

Chapter 2

Beyond Value

“Another time.” Akilah hurried toward his tent. “I need to check our bearings.”

His response was half true. The stark terrain and lack of roads demanded Akilah’s daily diligence to ensure they headed west by northwest. But guilt seared his conscience. He was getting better at telling half-truths.

Hakeem hadn’t pressed him for when to talk with the servants about Yeshua. But if he said anything, they’d surely ask what he believed about the prophecies. He didn’t know how to reconcile what they said with what he’d seen. He might never fully sort his Bethlehem experience, so how could he respond?

He retrieved his case of navigation instruments and retreated to his fellow Magi. They seemed to sense his inner turmoil and respectfully walked in silence with him.

At the nearest hill, Akilah whirled to face them. “Why did we get to see the prophesied child? We’re not Jewish.”

“Maybe because we paid attention to what others missed,” Tallis said.

Rashidi snickered. “What does that say about the priests we’d planned to talk with in Jerusalem?”

Akilah shook his head. “We can’t judge them. We never met them.”

“Knowing about the child isn’t as important as what we do with what we know,” Tallis said.

Akilah gripped his instrument case tighter. If he talked to the servants about Yeshua, he wouldn’t be able to control what they said. They might forget or twist the facts. Hunger and duress could loosen tongues of the most stalwart men.

If they lived long enough to reach civilization.

Rein in your thoughts, Akilah.

At the hill’s crest, he bent to open the case, but the lid wouldn’t budge. “Oh, no. Damaged? The lid warped?” He ran his hands across its edges. He jiggled the latch open and pried the lid off with difficulty. Moonlight falling on the interior revealed the culprit—a bag crammed into one corner. He poked it with caution. A familiar rustle replied. His hands trembling, he opened the drawstring.

Pistachios.

“Tallis, did you hide this in my instrument case?”

“Of course not.”

Rashidi glanced over Akilah’s shoulder. “We know how much you love pistachios, Tallis. But really ... a private reserve? You know that’s forbidden.”

“I didn’t put it there,” Tallis protested.

With care, Akilah lifted his astrolabe from its case. When he reached for the tripod, his fingers brushed against a folded cloth underneath it. “What ...”

He sniffed the cloth before spreading its folds. Short stacks of flatbread.

“Haruz.” He exhaled sharply. Haruz, the father of the caravansary owner where they stayed in Ayla, must have stowed some extra food in their gear.

What a thoughtful gesture—likely his last act before Herod’s scout overtook him. Haruz had suffered greatly to keep the Magi

safe in Ayla. Who would sacrifice himself for people he barely knew? Akilah could only hope and pray Haruz would heal from his wounds.

Akilah made a mental note to have Hakeem check every trunk and the rest of the gear tonight for more of Haruz's handiwork—and secure the food before the servants could raid it.

Get your bearings.

Oh, how Akilah wished that incredible star would appear again. He needed its guidance in this vast, uncharted wilderness. Moreover, he needed wisdom and discernment. And, for all the future decisions he couldn't anticipate, he needed help from his colleagues. Akilah knew how to read the sky. Tallis knew how to read the land. Rashidi's engineering expertise would be critical for rigging makeshift repairs. Akilah derived some comfort in telling himself he had chosen well—as if an invisible hand had guided him to people with skills he hadn't anticipated he'd need to depend on.

“Don't move.” A voice issued from the darkness.

Like ghosts, four silhouetted figures seemed to appear out of nowhere.

Akilah's blood ran cold. “What do you want?” he rasped.

“Information.” A deep, authoritative voice answered. “The most useful one of you will come with us.”

Even though the shadowed man spoke Aramaic, he placed one word out of order and twisted others with an odd accent.

Akilah caught his breath. The interloper was Nabataean.

“If you don't get us what we need, Herod's guards will conveniently learn that you are spying on him. Many people are eager to return you to Jerusalem ... by whatever means necessary.”

Akilah's hands grew clammy. How much did this Nabataean really know of the Magi's recent movements? The night before their caravan left Ayla, the Magi had entrusted Haruz and his

son to dispose of Herod's scout. Had they not succeeded? It was impossible to tell from the Nabataean's selectively vague words. "What could we do for you in Jerusalem?"

"Not Jerusalem," the Nabataean snarled.

A clue. But what could they want? Maybe an interpreter. "I speak eight languages—"

"I'm an engineer—"

In one liquid movement, the Nabataean whirled and swung his sword in an arc in front of the Magi, silencing Akilah and Rashidi. Both reflexively drew back, but Tallis held his ground. The sword missed him by less than an inch.

The Nabataean's eyes gleamed as he aimed his sword point at Tallis's throat. "You aren't afraid to die. You must have military training." With his free hand, the Nabataean gestured to the shadows. "Take this one." He jerked his head toward Tallis as two men emerged. "Order the rest to the Magi's camp. Quickly. No killing unless someone resists."

Akilah's face stung with heat. "No killing. Take what you need. But no one dies."

"We will take what we want. If you run fast, you might make it back to your camp in time to warn your caravan to not resist."

Akilah's mind raced. "Wait."

At his outburst, either curiosity or cunning spread across the Nabataean's face. He raised his hand to stay his men. "Give me what's most precious to you, and we will kill no one."

"You already took our colleague. Human life is precious beyond price."

Akilah's argument died at the Nabataean's feet.

