There Are Rivers in the Sky

 There Are Rivers in the Sky is a novel by **Elif Shafak**, published in **August 2024**. The narrative intricately weaves together the lives of three individuals across different eras and locations, all connected by the theme of water and the ancient **Epic of Gilgamesh**.

- **Arthur Smyth**: Born in **1840s London** to impoverished parents along the polluted **River Thames**, Arthur possesses an extraordinary memory. His fascination with the ancient city of Nineveh and its artifacts propels him from the slums to a career in publishing and archaeology.
- **Narin**: A **nine-year-old Yazidi girl** living near the **Tigris River** in **2014 Turkey**, Narin faces the impending loss of her hearing due to a rare disorder. Her grandmother is determined to have her baptized in a sacred Iraqi temple, a journey fraught with danger amidst the rise of ISIS.
- **Zaleekhah Clarke**: In **2018 London**, Zaleekhah, a hydrologist recovering from a recent divorce, moves onto a houseboat on the Thames. She becomes engrossed in a book about her homeland, leading her on a path of self-discovery and connection to her roots.

A unique narrative element is the journey of a single drop of water that traverses time and space, symbolizing the interconnectedness of human experiences and history. This drop witnesses key moments in each character's life, emphasizing the novel's central theme: "Water remembers. It is humans who forget."

Shafak's storytelling delves into themes of memory, identity, and the enduring impact of ancient texts on contemporary lives. The novel has been praised for its ambitious scope and lyrical prose, offering readers a rich tapestry of interconnected narratives that span centuries and continents.

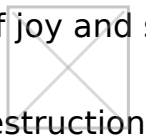
O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur finds himself in Constantinople in 1872, facing the ever-looming uncertainty of his journey to Nineveh. As days drag on without news of the firman that will allow him to continue his mission, a growing sense of anxiety starts to permeate his every thought. Despite his initial desire to remain focused on his work, Arthur’s isolation is interrupted when a dragoman and clerks suggest he take a break. They advise him to explore the city and seek diversion, and though hesitant at first, Arthur eventually agrees to this invitation, only to find himself swept into an unexpected and revelatory evening.

Upon entering the lavish house, Arthur is struck by the ornate decor and the aromatic spread of delicacies laid out before him. The dragoman explains that the establishment is intended to offer a glimpse of the authentic “Oriental” experience, tailored for those who have yet to explore the region. Despite the opulence surrounding him, Arthur can't help but feel uneasy, as memories of similar situations in the past resurface. These memories are laced with discomfort, reminding him of moments where the grandeur of such experiences failed to bring the peace he so desperately sought. Just as he contemplates leaving, the music from a qanun—a traditional Middle Eastern stringed instrument—fills the air, and Arthur is immediately drawn to its enchanting sound. The performance captivates him, providing a brief escape from his inner turmoil, and he becomes absorbed in the music, feeling an emotional release he had not anticipated.

As the evening progresses, the harmony of the music is shattered by an unexpected crisis. The sound of panicked voices fills the air as word spreads that a fire has broken out in the neighborhood. The guests, once caught in the tranquility of the evening, now scramble to flee as flames engulf the surrounding buildings in Pera, an area of Constantinople rich with culture and history. Amidst the pandemonium, Arthur makes

his way back into the establishment, determined to retrieve the qanun that had so captured his attention earlier. To him, the instrument symbolizes the beauty and fleeting peace he had experienced. As the fire rages on, Arthur’s determination to preserve this moment is a stark reminder of how quickly life’s most precious moments can be consumed by chaos. The tension of the fire against the serenity of the music underscores the fragile nature of life itself, leaving Arthur grappling with the impermanence of joy and sorrow alike.



After the fire’s destruction has subsided, Arthur seeks refuge at the British embassy, hoping for solace from the tumult he’s endured. However, his moment of reprieve is cut short when he is confronted with devastating news—the ambassador informs him that his mother has passed away. This revelation sends a wave of disbelief and despair through Arthur, who struggles to process the weight of his grief. Despite the ambassador’s kind offer to help arrange his return to England, Arthur makes the difficult decision to continue his journey. He resolves to press on toward Nineveh, feeling that he must fulfill his mission despite the emotional toll that the loss of his mother has taken on him.

This chapter poignantly contrasts the duality of beauty and tragedy through the imagery of Constantinople, where Arthur finds himself caught between the allure of the city and the harsh realities of life. The music, fire, and loss all represent the fleeting nature of peace and the uncertainty that underpins the human experience. Arthur’s internal conflict—torn between his mission and his grief—becomes a significant turning point in his journey. As he faces the loss of a loved one, Arthur is forced to reckon with deeper questions of life, purpose, and the meaning of personal sacrifice. The decision to continue his travels, despite the grief he feels, speaks to his resolve and the greater mission he feels called to fulfill.

H2O

H2O is more than just a simple combination of hydrogen and oxygen; it is the foundation of life, an element that has shaped civilizations, ecosystems, and the course of human history. This chapter explores the scientific, historical, and symbolic significance of water, highlighting its unique molecular structure and the profound impact it has had on the world. At its core, water is a chemical marvel—a molecule composed of two hydrogen atoms bonded to a single oxygen atom, forming a bent shape that allows it to exhibit properties unlike any other substance. This slight angular arrangement gives water its high surface tension, its ability to dissolve countless substances, and its remarkable capacity to store and transfer heat, making it indispensable to life on Earth. The very fact that water expands when it freezes, unlike most liquids that contract, has ensured the survival of countless species by allowing ice to float and insulate bodies of water from extreme cold.

The chapter delves into the scientific intricacies of water, examining its molecular behavior and how its properties influence biological and environmental systems. The unique hydrogen bonding between water molecules allows it to remain liquid across a broad temperature range, preventing Earth from being a frozen wasteland or an uninhabitable furnace. Water’s ability to absorb and release heat slowly regulates the planet’s climate, maintaining the delicate balance necessary for ecosystems to thrive. In addition, its status as the "universal solvent" means it carries nutrients through plants, enables chemical reactions within cells, and even shapes the very landscapes we inhabit by eroding mountains and carving valleys over millennia. It is the silent architect of nature, responsible for everything from the flow of rivers to the composition of the human body, which is approximately 60% water.

Beyond its physical properties, the chapter also explores the deep cultural and historical significance of water. Ancient civilizations flourished along the banks of great

rivers—the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Indus, and the Yangtze—where water nurtured agriculture, trade, and the rise of complex societies. Mythologies across cultures have revered water as a divine force, from the sacred Ganges in Hinduism to the life-giving floods of the Nile worshiped by the Egyptians. Water has been a symbol of renewal, purification, and transformation, appearing in religious rituals, folklore, and literature as an essential force that connects the spiritual and physical worlds. Even today, water plays a central role in traditions such as baptism, pilgrimage, and sacred healing practices, signifying its enduring power in shaping human beliefs.

The author draws a striking parallel between the three atoms that form a water molecule and the idea of three interconnected elements within human narratives—characters, relationships, and experiences. Just as the bonds between hydrogen and oxygen create something greater than the sum of its parts, so too do the connections between people, places, and emotions form the essence of storytelling. The fluid nature of water is likened to the fluidity of history, memory, and human interaction, emphasizing that life, like water, is constantly in motion, adapting and reshaping itself. The way water cycles through the atmosphere, land, and oceans mirrors the way knowledge, culture, and experiences are passed down through generations, creating an intricate web of continuity.

Water’s omnipresence in both nature and civilization underscores its fundamental importance, yet it remains a fragile resource increasingly threatened by climate change, pollution, and overconsumption. The chapter touches on modern concerns such as rising sea levels, droughts, and the alarming decline of freshwater sources, warning that humanity’s relationship with water is at a critical turning point. From the melting polar ice caps to the contamination of drinking water supplies, the challenges facing this vital element are vast, making conservation efforts more urgent than ever. Water, once thought of as an infinite resource, is now at risk, and the responsibility to protect it falls on every individual and society at large.

Ultimately, H2O is not just a chemical formula—it is the lifeblood of the planet, a force that sustains, shapes, and connects all living things. The chapter concludes by

reinforcing the idea that just as water flows endlessly, adapting and reshaping itself to fit its surroundings, so too must we learn to appreciate and safeguard this essential resource. In doing so, we preserve not only the physical world but also the stories, traditions, and legacies that have been carried along its currents for millennia. Water, in all its forms, remains both a scientific wonder and a profound metaphor for life itself, a reminder that the simplest elements often hold the greatest power.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin’s journey takes a dark and painful turn in 2014, as she is forcefully taken from her home and transported along with other women and children in a truck heading toward Mosul. Overcome by an overwhelming sense of fear, helplessness, and confusion, Narin finds herself struggling to cope with the chaotic and brutal situation unfolding around her. However, as they journey through unfamiliar lands, memories of her grandmother’s teachings about wild herbs begin to surface, offering her a brief but powerful connection to the past. These memories, filled with warmth and the simplicity of life before this nightmare, provide Narin with a fleeting sense of comfort in the face of an uncertain and perilous future. Her grandmother's wisdom and the small details of her life—like the herbs she once taught Narin to recognize—anchor her in this moment of despair, helping her hold onto the small fragments of her past.

While grappling with her captors, Narin finds herself reflecting on a lesson her grandmother taught her: the duality of good and evil within human nature. This concept, so carefully imparted to her over the years, now takes on new meaning as she witnesses the atrocities around her. The stories she was told as a child about evil figures who at least recognized the harm they inflicted begin to blur with the horrifying reality she faces—those committing atrocities now often view themselves as righteous and divinely justified. The question of how anyone could justify causing suffering in the name of faith haunts Narin, leaving her confused and troubled. Her grandmother’s words urge her to seek light in even the darkest times, but as Narin navigates through the brutal chaos of her present, she finds herself struggling to find that light, consumed by the dark reality of her captivity.

As Narin and the other captives arrive in Mosul, the extent of the destruction and violence facing her community becomes impossible to ignore. Narin’s fear grows as she watches a coordinated assault on her people, where militants ruthlessly destroy

homes, families, and lives in the name of their cause. These attacks hit Narin personally, as she recognizes some of the men leading these brutal acts, familiar faces from her life before the violence erupted. Within the confines of the building where the captives are held, Narin is forced to witness the desperate cries and pleas of those around her. As she is chosen for translation duties, she hears horrific accusations about her people’s so-called betrayal, and she is pressured to renounce her faith and accept the role of a "lawful wife" to one of the militants. Despite the torment, Narin cries out for her grandmother in a final act of resistance, a raw expression of her unwillingness to succumb to the horrors surrounding her.

The physical and emotional toll on Narin becomes unbearable as she is struck repeatedly by her captors. She is dragged across the cold, unforgiving floor until she loses consciousness, the pain overwhelming her. When she wakes, she comes to understand the full horror of her captivity. As a young girl, Narin is seen as an easy target for exploitation and abuse, and her terror deepens as she realizes the gravity of her situation. Despite her overwhelming fear, Narin refuses to comply with the militants’ demands, even as the weight of their cruelty and her own circumstances continue to press down on her.

In the midst of her suffering, Narin meets Salma, a woman who once knew her grandmother, and they find solace in each other’s presence. They share memories of the past, and for a brief moment, the bonds of friendship and familiarity provide some comfort in their dark and harrowing reality. However, even as Salma tries to protect Narin from further harm, the danger they face remains constant and ever-present. The commander’s increasingly harsh demands continue to loom over them, a reminder that the safety they seek is elusive and fragile. Salma’s protective instincts drive her to shield Narin from the brutal violence around them, but the omnipresent threat of exploitation and violence continues to haunt them, leaving both women grasping for any shred of safety or hope amidst the cruelty they endure.

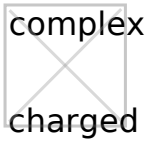
H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah awakens to an unexpected early morning visit from her Uncle Malek in 2018, finding him standing at the door of her houseboat by the River Thames. His usual pristine appearance is now disheveled, with his bloodshot eyes and stubble hinting at sleepless nights, which immediately raises Zaleekhah's concerns for his well-being. Despite his appearance, Uncle Malek attempts to carry on as usual, masking his true feelings with a flippant attitude, as he brushes off any inquiries about his health. As they talk, he shows curiosity about her unconventional lifestyle and sparse living arrangements, finding humor in her minimalist décor, which leads to a brief but telling exchange. The casualness of the conversation contrasts sharply with the emotional weight that seems to hang between them, signaling an unspoken tension.

As the conversation shifts, Uncle Malek addresses a subject closer to Zaleekhah’s heart—her marriage to Brian, which has now become strained after he filed for divorce. He gently suggests that there may still be a chance for reconciliation, despite everything that has transpired. Zaleekhah, however, quickly dismisses this notion, explaining that she is far from being in any emotional state to consider reconciling. Her unrelenting focus on moving forward contrasts sharply with Uncle Malek’s desire to cling to the hope of mending family relationships. Uncle Malek, not discouraged by her dismissal, tries to change the subject by proposing that they go out for a meal together. However, their conversation is suddenly interrupted by the unmistakable sound of a flushing toilet, signaling that there is more to the situation than initially thought.

The unexpected arrival of Nen in her pajamas further heightens the tension in the room. The surprise visitor, a quiet presence in contrast to the growing discomfort, leaves Uncle Malek visibly shaken, shifting between surprise, irritation, and confusion. As the atmosphere thickens, Nen, sensing the unease, offers to leave to ease the

tension, but Zaleekhah, in a moment of defiance, insists that she stay. The dynamic shifts as Uncle Malek voices his disapproval, struggling to understand the changes in Zaleekhah’s life, particularly her connection with Nen. He is not used to seeing her break from the path that was once so carefully laid out for her, a path rooted in tradition and expectations. The narrative takes a deeper turn as Uncle Malek reveals his vulnerability, speaking of the family bond they once shared, now strained by time, distance, and the complex turns life has taken.



In an emotionally charged moment, Zaleekhah confronts her uncle’s assumptions about her life choices, challenging his outdated views on tradition and the roles she is supposed to fulfill. As Uncle Malek reflects on the past, he reveals his own struggles with the changing dynamics of the family and his deep desire to protect them. His admission catches Zaleekhah off guard, showing a side of her uncle that had previously been masked by his rigid exterior. His plea for her to return to the family fold is not one of control but of concern, a desire to shield her from the pain that has plagued their family for generations. His words, filled with a rare vulnerability, stir something in Zaleekhah, making her reconsider the emotional landscape of her relationships. As the conversation draws to a close, Uncle Malek extends an invitation for dinner, asking Zaleekhah to bring Nen with her and promising to keep matters of the family private. His final comment, hinting that appearances can be deceiving, lingers in Zaleekhah’s mind, suggesting that the complexities of family dynamics are far from simple. The layers of tension, love, and confusion that mark their relationship are as intricate and nuanced as the path Zaleekhah must navigate in her own life.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin and her Grandma are filled with anticipation as they prepare for an important journey. Grandma busily prepares traditional dishes such as stuffed vine leaves and borek, setting the tone for the special trip ahead. As they sit together, Narin is deeply immersed in her spiritual practices, praying for guidance and protection from the spirit Khider and other spirits, including Sore-Soran, Mama-Rasan, and Xudāne-Mālē. These benevolent spirits are said to oversee different aspects of life, guiding and protecting people in their daily lives. Grandma shares a story about Ibrahim, emphasizing the idea that kindness can come from unexpected places. The story underscores the importance of showing compassion and taking action when others are in distress, suggesting that even the smallest acts of kindness can have a profound impact in the face of significant challenges.

Later, during their discussion, Grandma reflects on how storytelling is different from the linear progression of time. She teaches Narin that stories often carry deeper truths, transcending time and providing valuable insights that the ticking of a clock cannot capture. Grandma shares a painful memory from her youth, explaining how neighbors, who once appeared kind and welcoming, harbored deep-seated prejudices against her family. Despite this discrimination, Grandma encourages Narin to remember that beauty still exists in the world, even in the face of hardship. Grandma’s wisdom provides a foundation of strength for Narin, teaching her the importance of resilience, optimism, and the ability to find beauty in the world around them, no matter the difficulties they face.

As the evening progresses, their conversation shifts to the family’s deep-rooted connection to their ancestral home in Lalish, Iraq. Grandma explains the significance of the sacred valley, which was formed through divine intervention, a place of great cultural and spiritual importance for their people. The story of Lalish’s creation,

through the journey of angels and the leavening of water, fills Narin with a sense of pride. This connection to the land and their heritage is not merely historical but forms the essence of who they are as a family and a community. Grandma’s words instill in Narin a sense of belonging, a deep connection to her roots, and the importance of carrying their family’s legacy forward.

In a moment of reflection, Grandma shares the story of Leila, a relative who had to flee their homeland due to the violence and turmoil of their time. She speaks of Leila’s extraordinary talents and how these abilities have been passed down through the generations, with Narin perhaps being the next link in the chain. The mention of a "firman," a royal decree that led to Leila’s forced migration, brings a somber tone to their conversation. It serves as a reminder of the ongoing suffering and displacement that their people have endured for generations. Grandma’s words carry the weight of history, as they reflect on how past traumas continue to shape their present reality, even as they long for a safer, more peaceful existence.

As night falls and their conversation winds down, Grandma promises that she will share even more about their family’s history when they arrive in Nineveh. She compares the journey to a river’s path, explaining that sometimes, in order to survive, rivers must change course and seek new paths. This powerful metaphor encapsulates the journey they are about to embark on—one that will require them to adapt, learn, and uncover the truths of their past. With these profound words in mind, Narin reflects on the journey ahead, knowing that it will not only be a physical journey but an emotional and spiritual one as well. The chapter closes with Narin ready to face the challenges that lie ahead, understanding that sometimes, the road to understanding oneself and one’s heritage is fraught with obstacles but also filled with opportunities for growth and healing.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin is introduced in the year 2014, near the River Tigris, where she eagerly anticipates the arrival of her cousins from Germany. Her family, originally from Turkey, is filled with joy as they prepare to welcome them. Narin, while impressed by her cousins' fluent German, takes pride in her unique heritage and the special talents passed down through her grandmother. Her grandmother, an esteemed member of their community, has inherited the rare skill of dowsing, using her connection with the earth to locate hidden underground water streams. This ability is something Narin is eager to learn and one that she hopes to perfect in time. As she reflects on her grandmother's legacy, she shares with her cousins the important role of water dowsing in their lives, something that has been passed down through generations of women. Despite some playful squabbles between her cousins, Narin cherishes their time together, feeling a strong sense of belonging and joy that reconnects her with her familial roots.

The excitement of the family's preparations culminates in a grand breakfast, where the table is adorned with traditional dishes that showcase their rich cultural heritage. For Narin, this meal represents more than just food; it symbolizes the care, respect, and unity that define their family. As they sit together, Narin reflects on how their customs extend beyond the food they prepare and eat—there is also a deep reverence for the departed. The family honors their ancestors through rituals performed at the village cemetery, where the women lead the remembrance ceremonies. This moment is sacred for Narin, as she observes the importance of showing respect to their ancestors, ensuring that their cultural practices are passed on and never forgotten. The visit to the cemetery is not just about memorializing the dead but also a way to keep their lineage alive, connecting the living to the spirits of those who came before them.

During their visit to the cemetery, Narin and her cousins discover a gravestone that stands out—a marker for an Englishman who died near the Tigris River. His story, it is said, was one of searching for a poem, a tale that sparks intrigue and questions among the children. This discovery becomes a catalyst for a deeper conversation about identity, history, and the loss of cultural heritage. The family, facing the imminent threat of the construction of a dam that could flood their ancestral home of Hasankeyf, begins to discuss the impact this would have on their connection to the land. The thought of losing their home, which holds centuries of memories and history, leaves the family with a profound sense of loss. This realization about their heritage being threatened by modern development prompts deep reflections on the impermanence of life and the ever-evolving landscape of their homeland.

Later that evening, the conversation shifts toward more pressing concerns about the rising violence in their homeland. Narin overhears her uncle’s discussions about the escalating dangers in the region, which have made them question their safety and future. As the family contemplates relocating to Germany, Narin’s father expresses his hesitation, torn between the desire to protect his family and the profound attachment to their land and traditions. This generational conflict becomes a source of tension, as Narin’s parents struggle to balance the need for safety with the importance of staying connected to their roots. For Narin, this conflict stirs her own fears about what the future holds—not just for her family but for herself, as she grapples with the looming uncertainty surrounding her health and safety. Despite her growing anxieties, she finds comfort in her family’s love and in the rituals that continue to provide a sense of stability in the face of change.

The chapter captures the essence of how tradition and identity intersect with the challenges of modernity and conflict. Through Narin’s journey, we see the complexity of familial bonds and the burden of heritage in a world that is rapidly changing. The story highlights the importance of cultural practices, the memory of ancestors, and the way family dynamics shape our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Narin’s reflections on her past, her family, and the ever-present flow of time provide her with a deeper sense of who she is and the legacy she is a part of. Despite the

uncertainty that looms over her future, Narin holds onto the hope that the love and strength of her family will guide her through the most challenging moments.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857

Arthur stands before the British Museum in 1857, feeling small beneath the grandeur of its towering columns and impressive architecture. This iconic structure, with its colossal presence, seems almost to mock his modest background and humble beginnings. However, despite the rising tide of self-doubt and anxiety, Arthur is determined to press forward, stepping into the museum with a sense of purpose. As he enters, disguised as a student, his heart races with excitement and nervousness, eager to explore the exhibits that lie within. The opportunity to learn from such esteemed artifacts fuels his desire for knowledge, even though he is unsure whether he truly belongs in this world of privilege and prestige. His thoughts wander back to his previous interactions with the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, but the fear of making such a bold approach holds him back from connecting with this important figure.

