

"The Time Tourist"

Created May 2025, main storyline supplied by Carg, text and pictures by ChatGPT 4o.

Maya adjusted her pink overalls and stepped off the cobbled path into the grassy clearing, where the castle loomed behind her like a stone sentinel from centuries past. She was just another solo traveler with a museum pass—until curiosity got the better of her.

The wooden pillory had been roped off, a clear sign not to touch. But there was no guard around, and the temptation to recreate a photo she'd seen in a history book was too strong. She ducked her head and slid her arms through the weathered holes.

Click.

The top piece dropped a fraction of an inch and locked.

She laughed nervously. "Okay... not funny."

But the laughter faded as a breeze stirred around her, colder than the summer air had any right to be. The sky dimmed slightly. The castle no longer looked quite so staged for tourists—there were no signs, no vendors, no school groups.

A shout rang out from the battlements. Not in English. A group of men in chainmail and leather jerkins pointed in her direction, and one ran toward her with a rusted key.

Suddenly, Maya wasn't a tourist anymore. She was a very confused prisoner in the middle of the 14th century.



The Time Tourist – Part II: The Stranger with the Key

Maya's breath caught in her throat as the man drew closer. His armor clanked with every step, and though his face was partially shadowed under a coif, she could see the suspicion in his eyes.

He reached for the pillory's rusty lock, his brow furrowed. Then he froze.

"You're not from here," he said in heavily accented English. "Your clothes..."

Maya stared at him, heart pounding. "You speak English?"

The knight—or whatever he was—narrowed his eyes. “A bit. Enough. Who are you? Where is your crest?”

“I’m a—tourist. I was just visiting the site and...” She looked around. The neatly trimmed lawn had been replaced by uneven ground. Tents now dotted the landscape. Smoke curled from a blacksmith’s forge. The castle was still there, but more alive—flags snapping from towers, guards pacing, the portcullis lowered.

The pillory creaked as she shifted. “Okay, listen. This is a mistake. I don’t belong here. Literally.”

He didn’t reply. Instead, he slowly unlocked the pillory and pulled it open. Her arms and neck screamed in relief.

“Come,” he said curtly. “Before the reeve sees you.”

Maya followed, rubbing her wrists. The man moved quickly, leading her through narrow alleys of tents and wagons. She passed people dressed in coarse wool, vendors selling dried herbs, and children chasing a chicken through the mud. Every eye that met hers lingered just a second too long.

They ducked into a stable. He turned to her, serious now.

“There are rumors of a witch in the east wood—one who sees across time,” he said. “Some believe she cursed this land. Others say she protects it.”

Maya blinked. “Wait... are you saying I’ve time-traveled? That there’s a way back?”

“I don’t know what you are,” he said, “but I know you don’t belong in this century. If you are lucky, the witch may send you home. If you are not...” He trailed off.

She swallowed hard.

Outside, the bells of the castle tolled sharply. Trouble was brewing.

The man reached into his cloak and pressed something into her hand. It was a ring—heavy, warm, etched with a symbol she couldn’t quite understand.

“Show her this,” he whispered. “Tell her Sir Caelen sent you.”

The Time Tourist – Part III: Midnight and Mistaken Identity

The witch’s hut was hidden deep in the twisted woodlands beyond the castle walls. Roots gnarled like grasping fingers tangled Maya’s boots with every step, and the damp air clung to her skin like a warning.

She hadn’t expected the witch to be... young. Or amused.

“You fell into the crack between times,” the witch said, stirring something fragrant over a fire. “Not common. Not impossible.”

Maya sat stiffly on a log, clutching the heavy ring.

“I just want to go back,” she said.

The witch’s eyes gleamed. “You can. But time takes payment. And precision.”

“What kind of payment?”

The witch tapped her spoon on the cauldron's rim. "You must return the way you came. At midnight, you will place yourself in the pillory—exactly as before. Same posture. Same mood. Same position of the stars."

Maya winced. "That's it?"

"Almost," the witch said with a small smile. "You must also not attract suspicion. Your garments are foreign—odd even for a fool. The castle guards are on edge after your disappearance."

