

AMY McCULLOCH



THE
SHADOW'S
CURSE

FIGHTER. LEADER. AVENGER.

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Dedication

Map

Part One

1 Raim

2 Raim

3 Raim

4 Wadi

5 Wadi

6 Raim

7 Wadi

8 Raim

9 Wadi

10 Wadi

11 Raim

12 Raim

13 Wadi

14 Wadi

15 Raim

Part Two

16 Raim

17 Wadi

18 Raim

19 Raim

20 Wadi

21 Wadi

22 Wadi

23 Raim

24 Wadi

25 Raim

26 Wadi
27 Wadi
28 Raim
29 Wadi
30 Wadi
31 Raim
32 Raim
33 Wadi
34 Wadi
35 Raim
36 Raim
37 Raim

Part Three

38 Wadi
39 Raim
40 Raim
41 Raim
42 Wadi
43 Wadi
44 Raim
45 Raim
46 Wadi
47 Raim
48 Raim
49 Wadi
50 Wadi
51 Raim
52 Raim
53 Raim
54 Wadi
55 Raim
56 Raim
57 Raim
58 Raim
59 Wadi

60 Raim

61 Raim

62 Wadi

63 Raim

64 Wadi

65 Raim

66 Raim

67 Raim

68 Wadi

69 Raim

Epilogue

Read on for a sneak peek of The Oathbreaker's Shadow

Acknowledgements

About the Author

Also by Amy McCulloch

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About the Book

'Discover the origins of your scar. Then you can carry out your mission for revenge.'

Raim always dreamed of becoming protector of the Khan, but destiny had other plans for him. Now the new Khan has betrayed him, kidnapped the girl he loves, and started a bloody war for control of Darhan.

Raim longs to rescue Wadi, but his duty to the people must come first. Having made an unbreakable vow to protect Khareh's life, Raim may be the only one strong enough to stop him. But in order to master his new-found sage powers, he must seek the truth about the dark secrets of his past . . .

The electrifying sequel to *The Oathbreaker's Shadow*

THE
SHADOW'S
CURSE

AMY McCULLOCH

RHCP DIGITAL

For Sophie, mapmaker extraordinaire



PART ONE

1

RAIM

Raim snatched at a long blade of grass and released the seeds from their cluster at the top of the stem. They dropped like stones from his hand to the ground. The air was still, and the grass here was so tall it covered the men with ease. The perfect place for an ambush.

He caught his grandfather's eye and Loni nodded once, his forehead wrinkled in concentration. They had spent many hours poring over Dharma's visions. Raim's younger sister had woven them into an intricate carpet, which predicted where the wagon would pass. The wagon destined for the prison where Khareh kept his most dangerous enemies, and guarded by both man and shadow. The wagon that Raim believed was carrying the most important person in his whole world: Wadi.

Wind whistled by Raim's ear. He looked up and saw his spirit-companion Draikh settle down amid the grass. Even Draikh had to hide here. With this wagon in possession of its own shadow-guard, Draikh was vulnerable to being seen. Only oathbreakers could see the true figures of shadows - to everyone else, they appeared as patches of swirling dark, like ominous clouds.

'Oyu has seen them,' whispered Draikh.

Raim craned his neck to the sky and saw the garfalcon wheeling overhead. *How far?* he thought in reply.

'They're travelling quickly. Ten minutes, at most,' said the spirit.

Raim locked eyes with his grandfather again and signalled with his hands: *Time to go.*

Getting into position, the group barely moved the grass more than would the gentlest breeze, and for a moment Raim allowed himself a touch of confidence. They were going to do this. And who would have known it from looking at them? The group was made up of old men, long banished from their tribes, awaiting death in groups of yurts known collectively as 'Cherens', not even worth the knowledge they could pass on to their grand or great-grandchildren. But their new mission had drawn purpose out of the most cobwebbed minds. What they lacked in energy, they made up for in experience.

Then doubt. Were he and Draikh ready? Any physical combat with the guards was going to be up to them to win. They had practised. They had trained. But what if they failed?

