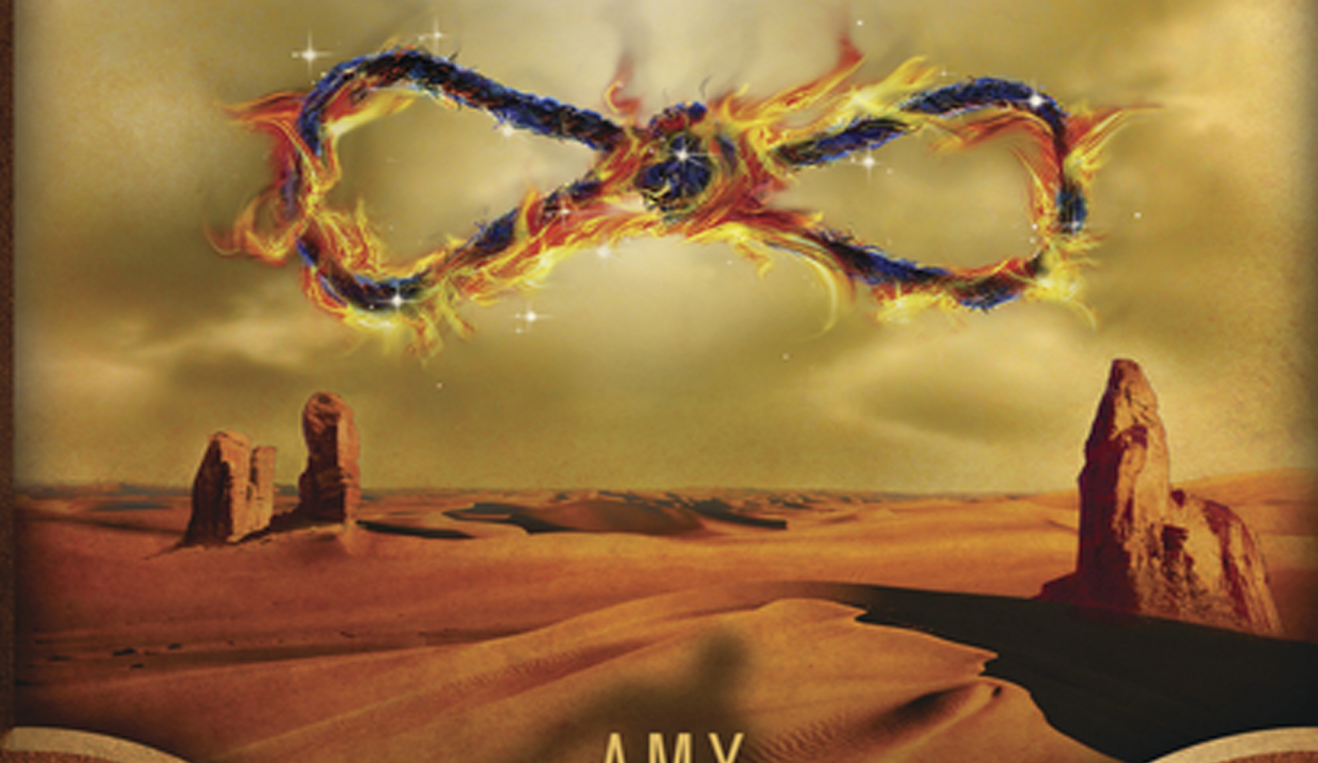


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THE
OATHBREAKER'S
S · H · A · D · O · W



AMY
McCULLOCH

PART ONE

1

Raim sat in the crook of an old, cracked tree, one leg dangling in the breeze, his head leaning back against the trunk. Long, needle-like leaves shaded him from the oppressive heat and hid him from the view of his grandfather, in case he was looking to assign Raim yet another chore. He just wanted a moment to himself. From his vantage point he could see his clan's encampment of yurts, the dome-like tents that made up his home, and watched as smoke lifted lazily out of the circular holes in the center of the roofs.

A rustling at the base of the tree distracted him. He looked down and spied two of the younger clan boys, Lousha and Nem, huddled around a small parcel wrapped in white paper.

"Do you swear you'll guard this for me?" Nem whispered to Lousha, while keeping one chubby brown hand on the goods.

"Yes!" said Lousha.

"Cross your heart?"

"Yup."

"Suffer like a traitor in Lazar?"

The other boy shuddered, but nodded.

"Will you make a knot for it?"

"A knot?" There was a moment's hesitation as Lousha chewed on his lower lip. "Fine, let's do it."

