

The Times Machine

In Year 3020, twelve spaceships left Beacon, New Haven star system with forty-three thousand databases of historical records from pre-space Earth. Many of these databases contain first person accounts of the inaugural Internet, the first iteration of what was then known as “the World Wide Web” or, even more figuratively, “the Cloud.” It is through the strands of this early, archaic ‘web’ that I will take a special interest in exploring Earth’s 21st century timelines, most notably those that branches from Year 2020’s coronavirus plague.

Etna paused in her writing and looked out her window as the Seeker Space Station rotated. Her pale reflection gazed back, a lonely spectre.

She heard a smooth chirp behind her, the sound of someone at the door. The entry panels slid back unprompted and her fellow researcher Joul marched through.

“Still up?” they said, “What are you working on?”

“Twenty-first century Earth,” Etna said without turning around.

“Another family project?”

Etna was slightly annoyed. “Yes, I know my ancestors are from Earth, but this one’s on the coronavirus pandemic.”

“I would have looked at the first Mars colonies in the twenty-fourth century,” Joul remarked off-handedly.

Etna had a lot to say about that too. “You could easily say that one led to the other. Earth’s considerable advancements in epidemiology in the twenty-first century contributed to the biowarfare of the twenty-second century, and then pressure on governments to establish havens on Mars in the twenty-third century led to the first colonies.” She took a deep breath, then tried to barrel on.

But Joul stopped her with a wave of their hand. “Oversimplification—we do enough of that during the day already.”

“Right.” Etna sighed.

What she was just working on was only a side project. Both her and Joul’s day jobs were Times researchers, historians who combed through thousands of years of history to feed into the Times Machine, which ran through their sorted anthropological data to mathematically construct “predicted timelines” for the future. Questions like what event led to another filled their minds during work and spilled into their off-hours.

Joul took a seat next to Etna and scrolled through the database she was looking at, tapping nervously with one foot. Etna pretended to ignore them, but secretly she didn’t mind their company. Joul bent over her writing and highlighted the word “timelines,” then wrote a little note beside it.

All histories are not one. History, the singular, is a construct.

Etna heaved a little air through her nose. It was the mantra of Times historians, the truth of their work as well as its counter-truth. It was ironic that they streamlined one history for the benefit of constructing alternate histories. And it was precisely why the pre-Times intrigued Etna. Histories back then must have felt organic.

Etna could see Joul out of the corners of her eyes, pointedly hovering about after the small talk. Joul stood still, pressed their hands together as the seconds ticked by, then bursted out, “Actually, I want you to see something.”

“Hmm?” Etna didn’t draw her attention away from the databases.

“It’s pressing.”

Maybe it’s the way that Joul said it, the way that their voice had gone dark and deep, all hints of humour gone, that made Etna afraid to turn around. She blinked hastily. When she was ready to face Joul, she found them waiting at the door, the panels already sliding open.

The two walked silently down the familiar hallway that led to a circular room that hosted the Times Machine. Etna didn’t ask where to go. If Joul had said it was pressing, been hesitant to admit that something was wrong, and waited until after work to find her, it could only mean one thing.

The Times Machine had made an outrageous prediction. And a terrible one.

Etna thought of pandemics and the fear that comes with not knowing what comes next. It jolted her heart. Made her afraid to take the next step, or even the next breath. She quickly reminded herself that whatever the Times Machine had predicted, she would soon have knowledge of. And everything would soon be fine.

The two paused before the door. Joul gave Etna a little shove.

The room was walled with a single monitor, and it read:

New Times Machines have been built beyond New Haven. They have new pasts, new presents, new futures. A thousand years from now, theirs will be the only histories.

Silence collected in the room.

Etna could sense Joul watching her. She reached out one tentative hand toward the monitor, as if that would do anything. Her hand shook.

"Which timeline is this?" She asked, even as she knew the answer.

"All of them. Ours."

"No. No, that can't be it. We've got to look back further, find records we haven't found, make other predictions. We just got these new databases, I can—" She started to head back, but Joul blocked her way.

Joul made a throaty sound. Etna looked at them, looked at them for so long that she memorized the soft lines around their eyes, the exact brown of their pupils and skin,

the tense thinness of their lips. Memories that no Times Machine could predict or erase.

Then Joul's lips parted in a question.

“When you looked at Earth's 21st century, what year did you start in?”

“The year 2030, our current year,” Etna said weakly. She swallowed. “To look at histories from where we are, isn't that our job?”

“But what have you left *out* of our histories?”

Etna couldn't answer.