

The Quantum Series: Book 2



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The Time Saving Agency by Christina Engela

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The Time Saving Agency

Imagine, if you will:

At the highly secretive, largely independent, inter-dimensional and – inevitably – clandestine organization called the Time Saving Agency, there is a saying that goes: “*You can't break an omelet without first making eggs*”. While this may appear to be a rather flippant little idiom, there is – as is usually the case, far more to it than meets the eye.

For starters, that's a rather simple principle of Time Travel right there – and according to the pioneers of time travel, who for the moment shall remain safely anonymous, it's one of the foundation stones of the Theory behind it. It's something of a paradox, you see, a mind-boggling annotation in the ever-puzzling and ever-growing *Annals of History* – and while some might be sniggering into their moustaches about finding a spelling error so early on in this story, the author of this work cannot be blamed for what they may think. While the *Annals of History* are something else entirely, the former applies entirely to the context of the work performed by the Time Saving Agency. Not that the TSA has a reputation for arsing about, you understand – but it's just that well, sometimes things do wind up going down the crapper sideways – but we digress.

Now, this point may be somewhat reminiscent of the age-old “*what came first, the chicken or the egg?*” riddle – in fact, at first sight the two concepts – the chicken and the egg, and the eggs and the omelet might even seem to be the same thing, but no, not really. Once we start digging a little deeper, we realize that in order for the hypothetical omelet to exist or be made (or indeed, be broken up to be eaten) there have to be some suitable eggs lying around first. These naturally, need to come from somewhere and indubitably, this also suggests that something has to get laid first – presumably the – *um*, eggs.

While both these idiomatic statements refer to eggs – specifically chicken eggs, the main difference between these two rather irking statements is this: omelets do not come from chickens – it is *eggs* which come from chickens. Chickens conversely come from eggs, and only *indirectly* from other chickens. Understand? Now, omelets on the other hand, are an entirely Human invention – Humans being here, the middle man as it were.

The conclusion to our brief examination of this rather perplexing conundrum is that while we may not know which came first, chicken or egg – we do know the omelet came after, and regardless of what eggs there are, unless you have an unusually accident prone chicken, they will not turn into omelets by themselves. In other words, there may be eggs and chickens to lay them – but without Humans to *make* omelets from the eggs, there would be no omelets – or in fact, any *need* for omelets.

Finally, nobody seems to know which came first; egg or chicken – except of course for agents of the Time Saving Agency – who can find out anything about, well – anything. The only trouble is, they never seem to say much about things like that – however, you can take it from me – they know. Why do I say that? Well, because it's the nature of the job – as is the need for secrecy. Believe me, the answer to these and other puzzles are kept safe and secure behind fire-walls and thick security doors secured with, er – time-locks, where one could possibly find answers to many other troubling questions, and not all of them necessarily relating to chickens.

Agents of the TSA, who police time-travel and prevent outside forces from mucking up the works and changing History, have to be very careful. One dropped egg and whoops, no omelet – if you follow the metaphor? In essence, to stretch the metaphor, this point links to yet another which is, unfortunately, best illustrated by yet another idiom in use at the TSA: “*A nine in time saves stitches*”. It's difficult to explain in only a few words what exactly is meant by this, but this much understated principle is what generally underlies the entire purpose of the TSA: To save Time.

From what? Well, one might ask. Well, while all of this gibberish about eggs and chickens and omelets – and time – may seem overly philosophical, and even far more theoretical than practical, it all comes down to this: Patterns. Yes, that's right – patterns. If you were to look at History, you'd see it's full of them. Try looking at a calendar – er, no... wait, links in a chain. Um, *oh dear*. No, let's start over – imagine a railway track with switching points in it... and the fleeting moment we understand as “now” is a locomotive on it, travelling forward at a steady pace – and then something happens to throw the switch at the points, and the train is directed down one side of the track ahead instead of the other... at which point the bit of track not travelled on vanishes and never existed at all... Chin up – agents of the TSA tend to get headaches from all this stuff as well, but

while all the technical explanations tend to tie their brains in knots at first, they get to be very good at it over – well, time. All that aside, what it really boils down to is this:

Each day shapes the days that follow.

