

Chapter 3

Another Look

The next day: the first day of Nowruz

Gongs resounding throughout the hallways of the Magi's quarters broke the trio's concentration on the map of their route. *Karana* fanfares called across the courtyard. Torches whooshed, blazing an ascending path from outdoor walkways to the grand banquet hall. Rashidi sprinted toward the door. "We should go. Can't be late for First New Day."

"Ah, yes. Nowruz," Akilah said. "New year. New life. New possibilities. And many courses of food. I'm right behind you."

As Rashidi sped down the hallway, Akilah chuckled. "His boyish enthusiasm will buoy him through oceans of disillusionment."

He dropped his voice to almost a whisper. "Tallis, do you have the scribe's scroll with you?"

Tallis nodded and pulled something wrapped in an oiled leather cloth from a pocket deep within his cloak. His attention to detail never failed. Of course he'd take steps to protect the scroll in a way that hid its provenance.

“Mind if I have another look?” Akilah extended his hand.

“The top third is just courteous formalities and information about the scribe’s ancestry.”

“Help me move it to the reading table?”

“For what?” Tallis’s forehead creased into a frown.

“Just another look.”

“That’s more important than starting our holiest festival with the rest of the Magi?” Tallis shielded the leather package behind his back.

“I won’t be long. Besides, everyone will eat and celebrate until dawn.”

“Then I’m taking your portion of *fesenjān*.”

“That is brutally unkind.” Akilah loved the ground pomegranate-walnut-poultry stew. “I won’t be *that* long.”

“I’ll take your portion of *haft mewa* as well.”

Akilah rose in half-feigned indignation. “That is sacrilege. You wouldn’t dare.” He knew Tallis wouldn’t. The seven-fruit salad paid homage to their religion’s seven deities.

The two burst into laughter. Still, Tallis hesitated at the door. Akilah shooed him away. “I’ll be there before you can finish the first course.”

As soon as he was alone, Akilah grabbed his box of oculars and selected the largest from its velvet-lined nest. Hovering the magnifying lens over the obliterated third of the scroll, he strained to detect remnants of letters or hints of words. The word “Daniel” was discernible in several places. Maybe more. What made this Daniel important enough for the scribe to devote so much space to writing about him? Was the Daniel prophesy about the child-king linked to the star Akilah’s team was studying?

Daniel ... Daniel. Akilah’s grandparents had talked about a man named Danyal. Those childhood memories were once lessons. Now they seemed more like lore. But his beloved Babayi and Mamani seemed so sure of what they and

generations before them had said ... moreover, believed. A Danyal who did what other magi could not. Who believed what other magi did not.

What had Mamani said about that Danyal? “He believed in the one true God.”

What a foreign concept. So exclusive. So contrary to the diverse religions the Magi served in their priestly duties.

Akilah pushed through the cobwebs of his mind. Babayi had mentioned something about God’s plans including a glorious king. Could that be the same eternal king in the scribe’s copied words? Was it even possible for a king to be eternal? That would make him deity. Earthly kings sought to deify themselves. But could a person—a child, no less—be eternal from the start? It defied explanation.

As Akilah re-read the last lines of the damaged scroll, he rued not paying more attention to his grandparents’ words. But then he was only ten. The banks of the Euphrates were within running distance of their house, and playing outdoors with his cousins was far more interesting than listening to lessons indoors. He’d rather trap a mole rat burrowed in the riverbank than snag instruction in religion.

Yet his grandparents had a way of sneaking life lessons and Danyal stories into model-boat building, hairstyling demonstrations, or whatever else Akilah and his cousins fancied at that age. Everyone delighted in the Danyal stories but quickly dismissed them—except Akilah’s youngest cousin, Farzaneh. She remained attentive at his grandparents’ feet long after the cousins had devoured mamani’s honey almond cakes and had seen past other clever bribes to listen to elder wisdom. No, “bribe” was too harsh a word. And Farzaneh probably just liked the attention. She was barely more than a toddler then.

Despite Akilah’s determination to play, something about the Danyal stories had kindled a spark in his heart, a deep-seated warmth and joy he’d never experienced from parroting his

family's religion. Emboldened by childhood curiosity, Akilah had asked his father about Danyal. His father's response was a smack, a swift rebuke, and a mandate to never speak of such matters again. Many years later, he learned his grandparents' abrupt silence about the Danyal stories was the price they'd paid so Akilah could keep visiting them. It was the first of many wedges that father or son would drive between themselves—wedges that ultimately splintered the family.

Akilah discerned another word. "Fullness." And a number. Six hundred eighty-something. Only part of the stem of the last number remained. Three? Six? More important, if that was a calculation, how was it derived? Such a precise number had to mean something, but what?

Something in the prophet Isaiah's words rekindled the dampened tinder from Akilah's childhood. He re-read the passage, hungering to discern more words but also desiring to understand the words he could see. Each pass fanned a flickering flame in his heart. Akilah's whole body warmed like something had harnessed the sun's heat inside him. He couldn't explain it, but somehow he *knew* Isaiah's words and his grandparents' stories referred to the same person. That, perhaps more than anything else he'd ever done, was worth pursuing. Worth confirming, no matter what the cost.

Another *karana* fanfare jolted Akilah from his hunched position. His absence would be noted if he lingered longer over the scroll. Re-rolling and wrapping it with care, he thrust it into a clothing chest.