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We had almost made it into the complex when a roving security guard caught us. He took one look at us and raised an eyebrow in question, hand already on his stun gun. We tried the innocent and confused looks, which just made him shake his head before he asked, “Ma’am, sir, please explain what you are doing in a restricted area without a permit?”

Mark, the coward, froze.

I have been told that I have impressive problem-solving skills and am quick with my rationalizations – both in congratulatory and derogatory manners – and so I hoped that my synapses wouldn’t fail me now. I just had to think up a way to explain why two twenty-somethings were dressed in black down to our work boots and laden with backpacks full of equipment and emergency rations, me with a camera in hand and Mark with a handmade device that scanned for energy signatures in his. Should be easy enough, right?

“I’m a huge history nerd,” I admitted with practiced bashfulness. Seem all quiet and demure and people are far less likely to check you for illegal items. “I’ve heard so much about this site and its exhibition on the era and its culture and wanted to know more. I’ve read every text that I could get my hands on except for the ones that are locked down for some reason and Shueler’s report mentioned in passing that your museum still had actual existing relics from that time! I just had to try to see them!”

Okay, so maybe the wide-eyed blink at the end was over the top based on the way the guard looked like he was actively trying not to laugh. “You’re urban explorers looking for a hit of something old to prove you’ve been there when others haven’t. Urban menaces is more like it.”

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Mark finally found his voice enough to sigh dramatically and offered, “Five hundred miles, man. She dragged me out here to see something that might not even exist. I told her that, if you even still had anything, it would be dusty and old and not worth her time.”

That part was true. I had to talk Mark into making the attempt. He cited the security concerns – rightfully so, it seemed – and I cited the possibility of maybe finally finding what we had already searched seven other places for. Those were slightly more clandestine and uneventful, save for number six where he bribed a guard dog with a ration so I could get the door unlocked and get us out of there.

“Five hundred?” the guard asked doubtingly. He was an older man with a worn uniform and gray at the temples of his otherwise mostly balding head. We were probably the most excitement he had had for a while, and he was making the most of it.

I carefully checked my chrono and its attached reader and said, “Correction: five-hundred-thirty-six.”

The man nodded with mock seriousness as if the extra thirty-six miles made all the difference. “And what exactly do you two hope to get out of this little excursion?”

I held up my camera in offering. “Images only, sir!” I promised. It technically wasn’t even a lie as Mark’s scanner graphed all measurements into a readable format.

I could tell he was about to cave right around the time his hand shifted over to his stack of key cards on his belt. “This isn’t for some sort of school project?” he asked warily.

“No, sir,” I swore. It was well known that the current administration tried to quash anything and everything made public from this era. They tossed shade and redaction algorithms at it with abandon as though that would make everything that was accomplished all those cycles ago unreal. The rumors of an almost-rebellion from the time mixed with their tenuous hold on

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societal control probably played a role, especially considering the other bits and bobbles of history they liked to put pretty black lines through.

“She’s a nerd, sir,” Mark said, repeating my earlier descriptor. “Once she has a tiny piece of data, she wants more. Unfortunately, there’s not a lot to be had which means she’s that much more obsessed. She likes art and history and culture and I can honestly say she would not disrespect anything you might have behind those doors nor you for daring to share it with us.”

The guard seemed to come to a final decision and nodded as much to himself as to us. “Okay, kiddos, let’s go in. It’s been a while since I’ve made a pass though anything but the outer areas myself so it will be less of a guided tour and more of a controlled wandering. Better than nothing, am I right?”

“Yes, sir!” I agreed enthusiastically. I tried not to actively bounce on the tips of my toes, but knew I failed.

He scanned his cards and input a code and had his back turned to where Mark pushed a button on his reader to try to figure out how to replicate the process should we need to break back in later. The guard opened the door with a flourish, and even held back the slightly dilapidated gate inside for us to squeeze through. There was a set of buttons and switches off to the side and he pushed and flipped a couple of those as well, ignoring the cobwebs that had formed on some and the way at least two took more effort than he had anticipated if his grunts were any sign. He paused, nodded to himself again, and slid one last key card into an almost invisible slot where it disappeared. One of an entirely different color shot out of a different slot in response, and the man palmed it as though nothing happened. The lights around us flickered and faded before they lit up in a dim yet steady manner.

We were in.

