A LOST BOOK

TED DEKKER



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

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beginnings

Our story begins in a world totally like our own, yet completely different. What once happened here in our own history seems to be repeating itself thousands of years from now, some time beyond the year 4000 AD.

But this time the future belongs to those who see opportunity before it becomes obvious. To the young, to the warriors, to the lovers. To those who can follow hidden clues and find a great treasure that will unlock the mysteries of life and wealth.

Thirteen years have passed since the lush, colored forests were turned to desert by Teeleh, the enemy of Elyon and the vilest of all creatures. Evil now rules the land and shows itself as a painful, scaly disease that covers the flesh of the Horde, a people who live in the desert.

TED DEKKER

The powerful green waters, once precious to Elyon, have vanished from the earth except in seven small forests surrounding seven small lakes. Those few who have chosen to follow the ways of Elyon now live in these forests, bathing once daily in the powerful waters to cleanse their skin of the disease.

The number of their sworn enemy, the Horde, has grown in thirteen years and, fearing the green waters above all else, these desert dwellers have sworn to wipe all traces of the forests from the earth.

Only the Forest Guard stands in their way. Ten thousand elite fighters against an army of nearly four hundred thousand Horde.

But the Forest Guard is starting to crumble.

DAY ONE

Qurong, general of the Horde, stood on the tall dune five miles west of the green forest, ignoring the fly that buzzed around his left eye.

His flesh was nearly white, covered with a paste that kept his skin from itching too badly. His long hair was pulled back and woven into dreadlocks, then tucked beneath the leather body armor cinched tightly around his massive chest.

“Do you think they know?” the young major beside him asked.

Qurong’s milky white horse, chosen for its ability to blend with the desert, stamped and snorted.

The general spit to one side. “They know what we want them

to know,” he said. “That we are gathering for war. And that we will march from the east in four days.”

“It seems risky,” the major said. His right cheek twitched, sending three flies to flight.

“Their forces are half what they once were. As long as they think we are coming from the east, we will smother them from the west.”

“The traitor insists that they are building their forces,” the major said.

“With young pups!” Qurong scoffed.

“The young can be crafty.”

“And I’m not? They know nothing about the traitor. This time we will kill them all.”

Qurong turned back to the valley behind him. The tents of his third division, the largest of all Horde armies, which numbered well over three hundred thousand of the most experienced warriors, stretched out nearly as far as he could see.

“We march in four days,” Qurong said. “We will slaughter them from the west.”

Two

Twelve of the forest's strongest and bravest young fighters crouched in their brown battle leathers at each end of the grassy stadium field, waiting for the command to stand and fight for the hairy ball sitting at center field. Five thousand spectators stood in the stands carved from the earth, holding their collective breath. Four squad leaders were to be chosen today, and each one given a house to own, the choice of any horse, and an emerald-handled sword—making them the envy of every man, woman, and child in the village.

All of this would be decided by one man: Thomas Hunter, supreme commander of the Forest Guard.

Johnis stood next to his father, Ramos, shivering a little. It wasn't cold, but the breeze dried the sweat on his neck and made him cool. So he told himself, anyway.

He had dark hair to his shoulders and, according to his father, a strong jaw that was sometimes best kept closed. His nose was sharp and his lips full, giving him the appearance that he was fourteen, not sixteen.

He stared at the hairy Horde ball at center field. His mother, Rosa, had been responsible for that lump of Scab hair. Three months had passed since she'd been killed by the Horde at the forest's edge while searching for a special plant, the catalina cactus, whose herbal power might've healed a fever that had come over Johnis. The Forest Guard had been to the north in battle, but she'd refused to wait for an escort while her boy suffered.

His mother had always been like that, dropping everything on his account. Sweet Mother, with her long, dark hair and ruby lips.

Mother, why did you go? Please forgive me, dear Mother.

Johnis had thrown himself on the ground and wailed for the whole village to hear. His father had left the forest in a rage and returned with the long, tangled hair from ten Horde he'd killed that very afternoon—the makings of that hairy Horde ball on the field now.

But nothing eased the pain in Johnis's chest.

Two weeks ago Thomas Hunter had announced the decision to lower the Forest Guard's recruitment age from eighteen to sixteen. He was looking to boost the fighting force by one thousand. The forests had erupted in debate.