After a brief time spent with the group of visitors, Arthur’s curiosity leads him to wander away, seeking out the famous lamassus from Nineveh, ancient statues that have long captured his imagination. These powerful sculptures, which represent both mystery and history, are a beacon for Arthur, urging him to connect with the ancient past. However, just as he is lost in awe, a museum staff member, with a teasing tone, questions his expectations about the ancient artifacts. The staff member jokingly wonders whether the lamassus might have flown away, and the comment brings Arthur’s insecurities to the surface. The teasing highlights the class differences that Arthur feels, and he quickly retreats, overwhelmed by his perceived inadequacy. Yet, this hasty escape only leads him further into the museum, where he accidentally stumbles upon a hidden storage room filled with ancient clay tablets inscribed with mysterious cuneiform writing. This discovery becomes the spark for his growing fascination with the history contained in these tablets.

Arthur’s immersion in the world of cuneiform tablets fuels an insatiable curiosity, drawing him deeper into the study of Mesopotamian history. As he examines the symbols and inscriptions, he feels a sense of connection to the ancient creators of these texts, but his personal doubts continue to linger. When he is discovered by another museum staff member, Arthur’s discomfort only grows, as his appearance and his humble background are a constant reminder of the class divisions that separate him from those around him. His desire for knowledge is clouded by a deep sense of inadequacy, and he is constantly reminded of how different he is from the other scholars and staff in the museum. Despite these feelings, the allure of the tablets remains too strong to ignore. Arthur’s deep-seated longing to uncover the mysteries of these ancient texts represents both his intellectual curiosity and his desire to escape from his own realities. His struggles with self-acceptance and societal barriers continue to shape his journey, but he pushes on, determined to make his mark.

Determined not to let his self-doubt get in the way of his goals, Arthur makes it a point to return to the museum every day during his lunch break, eager to spend as much time as possible studying the ancient tablets. His work schedule leaves little room for leisure, but the time he spends immersed in history gives him purpose. Despite the exhaustion that comes with managing his job and his newfound obsession with the tablets, Arthur finds solace in the pursuit of knowledge. He is keenly aware of the museum staff’s growing interest in his presence, and their initial curiosity gradually shifts toward respect. At first, they view him as an outsider, but his dedication and passion for the artifacts begin to shine through. The staff’s changing perception of him gives Arthur a small sense of validation, though the weight of his financial and social struggles never fully disappears.

Arthur’s persistence eventually catches the attention of Dr. Samuel Birch, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, who is intrigued by Arthur’s knowledge of the cuneiform tablets. Dr. Birch, recognizing the boy’s potential, offers him an opportunity to assist with organizing the ancient artifacts, a proposition that represents both a life-changing opportunity and a risk. Arthur is astonished by the offer, as it seems to open doors to a future he had only dreamed of. However, the opportunity also presents a new set of

challenges. Arthur knows that balancing this new responsibility with his existing job will require dedication and perseverance, but he is eager to prove himself. This moment represents a turning point for Arthur, one that brings hope for a brighter future. The knowledge he uncovers in the museum will not only change his life but also allow him to contribute to the preservation of history.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah has invited her close friend, Nen, to join a family dinner with her Uncle Malek and Aunt Malek by the River Thames in 2018. The setting, with its pleasant riverside views, holds a sense of quiet anticipation, but Zaleekhah cannot shake the unease that accompanies this gathering. As soon as they arrive, her discomfort grows, especially when Uncle Malek begins to ask Nen increasingly personal questions, probing into her profession as a tattoo artist and her living situation. These questions, though seemingly innocent, come across as intrusive and push boundaries. Nen, unfazed by the intensity of Uncle Malek’s inquiries, calmly explains her recent breakup and that she had been forced to rent out her houseboat to make ends meet. When Uncle Malek boldly asks about her sexual orientation, Nen answers with calm composure, surprising both Zaleekhah and the rest of the family. The moment hangs in the air, leaving a sense of discomfort that only intensifies as the conversation continues.

Aunt Malek, eager to defuse the situation, offers a warm welcome, calling Nen a "friend" and attempting to soften the atmosphere. However, Nen’s response—expressing that they weren’t really friends—adds an awkward tension, disrupting the moment of supposed camaraderie. The atmosphere shifts as a toast to friendship is proposed, but when Nen mentions that she is sober and has celebrated eight years of sobriety, the conversation veers into uncomfortable territory. The adults react with a mixture of curiosity and disapproval, with Uncle Malek taking a particular interest in the subject. Zaleekhah, observing Nen’s composure in the face of judgment, feels a growing sense of admiration for her friend’s strength. Meanwhile, Zaleekhah feels a growing discomfort, increasingly alienated from the judgments and expectations of her relatives. The energy in the room changes when her glamorous cousin Helen arrives, bringing a burst of vitality, though the news of Lily's medical

tests soon casts a somber tone over the dinner.

As the evening unfolds, Uncle Malek grows louder and more impassioned in his drunken rant about cultural identity and the misrepresentation of the Middle East, intertwining his arguments with references to his pride in being British. He uses the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a framework for discussing the values of loyalty and family, but his words seem to cut deeper as the conversation devolves into heated arguments about personal values. His criticism of Zaleekhah's lifestyle, especially her choices that defy traditional family values, leaves a bitter taste in the air. The conversation turns hostile, with Aunt Malek caught between supporting her husband and maintaining some semblance of peace. Zaleekhah, overwhelmed by the tension, becomes increasingly aware of the deep divide within her family, where old-world expectations clash with modern ideologies. As the night drags on, Zaleekhah finds herself grappling with the sharp contrast between her family's traditional views and her own evolving sense of identity. After dinner, Zaleekhah and Nen take a walk together, a moment of respite that allows them to debrief and process the emotions stirred by the evening. Nen, ever the philosopher, shares a poignant story about her first fish, tying the experience to her own personal growth and her ability to find meaning in difficult situations. Zaleekhah, reflecting on Nen's wisdom, feels a sense of connection and comfort in their shared understanding. The evening culminates with Zaleekhah being gifted a lapis lazuli necklace by Nen, a gesture symbolizing their deepening bond. This chapter poignantly captures the internal conflicts faced by Zaleekhah as she navigates the complexities of family, identity, and the weight of societal expectations. Her connection with Nen offers a sense of clarity and hope amidst the turbulence of her family's judgments, highlighting the strength of personal bonds in the face of adversity.

O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur finds himself in Constantinople at the British Embassy, located in the prestigious Pera district. The grandeur of the building, which resembles the elegance of Buckingham Palace, provides him with a certain sense of awe, though his excitement is tempered by the exhausting journey he has just completed. After arriving and settling into his temporary quarters, he enjoys a simple meal of rabbit stew, the comforting warmth of the food contrasting with the bustling city sounds drifting in from outside. In the morning, Arthur is summoned to meet the ambassador, who is a man of high social standing and intellectual refinement, located in a room lavishly decorated with a variety of artwork. The encounter, however, proves to be more strained than Arthur had anticipated, as his eagerness to begin his excavation work in Nineveh is met with the disheartening news that he must wait for the firman, a permit from the sultan, before proceeding. This bureaucratic delay, filled with endless waiting, dampens his spirit and leaves him in an increasingly restless state.

As the days drag on without any updates or news of the firman, Arthur finds himself grappling with the weight of his situation. He grows frustrated and impatient, constantly battling the limitations imposed by language barriers and the complex cultural differences that separate him from the people around him. The embassy's atmosphere, with its exclusive and aristocratic environment, makes Arthur feel like an outsider, even as he tries to navigate the elite circles and mingle with people of high society. This feeling of isolation becomes more pronounced as he compares the differences between his own customs and the social norms of Constantinople. His longing to begin his work in Nineveh intensifies as each day passes, but he remains stuck, unable to escape the bureaucracy and red tape that are seemingly holding him back. His mind often drifts back to his archaeological pursuits, though he knows he is far from achieving his goals in such a restrictive environment.

In an attempt to distract himself from the growing tension, Arthur turns to the local cuisine and culture, sampling a range of dishes that sometimes leave him with an upset stomach, yet occasionally provide moments of satisfaction. He is especially taken by the sweet desserts and the inviting coffee-house atmospheres that are so prominent in Constantinople. The streets, lined with the energy of multicultural crowds, provide a sense of vibrancy, but Arthur cannot help but feel the absence of women in these public spaces. His observations of women confined to the harem only deepen his curiosity about their lives, and he begins to reflect on the disparities between their hidden lives and his own public existence. These thoughts spark a desire to learn more about the city's hidden social structures, especially the role women play in this society. Despite these cultural differences, Arthur continues to find solace in the everyday scenes that offer a small glimpse into the life of the city.

Arthur's wanderings take him to the Grand Bazaar, a maze of bustling stalls and vibrant vendors, where he is guided by a dragoman eager to show him the ins and outs of the marketplace. The market is divided into specialized sections, each catering to a different trade, from spices to textiles, offering Arthur a rich cultural experience. During his visit, a commotion catches his attention when a Yazidi man is accused of devil-worship, sparking a moment of tension and fear in the crowded space. Arthur, moved by compassion and a sense of justice, steps in and erases the chalk circle that had been drawn around the man. The old man, in turn, thanks him, and his words resonate deeply with Arthur, touching a chord within him. The cryptic message the man delivers about a river flowing through him stirs something in Arthur, reminding him of the deeper, often restless currents that exist in his own life. Leaving the bazaar with a small piece of lapis lazuli, Arthur is left reflecting on the encounter, his thoughts turned toward the metaphor of the river and its connection to both the man's life and his own quest. The moment becomes a powerful catalyst, sparking an introspection that he cannot easily shake off, leaving him with a new sense of purpose and a deeper understanding of the world around him.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah arrives at her Uncle Malek’s home by the River Thames in 2018, feeling a sense of anticipation mixed with trepidation. As the house comes into view, she is greeted warmly by Aunt Malek and her younger cousin, Lily, who is deeply engrossed in constructing a Victorian dollhouse. The atmosphere inside the home is one of quiet activity and familial warmth, but there is an undercurrent of tension. This tension is most evident in the strained conversation between Uncle Malek and Aunt Malek, who seem to have clashed over recent issues, particularly Zaleekhah’s choice in marriage. Their conflicting views, especially regarding Zaleekhah’s life choices, cause a slight discomfort in the air, though it is masked by polite greetings and small talk.

Once seated, Zaleekhah notices the grand dining room, which is adorned with a chandelier from the Great Exhibition—a symbol of Uncle Malek’s refined taste and interest in antiques. However, as the conversation shifts to Aunt Malek’s plans to build a Zen garden, the tension becomes more apparent. Uncle Malek dismisses the idea as an unnecessary and expensive indulgence, while Aunt Malek remains steadfast in her vision, leading to a subtle clash of values between the two. Their differing approaches to finances—Uncle Malek’s willingness to indulge his passions and Aunt Malek’s more pragmatic mindset—mirrors the larger issues at play in their relationship. Zaleekhah, sitting in the middle of it all, silently observes the complexities of their marriage, making quiet comparisons to her own feelings of dissatisfaction with her marriage.

The conversation eventually turns to topics that are closer to Zaleekhah’s heart. She finds herself more comfortable discussing her professional life, especially the work she has been doing to restore lost rivers. She explains to her relatives the efforts she’s put into reviving the Bièvre river in Paris, one of many urban waterways buried beneath the sprawling cityscape. She also touches on the broader implications of this work, referencing other cities like Athens and Tokyo, where rivers have been hidden or

eradicated during urban development. Uncle Malek, ever skeptical, questions the practicality of these efforts, suggesting that attempting to restore something as old as these rivers is a fool’s errand. His skepticism opens a deeper conversation about the generational divide between progress and preservation, as Zaleekhah realizes the contrast between her forward-thinking approach to the environment and Uncle Malek’s more conservative view on change.

The meal is served, and Zaleekhah’s mind begins to wander back to her childhood, filled with fond memories of a simpler time before tragedy struck her family. The warmth of her early years contrasts sharply with the reality of her life now, and she can’t help but feel the weight of the past upon her. As Uncle Malek talks about family history and the importance of understanding one’s roots, Zaleekhah finds herself reflecting on her own broken ties with her parents. The discussion forces her to confront the ghosts of her past, as she realizes how much her family’s history still shapes her present life. In the quiet moments that follow, Zaleekhah resolves to reconnect with her cousin Helen, hoping that this reconnection might offer her some comfort and clarity amid the unresolved pain she feels.

Before she departs, Zaleekhah borrows a book on ancient Assyria, captivated by the possibility of learning more about her heritage and the stories that have been passed down through the generations. The book represents a chance for her to connect more deeply with her past and discover new insights into the cultures that have shaped her family. As she leaves the house, the weight of her past continues to follow her, but there is a sense of hope as she prepares to embark on a new chapter of her life. The possibility of growth, self-discovery, and reconciliation with her family’s history offers a flicker of optimism that, despite her pain, a brighter future might await.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah wakes up at 3:34 a.m., a time that has come to symbolize melancholy and sadness for her. The hour feels heavy, as though it pulls her deeper into her emotions. She reaches for her laptop, hoping to distract herself, but is immediately met with distressing news about scorpion invasions in Egypt. These invasions, caused by erratic weather patterns, deepen the unease in her heart as she processes the unsettling image of nature’s havoc. In a desperate attempt to escape her spiraling thoughts, she turns to sleeping pills, a temporary solution to quiet the storm within. Yet, the sadness lingers, amplified by the weight of her troubled mind, which has been restless for some time.

The next moment of emotional disruption comes when Zaleekhah receives a message from her husband, Brian, telling her that he is filing for divorce. This message forces her to revisit their marriage and everything that led to this painful moment. Zaleekhah wrestles with how to approach her family, particularly her uncle, who has been her pillar of support for years. The contrast between the cheerful birthday wishes flooding her inbox and the emotional void she feels intensifies her sense of isolation. It’s almost as if life is moving on for everyone else while she’s caught in a moment of grief and uncertainty. However, just as Zaleekhah’s mind becomes overwhelmed, there’s an unexpected knock at the door. Nen, her vibrant friend, enters, and Zaleekhah is momentarily lifted by the warmth and lightness that Nen always brings into her life. Nen’s thoughtful gift of gingerbread biscuits, shaped like ancient Mesopotamian tablets and inscribed with cuneiform writing, offers an endearing and humorous respite from the emotional chaos. The biscuits, each representing a word, seem to symbolize the deeper, often unspoken connections that Zaleekhah and Nen share.

Their conversation naturally flows from the playful to the profound as Zaleekhah learns about Nen’s tattoo business, which uniquely incorporates cuneiform symbols in her

designs. Nen shares her admiration for female figures in history, noting how their roles and contributions are often overlooked in mainstream narratives. This sparks a meaningful discussion about the underappreciated strength and resilience of women throughout history. Zaleekhah finds herself opening up about her own life’s challenges, revealing that the loss of her parents in a flash flood has shaped her perspective on the world. The tragic event left her with a deep connection to water, which now feels both a source of solace and a reminder of the past. The depth of their shared conversation allows Zaleekhah to feel a sense of release, as if her burdens have been lightened by the connection she has with Nen.

As the day progresses, Nen suggests that her tattoos serve as more than just body art—they are a way to tell stories, capturing personal histories and legacies through ink. Zaleekhah is moved by the idea that such a physical form can be so deeply tied to meaning and emotion. In these quiet moments of connection, filled with laughter and insight, Zaleekhah finds a spark of hope amidst the emotional darkness she’s been carrying. Inspired by Nen’s openness and their shared bond, Zaleekhah invites her to her birthday dinner at her uncle’s house that evening. This simple yet meaningful gesture marks a shift in Zaleekhah’s life—a step away from her isolation and toward the potential for new companionship and healing. She’s learning to embrace the connections that come her way, even in the midst of life’s ongoing struggles, as she prepares to face the challenges of the future with the support of those who care for her. This chapter closes on a note of transformation, with Zaleekhah opening her heart to the possibility of change, both in her personal life and her outlook on the world around her.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur sets out on a difficult journey from Constantinople to Mosul in 1872, traveling nearly 900 miles across Mesopotamia. As he makes his way through this ancient and complex region, he becomes increasingly aware of the religious and cultural diversity that characterizes the land. The disparities between the various peoples, even those from the same area, leave him intrigued and somewhat bewildered. Despite the overwhelming differences, Arthur finds a sense of familiarity in the landscape, recognizing elements from his studies of ancient civilizations, such as irrigation systems and reed houses. These symbols of the past seem to echo through the land, providing Arthur with a sense of timelessness, as if history itself is still alive in the earth beneath his feet.

During his stop at Jacob's Inn near the Tigris, Arthur is teased by a friend about the poorly prepared meal that is served, providing a moment of humor in an otherwise serious journey. This interaction highlights some of the cultural quirks and contrasts Arthur encounters throughout his travels, making him reflect on his experiences and the misunderstandings that can arise from cultural differences. The term "Orient" often comes up in his thoughts, leaving him confused and searching for its meaning in the context of his travels. This leads him to think about Napoleon's historic campaigns in the Middle East, which were heavily influenced by Enlightenment ideals. The ideals of the West, as embodied by Napoleon, seem to clash with the reality of the region, offering a glimpse into the complex relationship between Eastern and Western perspectives.

As Arthur continues his journey along the Tigris, he finds himself drawn to the river's unpredictable nature, especially when compared to the Nile. The Tigris, with its mix of beauty and danger, serves as a reminder of the impermanence of both life and history. Arthur cannot help but be struck by the contrast between the images of ancient

prosperity he has studied and the poverty he sees around him. These stark realities paint a picture of a land that has seen great civilizations rise and fall, a place where history is both tangible and elusive. The river itself becomes a symbol of this duality, its currents carrying not only the physical water but also the memories and tragedies of countless generations that have lived and died along its banks.

Upon his arrival in Mosul, Arthur attends a banquet hosted by the local pasha, where cultural misunderstandings begin to surface. Arthur's failure to meet the pasha’s expectations creates tension, as he realizes that his actions and words are often misinterpreted due to the stark cultural divide between himself and his hosts. This interaction underscores the challenges Arthur faces as a foreign archaeologist in a region with complex political and social dynamics. His Levantine friend subtly warns him that the pasha is suspicious of his intentions in the area, adding another layer of difficulty to Arthur's already challenging mission. Despite these growing doubts, Arthur remains focused on his ultimate goal of uncovering and preserving the region's rich antiquities.

As Arthur continues his journey, the excitement of his archaeological pursuits is reignited by the sight of the legendary ruins of Nineveh. Yet, he is not without reservations, and the local guide’s warnings about Zêrav—a village with a dark reputation for devil-worshippers—raise concerns. Arthur’s resolve to push forward only strengthens, setting the stage for potential conflict as he ventures deeper into a land full of both ancient history and modern-day dangers. This determination to continue, despite the foreboding atmosphere, marks the beginning of a more complex and dangerous phase of his journey, one that will test his perseverance and judgment in the face of both historical discovery and personal risk.

O: ARTHUR: On the way to the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur begins his journey in March 1872, crossing the vast English Channel with a sense of determination but also an underlying anxiety about what awaits him. He is driven by a desire to unearth the long-forgotten artifacts of Mesopotamia, but also by a deep-seated worry that public interest in the region’s history might dwindle over time. As the ship sails through the murky, cold waters, Arthur reflects on his motivations and the personal toll of leaving London behind, especially at a time when his mother’s illness continues to weigh heavily on his heart. The feeling of guilt gnaws at him, knowing that his decision to leave, despite his mother’s condition, might be seen as abandoning her in a time of need. A fierce hailstorm strikes as the ship battles the elements, heightening his unease, but a chatty merchant aboard offers him some comfort, urging him to embrace the uncertainty of the journey, and find solace in its unpredictability.

Upon reaching Paris, Arthur is swept away by the city’s vibrant energy, the blossoming flora, and the rich history that he has always admired from afar. The streets of Paris seem alive with possibility, offering Arthur a sense of liberation that contrasts sharply with the rigid constraints he had left behind in London. However, his initial awe begins to fade as he explores the more impoverished areas of the city, where poverty clings to the streets and survival is a daily struggle. The stark contrast between the wealth of the city's elite and the despair of its underprivileged residents shocks Arthur, forcing him to confront the broader implications of economic disparity. As he reflects on this juxtaposition, he realizes how deeply rooted the inequality is in society, and how wealth allows for a life of leisure while the poor fight a continuous battle just to get by.

Arthur's time in Paris brings him to the Louvre, where he is once again reminded of his deep connection to Mesopotamian history through the many artifacts housed there. He spends hours marveling at the ancient relics, reinforcing his sense of purpose and

fueling his passion for uncovering more of the past. After his time in Paris, Arthur boards a steamer bound for the Mediterranean, eager to continue his journey. Onboard, he encounters a diverse group of fellow travelers, including a plant hunter who is headed to Bhutan, which sparks Arthur's curiosity about the unknown and the natural world. Despite bouts of seasickness, Arthur is captivated by the vastness of the ocean, which seems to offer endless possibilities. His fascination with the missing lines of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* grows stronger, and as he gazes out at the endless horizon, the journey feels even more significant, a path toward unraveling ancient mysteries and discovering new truths.

Although Arthur begins his journey with some uncertainty, doubts creep in as the voyage continues. The weight of responsibility and the fear of failure make him question whether he is truly capable of achieving his ambitions. But as the days at sea unfold, his apprehensions are slowly replaced by anticipation, and the excitement of the unknown grows. The three syllables—Ni-ne-veh—resonate with him, becoming a mantra that fuels his drive to pursue his dreams. When the ship finally nears Constantinople, Arthur is struck by the beauty of the landscape, which stirs both awe and a sense of foreboding. The captain warns him about the seductive nature of the city, cautioning him to be wary of what lies ahead. Yet, Arthur steps off the ship and into the bustling streets of Constantinople, where his sense of unease is palpable. Searching for the British Embassy, he feels like a foreigner in a strange world, filled with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. The journey ahead holds many unknowns, but Arthur is determined to face them head-on, embracing whatever comes his way, while reflecting on how his past experiences are intertwined with this new chapter of his life.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1872

Arthur's return to England in 1872 marked a pivotal moment in his life. After experiencing the triumph of discovering the Flood Tablet, his excitement quickly gave way to the disappointment of being called back home by his employers. Despite his repeated attempts to extend his stay by the River Tigris and continue his work, he found himself bound by duty to return to London. The night before his departure, Arthur had a bittersweet moment with Leila, a local villager, who, with a gesture of kindness, spilled water for good luck. Her words encouraged him to return to this land of rich history and culture when the time was right. Arthur, deeply moved, marked a pomegranate tree as a symbol of his promise to return, carrying the memory of the land and its people with him.

