

Chapter 2

The Circle

One week later

Akilah lingered with Tallis and Rashidi on the front steps of the Great Hall of Audiences as long as he dared. “It’s time, my friends. Rules, you see. As our group’s leader, ‘one speaks for all’ before the Council.” He clapped his colleagues on their shoulders. “All will be fine.”

Rashidi drew back, his brow knit in a frown. “We agreed we wouldn’t say a thing about this eternal king business, yet it’s spread throughout the entire Magi complex. Now everyone is wondering about our study. Some think we’re fools. Others think we’re insurrectionists. The rest don’t know what to think.”

Tallis nodded. “That’s bad enough, but a meeting right before *Nowruz*? Unheard of.”

Akilah shrugged. “The Head Magus has the authority to call a meeting whenever he wishes. Even on the eve of our most important holiday. If there’s a problem, I’d rather face it openly than let whispers multiply behind my back.”

Muffled talk wafted over the trio each time the two-story double doors opened.

“Quite the crowd gathering,” Tallis said. “But you need not worry. I have faith in you.”

More Magi, all in official robes of the Lower Council, brushed past the trio.

Rashidi craned his neck to peer inside. “Maybe Burhan leaked something about our latest findings and twisted it to make us look bad.”

Akilah harrumphed. “Burhan is an Orderal, entrusted with cataloging and guarding the Magi’s research. He would not misuse his position.”

Rashidi’s eyes darkened deeper than the gathering nightfall. “Don’t be so sure.”

Akilah sliced his hand through the air to dismiss his colleague’s foreboding. “Burhan is not a Magus, so he’s not allowed in the meeting. Besides, any breach of trust would cost Burhan his job. He can’t afford that. He has no family or other means of support.”

Had Akilah’s words quelled his team’s misgivings? He couldn’t tell. He wished his words would unknot his stomach. Although Burhan didn’t concern him, rumors had a way of growing out of control. Akilah didn’t need unfounded attention.



Two hours later

Throughout his thirty years of service to Magi society, Akilah had stood in the center of the Great Hall’s Gathering Circle many times. But never like this.

Although the polished tiles sent coolness through his soft

leather shoes, his face heated. Nothing about this Council meeting was normal. Its late hour. The line of questioning. No water clock to limit its duration. Heads from both the priestly and governmental divisions attending. Was this a meeting or a hearing? Akilah gazed at the hall's vaulted ceiling as if answers might appear across its cedar beams. In response, light from suspended oil lamps thrust the attendees' shadows toward him in long, rebuking fingers.

Sassanak, Head Magus of the Lower Council, scanned his notes. "How can you prove your sighting wasn't a heavenly alignment?"

"A conjunction—whether solely of planets or planets with other heavenly bodies—aligns and separates within a few days," Akilah said. "What I saw did not. And it was much brighter than any conjunction I've ever studied. It must be a new star."

"But it disappeared."

"Yes."

"When did you last see the phenomenon?"

"A year ago."

Murmurs rippled through the Magi crowding the boundary of the Gathering Circle. Sassanak's glare swept across the gathering, silencing all watchers. They shuffled uneasily in place. The brief movement roused the metallic threads in their robes to send shimmers of reflected lamplight around the Circle. Why couldn't Akilah's reasoning behind his research shine so readily?

Pain crept through Akilah's left hip, reminding him how long he had been standing before the Council. Fallout from his childhood injury resurfaced at the most inconvenient times. But he remained motionless, erect and alone in the center of the Circle.

Refusing pain's bid for attention, Akilah counted heads. Twenty-one facing him. Perhaps as many standing two deep. Far more than a routine progress report would warrant. No

proceeding of the Lower Council required so many attendees except the appointment of a new Head Magus.

Sassanak's jaw tightened. "Harbingers disappear. Not stars. Even seasonal stars reappear at appointed times." Sassanak swiveled his head as if marshaling the entire room. "What makes you think you will see this ... thing ... again?"

Within the long sleeves of his robes, Akilah fisted his hands. This "thing" was more than an astronomical discovery.

Sassanak's voice boomed. "Akilah, you are bound by oath to answer. How can you be sure you will see this phenomenon again? Ever?"

Akilah swallowed hard. Research rested on science, not religion. He was treading shaky ground. He locked eyes with his superior. "Prophecies. As noted in my progress report." His crisp answer dissipated in the meeting hall's vaulted expanse.

They can't disallow my work now. What can I say to regain their approval? I need to keep studying this star.