Those who had protested had cried in fear at the thought of their sons and daughters entering battle against the Horde. They

all knew that the Forest Guard was outnumbered ten to one. They knew that every time the Guard went to battle, many died. They knew that the weakest, their sons and daughters, would die first.

But the people of the forest also knew that the Horde had sworn to kill them all. All living followers of Elyon knew, whether or not they admitted it publicly, that the fate of the Forest Dwellers rested squarely on the shoulders of the youngest fighters now joining the Forest Guard.

All sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds worth their salt had then signed up to be considered. With his mother's death fresh in his mind, Johnis had been one of the first in line. The Guard had dismissed all but two thousand, from which they would select the final thousand fighters.

Johnis was one of those who'd been dismissed. Too small, they said. He was just barely sixteen and still too wounded from his mother's death. Maybe next time, if there was a next time.

"What do you say, Johnis?" his father whispered. "Who is the strongest?"

Johnis scanned the players in this game Thomas Hunter called *football*—a name that supposedly came from his dreams of another land. All twenty-four were already mighty fighters, even though none was older than seventeen. Roughly half were women, and of those Johnis thought maybe Darsal was the strongest. Not the largest, but the strongest. And very quick.

She crouched fewer than fifty feet from where Johnis stood on the sidelines. Her fingers were wrapped tightly around the same

three-foot fighting stick they had all been given. Muscles rippled up her arm, glistening with sweat. The side of her sleeveless tunic was stained with a little blood—it was, after all, a full-contact sport. Within thirty days the recruits would be swinging razor-sharp swords in full battle against the Horde. No one dared enter the Forest Guard fearful of a little blood when so much more was at stake.

Her long, brown hair was tucked under a leather helmet and had been pulled back into a ponytail, showing a strong, smooth jawline to her ear on the right side of her face. A terrible scar marked her left—a burn that forced Johnis to stare and wonder what had put it there. It made her more fearsome than ugly. Whatever had caused the wound had also gotten her left shoulder, although her leather armor covered most of the scar there.

The Horde had killed her father. Johnis could practically see the thirst for revenge in her squinting eyes. But something else had happened to make her stick close to Billos, another fighter in contention for the top spot today. They were from the same forest and were clearly very close. At first Johnis had assumed they were brother and sister, but no.

“What do you say, lad?” his father asked again.

“Darsal,” he said, in a whisper that sounded hoarse.

His father grunted. “Now *there’s* a choice. She’d make any man a fine wife.” He glanced down at Johnis. “A little more muscle on those bones and you could make a play for her yet, boy. Though she seems a bit stuck on the other youngster.”

His father nudged him, and Johnis gave him a weak smile.

Father could not know that his frequent comparisons with those who'd been selected to try out for the Forest Guard bothered him. The honor of wearing the hardened leather breastplates, wielding the Guard swords and whips, riding the best horses, being watched by everyone else as you walked down the path on your way to battle—who wouldn't trade his life for a chance to be called one of the Forest Guard?

Who, besides Johnis? Truly, he wasn't sure he would make a good fighter in bloody battle. In fact, he was quite sure he wouldn't.

Still, Father's small comments made Johnis feel weak, reminding him that he stood on the sidelines because he wasn't worthy. He shifted on his feet and crossed his arms over his chest, hugging himself.

Thomas Hunter paced across the field. There wasn't a man or woman among them who wouldn't be honored to kiss the commander's hand. The Forest Guard had saved the forests many times, and Thomas Hunter was the reason for it all.

He slid his emerald-handled sword from its metal sheath, filling the stadium with the sound of steel scraping steel. Perfect silence settled on the crowd.

Thomas swung the sword absently, neatly cutting the grass at his feet in an arc.

"Is this all I can expect from you?" his voice rang out. He jabbed the air with his sword. "I'm looking for four leaders to step forward and show they are worthy to stand by my side."

No one responded. What Thomas could be looking for that he hadn't already seen was beyond Johnis.

"Take a look around," Thomas shouted. He slowly swung his sword across the stadium. "The fate of every man, woman, and child in this arena will be in the hands of the Forest Guard. And you say you want to *lead* that Guard? You are all either mad or complete fools, because I don't see a leader in the lot."

He paced back to the sideline, studying the line of twelve on his right, then the line on his left. Behind him the ball of hair lay undisturbed.

To win, one team had to run to the middle, pick up the ball, and cross the other team's goal line. What seemed simple enough was made very difficult by the fact that the other team was armed with fighting sticks.

