

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames,

1871

Arthur walks quickly through the crowded streets of Piccadilly on a warm June day in 1871, his mind consumed by the complexities of his life. Clutched in his hand is a scented silk handkerchief, a symbol of his attempt to control the details of his appearance, now that he has decided to grow a beard. In his pocket, he carries a perfume he meticulously formulated using an ancient Mesopotamian recipe created by Tapputi, a renowned female parfumer. This scent not only speaks to his dedication to his work but also to his personal desire for elegance, though he knows the steep cost of such indulgence. Despite his long years at the British Museum studying ancient artifacts, including Mesopotamian tablets, Arthur has yet to receive a promotion, which only fuels his sense of frustration with his stagnant career.

Arthur often finds his thoughts drifting toward feelings of deep loneliness, intensified by the physical distance between him and his family. His younger brother, who now resides in Yorkshire, has completely separated himself from London life, and Arthur has not seen his mother in over four years, after she was placed in an institution due to her ongoing mental distress. The fractured nature of his personal life weighs heavily on him, making him feel disconnected from both his family and his professional achievements. This internal dissonance between his aspirations and his familial isolation highlights his struggle with identity, both in the personal and professional realms. The contrast between his aspirations in the academic world and the isolation he experiences in his own life seems to echo in every aspect of his existence.

As Arthur walks past St. James's Church, the hustle and bustle of the city intensifies. He is startled by a newspaper boy's shout, announcing the death of Charles Dickens: "The author is dead! Mr. Dickens has gone to meet his Maker!" Arthur, deeply moved,

buys the paper, contemplating the inevitable passing of great men and the fleeting nature of life. The juxtaposition between Dickens's death and the joyous news from the London Zoo—a new hippopotamus calf born—is striking. While one moment marks the end of an era, the other celebrates the continuity of life, offering Arthur a somber reflection on the delicate balance between life and death, as well as the inevitable passage of time.

Arthur reaches the British Museum, where he finds solace in his research, locking himself away in his study, determined to dive deeper into the secrets hidden within the ancient tablets. The isolation he seeks through his work provides a temporary escape from the emotional turmoil he faces. But the following day, he experiences a shift in energy and, for the first time, takes a bold step by calling for a meeting with the museum's trustees and colleagues. During the meeting, Arthur excitedly reveals a groundbreaking discovery from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where he uncovers an account of a great flood that bears a striking resemblance to the biblical story of Noah's Ark. His revelation ignites excitement and passion in those present, and for the first time, Arthur feels truly seen and valued for his intellect and determination.

Arthur's discovery creates a ripple of excitement in the academic world, bringing him into the public's eye. The prime minister, William Ewart Gladstone, personally invites Arthur to lecture at the prestigious Society of Biblical Archaeology, an invitation that fills Arthur with both pride and trepidation. Though the honor is great, Arthur is overwhelmed by the pressure of speaking before such an esteemed audience. The night before the lecture, he lies awake, anxious and uncertain, doubting his readiness despite the recognition he's receiving.

During his lecture, Arthur passionately presents his findings on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, offering his interpretation of the Flood Tablet and its significance. His presentation is met with enthusiastic applause and admiration, but Arthur is left reeling from the weight of the public attention. The media begins to cover his achievements, some articles flattering him, while others distort and sensationalize his life. This newfound visibility leaves Arthur feeling vulnerable, especially as he struggles with the disparity

between his humble origins and the high expectations placed upon him. The constant scrutiny forces him to reckon with his identity in ways he had not anticipated, and he finds himself questioning the price of fame and success in an ever-watchful world.