Raim didn't want to think about losing Wadi for a second time.

Then, there was no more time to think. Raim's head filled with the pounding of horse hooves, and the grating of iron wheels slicing their way through the field. Dust, rising and pluming in the air, stung his eyes. It happened so fast, he wondered if his muscles would move in time or if he would remain rooted to the ground like another of the blades of grass, bending and breaking in the wagon's wake rather than holding firm, rather than leaping forward to attack . . .

A screech broke through the cloud in his mind and he answered with a cry of his own, raw and almost primal.

He leaped forwards, stringing an arrow and releasing it almost immediately, striking down the driver.

Simultaneously, the old men of the Cheren reacted, one man spearing a gnarled branch between the spokes of the front wheel. The horse, already spooked by the sudden loss of a man behind the reins, jumped forwards. A loud crack filled the air as the branch snapped and splintered, and as

it broke, so did the wheel. The wagon lurched and toppled, coming down hard on the corner where its wheel had given way.

The door on the far side flung open, almost horizontal, and immediately the space was full of swords as the human guards sprang out.

Raim was there to meet them. He swung his first strike with abandon, a wide arc that gave plenty of time for his opponent to leap clear. He cursed loudly.

‘We will get to her!’ shouted Loni. ‘Keep the guards away from us!’

That was it. Raim needed to keep his concentration, and then the others would rescue her. He stared at his enemy with sharper focus, slashing with purpose. In a few strokes he disarmed the man, and Draikh was at his side to collect the fallen weapon. Raim kicked the man to the ground and leaped over his prostrate body to find a new target, as another of his group trussed up the fallen enemy with rope.

One of the oldest Cheren men cowered in fear, a battered old axe in his trembling hand, his eyes wide, as a much younger man approached with menacing slowness. But the old man wasn’t staring at his opponent directly . . . because he was unable to see him.

‘Draikh!’ Raim screamed and pointed at the soldier – who was, in reality, a shadow. ‘Haunt!’

Draikh swooped down as the haunt attacked. Raim heard a scream, but was instantly distracted as another guard leaped towards him.

Raim was so close to the wagon now, he could almost feel Wadi’s presence. Strength imbued his every move in a way he had never experienced before. The next guard, already weak in the shoulder from the crash, was no match at all. He fell quickly to the ground.

Raim jumped onto the wagon and looked inside. It was empty.

‘Escape! Escape!’

Raim jerked his head up at the sound of the cries and saw a guard dig his heels into the side of his horse. There was a struggling prisoner, bound with their head covered by a sack, thrown roughly on the horse's back.

Raim strung another arrow, and shot. It whistled past the guard, missing him and, crucially, the prisoner, but flew close enough to the horse's ear to make it rear. The prisoner, still wriggling to break free, rolled off the back and hit the ground with a thump.

The panicked guard looked down at the prisoner, back at the ambush, and gave his horse rein, disappearing fast across the grassland.

Raim ran towards the writhing bundle on the ground.

'What of the guard?' shouted one of Raim's men.

'Leave him,' replied Loni. 'We have what we came for.'

Reaching his target, Raim flung himself down, skidding on his knees in his haste. He grabbed the edges of the rattan sack and ripped it from the prisoner's head.

But it wasn't Wadi.

It was Vlad.

2

RAIM

Vlad's wrists were ravaged red-raw, the edges blackened and blistered. His face, already so lined and drawn from his years in Lazar, seemed older by a decade. Raim found Vlad's haunt too, in the remnants of the wagon, so weak he was almost transparent.

There was no sign of Wadi. Raim kicked at the broken body of the cart, the wood splintering with a satisfying crack. He could blame no one for the assumption but himself.

Dharma's vision had been of the wagon, not the prisoner. Raim had let his hopes soar, and now they'd come crashing down, brought down by yet another of Khareh's arrows.

He swallowed down his disappointment, and walked over to where his companions were bandaging Vlad up as best they could with their meagre healing supplies. He was barely conscious through all of it, only a low moan escaping his lips.