They scabbled around for something to tie it with. Lousha ripped a loose thread from his tunic while Nem plucked a long, dark hair from his head. Then, with solemn determination etched on their faces, they folded one thread on top of the other and held them in a loose loop.

"Do you promise me you'll guard this until I return, and will you seal your vow with this knot?" said Nem.

"I promise, and I seal it with this knot," said Lousha, and then they both pulled until the two threads became one. Nem nodded before jumping up and disappearing into the village of yurts beyond.

A corner of the paper lifted in the breeze, and a hint of sticky sweet honey aroma wafted into the air. Honey cake. A Darhanian delicacy, it was baked only for special occasions like this afternoon's ceremonies. The scent tantalized Raim's nostrils as if he could taste the pastry already, sense the flakes crumbling and melting in the heat of his mouth—and he knew the boy below was feeling the same temptation. Lousha waited until he was sure his friend had gone. Then he inched forward for a closer sniff, putting his nose right down next to the ground and taking a deep breath. One finger, and then another, hesitantly stretched in the pastry's direction.

Don't do it, thought Raim. Almost as if he had spoken the words aloud, something seemed to hold the boy back. He stared down at the tatty piece of knotted hair and thread in his hand. He bit his lip. Raim bit his lip too, and dropped to a lower branch, sending showers of needles to the ground.

Lousha snatched the parcel and held it protectively to his chest and craned his neck to look around, brow furrowed in suspicion. *Look up*, Raim silently pleaded. If Lousha knew he had an observer, he wouldn't be so quick to break his promise. But with the cake now in his grasp, so tantalizingly close to his mouth ... the boy flicked the thread as far as he could. Then he ripped the paper off as fast as his little fingers could manage and stuffed the cake into his mouth.

Raim sighed and began counting inside his head: *One, two ...*

The discarded knot began to fizzle. A flame sparked to life, then quickly dissolved into a puff of black smoke.

... three.

Before the first of the honey cake crumbs had dissolved on his tongue, the smoke blew back over Lousha's hand and seared a bright red mark into his palm.

The boy screamed in pain and clamped his hand into a fist. Then he screamed in fear as the smoke refused to leave him alone. He tried to beat it away with his hands but it wouldn't budge. He got up and started running in circles from it, but the smoke followed him like a swarm of angry bees.

The noise attracted the attention of the nearest yurts' residents. A small crowd gathered around, laughing at the sight. Unable to help himself, Raim

started laughing too. The boys were still at an age when a scar from a broken promise meant nothing except for an hour's nuisance.

Lousha spotted his grandmother in the crowd and tried to run to her, wishing to hide from the smoky shadow by ducking behind the long folds of the woman's dress. But she backed away from him, unable to let him near, her nose wrinkled in disgust. She let her voice be heard, though, as she herded the boy back to their yurt with her angry shouts.

"What's going on here?" A familiar voice carried over the laughter of the crowd. It was Khareh, Raim's best friend—and the heir to the Khanate.

"Your pardon, Prince Khareh." The boy's grandmother bowed low. "My grandson here has broken a vow and must be punished."

An amused smile played on Khareh's face. "Is that so? Come here, little boy." Lousha took a few sheepish steps forward. "Who did you make this vow to?"

"To Nem."

"And where is Nem?"

The boy shrugged.

"Nem?" said Khareh, louder. "Are you here, Nem?"

The crowd parted and the other little boy appeared. Tears streaked down his face. "Lousha ate my cake! He promised he wouldn't!"

"Lousha, are you sorry for what you have done?"

Lousha nodded.

"And Nem, can you forgive him?"

"No!"

At that, the shadow swirled more violently around Lousha and he let out a cry of distress.

The smile still didn't leave Khareh's face. "I suppose you really wanted that cake, hmm?"

Nem nodded.

“But I’m afraid you can’t let your friend endure this torture any longer. A cake is just a cake, and someday your vows will be worth more than that.”

Nem scowled a little, but as Khareh’s smile slipped from his face, even the little boy understood the danger. He looked over at Lousha. “I forgive you.”

At that, Lousha’s shadow swirled into the air and his scar faded to nothing. Lousha’s grandmother ran up to Khareh, dragging Lousha with her, and fell to her knees.

“Thank you, Prince. You are most magnanimous.”

