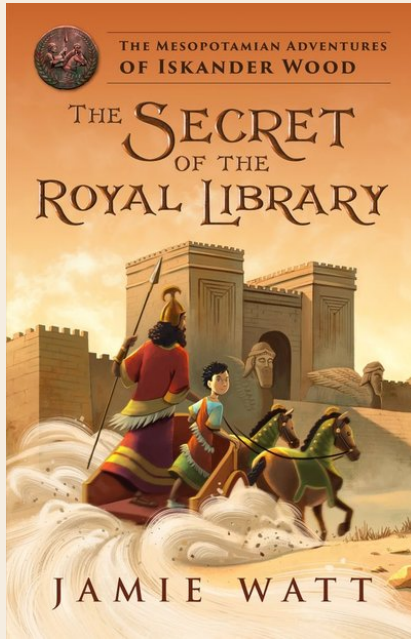




THE FIRST TWO CHAPTERS

The Secret of the Royal Library

BOOK ONE OF THE MESOPOTAMIAN
ADVENTURES OF ISKANDER WOOD

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ISKANDERWOOD.COM



LAYERS OF HISTORY

“**H**e blocks the final penalty kick, and the crowd cheers his name!” Iskander said. “Imagine it. Is-kan-der! Is-kan-der! Is-kan-der!”

“Do they even chant for goalies?” Lena, Iskander’s little sister, asked.

“Then all over Erbil, even all over the Middle East, little kids would start wearing jerseys with my name on the back,” Iskander added, brushing off her comment.

“I’m glad you found a good team out here,” Penelope, Iskander’s mother, said. “When the university offered your father the field research position in Iraq, I didn’t know if you’d be able to keep playing at all.”

“Hey, I can dream, right?”

“Remember, tomorrow you have to wake up early because you’re coming with me to the dig site,” Nigel, Iskander’s father, yelled upstairs.

“Okay!” Iskander called back.

“Lucky!” Lena said from the bottom bunk. “I wish I could go to the dig.”

“Don’t be so jealous,” Iskander said. “Unless you like dust, big holes, and sitting under the blistering sun while Dad tells a bunch of men where they should dig, brush sand, and shovel pebbles for hours.”

“But what if they find a gold coin?” Lena asked. “Or a treasure chest? You could be rich.”

“Treasure chests are from pirates, Lena. There probably aren’t even any left in real life. And whatever Dad’s interested in, I’m pretty sure it’s not gold coins.”

Lena shrugged and tucked in her stuffed hedgehog.

“I don’t even really know what he’s looking for,” Iskander said. “How does a crumbly old wall tell you anything? Trust me, you’ll have way more fun grocery shopping with Mom than slathering sunscreen on your nose every forty-five minutes.” They both giggled.

“Goodnight, son.” Nigel walked into the room. “Big day tomorrow. You might even enjoy it a little.”

“Sure, Dad.”

The next day, after an hour and a half driving past what looked like endless junkyards filled with piles of old tires, surrounded by dusty, weedy fields, they arrived at a wheat farm.

“We have to walk from here,” Nigel said. “Don’t forget your water and hat, son.”

The jagged crop lines stretched out in every direction, dust rising with each step. He could think of about forty places he’d rather be.

“Just like Indiana Jones.” Nigel grinned as he settled the wide-brimmed canvas fedora on his head.

“Let’s hope there are no snakes then,” Iskander said.

After a few minutes of walking, they came upon a group of people looking down into a flat-sided hole dug into the ground.

Iskander put on his own hat—not to be an adventurer but because it was late morning and the Iraqi sun could turn a boy into a lobster within minutes.

Volunteers dug up small amounts of earth, dusted each surface, then started over. “Keep brushing before you dig any more,” Nigel told them. “History is delicate.”

“What are we looking for exactly?” Iskander asked Dr. Evelyn Kramer, a Boston University archaeology professor who had flown in for six weeks to collaborate with Nigel’s team.

“Anything, really. I’m sure we’ll find something. There are unbound riches all over this region.”

“Riches?” Iskander wondered if Lena had been right about the treasure.

“Cultural treasures.” Dr. Kramer smiled. “Pottery, carvings, the walls of old houses, even objects with writing on them. All of it helps us piece together what people’s lives were like in that historical period.”