'You know this man?' asked Loni when they had finished, although it was more of a statement than a question.

Raim nodded. 'His name is Vlad. He accompanied Wadi and me from Lazar. We thought that he was just helping us to reach Darhan, but in reality, he wanted revenge.'

'Revenge?' Now Loni was confused.

Raim's voice broke, the sudden wave of memories hitting him hard as a lightning bolt. 'On Khareh.' He looked up into his grandfather's face, the man who had raised him on the steppes. He was grandfather to Raim's two adopted

siblings as well: his older brother, Tarik, and his younger sister, Dharma. Raim didn't know how Loni was going to take the next news. 'He is Dharma's father.'

As ever, Loni's expression remained stoical, though he tugged at his beard with twisting fingers. 'And how could you possibly know that?'

'He was Baril, once. Like Tarik is now. He and his wife, Zu, were exiled from Baril when they broke their oath. They used their Baril knowledge in Lazar to help me, and they said they once had a daughter, named Dharma.'

'A name means nothing,' Loni scoffed, and released his beard from his nervous hands.

'The scarf,' Raim continued. 'Zu gave her daughter her scarf as a token just before they were sent away. The same one that Dharma gave to me, before my . . .' He didn't need to finish. During his exile, that scarf had been his lifeline back to the home he never wanted to forget. He blinked back tears that had risen behind his eyes. 'When Vlad found out what Khareh had done to Dharma, he wanted to kill him. He thinks she is dead, but even if he knew how Khareh had injured her, he would have wanted vengeance. Obviously, he didn't succeed.' He looked over the man's scars again. 'Who knows what he must have suffered.'

Finally, after a pause that seemed to last a lifetime, Loni nodded. 'We need to get away from here,' he said, his gaze fixed on the empty plain ahead of them. 'They might come back with reinforcements.'

Raim nodded, not trusting himself yet to speak. He hoisted Vlad to his feet, and with the help of another they carried the broken man away from the site of the ambush, the long grasses obscuring their path. Vlad barely weighed a thing.

They set up camp a few miles away, and established a vigilant watch, but no one came; the only shadows on the horizon were the dark peaks of the Amarapura mountains. Still, Loni insisted they couldn't risk a campfire, not even to

boil water to help sterilize Vlad's wounds. The air felt so still though, Raim couldn't imagine anyone approaching without them knowing about it. Not that he thought Khareh would be particularly bothered by the ambush. They hadn't come away with the real prize.

Vlad drifted in and out of consciousness, babbling meaningless words. Raim cringed, looking at him. He was a shell of his former self - the arrogant former Baril priest Raim had met in Lazar. Some of Vlad's wounds were older - scars fading to white, cracking, healing poorly. His haunt was silent and docile. Raim tried to talk to him, too, but received nothing in return. His stomach turned at the thought of what the man must have endured.

Of what Wadi might still be enduring.

'Look, you didn't know. Couldn't have known.' Draikh sat cross-legged in front of him.

Raim shrugged. 'But what she saw . . .'

'She saw a wagon. Carrying a prisoner. She didn't see the prisoner. We all just assumed because they had shadowguards that they were carrying someone important. You hoped it would be—'

'Of course I hoped it would be her! The fact that it's not means that she's still there with him. That I've still abandoned her to whatever fate he has in store for her.' Raim stood up, stretching the cramp from his leg. 'Gods, this is so frustrating.'

Dharma had never been wrong before. Everyone was awed by Raim and his sage powers, but he was in awe of his younger sister. She had endured terrible pain at the hands of Khareh, but in doing so he had inadvertently unlocked her gift. She could see into the future, and what she saw, she wove into carpets that prophesied the future. It had been Dharma who had shown him that Wadi was still alive in the first place - when he thought she was dead. He had seen with his own eyes the knife Khareh had thrust

into her chest. But Dharma knew otherwise, and had set him on the path to rescuing her.