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It was everything I had hoped for. Not that I truly knew what to hope for with as little surviving information was available. The only reason this particular museum was still up and running was that it belonged to a private foundation with ties to someone fairly decently high up in the old oligarchy. One of the surviving cousins from a less direct line had tried to shut it down back when he curried favor with the current administration, but the patriarch had sided with the youngest instead and agreed art was something to be savored and cherished. Everything was supposedly innocuous and inert, too old to be useful and too weird to be lauded.

There was absolutely no way that was true given the way Mark's eyebrows raised. He was looking solely at his scanner and had not yet glanced up at the plethora of objects in the area. A fine layer of dust covered most of the displays and the paint was peeling in the high corners of the room. There was what looked to be water damage at the far side next to a window bolted shut with actual wood and metal versus the usual polymers creating an almost artistic decay to the area. Something was still running though, and it was more than the security cameras with the little red dots that had blinked off around the same time the screens off to the side went black.

I recorded everything I could. Full video from the entryway onward as well as detailed shots of the nearest exhibits. The clothing samples paired with drawn examples of how that clothing was worn in the first exhibit were already more than what was readily available almost anywhere else. Despite the slight fading and wear, most were bright and colorful and supported individual expression of all sorts; a far cry from the structured uniforms of today that identified your profession and rank within that profession, utilitarian neutrals to be worn outside of working periods, black allotted for the dirtiest of work or illegal activities. Most museums usually had only the same standardly approved images and nothing near the literal wall of fabrics and patterns and even jewelry. There was a bracelet that crudely tracked your biometrics next to

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a ring that did the same, the connection pieces tarnished but still present, unlike anything we had seen prior. Nothing implanted, and supposedly nothing reporting to the Central Security Database.

We hacked our current iterations during excursions such as this. It helped to have accomplices that would allow you to piggyback off their signal while they wandered in and out of stores and parks and such. The price for that help was us being willing to do the same for them when the time called for it. A few random frequency bursts from carefully placed disrupters helped to scramble the scanners to stop visual confirmation of just who was where at what time.

The clothing section eventually devolved into what we knew as familiar. More precisely, there was a literal chipped and cracked red line labeled when the Code was passed with all subsequent examples rapidly changing within what was marked as only a ten-cycle period. Well, on one side. The other side was no longer physical examples, but sketches and drawings of fantastical flowing pieces, ranks listed as “titles” and “designations” instead, and some of the options were downright scandalous by today’s standards.

The guard continued through several other smaller rooms at a relatively quick pace and we hurried to keep up even as we attempted to record it all. No need to unnecessarily annoy him and have him change his mind. He paused in front of one of the old-style transports and tilted his head meaningfully. Mark stepped closer, and nearly jumped back when a display registered his presence and began to show the ins and outs of the machine and how to both control and maintain it in a few simple steps.

This section also showed the evolution from what used to be common to what we knew from right outside of the walls that surrounded us, the red line once again marking the change.

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On a whim, I turned to see if this section also had corresponding artwork and was not disappointed. Blown away by the preposterousness of it all, but not disappointed. There were literal flying cars and trains with listed speeds that were simply unreal, still bright and white and pristine versus the gray monstrosities we crammed ourselves into daily.

The next area contained housing types from the prior generations. The rooms were side by side with furniture and everything. There was a miniature in the center that was far too detailed to be a child's toy that showed how these rooms would be arranged. Scratch that, there were multiple miniatures with everything from mansions like what the Directors had to standard family homes that were still massive and considered a rarity today. There was even the precursor to our current podding residencies with groups of rooms in rows side by side. These varied but were generally at least a tiny bit larger, though it was unclear if the sizing was assigned by need or based upon some sort of ranking system.

Knowing now to look, I glanced to the opposite wall and blinked at what it held. "They expected to live in The Green?" I asked, certain I must be interpreting the images incorrectly.

The guard simply smiled. "They expected plants and flowers – real plants and flowers – to be common and available in personal spaces. The idea was that there would still be spaces like The Green, maybe even full expanses of uninhabited lands for wildlife, but that individuals could cultivate the same on a smaller scale in and around their own residencies."

Mark looked doubtful. "Where would they fit their Ox Scrubbers? And are these supposed to be Sub-Director penthouses literally floating in the sky?" he asked with a gesture to something surrounded by blues and whites.

