

# Chapter 1

Grave digging calmed Collin Mann. As the shovel bit into the soil, an unnatural peace seeped into him, and a fragment of frustration left him as he flung the dirt up out of the hole. Maybe he liked the solitude. Or maybe it was his way of respecting the dead. After suffering through the Sickness, they deserved a little sweat from his brow.

Collin tossed a few more piles of dirt out of the knee-deep grave, then stabbed his shovel into the earth and rested a forearm atop the handle as he drank in a deep breath. He pushed damp, dark curls from his face as he inspected his labor. Three other graves lay in a row beside the one he stood in. The smallest one—the hardest to dig—lay at the far end.

He rubbed his callused hands together and gave them a look. No blisters. It was a good day.

The graveyard sat on the edge of Collin's city, near a high, chain-linked fence that wrapped around the entire perimeter. A tall, wooden guard tower stood next to the North Gate and looked out across the plains at the rolling hills that surrounded and separated his people from a world they knew nothing about.

The low rumble of hoof beats on a timeworn, broken street came from behind him. He spun toward the city.

Four mounted guards in steel helmets and shining chest plates approached along the road only a few yards from where Collin stood. Behind them stood the crumbling city they defended, closed off from the world a century before by a seemingly endless barrier of hills and the feeble fence.

The guards sat tall in their saddles—steel armor covered their torsos, leaving their muscular arms bare—with swords sheathed on their backs. A horse-drawn wagon, carrying six water barrels, followed them.

Collin's throat tightened when they looked in his direction.

“You there! Boy!” One of the guards turned off the road and came closer as the rest pulled to a stop.

“Yeah?” Collin straightened and wiped his brow. He squinted against the sun and searched their faces for his older brother, a high-ranking knight, but he couldn't find him behind the steel helmets that covered all but the eyes and mouth. Sunlight flashed on their chest plates and made it impossible to see any markings.

The guard dismounted and walked to the edge of the grave. “You dig all of these yourself?” He looked over the empty graves, his stare resting on the smallest one for a moment.

It wasn't common for guards to hassle the people, but not all citizens were related to the Captain of the Guard.

“Yeah.” Collin shielded his eyes and studied the man's helmet and chest plate, both polished to a shine and lacking the scratches and dents the others had. An untested newbie, probably younger than the others, but just as imposing.

“Today?” The guard lowered to one knee and scooped a handful of dirt from the pile beside the grave, letting it sift through his fingers.

“Yeah.” Collin leaned on his shovel again. “Been here since sun up.”

“That's a lotta work for a little guy like you,” the guard said loud enough for the others to hear. Some chuckled atop their horses.

“*Little?*” The word pierced Collin's pride. He looked past the guard at the others. Ethan had to be among them, enjoying the spectacle at Collin's expense.

The guard stood and crossed his arms. “Yeah. You can't be much more than ... twelve?”

“I’m *fifteen*.” Collin clenched his teeth. He wanted to smack his shovel into the guard’s shiny helmet.

“I see. Sorry. Thought a little guy like you would be younger.”

Collin tried to harden his face. “Well, I’m not a big goon like you, but I pack a heck of a punch.”

The guard’s lips tightened. “I’d kinda like to see that punch.”

Collin snatched his shovel out of the ground, sprung up out of the grave, and landed on the hard, dusty ground just in front of the guard.

The guard took a few steps back. His hands balled into fists at his sides. “Watch it, boy.”

“Okay, that’s enough!” A familiar voice came from within those watching, and one of them dismounted.

“You asked for it.” Collin ignored the command. He spun the shovel around like a staff. It whirled on his left side and then his right. In front and behind. The shovel blurred as it *whooshed* around him. If the guard intended to look tough in front of his buddies, he was failing.

Just as Collin really began to put on a show, the guard who’d commanded them to stop, bigger and broader than the one heckling Collin, stepped around the young guard. He grabbed the handle of the shovel mid-spin, causing it to abruptly stop, and jerked the shovel away from Collin. His bare, chiseled arm gave Collin a glimpse of the brute force he could unleash.

Collin stumbled forward, his face just a few inches from the swooping falcon emblazoned on the chest of the guard’s scarred armor.

Dark brown eyes twinkled down at him from inside the helmet. Recognition hit Collin, pushing him back a step as he hauled in a breath.

“That’s enough showing off, baby brother.” Ethan pulled his helmet off, showing his smile. His wavy brown hair cascaded down around his broad shoulders and fell around the handle of the sword on his back. A bit of stubble—all that he could grow, even at twenty-six years old—covered his chin.