Those who knew of her gift called her the Weaver. Vlad didn't yet know the wonder his daughter had become. Raim would tell him when he woke up; it might go some way to relieving his pain.

'Khareh is playing you,' said Draikh. 'He knows you too well. He knew you would come after her.'

'And surely *you* should have known Khareh better than anyone!'

'Raim!' Loni stormed over. Whereas before, his grandfather used to look at Raim as if he was going mad, now he understood what was happening when Raim appeared to shout at a dark cloud: that Raim was having a conversation with his spirit - or, in this case, an argument. 'How about channelling that energy into something more productive? You've neglected your training ever since we came on this expedition.'

Raim cursed under his breath, but he knew his grandfather was right. All his focus had been on rescuing Wadi and he had set aside the progress he and Draikh had been making. The first month after the brutal clash with Khareh had been about recovering, for both of them. Khareh had broken them of both physical and mental energy. Raim still had flashes of memory: the expression of sheer joy and cruelty as Khareh looked down on the men and women from Lazar; the fear that gripped his throat when Raim saw his likeness - a part of *his own* spirit - empowering his greatest enemy; Khareh's cool demeanour as he punched the knife through Wadi's chest.

It was a miracle Raim had escaped with his life. Without Draikh, he wouldn't have. Besides Khareh and his soldiers, they had also been fighting against members of the Yun - the elite guard of Darhan, the best anywhere in the world, and the order that Raim had once been apprenticed to. Once, Raim had dreamed of nothing more than joining the

Yun and becoming its leader – and the Protector of the Khan himself. The fact that his best friend at the time had been the heir to the khanate seemed to make it all the more clear that it was his destiny.

But destiny had other plans for Raim. Like an involuntary twitch, Raim's eyes flicked down to his wrist where a bright red scar encircled it, a brazen reminder of his treachery. In Darhan, vows were sealed with knots and carried for ever by the oath taker. Broken promises were seared into the skin like brands when the knots burned away. Even worse, a dark shadow would arrive to haunt the oathbreaker, who would henceforth be shunned. There was no escape from their final fate: banishment across the Sola desert, to the city of exiles – Lazar. An oathbreaker was considered too wretched even to deserve an honourable death at the blade of a sword. Either they would perish in the unforgiving sands of the desert, or they would become Chauk: residents of the city of Lazar, unable to return to their homeland. At least, that was the legend that Raim had grown up with, the legend that had engendered the deeply rooted hatred for all oathbreakers – even himself, now that he was one.

The truth, he discovered, was a little more complicated. The scars were bad, yes, but worse were the shadows – or *haunts* as they were known by the Chauk. As only an oathbreaker could know, the haunt was actually the spirit of the person they betrayed, who could berate the traitor until the oathbreaker was driven mad or entered the city gates. Once they entered Lazar, their punishment was over, and the haunt disappeared. The oathbreakers then lived out the rest of their lives in Lazar, not believing themselves worthy of returning home.

Any vow made before Honour Age – sixteen – did not suffer this consequence. Or so Raim had thought. But by vowing to protect his best friend Khareh's life, Raim had unwittingly broken a promise he never even knew he had

made. He had been scarred, but there was no sign of a shadow. It was still the greatest mystery.

On the run from his home, scarred as an oathbreaker, he had made his first big mistake. Khareh had offered to help him, and Raim had agreed. In exchange, Khareh wanted to make Raim a vow. He promised to take care of Raim's younger sister once Raim was gone. A promise Khareh would break as soon as he could, to unlock the *other* mystery of the haunts: the power that would make him a sage. If somehow an oathbreaker could gain dominance over, or cooperation with, their haunt, they could harness all their power: from levitation, to healing, and even to flight.

Draikh was Raim's haunt, but he wasn't like any other. Raim hadn't broken his vow to Khareh. Draikh had appeared when Raim was being attacked by a lethal swarm of behrflyies, in order to save Raim's life. Maybe Druikh was the only part of Kharth that was good.