Everything that makes up a day, every event that takes place everywhere – all adds up to what will follow. Everything, no matter how seemingly insignificant, plays a part in making that day what it was. Sometimes the meaning of every little thing – each individual component of a day – is made clear only by the effect of their absence. Take for example, a man and an apple.

Imagine a beautiful mild sunny day in the year 1666. Somewhere in the Lincolnshire part of Old England, an apple tree stood in the front garden of an old manor house. The grass around it was a lush yet restrained shade of green, and the sky above it was light blue, dotted with little white fluffy clouds. Birds chirped in the hedges and darted in and out of the rose bushes. Beneath its shady canopy, a funny-looking little man with wild-looking hair, who was dressed in the clothing of the period, was exactly where he was supposed to be – seated on an old bench that stood against the trunk, dozing. At more or less the same exact location – a little higher, in fact – in the branches of the tree above him – a blurry shape appeared, then seemed to shimmer slightly before solidifying into a male figure. It silently mouthed the words: ‘*Oh, f**k!*’ – before hurriedly grabbing onto a branch and hanging on tight. The figure below emitted a loud snore, blissfully unaware of the struggling figure above him. His name was Isaac Newton – not quite ‘*Sir*’ yet – and the man who seemed determined to not fall out of the tree this time? His name was Scrooby, Johnathan Scrooby, and he desperately wished to avoid having the same previous awkward exchange with the notoriously cantankerous scientist again!

The TSA believed that certain things happen at a certain time in a certain way, which in a sense, is what it’s all about – “it” being “everything”. If certain specific things didn’t happen, then *everything* else that followed would be completely different, wouldn’t it? I mean, if for instance, the First World War had never happened, would Adolf Hitler still have found fertile ground for his anti-Semitic message and risen to power? Would the Great Depression have taken place at all? To follow, would the Second World War have happened then without the actions of Nazi Germany, which had been fuelled by the crushing defeat of WW1 and the Depression? World War 2 after all, was a direct

consequence of World War 1 – and World War 1 spawned a whole new landscape in terms of both history and Human society, with effects being felt – well, in perpetuity.

To continue our theoretical exercise, let's posit the question that if something had prevented the assassination of the Austrian Arch-duke Franz Ferdinand in 1914, would World War One still have broken out? What if someone – someone *not* at the TSA – had managed to dismantle the chain of fatal alliances and treaties that bound and obligated the European powers to come to each other's military aid if attacked, and caused the world to plunge into war? What might happen then?

In the hallowed halls of the Time Saving Agency, there were those who believed that the entire structure of what was laughably called “reality” and “the present” depended on something rather like a fateful game of Jenga. Pull one stick out of the tower, and nothing might seem to happen. Jiggle it a little bit, give it a twist, and you might expect the same result – but pull the *right* stick out, and the entire tower might rearrange itself into something completely different! Thus, if something disrupted the flow of historic events, the result could be a completely new and different timeline which would be unique from the original – leading presumably straight to a bottle of headache pills for the unfortunate Time Agent assigned to un-fuck the resulting mess!

For those who might be wondering, this point has already amply been proven in numerous instances – which the TSA, being technically *outside* Time, recorded for – well, for record purposes. For example, because neither World Wars happened, there was the time the Soviets invented the A-bomb first, in 1943, and then proceeded to blow up cities around the world whenever anyone refused to see things their way. In another clear example of how minor and even miniscule changes to the timeline could affect the timeline and contribute to a unique, totally new reality, a certain Mr. John F. Kennedy became a very well-known used car salesman and Baptist faith-healer with a fondness for German confectionery, and steered clear of both military service *and* politics, which put a serious wrinkle in the Kennedy matriarch's dynastic plans. (For additional examples, those interested should consult the latest version of the *Annals of History* – where available.)