Upon arriving in London, Arthur was met with praise and admiration for his discovery. The media quickly turned him into a celebrated hero, and invitations from scholars and dignitaries poured in. Though the accolades were overwhelming, Arthur struggled internally with the public recognition. He had always been more at ease in the quiet of his scholarly pursuits, where his discoveries spoke for themselves. Now, with his newfound fame, Arthur faced the weight of high expectations and criticism alike. The accusations from some of his critics, claiming that he had falsified some of the artifacts, only served to intensify his feelings of isolation. He began to feel out of place in this world of socialites and academics, where every move seemed scrutinized, and every word judged.

Mabel, his fiancée, was eager to use Arthur’s new fame to elevate their social standing. She became fixated on planning their wedding and acquiring the luxurious items that came with being associated with someone of Arthur's stature. However, Arthur found himself uneasy with this materialistic aspect of their life. Shopping sprees for elegant attire, once exciting, now felt suffocating as he realized the cost of this new

lifestyle. At a grand party thrown by a wealthy countess, Arthur was struck by the way his archaeological work had been commodified. The precious artifacts, which once held deep cultural significance, were now on display as mere curios for the amusement of the elite, their true value overlooked. This encounter solidified his disillusionment with the way his discoveries were being treated by the very society that had once celebrated them.

During the dinner at the countess’s party, the conversation turned to the people of the lands Arthur had studied. As those around him casually discussed the inhabitants of the regions he had visited, Arthur felt compelled to defend the dignity and humanity of the Yazidis, a people whose struggles he had witnessed firsthand. The conversation highlighted the stark contrast between Arthur's view of these cultures and that of his dinner companions, further isolating him. It became clear to him that while he had a deep, personal connection to the places he studied, most people around him saw these lands and their people as little more than curiosities to be discussed over dinner. Arthur felt the weight of this disconnection, as it underscored the internal conflict he was experiencing—his desire to honor these cultures clashing with the reality of his role in Western academia.

After Arthur and Mabel married, the strains of their relationship became increasingly apparent. Mabel's desire for a life of luxury and the financial pressures that came with it began to clash with Arthur's priorities. While Arthur remained deeply absorbed in his work at the British Museum, Mabel urged him to seek a promotion, pointing out the financial demands of their growing family. This conflict between them reflected deeper tensions: Arthur's intellectual pursuits versus Mabel's material ambitions. Arthur continued to immerse himself in his research, but the memories of his time in Mesopotamia, and the woman he had left behind there, haunted him. He felt a sense of incompleteness, as if his life was not truly his own. Despite all his success and recognition, he longed for the simplicity and authenticity of the past, the connections he had made with people and places that felt more real to him than the world he now inhabited.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1854

Arthur had always dreamed of visiting the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations, but financial constraints had kept him away. Finally, in 1854, with a shilling in hand, he joined the masses heading toward the Crystal Palace at Sydenham Hill. The grand exhibition, which had already seen millions of visitors since its opening by Queen Victoria in 1851, promised to showcase the achievements of global industries. Arthur, feeling a wave of excitement mixed with nervousness, mentally multiplied numbers to calm his racing heart as he navigated through the bustling crowd, attempting to focus on the experience ahead. The sheer magnitude of the event was overwhelming, yet it stirred something deep within him, pushing him to embrace the journey ahead, despite the anxiety building up inside.

Inside the Crystal Palace, Arthur was struck by the exhibition's immensity and the dazzling displays that filled the space. He marveled at the intricate craftsmanship and diverse artifacts from all over the world. Exhibits from countries like India and the United States left him awe-struck, each item telling a unique story of culture and progress. As he moved through the galleries, Arthur felt a deep longing to not just witness these wonders but to explore the distant lands from where they had come. The experience ignited a desire within him to see these civilizations firsthand, to understand their histories beyond the artifacts. His heart was filled with wonder as he realized that reading about these places could never compare to the experience of being there.

Arthur's fascination deepened as he encountered objects and sculptures that evoked both admiration and controversy. He marveled at the intricate craftsmanship of the items on display, particularly admiring *The Greek Slave*, a statue that sparked contrasting views among the public, from admiration to strong abolitionist critiques. But it was the lamassus from Nineveh that truly captivated him, the ancient statues

seemingly whispering tales from a forgotten world. These ancient relics stirred a deep sense of curiosity in Arthur, making him ponder the stories they could tell if they could only speak. The more he explored, the more he felt connected to these artifacts, and the more he yearned to uncover the hidden history behind them.

Later, back in the office, Arthur shared his experience at the exhibition with Mr. Bradbury, recounting his awe and desire to explore ancient civilizations further. Mr. Bradbury, noticing Arthur’s enthusiasm and potential, encouraged him to visit the British Museum to see the famous tablets from Nineveh. Though Arthur lacked the funds for such a trip, Mr. Bradbury, recognizing his passion, kindly offered him a treat to support his curiosity. Arthur, filled with a sense of hope and possibility, left the office with a renewed sense of purpose. For the first time, he felt as if a door to a new world had been opened to him, one filled with knowledge, exploration, and the promise of a brighter future.

However, the next day, a tragedy struck that would forever change Arthur's life. Upon arriving at the office, he discovered Mr. Bradbury’s lifeless body, a victim of suicide. The loss left Arthur devastated, grappling with confusion and sadness over the inexplicable nature of despair, particularly in someone who seemed to have everything. The realization that Mr. Bradbury, despite his position and apparent success, could have been overwhelmed by such despair was a profound moment for Arthur. This experience forced him to confront the complexity of human emotions and the hidden struggles that even the most outwardly successful people could face. As life went on, Arthur dutifully attended to his responsibilities, but a deep sense of loss and isolation lingered, making him retreat further into his own thoughts as he tried to process the emotions that were now haunting him.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

Arthur begins his arduous journey in August 1876, traveling from Nineveh to Castrum Kefa, where the oppressive heat makes it difficult for him to eat. The journey is made all the more challenging by the harsh conditions, and his sustenance consists mostly of dates, flatbreads, and camel's milk. Accompanied by his guide, Mahmoud, they set out under the cover of night, the cooler hours offering them a reprieve from the scorching desert heat. As they travel across the barren landscape, the night brings an eerie calm, with the moonlight illuminating the terrain and making it feel as if it’s alive. Although Mahmoud warns Arthur of the dangers of traveling at night, Arthur is captivated by the serenity, his mind wandering through the ages, imagining the civilizations that once thrived under the very same sky.

Throughout their journey, Arthur is drawn into deep contemplation, reflecting on the land's once-immense glory. What was once a land filled with prosperous cities and fertile soils has now been reduced to a dry, unforgiving desert. The contrast of what was with what is, deeply affects Arthur, as he considers how human greed, power struggles, and environmental mismanagement have all played roles in the devastation of this once-thriving civilization. This realization shifts his perception of civilization itself, seeing it no longer as a stronghold of advancement but as a fragile, unstable construct that could easily collapse under its own weight. The ruins around him become a poignant symbol of what can happen when societies fall victim to their own vices.

During their travels, Arthur and Mahmoud pass through a village struck by cholera, a tragic sight that stirs memories of his own personal losses. Seeing the suffering of those around him, Arthur urges Mahmoud to seek medical assistance, only to be met with the bitter reality that no doctor will come to their aid. Mahmoud, in a solemn and respectful gesture, begins to pray for the afflicted, a moment that fills Arthur with a

quiet comfort despite his own struggles with faith. Arthur, in his heart, is torn between seeking solace in religion and recognizing the harshness of reality, where faith often offers little in the face of such overwhelming suffering. These moments highlight the profound isolation Arthur feels as he contemplates the fragility of life and the inability to truly heal the wounds of the world.

As the journey continues, Arthur becomes increasingly fixated on reaching Castrum Kefa, where he hopes to check on Leila, the woman he believes he is meant to be with. However, Mahmoud's counsel to turn back rings in Arthur's ears, questioning the impracticality of his quest. Mahmoud's reference to the story of Layla and Majnun, a tale of unattainable love, strikes a deep chord within Arthur, reminding him that his own obsession with Leila mirrors the tragic romance of Majnun. The realization that he is pursuing an impossible love adds weight to his already troubled heart, but despite his inner conflict, he refuses to turn back.

Eventually, after a difficult conversation with Mahmoud, Arthur decides to continue his journey alone, determined to press on regardless of the risks. However, he soon succumbs to a severe illness, suffering from dysentery, and finds himself in a weakened state. Mahmoud, despite his earlier advice to return, shows unwavering loyalty, seeking Arthur out and insisting on accompanying him through the last stretch of the journey. As they near Castrum Kefa, Arthur’s strength fades, and Mahmoud is forced to carry him to a nearby shepherd's hut, where they seek refuge. Mahmoud, ever faithful, watches over Arthur, tending to him as he drifts in and out of consciousness.

In his feverish delirium, Arthur experiences visions of his past, where both cherished memories and painful losses resurface. Among these muddled memories, a thief enters the hut and steals a prized blue tablet from Arthur's belongings, a seemingly small act that carries much greater significance. The theft of the tablet serves as a subtle reminder that even in the midst of his physical decline, the past continues to shape Arthur's journey. It is a symbol of the long-lasting impact of his experiences and the history that has been woven into the fabric of his life, showing that no matter how

much time passes, the past remains an inescapable force.

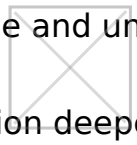
H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin listens intently as her grandmother recounts stories of the lamassus, the mythical creatures from their ancient past that once stood guard over their homeland. Grandma’s tale explains that these magnificent statues, which now reside in foreign museums, were once revered symbols of their culture and its strength. Although Narin initially struggles to fully believe in these fantastical stories, her grandmother reassures her of the deep significance these creatures held for their ancestors. The grandmother also teaches her the power of storytelling, explaining that it serves as a vessel for preserving truth, even when wrapped in myth. This resonates deeply with Narin, making her see storytelling not just as entertainment but as a powerful link to the past that shapes their identity and culture.

As their conversation shifts, Grandma speaks with reverence about the land that sustains them. She stresses that their people have always treated the earth as sacred and share a profound respect for nature’s power. This connection to the earth is evident in their traditions, such as the avoidance of marriages in April, a month dedicated to fertility and the natural cycles of renewal. Grandma's stories of a Yazidi woman’s bewilderment at the bathing customs in Germany illustrate the contrast in cultural practices and further emphasize the respect for water within their society. Water, in this context, is not just a necessity; it is an element that holds the essence of life and must be respected accordingly. Narin is struck by the realization that these practices and beliefs are not only about survival but about living in harmony with nature and the world around them.

Grandma continues her storytelling, revealing the personal rituals she follows to connect with the celestial world. Every morning and evening, she offers prayers to the rising and setting sun, a way to honor the forces that govern the universe. For her, the Tigris River holds a special place in her heart, symbolizing the flow of life and the

mysteries of nature. She shares with Narin the sacredness of ash in their healing practices, and how numbers—especially seven—hold deep spiritual significance, guiding decisions and actions in their lives. Grandma's wisdom extends to the realm of emotions, teaching Narin the importance of waiting for a week before acting on intense feelings, believing that this time allows clarity and wisdom to guide decisions. This lesson not only highlights the patience required in life but also the importance of emotional balance and understanding.



As the conversation deepens, Grandma uses the metaphor of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers to convey deeper truths about life. She explains that the Tigris is powerful, fierce, and untamable, while the Euphrates, though gentler, still requires inner strength and resilience to navigate. For Grandma, these rivers embody different aspects of life itself, where tranquility is not the absence of turmoil, but the strength to endure it gracefully. Narin, absorbing her grandmother's teachings, begins to understand that true peace comes not from avoiding hardship but from confronting it with respect and wisdom. These lessons will stay with Narin, shaping her perspective on life, relationships, and her place in the world as she grows older.

Grandma's stories also illustrate how deeply rooted their culture is in the reverence for both the seen and unseen forces of nature. Narin realizes that the wisdom passed down through generations is not just about the events of the past, but how these teachings shape their daily lives and interactions with the world. Grandma's words leave Narin with a profound sense of connection to her ancestors and to the earth they inhabit, inspiring her to honor the past while also embracing the challenges of the present. As the chapter draws to a close, Narin is not just learning about her culture's history, but also gaining a deeper understanding of herself and her place within the ever-flowing stream of life.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin awakens to a devastating sight in the village of Zêrav—a sight that marks the beginning of an unthinkable nightmare. The sacred water sources that her people have relied on for generations have been poisoned overnight. Thousands of bags filled with pesticides and other harmful substances litter the landscape, making the water undrinkable and leaving the villagers without access to essential resources. Desperation sets in as several men from the village head to a nearby Yazidi settlement in search of help, only to find that their neighbors are in the same dire situation. Meanwhile, they discover that Muslim villagers, although some are willing to lend a hand, show a reluctance to help others, further straining fragile relationships. With the heat intensifying and hope dwindling, the villagers are forced to rely on a few remaining bottles of water, each drop now a precious commodity in their fight for survival.

Days go by, and the villagers' efforts to clear debris from fountains are in vain as the Tigris River remains polluted, further deepening their despair. As night falls, the attackers return, this time targeting the land’s natural resources—burning olive groves and reducing fertile fields to ash. Narin watches helplessly from her window as the landscape around her changes, the once-thriving village now reduced to a scene of utter devastation. The hatred and violence around her seem inescapable, and Narin is left contemplating the brutal reality of their situation, realizing how fragile life is amidst such violence. Her mind races with thoughts of survival and the uncertainty of what tomorrow will bring.

The next day, Narin receives an unexpected phone call from her father, Khaled, who is in Baghdad. He informs her that he has been detained at a checkpoint, but hearing of the water contamination and destruction at home, he decides to return at once. However, his journey back is not without danger. As he travels, roadblocks and

increasing threats from extremist groups impede his progress, making his return seem impossible. Meanwhile, back in Zêrav, Grandma's restlessness grows with each passing hour. Unable to sleep since the poisoning of the wells, she notices a chilling change—the Kurdish forces that had once protected the village have mysteriously disappeared. Fear quickly spreads among the villagers when news reaches them that thousands of troops have left, abandoning the Yazidis to fend for themselves. In the face of such uncertainty, the villagers debate whether to stay or flee. Ultimately, they decide to remain, displaying white flags in the hope of avoiding violence and showing their surrender to the approaching threat.

As Khaled arrives at another Yazidi settlement, the situation becomes even more dire. Militants have taken control of the streets, and the once-peaceful village is now a battleground. Among the militants is Hajji Amer, a man Khaled once considered a trusted ally, but who now leads the armed force with a cruel determination. The Yazidis, including Khaled, are stripped of their possessions and threatened with violence. Although Khaled tries to remain calm and resolute in the face of these harsh realities, his resolve is tested when they are led to a water cistern and executed en masse. In a stroke of fate, Khaled survives, severely injured and alone, and with great effort, he makes a desperate call to his mother-in-law, urging her and Narin to flee the village at once and seek safety on Mount Sinjar.

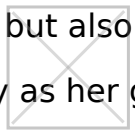
Grandma's voice trembles with urgency as she urges Narin and the few remaining relatives to escape while they still have a chance. The night is fraught with tension as they begin their journey, not knowing what dangers await. As dawn breaks, their hope fades as they are ambushed by ISIS fighters, and chaos erupts around them. Forced to flee into the desolate mountains, they are pursued relentlessly, with each step bringing them further from everything they knew. Yet, in the midst of the confusion, Narin and her family cling to the last vestiges of hope, knowing that survival is now their only goal.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin sits by the riverbank, deep in thought, as she listens intently to her grandmother, who begins recounting the significant and transformative tale of the great Flood. The event holds a special place in their shared heritage, and as Narin inquires about the origins of the disaster, her grandmother begins her tale. The story begins with a solitary drop of water, a seemingly harmless beginning that spiraled into relentless rainfall. The rain poured down without end, submerging entire regions and claiming countless lives in its wake. Despite the overwhelming destruction, Narin's people, the Yazidis, were spared by the bravery of Pira-Fat, a courageous woman who floated above the floodwaters. She managed to keep the seeds of their community safe, ensuring that once the waters receded, their people would repopulate the earth. This act of survival, aided by divine providence, became a defining moment in their legacy.

As Narin's curiosity grows, her grandmother expands on the story, revealing that the Flood was not an isolated event in their history. She explains that there was another catastrophic flood before it, one that struck the children of Adam and Eve, creating a sense of foreboding for future generations. This earlier deluge set the stage for the Yazidis' own experience, which, while similar, was also distinct in its own right. Narin is left pondering the divine reasons for such disasters. Her grandmother suggests that perhaps these floods served as a form of cleansing, a means of purging humanity's sins. However, she emphasizes that God's nature is one of kindness and mercy, not one of punishment. To explain the turmoil in the world, her grandmother uses the analogy of yogurt—always churning beneath the surface, symbolizing the cyclical nature of life, nature, and history. This continuous cycle, which they refer to as *dewr*, encompasses both the beauty and the struggle of their existence.

The conversation soon shifts to family heirlooms stored in an ornate chest, each item holding deep sentimental value for the family. Narin’s grandmother opens the chest, revealing intricate doilies and a qanun, a stringed instrument tied to Narin’s father. But it is an ancient slab of clay inscribed with symbols that stands out among the treasures. This slab, passed down from Narin’s great-great-grandmother Leila, has a special place in their family history. Leila, renowned for her beauty and wisdom, was not only a healer but also a gifted diviner, capable of seeing into the future. Narin listens attentively as her grandmother recounts Leila’s extraordinary abilities, which had made her a revered figure in their community.



However, such gifts came at a steep price. Narin’s grandmother recounts the tragedy that befell Leila when she received a grim prophecy in Nineveh, an experience that left Leila emotionally scarred. The weight of that knowledge became unbearable for her, and she chose to forsake her divining abilities, believing that some truths were too painful to know. Instead, Leila encouraged future generations to embrace more practical skills that could help them survive and thrive, such as the ability to locate underground water sources—a skill that would prove invaluable in their harsh environment. By shifting the focus to practical knowledge, Narin’s family maintained a connection to their cultural heritage while adapting to the world around them. This focus on practicality, paired with a deep respect for their past, enabled the Yazidis to survive the numerous challenges they faced.

As Narin reflects on her family’s legacy, she realizes the immense resilience and wisdom passed down through generations. The stories shared by her grandmother are not only lessons of survival but also lessons in strength, endurance, and the importance of preserving traditions. Narin’s bond with her family and heritage grows stronger with each tale, reminding her of the importance of remembering where they came from and carrying that legacy forward. She feels a deep sense of responsibility to continue honoring their history while navigating the complexities of her own life. As she listens, the river flows quietly beside her, a symbol of both the continuity and fragility of life, carrying the lessons of the past into the present.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

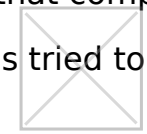
Zaleekhah steps out into the early morning calm of her houseboat on the River Thames, the serene waters gently caressing the shore beneath a dark, satin-like sky. Bundled in a fleece jacket and tennis shoes, she takes in the tranquility of the river, an environment that has always been her haven. Her runs, an integral part of her life, have long been seen by her husband as a way for her to escape unresolved emotions from her past. The rhythm of her movements, while familiar, also brings a sense of distance from her personal struggles, allowing her to momentarily disconnect from the complications that linger in her life.

As she begins her run, the cold morning air makes the initial breaths feel sharp and uncomfortable, yet as she continues, her body adapts, moving fluidly along the Chelsea Embankment. She passes a mix of early risers heading to work and others returning from their late-night activities, their paths crossing under the dim light of dawn. As she runs, Zaleekhah reflects on her environmental work, particularly the negative impact of pollution on the River Thames' ecosystem. Her research has uncovered disturbing findings, like the harmful plastics found in the stomachs of mitten crabs, underscoring the long-lasting damage human activity has inflicted on the environment.

The Thames, once thought to be lifeless, now teems with aquatic life, yet it still suffers from the same urban waste that has plagued it for years. Zaleekhah's work has taken her to various regions, observing the broader consequences of climate change and the pollution of natural resources. This knowledge brings her closer to understanding the intricate relationship between water and environmental health. Despite humanity’s heavy reliance on water, she is deeply troubled by society’s disregard for this essential resource, which, in its own way, defines the flow of time and life. The realization that water—an irreplaceable resource—is still undervalued and abused weighs heavily on

her, pushing her forward in her work.

While running, her mind drifts to memories of her childhood in Turkey. She recalls hiking with her parents through the countryside, feeling safe in their presence and the connection to the natural world around her. However, those nostalgic thoughts quickly shift into anxiety as she recalls the trauma that has since shaped her life, causing an emotional ache that compels her to keep running, lest she be overwhelmed by the painful past she's tried to leave behind.



By the time Zaleekhah reaches her Uncle Malek's grand home for dinner, she feels a sense of discomfort settle in. Despite the luxurious surroundings and the comfort they afford, there is a sense of estrangement, a disconnect between her life choices and the expectations placed on her. Uncle Malek, a successful immigrant, represents the very ideals Zaleekhah often feels alienated from, embodying success yet carrying his own inner turmoil about belonging. Their conversation, heavy with family expectations, personal disappointments, and cultural differences, exposes the tension between them. As they talk, she becomes aware of the underlying fears and unresolved issues about her marriage and identity, which linger unspoken, amplifying her sense of displacement.

