



A Rich Diet

Light the first violet candle.

Ishtar sat on his golden throne, dressed in royal robes with a crown of jewels on his head. He looked across the throne room, filled from wall to wall with his subjects shouting his name in admiration. “Ishtar! Ishtar!” They sang his praises not out of force or duty, but because they loved him. King Ishtar, King of Kings, ruler of all Persia, only ten years old but already the protector, provider, and savior of all his people. Never had there been a king so . . .

“Ishtar!”

At the sharp sound of his name Ishtar flinched, which caused his head to go under and water to go up his nose. He kicked and splashed until finally his feet found the bottom of the pool. He stood coughing and sputtering, wiping the water from his eyes. That’s when he saw his bodyguard, Kazeem, standing over him on the side of the pool.

“Many apologies,” Kazeem said. “I did not mean to startle you, but I called your name three times before you heard me. Were you daydreaming of power and wealth?”

“Uh, no, of course not,” Ishtar sputtered. “I . . . I was preparing my mind for my history lesson.”

Kazeem just smiled, an odd smile that Ishtar suspected meant Kazeem suspected that Ishtar was not telling the entire truth. Kazeem was big for a Persian. So tall was the man that the long, curved sword hanging from his belt didn’t come near to reaching the floor. His arms, resting on his hips, seemed to be the size of an elephant’s legs.

“In any case,” Kazeem said, “you are correct that it is time for your history lesson.”

Ishtar didn’t argue, mostly because it would have done no good. While Kazeem was technically Ishtar’s servant, it wasn’t the same as the slaves and masters he saw from other

countries. Kazeem was more of a paid worker, who could choose to quit at any time, and there were laws against mistreating servants. Besides, Kazeem had been at his side since the day he was born, and Ishtar thought of him as a friend.

Ishtar sloshed his way out of the long, rectangular pool that filled the center of his home. He lived with his father and servants on the uppermost floor of the Palace of Amaranth, where lived Sheik Konarak and all his advisors. Ishtar's father, Salamar, was the *mogan-andarzbad*, the highest-ranking advisor, and chief of all the magi.

Surrounding the pool were sleeping chambers, study rooms, and a large banquet hall where Salamar, with Ishtar at his side, would often entertain exotic guests. Amaranth was a seaport on the Arabian coast, a city that saw many merchants and traders pass through her gates. In fact it was the “magical” and nutritious seeds of the amaranth plant—brought here by Greek traders long before—that had given the city its name. Lounging on pillows through hundreds of banquets, Ishtar had learned many facts like this, and the ways of many different cultures from both east and west.

“Quickly now,” Kazeem scolded. “You must not keep Hormoz waiting.”

Hormoz. An expert in history, and one of Ishtar's several tutors. While he was allowed a swim in the pool in the heat of the afternoon, the rest of his day was spent with one tutor or another. Mathematics, science, language—it never seemed to end.

“I think if I learn much more my head may overflow and all my knowledge spill onto the floor.”

“You are ten years old,” Kazeem said as he escorted Ishtar to the other side of the pool. “If you live to be my age, you will discover there are always new things to be learned, and they all remain neatly stored within your head.”

Kazeem stood just outside the study room as Hormoz began the lesson. It always took Hormoz a minute or two before he turned over the time marker—an invention of glass that allowed sand to fall from one chamber to another, thus marking time. Ishtar had often thought that if he could just open up the time marker and enlarge the hole through which the sand flowed, his lessons would be much shorter.

“And so we begin with a recital of the royal ancestors.” Hormoz started every lesson exactly this way, and Ishtar sighed.

An hour later Ishtar was leaving his history tutor and heading for his tutor of mathematics when Salamar met him near the pool. "Father!" he exclaimed, and hugged Salamar's legs.

"*Zor bekhayr*, Ishtar," Salamar said, returning the hug. Then he took his son by the shoulders and stood him up straight. "And what did you learn in history lessons today?"

Ishtar shrugged. "Nothing."

Salamar frowned. "Then I must have Hormoz severely punished for failing to teach you."

"Oh no, no Father," Ishtar said quickly. "It is just that I already knew everything he taught today!"

Salamar's face melted into a grin and Ishtar realized his father had just been joking. Which he should have known, now that he thought about it. Out loud he said, "It's just so boring, going over the same things every day."

"It is by repeating a thing that you learn it well," Salamar said. "But for now, you will not be taking your lessons in mathematics or science. Your aunt has invited you over to play with your cousins."

Ishtar's face lit up. Only the children in the line of succession were permitted to live in the palace, and Sheik Konarak had no children of his own. The total number of children living in the palace was . . . one. The only time Ishtar got to play with others was when he visited relatives. Obviously, as part of the royal household, he could not simply go outside and play with the children in the streets.