Raim could barely suppress a laugh. Khareh could hardly lecture on forgiveness. Just a few years ago, that little boy would’ve been Raim. He and Khareh used to constantly push each other to see who could endure the most scar torture. Khareh would force Raim to promise to score a goal during a game of gutball and they would tie the knotted piece of string around his neck. If the other team saw the knot, they would hound him, doing whatever they could to prevent him from scoring. If he failed, if he “broke” his promise, then the curse would descend upon him. He would scream in pain as the scar appeared and a dark shadow would haunt him, just as had happened to Lousha. For an hour or so he would be a repulsive figure, unable to make contact with anyone. Then, once the curse had subsided enough for his grandfather, Loni, to take him home, he would be scolded and punished hard—first for accepting such a useless promise, and then again for breaking it. Khareh would also be punished for forcing a promise upon him and making him endure the torture that followed—but Khareh would never forgive. But then the elders would stop scolding and smile a little to themselves, for they knew it was important for young children to test the consequences of their actions, so that they knew what to do when they were ready to make real promises.

It wouldn’t be until they reached the Honor Age—sixteen—that a true promise could be made. And a true promise had serious consequences. Breaking a knotted promise meant excommunication to the desert in Lazar, with the community of exiled oathbreakers known as the Chauk.

There was no escaping this fate. If it was just a scar you could hide it, as Raim had watched Lousha do, clenching his palm tight. But it was the shadow that you could not escape. It was the shadow that others saw and judged, that sentenced the oathbreaker to exile. It was the shadow that followed you all the

way to Lazar and made sure you stayed there. Just the thought of it made Raim shudder.

The tree shook violently, sending a shower of sharp needles onto Raim's head, and he grabbed hold of the trunk to stop himself from falling. He spun round to see a familiar set of mischievous dark eyes clamber up on the branch beside him. Khareh was wearing an ornate black tunic with a high collar, richly embroidered with gold silk dragons in mid-dance. It was probably worth more than most villagers' entire possessions, but Khareh didn't care if he ripped it climbing up trees. Khareh was the Prince of Darhan. He was allowed not only to own expensive things, but to ruin them as well. "I've been searching every tree in the camp to find you," he said.

"It's called a hiding place for a reason. Plus, there's a good view from up here. Especially of that little show—what was that about?"

Khareh shrugged. "Can't have a shadow hanging about today, can we? It would be bad luck. Come on, I've got something to show you. You've got a few more hours before your brother's sacrifice, right?"

"One hour," said Raim, unable to hide the massive grin on his face at Khareh's reference to his brother's wedding as a sacrifice. He tried to stay serious. "And I can't be late. My grandfather will kill me."

"Oh, old Loni won't mind. That's plenty of time," said Khareh, with the small half-smile and glint in his eyes that meant he had no concern for Raim's schedule.

There was no way Raim wouldn't go with Khareh, however, and Khareh knew it.

With a shrug, Khareh leaped off the branch and Raim followed awkwardly, landing with a thump on the dusty ground. Even he wasn't dressed for tree climbing today.

They were high up in the Northlands, camped near a tiny village where the plains of Darhan met the Amarapura mountain range. The only time any of the tribes came to the village was if one of their members was marrying into the Baril, the scholars of Darhan. To Raim and Khareh, being Baril was to live a life of interminable boredom. It was the only class that did not prepare in any way for warfare, despite danger lurking at almost all of Darhan's borders—and sometimes within.

As the brother of the Baril entrant, Raim would not only be forced to sit through the entire hours-long ceremony, but also to do so wearing the most elaborate (and most uncomfortable) formal clothes he owned. His indigo tunic was as stiff as unboiled rice and reached down to the top of his ankles. It closed across his body, fastening with three clasps at the neck—too close to his face in the sweltering heat—three on his shoulder, and three more under his right armpit. A wide belt, dyed in the deep green of the Moloti tribe, wrapped around his waist. He wished he could wear his normal clothes, loose-fitting trousers and a waist-length tunic made from wool instead of the heavy, poor-quality silk. Unlike Khareh, though, Raim had to take care of his clothing. Any caked-in mud meant an hour of scrubbing for Raim later; every tear meant pricking his fingers with his awkward, fumbling sewing. Not his idea of a fun evening in the yurt.

Worst of all were the shoes. Instead of his normal well-worn, fur-lined, thick-soled boots, he was in delicate slippers with pointed toes that curled backward. On the tip of the curl was a ball that jingled when he walked. By the time they had clambered over a rocky ridge to reach the edge of the glade, the annoying golden bells were crammed deep into his tunic pocket.

They broke into a run, feeling the short mountain grass crunch under their heels. They passed by a herd of goats, their bleating urging them on. Then Khareh stopped.