Now Khareh had learned how to use the oathbreakers' shadows to form a shadow-army - one that would aid him in his quest to rule over all of Darhan, and Raim had no idea how to stop him. Khareh was a raging tornado, causing havoc wherever he went with his army.

'Brooding is just as bad as arguing.'

Draikh's voice shook him from his dark stupor. Raim shrugged his shoulders back a couple of times and stretched the cricks from his neck.

'You're right.' He looked up at Draikh. 'What do you feel like doing today?'

Draikh brandished a stick he had picked up. 'How about some hand-eye coordination?'

'Yes, anything!'

'Pick up that rock and I'll pretend it's Khareh's head.'

Raim did as he was told and chose a jagged shard of rock from the ground, then launched it as hard as he could toward Draikh. Draikh batted it away with the stick,

releasing the same pent-up frustration that Raim was feeling over not finding Wadi. They spent an hour tearing across the plain, practising coordinating their movements until they felt like one unit. Working with Draikh seemed so much more natural now, and with each session they discovered more and more about one another's capabilities, and how each was strengthened by the other.

Raim threw a stone, but Draikh missed. The stick dropped from Draikh's hands and landed with a thud on the ground.

'What is it?' Raim asked.

'It's Vlad. He's waking up.'

3

RAIM

Raim spun round and sprinted back to the camp. As he approached, he heard Vlad let out a low groan. Loni was already there, dripping water into Vlad's mouth.

Slowly, Vlad's eyes opened. 'Where am I?' His voice cracked.

'Vlad?' Raim knelt down beside him. Despite the disagreements they'd had back in Lazar, Raim was still glad to see him alive. 'It's me, Raim. We ambushed the wagon that was taking you to—'

'To the prison.' His voice was so weak, Raim had to lean in close to hear him. 'I had overstayed my welcome.' Raim thought he heard a hint of amusement in the man's voice, but then Vlad slipped back into unconsciousness.

Raim looked up at his grandfather, whose face was creased with concern. 'It's a good sign he spoke. It means he may yet recover more of his strength.' He craned his neck back, scanning the sky for something - although Raim wasn't quite sure what. 'It has been enough time, I think, and we haven't seen sign of another guard coming to retrieve the prisoner.

'Pola, Mali,' he barked at two of the other elders. 'Let's have a fire tonight. I think it's time we had some real food.' He turned to Raim, and raised an eyebrow.

Raim jumped up and nodded, glad for the task. He placed two fingers in his mouth and whistled loudly. Within seconds, he felt the wind rush towards him, a tornado in miniature, and in the centre of it flew Oyu - the garfalcon

he had acquired in the desert. Oyu was the reason Raim could not simply stroll into Khareh's camp and kill him for what he had done. Oyu had swallowed the promise-knot Raim had made vowing his life to Khareh, and now he could not break his oath even if he tried.

And gods above, did he ever want to try.

Oyu landed on his arm and let out a loud screech in his ear. Raim laughed even as he shied away in surprise, and then ran a hand over Oyu's silky black feathers. Oyu had also been instrumental in saving his life. The Yun were renowned for their skill with animals - and their hawks could be their deadliest weapons. Oyu had saved him when the Yun had sent their hawks to attack him.

Training Oyu was another task that had helped Raim focus his mind. 'Time to find some rabbits, right, Oyu?' said Raim. Oyu lifted off Raim's arm, and Raim had to duck to avoid being hit by his enormous wings.

Later that evening, they all sat around a crackling fire, searing a brace of rabbits over the open flame. Raim tucked into a skewer, the meat tender and pink. It was the most restorative meal they had had in months. The Cheren was situated in the most barren part of the steppes, where there was little game to hunt. Why did the old people need proper meat, when they were only sent to a Cheren to die? Sometimes Darhan logic was twisted.

'Raim - a little help?'

Raim turned around, a dribble of meat juice running down his chin. He saw Loni approaching, struggling to support Vlad. Raim leaped up, dropping his food in the grass, and moved to take the weight off his grandfather's shoulders. Together they made their way into the circle, and Raim helped Vlad settle onto the ground near the fire. The man shivered, and another elder threw a second cloak around him.