Think fast. "I have a powerful new navigation device. A mathematical jewel, really."

"We know how to journey through wastelands better than anyone. Your toy is of no use to us."

A holy boldness gripped Akilah. "You didn't ask for what was useful to you. You asked what was most precious to *me*."

Without this device, we will wander in the wilderness. That could cost us our lives.” He grabbed his astrolabe from its case and clutched it to his chest with startling ferocity. “This is yours—if you don’t harm Tallis *and* he returns to us with this as a sign of your honor. Then leave us in peace. We have no love of Herod but even less desire for entanglements—with anyone. Agreed?”

He glared at the Nabataean. A cloud cleared the moon, shining its wan light on the man’s wide gold armband. Red and purple silks wound through gold loops encircled the adornment that covered half of his sinewy upper arm. This Nabataean was no mercenary. He was a leader.

“You understand honor,” Akilah said through clenched teeth. “Promise on your honor you will return our colleague to us with my astrolabe. Both intact and unharmed.”

The Nabataean lunged for the device.

Akilah spun beyond the Nabataean’s reach. Surprisingly, the other man with him didn’t intervene.

The leader chuckled. “Don’t think yourself brave. I could have killed you twice already if I’d wanted to.”

“Then finish your business with us,” Akilah hissed. “Agree to the terms. My colleague assists you; you provide his safe return with the astrolabe.”

The Nabataean tipped his chin upward. “You took from our secret water sources.”

“We won’t divulge their location,” Akilah said. “You have my word.”

The Nabataean spat on the ground. “Persians. Your word means nothing to me.”

“Then our map might.”

The Nabataean grabbed Akilah’s throat. “Speak while you still have breath.”

Terror raked furrows across Rashidi’s forehead.

“Drew ... map ...” Akilah choked out between gasps. “Water

... beyond Petra.” Blood pounded in his temples. “Take the map ... keep your secrets.”

With his hand still on Akilah’s throat, the Nabataean summoned another man from the shadows and nodded toward Rashidi. “Take that one’s clothes and put them on. Go with this one to retrieve his map. Shield yourself so no one in the camp sees who you are.”

His grip tightened around Akilah’s neck. “Return with your map in six minutes, and you’ll get your Egyptian friend back,” the Nabataean said, his voice low and throaty. “If you fail, both your friends’ lives will be forfeit—and you’ll beg for the same.” He shoved Akilah away.

Akilah stifled his coughing as he and the guard slipped down the ridge. From a distance, a protector hailed them at the edge of the camp. “It’s just Rashidi and me,” Akilah called, turning to block the protector’s view of the guard.

Inside his tent, he had barely dug the cat statue from the bottom of his clothing trunk when the guard snatched it from him.

Soon Akilah and the guard were once again on the back side of the ridge where the caravan couldn’t see them. Under the light of a small torch, the Nabataean in charge examined the cat statue. With alarming speed, he found its hidden hinge and pulled the map from its hiding place.

He rooted farther, swirling his finger deep inside the cavity. His face hardened.

Don’t.

Using a small knife, the Nabataean pried the *stūrih* from its cramped place in the interior of the statue’s head.

“A contract hidden in a statue.” He scanned the document. “Most people hide inheritances. But hiding a contract of protection through marriage ... Is this arrangement from honor or necessity?”

Akilah lifted a shoulder. “It depends on which party you ask.”

“Is she young? Pretty?” The Nabataean’s mouth shifted between a smile and a sneer.

Akilah reached for the crushed document.

The Nabataean snatched it from his reach. “By Persian law, a copy of this should reside in your House of Comparisons. Otherwise, why carry it into the wilderness?” His mocking tone sharpened. “Unless you don’t want others to know.” His shoulders shook with silent laughter. “You Persians. So truthful, even when secrecy would serve you better.” He tossed the *stūrīh* at Akilah’s feet but waved the statue in his face. “My souvenir.”

“Agree you will return our friend with the astrolabe to us. Both intact and unharmed.”

The Nabataean cocked his head, then tucked his chin ever so slightly.

“Your nod is my surety.” With his eyes on the interloper, Akilah knelt to grab the *stūrīh*.

The Nabataean signaled to the darkness with his torch. At least a dozen men appeared and streamed down the ridge on a diagonal. Another signal. Another man emerged from the darkness and shoved Rashidi toward Akilah.

The Nabataean bounced the flat of his dagger on Akilah’s chest. “You are wise but talk too much. Now *run*.”

Akilah and Rashidi fled straight down the hill, leaving the astrolabe and its tripod where they lay.



Akilah had barely enough time to alert Hakeem and the protectors before the plunder began. Thankfully, the servants heeded their warnings to stay in their tents and not interfere during the raid.

With military precision, the Nabataeans took what they wanted of the caravan's supplies. In three minutes, the raiders vanished into the night. All Akilah could do was stand by, helpless.

Rashidi plucked Akilah's sleeve. "About Tallis. We can send—"

"No. The time the Nabataean spent talking to us was planned. It gave his men a longer head start to spirit Tallis away. We can't assume in what direction. If they were on horseback, they could be seven parasangs away by now. We must think of the caravan. Tell our head servants to collect everyone. I'll talk to them while Hakeem inventories what's left."

"What will they make Tallis do?"

"Focus, Rashidi. Go."

"What if they follow us?"

A sinkhole opened in Akilah's heart. "They won't. They got what they wanted."