

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857

In the chapter titled "Arthur," set by the River Thames in 1857, we meet a young boy named Arthur, who feels dwarfed by the grandeur of the British Museum. As he approaches the imposing building with its grand columns and majestic architecture, Arthur battles feelings of self-doubt and anxiety. Despite his nervousness, he enters, determined to explore. Disguised as a student, he hesitantly follows a group, contemplating his past interactions with the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities but lacking the courage to inquire about him.

After a brief stint with the group, Arthur ventures off alone, searching for the lamassus from Nineveh. When he encounters a museum staff member who teasingly questions the boy's expectation that the ancient artifacts might have flown away, Arthur feels the weight of his class difference and hurriedly tries to exit, overwhelmed by the sense of not belonging. However, he accidentally wanders deeper into the museum, stumbling into a storage area filled with clay tablets adorned with enigmatic cuneiform writing.

Engrossed by these tablets, Arthur's fascination intensifies, especially when another museum attendant finds him. Although the man is kind, Arthur struggles with feelings of inadequacy, suspecting that his appearance suggests his impoverished origins. The narrative explores the deep societal barriers and class divisions that Arthur grapples with, emphasizing his longing for knowledge and self-discovery.

Determined, Arthur returns to the museum daily on his lunch break, meticulously budgeting time to study the tablets while rushing through the city. The chapter details his efforts to maintain himself—staying clean in filthy London—and his interactions with the staff, who initially view him with intrigue and confusion.

Eventually, Arthur catches the attention of Dr. Samuel Birch, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities. Their encounter leads Arthur to reveal his interest and burgeoning understanding of the tablets' inscriptions. Birch, both surprised and impressed, offers Arthur a chance to assist in organizing the artifacts at the museum, a pivotal moment that threatens to upend Arthur's routine and apprenticeship while opening doors to a world of knowledge and discovery. The excitement of this new opportunity fills Arthur with hope and the challenge of balancing two demanding roles looms ahead.