The day had started with a hundred of the most promising recruits. Seventy-six had been dismissed, seventeen of them on stretchers.

It was down to these two teams of twelve each.

Thomas raised his sword high, then swung it down hard. "Go!"

The two lines of recruits silently bolted from where they crouched and raced toward the ball on a collision course.

three

For a count of five, the only sound Johnis could hear was the thudding of feet as the two lines sprinted for each other. Silvie, the wiry fireball with short blond hair, was the first to reach the ball.

She'd just scooped it up when the lines collided with a tremendous thud. Then the sound of sticks smashing filled the stadium with bone-jarring cracks.

The crowd erupted in a roar of support that smothered the grunts of the contestants. The leafy trees surrounding the oval amphitheater seemed to shake on all sides, sending birds scattering for cover. Possums, lizards, rodents, and smaller animals of all shapes and sizes ran into their holes as if they knew that their future, too, was at stake in this game.

Silvie ducked under a vicious swing from a fighter named Jackov, the largest and clearly the strongest one on the field. She came up under his extended arm with her own stick, but Jackov was too skilled to be fooled so easily. He deflected her weapon with the shield on his left arm and knocked the ball loose with his knee. The football flew high, then landed in the tangle of bodies, lost from sight.

“Think!” Thomas screamed. “Use your heads! For the sake of Elyon, use your heads!”

If the players on the field were not all highly skilled at deflecting blows with their leather-wrapped forearms, they would undoubtedly all be dead, Johnis thought. *They would at least be a pile of broken bones.*

“Better to break an arm here among friends than have your head cut off in the desert,” Thomas cried to all who protested the brutal fighting. These were desperate times, and they called for desperate measures.

Billos, the seventeen-year-old snake-quick fighter who was known as “the bulldog,” slid out of the mess and ran around the sparring teams, searching for the ball.

He darted in, snatched something near Darsal’s feet, took two steps toward the opposite goal, and came face-to-face with Jackov. The big boy swung his stick at Billos’s chest. The wood landed with a blow that rose over the crowd noise.

Thud!

Johnis winced. The stadium fell silent except for a few clacking sticks.

Billos stood his ground, stunned, ball gripped in his left fist.

Seeing Billos hurt, Jackov dove in for the kill.

“Head butt!” Darsal screamed.

Instead of dodging, as Johnis expected him to, Billos tossed the football in Darsal’s direction, lowered his head, and stepped into the onrushing opponent.

But Jackov sidestepped Billos’s helmeted head and snatched the flying ball from the air before it reached Darsal.

Billos flew past him, hit the ground, and rolled to his feet.

Before Jackov could head for the goal line, Silvie grabbed his right ear from behind. She yanked back, slamming the boy on his back.

Then twenty-four bodies dove at the loose ball. They were all so bunched up, so tangled and intertwined, that no one had room to swing, much less take the time required to think through any strategy.

And the ball was lost in that pile.

Thomas paced like a lion and let them fight, but he wasn’t happy. And no wonder: a fight like this with the Horde would get them all killed.

Some said the only way the Forest Dwellers could survive would be to make peace with the Horde, but they said it in a whisper because such cowardly talk could get a person killed. Only traitors would dare say it publicly.

But watching the mess on the field, Johnis wasn’t sure a battle led by any of these sixteen- or seventeen-year-old fawns would be better than surrender. They looked like one huge ball of hair themselves.

Something shot out from the pile and bounced across the grass toward the sideline. It was the ball of Horde hair, the football.

All would have been fine if the ball had stopped on the field. But it didn't. It kept rolling. Toward Johnis.

He was sure it would stop as it passed Thomas, but it kept rolling.

Still toward Johnis.

Every eye in the stadium followed the lumpy brown sphere. Johnis glanced up at Thomas and saw that his eyes, too, were on the ball. When he looked back down, the football had stopped. At his feet.

One look at the field and Johnis saw that the fighting had only intensified.

"Fools will get us all killed," his father said, bending to pick up the ball. He grabbed it with a thick, cracked fist, lifted it, then stopped.

"Throw it out," Johnis said. "Hurry!"

Instead, his father dropped the ball. It bounced once and landed on Johnis's left foot, where it rested.

"What are you doing?" Johnis asked, glancing up at his father. But Ramos's eyes were on Thomas.