“Wait here,” he said as he ran on a bit further. He stopped over what looked like a stick beaten into the ground. “Ready?” he yelled. Then he appeared to pull something with all his might. “Get down, now!”

Raim fell to the ground and put his hands over his turban, just in time to feel the wind slice overhead. He flipped round and sat up, watching the object as it veered toward the goats, scattering them. It made a sharp U-turn in the air and came straight back at him.

“Vows alive!” Raim scrambled to his feet and rushed toward Khareh. By the time he reached his friend, the object had lost steam and skipped onto the ground, snipping the blades of grass. It was large and round, with tiny spikes that were sawed down almost to the edge.

“What in Sola was that?” Raim spluttered, catching his breath.

“Oh, I stole the disc from one of the workshops back in Kharein. Don’t worry; they were going to throw it away anyway. But this”—Khareh gestured to the pole in the ground, his eyes sparkling—“is my newest invention. Marvel, Raimanan, marvel!”

Khareh was the only person who called Raim by his full name, and only when he was feeling particularly proud of himself. Raim hated it, but was so used to hearing it from Khareh’s mouth that he barely cringed. He only suffered Khareh’s use of the name because, even though he was his best friend, he also had the power—as Crown Prince—to order Raim about as he pleased. Thankfully he didn’t abuse it too often.

Khareh was Crown Prince despite not being the son of the current leader, Batar-Khan. When the Seer-Queen had not produced an heir after the first five years of marriage, a prince had to be chosen. The council of Darhanian warlords had convened and chosen Khareh, the son of the Khan’s brother, as the official heir. So now, whatever Khareh wanted to do, he did, no matter what the consequences. Raim admired Khareh’s independence but didn’t covet it. Khareh was always experimenting, innovating, testing the boundaries of what he could get away with and questioning the rules if he was told they couldn’t be broken. He had big dreams about how to improve Darhan, to make it a real force to be reckoned with.

Raim recognized the pole—it was identical to the ones used to build the frame of a yurt. He wondered whose yurt was tilted after Khareh had sawed off this piece. When Khareh was inventing, nothing could stop him. Once he had even cut up the Seer-Queen’s prized headscarf in order to get material of the perfect tensile strength for his goat parachute—“in case bandits attack and we have to drop the goats off a mountain,” he’d said. That was the other thing about Khareh’s inventions. They rarely made any sense to Raim.

Khareh picked the disc up off the ground and placed it delicately on top of the pole. In his hand he held a long, thin metal rod, which had little grooves on it all down the side.

“Not quite enough nicks,” Khareh said. “Do you have your knife on you?”

“Here you go.” Raim lifted the hem of his trouser leg and pulled out a small dagger from the strap around his calf. The blade was pitch-black, matte, and made from ocher, a translucent metal that seared black during the forging process. Owning one marked him as an apprentice of the Yun, Darhan’s elite

guard, the sworn protectors of the land and all of its inhabitants. When he received his acceptance, he would be given his own sword, one made especially for the Yun. They had perfected a method of preserving ocher's translucent quality and it resulted in a sword that was harder and clearer than diamonds. It was near indestructible. When wielded properly, it dazzled the eyes of opponents, confusing them with tricks of the light. Battles between the Yun of Darhan and their enemies were magnificent to behold, the near-invisible blades striking against ordinary metal.

But before he could even hope to be accepted, he had to pass one final test: a duel against a fellow Yun apprentice. He was to face Lars, the second son of one of the seven noble Darhanian warlords—and one of the most fearsome young warriors in Darhan.

Khareh took the blade and scratched more notches into his metal stick. When finished, he threaded the stick through the eye cut into the hollowed-out wood and pulled back with all his strength. For a second, the disc jumped and hovered above the invention as if surprised to be mobile. Then it spun off hastily over the field. This time, it didn't come back.

Khareh looked delighted. "Don't have to be a sage to make things fly!" He flipped the blade back to Raim.

"No, you'd have to exist first. Sages are legend, make-believe."

"Gods, your ignorance is really annoying sometimes. Don't the Yun teach their students anything? Anyone who says sages don't exist is a fool. I've read about them. There were magicians in the past who could command whole armies with their power, who could self-heal and levitate things like swords—they could even make themselves fly!"

"Sounds to me like you're the fool, for believing in that goat's dung."

"It's not goat's dung. Anyway, I wouldn't expect you to know anything about it. I hear the real sages are south. In Aqben."

"Let them rot there, then. Aqben houses only devils," Raim said, repeating the typical adage used whenever the south was mentioned.

