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THE
MINISTRY
OF TIME

KALIANE BRADLEY



Sceptre

I

Perhaps he'll die this time.

He finds this doesn't worry him. Maybe because he's so cold he has a drunkard's grip on his mind. When thoughts come, they're translucent, free-swimming medusae. As the Arctic wind bites at his hands and feet, his thoughts slop against his skull. They'll be the last thing to freeze over.

He knows he is walking, though he can no longer feel it. The ice in front of him bounces and retreats, so he must be moving forward. He has a gun across his back, a bag across his front. Their weight is both meaningless and Sisyphean.

He is in a good mood. If his lips were not beyond sensation, he would whistle.

In the distance, he hears the boom of cannon fire. Three in a row, like a sneeze. The ship is signalling.

Chapter One

The interviewer said my name, which made my thoughts clip. I don't say my name, not even in my head. She'd said it correctly, which people generally don't.

'I'm Adela,' she said. She had an eye-patch and blonde hair the same colour and texture as hay. 'I'm the Vice-Secretary.'

'Of . . . ?'

'Have a seat.'

This was my sixth round of interviews. The job I was interviewing for was an internal posting. It had been marked 'Security Clearance Required' because it was gauche to use the Top Secret stamps on paperwork with salary bands. I'd never been cleared to this security level, hence why no one would tell me what the job was. As it paid almost triple my current salary, I was happy to taste ignorance. I'd had to produce squeaky-clean grades in first aid, Safeguarding Vulnerable People, and the Home Office's Life in the UK test to get this far. I knew that I would be working closely with a refugee or refugees of high interest status and particular needs, but I didn't know from whence they were fleeing. I'd assumed politically important defectors from Russia or China.

Adela, Vice-Secretary of God knows what, tucked a blonde strand behind her ear with an audible crunch.

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'Your mother was a refugee, wasn't she?' she said, which is a demented way to begin a job interview.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Cambodia,' she said.

'Yes, ma'am.'

I'd been asked this question a couple of times over the course of the interview process. Usually people asked it with an upward lilt, expecting me to correct them, because no one's from Cambodia. You don't *look* Cambodian, one early clown had said to me, then glowed like a pilot light because the interview was being recorded for staff monitoring and training purposes. He'd get a warning for that one. People say this to me a lot, and what they mean is: you look like one of the late-entering forms of white – Spanish maybe – and also like you're not dragging a genocide around, which is good because that sort of thing makes people uncomfortable.

There was no genocide-adjacent follow-up. (Any family still there *understanding moue*? Do you ever visit *sympathetic smile*? Beautiful country *darkening with tears* when I visited *visible on lower lid* they were so friendly . . .) Adela just nodded. I wondered if she'd go for the rare fourth option and pronounce the country dirty.

'She would never refer to herself as a refugee, or even a former refugee,' I added. 'It's been quite weird to hear people say that.'

'The people you will be working with are also unlikely to use the term. We prefer "expat". In answer to your question, I'm the Vice-Secretary of Expatriation.'

'And they are expats from . . . ?'

'History.'

'Sorry?'

Adela shrugged. 'We have time-travel,' she said, like

someone describing the coffee machine. 'Welcome to the Ministry.'

*

Anyone who has ever watched a film with time-travel, or read a book with time-travel, or dissociated on a delayed public transport vehicle considering the concept of time-travel, will know that the moment you start to think about the physics of it, you are in a crock of shit. How does it work? How *can* it work? I exist at the beginning and end of this account simultaneously, which is a kind of time-travel, and I'm here to tell you: don't worry about it. All you need to know is that in your near future, the British government developed the means to travel through time but had not yet experimented with doing it.

In order to avoid the chaos inherent in changing the course of history – if 'history' could be considered a cohesive and singular chronological narrative, another crock of shit – it was agreed that it would be necessary to extract people from historical warzones, natural disasters and epidemics. These expatriates to the twenty-first century would have died in their own timelines anyway. Removing them from the past ought not to impact the future.