Johnis looked down at the ball. A picture that had haunted his dreams flashed through his mind: an image of ten huge Horde warriors—"Scabs," as the Forest Guard called them—killing his mother. This was their hair! It made him suddenly sick. He froze.

“Stop!” Thomas Hunter’s voice roared above the sounds of fighting. “On your feet!”

Jackov was already standing, storming toward the crowd at Johnis’s right. He was hunting for the ball, Johnis realized. The boy’s face was red from fighting, and his eyes glared with anger.

“Give it up,” Jackov growled, eyes scanning the crowd.

Whether it was the image of his mother or the sight of the furious Jackov, Johnis didn’t know, but he moved without thinking. He slipped his foot around the ball and eased it behind his heels so that it was hidden from view.

“Give it up!” Jackov thundered, pacing along the sideline closer to Johnis. The other fighters had stood and were watching.

“You’ve lost the ball and you think a few words will bring it back?” Thomas called.

Johnis’s heart thumped. He almost kicked it out then. But he didn’t.

“Use your head!” Thomas said, facing the others. “All of you, listen to me. How many times have I told you that you must defeat the Horde with what’s in your head and your heart before you defeat them with your muscle? They outnumber us! They outmuscle us! They are stronger, but we have more heart. So think with your heart!”

His voice rang out with enough force to bring a tremble to Johnis’s legs.

“Let them see the confidence in your eyes. Let them know that your heart cannot be stopped! I need leaders who will stand in the

face of terror and laugh. I need a few who will throw their heads back and roar at the sun because they know that Elyon is on their side, and no one, not even the smelly Horde, can defeat the followers of Elyon!”

Encouraged by Thomas’s speech, Jackov screamed at the crowd. “Give up the Horde hair or I swear I will slit your throat where you stand!”

Is this what Thomas meant? Johnis wondered.

“Use your head, Jackov!” Thomas shouted, egging the fighter on. “Find me my football!”

Jackov began to run along the sideline, joined now by three others from his team.

“An extra horse to the one who finds my ball!” Thomas challenged.

Now ten of the twenty-four ran to the sidelines, slapping their palms with sticks.

Johnis felt sweat running down his neck. Why was the crowd so silent? He’d done a foolish thing, hiding the ball. Why wasn’t his father scooping the ball up and throwing it out before any of the fighters discovered that it had been him, Johnis, who’d hidden it from them?

Then Thomas winked at him, and he knew what was happening. The commander was using him to make a point. *Even a weak boy, rejected from consideration to join the Guard, can hide a ball from you.*

“Stop!”

They stopped. All but Jackov, who required more urging.

“Stop or take the back of my hand, boy.”

Now Jackov stopped.

“Use your heads,” Thomas said, pacing again. “I said I want you to find my Horde football. It was a special gift, and I have no intention of losing it.”

He faced Darsal. “Darsal, do you think the football has vanished? Plucked from us by a beast in the sky?”

“No, sir. It’s being hidden by someone along the side.”

“Then why are you standing in the middle of the field?” Thomas asked.

“Because as soon as your football is found, there will be another fight,” she said. “I’m resting.”

Thomas hesitated, then nodded. He looked at Billos. “And you?”

“I plan to retrieve the football for you, sir,” Billos replied.

“Is that so? By standing there in the middle with Darsal, resting?”

Billos glanced at Darsal but said nothing.

Thomas shifted his attention to Silvie, the short blond who’d reached the ball first. They said she was an intelligent one, given to schooling before she lost her mother and took up fighting. All Johnis could see was speed and power and a firm jaw. She was a quiet girl.

“And you, Silvie?” Thomas asked.

“If I thought stomping around the field like a spoiled child would get me the ball, I still wouldn’t bother,” she said.

“Then you don’t care about my football? I, your supreme leader,

have offered you an extra horse if you can find it, and you stand as if you don't care?"

"Begging your pardon, sir," Silvie said, dipping her head. "But you're right, I *don't* care about your Horde football. In fact, I find it a bit disgusting. And I think there are a thousand boys who will offer me their horses after today."

This was the most Johnis had heard her say in all the days he'd watched them spar. She was the loner on the field, like him in some ways.

"You're not married yet?" Thomas asked.

"No." Even though sixteen was an acceptable marrying age, marriage was discouraged among new recruits.

"Sixteen or seventeen?"

"Sixteen, sir," Silvie said.

They all knew Thomas would make his selection as much on how they answered his questions as on how well they fought. He was obsessed with this thinking stuff. Head and heart, head and heart, head and heart, it was more head and heart than strength, he often said.