“You’re gonna spend six weeks pushing dirt around just to find out what the lives of dead people were like?”

“Yes, exactly. There’s so much still hidden in this country. Maybe one day you’ll know more about these people than I ever will.”

Iskander shrugged and ducked under the canopy, where a bucket of pottery shards sat in the corner.

"Can I look at these?" he asked Dr. Kramer.

"Sure. Just some pottery we found this morning."

"Why are they all so different?" Iskander turned over the pieces in his hands.

"Because they're from different places," Dr. Kramer said. "Greek, Persian, Median, and of course Neo-Assyrian."

"Greeks? All the way out here?"

"It's a bit more complicated," she said. "Are the toys in your house, the clothes on your body, and the sheets on your bed all from this country? They come from all around the world because of trade. The ancient world was the same."

Iskander glanced at his Nike shoes and rifled through more broken pieces.

He stood back up and scanned the horizon. "So why here? It's just a big, dusty field. How'd you even know there'd be anything?"

"We used declassified Cold War spy photos." Dr. Kramer winked. "CIA satellites from the 1960s."

"Yeah, sure. I bet my dad told you to say that."

"No, it's true. Modern satellites would actually be useless here—all this farming has churned up the ground too much. But sixty years ago, before any of this development, the old crop patterns were still visible from the air. Whole lost cities have been found that way."

Iskander put down the pottery shard and stared out at the field.

"Huh."

Dr. Kramer returned to the dig, and Iskander drifted toward the far edge of the site, where the ground dropped into a narrow trench the team hadn't gotten to yet. Something rectangular was sticking out of the dirt wall.

Interesting.

He crouched at the edge and brushed the soil away.

"Iskander!" Nigel appeared from behind him. Dr. Kramer turned around too. "That section hasn't been cleared. You know better than that."

"Sorry, Dad."

"Since you need something to do, help the volunteers sweep under the canopy." Nigel handed him a broom.

He swept until he got bored, then dug through the bucket of shards again.

"Black limestone!" Nigel yelled with more excitement than Iskander had ever heard. Everyone stopped what they were doing and rushed to the trench.

"What is it?" Iskander asked.

"We don't know," Nigel said. "But it's well preserved. Looks similar to other monuments from the Neo-Assyrian period, perhaps right after the time of King Sennacherib."

"King who?"

"King Sennacherib. Military leader, 700 BC—about 2,700 years ago."

"A military leader who leaves treasures around for us to find thousands of years later," Iskander said. "If he left any swords or spears, then he sounds like my kind of guy."

"You might not say that if you got to know him in real life." Nigel directed a volunteer to brush more gently. "He

was pretty ruthless. A lot of the Assyrian kings were, especially the ones after Sennacherib. They would absolutely destroy and humiliate their enemies. Why do you think Jonah didn't want to tango with these guys?"

Nigel laughed, but something prickled at the back of Iskander's neck as he looked down at the black stone.

"Layers of history!" Nigel tried to read the writing on the ancient limestone. It was an odd style with lines pressed into the stone at various lengths and angles.

"The voice is royal." Nigel's finger moved along the stone. "But the script is priestly." He stepped back. "These two things don't belong together. I don't know what to make of it."

After a final round of brushing and picture-taking, Nigel re-covered the limestone with a tarp. "To protect it from looters."

He called everyone back to the cars for the drive to Erbil.

"Most important thing I've ever found." Nigel started the ignition, then looked at him. "And you were here for it."

"It's great, Dad, really. But what does it even say?"

"We'll send the pictures back to the University of Padua tonight. Within a few days, I bet the linguists in the Ancient Near East Department will have an idea of what's being communicated—even if parts of it are too obscure to make out."

"I hope so. Or maybe I shouldn't hope so if King Sennacherib is as bad as you said."

They made it home for a late supper. For once, Iskander headed straight to bed.

“Thanks again for coming with me.” Nigel tucked him in.

“I’ll admit that the surprises are pretty cool.” Iskander pulled the sheet up to his chin. “You never know what you’ll find buried in the ground.”



THE PILGRIMAGE

Life settled back to normal for a few days. Iskander returned to school. Nigel disappeared to the dig site each morning.