Though she is surrounded by comfort and familiarity at Uncle Malek's, Zaleekhah feels like an outsider, caught between the expectations of those around her and her own unresolved questions about who she is. Her thoughts return to her childhood memories and her family dynamics, both of which feel like distant parts of a life she no longer fully inhabits. As she navigates the complexities of familial love, sacrifice, and duty, Zaleekhah is forced to reconcile her past with her present, finding her commitment to the environment and her personal convictions acting as both her anchor and her escape.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1840

Arthur was born in the harsh winter of 1840 in London, a city dominated by bitter cold, snow, and the pervasive smog of industrial pollution. The Thames, once known for its clean waters and abundant fish, now flowed dark and murky, tainted by the refuse of factories, industrial waste, and even decaying bodies. This dismal scene was a direct consequence of London's rapid industrialization, which had led to it becoming the most densely populated city in the world. Amid the filth and despair, toshers—brave, resilient scavengers—searched the riverbanks daily, risking their lives to find anything of value in the garbage-strewn waters, including discarded coins, scraps of metal, and even hidden treasures that had been cast aside in the chaos.

On a particularly bitter November morning, a group of toshers combed the Chelsea shore, working together to avoid the dangers of flooded sewers and other potential hazards. Among them was Arabella, a pregnant woman whose husband, once a promising carpenter, had succumbed to alcohol, abandoning his responsibilities. Despite the weight of her pregnancy, Arabella worked tirelessly, driven by the desperate need to support herself and her unborn child. She toiled in the muck, searching through the refuse as her body strained against the demands of labor, a tragic reflection of the hardships of life for many working-class women in London.

As Arabella's labor pains began unexpectedly while searching the shore, the group of toshers was thrown into a frenzy. Arabella, desperate and in distress, confided in an elderly toshers' member, revealing that her husband was missing, and she had no means of support for her child. The situation grew increasingly dire, especially as Arabella's waters broke in the filthy river, leaving the group to frantically attempt to help her. Meanwhile, a stark contrast was unfolding in Buckingham Palace, where Queen Victoria herself endured the pains of childbirth in comfort and luxury, underlining the vast disparity between the lives of the wealthy and those of the

destitute working class. This juxtaposition between the two worlds highlighted the inequalities that marked life in London at the time, where even the most fundamental experiences like childbirth were experienced in profoundly different circumstances based on one’s class and status.

Despite the grim setting of her birth, Arabella gave birth to a son, who was named King Arthur by the compassionate toshers who had gathered around. This moment, despite the squalor of the riverbank, embodied a sense of hope, as the infant’s birth represented a new beginning, a fresh start amid the desolation surrounding him. While his entrance into the world was anything but ideal, the name given to him was symbolic, hinting at a future that might be filled with potential despite his impoverished beginnings. Arthur’s birth, amid the filth and decay of the Thames, served as a reminder that even in the most challenging circumstances, there is hope for change and transformation.

Arthur’s extraordinary memory, coupled with his ability to perceive beauty in the world around him, would set him apart from others in his life. While his gift was often a blessing, it also came with its burdens, as it made him acutely aware of both the beauty and the suffering around him. As he grew, the challenges of his early life would shape him in ways he could not yet fully understand. His life, deeply rooted in the realities of Victorian London, was one of both hardship and hope, as he navigated the complexities of a world that often seemed stacked against him. The snow-covered Thames, the river that witnessed his birth, would continue to shape his path, guiding him through the contrasts of his existence. This moment, which began with a child born in poverty and struggle, would unfold into a life filled with challenges, but also the potential for greatness.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

Arthur finds himself caught in a precarious situation by the River Tigris in August of 1876. With the city of Nineveh engulfed in the devastation of a spreading plague and cholera, Arthur is unable to continue his work. Struggling with the isolation and the mounting pressures of his mission, he decides to send a telegram to the Trustees of the British Museum, requesting an early end to his expedition. His hope for relief is dashed when he receives a brief and impersonal reply from S. McAllister Jones, the Museum's secretary, emphasizing caution but offering no solution to Arthur's desire to return home. Left without the escape he so desperately craves, Arthur feels increasingly trapped, his quest for discovery weighing heavily on his spirit. He finds solace only in the discarded remnants of past archaeological teams, sifting through chipped pottery and ancient tiles that no one else had cared to examine.

As Arthur sorts through the debris, he stumbles upon a striking cobalt tablet—an unexpected treasure that piques his curiosity. This tablet, part of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, holds a portion of the story that Arthur has never encountered before, revealing a deeply resonant theme of loss. The text speaks of Gilgamesh returning home a broken man, struggling with the weight of his experiences, and in the midst of his sorrow, Arthur finds a reflection of his own inner turmoil. The tablet is particularly captivating due to its dedication to Nisaba, a mysterious goddess, rather than the typical deity, Nabu. Arthur, lost in thought, reflects on the importance of rivers in Mesopotamian culture, realizing that they represent much more than mere geographical features. They serve as vital lifelines connecting the past with the present, embodying the cycles of life and death, as well as the grief and loss inherent to the human condition. This insight deepens Arthur's understanding of the civilizations that once thrived along the Tigris and Euphrates, and how their stories are still intertwined with the landscape today.

Amid these reflections, Mahmoud arrives with startling news: a young Yazidi woman has been seen traveling alone in the area. Arthur’s mind immediately jumps to Leila, a woman who had once prophesied disaster, and his hope flares up at the thought of finding her. Mahmoud, however, cautions him against the dangers of chasing this lead, noting that such pursuits often end in disappointment and danger. But Arthur, driven by the hope of finally finding Leila, insists on setting out for Castrum Kefa, where Leila’s sister is said to reside. Determined to follow this thread of hope despite the potential risks, Arthur prepares for the journey with renewed purpose. Mahmoud, seeing that Arthur’s determination is unwavering, reluctantly agrees to accompany him, understanding the dangers of venturing into the unknown alone.

The journey begins in mid-August, with Arthur and Mahmoud traveling through the arid landscape along the River Tigris, leaving behind the ruins of Nineveh. Arthur’s body is weary, but his spirit is reinvigorated by the thought of finally finding Leila and perhaps discovering answers to the questions that have plagued him for years. As they move further from Nineveh, the land becomes more desolate, yet Arthur feels a connection to the ancient history that still lingers in the sand. Each step brings him closer to the past and to the truth he seeks, not only about the woman he is searching for but also about himself. In this journey, Arthur is not just chasing a woman who might never be found, but he is also grappling with the echoes of his own life, the mistakes he has made, and the redemption he longs for. As they head toward Castrum Kefa, Arthur faces the inevitability of the unknown, a man in search of answers, hope, and closure.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1871–2

Arthur finds himself engulfed in a whirlwind of social events following the success of his lecture at the Society of Biblical Archaeology. With invitations from prestigious educational societies and exclusive gentlemen's clubs pouring in, he finds himself rubbing shoulders with high society. Dressed in their finest silk cravats and indulging in extravagant meals such as turtle soup, Arthur is initially dazzled by the opulence around him. However, despite the luxurious surroundings of gilded mirrors and champagne flutes, a deep sense of unease weighs on him. The mystery of the missing Flood Tablet from Nineveh continues to gnaw at his thoughts, making him question whether these social distractions are merely superficial, preventing him from pursuing his true purpose. The social pressures and lavish distractions seem to divert his attention, yet his mind continually drifts back to his academic ambitions and the unresolved quest that lies ahead.

During a dinner at The Boltons, Arthur is introduced to Mabel, a charming young woman from a respectable family. Their interactions appear coincidental at first, but Arthur soon senses the subtle efforts of his peers to bring them together. While Mabel is not particularly knowledgeable about his work in archaeology, she expresses a genuine interest in his research, offering Arthur an engaging simplicity and warmth that contrasts with his own shyness and reserved nature. As he navigates the expectations of love and marriage, Arthur becomes acutely aware of how societal norms value domesticity and companionship, ideals that are at odds with his obsession for the Mesopotamian tablets. This stark contrast between his personal aspirations and the conventionality of the marriage market creates a sense of internal conflict. Arthur must reconcile these differing priorities—his commitment to historical discovery and his growing attraction to Mabel—leading to moments of reflection about the direction his life should take.

Amidst these personal challenges, Arthur receives an exciting but daunting offer from the *Daily Telegraph* to spearhead an archaeological excavation in the land of Gilgamesh. He is filled with enthusiasm at the opportunity but is quickly reminded of the financial constraints that accompany such an ambitious project. However, Mabel’s father encourages him to propose to Mabel before he departs, suggesting that companionship could provide him with support during his travels. While Arthur appreciates the encouragement, his focus remains firmly on the excavation and the significance of the work that awaits him. Yet, as he prepares for this pivotal journey, he is struck by the urgent need to visit his mother, who has been residing in a sanatorium, struggling with her health. This brings him face-to-face with a deeply emotional reality that he cannot ignore, a challenge he must face before moving forward with his professional ambitions.

Upon arriving at the Middlesex County Lunatic Asylum, Arthur is confronted with the sad reality of his mother’s condition. She suffers from "restless melancholy," a term that seems to only partially capture the deep suffering she endures. What was once a vibrant, full-of-life woman has now transformed into a shadow of her former self. The physical and emotional distance between them is undeniable, as Arthur’s attempts to rekindle their bond through familiar stories seem to fall flat. The realization that his mother may never recover from her condition weighs heavily on him, adding emotional complexity to his already strained existence. Despite this, Arthur is determined to make his mother proud. He resolves to push forward with his mission, vowing that his work in Nineveh will bring about a better future, not just for him, but for his family as well. As Arthur prepares to leave, he takes with him a carved guardian spirit, a symbol of his love and commitment to his mother, hoping that it will remind him to return to her when his journey is complete. As the narrative unfolds, Arthur’s personal journey, laden with loss and hope, intersects with his professional ambitions, driving him toward the uncertain future that awaits in Nineveh.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin resides in a dilapidated cinderblock house beside the River Tigris in 2014, a place of despair where her daily life is steeped in violence and suffering. The militant group surrounding her has just suffered a major defeat, and their frustration is palpable. Among the chaos, Narin serves the commanders and their fellow militants, performing menial tasks like scrubbing pots while a palpable sense of frustration hangs in the air. Her thoughts are interrupted by the abuse of two newly acquired Yazidi women, who are subjected to cruelty, with one of the women crying nonstop and the other, an older woman, attempting suicide in a desperate bid to escape. The commander’s rage intensifies, and his harsh punishment of the older woman only deepens the sense of fear that permeates the air. Narin, tasked with bringing tea, enters the room, only to be grabbed by a militant and roughly spun around. In a swift act of intervention, the commander scolds the attacker and then dismisses Narin with a cold gesture, leaving her trembling and conflicted.

Days later, while Narin works in the kitchen, a conversation between the commander and his wife reveals a disturbing belief—the wife blames Narin for her husband’s misfortune, claiming she is cursed and that her presence is responsible for his impending demise. Narin feels the weight of this hostility, yet she tries to keep her distance from the commander’s wife, hoping to avoid any further conflict. Despite her best efforts, the encounters between them grow increasingly frequent and uncomfortable, filling Narin with a sense of dread. The commander's wife’s accusations only add to the unbearable atmosphere, leaving Narin unable to escape the looming threat of violence. Eventually, the commander informs Narin that due to her so-called “bad luck,” she will be sold to a new owner in Antep. Stricken with horror, Narin pleads with him for the chance to reunite with her friend Salma, but her request is brutally denied. The thought of being sold to a new master, someone who has a reputation for

abusing young girls, fills her with a deep sense of fear, and Narin sees no way out, knowing that resistance would mean certain punishment.

In the midst of her despair, Narin comes across an ancient clay tablet, a small object that brings a fleeting moment of connection to her past. She remembers her grandmother telling her stories about such artifacts, and for a moment, she allows herself to feel the comfort of nostalgia. But her moment of peace is shattered when the commander discovers her holding the tablet. In a fit of rage, he violently strikes Narin, knocking her to the ground, and kicks her while she lies incapacitated, the pain a sharp contrast to the fleeting hope she had found in the relic. After regaining consciousness, Narin finds herself face-to-face with a doctor and the commander, who now reveals his dark intentions. The commander, seeing an opportunity for profit, demands that Narin read the tablet, as it holds potential value in his ongoing scheme of looting and selling ancient antiquities. Narin realizes that these militants are not just committing violence—they are also profiting from the destruction of historical treasures, perpetuating a cycle of greed that will only continue to destroy more lives.

The commander presents her with a lapis lazuli tablet, demanding that she decipher its meaning for financial gain. Narin, now overwhelmed by the cruelty surrounding her, refuses to back down without a fight. In a rare moment of defiance, she extracts a promise from the commander that Salma will be spared from harm. The faint hope of this promise is the only thing keeping her going, though she knows the likelihood of the commander honoring his word is slim. As the reality of her situation sinks in, Narin feels numb, her emotional walls thickening as she prepares for the inevitable. The constant threat of violence, the abuse of power, and the unimaginable cruelty she faces daily weigh heavily on her. Even in the face of this horror, Narin understands that survival is the only option, even if it means sacrificing parts of herself along the way. She feels the sting of helplessness as she watches her friend suffer, knowing that the commander's viciousness will leave them both trapped in a world that sees them as nothing more than objects to be used and discarded.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin and her grandmother walk along the banks of the River Tigris in 2014, a tranquil yet powerful bond growing between them as they collect wild herbs. The air is crisp, and the sounds of the river gently rolling over its banks echo in the background. As Narin contemplates their existence, she grows increasingly frustrated with the way her grandmother is misunderstood. Often seen as illiterate and unimportant by the outside world, her grandmother holds a depth of wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual significance that is passed down through generations. Narin wishes people could look beyond her grandmother's apparent simplicity and see the wealth of stories and wisdom she carries—stories that connect their heritage to the divine. With a quiet sense of reverence, Grandma shares a tale passed down through their family, a story that begins with the creation of the world itself.

Grandma recounts how God, or Xwedê, existed alone in silence before creating a radiant pearl filled with divine light, setting the stage for the unfolding of creation. A magical bird named Anfar is tasked with guarding this sacred pearl until, for reasons unknown, God smashes it, sending the pieces cascading into the creation of mountains, forests, and rivers. This act of divine destruction is not a sign of wrath, but of creation, giving birth to the natural world. From this chaotic beauty, angels and humans are born, marking the beginning of life on earth. For the Yazidis, the creation story is tied to their understanding of their place in the world, with a unique perspective that links them directly to Adam, unlike other faiths that trace their lineage differently. This distinction is significant to their identity, offering them a sense of belonging within the universe.

As the narrative unfolds, Grandma gently shifts the topic to the inevitable changes threatening their homeland—the construction of a dam that will flood their cherished land and submerge their ancestral memories. She speaks with sadness and wisdom

about the loss of the pistachio trees and the various species of birds whose lives depend on the habitat they've known for generations. These deep, intimate connections to nature form the backbone of their identity, and the thought of it being washed away is too much to bear. In this moment of shared grief, Grandma introduces a fantastical notion: a dream of building an ark, similar to that of Baba Noah, to preserve their home and the life they've nurtured. The idea is not merely an escape but an attempt to protect the memories and traditions that have been passed down through the ages. Grandma also speaks of the soul's journey, assuring Narin that even in the face of death and destruction, the soul continues, reincarnating over time, experiencing the world again and again. The belief in reincarnation brings a sense of comfort to Narin, helping her to understand that nothing truly ends—it only transforms.

As they continue to walk, the conversation meanders to other topics, including Grandma's tattoo, a deeply personal marking of identity and culture. She also speaks of the spirits that guide them and tells the tale of an Englishman's grave, which stands as a poignant reminder of loss. This Englishman had come to the region searching for lost poetry but tragically perished from thirst, a death that resonates with the deeper meaning of their existence. His story, like so many others, serves as a symbol of longing and the fragility of life. His grave, neglected and forgotten by the world around it, stands as a stark contrast to the destruction caused by the approaching dam. The chapter closes with the disturbing realization that change is unavoidable; the bulldozers are already beginning their work, tearing down the landscape and forever altering the world Narin has known. As Narin contemplates this, she feels a mixture of sorrow and uncertainty. Her thoughts are heavy with questions about her future, her heritage, and the loss of the world she has loved. The looming destruction feels both personal and universal, encapsulating the complex emotions tied to family, tradition, and the environment. This chapter beautifully captures the essence of how nature, history, and identity are intertwined, and how deeply these elements affect the characters' lives. Narin's inner conflict—her desire to preserve the past while facing an inevitable future—remains unresolved, leaving her with a sense of longing and hope for something better amid the encroaching changes.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah spends her late nights at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology, conducting research on various environmental samples. As she peers through her microscope, she contemplates the ongoing global challenge of cholera, a disease that continues to ravage vulnerable populations, particularly in areas where environmental neglect and pollution run rampant. The persistent issue of water scarcity also weighs heavily on her mind, especially in regions like the Tigris River, a once-thriving body of water now suffering due to rapid environmental degradation. The river, which flows through the Fertile Crescent, has seen its life-sustaining properties diminish, leaving communities dependent on its waters vulnerable. Zaleekhah's work reflects a growing awareness of the impact human actions have on ecosystems, as well as the ever-worsening consequences of ignoring sustainable practices that can help prevent such crises.

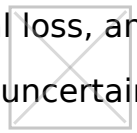
Beyond her professional work, Zaleekhah is also deeply affected by her Uncle's emotional detachment, a stark contrast to the instinctive behaviors of other creatures, like salmon, which always return to their birthplace. This disconnection leaves Zaleekhah wondering about the nature of family bonds, as her uncle's reluctance to engage with his heritage seems at odds with the strong, unyielding pull that the concept of home has on most people. However, a phone call from her dear friend, Helen, brings a sense of relief to Zaleekhah's otherwise tense life. Helen shares the hopeful news that a potential organ donor has been found for a transplant procedure that has been a source of worry for both families. Zaleekhah, filled with relief and compassion, immediately offers her support, even volunteering to travel to Istanbul to assist with the procedure. Her readiness to help highlights her unwavering commitment to those she cares about, no matter the distance or the challenges that arise.

Later in the evening, Zaleekhah prepares dinner for Nen, her close friend, by ordering Lebanese food and creating an intimate, warm atmosphere in her home. As they share the meal, Zaleekhah takes the opportunity to explain her research on the environmental destruction of the Tigris River, emphasizing the harmful effects of upstream dam constructions that worsen water shortages downstream. She talks about how these man-made alterations to the river's natural flow are exacerbating an already dire situation, where the livelihoods of many are at risk. Despite her concerns, Zaleekhah remains passionate about finding solutions and contributing to positive environmental change, though she acknowledges the significant obstacles in the way. As she speaks, Zaleekhah's words reveal a blend of frustration and determination, reflecting the conflict between her scientific knowledge and the harsh reality she witnesses in the world around her. Nen listens intently, offering support as they delve into discussions about the fragility of nature and the effects of human interventions on the planet.

Their conversation soon shifts toward ancient Mesopotamian history, with Zaleekhah recounting the story of the creation of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers from the tears of the goddess Tiamat. This connection to the past brings an emotional release for Zaleekhah, who is struggling with feelings of sadness and isolation. She reflects on how, despite her passion for science and knowledge, she feels an overwhelming sense of disconnect from the world's seeming happiness. To her, it often feels as though others are living carefree, oblivious to the environmental and personal crises that she faces daily. Nen, however, provides a calming presence, encouraging Zaleekhah to see herself with compassion and reminding her of the beauty within. The growing closeness between them is palpable, as Zaleekhah finds solace in Nen's words, and their shared connection deepens. This quiet moment of intimacy marks the beginning of a relationship that promises both healing and understanding for Zaleekhah, who has long struggled with her internal battles.

The chapter takes a poignant turn as Zaleekhah confronts the trauma of her past, specifically the devastating flood that claimed her parents' lives during a family trip to the Middle East. In a quiet and safe space, Nen gently encourages Zaleekhah to talk

about the flood, allowing her to process the lingering emotional wounds from that tragic day. As she shares her memories, Zaleekhah begins to open up in ways she hasn’t done in years, finding comfort in the shared vulnerability. The bond between Zaleekhah and Nen strengthens, as they both acknowledge the power of shared trauma and mutual understanding. Zaleekhah’s emotional release signifies the beginning of a healing process, one that intertwines with the themes of environmental concern, personal loss, and the search for human connection. Despite the darkness of her past and the uncertainty of the future, Zaleekhah finds in Nen not just a friend, but a partner in navigating the complexities of life.



H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin finds herself in a deep and reflective conversation with her Grandma, sitting by the serene banks of the River Tigris in 2014. This moment between the two women becomes a space for exploration, as they discuss the cultural myths that have shaped their identity and the isolation that often comes with adhering to these ancient beliefs. Grandma opens up about a painful memory of her younger brother being shunned by their community due to the prejudices and stereotypes tied to their cultural roots. As they journey toward Iraq, Narin, filled with a sense of excitement and maturity, reflects on the family's rich heritage and the personal history that is intertwined with the land they are traveling through. This emotional journey takes Narin beyond the physical landscapes, as she begins to understand how the past shapes her present and the future ahead. She feels a deep connection with her ancestors as Grandma's words imbue her with the sense of responsibility to carry their stories forward.

Upon arriving in Cizre, Narin's world expands when her Grandma introduces her to the famous figure Al-Jazari, a renowned scientist and engineer from Upper Mesopotamia. This historical encounter brings to life Al-Jazari's extraordinary inventions, such as a mechanical peacock designed to dispense water and attendants who provided guests with soap and towels. Narin is fascinated, realizing that these remarkable designs reflect the advanced knowledge of a long-forgotten era. As her father shares that Al-Jazari's inventions are now housed in museums, particularly in the United States, Narin becomes aware of the broader implications of cultural heritage being displayed far from its place of origin. Grandma expresses her frustration and sadness over the loss of these invaluable pieces of their history, now removed from the very soil that once nurtured them. This realization sparks a meaningful conversation about the struggles faced by their culture in preserving their history while others around the world continue to profit from it.

