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Rewriting History (Without Words)

“What exactly is history, and how do we learn it?”

Serafina looks up at the ceiling as she ponders her teacher’s question. *How would I even define history?* she asks herself. As the bell after last period rings, and her teacher announces the next homework assignment, Serafina lets that question sit with her. She grabs her backpack and walks outside to her car to head home.

As Serafina is driving, she gets a call on her cell phone. *Oh my god, it’s 3:00!* she realizes.

“Hello?” she says, as she puts the call on speakerphone.

“Hello, is this Serafina Belcast?”

“Yes, this is she.”

“Hello, Serafina. This is Lauren with the Federal Memory Vaults. I am calling to let you know that you have been accepted for the position as an Archivist Intern.”

“Wow, thank you so much!” Serafina exclaims. “When can I start?”

“You can start tomorrow,” Lauren says. “Please be outside the Vault entrance by 4:00pm sharp. Do you need help with directions to get there?”

“No, I think I’ve got it,” Serafina replies. “Thank you!”

“No problem, Serafina. Congratulations on being accepted, and good luck.”

After hanging up the phone, Serafina squeals with excitement. “Finally!” she cheers.

The following day at school, all Serafina can think about is her upcoming first shift at the Memory Vault. Before her eighteenth birthday, Serafina would dream of

finally being able to apply for the internship; once she turned eighteen and could apply, she anxiously awaited the results. Having a passion for history, Serafina had always wanted to work at the Vaults. She dreams of being a historian, and so, naturally, she wants to understand the behind-the-scenes of today's archiving of memories.

The Memory Vaults consist of towering shelves filled with millions of codices; each codex portrays the life of the human whose memories fill the pages. At a young age, Serafina was always curious about the process by which memories are stored.

"Why do I always need to have a camera on me, Mom?"

"Everyone is required to have one, Serafina," her mom tells her. "Ever since the moment after you were born, you've had that camera on your body. Every human is required by the government to have their bodycam on them at all times—you're only allowed to turn it off for a total of one hour a day, for ten minutes at a time."

"But why? Where do all of these videos go?"

"All footage from our cameras is actively being stored in books—codices—which are kept safe by the government. This way, history can be preserved, and memories can be stored forever."

"But why don't we just tell history using regular books, with written words, like they used to?" Serafina inquires.

"That is a good question, Serafina—one that I don't have the answer to. But I can tell you that times have changed, and while we all may be used to this lifestyle, things were very different long ago."

Now, as Serafina enters the Federal Archives building, her eyes light up with curiosity and excitement as she walks up to the door to the Memory Vault.

“Hello, are you Serafina Belcast?”

Serafina turns around to see a short, timid, young man whose glasses seem to cover half of his face.

“Hi! Yes, I am.”

“Ah, yes,” says the man. “Welcome. It’s nice to meet you. My name is Harry, and I am the archivist whom you will be shadowing.”

“Oh, great! It’s nice to meet you! I’m very excited for this internship,” Serafina replies.

“Yes, you will get to experience firsthand a little bit of how this process works. Follow me,” Harry says. Harry turns and opens the tall, heavy door to the Memory Vault, and the two of them step inside. *Woah*, Serafina thinks as she gazes at the tall, vast array of shelves. Serafina and Harry walk over to a small table in the corner of a room, where next to the table, a small cart holds several stacks of codices.

“Alright, here we are,” Harry says. “Your job is to sort these into alphabetical order and stack them onto the table. Someone else will put them on the shelves.”

“Sounds good!” Serafina replies. “What do I do when I’m done?”

“I will repeatedly check on you while you’re here, so don’t worry about that. When you’re done, I will give you another task.”

“Alright, thanks!”

“Oh, and of course, opening any of the codices is strictly prohibited, which I’m sure you know,” Harry warns.

“Yes, of course,” Serafina replies.

“Well then, I’ll leave you to it. See you soon!” Harry walks away and leaves Serafina alone in the archive library. She begins sorting through the codices, placing them in separate piles on the table, organizing alphabetically by last name. The paper in each book glows faintly, humming with the captured memories of numerous strangers. Serafina had previously heard a bit about how these books work—the paper in each codex is a biotech hybrid that displays video footage in moving ink. It is a relatively recent technology that scientists have been very proud to develop. Serafina’s curiosity about these books grows rapidly as she sorts them one by one. *I really want to just take a peek to see what they’re like*, she thinks. *Maybe just one...? No, I can’t....can I? Who is gonna stop me? How will they know?* As these thoughts race through her head, Serafina reaches for the camera on her chest. *I haven’t turned off my bodycam yet today...I might as well do it now.* Reluctantly, but quickly, she switches off her bodycam and opens the codex in front of her to a random page.

