

Chapter 3

Secret Names

After reassuring the terrified servants, Akilah rushed into the Magi's shared tent. The Nabataeans had coldly calculated what likely held the greatest value. Only the locks on their three sturdiest trunks had been broken.

Rashidi barely glanced at the damaged trunks. "Tallis just sacrificed himself for us. You don't seem worried about that."

Akilah turned away, pretending to fuss over how to fix the locks. "There was nothing we could do for him."

"That is cold."

"I know Tallis well enough to know he can take care of himself." He threw the comment over his shoulder.

"Tallis against who-knows-how-many Nabataeans?" Rashidi's voice rose. "What aren't you telling me?"

Akilah repressed a sigh.

Rashidi grabbed Akilah's arm. "Is this about his past? Why keep it a secret?"

"He doesn't want anyone to know of it."

"The Council had to know before his Magi induction."

"Only his sponsor on the Council did."

"But no one else—except you? Why?"

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“Rashidi, we have more important things—”

“No, we don’t.” Rashidi bristled. “Am I an equal on your team or not?”

A stone dropped in Akilah’s stomach. He couldn’t break his oath to Tallis.

“What other secrets are you keeping?” Rashidi razored his words. “Next thing you know”—he snorted—“you’ll tell me you’re married.”

Akilah’s stomach knotted, thrusting that stone up to his throat. What could he say?

Rashidi drew back. “You’re not married, are you?”

“I ...”

“You *are*?” Rashidi stepped back, as if distance would dilute his anger.

“Contractually.” Akilah forced the word through his lips.

Rashidi snapped his slack jaw shut. “Why should that be a secret?”

“It’s complicated.”

Rashidi swept his arm in an arc that ended in the direction of the sliver of barren land visible beyond their tent flap. “I don’t think life can get more complicated than this.” He shook his head. “If we’re going to survive this wilderness, we can’t keep secrets from each other. Even if you have to settle for me instead of Tallis.”

“What?”

“Tallis is trained in survival skills. Without him, you have ... me. Your regret shows.”

Akilah stood in stunned silence. He hadn’t intended to show favoritism to any colleague. But he and Tallis had shared ten years of travels and dangers in service to Magi society. They had become closer than colleagues. They were friends.

Now Akilah had to live with what he was dealt. Maybe he had assumed Tallis was indispensable. He faced his young colleague. “Rashidi, you are no less skilled than any other

Magus. I need your engineering mind, your innovative thinking, and your knowledge of Egypt to help us get to Alexandria.”

“You have my skills but not my trust. Secrets destroy trust.”

“For now, secrets and silence are our allies. We should also stay silent about what we saw in Bethlehem. At least for a while.”

Rashidi scoffed and swiveled in every direction. “Who is there to tell?”

“Exhaustion, hunger, or capture can coax what’s in the heart to come out through the mouth.”

“Do you mean—”

“Who knows what enemies we have yet to face?” Akilah turned away. “I’ve said too much.”

“No, you haven’t said nearly enough. Explain yourself.”

Akilah whirled, his eyes flashing. “Then swear an oath of silence.”

Rashidi recoiled with an incredulous look. “The miles have tarnished your perspective. Persians don’t make oaths. Neither do I.”

“I will not move this caravan another parasang until you do.” Akilah ground the words through clenched teeth.

“We could die here.” Rashidi scorched the air with each elongated word.

“Yes.” Akilah’s glare met Rashidi’s truculent stare. “With or without you knowing about Tallis. Are you willing to die for what I would tell you about him? Because that could be its price.”

“First you say we must keep quiet about what we know of Yeshua. Then I learn you’re married. Now you say we can’t talk about Tallis. This pattern—”

Akilah grabbed Rashidi’s arm. “I am deadly certain about Yeshua *and* Tallis. Ignorance is a safe choice. Knowledge is a dangerous choice. Choose wisely.”

“I’ll never be an equal in your eyes until I’m equal in

knowledge about the people you picked to work with you.” Rashidi shook off Akilah’s grip. “Tell me.”

Akilah paused. How could he convey the situation’s gravity so Rashidi would *want* to keep Tallis’s secret, regardless of future duress? Rashidi had conducted himself admirably when raiders near Susita attacked their caravan and tried to capture him. Yet one day later, he had made a snap decision to the detriment of the whole caravan. If the heat of a moment broke his resolve, a careless word about Tallis could have disastrous results. Akilah had to make sure Rashidi would keep Tallis’s secrets forever, no matter what.

“I will tell you about Tallis if you tell me your true name.”

Rashidi clutched his throat as if poison from a viper bite was slowly stealing his breath.

“Every Egyptian has two names, yes?” Akilah continued. “Your ‘good’ name—the name by which everyone knows you—and your ‘true’ name? A name never spoken? A name said to hold the essence of your life?”

Rashidi stiffened. “I haven’t believed that for years.”

“Then you won’t mind telling me your true name.”

“I keep it secret to honor my parents and my heritage.” Rashidi bristled. “Don’t try to compare that to whatever you won’t tell me about Tallis.”