Khareh raised an eyebrow and shrugged. "So, you're not worried about the whole first-chance-to-fight-to-be-Yun thing, are you?" he asked, changing the subject.

Raim bit his lip. “If it was an ordinary fight, I wouldn’t be. But this is *it*. I heard one of the other villagers saying they’d crossed with Lars’s tribe not a month ago. His father was saying he’s really bulked up this year, as big as an ox. And that he’s going to have a Yun for a son, soon.”

Khareh grimaced. “What would the warlord know about his son anyway? He’s probably not seen him since we last did. Lars has been off training with his mentor.”

It was Raim’s turn to grimace this time. “While I’ve been stuck here herding goats.” Then he shrugged. “But it’s not like I could leave my grandfather and Dharma alone to go off to train, especially with Tarik wrapped up with his studies. And I’m lucky that my mentor has been here, so I’ve had plenty of practice.”

“True. Besides, that’s not the real issue, is it? Isn’t this Lars’s third and final try? It’s not you who should be worried, it’s him. With you as his opponent, it looks like we might be watching heads roll at this tournament after all!”

“No, it’s his second try. It’s Jendo’s final one though.” Raim frowned. Every Yun apprentice knew that if you didn’t pass the third try, your life was forfeit. It was why he couldn’t joke about it as Khareh did. It could be his reality in another two years, should he fail all three bouts.

Khareh seemed to read his mind and shrugged. “You’re the best fighter the Yun has trained in generations, and you know it. Well—” He broke into a maniacal grin. “Except they never had me, of course.”

“Is that a challenge?” Raim’s eyes darted around and spied a metal pole Khareh had discarded while making his invention. He grabbed it and spun it around in his hands. Khareh was partially right. As a prince, Khareh couldn’t join the Yun, since he needed to study and be trained in his royal duties. But he had studied sword fighting for as long as Raim, and he was the only sparring partner—other than Raim’s own Yun mentor, Mhara—who always gave him a good run. And Mhara was Batar-Khan’s official Protector, and chief of all the Yun.

Lars was older. No one really expected a Yun apprentice to win their first attempt—after all, Lars had a whole year of growth and experience on Raim. But still, he felt confident. His training had settled into his muscles like knots tying everything into its rightful place, joining all the movements together. If

he couldn't trust his body's promise to execute the moves his mind asked it to, then what could he trust?

There was a dangerous twinkle in Khareh's eye as he snatched up another pole, ready to scuffle. Khareh taunted Raim about his weaker left side. For the most part, Khareh was the aggressor, pushing Raim backward with quick, strong strokes. Raim remained on the defensive, absorbing his opponent's blows. He tried to focus on anticipating Khareh's next move, on his footwork or his sword strokes, but still he couldn't help imagining what it would be like to fight with a real Yun blade. *Soon I will be a great warrior, leading the Yun as the Khan's Protector. I'll lead the army that will finally unite all the tribes of Darhan and then maybe I'll ...*

He blinked. Khareh swung at his pole with all his might and it popped out of Raim's hand and fell to the ground with a thud. For a second Raim stood in shock, his hands splayed palm out in front of him and his legs bent like a frog's. Mhara called this the "moving mountain" position. Winning now was as impossible as shifting a mountain with your bare hands.

The low, clear sound of a bone horn sounded out over the field and snapped Raim back to life. "Gods, the wedding!"

Khareh spun the pole in his hand and speared it into the earth. "Saved by the horn," he said with a grin. He turned serious when he saw the devastation on Raim's face. "Just keep your focus. You will win. You have to."

2

The priest's voice was slow and monotonous as he led Tarik, Raim's brother, and his young soon-to-be wife, Solongal, through a series of complicated vows and sermons. Raim had never seen his brother's betrothed before. They were an odd pairing. His brother was tall and as thin as a stick of bamboo. Khareh used to joke that Tarik had too many bones, since so many poked out of his skin at odd angles—especially his Adam's apple, which jutted out of his throat like a second chin. By contrast, Solongal was several inches shorter, with a squashed round face and hooded eyes so small they seemed like little black peas in a sea of rice pudding. They both held long pieces of string in their hands, and at the end of each vow the priest signalled for them to tie a knot in the string to form an elaborate pattern. Slowly they were sealing their fate as Baril.