"May my cousins come to the palace instead?" Ishtar asked. Although he was often lonely, he hated leaving the palace, even to go see his cousins. As beautiful as the city was, it was still dirty, and full of strange people. "You have nothing to fear," his father had once told him. "Then why do I need a bodyguard?" Ishtar had asked. Salamar had no answer.

But now Salamar said, "The invitation was for you to come to their home, and thus you shall."

Ishtar sighed and took his lesson parchments to his sleeping chamber.

Kazeem informed the tutors of mathematics and science that they wouldn't be needed today, then called for the bearers and led Ishtar down four flights of stairs to the courtyard. The palace was built of a reddish stone, and every door and window was topped with an ornate arch. Green trees and bushes filled the courtyard, which was decorated with colorful mosaics. A fountain in the center of the courtyard gave off a cool mist in the afternoon heat.

Ishtar climbed into his *tahtirevan*, a tall box with a seat inside and poles jutting out the front and back. Four bearers immediately lifted the poles. The metal gate—taller than four men standing on each other’s shoulders—was raised, and the bearers carried Ishtar in his *tahtirevan* out into the streets, with Kazeem walking behind.

Ishtar watched the city go by through his open windows. The streets were wide and paved with stone, but very stinky from all the animals that traveled it. Along the sides were sellers of anything a Persian or visitor could possibly want—roasted meats, sharp cheeses, sweet delicacies, clothes of every color and material. As they moved along the main avenue he saw games and weapons and jewelry for sale. For a price, you could even get your future told, though Ishtar’s father had warned him many times that such fortunetellers were frauds.

Being a seaport directly on the trade routes, Amaranth was full of all kinds of people: Greeks, Asians, Africans, even Romans, though the Persian Empire and the Roman Empire were always on the verge of war.

The shadows hadn’t moved very far by the time Ishtar reached the home of his cousins. They spent the afternoon playing King’s Ransom—one of many games Salamar had brought home with him from his travels. The sun was getting low in the sky when Kazeem said it was time to return to the palace. Many of the sellers’ stalls were closing, and children played in the mostly empty streets. As they passed one group of boys about Ishtar’s age he heard them talking.

“There goes that fancy boy Ishtar,” one boy said.

“He even has a girl’s name!” another added.

Then they chanted his name in a mocking way—“Ishtar, Ishtar, Ishtar.”

Back at the palace, Ishtar was silent as he put on a clean coat for dinner.

“You are quiet tonight.”

Ishtar jumped at the sound of his father’s voice behind him.

“Usually I can hear you babbling to Kazeem from the other side of the palace.”

“I . . . I was thinking about something,” Ishtar said.

“And what great thoughts so occupy the mind of my son that he has no room for talk?”

Ishtar looked away. Part of him was embarrassed to answer the question, but part of him really wanted to. Finally the second part won.

“Is . . . is my name a girl’s name?”

Samar sighed deeply, then sat on his son’s bed. “Names can behave strangely,” he said after a long pause. “In one country they can be one thing, in another country they can be just the opposite.”

“But is *Ishtar* a girl’s name?”

Samar gave his answer much thought while Ishtar pulled the belt around his green silk jacket. “In some countries, the name Ishtar is given to a goddess of love,” Samar said finally. “In other countries, it’s the name of a god of war. But long before you were born your mother and I decided our first son would be named *Ishtar*.”

At the mention of his mother, a rare occurrence, Ishtar just looked at his father.

“It was your grandfather’s name,” Samar said. “We gave you that name in honor of your grandfather.”

Now it was Ishtar’s turn to think a long thought. “Then I shall wear the name with pride,” he said finally.

Samar stood to leave. “Good. It is not wise to worry what others might think of you, except as it may affect your relationship with them. Come now. We have guests for dinner. Merchants from several lands.” *So what else is new?* Ishtar thought.

The feast that night was quite ordinary: lamb, duck, whitefish, eggplant, olives, boiled eggs, several kinds of flatbread, and lots of sauces. Everyone lounged on pillows on the floor around the food, and each had a small bowl of water beside their plate, for washing their fingers between courses. There were no actors performing Greek plays as there often were, but five musicians did play quietly in the corner. Ishtar helped himself to some more *koof-teh*, scooping a meatball up with his bread. As the men ate the fine foods and drank their tea, they talked. Boring talk, Ishtar thought. And it went on forever because, as happened at so many of these dinners, the guests didn’t know it was impolite to stay late into the night.

Ishtar’s favorite dishes were the desserts. At least three at every meal—including *nogha*, made from the sweet sap of a rare plant, mixed with ground nuts, and spread between two crisp wafers. It was chewy and nutty.

“Ishtar, no more *nogha*,” his father whispered after Ishtar’s third helping.