Vlad began attacking the meat Raim gave him with a fury that belied his apparent frailty. That had always been Vlad's

way – to take advantage when the advantage was there to take.

‘Enough strength to eat is enough strength to talk, don’t you think?’ Draikh said.

Vlad threw him a scowl – since Vlad was an oath-breaker, he could see and hear Draikh – but swallowed his mouthful and rearranged his expression into something more placid. ‘I thought you were dead,’ he said to Raim. ‘It’s good to see you. Can I ask . . . how did you find me?’

Raim hesitated. ‘We have a seer among us.’

Vlad couldn’t hide the look of surprise on his face. ‘Truly? A real seer?’

Raim nodded. ‘Yes. I promise to tell you all about that later. But first, Vlad, I have something even more important to tell you.’ He gripped the old man’s shoulder. ‘Dharma is alive.’

‘What? But I thought Khareh . . .’ Vlad attempted to scramble to his feet, but his legs gave way from under him. ‘I have to see her. Where is she?’

Raim nodded. ‘We will take you to her, don’t worry. And no, Khareh didn’t kill her. But he did break his promise to me.’

‘So he did still hurt her.’ Vlad’s shoulders slumped.

‘He did. And he will pay for that. But – and these are Dharma’s words – he also helped her to see. She is the seer now. And Vlad – you would be so proud. She is amazing.’

‘*My daughter* is the seer?’

‘Dharma is the seer,’ said Loni, gruffly.

‘I want to go to her now,’ said Vlad. ‘What are we waiting here for? Where is she?’

‘We will return to the Cheren in the morning,’ said Raim. ‘And in the meantime, I will tell you anything else you want to know about her.’

‘A Cheren? What, a place for withered old men and women, good for nothing?’ Vlad’s nose wrinkled in disgust.

'What is she doing there? A true seer should be celebrated! She should have her own tribe of followers!'

'She is where she is safe,' Loni snapped. 'What would you know about keeping her safe, when you abandoned her in the first place?'

'Don't talk to me like that, old man.'

'Oathbreaker!'

'Stop this!' said Raim, throwing his arms between them. 'Vlad, we will take you to her. Soon. But now, you must tell us what happened to you. And you need to tell me what you know about Wadi.'

Vlad glared at Loni, and chewed another morsel before speaking. He threw a bone onto the fire. 'I was mostly kept in with the camp of shadows.'

'Khareh's spirit-army,' Raim said, his eyes wide.

Vlad nodded. His hands shook, and his chewing became both more frantic and sloppier. 'Except when he wanted to torture me. He's a clever khan, I will give him that much. He thought he could use me - after all, I'm not only Baril, but Shan too, and Garus informed him that I knew about sagery. But I would never give that monster anything. Not after what he did to my daughter.' Vlad took a shuddering breath and clutched at his side. Then, slowly, he lifted the edge of his tunic, all the way up to his armpit. Dozens of cuts littered his side, some of the scars puckered and gnarled.

Raim had heard of this form of torture, but never seen it in the flesh. Every hour, a different part of the body was sliced with a sharp knife, causing an endless stream of agony. Eventually, when all the skin was scarred or marked, they would start removing limbs. Luckily - if any luck could be found - Vlad's torture hadn't reached that point yet. Raim's stomach turned.

'The Khan gave me to Garus to see what information he could extract from me.' Vlad dropped his tunic. 'After Garus failed to learn anything, Khareh gave up and sent me to the

prison. I think he disliked having so much blood on the floor of his yurt.'

Raim winced. 'But I thought Garus was the most advanced sage the Shan had ever known - what could you know that he didn't already?'

Vlad shut his eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath.

Loni looked up at Raim, concern deep in his eyes. 'Don't make him relive it. Not yet. Ask him again when he is stronger.'