The family delves further into their conversation, contemplating how the legacy of Al-Jazari is viewed through different cultural lenses—Arab, Iranian, and Kurdish. This discussion brings to light the deeper issues of cultural recognition and identity, highlighting how each community holds onto different interpretations of their shared past. Despite the historical erasure of figures like Al-Jazari, Narin's father reassures her that their family plays a vital role in keeping these memories alive, referring to them as the "memory tribe." This sentiment strengthens the family's commitment to preserving their history and passing it on to future generations. As their journey progresses, they find themselves once again by the Tigris River, where Grandma fondly reminisces about the vibrant wildlife that once flourished in the region. The oryxes and lions that roamed freely are now lost, their presence wiped out by relentless hunting and the ravages of war. The memory of these animals' majesty stirs up a deep sense of grief in Narin, as she reflects on the fragile balance between nature and human interference. The conversation then shifts to the marshlands, once a fertile and sustaining land, now drained and destroyed by the environmental and political forces that have devastated their homeland. Narin's father then speaks of the Yazidi communities who have been displaced by the actions of oppressive governments, further emphasizing the fragility of their people's survival. The continuing threat posed by the Mosul Dam adds to the weight of these reflections, but despite all the destruction, Narin's family holds on to the hope that their culture and heritage will endure, even in the face of adversity. Their deep love for their history, rooted in both pain and resilience, becomes a beacon of strength as they continue their journey into an uncertain future, determined to preserve the stories and traditions that define them.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah sits on her houseboat by the River Thames in 2018, feeling the weight of solitude after Nen’s departure. Her gaze is drawn to a seagull soaring overhead, clutching something strange in its beak. The sight of the bird, coupled with the overcast sky, fills her with an unsettling sense of unease. The clouds above mirror the storm brewing inside her, reflecting the turmoil in her heart. As she begins to eat the cuneiform biscuits Nen brought, she finds herself lost in thought, pondering the world around her. Her mind wanders to the fish in the river and how they must seek shelter when the weather becomes as unpredictable and violent as her emotions. Even though she knows that fish naturally seek deeper waters during such conditions, she feels a sense of powerlessness in truly understanding nature’s secrets. The river’s pollution only compounds her concern. She recalls how the fish struggle to breathe when the oxygen levels drop in the water, suffocating silently. It is in this moment that she realizes just how fragile the world is—everything in it, including herself, vulnerable to the unseen forces at play.

As the day turns to evening, Zaleekhah struggles to pick out an outfit for the family gathering she’s dreading. She finds herself lost in memories of past birthdays, one of which stands out with haunting clarity. It had been a birthday party mostly attended by strangers, a painful reminder of the overwhelming isolation she had felt after the tragic loss of her parents. Uncle Malek had tried his best to make the day special, baking a mermaid-themed cake that only served to remind her of her loneliness. As she sifts through her clothing, she is struck by how nothing seems appropriate—none of the garments can disguise the sadness or the self-doubt she carries. Despite the outward appearance of abundance, nothing feels right. The clothes she tries on serve as a stark contrast to the warmth and love her parents once offered, memories of which still linger, casting long shadows over her every attempt to move forward. The

absence of her parents is an aching presence in her life, and she realizes that every year that passes only deepens her grief.

Zaleekhah feels an increasing sense of emotional isolation as the time for her birthday dinner approaches. She is torn between attending the gathering out of duty and the strong desire to retreat into solitude, away from the expectations placed on her. The thought of isolating herself entirely is frightening, though, because even in her emotional struggle, she still seeks connection. Her uncle's house, which had once been a refuge after her parents' passing, no longer feels like home. It serves as a temporary shelter, a place where she has been forced to adapt and survive but never truly live. Every corner of the house is imbued with memories of her late parents, making it impossible to escape the ache of their absence. She knows she can never replace them, and the weight of that realization presses heavily on her heart. Still, she finds herself unable to deny the necessity of showing up for her family, even if her soul feels like it's still stuck in the past. As she gathers herself to attend the dinner, a mix of fear, uncertainty, and a faint glimmer of hope washes over her. It is not an easy decision, but the desire for connection outweighs her discomfort. The chapter reflects Zaleekhah's struggle with her identity, torn between the person she has become after her parents' death and the emotional turmoil she still faces. Amidst the layers of grief and self-doubt, she seeks solace in the small moments of human connection, hoping that someday, she might find peace within herself again.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1853

Arthur walks alongside his father through the dense fog that envelops London in 1853, the cold mist casting an eerie silence over the city. The air is thick with pollution, and the streets are filled with a sense of decay as they navigate their way through the city. Arthur's father, once a source of guidance and warmth, has become distant and harsh, the weight of their financial struggles transforming his personality. At just thirteen years old, Arthur has been forced to grow up quickly, taking on menial tasks to support the family—tasks that most children would never dream of. He scavenges, collects manure for sale, trades old clothes, and even dives into filthy waters to gather leeches. Despite his mother's efforts to work as much as possible, the family remains entrenched in poverty, and Arthur feels the burden of responsibility for his younger siblings weighing heavily on his shoulders.

Arthur's longing for a return to his school life, with its structure and predictability, feels distant now. The realities of life in London demand far more from him than the comfort of education or youth. He is keenly aware of the suffering around him, with many of his peers enduring similar hardships, working dangerous jobs just to make a living. His experiences with his father's frustration over their situation only serve to deepen his sense of isolation and confusion. The harsh words and actions from his father fuel a growing sense of rebellion within him, but at the same time, Arthur is determined to do what it takes to help his family. The apprenticeship his father seeks for him seems like an opportunity, but Arthur's questions about it are met with harsh responses, and his curiosity is quickly stifled. As they walk through the foggy streets, Arthur wonders about the nature of the work ahead, though his father does not offer any real answers.

Their journey takes them into the heart of St Giles, a neighborhood infamous for its crime, vice, and squalor. It is a place where the darkness of the city's underbelly is laid bare, and as they walk through it, Arthur feels an overwhelming sense of shame. His

father’s coldness towards a desperate prostitute they encounter leaves a lasting impression on him, highlighting the harshness of the world they live in and his father’s inability to show empathy. This encounter only intensifies Arthur’s sense of injustice and fuels his desire for a better life. Their arrival at Bradbury & Evans, a well-established publishing house, brings a glimmer of hope to Arthur. His father attempts to use a connection with a local chemist to secure a job for Arthur, but the publishers inform them that no positions are available. In a moment of desperation, Arthur’s father insists that his son is a “genius” and pleads for an opportunity to prove himself. Intrigued, the publishers decide to test Arthur’s abilities, challenging him to recall dates from the past. Arthur’s impressive memory catches their attention, though the memories he recalls bring up emotions he would rather not confront.

Eventually, Bradbury & Evans agrees to take Arthur on as an apprentice, offering him the chance to prove himself over a week-long trial. Arthur is both excited and nervous, knowing that this could be the opportunity that changes his life. The chance to work in the world of printing and publishing sparks something within him, a newfound passion for literature and learning. Arthur’s curiosity about the world of publishing is ignited, and he sees this as a path to escape the poverty and struggles that have defined his early life. The excitement of this opportunity is tempered by the harsh realities of his situation, but Arthur is determined to embrace this chance with everything he has. The hope of building a better life for himself, fueled by his love for knowledge, begins to shine through as he steps into this new chapter. He is now on a journey that will not only transform his life but also shape his future, as he learns to navigate the complexities of the world he has always been excluded from.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1876

Arthur lies in a run-down shepherd’s hut by the River Tigris, his body weak and struggling to process the poverty that surrounds him. The cold tea and tattered rags offer little comfort, and yet, amidst the despair, he discovers his journal lying on the floor. With his breath shallow and labored, Arthur picks up his journal, determined to write a final reflection on the course of his life. His thoughts drift to the influences that have shaped his existence, specifically his long-held love for poetry and the written word. Over the years, Arthur has devoted himself to the art of collecting, interpreting, and translating literary works, especially an ancient epic that has provided him with endless joy. The poetry, woven into his heart and soul, becomes a source of solace, even as his life comes to a close in a humble setting.

Arthur has often been praised for his talents, his mother being the most ardent supporter, while his father’s approval came intermittently. His colleagues have also recognized his skill, but the belief of his wife remains a mystery to him. As he reflects on his life, Arthur comes to the realization that while talent may have been a gift, it is his passion for literature that has defined him. His heart has been restless, forever searching to break boundaries and push limits, much like the ancient kings he admires—Gilgamesh and Ashurbanipal. These kings endured immense trials, and their stories echo in Arthur's mind as he compares himself to them. He now views himself as "King of the Sewers and Slums," a far cry from the grandeur of his historical counterparts. He recognizes that his own identity has been shaped not just by the words he loved but by the life he led far from royal palaces.

As tears begin to form in his eyes, Arthur mourns the lost opportunities in his life, particularly in his roles as a father and husband. He feels the weight of loneliness where companionship and intimacy should have been, as secrets remained unspoken and desires unfulfilled. His scholarly pursuit of ancient texts has always been a refuge,

but the complexities of love—something he has never fully understood—elude him. Arthur contemplates the epic narratives he has studied, acknowledging that they belong not to any one person but to the collective human experience. In his hands, he holds a blue tablet—an artifact from his travels—intended as a gift to Leila, a symbol of both connection and disconnection. It is through these narratives and his deep bond with Leila that Arthur finds some measure of peace, despite the heartache he carries.

As his life draws to an end, Arthur envisions the *Epic of Gilgamesh* living on across time, its allure reaching new generations of admirers who will find beauty in its imperfections. The epic, a testament to human emotion and mortality, will transcend borders, serving as a bridge between past and future. Arthur believes that art, in all its forms, is a legacy—a way for humanity to recognize and remember their ancestors' struggles, triumphs, and fragility. In his final moments, Arthur accepts his own mortality, seeing it as a necessary part of the cycle of life. He recalls the teachings about death not as an end, but as a new beginning, finding peace in the knowledge that his journey, like those of the heroes in the epics, is only part of a larger, never-ending narrative.

When Arthur breathes his last on August 1876, he leaves behind a legacy of intellectual pursuit, exploration, and emotional depth. Mahmoud arrives to bring news of his passing, and Leila, deeply affected by their shared connection, awaits his arrival in the afterlife. Arthur’s body is to be laid to rest at the Castle of the Rock, and his memory will endure, not just as a scholar, but as King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums. His life—a blend of triumph and struggle—will remain etched in history, a reflection of the complexities of the human experience, where literature, love, and loss intersect in ways both profound and timeless.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin and her Grandma had settled into a quiet routine by the River Tigris in 2014, finding peace in nature after their move to Zêrav to stay with relatives. The pair often sought solace by sitting on a large rock near the river, reflecting on the surroundings that had once been filled with life and prosperity. The area, once home to bustling eateries with the aroma of grilled fish, particularly masgouf, now appeared desolate, with buildings decaying and forgotten. Narin, as per her religious beliefs, refrained from eating fish, and she felt a deep sadness for the loss of the vibrant energy the place once held, wishing she could have experienced it in its prime. Despite the melancholic atmosphere, the river's flow continued to remind them of what had been, and it served as a poignant symbol of how time and neglect had changed the land around them.

Their peaceful moment is abruptly interrupted when Grandma notices a scorpion nearby, which sparks a philosophical conversation between them about the silent language of nature. Grandma, ever thoughtful, explains how everything in nature communicates in its own way, from the rustling leaves to the very stillness of the air. She speaks of the importance of listening, as even death and silence carry their own messages, reminding Narin of how little is truly understood about the world. Grandma's observations of the scorpion, as dangerous as it is, reflect her broader perspective on the interconnectedness of all things. Narin, while intrigued by these reflections, remains hesitant, as the notion of communicating with creatures that can be deadly unsettles her, yet she is drawn into Grandma's way of thinking.

The moment takes a darker turn when Grandma, sensing something unusual, leads Narin closer to the river. They discover a floating body in the water, an unsettling sight that sharply contrasts with their earlier peaceful reflections. Grandma, upon seeing the lifeless figure, experiences a deep sense of sorrow, recognizing that another life has

been taken, its body now carried by the current. Her attempts to retrieve the body are in vain, as the strong current keeps it just out of reach, despite her gentle prayers and efforts. This encounter with death forces Grandma to reflect on the harshness of the world around them, leaving her with a sense of unease that lingers even as the day progresses. Her decision to keep the incident to herself is prompted by the rumors of disappearances in the area, as the river's dark history continues to haunt the village.

The Tigris River, once revered as a lifeline for the people, had now become a symbol of loss and despair, carrying with it the remnants of countless tragedies. The once-pristine waters, now polluted by human waste, reflect a sad truth: the river had become a forgotten graveyard for those whose lives had been claimed by violence, neglect, or misfortune. The oppressive atmosphere is compounded by the growing fear of ISIS militants in the region, with whispers of people disappearing into the river's depths or being taken by the rising tide of violence. Grandma, always attuned to nature's whispers, continues her habit of speaking to the elements, finding solace in the belief that there is still communication to be found in nature. Yet even as she connects with the land around her, there is an undeniable sense of danger lurking, as though the river and the earth themselves are warning them of the dark forces that threaten their peaceful existence.

As the day fades into evening, the stark contrast between nature's beauty and the human suffering around them becomes more apparent. Grandma and Narin, once comforted by the river's flow, now find themselves filled with a quiet dread, understanding that their world, once full of vibrancy and life, is being overtaken by an unseen threat. The ominous presence of the river, its waters tainted by pollution and bloodshed, serves as a metaphor for the harsh reality they now face. With every step they take, they are reminded of the fragility of life, the unspoken dangers surrounding them, and the inevitability of change. This chapter marks a turning point for Narin, as the haunting images of the body in the river and the growing sense of danger compel her to reconsider her place in this world and the future of her people.

By the River Tigris, in olden times

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O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur arrives in the village of Zêrav in 1872, greeted by the villagers with curiosity and warmth. Children run eagerly to meet him, while elderly men observe his arrival, one of whom is a distinguished sheikh dressed in white robes and holding an intricately designed cane. Arthur expresses his sincere gratitude for the hospitality extended to him, and he and his guide are led to the sheikh's home. There, they are offered goat's milk and a lavish dinner that includes traditional dishes like chicken biryani and kubba Mosul. The sheikh explains that every guest is viewed as a gift, a sentiment that resonates with Arthur, making him feel more connected to this unfamiliar place and its people. His appreciation for the hospitality grows as the evening unfolds, and he is touched by the genuine kindness shown to him.

During the dinner, Arthur observes his guide’s reluctance to partake in the meal, which causes Arthur’s own appetite to flare up unexpectedly. Sensing that the villagers might be cautious about outsiders, Arthur expresses his sympathy towards the sheikh regarding the negative perceptions others may have about their village. The sheikh, however, responds with resilience, acknowledging the struggles they face but emphasizing the strength of their community, which has endured hardships for generations. Arthur, inspired by the sheikh’s perspective, listens intently, feeling a deep respect for their ability to withstand adversity with pride and unity. The dialogue leaves him reflecting on the differences between his own life and that of the villagers, bringing into focus the contrasting elements of privilege and struggle.

After the meal, the atmosphere becomes more intimate as Arthur enjoys coffee with the sheikh. In this quieter moment, the sheikh warns Arthur about the local Pasha of Mosul, suggesting that the Pasha may view Arthur’s arrival as an opportunity for profit. Arthur, however, clarifies his true purpose in visiting the area—he is not seeking wealth, but rather, he is determined to uncover an ancient poem related to the Great

Flood. The sheikh, sensing Arthur’s sincerity, reassures him that he is indeed in the right place. This region, rich in history and steeped in legend, is linked to the Ark and the Deluge, reinforcing Arthur’s conviction that his research here could yield significant findings.

As the evening progresses, the sheikh begins to ask more personal questions about Arthur’s life, prompting him to reveal that he has a fiancée back in England. However, Arthur’s emotions are conflicted; he feels a strong pull toward the ancient land and its mysteries, which seems to distance him from his personal ties. He confides in the sheikh about his internal struggle, describing the sense of being drawn toward a “ghost river,” a force that seems to call him away from his life in England and his engagement. Just as the conversation becomes more personal, Arthur meets the sheikh’s adopted daughter, Leila, a faqra who possesses a unique spiritual connection to the world. Leila’s presence adds a layer of mystique to the evening, and Arthur feels intrigued by her insight, which seems to transcend the ordinary.

Later that night, Arthur’s rest is disturbed by strange rustling sounds coming from outside. Curiously, he glimpses Leila sleepwalking, an unsettling but intriguing sight that makes him wonder about the deeper truths she may possess. The next morning, Arthur wakes to the sound of children’s laughter and discovers that his guide has left. In his absence, Dishan, the sheikh’s son, steps in to assist Arthur as his new translator, and they begin the day with a renewed sense of purpose. The village, vibrant with activity, provides a warm and welcoming atmosphere that encourages Arthur to feel more connected to this strange land.

Eager to begin his work, Arthur expresses his desire to start excavating near the archaeological site of Nineveh. The sheikh, displaying immense generosity, invites Arthur to stay with him during his research, emphasizing that sharing food and shelter enriches any endeavor. This invitation offers Arthur not only a place to stay but also a deeper connection with the people of Zêrav, who have accepted him as one of their own. Encouraged by this warm reception, Arthur looks forward to exploring the Kouyunjik mound, where he believes layers of ancient history await him. The sheikh’s

hospitality and support strengthen his resolve, and Arthur feels optimistic about the work ahead, hoping to uncover insights that will deepen his understanding of the ancient world and its mysteries.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin stands on the edge of the Tigris River in Turkey, surrounded by her family and a small gathering of Yazidi elders, awaiting her long-anticipated baptism in the spring of 2014. Dressed in a white garment, her small frame is barely noticeable among the larger figures of her relatives, yet her sage-green eyes gleam with curiosity and quiet anticipation. The sheikh, draped in traditional white robes, places a gentle hand upon her head, whispering words of blessing that invoke strength, wisdom, and protection for her future. Nearby, her grandmother watches intently, her gaze filled with both pride and sorrow. As the river flows steadily beside them, she calls Narin “the corner of my liver” and “the light of my eye,” affectionate phrases that Yazidi elders use to express deep familial love. The ceremony, a sacred moment in Narin’s life, carries the weight of generations, linking the present to the rich history of their ancestors.

Despite the solemnity of the occasion, Narin feels an ache in her chest at the absence of her father. A talented qanun player, he travels frequently for work, leaving Narin to be raised primarily by her grandmother after the untimely death of her mother. His absence has been a constant in her life, a reality she has learned to accept, but on days like this, she longs for his presence. The ceremony is nearing completion when an unwelcome intrusion shatters the peace—a bulldozer, part of the Turkish government’s controversial dam project, roars to life just beyond the riverbank. Its presence is a stark reminder of the impending destruction of Hasankeyf, a place that holds centuries of history, now facing submersion beneath artificial lakes. The gathered Yazidis glance at one another with a mixture of frustration and helplessness, knowing they have little power to stop what is coming.

Despite the protests of environmentalists and historians, the government has pushed forward with the dam’s construction, citing progress and modernization as its justification. The driver of the bulldozer, seemingly indifferent to the cultural and

historical loss, yells at the group, urging them to leave before the work begins. Grandma, a woman whose spirit is as unwavering as the mountains, refuses to move, meeting his glare with quiet defiance. The tension is thick, but ultimately, the group must concede, forced to relocate further up the riverbank to complete the ceremony in relative peace. The disruption leaves an unspoken mark on the event, a reminder that their homeland is slipping away from them, piece by piece.

As they resume the baptism, Grandma expresses her long-held desire to take Narin to Iraq, where a proper baptism could be performed at the holy Yazidi site of Lalish. She believes that the sacred valley, untouched by modern destruction, will offer the girl a more profound connection to her faith. However, Narin has her own struggles—her worsening hearing loss, caused by a rare genetic condition, has begun to affect her daily life. She fears a future where she will no longer hear the rushing of the Tigris, the songs of her people, or the sound of her grandmother’s voice telling stories of the past. Sensing her unease, Grandma reassures her that love and memory transcend even the loss of one’s senses. Though they may lose their lands, their rivers, and even their ability to hear one another, the spirit of their people will always endure.

As the ceremony concludes, a heavy silence lingers in the air, filled with both hope and sorrow. Narin feels the weight of her people’s history pressing down on her, the realization that she belongs to a lineage marked by both resilience and loss. Though her baptism is complete, she knows that her journey is only just beginning. The Yazidis are a people of survival, their stories flowing through time like the waters of the Tigris. Even as their world changes, even as bulldozers erase their past, they remain. Narin, standing at the edge of her childhood, begins to understand that her life will be shaped by this same unbreakable spirit. And though the future is uncertain, she takes comfort in the knowledge that she carries the legacy of her ancestors within her, like a river that refuses to be buried.

H: NARIN: By the River Tigris, 2014

Narin is caught in a desperate struggle for survival in the harsh landscape surrounding Sinjar Mountain, an area deeply sacred to the Yazidi people. The mountain, long considered a living entity in ancient Mesopotamian culture, is more than just a physical feature to the Yazidis; it is a symbol of their connection to the divine and their refuge from danger. The belief in the mountain’s sacredness stems from its role as a bridge between earth and the heavens, a place of shelter during times of great distress. The Sharfadin Temple, perched upon this hallowed ground, is a testament to centuries of devotion, its pale yellow stone structure standing resilient amidst the turmoil. Yet, as the Yazidi families climb the mountain to escape violence, they are met with overwhelming adversity, including the relentless heat and the fear that the sanctuary they seek may be slipping further out of reach.

As Narin and her family ascend the mountain, the weight of their situation becomes unbearable. The sweltering sun beats down on them, draining their energy and hope, as they carry the heavy burden of their loss and uncertainty. Narin's grandmother, a pillar of strength, offers comfort and love, but even her resolve begins to waver under the pressure of the dire circumstances. She tends to Narin and the others, providing the last few drops of water, but knows that the hours ahead are uncertain. The elderly, already weakened from the oppressive heat and lack of nourishment, are the first to fall, succumbing to the elements in the harshest of ways. This scene, painted with sorrow and devastation, symbolizes the profound reality of the family’s situation. The toll of the journey weighs heavily on the entire group, yet despite it all, they cling to the hope that survival is possible.