“I don’t get it,” Nigel said to Penelope one evening while they cleaned up the kitchen. Iskander was reading in the next room. “The inscription switches between registers. Royal one moment, then almost liturgical.”

“Give the team in Padua some more time.” Penelope wiped the countertop. “They may be able to crack the message.”

“It’s as if whoever wrote this didn’t have the right words for what they were trying to describe.” Nigel paced back and forth across the kitchen.

When Penelope picked up Iskander from school the next day, he was with his friend Schmoni.

“How are you doing, Schmoni?” Penelope asked. “How

is your mother? I heard you all are expecting a new baby brother any day now.”

“She’s good but busy!” Schmoni said. “She’s been preparing a restaurant’s worth of food because this weekend we’re going to my relative’s house in Dubardan. Before the baby is born, she wants to make our annual trip to Mar Mattai Monastery so we can pray, light candles, and ask the monks’ blessing on the new baby.”

Back home, Iskander helped his mom make his second-favorite dinner of pasta with fresh pesto from the basil they grew in their garden.

“Today I killed four cockroaches out by the sewer and brought them back for sweet Iggy,” Lena said at the dinner table. Iggy was the lizard she had captured several days before, which now lived in a shoe box in her room.

“Somehow that is both disturbing and cute, Lena,” Nigel said. “But good for you. How was your day, Penelope?”

“It was good to talk with Schmoni today,” Penelope said. “They’re such a nice family.”

“Yeah, but he can never do anything on the weekends because his mom is always taking them on pilgrimages,” Iskander said. “This weekend I think they’re going to Mar Matt or something.”

“Mar Mattai!” Nigel stared off into the corner. “Mar Mattai Monastery.” He jumped up from the table and made for his study.

“How could I have missed it!” Nigel came rushing back to the dining room.

“Missed what?” Iskander grinned. “The house rules are right there on the wall. No eating with your mouth open. Four chair legs on the floor at all times. No leaving the table without being excused.”

“Yeah, sorry, everyone,” Nigel said. “I think I might be near a breakthrough. I’ll... try to return to that later. How was your school day, Iskander?”

“Not bad. Excited to have a break from school tomorrow. Math has been brutal lately.”

After getting ready for bed, Iskander waited in his room for his father to come turn the lights off.

“How would you feel about coming with me tomorrow?” Nigel asked.

“I don’t know, Dad. It was great last time and all, but I think I’ve seen all the dust and rock mysteries I need to. I wanted to have a nice day at home kicking the ball around and maybe finishing my rocket.”

“Come with me, bud,” Nigel said. “You were there when we found the black limestone, and my next clue came from your friend Schmoni. Call it a hunch. I don’t think you’re done with this yet.”

“Schmoni gave you the clue? He can barely tie his shoes, let alone give insight into secrets from the past.”

“Oh, it was the place his family is visiting,” Nigel said. “We need to go there. And maybe you’ll even see Schmoni on their pilgrimage—who knows?”

“Alright. But how about if we get ice cream afterward to sweeten the deal?”

“Sure.” Nigel laughed. “It can be to celebrate. I think

what we're about to find could be important for you, me, and a whole lot of other people."

The next morning, Iskander and Nigel were off on their two-hour journey across bumpy roads, through old villages, and past flares of gas from oil fields.

"Why do you think this is going to help you figure out Sennacherib's message?" Iskander asked as they passed dozens of storks making nests along the power lines that ran parallel to the highway.

"The monastery is home to a library with one of the largest archives of Syriac manuscripts in the world. With careful analysis, we may be able to cross-reference them with their ancient precursors."

"Tell me that again like I'm twelve."

"Basically, the old library may have the key to help us figure out the secret message."

"Secret codes from ancient kings? Maybe history isn't so bad."

"I knew you'd come around." They continued driving across the yellow plains.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Nigel asked as they approached Mount Maqlub.

"I just see a rocky mountain."

"Look up."

Iskander squinted, and structures took shape near the peak.

"Mar Mattai was built of the same rock as the mountain, so it blends in," Nigel said. "Hundreds of years ago, monks would come up these mountains to pray. They lived in caves

and simple shelters to seek God. Some still do. The larger structure you're looking at is new, but you can still see the original caves to the left. Layers of history!"