The man looked almost wistful when he answered, "The plants were to scrub the air naturally, scrubbers only needed by industrial sites and even those were to be minimal. I'm

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honestly not sure about the blue. I did hear one ridiculous tale of planning for housing within the seas themselves. I'm assuming they would also need to be cleared of most pollutants for that to happen though."

"Weird," Mark said with a sigh and a shake of his head.

I felt the need to confirm, "So, this artwork, this is what the older generations thought the future would look like? How they thought things would be today?"

He nodded, a gleam in his eye. It was Mark, though, who snorted and added, "You've got to admit, some of this is even more outrageous than what the Revs come up with.

Interesting, that's for sure, but implementing this against Code provisions? Out there."

"But there was no Code," I reminded him. Everything they thought up, all of this, they came up with when Economic Efficiency Code didn't yet exist. They didn't have to worry about the impact to profit margins or supply disruptions. They didn't have to worry about perceived preferential treatments or slights to the Congregate, not like today. We worked as one to better the whole, or at least that was the promoted thought process behind it all. The fact that the few Directors and their families seemed to have a lot more than the standard working segment was something the Revolutionaries liked to point out. It was also something obvious enough that the Revs databursts were getting more and more traction within the Congregate as of late.

Through the next doorway were more of the strange miniatures, this time with buildings where the general populace worked. It was similar enough to what we had today for the most part. To the side were things like chairs, ancient data devices, and framed images of people doing their assigned tasks. There were a few uniforms like today, but there appeared to be far more leeway depending upon the task as well as variation in the uniform types for accommodation purposes. He barely paused at those, and I feared this would be the end of the

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tour as the hallway now made another abrupt turn back towards the front, only the history of foodstuffs blending into what must have once been a souvenir shop along the expanse, the final exit sign flickering near the door we entered through at the far end.

He didn't make the turn.

Instead, the mysterious final key card made an appearance. I saw no obvious doorway nor an insertion slot against the wall that was made up of actual wood paneling. He slid it along the edge of one of those panels until there was the slightest catch of a sound and the panel itself rolled back to reveal an ornate staircase made of more wood and steel. It was dusty and stale and amazing.

He grabbed an old-fashioned broom off to the side, ignoring the thick cobwebs heavy with dust that clung to it and pretty much every corner of the stairwell. He gestured to the steps themselves and said, "Go quickly. There's a chance the sensors will pick up the power surge."

We hurried as much as we dared, the dim lights just enough to illuminate and stop us from tripping and damaging either ourselves or whatever lay below. I turned back roughly halfway down when Mark sneezed to find the guard sweeping the steps behind us, erasing the footprints we had left on the treads.

At the foot of the staircase was darkness, but only for a moment before the room before us lit up bright and almost pristine, save for the occasional streak of dust that lined up with the edges of the man's reach. "What in the world..." I whispered as I took it all in.

"This is what you truly came for, yes?" the guard asked, broom now set to the side. "The stuff the bigwigs in power don't want you to know?"

"We just like history," Mark replied, careful and rehearsed.

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The man rolled his eyes. “You want to change history. Our family always has. It’s why we made this damned place and maintained it for so long,” he huffed.

I shook my head, my short stub of a ponytail catching on the collar of the jumpsuit I wore. “I’m sure I don’t-” I started, but he cut me off.

“We don’t have time for this extremely poor attempt at subterfuge!” he insisted. It was the most emotion he had shown thus far, and it was agitation and frustration more than fear at being caught, or so it seemed to me at least. He used his little special card to open what I had thought was a marble wall but was apparently a cabinet full of gear. He did the same for three more innocuous-looking bits of plain white, and then to a table that turned into a full data viewer.

“S-sir?” Mark asked. His own makeshift equipment paled in comparison to what lay before us now lay lax in his hand.

The man gestured to everything he had just revealed. “Grab a pack. Honestly, grab two if you think it will help and you can carry them. Everything should already be loaded on the readers, but we readied them to what we thought might be pertinent versus what you think you might need. I trust your scanners recorded the superfluous things we missed. You’ll find what we uncovered about who the major players were, how they came to power, and what they put in place to keep that power.”

Now it was my turn to doubt. This was too much. Too much data. Too much of the very thing we and the rest of the Revs searched for, craved for cycle upon cycle. Too much potential risk to have everyone involved not just shut down but eliminated completely.