No one had any idea what travelling through time might do to the human body. So the second reason that it was important to pick people who would have died in their own timelines is that they might well die in ours, like deep-sea fish brought up to the beach. Perhaps there were only so many epochs the human nervous system could stand. If they got the temporal equivalent of the bends and sluiced into grey-and-pink jelly in a Ministry laboratory, at least it wouldn't be, statistically speaking, murder.

Assuming that the 'expats' survived, that meant they would

be people, which is a complicating factor. When dealing with refugees, especially en masse, it's better not to think of them as people. It messes with the paperwork. Nevertheless, when the expats were considered from a human rights perspective, they fit the Home Office criteria for asylum seekers. It would be ethically sparse to assess nothing but the physiological effects of time-travel. To know whether they had truly adjusted to the future, the expats needed to live in it, monitored by a full-time companion, which was, it transpired, the job I'd successfully interviewed for. They called us bridges, I think because 'assistant' was below our pay grades.

Language has gone on a long walk from the nineteenth century. 'Sensible' used to mean 'sensitive'. 'Gay' used to mean 'jolly'. 'Lunatic asylum' and 'asylum seeker' both use the same basic meaning of 'asylum': an inviolable place of refuge and safety.

We were told we were bringing the expats to safety. We refused to see the blood and hair on the floor of the madhouse.

*

I was thrilled to get the job. I'd plateaued where I was, in the Languages department of the Ministry of Defence. I worked as a translator-consultant specialising in Southeast Asia, specifically Cambodia. I'd learned the languages I translated from at university. Despite my mother speaking Khmer to us at home, I hadn't retained it through my formative years. I came to my heritage as a foreigner.

I liked my Languages job well enough, but I'd wanted to become a field agent, and after failing the field exams twice I was at a bit of a loss for career trajectory. It wasn't what my parents had had in mind for me. When I was a very small child, my mother made her ambitions known. She wanted me to be

Prime Minister. As Prime Minister, I would 'do something' about British foreign policy and I would also take my parents to fancy governmental dinners. I would have a chauffeur. (My mother was a reluctant driver; the chauffeur was important.) Regrettably she also drilled the karmic repercussions of gossip and lying into me – the fourth Buddhist precept is unambiguous on this – and thus at the age of eight my political career was over before it began.

My younger sister was a far more skilled dissembler. I was dutiful with language and she was evasive, pugnacious with it. This is why I became a translator and she became a writer – or at least she tried to become a writer and became a copy-editor. I was paid considerably more than her and my parents understood what my job was, so I would say that karma worked in my favour. My sister would say something along the lines of: go fuck yourself. But I know she means it in a friendly way, probably.

*

Even on the very day we were to meet the expats, we were still arguing about the word 'expat'.

'If they're refugees,' said Simellia, one of the other bridges, 'then we should call them refugees. They're not moving to a summer cottage in Provence.'

'They will not necessarily think of *themselves* as refugees,' said Vice-Secretary Adela.

'Has anyone asked them what they think?'

'They see themselves as kidnap victims, mostly. Nineteen-sixteen thinks he's behind enemy lines. Sixteen-sixty-five thinks she's dead.'

'And they're being released to us *today*?'

'The Wellness team think their adjustment will be negatively

impacted if they're held on the wards any longer,' said Adela, dry as a filing system.

We – or rather, Simellia and Adela – were having this argument in one of the Ministry's interminable rooms: pebble-coloured with lights embedded in the ceiling, modular in a way that suggested opening a door would lead to another identical space, and then another, and then another. Rooms like this are designed to encourage bureaucracy.

This was supposed to be the final direct briefing of the five bridges: Simellia, Ralph, Ivan, Ed, and me. We'd all gone through a six-round interview process that put the metaphorical drill to our back teeth and bored. *Have you now, or ever, been convicted of or otherwise implicated in any activity that might undermine your security status?* Then nine months of preparation. The endless working groups and background checks. The construction of shell jobs in our old departments (Defence, Diplomatic, Home Office). Now we were here, in a room where the electricity was audible in the lightbulbs, about to make history.

'Don't you think,' said Simellia, 'that throwing them into the world when they think they're in the afterlife or on the Western Front might impede their adjustment? I ask both as a psychologist and a person with a normal level of empathy.'

Adela shrugged.