Raim couldn't help himself. 'Tell us about Garus later. But what about Wadi? Is she still with Khareh?'

Vlad managed to nod, and Raim's heart beat loudly in his ears. 'Did you see her? Is she safe?'

Vlad only let out a groan in response, and Raim wanted to shake him in frustration. Loni put a gentle but firm hand on his knee. 'We can learn more when we get back to the Cheren. He needs an experienced healer - and so do our other wounded men. We're like sheep on a plain here, waiting for the wolves to find us. Wait until tomorrow.'

'Grandfather, I cannot wait.' Raim bit his lip. A plan had been forming in his mind for some time now, but he hadn't had the opportunity to voice it. Now was the time. He looked out at the steppes, in the direction that the last of Khareh's guards had ridden away. 'I don't think I will come back to the Cheren with you. I can't have travelled all this way without even attempting to rescue Wadi.' He had felt so sure that this was going to be the moment he would get her back. Not having accomplished that felt so wrong.

'What if he is torturing her too? What if I am leaving her to this same fate?' He gestured at Vlad. 'I have to find her.'

'I don't think that's a good idea,' said Vlad, one eye cracking open.

'And why is that?' snapped Raim.

'She is being held by Khareh himself. Surrounded by every haunt and human guard you could imagine.'

'But I can't just return without even trying. Not when I'm already halfway there.' A hint of desperation crept in at the edge of Raim's voice.

'No, that's right. You cannot go back to the Cheren - you cannot waste any more time there.'

'Then what?'

'Raim, you are the only one close enough to achieving the kind of sage power Khareh has mastered. You are the one who could overthrow him. But you will never be able to do that with your scar. No one will follow an oathbreaker.'

Raim's fists tightened into a ball, but he knew it was true.

'Garus was right about something. I - and Zu - have both known things about sagery that no other Shan knows. And we knew something of the significance of that scar around your wrist that we never shared with you.'

Raim looked up sharply.

'Have you heard of a group called the Council?'

Raim shook his head, and instinctively moved his opposite hand over his wrist, to cover his mark of shame. It was a habit born of instinct, and one he couldn't shake.

'Zu was a member. She was bound to not share all its secrets with me, but I know where you can find others who belong, who can grant you answers: the Baril. Go to the Amarapura mountains.' He gestured to the shadows of the mountain range in the far distance. 'You have a brother there, no? Go to him, and ask him about the Council. He might be able to help you. The Council can put you on your true path, and you will be able to rid yourself of that scar - and rescue Wadi.'

Raim gazed over at the Amarapura mountains. *Is the answer really there? Could I finally find a way to rid myself of this scar, once and for all?*

'Worth a try,' said Draikh, in his mind.

But Wadi has to come first. I can't leave her to Khareh's torture.

'Agreed.'

‘I’m sorry Vlad, Loni,’ Raim said aloud. ‘I’m going to Khareh’s camp to free Wadi. That comes before everything – even my scar. Even if it means fighting against Khareh, his entire spirit-army and the Yun. Draikh and I can do it. I will not leave her to suffer whatever he has planned for her.’

Vlad stared at Raim for a long time, sending an uncomfortable shiver down his spine. Then the man attempted to stand, waving off the helping hand that Loni offered him. He placed one hand on a shaking knee to support his weight, then with a groan pushed himself to his full height. Raim had forgotten what an imposing figure Vlad struck when he wanted to. But he resisted taking a step back, standing as tall as Vlad, the grass of the steppes waving all around them.

‘Go to the Baril. Discover the origins of your scar. Rid yourself of that burden. Become whole again, in the eyes of the people. Then you can carry out your mission for revenge.’

‘No. I want to rescue Wadi.’

Vlad looked Raim dead in the eye. ‘But what makes you so sure that Wadi wants to be rescued?’

4

WADI

Wadi sat at the hard wooden desk in the yurt and stretched the cramp from her fingers. The circulation had returned to her hands since they had last been bound, but it had been a long time since she had written for such an extended period of time. In the desert, there wasn't much need for correspondence.