“Damn, that's what almost happened last time again!” Scrooby thought tensely while maneuvering himself as quietly as possible onto a stronger-looking

branch. Details, everything was about the details! Sometimes there was almost too much detail to keep up with!

Beaming into the thick of a tree *without* becoming a lifelong tree-hugger was a tricky business – it was a precision job! Luckily for Scrooby, he had a really whizz-bang operator back in the ...future – wait, *was* it the future? Scrooby dismissed the distracting thought. His job at the Time Saving Agency was a tough one, and no mistake! Billions of lives depended on him not screwing up. Literally *billions and billions*! Perhaps even a few gazillions too. Anyway, once he'd screwed up in only a *very small* way, and people on Earth had worn those little yellow smiley faces on t-shirts for decades afterwards – and that was just a *small* screw up! Scrooby sighed, appreciating his present lot in life. There he sat, in the branches of an apple tree in apple season – and without a single apple in sight! Those damned time terrorists sure didn't play fair! Below him, a kipping *not* Sir Isaac was waiting to get bonked on the noggin with an apple so that he could fulfill history by toddling off to invent gravity and shape scientific and mathematical principles for generations to come! The only apparent obstacle to closing this glaringly apparent gap in that circle was a complete absence of apples!

Some wise-ass bastard (the Agency preferred to call them Time Terrorists) had apparently slipped back in time illegally, and infected the local trees with a short-lived disease which wiped out the entire crop of apples for this year. Enter at this point, the Time Saving Agency – and *him*. Scrooby reached into his period-correct jacket pocket and removed the lump inside it while clinging tightly to the branch with his other hand and knees. Out came a bright shiny yellow apple – not exactly what grew around these parts (or in these times) – but an apple nonetheless. At any rate, it sure as hell wasn't the cooking variety known as "Flower of Kent" – which was glaringly absent from this very tree – but it was the best he could come up with at short notice. Aiming carefully, Scrooby let it go and waited a short moment as it dropped – while he dematerialized. *Bonk*, went the apple. Newton awoke, startled – gawped at the strange yellow apple which had rolled a little way off, looked up into the empty branches – and then skipped off to announce his invention of gravity to the scientific world! It only occurred to the man much later to wonder where the blazes that peculiar apple had come from in the first place.

So it was that Agent Scrooby rematerialized roughly a thousand years later, give or take a couple of ticks, on the time-jump platform at the TSA

headquarters.

“Did it work this time?” He asked to the room in general.

“Well, gravity’s still working!” Said the voice of someone being a smart-ass from behind a console across the room. “And we’re all still speaking English.”

Scrooby’s shoulders relaxed and he heaved a sigh of relief. He was satisfied with the thought of another job well done – and that he’d just saved the continuum from more funny t-shirts!

“Nice job, Jimmy!” Scrooby complimented his operator at the controls of the Time Jump Motivator – or if you will, time machine. “You’re still the ace!”

“Thanks, J.” Jim Rusche smiled back. “At least you didn’t fall out of the tree this time. Ha-ha.”

That was true – the startled Newton had got very angry with him the other two times that happened! Of course, things went wrong in time policing. They often did. Whenever that happened, a Time Agent could just press a button on their Remotes, return to the TSA, and then go back to Try Again Later.

“Ha-ha.” Scrooby repeated mockingly. “It’s lucky we were able to do it over, or the American War of Independence would’ve happened in Mexico again!” Scrooby sighed.

“Oh yeah, and d’you remember the time the USA became a province of Canada, eh?” Jim Rusche chortled.

“Oh yes – I remember!” Scrooby nodded, giving his colleague a tired disingenuous little smile. “What a shame that had to change back.”

