**Rebecca F. Kuang, BABEL or The Necessity of Violence**

**An Arcane History of the Oxford Translators**’ **Revolution**

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*You might want to know before you start reading & translating:*

*The novel will take you to 1830s Oxford and Oxford University, particularly to the College of Translation housed in a bit mysterious tower called Babel. You’ll join a small group of newly admitted international students of translation – Robin, Letty, Ramy, and Victoire – right at the moment of their first visit to Babel, introduced to the realm of translation by an old Prof. Playfair.*



For a moment, no one spoke. Letty, Ramy, and Victoire all seemed as stunned as Robin felt. They’d been exposed to a great deal of information at once, and the effect was that Robin wasn’t sure the ground he stood on was real.

Professor Playfair chuckled. ‘I know. I had the same impression on my first day here as well. It’s rather like an induction into a hidden world, isn’t it? Like taking food in the seelie court. Once you know what happens in the tower, the mundane world doesn’t seem half as interesting.’

‘It’s dazzling, sir,’ said Letty. ‘Incredible.’

Professor Playfair winked at her. ‘It’s the most wonderful place on earth.’

He cleared his throat. ‘Now I’d like to tell a story. Forgive me for being dramatic, but I like to mark this occasion – your first day, after all, in what I believe is the most important research centre in the world. Would that be all right?’

He didn’t need their approval, but they nodded regardless.

‘Thank you. Now, we know this following story from Herodotus.’ He paced several steps before them, like a player marking out his position on the stage. ‘He tells us about an Egyptian king Psammetichus, who once formed a pact with Ionian sea raiders to defeat the eleven kings who had betrayed him. After he had overthrown his enemies, he gave large tracts of land to his Ionian allies. But Psammetichus wanted an even better guarantee that the Ionians would not turn on him as his former allies once had. He wanted to prevent wars based on misunderstandings. So he sent young Egyptian boys to live with the Ionians and learn Greek so that when they grew up, they could serve as interpreters between the two peoples.

‘Here at Babel, we take inspiration from Psammetichus.’ He peered around, and his sparkling gaze landed on each of them in turn as he spoke. ‘Translation, from time immemorial, has been the facilitator of peace. Translation makes possible communication, which in turn makes possible the kind of diplomacy, trade, and cooperation between foreign peoples that brings wealth and prosperity to all.

‘You’ve noticed by now, surely, that Babel alone among the Oxford faculties accepts students not of European origin. Nowhere else in this country will you find Hindus, Muslims, Africans, and Chinamen studying under the same roof. We accept you not despite, but *because* of your foreign backgrounds.’ Professor Playfair emphasized this last part as if it was a matter of great pride. ‘Because of your origins, you have the gift of languages those born in England cannot imitate. And you, like Psammetichus’s boys, are the tongues that will speak this vision of global harmony into being.’

He clasped his hands before him as if in prayer. ‘Anyhow. The postgrads make fun of me for that spiel every year. They think it’s trite. But I think the situation calls for such gravity, don’t you? After all, we’re here to make the unknown known, to make the other familiar. We’re here to make magic with words.’

This was, Robin thought, the kindest thing anyone had ever had to say about his being foreign-born. And though the story made his gut squirm – for he had read the relevant passage of Herodotus and recalled that the Egyptian boys were nevertheless slaves – he felt also a thrum of excitement at the thought that perhaps his unbelonging did not doom him to existing forever on the margins, that perhaps, instead, it made him special.