“You don’t believe in the power of your true name, yet you see a threat in sharing it with me.”

Rashidi’s jaw, set in stone, warned Akilah he was treading on dangerous ground. “As I recall, Egyptians believe that speaking one’s true name can make that person vulnerable to bad influences ... harm ... even jeopardize their ability to enter the afterlife. Did I get that right?”

Rashidi nodded but shot eye daggers at Akilah.

“We’re already in harm’s way, so why tempt fate for worse, yes? I understand.” Akilah’s voice softened. “Whether voicing your true name poses a threat to you or not, there’s a very real

threat in your learning Tallis's past and his true name. I don't exaggerate when I say such knowledge, in the wrong hands, would cost the lives of many people, including possibly everyone in our caravan."

Rashidi tore his tunic from neck to waist. "Don't you trust me?" He palmed his hand toward the east. "I swear on all I value and call holy that I will never divulge to anyone what you tell me about Tallis—even if under threat of death."

Akilah sighed. Was this how parents felt when teaching their children difficult life lessons? He had to make sure Rashidi would never forget this moment. "Very well. Sit."

When Rashidi had settled onto a cushion, Akilah spoke in low tones. "First ... Your true name."

Rashidi gulped.

"Your secret is safe with me." A smile played about the corners of Akilah's mouth. "Although it is intriguing to think that saying your true name could subject you to ..." At Rashidi's stricken look, he laughed heartily. "That's a joke, not a promise."

Akilah tapped his ear and leaned in close to Rashidi. "Now ... your true name."

"Zuberi-Bassel," he whispered.

Akilah smiled kindly at his younger colleague. "A noble-sounding name. What does it mean?"

"Strong and courageous."

"Well placed." Akilah clasped Rashidi's shoulders. "You've already proven to be both. If your parents could see—"

"Now you." Rashidi shrugged out of Akilah's grip. "Make it truth."

Akilah silently prayed his words would bring no harm to his absent colleague. "Twenty years ago, Tallis was a rising star in Persia's military. Since then, he has expended great effort to bury his past. So should we."

"Why?"

“The Nabataeans didn’t like how Tallis and his troops patrolled one of their trade routes at a key junction in Babylon. They claimed the troops interfered with their commerce. They threatened him with force and ordered him to leave. He carried out his orders and stayed. They retaliated by capturing Tallis’s wife and infant son.”

Rashidi sucked in his breath. “Tallis has a family?”

Akilah’s eyes moistened. “He and some of his best men succeeded in rescuing his family from the Nabataeans. But in doing so, he incurred heavy losses. That was bad enough, but the Nabataeans vowed revenge on him—to erase the shame their losses had brought them. To keep his family safe, Tallis sent them far away. Only he knew the location. To keep their whereabouts secret, he didn’t correspond with them. He doesn’t know if they moved on from there.”

Akilah wiped his face. “He chose to stay in Persia but needed to ‘disappear,’ so he entered Magi society. That way, if the Nabataeans ever found him, they wouldn’t be able to trace his family.”

“He can’t be with family ... ever?” Rashidi’s frown deepened. “He sacrificed himself for them ...”

“Magi society offered Tallis a measure of peace and protection. But becoming a Magus was more than an escape. Tallis was and is a devoted priest-scholar. For many years, only one person in Magi society knew the truth of Tallis’s identity—his sponsor. He pledged to keep Tallis’s secret unto death.” Akilah paused. “That sponsor was Fakhri.”

Rashidi exhaled a shaky breath. His head drooped. “How do you know all this?”

“Tallis confided in me after we had worked together for seven years. By then, he felt he could entrust a second person with his secret in case he or Fakhri didn’t ... survive.

“Listen well.” Akilah forced brightness into his voice. “There’s light in this darkness. Although Tallis has been

captured, the Nabataeans didn't recognize him. They don't see him as their enemy. To them, he's only a pawn with military fortitude they can exploit. They don't know his real name. At all costs, it must stay that way. It will help keep our friend alive. Understood?"

Rashidi nodded.

Akilah paused. What would it ultimately cost *him* for breaking his oath to his closest colleague? His honorable friend. "If the Nabataeans learned Tallis's true name, his life would be forfeit. And it would eventually lead the Nabataeans to his family, as his wife and son know him only by his true name."

Akilah searched Rashidi's face for signs of fear or regret, but it was as resolute as granite. "Fakhri and I kept Tallis's past and his name secret from everyone. Now you are bound by oath to do the same. For the rest of your life."

"Tell me Tallis's real name."

What Rashidi didn't know, he couldn't divulge. But that would carve a chasm between the two Magi. Akilah's throat turned dry. "It's Adrahasus. In Babylonian, it means 'great intelligence.'"

A thick silence settled between them.

Finally Rashidi parted the silence with a whisper. "I will guard this information with my life, no matter the cost." He met Akilah's gaze with settled resolve.

"Thank you," Akilah mouthed. He prayed he could trust Rashidi's vow.