“He started it!” Collin said.

Ethan placed a hand on Collin’s shoulder and gave him a little jostle. “You almost done here?” He peeked into the grave.

“Still got a few more feet.”

“Close enough. C’mon, I need your help.” Ethan motioned toward the waiting guards and the wagon.

“With what?” Regular folk didn’t normally venture outside the fence, unless they were hunters escorted by the guards.

“Come help us to the river for a water run. Get outta that hole for a while.”

“You want *my* help? Out *there*?” What help could a scrawny gravedigger bring the guards assigned to get water from the river?

Ethan shrugged. “We haven’t seen any sign of Saetos in a while. And you’re safe with us. We’ll ride through the city and leave out the West Gate, since the Saetos keep to the north for the most part. Besides, you’ve always dreamed about what’s outside the fence. Now you can see for yourself. You’re old enough.”

Collin brimmed with excitement. Or maybe it was fear. The land beyond the fence was a mystery to most. Now he could at least get a glimpse. But was it truly safe? Surely Ethan wouldn’t let him go if it wasn’t.

He stabbed his shovel into the pile of dirt beside the grave and followed his brother.

“Wanna hop on with me?” Ethan climbed onto his tall bay gelding.

“No, I’ll ride in the wagon.” Collin walked past the other guards to the wagon and its burly, sandy haired driver, Paul Winslett.

“What was that all about?” Paul asked.

Collin climbed into the seat next to him. “Some new guard showing off.” He crossed his arms and glared at the back of the young guard’s head.

“Looks like *you* were the one showing off,” Paul said.

“*He* started it.” Collin leaned back in the seat. His face burned.

“Y’all need to play nice,” Paul joked and shook his head. “Hyah!” He snapped the reins and set the horses into a slow trot.

Paul’s wagon rattled across the dirt road and onto broken pavement as they followed the guards back through the city to the West Gate. Tattered houses and crumbled buildings lined each side of the street, somehow still standing even after the Great War of a century before. The war that, some said, ended everything on the outside, but left Collin’s city to wither away.

Collin nodded to a young woman who worked a spinning wheel on her front porch while her children played in a grassless yard. Further down, a man took a break from picking cotton in a patch between two ruined factories and watched the guards and wagon pass.

The group made their way through the city and out the West Gate. Dust puffed up from the horses' hoofs as the wagon rattled toward the hills where the river wound through and found its way close to the western part of the city. Small mesquite and cedar trees—with the occasional prickly pear bush—decorated the arid land surrounding them where the cracked ground thirsted for rain. The city, growing ever smaller behind them, seemed to be painted with a faint cloud of sadness.

Some people said that this was the end of the world, that they were all that was left. But the end was supposed to be grand, not some secluded city dying a slow death.

Old stories told of great explosions that would wipe out all existence. Others prophesied falling stars that would doom all mankind. Some sillier tales even proclaimed that the dead would rise and consume the living. What led to things being this way instead? Man seemed to be going out with a sigh.

Collin's gaze drifted to the green hills that lay ahead. Cool water from the shallow river gave life to them as they sprung from the flatness and rolled toward the horizon like waves chasing the sky. Though beautiful, they threatened danger because of those who dwelled among them.

Those hills. Collin longed to venture into and beyond them. If not for the savages living there, he would have set out long ago.

*What's out there?* His mind often drifted to what might lay past them. *Anything? Nothing?* Maybe huge cities that didn't suffer like his. Maybe great dangers. Perhaps even a beautiful girl in need of rescue.

"You sure do look at them hills a lot." Paul spit over the front of the wagon. "Every time I see you around the city, you're starin' off in the distance. There ain't nothin' out there for you, boy."

"Not *at* them," Collin said. "*Beyond* them."

"Beyond, huh?"

"Yeah." Collin kept his gaze on the horizon. "Ever wondered what's past the hills?"

"Who knows." Paul spat again. "Some say there's nothin' left. That we're the last. Others say the war changed everything out there. They say the nukes killed most everybody, and the ones who survived might be better off dead. And I guess we all just got lucky. If you call waitin' to die from the Sickness 'lucky'."

Collin sighed as he scanned the hilltops. Their city was just a speck of what used to be an enormous world. More visions of damsels awaiting rescue raced through his mind. “There’s *gotta* be something out there.”

“Ain’t nothin’ ’cept them goons have come out of them hills in a hundred years.” Paul gave the reins another snap. “And you gotta git past them to find out. Good luck with that.”

“Straight ahead!” a guard shouted.