As night falls, the temperature drops, offering a fleeting moment of relief from the oppressive heat. The family gathers closely, trying to find warmth and comfort in the presence of one another. In this vulnerable moment, Narin’s grandmother imparts one

final piece of wisdom—teaching her to connect her emotions with water, viewing it as a form of healing and release. Yet even as hope flickers with the possibility of aid, the families are left to fend for themselves. News of American support begins to spread through the air, but the reality of receiving help becomes increasingly remote. The grandmother, unwilling to let despair overwhelm her, sends young boys to retrieve water from a nearby fountain, but their tragic deaths at the hands of ISIS militants mark a turning point in their already dire situation. The loss of the boys only serves to highlight the unrelenting violence that surrounds them, pushing the family into further isolation and despair.

The grandmother, undeterred by the losses she has witnessed, takes it upon herself to search for water, believing that despite the barren landscape, there may still be hope beneath the earth. With a forked branch in hand, she begins her search, driven by love and desperation, determined to secure life for those who depend on her. But the harshness of the world she faces is made starkly clear as ISIS militants observe her every move, mocking her efforts and belittling the belief that water could still be found in such an unforgiving place. In a moment of fear, Narin appears, having followed her grandmother in an act of love and solidarity, determined to share the burden of survival. The two women now face not only the ever-present threat of violence but also the emotional and physical toll of their journey. Their lives hang in the balance as they confront the stark reality of their situation, but through their shared vulnerability, a bond of strength and determination is forged. Together, they continue to hope, to fight, and to endure the seemingly insurmountable odds that threaten to overwhelm them.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames/Tigris, 1876

Arthur prepares for his journey back to Nineveh, burdened by a deep sense of sadness. His return is complicated by the lack of a sponsor, which adds an extra layer of uncertainty to his mission. As he struggles with the emotional impact of leaving his family behind, particularly his young twins, he is reminded of their dependence on him. His daughter’s heartfelt embrace and his son’s poignant drawing serve as vivid symbols of their understanding of his departure. These innocent expressions show the mixed emotions that accompany his choice to pursue his work, knowing that the dangers of his expedition may keep him away for an extended time. This bittersweet moment marks a crucial turning point for Arthur, who faces the personal conflict of his academic ambitions versus his role as a father and husband.

Tensions arise as Arthur faces a confrontation with Mabel, his wife. She expresses frustration over his decision to leave so soon, revealing her feelings of abandonment. Arthur tries to explain that his work is essential, emphasizing his deep connection to the ancient tablets he is studying. However, Mabel’s concerns go deeper, accusing him of prioritizing his scholarly pursuits over his family and even hinting at infidelity. Though Arthur defends himself passionately, the unresolved issues between them remain. Mabel's dissatisfaction with his decisions suggests a growing rift in their relationship, one that Arthur cannot easily dismiss. Despite these emotional challenges, Arthur feels compelled to continue his archaeological work, convinced that it is crucial to both his personal and professional identity.

Upon arriving in Constantinople, Arthur is confronted with the disquieting atmosphere that surrounds him. The recent death of the sultan has left the city in turmoil, with unrest and fear spreading throughout the population. Arthur is warned about the potential dangers on his journey to Nineveh, including uprisings and the threat of disease. Despite these ominous cautions, Arthur remains undeterred, resolute in his

decision to continue. He is determined to send letters back home to his family, intending to bridge the physical and emotional divide between them. These letters, filled with vivid descriptions of his journey, are meant to keep the connection with his loved ones alive, even as the distance between them grows. Arthur’s commitment to his family and his work is clear, but it is tempered by the realization that his journey is fraught with risks that could alter his life in unexpected ways.

As Arthur approaches a Yazidi village he had once visited with fondness, a sense of unease overtakes him. He is accompanied by his guide, Mahmoud, and together they observe the once-thriving community, now deeply scarred by violence. The peaceful village Arthur remembers has been ravaged by conflict, leaving behind devastation and sorrow. Mahmoud, visibly distressed, explains that the village had been the site of a brutal massacre carried out by local leaders. The news shocks Arthur, who is deeply affected by the loss of life and culture that had once been so vibrant. The massacre forces Arthur to reflect on the fragility of human existence, and the implications of his archaeological pursuits suddenly feel insignificant in comparison to the human suffering around him. His connection to the past, once something that brought him joy and purpose, now feels burdened with guilt and confusion, as he grapples with the true cost of his work.

The massacre becomes a turning point for Arthur, one that shakes his beliefs about his role in the world. While he had once viewed archaeology as a noble pursuit, capable of preserving history and culture, the events in the village force him to reconsider. The realities of human suffering and loss bring a sobering perspective to his work, and he begins to question his motivations and his place in a world where history is often defined by violence and destruction. As Arthur contemplates the implications of his discoveries and the legacy he is helping to preserve, he is struck by the tension between his professional ambitions and his moral conscience. His once unwavering commitment to understanding the past now seems less clear-cut, and he struggles to reconcile his passions with the overwhelming weight of the human cost associated with them. This chapter captures the internal conflict Arthur faces as he navigates his journey, not just through the physical landscape, but through the emotional and moral

terrain that challenges his identity and purpose.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah arrives at her Uncle Malek's home in the elegant area of Chelsea, feeling an overwhelming sense of estrangement despite the familiarity of the surroundings. As she steps into the house, the sight of the well-maintained garden stirs nostalgia within her, yet also serves as a reminder of the emotional distance she feels from her family. She passes the doorman, Kareem, handing him a book titled *Nineveh and Its Remains*, a simple gesture that sets the tone for her visit. As she moves up the stairs, the closed door to her childhood bedroom stands in stark contrast to her current state of detachment. The house, once a symbol of familial closeness, now feels like a place she no longer belongs.

Inside Uncle Malek’s study, Zaleekhah is confronted with a space brimming with luxury and warmth, but her emotional disconnect lingers. She pauses by the window and watches as her Uncle and Aunt, along with their granddaughter Lily, interact with a tenderness that she longs for but feels excluded from. The moment stirs a whirlwind of conflicting emotions, amplifying the distance she feels from her relatives. Zaleekhah's attention then shifts to a book she intends to leave on the coffee table, but as she opens an old drawer, her eyes fall upon a photograph that sends a jolt of alarm through her. The picture of a young girl, accompanied by unsettling details about her condition, ignites a sense of urgency, compelling Zaleekhah to take the photograph and leave the study abruptly. The act of removing the image underscores her growing anxiety, as she grapples with the implications of what she has discovered.

Downstairs, Kareem observes her swift departure, noting that Uncle Malek has been informed of her arrival and will be joining her shortly. Despite his reassurances, Zaleekhah insists on leaving, her desire to escape the house fueled by the tension building inside her. Soon after, Uncle Malek arrives, his search for a girl at a tattoo shop indicating the gravity of the situation. Zaleekhah confronts him, and he reveals

that Lily is critically ill, and her condition has left them desperate for an organ donor. His words hit hard, as the weight of the situation becomes apparent: time is running out, and the need for a match has reached a critical point. Uncle Malek’s anxiety is palpable, making it clear that this is no ordinary family matter but one that involves the delicate balance of life and death.

Uncle Malek then shares that he has identified a potential donor among a group of Yazidi girls who are in dire circumstances. He paints a picture of a group that has been overlooked by society, suggesting that this arrangement could rescue the girl from a life of suffering and provide a solution to Lily's dire health crisis. However, Zaleekhah's sense of unease deepens as she realizes the darker truth behind her uncle's plan. The proposition is not one of rescue but of exploitation—organ harvesting masked as a paternalistic solution. She recoils at the thought of her uncle justifying such a morally questionable decision, and her shock is compounded by the realization that his rationale is built on the exploitation of vulnerable girls. This moment of reckoning forces Zaleekhah to confront not only her uncle’s choices but also the ethical dilemma at the heart of their family dynamics.

The conversation escalates as Zaleekhah struggles with the ethics of Uncle Malek’s plan, questioning the value of human life and the worth of a person when weighed against the desperation of a loved one. Uncle Malek attempts to rationalize his actions, but Zaleekhah remains steadfast in her condemnation, unable to accept the moral compromises he is willing to make. The argument exposes deep cracks in their familial bond, as Zaleekhah is forced to reckon with the darkness that now shadows her uncle’s intentions. She is confronted with a painful truth: her family’s values and her uncle’s choices no longer align with the principles she holds dear. The chapter ends with Zaleekhah torn between her love for her family and her duty to stand against an immoral proposition that could haunt her for years to come.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1856

Arthur begins his life in the year before his sixteenth birthday, when his family is hit hard by financial struggles. This difficult situation pushes him to work extra hours at a young age to help pay the rent and contribute to the household. Each morning, he rises before dawn, enduring a daily routine that involves using the little resources available to him. He uses cold water mixed with diluted vinegar to wash his face, as the soap he receives from charity is of poor quality. As he walks through the streets of London during these early hours, he is confronted by the harsh realities of the city, where beggars and the broken-hearted can be seen at every corner. One day, Arthur stumbles upon a tragic scene: a man who has frozen to death on the sidewalk, an event that adds to the crushing weight of his struggles and reinforces the dismal reality around him.

Hunger becomes an ever-present issue for Arthur, who starts his day with nothing more than a simple bread roll. Occasionally, he finds a small indulgence in butter or a warm drink from a nearby stall, trying to momentarily lift his spirits. These fleeting joys come when he brings treats home for his mother and younger brother, offering them small tokens of happiness amid the gloom. The overwhelming fatigue from his long hours of work by night leaves him devoid of energy to read or entertain any hope for a better future. Instead, he is haunted by the memory of his late brother, whose absence weighs heavily on his heart. Even though life seems relentlessly harsh, there are moments of beauty—like the songs of gulls or the inviting aroma of roasting chestnuts—that briefly offer him a sense of peace, reminding him that even small things in life can bring comfort.

One day, while at the office, Arthur gets engrossed in examining illustrations for an upcoming English reprint of *The Works of Rabelais*. His admiration for the power of visual storytelling contrasts sharply with his self-doubt about his artistic talents. But

then, the door to the office bursts open, and a man rushes in, later revealed to be the famous Charles Dickens. Dickens, seeking Mr. Evans, is told of Mr. Bradbury’s passing, and Arthur, as Bradbury’s apprentice, seizes the opportunity to introduce himself. Dickens immediately notices Arthur’s potential and acknowledges his skill, inspiring Arthur to continue striving in his career.

Their conversation turns to the difficulties authors face, especially those bound by oppressive publishing contracts. Dickens, who shares his frustrations with the publishing world, expresses a desire to break free from these constraints and proposes a partnership with Mr. Evans. This collaboration results in the successful publication of four novels, though their attempt to launch the *Daily News* falls into financial ruin. Months later, Arthur runs into a disheveled Dickens who brings with him a special gift—a rare treat from the Ottoman lands, offering a glimpse into Dickens' personal life and struggles amid rumors of infidelity. As they talk, Arthur opens up about his dreams of traveling to Nineveh, and Dickens, recognizing his potential, gifts Arthur with tailored clothing to help him experience the world beyond the limits of his working-class upbringing.

Dickens’ thoughtful gesture is accompanied by a letter that encourages Arthur to explore new horizons, marking a significant turning point in his journey. The letter hints at the transformation that lies ahead for Arthur, urging him to break free from the limitations of his current life. Despite Dickens soon disappearing back into his personal struggles, Arthur is left with a renewed sense of hope and purpose. This moment sparks a fire within him, fueling his desire to escape the confines of London and embrace a future full of opportunities. Dickens, even in his absence, leaves Arthur with the belief that a brighter and more adventurous future is within reach, far beyond the narrow world he once knew.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1853–4

Arthur finds himself on an unexpected path when he becomes an apprentice at a prestigious printing and publishing house. Initially, he performs menial chores like cleaning and maintaining the workspace, but soon he is entrusted with working on the rotary steam printing press. Despite the apparent dangers of the machinery, Arthur is captivated by the rhythm and precision of the process. He is drawn to the notion of creating identical copies of works, each one a perfect replica of the original, and finds the environment in the print shop far more welcoming than the rigid and punishing nature of his schooling. The vibrant atmosphere of the print shop offers a stark contrast to his previous experiences, and, despite the occasional teasing from his colleagues, Arthur thrives in this new environment.

As Arthur’s skills improve, he is tasked with various projects, such as creating postage stamps and experimenting with embossing techniques. The increasing demand for illustrated prints excites him, giving his work newfound purpose. Mr. Bradbury, his employer, further educates him on the power of the printed word, likening it to a free bird that flies to a wide and varied audience, transcending social classes. This concept of print as a medium for spreading ideas and knowledge resonates deeply with Arthur, who begins to see his work as part of something much larger than just creating physical products. As his understanding of printing deepens, so does his fascination with its potential to influence and connect people across different walks of life.

Arthur’s growing appreciation for beauty is fueled by his exploration of engraving and the works of famous artists and writers. As he learns more about the intricacies of the craft, he begins to nurture his own creative sensibilities. His aspirations for a better life take root when he receives his first wages, but the harsh reality of his impoverished circumstances becomes impossible to ignore as he walks through the affluent streets of London. The contrast between his modest existence and the wealth around him fills

him with both yearning and determination to escape his current situation. He dreams of a life that is more than just survival, hoping to rise above his circumstances and make something of himself through hard work and knowledge.

Upon returning home, Arthur faces tension with his father, who is less than supportive of his efforts to contribute to the family. His father’s anger and physical abuse only drive Arthur to focus even more intently on his studies and his aspirations. Despite the harsh treatment, Arthur's resilience shines through, and he immerses himself in reading and literature as a means of escape and self-improvement. Mr. Bradbury recognizes Arthur’s potential and encourages him to continue growing by providing him with books to borrow. This mentorship becomes a pivotal moment in Arthur’s life, helping him to see that his dreams of a better life are within reach through knowledge and persistence. The guidance he receives from Mr. Bradbury inspires Arthur to pursue a career in publishing, a field that, despite its challenges, represents a path to a brighter future.

Arthur’s desire to make a name for himself in the publishing world evolves over time, as he articulates his goals and ambitions to Mr. Bradbury. With the encouragement of his mentor, Arthur begins to believe that a future filled with hope and opportunity is possible. His journey from a boy working in squalor to an ambitious young man with dreams of success is marked by his hard work, his love of literature, and his commitment to self-improvement. This transformation sets the stage for Arthur to embark on a life that holds the promise of fulfillment and achievement, where the power of literature and education becomes the driving force behind his success. As he moves forward, the narrative weaves together themes of aspiration, beauty, and the transformative power of learning, showcasing the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity.

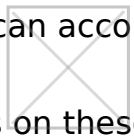
O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur finds himself immersed in the remnants of Nineveh in 1872, surrounded by the decayed ruins of once-proud structures now pillaged and broken by time and human interference. As he oversees a team of thirty laborers, Arthur is deeply troubled by the grueling conditions they face beneath the relentless heat of the sun. Their labor, marked by the constant sound of shovels digging into the earth, is a rhythm that never stops, reminding Arthur of the weight of their work and the dwindling resources that could soon prevent them from continuing. During the heat of the day, when the sun's rays grow unbearable, he retreats to his tent, where, despite the oppressive environment, he remains determined to study the ancient cuneiform tablets he has uncovered, believing that these pieces of history could unlock secrets that had been lost to time.

As he dives deeper into his research, Arthur makes an unexpected discovery—the remnants of an ancient boatyard, hidden beneath the dry earth. This surprising find suggests that what was once a bustling trade center, full of life and activity, now lies in desolation and abandonment. Arthur is struck by the irony of it all—this area, once a thriving hub, now suffers from the ravages of time and neglect. He reflects on the significance of this region, particularly the early findings at Ashurbanipal’s palace, where tablets, important to the study of ancient civilizations, were overshadowed by the more visually striking statues. These finds were neglected because they lacked the immediate glamour of sculptures, illustrating how certain types of knowledge and heritage were lost in the frenzy to preserve and display more glamorous artifacts.

Further exploration leads Arthur to learn that many of the artifacts from previous excavations were carelessly handled and damaged due to the chaotic rush of archaeologists eager to claim their finds. The intense rivalry between the British and French excavation teams, each desperate to secure Mesopotamian treasures, only

exacerbated the situation, with both sides hurriedly attempting to ship their discoveries back to Europe. This reckless pursuit of artifacts culminated in a tragic incident where an attack on a transport ship resulted in the loss of priceless items, which sank into the Tigris River, forever lost to the depths. This heartbreaking event emphasizes the fragility of historical treasures and highlights the dangers faced by those attempting to retrieve them, making Arthur acutely aware of the potential destruction that can accompany the pursuit of ancient knowledge.



As Arthur reflects on these events, a sense of humility and confusion washes over him. He becomes more aware of the fleeting nature of civilizations, realizing that no matter how mighty or advanced they may have been, every society leaves behind a legacy of pain and brutality, hidden beneath its triumphs. These realizations become even more poignant during his visits to a nearby Yazidi village, where Arthur, now deeply connected to the community, finds solace in the relationships he builds with its people. He becomes particularly drawn to Leila, a faqra, whose stories and music captivate him with their depth and emotional resonance. These moments with Leila draw Arthur away from his scholarly pursuits, pulling him into a world defined not by written texts but by the oral tradition that has kept the Yazidi culture alive for centuries. Through Leila’s tales of water, which are central to their cultural identity, Arthur begins to see the profound connection between the Yazidis and the land they inhabit. These nightly encounters offer him more than just an intellectual curiosity—they allow him to feel a deep and spiritual connection to a culture that, though different from his own, shares similar human struggles and aspirations.

Arthur’s engagement with the Yazidi community and Leila’s stories begins to change the way he views his own work. No longer focused solely on the recovery of artifacts for intellectual or scholarly gain, Arthur becomes more attuned to the cultural significance behind these treasures and the living history they represent. His time with Leila and the Yazidi villagers shapes his perspective on archaeology, leading him to consider not just what is lost in the past, but what continues to thrive in the present. The connections he forms with the people of the village enrich his understanding of both ancient and contemporary life, offering him a broader view of history’s cyclical

nature.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1852

Arthur spent his early childhood in the grimy and impoverished districts of London, known as the Sewers and Slums, where the River Thames, once a symbol of life and commerce, now reflected the decay of the city. The thick fog that often blanketed the streets, combined with the stench from the nearby factories and tanneries, created an atmosphere of despair. As a boy of five, Arthur’s keen observational skills allowed him to notice the habits of those around him, from the poor families struggling to make ends meet to the laborers toiling away in the city’s smog-choked factories. By the time he reached eight, he had picked up the Yiddish language from a nearby Jewish-Russian family, adding to his impressive ability to mimic the sounds and sights of his diverse surroundings. Enrolled in a ragged school designed to educate children from destitute backgrounds, Arthur found solace in the classroom’s occasional offerings of food, a small but important escape from the harsh realities outside.

Although Arthur was introverted and often overlooked, his intellect stood out. He quickly mastered lessons and was eager to assist his teacher, Mr. Hopkin, whenever the opportunity arose. Despite the teasing from boisterous classmates who were more interested in mischief than academics, Arthur’s love for learning continued to flourish. His unkempt appearance, paired with his quiet demeanor, left him largely invisible to those around him. However, Arthur’s remarkable memory and thirst for knowledge allowed him to thrive in a setting that, for many, offered nothing but hardship. One day, after staying home to care for his ailing mother, Arthur arrived late to school and was immediately confronted by a stern substitute teacher. The teacher, dismissing Arthur’s explanation for his tardiness, humiliated him by accusing him of making up excuses, and it wasn’t long before Arthur was sent to the headmaster’s office for punishment.

What followed was an unexpected turn of events. Instead of administering the usual punishment, the headmaster quizzed Arthur on various academic subjects, testing his memory and knowledge. Arthur, whose intellectual abilities had long been suppressed by his humble surroundings, surprised the headmaster by recalling historical facts, dates, and passages from books he had read in his free time. The headmaster, initially incredulous, recognized Arthur's exceptional talents and realized that the boy was far more than the poor street urchin he had assumed. Despite enduring physical punishment, Arthur's abilities had been inadvertently acknowledged, an acknowledgment that would shape his future decisions. The headmaster's actions, though harsh, unknowingly opened the door to new opportunities for Arthur to rise above his circumstances.

Determined to make a better life for himself, Arthur left the school, but the oppressive weight of his reality still loomed large. He wandered the streets of London, unsure of where his path would lead, until his steps brought him to the British Museum. There, amidst the grand pillars and the hushed reverence of the museum's halls, Arthur was drawn to the Assyrian statues and Mesopotamian artifacts displayed before him. These relics, some of which had traveled across vast distances, represented the lost cultures of ancient civilizations, and Arthur felt an overwhelming sense of connection to them. It was within these artifacts, with their intricate carvings and ancient cuneiform inscriptions, that Arthur found a spark of inspiration.

Arthur's encounter with Dr. Samuel Birch, the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities, would prove to be a pivotal moment in his life. The learned curator noticed Arthur's keen interest in the artifacts and struck up a conversation with the boy, who had a surprising depth of knowledge for his age. Arthur's enthusiasm and curiosity about the ancient world impressed Dr. Birch, who began to see potential in him. This meeting left Arthur with a profound sense of purpose, knowing that his thirst for knowledge could one day lead him out of the poverty-stricken life he had known. The British Museum, with its vast treasures, seemed to offer a new beginning for Arthur, one filled with the possibility of discovery and the hope of shaping his own future.