As much as I wanted to grab everything and run, I stood my ground, chin raised in defiance. “And what, you’re just going to give us this? Send us out there to take the fall for whatever it is you’ve got planned?” I questioned.

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The smile he gave me was all too familiar now. “No, my dear, nothing like that,” he assured me. I waited for the other boot to fall and was not disappointed when he said, “Because you are technically never leaving this building.”

Mark reached for the sharp he carried with him on adventures such as these and I reached for my own. “You can’t just keep us here against our will!” he protested.

The guard held up a hand – and his stun gun – almost placatingly when he said, “Let me rephrase that: This is the last I will see of you. As far as the Congregate will know, you simply disappeared. Your friends who are assisting you will assume you were captured and rotting in a cell somewhere, maybe not even surviving to rot for long. I am assuming, should this work, that you will eventually leave the building, but it will not be within my existence to know.”

“You’re putting us in cryo? What good will that do anyone? Someone might come across us and thaw us out and then what? Have another mouth to feed? Have another subject for experiments?” I asked. Then, boldly and with a confidence I didn’t actually have, I added, “And how did you plan to stop us from broadcasting what we found to the Congregate anyway?”

“Not cryo,” he insisted. He glanced to the little button I threatened to push, his expression far from fearful. “And we both know that won’t work.”

“Then what?” Mark demanded. His tech was good, better than what was generally available and he knew it, but he also knew we were clearly outmatched.

The guard did not directly answer. Not yet. Instead, he said, “This building has been in my family for generations. Well over a hundred cycles. We have always taken in those in need and planned on continuing to do so until it was made illegal. Well, we found a way around that now, didn’t we?” He chuckled to himself at some unknown joke. “We’ve always been scientists, what you called nerds. We’ve also always fought against the power imbalance as

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much if not more than what you call the Revs. We recorded everything we could, everything that could hint at how things came to be, waiting for the day we could put that knowledge to use.”

“But what does knowing the past have to do with changing the future?” Mark asked doubtfully.

“Everything, child! Absolutely everything!” the man near screamed in response. Quieter now, he chuckled to himself when he muttered, “Sorry, we’re supposed to respect our elders and all that, aren’t we?”

Believing that he was truly and utterly mad, I started edging my way back towards the staircase. There was a chance I’d be caught and held for trespassing if his warning about the sensors was to be believed, but I could play it off as seeing something strange while out for an evening stroll and wishing to investigate. The black clothing would be a stretch if I couldn’t change to what was in my pack in time, but it had worked in the past.

“You won’t get out that way, dear Madeline,” the man warned.

I whipped around fast enough to get dizzy as I knew for a fact that I had not shared my name and that I had no identifiers with me aside from a fake ID tucked into the pocket of my pack.

“Last time, it took Security eight hours to break through and get down here. It took cycles to improve the original design, but we think the pod should be powered up enough to make the jump in under six now,” he rambled as though that made sense. He leaned closer to Mark and said, almost conspiringly, “You barely got to it. You hadn’t been sure if the shot would alter the trajectory irrevocably, but your journals promised you arrived safely if about three weeks off of the initial target.”

“What are you talking about?” I shouted, fully at my wits end.

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He rolled his eyes. “You want to make things better, yes? You have everything you could find about the pre-Code era, yes? You have every drop of knowledge on the subject matter that the Revs could dredge up, yes? Well, now use it! Go back and make it right!”

He slapped a button on the console and what I thought was a wall on the far end raised to show a sort of garage behind it. In it was something that resembled a pre-Code transport with a gigantic protective tube around it.

“What the-” Mark tried to ask but was cut off.

“We added the shield after the last attempt. Hopefully, it will help keep things on course this time,” the man said as if it meant anything. “And they did not warn me about how pigheaded or stubborn you would be, though I should have known given Aunt Nancy’s usual proclivities. Having to try to convince you to do the work you literally started was not on my agenda, but here we are.”

The pieces were starting to connect in my mind. We wanted to change the world. All attempts by the Revs so far had failed, the Directors entrenched in their ways. Any movement to poke them in their fortified little holes ended in failure but, if we could get to them before those foxholes were even dug, maybe we would stand a chance. Given that there were texts, hidden and treasured, on the fundamental principles regarding time travel dating back long before the date written on those crumbling red lines upstairs, perhaps someone took a chance to make a difference. There was just one problem with that particular scenario, and it was rather obvious and blaring.