She turned to a bundle and drew out a faded linen dress, laced at the sides and cinched at the waist with a rough belt.

"You'll wear this. Blend in. Be unseen."

That night, Maya stood once again before the pillory. Now dressed in a drab peasant's dress, her hair loose and face dusted with ash, she looked like just another unfortunate.

Sir Caelen stood beside her, silent. The witch had vanished as strangely as she appeared.

"I still don't understand how this works," Maya whispered. "Why the pillory?"

"Anchors," Caelen said. "Your body remembers where it was. The moment remembers you."

She nodded, uncertain.

The moon reached its peak. A sudden gust of wind, sharp and cold, swept the courtyard.

Without ceremony, Caelen lowered the wooden board over her neck and wrists, just as it had fallen that morning. He locked it gently.

Maya felt her chest tighten. Her vision blurred. The torches around the castle flickered violently—

And then silence.

Birdsong.

She blinked. The smell of burning wood and sweat was gone, replaced by sunscreen and kettle corn. Her head whipped up.

Plastic trash bins. Tourists with smartphones. A man in cargo shorts taking a selfie.

She was back.

"Hey, check this out!" said a woman in a sunhat, approaching the pillory. "She looks so real!"

A small group gathered.

Maya groaned. "Excuse me? I need help—this thing's actually locked."

A teen snapped a photo. "You're amazing! Is this a performance?"

"I'm *not*—" she pulled at the wooden board "—part of the act!"

A child giggled. “Mom, she’s talking like it’s real!”

One by one, the tourists lost interest and wandered off. Another group arrived. A man in a staff polo passed by, glanced at her, and nodded.

“Nice commitment to the bit,” he said, walking on.

Maya sighed, shoulders slumping.

Trapped again. Different century, same problem.

The Time Tourist – Part IV: Locked in Time

By the time the sun was high, Maya’s arms were numb, and her neck was beginning to throb. The pillory’s wood, centuries old and splintery, hadn’t softened during her time-jump.

A pair of children tossed popcorn near her feet, trying to bait a pigeon.

She groaned. “Seriously?”

The family laughed. “Best reenactment all day,” the father said. “You should do Ren Faire.”

Maya resisted the urge to scream. Her stomach churned—not from hunger, but from the creeping dread that no one was coming.

Then a miracle—or so it seemed.

A woman in a staff vest finally walked over, sipping from a plastic cup. “Hey. You alright?”

“Yes,” Maya gasped. “No. Please. I’m not part of this. I need the key or a manager or something—”

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “You weren’t scheduled for today. What department are you with? Interpretive or immersive?”

“I’m with the *I-fell-through-time* department!”

“Right...” the staffer muttered, clearly marking Maya down as one of the new method actors. “You people always take things a little too far.”

She pulled out a walkie-talkie. “Yeah, guest services? Can we get someone to check the pillory display? The girl from the 2 p.m. slot is already set up—looks like she skipped check-in.”

Maya slumped again. “Unbelievable.”

She remained there into the evening, when the crowd thinned and shadows lengthened across the courtyard. Finally, a janitor wandered by, dragging a wheeled trash bin behind him.

He stopped. Blinked.

“...you’re still in there?”

“Yes. Please,” she whispered. “Get. Me. Out.”

The man frowned and walked around the pillory. “Lock’s real. Huh. I thought this was a replica.”

"I time-traveled."

He paused. "You what?"

"I—never mind. Just... find someone with a key."

An hour later, a security guard arrived with bolt cutters.

The moment the lock snapped, Maya practically collapsed forward. The guard caught her.

"Lady, what the hell happened?"

"It's a long story," she muttered, rubbing her wrists.

"Looks like you've been here all day."

"All *year*, technically."

That night, Maya checked into the cheapest motel she could find. She stood in the shower for an hour, letting the warm water remind her she was home—or close enough.

But her troubles weren't over.

As she dried off, her phone—newly retrieved from lost and found—buzzed.

Unknown Number:

Do not return to the pillory. The anchors are unstable. Others may have seen you. Time notices.

Burn the dress.

Maya stared.