Thomas turned to Jackov, who was still scanning the sidelines and hunting for the ball. The only reason he hadn't spotted the sphere of hair behind Johnis was because of Ramos's larger boot blocking part of the view.

"Jackov?" Thomas demanded.

It has come down to these four, Johnis thought. Thomas had chosen two men and two women.

"I would have found your football, sir, but you stopped me," Jackov said.

"I don't remember stopping you," Thomas said.

"You ordered me to stop," Jackov protested.

"I also ordered you to find my football, which you failed to do in a timely manner," Thomas said. "Then I suggested you come to your senses or take the back of my hand. But you know the rules: there *are* no rules in matters of wit and mind. Yet you blame me for your not having the ball in your hands at this very moment?"

"Then let me resume my search," Jackov said as he bowed.

"I intend to. As soon as I give Billos a chance."

Thomas turned in a slow circle and spoke loudly so that the thousands gathered heard every word. "And when you do find my Horde football, Jackov or Billos or whoever manages the task by might or mind, I want you to beat that single soul who has hidden my Horde football to a pulp."

Silence echoed.

"Do you hear me?"

"Yes, sir," Jackov said.

"Just enough to teach them a lesson," Thomas said. "Enough to break a bone or two."

"Yes, sir."

"And if they try to squirm out of it now, I will personally break a bone or two," Thomas said.

Johnis's heart pounded with panic.

four

The day had taken a terrible turn for the worse, and Johnis was out of options. He had always been known for two things: his love of words and his impulsiveness. What so many thought of as an odd combination seemed perfectly natural to Johnis. But at the moment, he doubted running impulsively from the stadium in blind panic would make his day any better.

That left words, and the only words Johnis could think of at the moment were, *The Horde ball is a trick.*

Johnis didn't have time to think through the reason or likelihood these words might help him out; he just spoke them on instinct, knowing that something in his head thought it was a good idea, if a bit juvenile.

So he pulled his father down by his sleeve and whispered into his ear, “The Horde ball is a trick. Pass it on to save my life.”

“What?”

“Pass it on to save my life—the Horde ball is a trick.”

His father gave him a short, strange look, then leaned to his neighbor, Thelma, a seamstress who made leather goods for the Guard, and whispered into her ear. She in turn whispered into her neighbor’s ear. And around it went.

“So, Billos,” Thomas was saying, “will you agree to beat the one who’s hiding the Horde ball to a pulp if you uncover him?”

“Consider it done,” Billos said.

“Then have at it.”

By now the whispering had gone a quarter of the way around the stadium and had gathered some attention. Five or six people sharing a secret was easy to hide, but this secret was passed on and on, gathering more and more looks from those around. Even some of the fighters had noticed.

Billos scanned the crowd and called out for all to hear. “My friends, as you can see here, I will soon be serving in the Guard, which means I will be offering my life to protect yours.”

Johnis guessed that Billos meant to ask the crowd to turn him in.

Billos noticed the whispering and glanced to his right, by the far goal, where a man was bending to a shorter woman, passing on the secret. Most of the fighters had followed Billos’s eyes and were watching with some curiosity.

“In exchange for my life, I would like to ask one thing only,” Billos continued.

Johnis moved quickly, while their attention was diverted. He slipped the knife from his father’s belt, squatted down over the ball, and quickly sawed at the main cord that held the long strands of hair tight. Sweat streamed down his cheeks.

The cord around the ball snapped easily, thank Elyon.

Johnis dropped the knife, turned so that his back was toward the field, and stood, holding the Horde ball in his hands.

Horde warriors never cut their hair, preferring instead to weave it into long, nasty dreadlocks. The hair was greasy in his hands as he fumbled with one of the knots. It smelled like sulfur.

Still, considering the predicament he was in, he might have swallowed the whole ball of hair if it would save him from a beating.

Then again, who was to say that Billos could really beat him in a fight? Johnis was no stranger to swinging a sword.

Then yet again, Billos was stronger.

The knot loosed, and the hair unraveled. Johnis wrapped it around his hips, slid it up to his waist, tucked each end under his belt, and pulled his shirt over it. He slowly turned around.

“I pledge my life,” Billos was saying. “Offer me the ball, my friend, and I’ll go easy on the beating I’ve been ordered to give you. It’s the least you can do.”

