

Chapter One — Land of the Boiling Sun

After the wise master didn't make it back, another man became master of the clan. That man took the name Evil Master. No one laughed—the name fit him well.

Evil Master led the Red Sun Clan into battle after battle, nearly to the edge of the world. In his crusade to hold dominion over the steppe, all had been crushed before him. Only two lonely armies remained.

Under the heat of the midday sun, Evil Master barked orders at his mostly disciplined spearmen. The spearmen marched prisoners: a wall of human shields roped together like a vast net; forcing them at speartip as the vanguard of the clan-army. Behind them, the clan's swordsmen protected their hind, while their horsemen flanked out wide to prepare their counterattacks and harry.

Across the field from them, under a banner blue, paced the second-to-last army. Those miserable holdouts. The army was nothing more than a motley of men from the local tribes: hunters, farmers, ex-soldiers too old to be fighting, lined up on the horizon, some on horseback, most on foot, guardians before the edge of the world. The sad army waved a lone, blue banner emblazoned with a fork-tongued snake. It'd been hastily and crudely assembled.

A man, gray-bearded, in flowing blue robes now ragged and torn, stepped forward from among them. His blue robes billowed in the wind, the only thing that cooled the skin. The field became quiet. He took a deep breath in, blowing a ram's horn that reverberated, echoing across the plains.

The blue-snake swordsmen raised their glinting blades, hollering. They shouted together, marching forward, a cacophony of yelling and whoops and dust. Their horsemen burst forth—an onrush of blue bannered hooves pounding, thundering across the field, kicking up dirt and grass. Across the plains they rode fiercely under that burning sun.

They bore down hard, those blue horsemen, crashing into the roped prisoners, cracking bones, tangling themselves up in rope—caught like squirming mermaids in a great fish net, and finally lanced by the Red Sun spearmen as they cried out in the bloody grass dying.

Prisoners descended on the downed horsemen, ripping the armor off their still dying bodies. Horned helmets, iron swords, hide armor, anything they could hold onto to survive

the imminent onslaught wave of footsoldiers incoming.

The blue-bannered footsoldiers, charging, reached the front lines—hacking down the cuffed prisoners with ease. They spilled through the corpses of the prisoners, attacking the Red Sun spearmen and their sergeants behind.

A footsoldier, unremarkable, swung at Evil Master, his blade arcing haphazardly by the master's right ear. Evil Master drove his sword through the footsoldier's neck, then shunted the man off his sword. The man's neck folded backwards, unable to support the weight of his head, and his twitching body collapsed to the ground.

"Why didn't you strike him down?!" master barked. An enraged wide-eyed stare.

Coyote looked down, not meeting his eyes. He had no answer.

Master struck Coyote, beat his ugly face with the pommel of his sword, adding another scar to the miserable countenance.

Coyote winced, reaching a hand to his forehead. The blood trickled into his eyes, bloody tears down his nose and mouth. The taste of iron. He spit.

The Red Sun swordsmen fell in, reinforcing their spearmen who began to waver in battle with the footsoldiers.

The clashing of iron—sword on sword—rang out; Below that were the war cries, yells, and hollers of men with zeal—and below them, were the somber moans of the dying. And yet below it all, under the world of men, was the faint buzz of a bee toiling in the dusty grass.

The Red Sun Clan's forces mopped up the blue army. Coyote killed two men, probably a third. Prisoners were taken, stitched, woven together.

After the battle, while the corpses were being combed through for valuables, a runner-boy found Coyote.

“Evil Master demands your presence.”