Three of the guests were Jewish merchants from Palestine. Every time someone would

mention the gods, one of them would say, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.”

The third time the merchant said this a trader from Kashgar said, “You Jews say there is but one god, yet he has abandoned you. Would it not be wise to turn to another? Samantabhadra, perhaps. Or the Persian god Ameretat.”

“The Lord is our God, the Lord is one,” the Jewish merchant said again. “He has not abandoned us. He has promised us a Messiah, one who will save us some day.”

“Someday soon, perhaps?”

“Oh no, the prophecy of the Messiah shall not be fulfilled for many centuries,” the merchant scoffed.

Ishtar was almost glad when Kazeem finally fetched him for his astronomy lesson. He followed his bodyguard to the other side of the pool and up a spiral stairway made of stone, to the roof of the palace. Ishtar looked out across the city, lit only by starlight and a sliver of moon just peeking over the horizon, such that all the tall buildings were outlined in silver. Beyond that he saw the Akhzar Sea, its waves lapping against the shore.

Since astronomy was the study of the stars, and since stars only appear at night, astronomy lessons were almost always taught at night. Ishtar’s tutor for these lessons was a rickety old man that Ishtar was sure must have been born ages *before* the stars. Alim was his name, and his lessons were always the same. He sat in a chair and read a book by lamplight while making Ishtar identify star after star.

“You’re late,” Alim snapped.

“We had guests for dinner,” Ishtar replied, thinking as always that Alim was his servant and should treat him with more respect. But Ishtar wasn’t about to tell him that.

“We must begin immediately, before the moon fully takes over the sky and there is nothing to see.” With that he began giving Ishtar a string of stars to identify, not once looking up from his book.

“There are three stars above the eye of *Karzang*,” Alim droned on. “They are . . . ?”

Ishtar sighed. “*Al-Waqi*, *Wasat as-Sama*’, and *Az-Zubana*.”

“And above that, the two stars to the right of *Nemasp*’s ear?”

“*An-Nihal* and *Kalb ar-Rai*.” Would this lesson never end?

“And the crown on the head of *Sagr* is made of three stars. What are they, please?”

Alim turned a page in his book. Ishtar stared at the sky. He knew these stars as well as his tutor—though not quite as well as his father. He knew the face of *Sagr* like he knew his own. But something was wrong . . .

“Ishtar, an answer please.”

Ishtar shook his head, then picked up one of his father’s seeing devices—a lens made of crystal rock in a leather tube, given to him by a man from China. The lens magnified the head of *Sagr*, but that only made Ishtar more confused.

“Ishtar! There are three stars that make up the crown of *Sagr*!”

Ishtar lowered the lens and slumped back into his chair. “No,” he said, shaking his head slowly, “there are not. Tonight . . . there are *four*.”

Alim set his book aside with a sigh. “Child, I had thought this a simple review, but now I see I must teach—” He had been looking at Ishtar, who was staring at the sky, but then followed Ishtar’s gaze up to the constellation of *Sagr*. When his eyes landed on the fourth star now forming the crown, he stopped in mid-sentence.

Alim stared . . . and stared . . . and stared, then turned with a rush and ran back down the spiral staircase with the speed of a much younger man, yelling behind him, “Wait right there!”

Moments later Alim returned. Behind him followed Ishtar’s father, his father’s two brothers, and all the guests from the banquet dressed in their colorful robes. Salamar took up the looking device and aimed it where Alim pointed. Salamar gasped, then passed the device to his two brothers, who were also shocked. They began to talk quickly with one other, using words that Ishtar couldn’t even understand. Finally Ishtar tugged at Salamar’s trousers.

“Father! What is it? What’s happening?”

Salamar looked at his son with a look Ishtar had seen only once before, the first time Ishtar had beaten him at King’s Ransom, and said, “Ishtar, it seems you have discovered a star that even yesterday did not exist!”



Matthew's story of the magi who visited the baby Jesus has led to much speculation. So little is known about who they were, where exactly they came from, how many there were, or when and where they arrived, that most of what we believe about the story has been invented over the centuries. We don't even know how they "followed" the star.

But one thing we know, and the most important thing we know, is that God, in some mysterious way, led a group of Gentiles across vast spaces to bow down to Jesus, and present him with gifts.

During the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." MATTHEW 2:1-2

Tonight we start an adventure that will take us right up to Christmas day. Like Ishtar, along the way we'll meet many people, cross a lot of ground, and learn many lessons. Ishtar has no idea what's about to happen to him, and neither do we.

But if we'll keep our hearts and minds open, listen closely for the whispers of God, and follow whatever "star" he puts before us, maybe we, too, will have some very special gifts to offer Jesus on Christmas morning.