

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 begins with the narrator reflecting on an unexpected interview for a high-security position, one for which they feel completely unqualified. The interview is conducted by Adela, the Vice Secretary of "Expatriation," a position that immediately hints at the gravity and unusual nature of the role. Adela, with her eye patch and hay-like blond hair, abruptly inquires about the narrator's Cambodian heritage, bringing up their mother's experience as a refugee. This inquiry sparks a conversation about terminology, where Adela reveals her preference for the term "expats," despite the complex and traumatic history it implies for those displaced. The narrator shares that their mother, although a refugee, never identified as such, highlighting the deep complexities of identity and how it's shaped by societal expectations. This exchange sets the tone for the chapter, exploring the nuances of cultural identity and how language influences perception.

As the conversation progresses, it's revealed that the British government has successfully developed time travel technology. Their intention is to extract individuals from key historical moments, such as wars and epidemics, to preserve history and prevent any alteration of the past. The narrator is chosen to assist in this unorthodox project, tasked with serving as a "bridge" to help these time-traveling "expats" adjust to contemporary life. This role is not just about facilitating their transition but also ensuring their rights are maintained under constant surveillance. The project, while groundbreaking, raises profound ethical questions about the intersection of technology, history, and human rights. The narrator's excitement grows as they realize this job offers a chance to break free from their stagnant position as a translator specializing in Southeast Asia, even though they still grapple with the implications of the role.

The tension among the staff regarding terminology intensifies as the discussion turns to the project's true philosophical weight. The choice of words used to describe the displaced individuals speaks to broader debates about identity, history, and the human condition. The narrator reflects on their own childhood ambitions, which were shaped by their mother's hopes for them to find success. While the role in the "Expatriation" project may not be exactly what they envisioned as a child, it aligns with their personal heritage and the skills they've developed. As the narrative continues, it becomes clear that the job represents both a professional challenge and a personal journey, one that involves understanding and accepting the complexities of their cultural background. The relationship between language, identity, and the societal structures they navigate is explored in depth, revealing how words can define, reshape, or even obscure personal realities.

The narrative takes a turn when the meeting shifts to an urgent briefing about their first expat, Commander Graham Gore, a man pulled from the 19th century. His arrival is marked by a distinct presence, as he struggles to comprehend the contemporary world he has been thrust into after being extracted from a pivotal historical moment. Gore, like many expats in this unique project, is caught between two worlds—his own past and the future he is now forced to navigate. The narrator's role becomes even more complex as they must help him adjust to modern life, introducing him to contemporary customs, technology, and societal norms. This interaction sparks moments of humor and deep reflection, as both the narrator and Gore try to understand each other's vastly different perspectives. The juxtaposition of Gore's historical context and the narrator's modern worldview opens the door for a rich exploration of historical trauma, cultural adaptation, and the challenges that come with assimilating into a world that feels alien. As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that the connection between these two characters will drive the narrative forward, highlighting the complexities of identity, displacement, and the search for belonging.