Then the second message came:

They're already looking for you.

The Time Tourist – Part V: Return to the Castle

Maya didn't want to go back.

She told herself she was done with castles, done with ancient wood and time-riddled portals. But two days after the cryptic text, her motel door was ajar. Her phone was gone. The pink overalls—washed, folded—sat on the bed beside a folded note:

"They think you're still playing your role. Stay hidden in plain sight."

And beneath that:

"Go back. The displays are the only safe place left for you—for now."

Back at the castle grounds, Maya slipped through a side entrance early in the morning. She'd expected security to stop her. No one did.

She wandered cautiously between the sets and historical exhibits until she found the *staff area*. Costumes lined the walls. Most were period-correct: corsets, aprons, scratchy wool tunics. At the end of the rack hung something labeled "Living History – Reserve."

It was a replica iron collar with shoulder restraints. The label: "**Dungeon Prisoner (Immersive).**"

Before she could overthink it, a voice behind her said, "You're late."

She turned. A woman with a clipboard motioned her toward the courtyard.

"I'm... sorry?" Maya managed.

"Don't be. You've got the look. We needed someone for the chain-and-stock rotation. Take the dungeon set for first shift. Two hours—rotate when the bell rings."

"Wait, I don't—"

But the woman was already gone.

Maya's new world became one of displays and restraints—each one an echo of some past or future moment. A pillory in the central courtyard. Shackles in the shadowy dungeon set. A traveling exhibition with a mock jail wagon, where she was "secured" behind barred doors.

And through it all, guests *still thought it was an act*.

Photos were taken. Children pointed. Guides recited her "story" while she stood silently, bound and observing.

Yet something was wrong. Sometimes, when she blinked, the courtyard flickered. The sky stuttered like a skipping reel of film. Her fellow "actors" never left through the same door twice. One day, she looked into a mirror near the dressing room and *didn't see herself at all*—just an empty costume hanging still.



One evening, after a long shift spent manacled in the stocks, she overheard two guests whispering.

“That one,” a man said, nodding toward her. “They say she’s not part of the cast. She never eats. Never leaves.”

“Urban legend,” said the other. “Like the girl who disappeared in the 1800s and was seen again last year.”

Maya’s pulse quickened.

Maybe she wasn’t the only one caught in this twisted loop.

And maybe—just maybe—being a “display” was the only thing keeping her *anchored to reality at all*.

The Time Tourist – Part VI: Another Like Her

It happened on a rainy Tuesday afternoon, when the tourists thinned and the castle air hung damp and heavy.

Maya had just been locked into the “tavern holding stocks”—an indoor display meant to evoke 17th-century justice, complete with fake bar brawls and animatronic jeers. Her wrists rested in iron brackets. Her eyes, as always, scanned for inconsistencies—glitches in time.

That’s when she saw her.

Not a guest. Not staff.

A woman, about Maya’s age, dressed in slightly off-period clothing—a blend of 1950s utility wear and a modern raincoat. Her eyes met Maya’s across the tavern. Not casually. Intentionally.

Knowingly.

The woman approached slowly and pretended to study the display. Then she leaned close and murmured:

“You were in the stocks yesterday too.”

Maya froze. “You saw?”

“I *see a lot*.” The woman kept her face turned, eyes fixed on a nearby wall. “Name’s Elsie. Been stuck since 1962. Think it’s 2025 now. Hard to say.”

Maya’s heart slammed. “You’re from another time?”

“So are a few of us. The castle collects things. Tourists. Staff. Accidents.” Elsie exhaled. “Some of us blend in. Some of us get... absorbed.”

“Absorbed?”

Elsie glanced at the fake tavern patrons. “They weren’t all mannequins when I got here.”

Maya swallowed hard.

“Why the restraints?” she asked quietly. “Why are we always... locked up?”

“They anchor you,” Elsie said. “The longer you’re restrained, the less the time slip can pull you away. The display keeps you in *one moment*—stable. It’s the only reason we’re still real.”

Maya shifted in the stocks. “So we’re props now?”

Elsie gave a tight smile. “Living history, right?”