“Woah,” she whispers out loud. It’s as if the pages in front of her had come alive—videos of this person’s life move on the paper as they normally would, except it’s ink that is moving. *I’ve never seen anything like this*, she thinks. She turns the page, immersed in the feeling of awe she was surprised to have; but then, her smile fades, and she instead develops a look of confusion. *What the...? Why are these pages empty?* She looks down at the pages in her lap. There’s a date in the top right corner: November 15, 2526. But there’s nothing on it—just an empty page. *That can’t be right*, Serafina thinks. She grabs the log from the table in front of her, finds the name of the person whose codex she’s holding, and checks the status. *That’s weird*, she ponders, *this says that everything in this codex is intact.* A feeling of unease creeps inside of her:

Why would a memory be missing? Isn't this system supposed to be flawless? Suddenly, before she can explore much longer, she hears the big door of the library open, followed by approaching footsteps. She quickly closes the codex and places it in a pile on the table.

"How's it going in here?" Harry asks.

"Great!" Serafina nervously rubs the back of her neck. "I'm making good progress, I think."

"It appears that you are! Keep up the good work. I'll be back in another five minutes." Harry turns back around and once again leaves Serafina alone.

"That was close," she sighs in relief. She continues to sort through the codices, but cannot stop thinking about what she saw: empty pages. *Those should not have been empty*, she thinks. As Serafina picks up the next codex, her fingers freeze on the spine. Her mouth opens, and her breath catches. Written in clear, big letters on the cover is "BELCAST, SERAFINA". *Oh my god. This codex is...MINE*. Serafina knows that no one is ever supposed to have access to their own codex. *This must be here by mistake*, she thinks. And sure enough, her name is not listed in the log. She knows what she should do: put the book down, and ignore it. Or, she should report it to Harry immediately. However, she finds herself opening the book to a random page towards the middle. Suddenly, Serafina's stomach drops. Her eyes widen. On the page in front of her, she sees ink surging to represent fire—rows of shelves collapse; codices turn into ash. *That's me*, she realizes. But a sudden feeling of dread sends a shiver down her spine: *I never did this*.

"What are you doing?"

Serafina whips around to see Harry standing over her. *Oh no*, she realizes. *I must have been too distracted to hear Harry come in.*

"I...um..." she mumbles.

"Don't say a word. Come with me. And bring the book." Harry begins to hastily walk towards the exit.

Oh my god. What have I done? Serafina panics. *I just lost the internship. On DAY ONE. And, oh my god, it's worse than that. Harry is gonna go to the government. What are they going to do to me? What if—?*

Before Serafina can finish her thought, Harry whips back around.

"And turn off your camera."

Harry's steps are quick and sharp, and Serafina struggles to keep up, clutching her codex to her chest. They reach a corridor she hasn't seen before, and Harry stops suddenly. He turns to face her.

"It's you," he declares.

"What?"

"I've been waiting for someone to come along—someone to help me. And it's you who's going to do that."

"What are you talking about? Help you with what?" Serafina asks reluctantly.

"The rebellion."

Serafina's stomach does a flip. "The...rebellion?"

Harry grabs the codex from Serafina's hands. He opens it to the same page Serafina had just seen.

“This. This right here. Do you see what’s happening on this page? This might just be exactly what we need.”

“But...I don’t understand—”

“Listen,” Harry cuts her off. “I know you saw the empty pages in the other book. I’m not clueless. I saw it too. The government is tampering with the memory archives.”

“But why would they do that?”

“Something bad has been happening ever since the invention of this technology. How do you think we know about prior history? Humans used to *write things down*. No one had to wear cameras on their person all the time. Before pen and paper, humans had carvings in stone. Even before we could write, humans used to tell history through oral traditions. But things have changed, and the government is changing, too. While humans have always had the ability to tamper with documentation, things are different now. The government is changing “memories” themselves. It’s time for a change.”

“I don’t...” Serafina began. “I mean...I agree with you. Something is wrong with the world’s current documentation. But, what do you need me for?”

“Well...start with this.” Harry hands Serafina her codex. “Keep it. You’ll need it when the time comes.”

“The time for what?” Serafina asks.

“To burn down the truth they built.”