Collin flinched and turned in the direction of the guard leading their little convoy. Arik Martin pointed to the hills. He sat taller and broader in his saddle than the others. His stringy blonde hair fell from beneath his helmet and flew in the breeze.

Far away, amongst the trees on the side of a hill, a bright flash of light flickered like a mirror reflecting the sun.

Was it the Saetos? Were they signaling each other?

Collin studied Arik and Ethan— The First Knight and the Captain of the Guard. He bit the inside of his lip and tried not to worry. After all, they were the most skilled fighters in the city.

Unlike the others in shining steel, they had been knighted—evidenced by the emblems on their chest plates. Ethan wore the swooping falcon on his chest, and the bear of the First Knight adorned Arik’s armor. Both were young, but the Sickness allowed no one to grow old anymore. Though the knights of olden times jousted and dueled for recognition or riches, these knights served as defenders—dedicated and loyal. Born of necessity.

They looked like men carved from stone. Swords hung sheathed on their backs, hand-forged from the best steel in the city, sharp and deadly in the hands of each of them. Whatever person or creature dared threaten their group would find themselves in a bind.

“Think that was a Saetos?” Collin asked Paul. He tried to swallow, but fear had dried his mouth. Of all the trips the guards made to the river each day, this had to be one where they ran across them.

“Don’t know.” Paul’s words shook a little. “Don’t care. Let’s just get the water and go.”

“I’m not afraid of them.” Collin slid his hand to the hunting knife strapped to his belt. He *was* afraid. He had to be brave, though. Otherwise, Ethan would never bring him out again.

“You’d better be scared.” Paul chuckled. “You left your shovel back there!” Then he gave Collin a nudge with his elbow, which almost sent him over the edge of the wagon. Paul showed no concern that Collin sat less than half his size.

“I’m not talking about *me*.” Collin rubbed his left arm. “They better have a swarm of them if they’re going to get past these guards.”

“Oh, there’s a swarm of ’em, lil’ man.” The smile left Paul’s face. “A *heck* of a swarm. Let’s hope we don’t meet up with ’em.”

Collin focused on the spot where he’d seen the flashes until they arrived where the river bent near the edge of the hills.

Paul pulled the wagon through the tall oak and willow trees, as close to the river as he could get without the wagon bogging down in the sand. A warm wind rustled the leaves of the tall trees, which offered a soft warning.

*Don’t linger too long.*

Ethan, Arik, and the rest of the guards tied their horses to low-hanging branches near the wagon. Like the rest of them, Collin took a bucket and headed down to the river. He sloshed into the water until it hit his knees. The gentle river flowed in a whispering rush around him, clear and cool. A small catfish came within a few inches of his boot, investigated the toe, then darted away.

He filled his bucket and lugged it back to the wagon, where he dumped it in one of the barrels, bringing the water to the midway point. He trudged back into the water.

“Who’s that there?” a man called from somewhere in the trees.

Collin straightened and searched the shadows. Silence settled around him, joined only by the quiet rush of water at his shins. His knees trembled. He looked to Ethan, who stared upriver.

Arik plodded onto the river bank. “I’m Arik. Leader’s Guard and First Knight of our city.”

No response came save the shuffling of trees and snapping of twigs.

Collin froze. The sense of adventure that came with leaving the city had vanished. A cold fear replaced it. He might soon meet the Saetos. Would they be disfigured half-animals like he’d always envisioned? Or worse?

After a few moments, multiple figures appeared out of the shadows. Collin took a step backward, and the world seemed to spin around him.

Six Saetos stood high on the river bank like a pack of bandits. They weren’t the mutated beasts he’d pictured, though. They looked to be normal human beings just like those from the city, though far less clean.

Tattered and soiled clothes made of animal skin hung on their thin frames. Dirt covered their faces. They wore their hair long, matted, and just as filthy as the rest of them.

Collin felt the blood leave his face. A giant knot formed inside him. What would happen? They had Ethan and Arik. They would be okay. Right?

“*First Knight. Leader’s Guard,*” the one in front mocked.

As with the city folk, the Saetos were all young. The leader couldn’t have been much more than eighteen years old. A thin pre-man beard patched its way across his jaw. His men stood behind him with their hands on the grips of their swords. “You sound important.”

The four from the city and the six Saetos stared each other down. The Saetos leader turned down the corners of his mouth and looked at the guards in disgust.

Numbness tingled Collin’s legs. Would they even move if he needed them to?

A tingle crawled up his back. Out of the corner of his eye, farther up the river, a figure stood. Watching. Then it was gone.