As the day came to an end, Arthur walked away from the museum, his heart filled with a newfound sense of direction. No longer was he just a boy from the slums; he was someone who could uncover the mysteries of the past and bring them to light. The towering stone sculptures and ancient artifacts he had seen that day resonated deeply with him. He saw in these relics a reflection of his own struggle—displaced from their homeland, yet still holding the stories of a forgotten time. His journey was just beginning, and Arthur knew that through his dedication to learning and discovery, he could rise above his circumstances and create a future filled with hope.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah enters a cozy café tucked away in the heart of Russell Square, London, in 2018, a place where she reconnects with her cousin, Helen. The café, vibrant with lush greenery and colorful flowers, provides a serene setting that sharply contrasts with the gravity of the news Helen has come to share. Helen’s young daughter is in desperate need of a kidney transplant, a crisis that has cast a heavy shadow over their family’s lives. Zaleekhah listens intently, her heart heavy with sympathy, as Helen discusses the daunting challenges of finding a suitable donor. The conversation is filled with tension, not just over the practicalities of finding a donor, but also the emotional toll this impending medical procedure is taking on Helen and her family. Despite hope being offered in the form of Helen's husband's early return, the looming issue of the transplant remains the focal point, creating an air of uncertainty.

Amid their conversation, Zaleekhah notices the weariness in Helen’s voice, the toll that the ongoing situation has clearly taken on her cousin. Helen, noticing a change in Zaleekhah as well, remarks that she no longer seems as joyful or at ease as she once did. This comment strikes a chord in Zaleekhah, who has been quietly battling her own struggles with depression and sleeplessness. She chooses not to burden Helen with her own problems, instead opting to keep her inner turmoil to herself, though she cannot help but feel the weight of her emotions. As the conversation shifts, Helen praises Zaleekhah’s friend, Nen, sharing how they both admire the complexities of family relationships. This mention of Nen leads to a slight diversion in their dialogue, allowing Zaleekhah to momentarily step away from the heavy topic of the transplant.

When the conversation ends, Zaleekhah leaves the café feeling an overwhelming mix of emotions. She feels a sense of guilt for her own personal struggles, especially when compared to the severity of Helen’s situation. This introspection leads to a pivotal moment of self-realization, where Zaleekhah acknowledges that she needs to make

changes in her life. Fueled by this need for personal transformation, she decides to visit a tattoo shop in search of Nen, whom she later learns is at the British Museum. Upon finding Nen sketching a lamassu—an ancient Assyrian creature—Zaleekhah admires her friend's artistic expression. Nen's work stands in sharp contrast to the more formal, stiff attire worn by the museum staff, highlighting her unique, creative flair. Their conversation shifts towards the therapeutic power of ancient artifacts, discussing how these relics provide comfort, offering a connection to the past that can be deeply healing. Nen, sharing her own experiences, reveals how her fascination with Ancient Mesopotamia helped her cope with her tumultuous mental health journey, finding solace in the stories and symbols of the past.

As their conversation deepens, Nen uses her past struggles with alcohol as a metaphor for the way many people seek unhealthy refuges from their emotional pain. This metaphor resonates with Zaleekhah, who, like Nen, has often turned to coping mechanisms that may not always be the healthiest. The discussion moves into a broader exploration of life's complexities, touching on themes of history, power, and the personal struggles that define each individual's journey. For the first time in a long while, Zaleekhah feels truly understood, and this shared connection with Nen provides her with a sense of emotional release. Inspired by their meaningful exchange, Zaleekhah decides to get a tattoo, something symbolic that marks a new beginning for her. The tattoo, a simple yet profound design of water, represents her desire for healing and growth. It serves as a constant reminder of her transformation and the powerful bond she shares with Nen. This moment signals a turning point for Zaleekhah, one where she begins to embrace the changes she needs to make in her life, marking the start of her journey toward personal healing and a deeper understanding of herself.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1857–8

Arthur begins his journey at the British Museum in 1857–58, stepping into a new chapter of his life with both excitement and apprehension. He is introduced to the Keeper of Oriental Antiquities and his assistant, Edward, who represents everything Arthur feels he lacks—refinement, education, and a well-to-do background. Edward’s poised demeanor and physical fitness, along with his well-tailored clothes, stand in stark contrast to Arthur’s self-perceived shortcomings. Arthur's lack of formal education and his unkempt appearance make him feel like an outsider, but despite this, he is determined to make a name for himself in this prestigious institution.

At the museum, Arthur faces an enormous task that would overwhelm anyone: the examination and organization of over thirty-five thousand Mesopotamian clay tablets, many of which are damaged or fragmented. Despite doubts about his ability to manage such a monumental responsibility, Arthur continues to tackle the job each day, finding a sense of purpose and order amidst the chaos. His fascination with the ancient artifacts grows, and as he pieces together the fragments, each discovery feels like a personal victory, drawing him deeper into the ancient world and its mysteries. This task becomes more than just labor for Arthur—it evolves into a deeply personal mission to uncover the stories of the people who lived thousands of years ago.

As Arthur delves further into the tablets, he begins to identify with the people who wrote them. He starts imagining their lives, their struggles, and their emotions, realizing that the inscriptions on the clay tablets are not merely transactional records but also expressions of human experience. Arthur finds humor, frustration, and even profound insight within the ancient scribblings. With each tablet he deciphers, Arthur feels a closer connection to the past, understanding that the emotions and experiences of ancient civilizations are strikingly similar to his own, despite the vast passage of time.

In parallel with his personal growth, the British Museum undergoes a transformation. What once appeared as a chaotic collection of relics is gradually becoming a more structured and academically focused institution. This shift mirrors Arthur’s own journey, as he finds his place within this newly evolving field of Mesopotamian studies. Unlike other fields of academia, Arthur discovers that there is no rigid hierarchy in his field, allowing for a rare opportunity to contribute freely and grow in his knowledge and understanding without the constraints that might stifle creativity in other disciplines.

While his professional life begins to stabilize, Arthur’s personal life remains turbulent. As he deals with eviction notices and overcrowded living conditions, he becomes more disheveled, both physically and emotionally. His family’s struggles weigh heavily on him, with his father’s ongoing issues with alcohol and his mother’s declining health creating an overwhelming sense of despair. Arthur feels as though he is trapped between his aspirations and the realities of his personal life, but he remains committed to his work at the museum, hoping that it will lead him to a brighter future.

In the midst of these personal challenges, Arthur makes a remarkable discovery that reignites his passion for his work. He uncovers a tablet that hints at the existence of ancient poetry, a finding that adds a layer of beauty and significance to the everyday records he has been studying. This discovery not only sparks his excitement but also secures him a permanent position at the museum, offering him a sense of stability and purpose. Arthur’s newfound sense of dedication to preserving the stories of the past becomes the cornerstone of his professional life, and through his efforts, he hopes to leave a lasting legacy, much like the River Thames itself, which flows through history, unbroken and constant. In his work, Arthur finds not just a career but a mission to preserve the forgotten voices of the ancient world.

H2O: NARIN, ZALEEKHAH, ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 2018

H2O plays a significant role in the shifting landscapes of human history, as illustrated by the looming flood of the Tigris River in 2018. The river's floodgates are set to open, bringing with it the inundation of the once-dry, barren land that is about to be submerged. The rising water level will eventually cover Castrum Kefa, an ancient city with a rich history, causing it to be lost beneath the swelling reservoir. Zaleekhah, one of the central figures in the story, reflects on the sorrowful fate of the city. She contemplates how this tragedy symbolizes the constant ebb and flow of time, where civilizations rise and fall with the water. As the flood approaches, the impending loss feels symbolic of the broader forces of nature that shape human history, often without mercy or regard for what has come before.

As Zaleekhah and her companion Nen discuss the changes happening around them, the conversation turns towards environmental issues, such as the destruction of habitats for soft-shelled turtles. Zaleekhah, deeply connected to the natural world, shares her concerns about how the changing landscape impacts not just the animals, but people as well. She reflects on her strained relationship with her family, particularly her uncle and aunt, after making the difficult decision to support her friend Helen's need for an organ donation. Despite the emotional toll and the estrangement she now faces from her relatives, Zaleekhah remains committed to finding another donor for Helen, underscoring her dedication to helping those she loves. This inner conflict emphasizes the complex emotions Zaleekhah grapples with, balancing her responsibility to others with the personal sacrifices she must make.

The journey continues as Zaleekhah and Nen visit an old cemetery, where they find a young girl named Narin mourning her ancestors. Narin, who was tragically bought from

a dealer with ties to ISIS for $3,200, represents the deep scars left on the Yazidi people due to the violence and displacement they've endured. As Zaleekhah and Nen watch from a distance, they feel a mix of compassion and helplessness, knowing that Narin's pain is not just rooted in loss but also in the cultural genocide her people have suffered. Narin is left with the absence of her beloved Grandma Besma, and she struggles with uncertainty about her father's fate. Still, there's a flicker of hope within her as she looks forward to a potential reunion with her relatives in Germany, though she is unaware of the complications that lie ahead. The emotional weight of this scene is palpable, underscoring the difficulty of recovery and the challenge of healing from such profound trauma.

As the trio approaches Narin, a faint trust is sparked within her when she notices Zaleekhah's wrist tattoo, which resembles one her grandmother used to wear. This subtle connection marks a small but significant moment in the story, hinting at the possibility of a shared understanding between these two women from different walks of life. The three women then head back to their hotel, where they encounter a strange tombstone inscription that further deepens the sense of mystery and intrigue that surrounds their journey. This unexpected discovery serves as a reminder that history, even in its final moments, often leaves behind clues and symbols that challenge us to consider what has been lost and what may still remain.

The narrative concludes with a reflective meditation on the impermanence of time and cultural identity. As the waters of the Tigris prepare to flood Mesopotamia, tomorrow will witness the submersion of ancient lands and civilizations. Yet, even in the face of such loss, there is an undercurrent of hope—suggesting that rebirth may arise from destruction. The symbolism of the snowflake falling on an innocent child in London, representing an eternal connection to the rivers that flow through history, reinforces this theme of continuity. It suggests that, despite the cycles of loss and regeneration, human connections and memories endure, carried through time by the very waters that shape the world.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah walks along the Chelsea Embankment in 2018, her feet carrying her through a drizzly London morning. Clutched in her hands is a damp cardboard box containing a mishmash of items: books, a china teapot, mismatched cups, clothes, and a Tiffany-style lamp. The rain, soft and steady, doesn't seem to bother her as she walks in the cool air, her chestnut curls and deep brown eyes gleaming with a connection to her ancestors. As she moves past the elegant flats now overlooking the River Thames, she recalls the slum that once occupied this space, now turned into a luxurious area with commanding views. Though the property might seem like a dream for most, she finds the Thames unremarkable, far less interesting than the houseboats moored nearby.

The houseboats on Cheyne Pier, each uniquely named, serve as Zaleekhah's new home. Moving to one of these boats feels surreal to her, as if it's a fresh chapter in her life, despite the baggage she carries. Known as Dr. Z. Clarke in her professional capacity, Zaleekhah has always had a difficult relationship with her name. Over the years, her name has been mispronounced or misrepresented countless times, adding to her sense of estrangement. Recently, a colleague dismissed her full name with a casual nickname, a slight that stings deeper than she allows others to know.

Her name, given to her by her mother, connects her to the complex history of Zuleikha, a woman often portrayed negatively, representing the struggles of desire, punishment, and emotional complexity. Unlike her namesake, Zaleekhah strives for simplicity, rejecting vanity and choosing comfort over outward beauty. The name symbolizes both the rich heritage of her family and the burdens placed upon her by expectations that sometimes feel too heavy to bear. Her mother's choice to pass down this name, rooted in their Mesopotamian heritage, connects her to her ancestors, while her father's quiet acceptance of it speaks to his more passive relationship with the

past and their shared culture.

As Zaleekhah approaches her new home on the boat, her thoughts are clouded by recent emotional upheaval. Her recent breakup with her husband, combined with the haunting remark he made about her future as a mother, amplifies the sense of failure she feels. Living alone on the houseboat is both liberating and lonely, as it serves as a constant reminder of her disconnection from both her family and herself. Her struggles reflect the ongoing immigrant experience passed down through generations, constantly battling the desire to belong while feeling alienated from everything around her. This complex web of emotions, compounded by her need for connection, makes her feel isolated despite her best efforts to move forward.

Upon stepping inside her new home, Zaleekhah surveys the sparse furnishings and weathered walls. The conditions of her boat mirror the state of her life — old, neglected, but still with the potential for renewal. Despite the simplicity of the space, there’s an undeniable pull of spontaneity in her choice, an attempt at breaking free from the routines that have bound her. However, as she sits in her solitude, dark thoughts creep in, and she begins to reflect on the internal battles she’s been fighting. The metaphor of water, a powerful force that both nourishes and erodes, becomes central in her contemplation of life, as she imagines her own struggles flowing in the Thames outside. The weight of her unresolved emotions presses heavily on her chest, and for the first time in years, she entertains the thought of ending it all. As the rain continues to fall, Zaleekhah plans a quiet departure from life in a month, hoping to reclaim some sense of peace, but fearing she will never reconnect with the familial belonging she desperately craves.

Drenched in inner turmoil and weighed down by societal expectations, Zaleekhah exists in a constant state of flux. Her identity, formed by a delicate balance between cultural legacy and personal ambition, seems to hang in the balance as she navigates through emotional pain and disillusionment. At this critical juncture, she faces a crossroads: the urge to retreat into herself and let go of the burdens she carries, or to confront her fears and continue searching for purpose. This conflict within Zaleekhah

speaks to the universal struggle of reconciling one’s past with the demands of the present and the future. As she lies awake at night, the sound of the river outside her boat serves as both a comfort and a reminder of the depths of her struggle.

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 parfumier. 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.

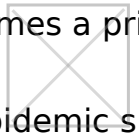
O: ARTHUR: By the River Thames, 1854

Arthur walks through the heart of London in the oppressive heat of August 1854, the air thick with the putrid scent of decay. Factories churn out smoke, mixing with the stench of overflowing cesspools and horse-drawn carriages leaving trails of waste along the cobbled streets. The once-mighty River Thames, now a lifeless ribbon of filth, sluggishly carries the city’s refuse, serving as both a source of drinking water and a breeding ground for disease. Arthur, conscious of the risks, covers his mouth and nose with a damp cloth as he makes his way from his modest printing job back home. He moves quickly, stepping over puddles of unidentifiable sludge, desperate to escape the suffocating air. Though he has grown accustomed to the filth, something about this summer feels worse than previous years—more deaths, more sickness, and a growing sense of unease that weighs upon him.

His home, a small, dimly lit basement flat, offers little relief from the stifling heat. Despite its cramped quarters, Arthur takes pride in keeping it as clean as possible, ensuring the windows are open when the air permits. That morning, before heading to work, he had stopped at a public water pump to fill a pail, trusting it to provide fresh water for his family. With wages barely enough to cover food, he purchases a small gift for his mother—a pair of gloves—as a token of appreciation for her sacrifices. Though he longs to buy sweets for his younger brothers, he resists, reminding himself that money must be stretched carefully. A rare indulgence comes in the form of *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, a book that brings him solace in a world where beauty is often drowned out by hardship. As he returns home, he allows himself a brief moment of satisfaction, believing he has done well for the day.

However, his peace is shattered the following morning when one of his younger brothers suddenly falls ill. It begins with stomach pain and nausea but quickly escalates into relentless vomiting and diarrhea. Arthur watches helplessly as his

mother attempts to comfort the boy, though her worry is evident in the tremble of her hands. Panic creeps into Arthur’s mind as the dreaded word begins circulating among neighbors—cholera. He recalls the water he had so carefully fetched and feels a terrible realization settle over him. Could he have unknowingly poisoned his own family? The thought is unbearable, and as more members of the household begin showing symptoms, he is overwhelmed with guilt. Their small flat, already suffocating in the heat, becomes a prison of sickness and despair.



As the cholera epidemic spreads, the city’s response remains misguided, with authorities convinced that the disease is caused by foul air rather than contaminated water. Streets are doused with disinfectants, and residents are advised to avoid bad smells, yet the death toll continues to climb. Arthur, now consumed with fear, learns of a physician named Dr. John Snow, who proposes a radical theory—that cholera is waterborne, spreading through the very pumps that people rely on for survival. Despite evidence linking the outbreak to the Broad Street pump, his warnings are largely ignored by officials who cling stubbornly to outdated medical beliefs. Meanwhile, more lives are lost, and Arthur’s sense of helplessness deepens.

The realization that the very substance meant to sustain life is the source of death is both horrifying and cruel. As Arthur watches his brother's condition deteriorate, he wrestles with the knowledge that he may have played a role in their suffering, despite acting with the best intentions. The city around him, teetering on the brink of crisis, offers no answers—only the unrelenting march of disease. London, with its grandeur and filth intertwined, continues its routine as bodies pile up, and the river carries its secrets. For Arthur, the weight of this tragedy will never fully leave him, a permanent mark of the fragile and perilous nature of survival in a city that refuses to acknowledge its own decay.

Note to the Reader

Note to the Reader begins with a deeply personal reflection by the author on their maternal grandmother, who, although unaware of Thales of Miletus and his theories, intuitively grasped the essential nature of water as a fundamental force of life. Through the lens of literature, the author’s understanding of water deepens, recognizing it not just as the source of life but also as a symbol of the transformation of landscapes throughout history. This theme of water’s importance is expanded through the lens of the ancient Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Mesopotamia, where once-thriving waters now recede, exposing ancient cities and monuments. The drying of these rivers serves as a stark reminder of the climate crises affecting many nations, highlighting the struggles of civilizations in times of environmental depletion. The metaphor of water's ebb and flow becomes not just an observation of the physical world but also a broader commentary on the shifting tides of history and human survival.

The narrative transitions to the figure of King Arthur of the Sewers and Slums, a fictionalized character inspired by the real George Smith, a pioneering Assyriologist who, through self-study, unlocked the secrets of cuneiform and uncovered the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. This homage to Smith and other scholars is underscored by the author’s extensive research, weaving together references to significant works such as *The Buried Book* by David Damrosch and *The Ark before Noah* by Irving Finkel. These scholarly contributions not only illuminate the literal and metaphorical importance of water in human history but also trace how water has been both revered and feared throughout various cultures. Smith’s work, in particular, serves as a powerful example of how one individual’s quest for knowledge can open a floodgate of understanding that transcends time and place, reshaping how we interpret the ancient world and its complex relationship with water.

As the chapter progresses, the author weaves in various historical events and figures, shedding light on the tragic and often violent history of the Yazidi people. The Yazidis, a minority group with a rich cultural heritage, have faced centuries of persecution, including genocide, which is woven into the larger narrative of water's role in the human experience. The author emphasizes the complexity of their relationship with the Yazidis, illustrating how their struggle for survival and recognition is not merely a historical footnote but a poignant reminder of ongoing human rights abuses in the world. This larger conversation about human suffering and resilience is framed within the context of water’s transformative power—how it sustains and nurtures, yet how it can also become a symbol of destruction when misused or withheld. By linking the struggles of marginalized communities to the flow of water, the author underscores the interconnections between environmental and cultural narratives, showing how both are essential to understanding humanity’s shared history.

The chapter closes with the author’s heartfelt gratitude to the scholars, survivors, and others whose lives and work inform the narrative. Their resilience, stories, and experiences are woven into the tapestry of history, creating a deep connection that transcends generations. This is echoed in the final imagery of Thales observing water, a symbol of the continuity of life across time. The author’s reflection on the simplicity of a single droplet of water ties together the book’s themes of interconnectedness and the importance of understanding our shared history. This universal element, water, connects all humans, past and present, highlighting the timeless nature of our collective experiences. Through this reflection, the author calls the reader to recognize the weight of cultural narratives and their power to shape the world, reminding us all of the flow of time and the enduring force that binds us together.

O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur finds himself deeply conflicted and introspective during a pivotal moment in 1872 by the River Tigris. Accompanied by Leila, a member of the Yazidi community, he explores his excavation site, where she shares insights into Yazidi spiritual beliefs, including the concept of "axiretê," which refers to the next world. Leila emphasizes the idea that every Yazidi should have a spiritual sibling, someone with whom they share a profound connection in the afterlife. She humorously speaks about her "heavenly sister," someone who, according to her beliefs, will transform into water after death, meeting her again in the afterlife. While Leila speaks with playful warmth, Arthur becomes uneasy. The mention of death evokes discomfort in him, compounded by the earlier unsettling divination Leila shared. Despite his strong desire to comfort her, Arthur is held back by the rigid Yazidi customs, which prevent him from offering the solace he wants to provide.

As the conversation continues, Arthur’s own grief surfaces, allowing him to open up in a way he had not expected. He shares the painful memory of his younger brother's tragic death from contaminated water, a loss that has haunted him for many years. This event, one that Arthur feels guilty about, has shaped his worldview, and he reveals his deep regret over not being able to save his brother. Leila, listening with empathy and understanding, helps Arthur confront the emotional weight he has carried for so long. The depth of their connection grows as they exchange their personal losses. However, their conversation is interrupted when Arthur receives an urgent summons from the Pasha of Mosul. This sudden shift forces Arthur to leave his reflective moment behind and step into a more confrontational reality, where his connection with the Yazidis becomes a point of contention. At the Pasha’s residence, Arthur is subjected to intense scrutiny and derision for his association with the Yazidis, who are derogatorily labeled as "heathens" and "devil-worshippers." Despite the harsh

treatment, Arthur stands firm in his defense of the Yazidi people, asserting his desire to engage with their culture and language, even though it places him at odds with the authority figures around him.