She was grateful that her father had taken the time to teach her to read and write as a child, as one of the few Darhanians who knew how. She knew that meant he must have been Baril at some point in his life, but not since she had been born.

Throughout all that time learning, she had never envisaged using her skills to become a scribe to a ruthless khan.

It saved her from being just a prisoner, at least.

A tug at her ankle as she attempted to cross her legs reminded her of that fact. A thick, coarse rope tied her ankle to a stake firmly embedded in the ground at the centre of the yurt. She had free rein within a predetermined perimeter. Long enough to get to the desk. Long enough to reach the jug of water that had been left for her. Long enough to reach the pile of cushions she slept on. Not long enough to reach the candles, which provided her a little light after the sun went down. Not long enough to reach the doorway.

Sometimes she imagined picking up a cushion and throwing it at the candle, setting the place ablaze. But then

either she would be beaten as punishment, or burned alive. Neither of those options was appealing.

Her task had been Khareh's idea, even though Altan - his vile adviser - had argued persistently against it. Wadi had quickly learned to avoid the scrutiny of the beak-nosed Altan, who had once advised Khareh's uncle, before turning traitor to him and throwing his support behind Khareh. The only person in the entire camp worse than Altan was Garus - the snivelling, weak sage who had taught Khareh the secret of his craft: that he needed to break a vow. Where Altan was like a vulture, circling the carnage until it was safe to feed on the remnants, Garus was a rat scurrying for Khareh's scraps on the ground. And it was Garus who had convinced Khareh to break his oath to Raim.

For most of the first month in captivity, Wadi had heard a man's screams on the other side of the yurt's thick felt walls. More than once, it had been enough to make her heave the contents of her stomach onto the carpets, imagining what the man must be going through, although she never gave Khareh the pleasure of seeing her discomfort. One night, she had heard the man scream a name - 'Zu' - and she realized it was Vlad being tortured. From the cackle that followed, she recognized his torturer: Garus.

She had tried to break through the walls that separated them, then. She had kicked at the frame of the yurt, trying to break off a splinter of wood and hack through the felt. But Khareh's guards had been on her immediately, shortening her rope and securing it more tightly than usual.

Last night, there had been silence. No more screaming.

Wadi almost cried tears of relief, but then her stomach filled with dread. The lack of noise could only mean one of two things: Vlad was dead, or he had been sent away. She would never be able to help him. And he would never be able to help her.

Her last connection to her former life was gone. Raim was her only hope. But she didn't know where Raim was, or if he was even in Darhan any more. The last time she had seen him, he had been trapped underneath falling rocks as a cave came crashing down around him.

Pain blossomed beneath her ribs, reminding her of Khareh's brutality and recklessness - the memory of Khareh plunging the knife into her chest almost as painful as the moment itself. The wound could have killed her, but he had reassured her later that he had always known his spirit could heal her before she lost too much blood. Khareh played with life like it was a toy he could discard at any moment.

It had been the second time she had been brought back from the brink of near-death by a spirit. Once by Draikh, after she had fallen from the tunnel exit of Lazar. Once by the spirit of Raim.

She wasn't keen to try the trick a third time.

She reached instinctively to the pendant at her neck. One of her haziest memories of her time in captivity was just after she had been stabbed. Khareh had brought her to his yurt, where the spirit of Raim performed the healing. Khareh had tried to take the pendant from her then, but Garus had stopped him. Even through the cloud of pain, she heard him explain about the oath contained within the pass-stone: that any person who possessed it was sworn to return to Lazar. 'Let the girl remain bound to that cursed place, like I am, your Eminence. You do not want that burden to bear.'

Since then, Khareh had rarely let her out of his sight. He had her trapped. She couldn't just take off the pendant and leave it behind, and he knew it. Any attempt to abandon the pass-stone would make her an oathbreaker to the spirits within the stone. And that was something she could never allow. The taboo bothered her still. Even if the person who occupied her thoughts the most was an oathbreaker.