Scrooby sighed, remembering the time before that when – in a breathtaking triumph of nineteenth century engineering – Napoleon, Emperor of Europe, actually managed to dig his famed tunnel across the French Channel and invaded Londres! They all ended up speaking French at the Agency for a while – and sorting that out had been... well, challenging. *Mon dieu.*

“Thank the gods for the Buffer!” Scrooby thought gratefully, and not for the last time. It protected them from unforeseen time events, or UTE’s (in other words, screw-ups) and gave Agents the chance to go back and TAL (Try Again Later). Scrooby sighed. In this line of work, people who made the same mistake twice were usually the lucky ones who killed themselves doing it the first time – and still didn’t learn from it. He’d had enough of it for one day. More than that, he needed a holiday – a *real* holiday!

The TSA liked having fresh agents on the job – fresh agents with a clear mind and a steady hand. Time travel wasn't for the faint of heart, after all. The pay was good though, as an Agent – but as Scrooby had decided long ago – even if he didn't get paid for it, the thrill alone was payment enough! Then again, the TSA – having pretty much the gift of both fore and hindsight – had long ago realized they couldn't afford to have disgruntled employees with too much time on their hands *and* the power of the gods at their fingertips – so the pay was *very, very* good indeed.

Debriefing always made Scrooby groan, but it was necessary, and it was part of the routine – but how he hated routine! People only had on average something like seventy years to live their lives – why would they willingly clutter it up with something as dull and boring as a routine spent doing unpleasant things? He reported to his supervisor, who was a Senior Agent called Guy Krummeck. That fella was a rather drab, ordinary – routine character who liked his shiny silver suits almost as much as he liked to go over every little detail at least three times as a guaranteed minimum. This last time on today's assignment, everything had gone alright, so debriefing went quickly. Twenty minutes later, a tired Johnathan Scrooby clocked out and went home to his small “routine” apartment in the accommodation wing. Tomorrow, after all, was another day again.

* * *

It was neither dark nor light here, and yet somehow at the same time it was both. There was no air, but there was a very definite chill of terror and despair in whatever passed for it. The eerie absence of sound was absolutely deafening. It was said that idle hands were the Devil's instruments, and although this wasn't Hell – not exactly – this place had many idle hands. Idle minds too. Bodies drifted in the confines of the chrono-spacial anomaly that was the *Limbo Practicale*, bodies that were for all intents and purposes, not dead. Not really alive either, not here – but certainly not dead... which was the rather terrifying point.

Frantic souls lingered here in this place, languishing in this terrible limbo, each tortured in their own private little Hells, living and re-living the same horrible nightmares again and again, ad-infinitum... ad absurdum. After only a short while, most of them would start losing their minds... their sanity would start unraveling just to help them pass the time! If anyone – or anything were

able to observe their progress here, the inmates could be seen to twitch occasionally.

The only hope for any variety in their torture the inmates had, would be when they experienced the same time-loop in their lives from another angle or dimension entirely – or perhaps upside down and in purple! Dense smothering silence cocooned the inmates, as though it were slowly draining the sound out of them... Yet on another, very different level – detectable only by the psyche – there was the inaudibly faint sound of slow, backward screams... And, if one held one's breath and listened even harder, mindless gibbering.

If the inmates had been fully conscious, those imprisoned here would doubtlessly be wide-eyed and screaming! Seeing one's own life replaying over and over from the inside, and without being able to change anything, was supposed to be something like watching re-runs, again – or re-runs of someone else's home movies... It was a singularly inventive form of cruel and brutal torture. Most people could withstand physical pain if they tried long enough, or even learned to like it, over time... but what nobody could stand for long, was boredom – and being forced to relive their own lives, their own mistakes and their own triumphs too, over and over again – without being able to change anything, or to *stop!*

Most people, as had been noted before, would be certifiably, window-licking mad after spending just a few days in the *Limbo Practicale!* It was a prison for the mind, body and soul, where perpetrators of Time Crime would, well, *do time.* Like, forever.

Among the inmates, who came from all kinds of backgrounds – there were representatives of several different time-periods across several millennia, from a multitude of worlds, races, and even realities in there – but there was *one* man of particular interest to us in this little bubble of Hellish purgatory. Like the others, this man drifted silent, still – seemingly unconscious in the depths of this infernal plane – only, against all known odds, *Brad Xyl* was smiling. He'd just been through his life again, backwards, and was celebrating the trail of death, destruction and chaos he was leaving ahead of him!