Sassanak glanced at the only other person seated—the head of the Upper Council. The man's expression remained as unreadable as deep water on a windless lake.

Akilah didn't dare shift his gaze in that direction. The Upper Council, Persia's governmental overseers, cared nothing about progress reports of obscure research. Least of all the Upper Council's highest-ranking member, the Chief Megistane. Why was *he* here tonight?

"Akilah, your past achievements in astronomy are unblemished," Sassanak said. "But frankly, the only 'progress' I see in your progress report is your increasing expenses—to study a missing star—if you can even call it that." This time, Sassanak let the group's muffled laughter rise and fall unhindered. He pressed his back into his chair and folded his hands.

Akilah's nostrils flared. Sassanak assumed that position

every time he made young Magi hopefuls squirm under his withering questions.

In the uneasy silence, Akilah fixed his eyes on a spot above Sassanak's head, beyond the meeting hall's hexagonal walls, across the courtyard. *Ring, tower bells. That will end the meeting if the Council won't.*

Merciful peals! Their herald to evening prayers forced Sassanak to his feet. "All in attendance are bound to silence regarding these proceedings. May Zarathustra's principles guide our words and actions in pursuing truth, fairness, and justice." He retrieved an object hidden under his chair, its outline bulging beneath an imperial purple velvet cloth.

Sassanak strode to the center of the Gathering Circle. With a glower that could impale a bull, he whisked away the cover and thrust the stone statue at Akilah.

Not the *Faravahar*.

Akilah's hand hung limp at his side. How could he in good conscience touch the sacred symbol of Persia's official religion? It would signal his agreement that the meeting—and its outcome—were just and right. But Sassanak hadn't delivered the Council's decision yet. A protocol breach that others would easily overlook due to the late hour.

Akilah remained riveted on the specter of the statue. Satisfy his scruples or risk forfeiting a year's worth of research? Endanger his career or adjust his conscience?

Lift your hand. You have no choice. Akilah's hand wavered momentarily before he grazed the head, wings, and left loop of the winged-man carving. "Wisdom, positive forces, and right direction," he said. His gaze strayed to the floor.

Sassanak turned, held the Faravahar high, and delivered a short rendering too perfect to be spontaneous.

Akilah exhaled forcefully. This meeting—and its outcome—had been rigged.

The back of his neck prickled. The ruling was smattered with

threats veiled in carefully worded conditions. But challenging it would be foolish. At least it didn't disband the study. That's all that mattered.

Akilah's inner voice said to heed his niggling concerns, but he did not. Despite the threats still ringing in his ears, he filled his mind with details of his travel plans and gifts for the child-king.

He wove his way through dispersing Magi. Their bustling chaos and preoccupation with preparations for evening prayers cloaked Akilah's exit from the Great Hall. Finally free from the crowd, he rushed through a side door to a seated figure with woolly ebony hair.

"You're late." Rashidi's faint Egyptian accent tweaked his vowels.

Ignoring the gibe, Akilah stooped to sit on the steps with his colleague. "Rashidi, what of the commissioned pieces"—he lowered his voice—"our gifts for the child?"

"Still as safe as they were yesterday. The metalworker is having trouble with the locks on the boxes that will hold the gold. Should we switch the metal?"

"No. The metalworker is a Kushite. He can handle it."

Tallis emerged from a pillar's shadow. "What of the Council's ruling?"

Akilah had to tell his colleagues. But not in front of the Great Hall, the hub of all Lower Council activities. "Meet me in my chambers."



"In short, the Council still approves of our study of a new heavenly body ... and, to a lesser extent, our lengthy trip to Jerusalem." Akilah kept his tone light as he circled his reading table. He tapped the map they'd studied in planning

Lana Christian

their travel route. “In all those respects, nothing has changed.”

“But something *has* changed, yes?” Tallis said.

“Not for you, my friends. Only for me.”

“What?” Rashidi shifted to the edge of his seat.

“Research is very important to Persia’s image as a world power.” Akilah slowed his words. “I’m walking a fine line between science and religion. Jerusalem’s priests hold the key to all our unanswered questions about the star and the exact location of this prophesied child-king. If I don’t find the child or confirm he is the eternal king foretold, I’ll lose my position as a Magus. If I do find him, then it could ... upset some in our society’s highest circles. That, too, could jeopardize my career.” Akilah grinned ruefully. “So ... do you still want to go to Jerusalem with me?”