The car rolled to a stop. Nigel stepped out and put on the canvas fedora. "Today we have an ancient linguistic secret to discover."

They walked under a large archway into a courtyard of tan brick. Flowers and vines climbed the walls. Above them, a few people crossed a verandah.

"This way to the manuscript library," Nigel said. "I hope Brother Yakub is here to show us in."

Nigel and Iskander walked down the right corridor toward a dark room across the courtyard. A man in a black gown welcomed them. A dark cloth, marked with several white crosses, wrapped his head.

"Brother Yakub." Nigel shook his hand.

"Feel free to come into the library if you like," Nigel said to Iskander. "Or stay and enjoy some quiet in the courtyard. I'll be in here if you need me. Make sure you respect the monks by following the few rules they have."

Growing up in the city, Iskander had never heard this kind of silence. Just mountain birds and a breeze moving through the compound.

He circled the courtyard, peeking inside different windows and doors. Some were locked. He passed the library where his father was already sorting through old manuscripts and kept walking toward a simple fountain. He cupped his hands under the flow and ran the water through his hair.

“Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water,” said an old voice from behind.

Iskander turned. An old man with a long white beard walked toward him, a purple sash around his waist.

“This is our holy water,” the man said. “Didn’t you see the sign?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, sir. I was hot and my father has been in your library a while.”

“What is your name?” the man asked.

“Iskander.”

“A fine name,” the man said. “A name these very plains still remember.”

“I always wanted a more normal name,” Iskander said. “Something like John or Peter. Even George would be okay.”

“I think by looking into the past—into your name, into this land—you will find your true self, Iskander.” There was a strange, wise mystery about the man.

“What is your name?” Iskander asked.

“I am Raban Gorgis.”

“You seem to like my name. But I don’t even get yours.”

“Raban means monk in Syriac. And Gorgis is my name. In English, you might say George.”

“So your name is George!” Iskander smiled at the man. “And you’re saying a name as odd as mine is the better one to have?”

“I never said better or worse. We are all called to look within ourselves to write a better future.”

“You sound a lot like my dad. He’s always saying stuff

like that. I thought today was going to be about solving riddles, and now I'm just... standing here. In the heat."

Gorgis looked at him for a moment. "Enjoy our monastery today, Iskander. I hope you find the stillness, and also the adventure, that you're hoping for." He turned and walked away.

Iskander sat for some time, thinking about the monk's words. He opened the lunch his mother had packed and began eating. As he finished his tuna sandwich (except for the crusts, which he never ate), chanting drifted from a double-wide door at the opposite end of the courtyard. It had been locked earlier, but now it was ajar. Iskander moved closer to listen.

He pressed his ear against the door and heard several male voices. They were singing, but not like any song he knew. It was repetitive, and the notes sounded more like the beating of a drum. He peeked inside. Smoke hung in the air, thick with incense—the same smell as the grand bazaar back home. A monk swung a black orb on a metal chain, back and forth.

More monks in black robes stood around a large leather book, open on a lectern at the front. They were in a cave chapel hewn from the mountain's rock.

Maybe this is the original site from sixteen hundred years ago.

Iskander quietly slipped into the back row of pews.

The monks' chants rose into fervent shouts. Smoke thickened the air. To the left of the altar, a small alcove opened like a catacomb, the words "Monks Only" carved

overhead in Syriac, Arabic, and English. The room pulled at him.

I wonder if anything from over there could help my father uncover the secret message?

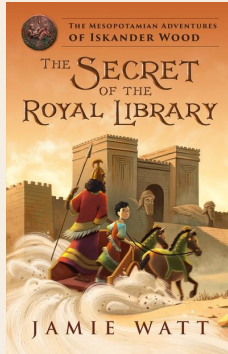
He army-crawled along the empty pews. The chanting covered his sounds, and the incense smoke was beginning to obscure the room. There was an open space between him and the alcove, and he knew if he made a quick sprint, he might get inside without the monks noticing.

He darted for the catacombs. In the darkness, he tripped and flew forward. Everything went black.

Keep reading

When Iskander wakes up, his life will change forever.

There are thirty-one chapters left: a lion hunt, spies in every shadow, the oldest library on earth, and a king marching on his own brother.



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