'It might. But this country has never accepted expatriates from history before. They might die of genetic mutations within the year.'

'Should we expect that?' I asked, alarmed.

'We don't know what to expect. That's why you have this job.'

*

The chamber the Ministry had prepared for the handover had an air of antique ceremony: wood panels, oil paintings, high ceiling. It had rather more *éclat* than the modular rooms. I think someone on the administration team with a sense of drama had arranged the move. In its style and in the particular way the windows flattened the sunlight, the room had probably remained unchanged since the nineteenth century. My handler, Quentin, was already there. He looked bilious, which is how excitement shows on some people.

Two agents led my expat through the door at the other end of the room before I'd adjusted to knowing he was coming.

He was pale, drawn. They'd clipped his hair so short that his curls were flattened. He turned his head to look around the room and I saw an imposing nose in profile, like a hothouse flower growing out of his face. It was strikingly attractive and strikingly large. He had a kind of resplendent excess of feature that made him look hyperreal.

He stood very straight and eyed my handler. Something about me had made him look and then look away.

I stepped forward and his eyeline shifted.

'Commander Gore?'

'Yes.'

'I'm your bridge.'

*

Graham Gore (Commander, RN; c.1809–c.1847) had been in the twenty-first century for five weeks, though, like the other expats, he'd only been lucid for a handful of those days. The extraction process had merited a fortnight of hospitalisation. Two of the original seven expats had died because of it, and only five remained. He'd been treated for pneumonia, for severe

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frostbite, for the early stages of scurvy, and two broken toes on which he had been blithely walking. Lacerations too, from a taser – he'd shot at two of the team members who'd come to expatriate him, and a third was forced to fire.

He'd attempted to flee the Ministry wards three times and had to be sedated. After he'd stopped fighting back, he'd gone through a ground-zero orientation with the psychologists and the Victorianists. For ease of adjustment, the expats were only given immediate, applicable knowledge. He came to me knowing the basics about the electric grid, the internal combustion engine and the plumbing system. He didn't know about the World or Cold Wars, the sexual liberation of the 1960s, or the war on terror. They had started by telling him about the dismantling of the British Empire and it hadn't gone down well.

The Ministry had arranged a car to take us to the house. He knew, theoretically, about cars, but it was his first time in one. He stared through the window, pallid with what I assumed was wonder.

'If you have any questions,' I said, 'please feel free to ask. I appreciate that this is a lot to take in.'

'I am delighted to discover that, even in the future, the English have not lost the art of ironic understatement,' he said, without looking at me.

He had a mole on his throat, close to his earlobe. The only existing daguerreotype of him showed him in 1840s fashion, with a high cravat. I stared at the mole.

'This is London?' he asked, finally.

'Yes.'

'How many people live here now?'

'Nearly nine million.'

He sat back and shut his eyes.

'That's far too large a number to be real,' he murmured. 'I am going to forget that you told me.'

*

The house that the Ministry had provided was a late Victorian redbrick, originally designed for local workers. Gore would have seen them built, if he'd lived into his eighties. As it was, he was thirty-seven years old, and had not experienced crinolines, *A Tale of Two Cities* or the enfranchisement of the working classes.

He got out of the car and looked up and down the street with the weariness of a man who has travelled across the continent and is yet to find his hotel. I hopped out after him. I tried to see what he could see. He would ask questions about the cars parked on the street, perhaps, or the streetlamps.

'Do you have keys?' he asked. 'Or do doors operate by magic passwords now?'

'No, I have—'

'Open sesame,' he said darkly to the letterbox.

Inside, I told him I would make tea. He said he would like, with my permission, to look at the house. I gave it. He made a swift tour. He trod firmly, as if he expected resistance. When he came back to the kitchen-diner and leant against the door-jamb, I seized up painfully. Stage-fright, but also the shock of his impossible presence catching up with me. The more he was there – and he kept on being there – the more I felt like I was elbowing my way out of my body. A narrative-altering thing was happening to me, that I was experiencing all over, and I was trying to view myself from the outside to make sense of it. I chased a tea bag to the rim of a mug.

'We are to – co-habit?' he said.