Tarik was tripping over his words, the letters in his mouth tumbling out as cumbersome as an elephant wading through mud. He wasn't handling himself well, but anyone would be nervous in the presence of Qatir-bar, the first of all the Baril priests. When Qatir-bar had appeared, Raim had been awed. The man was shaped like a spear, with a gaze that was just as sharp. Around his neck, lying on top of his pristine white robes, was an intricate necklace of knots that represented his Baril vows. But it was his forehead that drew the most attention. It was almost completely flat. Tarik had told him in the past that the Baril spent so much time deep in prayer with their heads on the ground that their foreheads flattened, but Raim hadn't believed him. He wondered how long it would take for Tarik's head to get like that. Tarik was so pious, he imagined it wouldn't be too long.

Raim sat cross-legged on the ground a few rows of people back from where the priest and the couple were standing. Baril marriages were the exception in Darhan. For a man and a woman to promise to remain together and raise a family until death was a foreign concept to most tribespeople. It was a luxury they could not afford. Life on the steppes was hard at the best of times and it was necessary for each person

—man or woman—to continue to work for their clans in order for life to continue. When she came of age, a woman would promise herself to her chosen partner and his tribe, and her children would become the tribe's

children, raised by the elders. After the birth, the parents would return to their clan roles—perhaps as soldiers in the army or as weavers or tenders to the animals. When they grew too old to perform their role, they would return to their old tribe as elders to raise the tribe’s children, and so it would continue. On the steppes, idleness wasn’t a sin; it simply wasn’t an option.

Loni was one of the Moloti tribe elders, and he had taken in first Tarik, then Raim and then Raim’s sister, Dharma, as his grandchildren. Tarik and Dharma were Raim’s siblings by adoption, not blood. Raim knew almost nothing about his true parents, not even their clan profession. It didn’t matter; he had his own path to follow. His father could be the lowliest dung collector in Darhan and Raim would still aspire to be Chief Yun.

Beside him, his grandfather was squinting forward to capture every moment of the ceremony. In fact, most of the other people around Raim were leaning forward, but they were falling asleep, not craning their necks in interest. Raim yearned to join the ranks of the dozing. He felt his eyelids droop, heavy with sweat and boredom. But Loni’s hand, hard and bulbous, pressed down on his, snapping him back to attention. Raim scolded himself. He should try to stay awake. It was his brother’s wedding, after all.

To keep alert, he ran over his moves for the upcoming Yun trial. He put his recent tussle with Khareh out of his head. *It’s only nerves*, he told himself. He had allowed himself to get distracted. He wouldn’t let it happen again. Step left, parry, retreat. Forward, strike to the shoulder, swoop down to the knee, protect his chest with the shield. Knock the enemy’s weapon out of his hand, finish with a fatal blow to the neck. Well, without the last move in the actual duel.

An involuntary shiver ran down his neck. Was Lars thinking the same thing? He tried to think back to what he could remember of Lars’s first attempt. Raim had watched from the very front—all the Yun apprentices who had yet to reach their Honor Age stood side by side to form the ring in which the older apprentices fought, to keep the crowds back. Lars had done well—the duel had lasted a long time, with neither side backing down easily. Eventually, though, Lars had tired. That had been his mistake. If it had been Raim in his position, he would have spent all of the next year training to increase his stamina. To avoid the same problem, Raim would have to try to end the duel quickly, before *he* became the one that ran out of fuel.

The priest raised his hands and Raim scrambled to his feet with the rest of the crowd. As he stretched to shake the stiffness from his back and neck, he caught sight of Khareh surreptitiously making his way over to where the royal family was seated. Under a carefully erected shelter lay Batar-Khan, the Seer-Queen, the Khan's advisers, and their entourage. The Seer-Queen was barely feigning interest as she was attended by servants clad in pristine white linen, who were trying to create a breeze in the still, stifling air by waving fans of woven reeds.

The Seer-Queen was supposed to be one of the most powerful women in the world, with the power to "see" into the future. The Baril were charged with examining dozens of women to find the one who could pass the test and become the Khan's principal wife. Somehow, a remarkable number of ugly daughters of important warlords turned out to be "seers." When it was Khareh's turn, he would have to marry whomever the Baril chose—and that was an obligation Raim didn't envy one bit. Heat pricked the back of his neck as he thought of the girl he would be seeing in only a few short days. No, he knew who he would choose if he could. Suddenly, he really envied the breeze Khareh was enjoying.

With the sun at its peak, the royal tent was the only source of shade on the flat ledge about halfway up Mount Dahl. The entire village had climbed the long, circuitous path carved into the mountain in the early morning, when the sun was low and hidden by the mist. But now the sun beat down on the weary audience with its powerful rays. Raim slipped his finger under the edge of his turban, trying to release some of the sweat that glued the cloth to his forehead. The villagers steamed around him, forced to sit on the hard ground outside and endure the entire ceremony with the sunshine reflecting off the smooth, flat rock.