The tension in the Pasha’s residence reaches a boiling point when the high qadi arrives, bringing with him an even more hostile attitude toward the Yazidi community. The qadi dismisses the Yazidis as inferior, with a cold remark that lying to them is permissible, signaling a profound disrespect for their humanity. Arthur’s concern for the Yazidis intensifies, as he realizes the threat to their safety is growing with each passing moment. His mind races, torn between his duty as an archaeologist and his moral obligation to protect the people he has come to admire. After leaving the Pasha’s residence, Arthur returns to the Yazidi village, contemplating whether to share the troubling details of his encounter with the sheikh’s family. Despite the uncertainty surrounding the situation, Arthur finds solace in the work he’s doing, especially when he uncovers a crucial fragment of the Flood Tablet that ignites his passion for further research. While the academic discovery provides a moment of relief, Arthur’s thoughts are consumed by Leila, and he is forced to confront the growing feelings he has for her. This emotional realization forces Arthur to navigate the complexities of their connection, especially considering their cultural differences and the fragile nature of their bond. The chapter culminates in a poignant moment when, in a dreamlike and unexpected gesture, Leila kisses Arthur on the cheek. This tender action leaves Arthur feeling a mix of elation and uncertainty, as he contemplates what their connection truly means and what lies ahead in the uncertain future of their relationship.

H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah walks along Great Russell Street, lost in thought as the hum of rush hour traffic surrounds her. She had just visited a gallery that was supported by her family, the Maleks, with the hope of seeing her cousin Helen, but to her disappointment, Helen was nowhere to be found. As she walks back towards her home, memories from her neighbors about the owner of a nearby houseboat come to mind. Unknowingly, Zaleekhah ends up walking in the direction of a tattoo parlour called "The Forgotten Goddess," intrigued by the idea of what might await her there.

Upon entering the tattoo parlour, Zaleekhah is immediately struck by the clean, sophisticated interior. The shop features a stylish emerald sofa and warm, inviting decorations that make the space feel intimate and comfortable. The shop’s owner, a tall and attractive man, greets her with a smile and assumes she is a potential tattoo client. Zaleekhah identifies herself as the houseboat tenant, and it’s soon revealed that the actual owner, Nen, is downstairs, waiting to meet her.

When Nen appears, the two exchange a warm greeting, and Nen quickly opens up about her family, sharing that she has five younger brothers. This detail sparks a conversation about family dynamics, which makes Zaleekhah reflect on her own upbringing. Unlike Nen’s lively household, Zaleekhah’s childhood had been marked by solitude, an experience that gives her a deeper appreciation for Nen’s close family ties. This exchange fosters a mutual understanding between the two, as both women begin to connect over their contrasting experiences.

As their conversation continues, Zaleekhah casually mentions the leaky kitchen sink in her houseboat, prompting Nen to immediately offer her help. Nen’s willingness to assist with such a seemingly minor issue speaks volumes about her generosity, further drawing Zaleekhah to her. Nen then prepares a special coffee for them, using dried

lavender as a key ingredient. Zaleekhah savors the soothing flavor, and the two delve into a conversation about the history and cultural significance of cuneiform tattoos, which are crafted with symbols from an ancient script.

Throughout the evening, Nen shares her passion for mudlarking on the Thames, describing how she has uncovered fascinating artifacts from history. Zaleekhah listens intently, captivated by the stories of hidden treasures and the connection Nen feels to the past. Their conversation becomes a celebration of the intersection of history, culture, and personal experiences, something that resonates deeply with Zaleekhah, who has always been drawn to the richness of the past. These tales help Zaleekhah momentarily escape the turmoil of her mind, finding comfort in the exploration of the unknown.

As Zaleekhah prepares to leave, Nen expresses genuine surprise at Zaleekhah’s decision to rent a houseboat. She remarks that life on the water may offer unforeseen joys and experiences, and Zaleekhah is left to ponder this suggestion. The thought of such a lifestyle stirs memories of a childhood book, which portrayed a life filled with exploration and possibility. The idea of embracing something so different from her current life excites her, though she remains uncertain of what it would truly mean.

When she exits the tattoo shop, Nen hands her a small slab of dough, its surface marked with Zaleekhah's name in cuneiform. This simple gesture, though small, represents the start of something new and meaningful in Zaleekhah’s life. The dough slab serves as a symbol of a connection that has begun to form, one that carries with it the potential for personal growth, healing, and new opportunities. As she steps out into the cool evening air, the houseboat, once a place of isolation, now feels like a potential home for new beginnings. The night ahead, filled with the sounds of the river and the soft rustling of the trees, feels full of promise, as Zaleekhah takes the first step toward embracing the changes that may come her way.

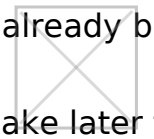
O: ARTHUR: By the River Tigris, 1872

Arthur finds himself grappling with a deep sense of cultural dissonance in the chapter "By the River Tigris, 1872," as he navigates his time among the Yazidis during their annual festival, “Çarşema Sor,” or 'Red Wednesday.' The festival marks the arrival of spring, a celebration of renewal and hope that contrasts sharply with Arthur’s personal and external struggles. The Yazidi villagers of Zêrav spend their time painting eggs, cleaning homes, and making candles from sheep fat, all integral to their customs and traditions. For Arthur, an Englishman unfamiliar with these practices, his own cultural perspective feels distant. The idea of celebrating a new year during the dead of winter, a time when nature seems to be in hibernation, is foreign to him, and the curious children listen to his explanation with polite intrigue, unaware of the underlying differences between their lives and his.

As the festivities reach their peak on the seventh sunset, Arthur receives a rare honor: an invitation to the sheikh’s house, a gesture that underscores his outsider status. The sheikh’s home is filled with the scent of rosemary and sage, symbolic of warmth and healing, as the villagers prepare an array of food. During this gathering, Arthur’s gaze falls upon Leila, a faqra, who begins performing a traditional divination ritual with her daf, a hand drum. As the evening continues, Leila falls into a deep trance, her haunting melody transcending time and space, capturing the attention of all who listen. Yet, as her voice intensifies, so does the tone of the prophecy she delivers, one filled with chilling forewarnings of death and destruction, predicting a massacre that will befall the Yazidis.

Leila’s trance becomes more alarming as she calls out "Firman," a word that not only signifies permission but eerily suggests a license for violence against the Yazidi people. As the prophecy unfolds, the details become painfully specific, foretelling the destruction of sacred Yazidi sites and the imminent slaughter that will leave no

survivors unless they flee to the mountains for refuge. In that moment, the once festive atmosphere shifts into one of foreboding silence. The children, who had been gleefully playing, return to their activities, blissfully unaware of the grave words that have just been spoken. Arthur, however, is deeply shaken, the weight of what he has witnessed overwhelming him as he struggles to comprehend the full depth of the prophecy. His mind races as the night grows darker, burdened with the fear that the Yazidis' fate has already been sealed by forces beyond their control.



As Arthur lies awake later that night, the remnants of ancient Nineveh continue to haunt his thoughts. The city, rich with history and marked by countless tragedies, serves as a painful reminder of the cycle of violence that has plagued this region for centuries. Arthur's reflections turn inward, and he wonders whether the Yazidis, much like the ruins of Nineveh, are destined to be lost to time. The prophecy, though spoken in the present, carries the weight of history and seems to echo the suffering of those who came before. As he contemplates the inevitability of the destruction, Arthur is forced to grapple with his own sense of helplessness. He begins to question whether it would be better to remain ignorant, untouched by the horrors he now understands. As the chapter closes, the sense of impending change grows stronger, underscored by the natural world around him, which seems to reflect the looming catastrophe. The haunting presence of nature, the village, and the prophecy converge, signaling a profound shift in Arthur's understanding of both his own role and the fate of the Yazidis.

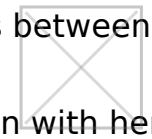
H: ZALEEKHAH: By the River Thames, 2018

Zaleekhah sits quietly in a black cab arranged by Uncle Malek, gazing at the blur of London’s cityscape as it rushes past her window. She views the city not just as a monumental collection of historical landmarks, but as a living, breathing entity, shaped over time by its rivers—some known, some buried. The River Fleet, once a bustling artery of commerce, now lies hidden under layers of concrete, a silent testament to the city’s transformation and a metaphor for forgotten histories. Likewise, the River Effra remains largely ignored beneath the urban sprawl, while the Tyburn River, once teeming with salmon, is now lost under the city’s infrastructure. Even the Westbourne flows unnoticed under Sloane Square Tube station, and these rivers, though unseen, hold within them the whispers of time and the echoes of stories long gone, just as Zaleekhah reflects on her own internal narratives, buried beneath the weight of life’s demands.

When Zaleekhah arrives at the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology in Bermondsey, the sterile, bureaucratic office environment greets her. The workplace feels cold and impersonal, designed more for efficiency and collaboration than human connection. Yet, it is here that Zaleekhah finds herself, her name now etched on a door, marking her place in a professional world she has crafted, but one that feels disconnected from the woman she once was. As she sits in her new office, she grapples with the disillusionment of her crumbling marriage. Once, her husband had been her entire world, the center around which all her life revolved. But now, the relationship is a shadow of what it was, and the realization of its slow disintegration haunts her every thought.

The memory of Professor Berenberg, her late mentor, emerges unbidden. His theory of ‘aquatic memory’—the idea that water holds onto the memories of substances it comes in contact with—had once consumed her. Though ridiculed and dismissed by his

peers, his groundbreaking research had made a lasting impact on Zaleekhah, leaving her with a sense of unfinished business. After his untimely death, Zaleekhah secretly continued his work, exploring the validity of his controversial ideas. This pursuit, however, caused tension with her husband, who viewed her dedication to Berenberg's theories as a distraction from their already strained relationship. The discovery of her obsession led to a clash, bringing unresolved emotions to the surface, and highlighting the deep divides between her aspirations and her husband's expectations.



The confrontation with her husband reveals more than just disagreements over Berenberg's legacy—it exposes the deeper cracks in their marriage. Zaleekhah's unspoken feelings for Berenberg, complicated by her intellectual and emotional attachment to his work, become an insurmountable issue for her husband, who cannot accept such complexity in their relationship. After the painful argument, Zaleekhah decides to leave their home, seeking solace in the lab where she feels closest to Berenberg's spirit. Alone and surrounded by the remnants of their shared research, she is confronted by the realization of her inability to truly communicate with her husband. This moment of solitude forces her to face the emotional toll of her choices, and the weight of Berenberg's influence on her life becomes undeniable.

As she lies on the office sofa, preparing to sleep in the sanctuary of her workplace, Zaleekhah reflects on the rivers of time, their unseen presence a constant reminder of what has been lost and what continues to flow unceasingly. These rivers, like the currents of her own life, move silently but powerfully, shaping her path in ways both subtle and profound. Zaleekhah comes to understand her attraction to those driven by larger-than-life dreams, recognizing the cost such dedication brings—an unrelenting commitment that can blur the lines between personal sacrifice and self-actualization. Despite the sacrifices, she acknowledges that these ambitions, though often perilous, have the power to shape the future in ways she still longs to understand.

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Scholars and academic figures are also mentioned for their role in supporting the book’s intellectual foundation. David Damrosch, whose kindness and helpfulness were pivotal in enriching the research for the novel, is specifically mentioned for his invaluable assistance. Dr. Sebastien Rey is acknowledged for his expert knowledge in ancient history, which contributed significantly to the historical accuracy of the narrative. Francesca Stavrakopoulou and Dr. Moudhy Al-Rashid are thanked for their scholarly contributions and their willingness to engage with the author’s inquiries. Their responses helped bring depth and authenticity to the author’s understanding of the ancient world. The early feedback from Mary Beard is mentioned as a formative moment, providing the author with crucial perspectives on the manuscript. Richard Ovenden is also recognized for his encouragement during the novel’s inception, offering moral support at a critical stage. The acknowledgments section closes with heartfelt thanks to Leyla Ferman and Mona Kizilhan, both of whom embody the strength and resilience that have inspired the author throughout the writing process. Finally, the author gives special thanks to their family—particularly their mother and siblings—whose constant love and emotional support provided the foundation for the entire creative endeavor. The section underscores the essential truth that writing is not just an individual pursuit but one that is supported by a network of people who offer intellectual, emotional, and practical help. It is a reminder that creating something meaningful involves many contributors, whose collective efforts shape the final work. Through these acknowledgments, the author reflects on how intertwined personal and professional support is in the artistic process. The conclusion of the acknowledgments pays tribute to the interconnectedness of all these people, with the metaphor of rivers—flowing and transformative—serving as a powerful representation of the many forces that come together to shape a piece of art. The author’s deep gratitude for these contributions is reflected in the heartfelt nature of these thanks,

reminding readers of the collaborative nature of creation.

Epigraph

Epigraph begins with the timeless wisdom of Ovid, focusing on the theme of persistence and the transformative power of consistent effort. Ovid uses the image of water slowly wearing away stone, an enduring metaphor for how gradual, steady progress can achieve remarkable results over time. The concept of persistence is central here—suggesting that life’s challenges can often be surmounted not through sudden, forceful actions but through the quiet, unyielding march of time and effort. This wisdom reminds the reader that even the smallest, most seemingly insignificant actions, when done consistently, can lead to monumental change, both in the world and in one’s personal life. It encourages a long-term view, one where patience and resilience are seen as the true drivers of success. Over time, Ovid's metaphor invites individuals to appreciate the quiet, repetitive movements of life, showing that true transformation often comes through consistent, seemingly unnoticed actions.

The chapter transitions to a verse from W. B. Yeats, urging readers to step into a world of magic and wonder, where nature’s beauty and the supernatural are intertwined. Yeats points out that while the world is full of sorrow and unnoticed pain, there is a certain childlike wonder to be found in embracing life’s mysteries. He draws attention to the magical quality of nature and invites the reader to experience it through the eyes of a child or faery, where even sorrow is softened by the beauty of the world around us. Yeats challenges us to embrace the wonder of life while acknowledging that pain and joy exist side by side. Through this lens, the reader is encouraged to discover the depths of their own emotions and the richness of the world’s beauty, reminding them that life is full of layers that can be uncovered with the right perspective. Yeats suggests that life is not merely a series of hardships but a tapestry woven from both joy and sorrow, encouraging us to embrace every element of this intricate human experience. By reconnecting with the magic of the world and viewing it with the

wonder of youth, the reader is prompted to find deeper meaning in both the mundane and the extraordinary aspects of life.

The chapter concludes with Hafiz, who presents an evocative metaphor of wells to describe the inner emotional landscapes of individuals. Hafiz's metaphor compares human emotions to wells, some of which are easily filled, representing the simpler joys of life, while others are deep, mysterious, and often unreachable, symbolizing the more profound emotional struggles. This metaphor invites the reader to reflect on their own emotional depth and the complexities of the human experience, acknowledging that not all emotions are easily accessed or understood. For some, happiness may flow freely, while for others, it remains elusive, hidden in the deepest recesses of their soul. This stark contrast highlights the diverse nature of human emotions, suggesting that our emotional capacity is not only shaped by our experiences but also by the inherent complexities of who we are as individuals. The reflection from Hafiz encourages us to embrace both our happiness and our struggles, recognizing them as parts of a larger, interconnected emotional experience. The poet's words push us to face the depth of our emotions and to honor the various layers of our emotional selves, as each individual's well holds its own unique story. Through Hafiz's teachings, readers are reminded that every human being is a complex being, constantly navigating the balance between light and dark, joy and sorrow.

These three reflections—Ovid, Yeats, and Hafiz—come together to create a powerful tapestry that explores the nature of human persistence, the complexity of emotions, and the delicate balance between joy and sorrow. The reader is invited to reflect deeply on the wells within themselves, the persistence required to overcome life's challenges, and the magic of seeing the world through a lens of wonder. Ultimately, these poetic insights encourage a holistic view of human existence, one that encompasses resilience, emotional depth, and the pursuit of understanding in a world full of both beauty and hardship. The chapter reminds us that life's journey is shaped not just by the paths we take but by the ways in which we connect with both the world and ourselves. It teaches us that while life may sometimes seem unbearable, it is through our persistence, our ability to embrace both sorrow and joy, and our

willingness to find beauty in the ordinary, that we can truly grow. The message is clear: human existence is a balancing act, one where the light and dark exist side by side, and both are equally necessary for our evolution.

Dedication

Dedication to understanding the intricate relationship between women and fiction marks the opening of this insightful chapter. The writer, when approached to comment on the topic, refuses to offer a standard or expected response. Instead, they find solace by the riverbank, taking time to reflect on the meaning of these words, allowing contemplation to take precedence over a hurried response. This thoughtful approach to the question of women and fiction introduces readers to the complex relationship between women and literature, preparing them for a deeper dive into the roles women have historically played in shaping stories, and how they continue to influence the literary world today.

The riverside setting where this reflection takes place is rich with symbolism. Nature, in its tranquil and unhurried flow, becomes an apt metaphor for the depth and thoughtfulness needed when approaching such an important and multifaceted topic. The river’s calm yet determined movement mirrors the unspoken persistence of women throughout history, whose voices have often been silenced, yet who continue to endure and evolve within the confines of societal expectations. The writer’s time alone by the water invites readers to join in the introspection and to consider how the representation of women in literature has been shaped by external forces, and how these portrayals often mirror the struggles faced by women in real life.

As the writer reflects, the chapter foreshadows a discussion of the different roles women have occupied throughout literary history. More than just being the objects of stories, women have also been the architects of narratives, shaping the course of literature with their voices and ideas. This thought-provoking shift in perspective invites readers to think not only about the roles women play in fiction but also about the challenges they face in creating fiction. Historically, women have been marginalized in the literary world, often having to fight for recognition and respect.

The chapter promises to unpack the way women's contributions have reshaped the literary canon, pushing past gendered boundaries to assert their rightful place in the storytelling tradition.

This initial reflection serves as a profound invitation to the reader to engage in a larger conversation about the societal expectations placed on women both within literature and in the real world. Through this exploration of gender, the chapter opens the door to understanding how literature has reflected and, at times, reinforced the marginalization of women. However, it also highlights the agency of female writers, whose resilience and creativity have allowed them to carve out spaces for their voices to be heard. The journey promised in the rest of the chapter will delve deeper into how female writers have used their work to challenge social norms, create new narratives, and question longstanding assumptions about gender and storytelling.

In a world where women’s stories have often been relegated to the background or minimized, this chapter urges readers to reconsider the value and power of women’s voices in literature. The writer’s pause by the river encourages us to look beyond surface-level narratives and instead examine the ways in which female authors have subtly and powerfully shaped the very stories we tell. By reflecting on the quiet yet enduring impact of these authors, readers are prompted to appreciate the deeper layers of storytelling and the transformative power of women’s contributions to the literary world. The chapter thus prepares the audience for a broader exploration of identity, representation, and the role of women in creating the stories that define us.

Ultimately, the chapter sets the stage for an exploration of the gendered dynamics within literature, suggesting that the act of storytelling is both a personal and a collective process. Through introspection, the writer invites the reader to reflect on how women have been portrayed in fiction, both as characters and as authors, and how their representation has changed over time. This chapter, which begins with a quiet moment of reflection by the river, opens the door to a deeper understanding of women’s place in literature and encourages a thoughtful dialogue about the intersection of gender, identity, and storytelling. The reflection on the complexities of

"women and fiction" sets the tone for an ongoing conversation about the importance of gender equality in literature and the power of narrative to shape society.

About the Author

About the Author, Elif Shafak stands as one of the most celebrated British-Turkish novelists in the world today. Renowned for her poignant and insightful exploration of themes such as identity, migration, history, and the intersections between personal lives and larger political movements, Shafak has earned widespread recognition for her storytelling mastery. With her work translated into fifty-six languages, she has built an international readership that spans across continents. Over the course of her career, she has authored nineteen books, twelve of which are novels, underscoring her ability to captivate readers with complex characters and intricate plots that explore the intricacies of human nature.

Shafak’s works often serve as a mirror to society, offering commentary on the human condition while blending elements of history, politics, and philosophy. Her novel *The Island of Missing Trees*, a profound narrative that delves into the relationship between personal and collective histories, earned her the distinction of being a top ten bestseller on the *Sunday Times* list. The novel also garnered critical acclaim, securing a spot as a finalist for prestigious awards such as the Costa Novel Award and the Women’s Prize for Fiction. Similarly, her earlier work *10 Minutes 38 Seconds in This Strange World* received a glowing response from critics and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and the RSL Ondaatje Prize, reinforcing her standing as one of the foremost literary voices of our time.

Elif Shafak’s writing reflects her unique blend of cultural influences and intellectual curiosity, having grown up navigating both Eastern and Western traditions. Her storytelling weaves rich cultural reflections into the narratives, creating a tapestry of multi-dimensional characters that resonate with readers worldwide. She is widely regarded not only for her literary prowess but also for her ability to break down the barriers between cultures, encouraging readers from diverse backgrounds to relate to

the universal themes she addresses. As an advocate for social change, particularly in terms of gender equality and free expression, Shafak uses her platform to speak out against oppression and amplify marginalized voices, positioning her work as a catalyst for change in contemporary literature.

As a public intellectual, Shafak frequently contributes to global conversations surrounding the role of literature in shaping society and creating meaningful change. She has delivered powerful talks at esteemed forums such as TED and the World Economic Forum, using her platform to champion democratic values, human rights, and the importance of empathy. Her writing and speeches tackle urgent issues like freedom of speech, the role of women in society, and the challenges faced by immigrants, particularly in Europe and the Middle East. Shafak’s exploration of these topics resonates deeply, providing a space for readers to reflect on their own cultural and societal frameworks while encouraging them to engage with the world around them in a thoughtful and compassionate way.

In addition to her literary career, Shafak is a passionate advocate for education, diversity, and inclusion, often using her academic background to enrich her work. Holding a Ph.D. in political science, she has taught at renowned institutions like Oxford University, where she has shared her expertise on literature, politics, and philosophy. Her academic and literary work often intersect, blending intellectual thought with creative expression, providing a unique perspective on the complexities of the human experience. Shafak’s role as an educator further solidifies her importance as a thought leader, as she continues to engage the minds of students and readers alike, fostering dialogue that transcends borders and disciplines.

Elif Shafak’s influence goes far beyond the pages of her books. She remains a leading figure in contemporary literature, shaping the cultural landscape with her contributions. Her novels do more than entertain—they push readers to question societal norms and confront difficult truths about human nature and the world we live in. With each new work, Shafak continues to inspire readers, reminding them of the power of storytelling to heal, connect, and bring about positive change.