Later that evening, after the guests left and the doors locked behind them, Elsie returned.

This time, she brought a key.

“Your shift’s over,” she whispered.

Maya stepped free, rubbing her wrists.

Elsie handed her a cloth bundle. “Change into something dull. You’ll stay invisible longer. We’re meeting someone tonight—another like us. He says he’s found a crack under the East Tower.”

“A crack?” Maya asked.

“A real one. A fault in time. We have one chance before it resets again.”

“Resets?”

Elsie didn’t answer.

They moved silently through the castle. The walls flickered once—like a VHS tape skipping. A scream echoed briefly through the courtyard and then rewound into silence.

Maya didn’t ask what it meant. She was starting to understand the rules.

And now, for the first time, she wasn’t the only prisoner.

She was part of something else.

Maybe a rebellion. Maybe an escape.

Or maybe just the next exhibit.

The Time Tourist – Part VII: The Crack Beneath the East Tower

The door to the East Tower wasn’t locked, but it *resisted*. Maya felt it in her bones—a low vibration, like the hum of a live wire under ancient stone.

Elsie placed a steadying hand on the frame. “He’s down there. Doesn’t talk much. Used to be a guide, back in the ’30s. Said he found the fracture by accident during renovations. Then he never left.”

They slipped inside.

The stairs were uneven, slick with moss and time. Electric sconces flickered, not quite working. Maya swore she saw them flicker in candlelight instead—just for a heartbeat—before reverting to modern bulbs again.

"Reality's thinner here," Elsie whispered, as if the stone could hear.

They reached the bottom. The chamber was narrow, the walls crumbling, some etched with carvings in languages Maya didn't recognize—and a few in English, scrawled like graffiti:

"Don't touch the crack."

"It opens both ways."

"Leave something behind or lose everything."

A figure emerged from the shadows.

He was old—but *not* withered. Preserved. Solid. Dressed in a gray vest, trousers, and round spectacles that flashed as he turned his head.

"I see you brought the new one," he said to Elsie.

"Maya," Elsie nodded. "Maya, this is Wallace."

Wallace gave her a careful look. "You're holding together better than most. That won't last long."

"Then help me get out," Maya said.

Wallace turned to a jagged seam in the stone—barely the width of a hand, but blacker than shadow. Something about it hurt to look at.

"It's not a doorway," Wallace said. "It's a choice."

He knelt and laid a coin—weathered and dull—near the base of the crack. "Time trades in meaning. If you want to pass through, you leave behind something that proves who you were. Something it can't give back."

Maya glanced down at her wrists. The faint bruises from the pillories and shackles still lingered.

"I don't have anything on me," she said quietly.

"You do," Elsie said. "That ring. The one from Caelen."

Maya touched the band around her finger. She'd forgotten it was still there.

"But it's my anchor," she protested.

"Exactly," Wallace said. "Time can't keep both of you."

Maya placed the ring at the base of the crack.

It pulsed once—soft light spilling through. Not blinding. Just enough to see outlines. Shapes. A path. *Home?*

She looked at Elsie. "Come with me."

Elsie shook her head. "I'm already too woven in. But you might still have time."

Wallace's voice, barely above a whisper: "Go now. Before the crack chooses otherwise."

Maya stepped toward the fracture.

The air split—soundless.

She fell through light.

Not backwards. Not forwards. Just **out**.

And landed—

—in a castle gift shop.

A bell rang cheerfully as she stumbled through the back stockroom, past shelves of plastic swords and novelty mugs. A teenage employee looked up from a phone.

“Whoa, ma’am—are you part of the escape room tour?”

Maya’s hands trembled. She was back.

But the walls flickered.

Just once.

Then again.

Reality **wasn’t holding steady**.

And in her palm, though she swore she’d left it behind—

the ring had returned.

The Time Tourist – Part VIII: Souvenir

Maya didn’t speak to anyone for a week.

She stayed in a quiet village two towns over, far from castles and cobbled courtyards, and spent her days walking wooded trails, relearning the feel of normal. Her wrists healed. Her mind didn’t race at every flicker of light.