No one on the field appeared to have noticed Johnis. Who could resist a whispered secret? No one. A mild but effective distraction. Now he had the Horde hair hidden around his belly.

The murmurs and chuckling of those around him might give him away. His father had already thought of that. “Shut up!” he snapped at those behind.

They quieted.

Billos called to an old man who’d just been whispered to by a girl. “You there, old man. Step out.”

He did.

“What did she tell you?” Billos asked.

“She told me, ‘I’m bored and sick.’”

“Bored and sick?” Billos repeated.

“This talk is making us all bored and sick,” the old man said. “Get on with the fight, boy!”

“The Horde ball is a trick” had become “I’m bored and sick,” Johnis realized. Laughter rippled softly through the crowd, and his tension eased a little. Maybe this would all work out.

Then again, there was that “beat him to a pulp” thing.

Elyon, by the mercy of the Roush, save me, he pleaded, referring to the stories of the white bats that had once protected them from Teeleh and the evil Shataiki bats. None had been seen in thirteen years, but some said the shrieks of the black bats could be heard in the desert night.

The legends didn’t matter at the moment, but Johnis could use a miracle. Some of the power of old.

A little magic, maybe.

But there was no magic. Not here, not now. There was just him with smelly Horde hair wrapped around his bare, sweating belly.

How had he managed to get into such an absurd situation? Quick thinking could save your life or end it, Thomas was known to say.

Johnis was the king of quick thinkers.

Billos swung around, gazing at the crowd and wearing a grin. “I must say, I have to agree. It’s all become a bit boring and sick to me as well. Some fool has gone off and hidden the ball and won’t give it back. Fine, let’s try something else. All those who think that the fool who is hiding Thomas’s Horde hair ball should give himself up, step forward and be counted.”

Without pausing to consider precisely why it made perfect sense, Johnis stepped out. It did make sense, of course. Perfect sense. The best defense was always an aggressive offense. So said Thomas Hunter.

Billos faced him. “Good, one boy who knows the meaning of honor. A small boy without much meat on his bones, but more courage than the rest. Is he the only one?”

Almost as one the entire first row of onlookers stepped out to form a ring around the stadium.

Billos glanced at Darsal. “Check behind them.”

Darsal took off in a jog, running behind the row that had stepped out, scanning the ground and bleachers for the ball.

“This is absurd!” Jackov cried out. “Give me my way and I’ll find you your Horde football, sir.”

Darsal finished her loop and rejoined Billos, shaking her head. No ball.

Thomas studied his fledgling Guard recruits. “I still don’t think any of you are using enough of the muscle between your ears to be counted as leaders. The objective of this entire game was a simple one. You started well, Billos, but have still failed at the objective. Which is what?”

Billos, the seventeen-year-old with dark hair, returned Thomas Hunter’s stare. “To cross the opponent’s goal with the ball.”

“Rules?”

“No killing or intentionally maiming,” Billos said.

“Yet the ball has yet to cross the line. You have all failed to satisfy this objective.” Thomas walked around them, swinging his sword angrily. “You’ve all stood here like idiots engaging me. The opportunities for victory have been countless in these last few minutes!”

Silence.

“I do think I could take any sixteen-year-old from the crowd and show them stronger than any of you.”

“Then do it!” Jackov screamed.

Thomas swung to him. “There are no rules in matters of wit and mind, Jackov, but I still haven’t made my final selection. You should watch your emotion.”

Jackov saw his mistake and bowed his head. “Forgive me.”

“I will. And I will agree to your insistence that I . . . *do it.*”

He faced Johnis. “You there, who stepped out first. What is your name?”

At first Johnis wasn’t sure he was speaking to him, but there could be no mistake. All eyes were on him.

“Johnis,” he said.

“Johnis. How old are you?”

“Sixteen.”

“Are you married, Johnis?”

“No,” Johnis said.

“Well then, I think we have our new player.” Thomas faced his fighters. “I do think that this boy, who was either too cowardly to try out for the Guard or was dismissed early, could run circles around the lot of you.”

Jackov spit to one side.

Rather than consider his options in slow deliberation, Johnis once again reacted on impulse, trusting his heart. He simply did what he knew he must do if he wanted to avoid a terrible end to this day.

“Should I invite him to show you all a lesson?” Thomas demanded of his fighters.

Without any further invitation, Johnis left his spot by the side and walked toward Jackov.

Quick thinking.

Deadly thinking.