“We’re here for water. And then we’ll be on our way.” Arik widened his stance.

“That’s the Hill King’s water.”

“There’s enough for everyone,” Arik said.

The leader scowled. “*You* get the city with all of your houses, women, and soft beds. *We* get the river!”

“Jeron.” One of the other Saetos allowed a wide smile full of rotten teeth to spread across his face. “Let’s take ’em to meet your brother.”

Collin took a nervous breath. Would he die in this river? Would a water run be his greatest adventure before taking a Saetos sword through the heart? His quivering hand fingered the rough leather of the scabbard attached to his belt. He moved his fingers up and rested them on the smooth, wooden handle of his hunting knife.

Arik pointed at Jeron. “You’ll go about your business. We’ll take our water and go.” He turned his back on them and stepped into the water.

Jeron’s scowl turned to rage. He unsheathed his sword and charged Arik, his blade raised to come crashing down on his head.

In a blur, Ethan raced out of the water and jumped in front of Jeron. He drew his sword from his back and raised it to block.



The clashing of steel rang in Collin's ears. He jerked his head to the left and right as Arik and the other guards drew their swords and readied them.

Ethan knocked Jeron back several feet with an arcing slash.

The hillsman stumbled in the sand. He lunged and stabbed at Ethan again.

Ethan sidestepped the attack and smashed his fist into the Saetos leader's jaw, which sent him sprawling into the sand.

Jeron's henchmen drew their swords and charged.

The guards met the Saetos men in the shallow water, and a flurry of blades collided.

Arik dodged a sword thrust from the man he fought and smashed a fist into his nose.

The man let out a yelp. He splashed through the water and rammed into Collin.

Collin fell headlong into the river. He rose with a gasp and shook the water from his eyes just in time to see the savage lunge at him.

Then the Saetos man stopped.

Arik lifted him into the air by the back of his collar. The First Knight sent him flailing through the air and onto the riverbank. He gave Collin a quick glance, then charged back into the fight.

His man rose back to his feet, and Arik thrust, then sliced at him, knocking him back a step with each attack.

The man raised his sword above his head with both hands.

Arik took advantage of his foolishness and plunged his sword into his chest.

The Saetos man fell to his knees, then facedown into the water.

The body floated past Collin as he stood motionless. Unable to think. Unable to breathe.

Near the riverbank, one guard slashed the throat of a Saetos while another stabbed his man through the eye. Both Saetos men fell lifeless into the river. In the sand of the bank, another lay bleeding out as the thirsty sand drank his blood.

One of the guards dueled with a Saetos and knocked the sword from his hand, landing out of his reach. The Saetos gave the sword a quick look, then dashed away into the trees.

Only Jeron remained. He lay on his back on the riverbank, shook his head, and rose to his feet. He came at Ethan, slashing his sword to the left and right.

Ethan blocked each attack. He sliced and parried with power and speed. Every blow sent Jeron staggering back. Until he seemed to accept defeat and held his sword over his head.

Ethan brought his sword down on it with a swooping stroke that sent the Saetos man to the ground, then stood over him with his sword raised.

Jeron scrambled away, then pushed himself off the ground and attacked again. He dove at Ethan, who spun and stabbed his sword into the hillsman's ribs.

Before Collin could register what happened, Ethan had already withdrawn his sword.

Jeron grasped his side with both hands. Agape, he fell to his knees. The wheeze of his last exhale filled Collin's ears. Blood trickled into the sand and made as haunting a sound as Collin had ever heard.

As Jeron flopped to his side, all went silent but the flow of the river. His head came to rest in the sand, and its lifeless eyes stared at Collin.

Death looked at him. His heart fluttered like a bird trapped in a cage. He'd seen many dead bodies during his time as a gravedigger, but never had he seen the instant death come.

He couldn't believe what he had just witnessed—a duel between two soldiers. One good and one bad. The fight had gone from hair-raising action to the quiet finality of life ending.

Never before had Collin seen Ethan in a real fight. His kindhearted big brother had become a vicious warrior in those last few moments. Collin had always been afraid to anger Ethan, and at that moment, he truly feared him.

Standing in the hushed flow of the river, Collin blinked away hot tears. He'd done nothing. The guards' lives had been in danger, and he did *nothing*.

*Coward.*

Ethan splashed to him through the water and looked him over. "You okay?"

"Wha-what just happened?" Collin pressed a trembling hand hard against his lips to hold in the groan that fought to escape.

Ethan swallowed, and his face hardened. "We've started a war."