Finally, the moment of the ceremony Raim had been waiting for arrived. The moment when the apprentice Tarik-en-bar was to become Tarik-bar: a Baril priest. Raim stood up on his tiptoes to see over the crowd. Tarik's length of promise string was tied in a complicated web of knots, each of which was an oath to the Baril to obey their laws.

Qatir-bar turned to Tarik. "Tarik-en-bar, son of the Moloti tribe, this string is your word. And with this string do you vow to join your life with Solongal-en-barja, daughter of the Temu tribe, until death takes you?"

“I vow this,” said Tarik, all traces of nerves vanished and replaced with a calm solemnity. In one swift movement, he knotted one end of his string to Solongal’s.

“Let this knot be your vow to Solongal-en-barja, and may you never witness the flames of your betrayal.”

The priest then turned to Solongal, who repeated the vows back to Tarik. She in turn knotted her string to Tarik’s and pulled the knot tight. They were promised together, now and for always.

Qatir-bar pulled a blade out of his robes and sliced through the piece of string joining the two circles of knots together. He placed one loop around Tarik’s neck and pronounced him Tarik-bar.

Raim bristled and his shoulder blades tightened under his skin. The knotted necklace gave his brother an instant authority, making him seem stronger and wiser. Raim, despite being three years younger than Tarik, had always been the leader of their family. Tall and muscular, he towered over his eighteen-year-old scrawny sibling. While Raim had spent nearly every hour training to join the Yun, Tarik had learned to read and write, preparing for a life of quiet domesticity and study. But now it was different. Tarik-bar had purpose. Tarik-bar had a knot.

Instinctively, Raim clasped a hand to his left wrist. Underneath the heavy cloth of his tunic, so small he couldn’t feel it—although he knew it was there—was a tiny indigo bracelet he had worn on his wrist since before he could remember.

The bracelet had the tiniest knot in it, almost imperceptible unless you ran your fingers over the string and noticed the tiny bump along the way. It had grown with him as his muscles expanded from Yun training; the bracelet was a part of him. Sometimes he paid it as little mind as a birthmark. Other times—like now—it felt as heavy as an iron clamp. Raim swallowed hard and repeated his mantra back to himself: he hadn’t reached his Honor Age yet, so whatever promise the knot held—if it really did hold a promise—it couldn’t mean anything. He let the moment of fear pass from his mind, then pushed his left sleeve up until the bracelet was visible. Just an insignificant thing. A tiny bit of string. It meant nothing.

He looked up. Tarik-bar and Solongal-barja turned their backs to the crowd and walked toward the gaping black hole that led deep into the mountain, following the Baril priest. Sound seemed to follow them into the cave, until all that was left outside was an unearthly silence. No one breathed. No one moved.

The silence was shattered by the clatter of a horse's hooves. A Darhanian soldier thundered round the corner—a scout from the outlying borders. Normally scouts wore camouflaged clothing, but this one had changed into the sky-blue turban of a messenger. Raim's thoughts immediately turned to war, and he wondered who had invaded Darhan this time. What else could be important enough to interrupt the Khan during a solemn Baril wedding?

Men and women, caught in the soldier's path, yelled in protest as they were forced to leap out of the way of the charging stallion heading straight for the royal tent.

Raim could see that Batar-Khan was fuming with anger that the ancient ceremony had been interrupted. The Khan snapped his fingers at his most senior adviser, Altan, who immediately stepped forward and barked at the man, "What is the meaning of this?"

The soldier leaped off his horse and bowed low at the feet of the adviser without lifting his eyes from the ground. "Please, Altan-leder, I must speak with the Batar-Khan in private."

The Great Khan sensed the urgency in the man's voice—the entire congregation could. He hesitated for a moment, then with a regal wave of his wrist ushered the man toward him as the servants dropped a curtain over the tent's entrance to separate the Khan from the congregation.

Raim watched Khareh closely throughout the commotion. Khareh signed a message to Raim, in the language he had invented for them after learning in one of his lessons that the savage desert nomads, the Alashan, used sign language to communicate while hunting so as not to spook their prey.

"If they can do it, you bet that we can," Khareh had said as he tried to invent enough signs to keep their conversations interesting. There had to be signs for at least the most basic of words and phrases: *yes, no, you're on your own now*. "And just think! That way we can talk to each other without any of

these stone-heads knowing.” Khareh was always trying to think about ways to get around his bodyguards.