“You want us to go back in time and change things,” I confirmed, the words sounding outrageous to my own ears. Beside me, Mark was still in a state of shock.

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The guard nodded enthusiastically, as if to an infant or pet that had learned a new yet obvious trick. “Yes! Though, technically, you are the ones who wanted to go back and our family has just been facilitating the attempt.”

I pushed that to the side as time paradoxes hurt my brain. It probably had to do with the fact that all research on such things had been banned as immoral roughly a century ago. Any and all resources on the subject was thought destroyed for the betterment of society, which is why the few that survived in Rev strongholds were so treasured. To try to change time was to change the natural order of things; key word there being order, as in Order of the Code, as in the Code that controlled all aspects of life as we knew it. I did remember one key point stressed in the few sentences allotted to the subject matter back in school: if someone went back and changed things, what was to stop another person from going back and changing it again?

I opened my mouth to ask precisely that, but Mark beat me to it. We always were on the same wavelength, even if he was far more timid in his vibrations. “If we travel to the past, won’t a Director just send someone back to strengthen their hold that much more?”

The man pursed his lips at that, contemplative. Eventually, he agreed, “It’s possible, and would explain why we have an ever-growing list of things we tried with minimal changes to the outcomes. There was change though! Don’t you forget that! This most recent attempt, we hid the research though, which should help.”

I resisted the urge to bang my head against the pretty marble. “This attempt? Doesn’t that mean that we did this all before and failed?”

“No!” he insisted. “It means that one version of you did, not necessarily that you will as well.”

“I hate time paradoxes,” Mark muttered, echoing my thoughts as per usual.

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“Well, suck it up, Grandpa, because you are about to become one,” the guard laughed.

“Grandpa!” Mark exclaimed. His expression was one of outrage and confusion, with maybe a little bit of exasperation thrown in for good measure.

“Technically, Great-Grandpa,” the man corrected. “I never had the joy of meeting you before now, possibly on purpose. There is one theory that says we would have messed things up right and proper if that were to have happened. Dad agreed, but Mom wasn’t so sure.”

My head was spinning, but I knew it was probably just the beginning of a sensation that wasn’t going to quit anytime soon. “We did this all in just four generations?” I confirmed.

“Five or six, I can’t remember, to be honest,” the man, possibly my own descendant, admitted. “We were able to send James back to a little bit earlier in preparation of your arrival. He got the Wilkshire family on board with the plan and they should be ready and waiting to claim you as theirs. That part made the biggest difference as you will have identities waiting for you instead of having to try to create them. They were always a bit more radical and just reclusive enough that others will just assume they are telling the truth or will claim to for the right price. The family histories get a little droll around the time of your arrival, though. Falling in love, marrying in, all that. But your names are known and known for a reason: you make a difference.”

“But things are still kind of awful out there,” Mark pointed out with a vague gesture to the world above us.

“Just imagine how bad it could be if you never went at all,” the man shrugged, and I had the feeling he knew far more about the split realities and what happened in each than he was letting on. He clapped his hands together and said, “Now, you have a limited time to get caught up on what you need to know. Just to be on the safe side, I’ve added file of what we know about

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each iteration: what was done differently and what changed with the outcome. It is edited slightly as you shouldn't know everything about everything, but the basics are there and should help guide you where you need to be.”

He handed me a data card and a reader slightly different than what I was used to along with a stack of what I knew where backup power supplies for those we already had. I took them and tucked them into the offered pack, but couldn't stop myself from asking, “But what will happen to you? If we go back and change things, will you disappear?”

“Not sure, honestly, which is kind of exciting.” He shrugged but there was a light to his eyes that I recognized from my own whenever Mark and I were going to sneak out on an adventure. “We only have records of what was, not what will continue to be. I assume I will continue in this timeline, and you will go create a new one.”

I wasn't about to give him information on Rev hideouts or anything silly like that in thanks. If this was all a scam, Mark and I would go down but we wouldn't take the others with us. I did, however, wish him the best of luck and he did the same in turn. Then, he showed us how to access what he thought we needed, and Mark and I prepared to face whatever fresh destiny awaited. We could only hope that we did our descendants proud.