The ring never left her hand—but she no longer wore it. She wrapped it in cloth and placed it at the bottom of her pack. Sometimes, she felt it pulsing faintly, like a distant heartbeat.

One afternoon, she returned to the castle—not for answers, not for closure. Just curiosity.

She entered through the front like a tourist this time. Paid with cash. Took the brochure.

Everything was normal. Families wandered the halls. Docents droned on about 14th-century torture devices and crumbling battlements. Nobody recognized her. Not even the woman who had once locked her wrists in the stocks with a professional nod.

Maya smiled quietly. It was over.

She stopped in the gift shop on the way out.

There, on a dusty rotating rack next to foam swords and medieval-themed postcards, she found them.

Plastic manacles.

Children's toys, meant for dress-up. Cheap and hollow, with a snap-close clasp and faux iron finish.

She picked up a pair.

The label read:

"Historic Castle Shackles – Replica Souvenir. Lock yourself into the past!"

She turned them over in her hands.

They clicked shut around her wrists with a surprisingly smooth mechanism.

Too smooth.

Too real.

The plastic felt cold. Dense. Almost metallic.

She laughed softly, more amused than alarmed. Just a trick of memory.

She bought them anyway.

That night, in her room, the manacles sat on the bedside table.

Under the lamplight, they looked plastic and silly. But when the lights were off, and only the moonlight touched them—they gleamed like steel. The chain links clinked faintly when the wind moved through the cracked window.

Maya lay in bed, eyes open, listening.

She no longer wore restraints.

But they were still there.

Waiting.

The End.

Or maybe not.

The Time Tourist – Part IX: The Full Set

Maya hadn't planned to wear them again.

The souvenir manacles had sat untouched on the nightstand for days, collecting dust under the filtered golden light of her rented room. They still looked like props—hollow plastic, spray-painted silver, sold to tourists with too much imagination.

But tonight, something gnawed at her. Restlessness. Memory. Or maybe something deeper, something **residual**.

She opened the package again.

Inside were not just the wrist cuffs she remembered... but more.

A **collar**, jointed like soft leather but unnervingly firm.

A pair of **ankle shackles**, linked by a light but clinking chain.

Each piece bore the same stamped emblem—worn, almost ancient: a twisted spiral surrounded by runes she didn't remember seeing before.

"I... don't remember buying this whole set," she murmured.

But her fingers worked methodically.

Click.

The collar settled around her throat, soft at first... then colder, tighter.

Click.

The wrist cuffs closed smoothly. The chain between them draped across her lap.

Click. Click.

The ankle shackles, fitted snug just above her socks, left just enough room to move—but barely.

Maya sat on the bed, now fully bound in what should have been a novelty costume.

Yet as soon as the last shackle locked, the room changed.

The air thinned.

The moonlight filtering through the window bent at the edges, like light through warped glass. Shadows deepened unnaturally.

Maya tried to stand—but the ankle chain dragged like lead. The collar tugged her downward, making her vision blur.

A ringing noise started low and grew louder. Not in the air—in **her bones**.

She reached for the release clasps—those silly plastic buttons. They were gone. Seamless now. Cold.

She stared into the mirror.

And froze.

In the mirror, she looked the same—but the restraints didn't reflect at all.

Not the collar. Not the chains. Not even the dull gleam of the metal.

She lifted her hands slowly. In the glass, her arms stayed still.

She blinked. Her reflection **smiled**.

Not her.

Something else.

A low voice unfurled inside her head, smooth as fog:

“You wore the costume. You accepted the story. Now... you belong to the set.”

The mirror darkened.

The wind outside screamed.

Maya collapsed back onto the bed, chains dragging against the sheets. Her breath quickened.

The collar pulsed.

Not tight. Just *firm*. Like a hand on the back of the neck.

When dawn finally broke, everything appeared normal.

The restraints were on the nightstand again—plastic, weightless, harmless.

But she didn’t touch them.

Not again.

Still, every night since, she swore she could feel the collar return the moment she closed her eyes.

And somewhere far away, behind the stone walls of time’s oldest castle...

Her place in the exhibit remains reserved.

The End...?