Back on the mountain ledge, Khareh repeated the message and Raim decoded it: “Meet me in the glade in ten minutes.” He signed back that he understood, and Khareh disappeared behind the curtain with his uncle.

Suddenly, Raim remembered his brother and swung back round to look at the mountain. But the entrance to the cave was empty, his brother now a sworn entrant into the Baril.

Raim swallowed down a lump in his throat, which threatened to escape as a tear. He felt like applauding Tarik’s achievement. He felt like yelling a goodbye into the mouth of the cave. He felt like running after his brother and making him promise to visit. But he did none of those things, simply lowered his head and allowed himself to be swept along with the rest of the tribe, who were beginning to descend from the mountain ledge.

His brother had a knotted purpose now, a clan. And soon, Raim would have a purpose of his own. He was going to join the Yun and leave his old life behind forever.

Raim would never see his brother again.

3

Rumor and speculation buzzed in the air like a swarm of behrflies swept up from the desert. Clumps of people chatted noisily with one another as they began the slow descent down the mountain, and all the while they wove their excitement into a tale they could pass on to the next region they traveled through. For a nomadic people who moved constantly, news was a valuable trading good, and stories were bartered as much as sheepskin in Darhan. This story would be a juicy one to tell to anyone they met.

Raim didn't even make it halfway down toward the glade before Khareh caught up with him, the prince's face flushed with excitement. In fact, Raim couldn't remember seeing his friend so happy since he had been named Prince in the first place.

"You won't believe this," he said, shifting from foot to foot, unable to stand still. "They've found a *real* sage."

"What?" Raim spluttered, pulling Khareh off to the side so that the passing tribespeople wouldn't hear.

"You heard me. A real live sage! Apparently they found him on the outskirts of the Sola desert near Mauz and they're so scared of him, they've brought him here, to the village, to be dealt with straight away! You coming?"

Khareh didn't wait for an answer, but there was no way Raim was going to miss out on seeing a sage in action. He felt his heart catch in his throat at the thought, but he tried not to let himself get too excited. At least twice a year some crazy man or woman—most often clanless—would come forward claiming to be a sage. And each time, it was a disappointment. But Raim had almost never seen Khareh so excited. And Khareh was normally the most scathing and skeptical of all, despite his belief that real sages did exist.

As they darted in among the rough, dusty streets of the village, tribespeople and villagers alike stopped in their tracks to wonder just where the prince could be running off to this time.

They arrived at the royal caravan. It was stationed outside the village—there was nowhere for it to fit within the restrictive confines of the tiny settlement. Besides, even though the caravan was portable, it was infinitely

more comfortable than any of the ramshackle village houses. Sometimes Raim forgot just how opulent it must appear to those unused to seeing it. It was built up off the ground on a platform of wooden planks. It had eight wheels so it could be transported easily and pulled from village to village by four oxen. The exterior was wrapped in the pelts of snow leopards and tied together by ropes that had been dipped in gold. But the most dazzling adornments were the seven rugs that represented the pledges of fealty from the seven warlords of Darhan to Batar-Khan. Mhara reminded him constantly that this was the highest number of fealty oaths any single Khan had managed to unite under his reign.

Highly skilled clans of weavers had created the carpets—and the competition for a commission from the Khan was fierce. Weavers held a prestigious position in Darhanian society, and men and women with nimble fingers and an eye for color would be quick to try and join one of the most highly regarded clans. Their skills were always in demand, which made an accomplished weaver extremely valuable. When a promise knot was formed, the most respected way of honoring that promise was to weave the story of how that vow came to be into the carpet.

The carpets then represented the source of the Khan's power: absolute loyalty.

Raim crept into the royal yurt behind Khareh. They had been friends for so long that no one took any notice of the fact that he was there. They zigzagged round members of the royal entourage lounging on pillows on the ground until they reached where Altan was standing.

Raim felt a sudden rush of cold, like an icy winter draft blowing under the felt of an unsealed yurt. It wrapped around him and made him shiver, a deep-seated shake that started in his neck and traveled all the way down his spine. But it was the height of summer, and he wasn't shivering from cold; he was shuddering in disgust.

Amidst the rich golden ornaments, the lush silks and the sweet-smelling incense, Raim's stomach was turning, boiling over with a nausea that caused sweat to drip down his spine and the bile in his stomach to rise.

He wasn't alone. All around him, people were looking pale and physically shying away from the far corner of the room. Not Khareh, though. If he was

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