Brad Xyl! Now *this* was a man who stood out from the crowd, a Time Terrorist *extraordinaire!* Xyl was a man who had taken all the resources of the Time Saving Agency – which if you consider the ability to control, manipulate

and even bypass TIME, are pretty damned awesome – to capture him. It'd all started, well who knows when – years ago, or in a time still to come? In here, who the hell could ever know? Xyl was a man who wrought chaos and devastation across three millennia of known time and disrupted the time-stream so badly that at one time it resembled a pretzel – simply for the fun of it, just because he *could!*

Rumor had it that Brad Xyl was one of the first Humans to invent time travel – not just the concept of it, as renowned Human scientists like Albert Einstein, Stephen Hawking and Melinda Inkman had – they were more like explorers dreamers by comparison... No, Xyl had always been a *do-er*, and he *did* it – he made it happen. The resounding irony of the whole thing was that this man, who was currently floating weightlessly upside down in this terrible place, was one of the founders of the TSA itself! How he'd ended up here was, needless to say, ironic – and naturally, very, very well-deserved. It was a place of punishment, better than just a rap across the knuckles with a lame warning not to do it again, better than spending ten or twenty years in a prison cell to build up a horrible resentment of the system and people in charge who'd put them there – to come out again hungrier and with more skills than before – and more morally satisfying than just killing someone for messing around with Time...

The *Limbo Practicale* was a life sentence, but it was also a death sentence – because while inmates never died – not ever, they also were never set free, and never got to actually *live* again. Because it was such a final punishment, being sent here was a fate reserved for those who the TSA felt deserved it... the people who abused time travel, and went back in time in order to change it for whatever reason... which was the very reason for the existence of the TSA.

Everyone in the *Limbo Practicale* had got there at the end of what everyone in charge assumed was a one-way trip... But just because the TSA considered being sent to the *Limbo Practicale* to be a one-way trip, didn't mean that it really *was*. After all, a trip between two points, a point of origin and a destination may seem linear in a one-way sense – but time is rather pliable under certain circumstances, and especially if the flow of it is reversed...

Against all odds, and no matter what the tech-wallahs at the TSA's research and development lab said, Time *did* exist there, in small amounts (well, just some of the time). There were feint eddies and currents of time surrounded the inmates, moving this way and that – tugging at them with slow, rhythmic pulses,

like waves in the ocean. They were things that were barely tangible, faint forces of the universe they were, nearly indiscernible from the nothingness like a warm breeze on a hot summer night! And Brad Xyl – a man who stood out from the crowd, felt them! How long he'd been here, he knew not – but he was slowly learning to draw on these barely tangible waves, to attract them, and to master them like a new surfer with one foot on the sandy beach and the other on a shiny new surfboard – a board that had taken shape out of raw Hatred! Revenge splashed around his feet like the cold waves of the ocean of Time, while nearby, two other inmates collided with each other, bounced apart spread-eagled and spiraled off into the distance in infinite slowness... Xyl drew the Wetsuit of Insanity around his spiritual body, and it clung tightly to him, isolating him from the timelessness that seemed to exist here.

A wind of Change blew at him from behind and Brad Xyl pushed off from the beach with iron determination and a mental clarity hitherto before unknown to him! Something in the microcosm that didn't even have a name, went '*bling*' – and against all the laws of probability, the time terrorist, Brad Xyl, opened his eyes.

* * *

In the grand scheme of things, the third-rate Terran colony world called *Deanna* – which had been settled for more or less between half and three-quarters of a century – was pretty much just a footnote in the – er, *Annals of History*.

Deanna was roughly the same size as good old Earth, but unlike that remote place which fewer and fewer Humans were thinking of as *home* with each passing year, Deanna had much more land than ocean. Unlike Earth, which was covered nearly two-thirds by water, Deanna had just a single ocean on Deanna, and lots of lakes and rivers. Ice-caps at the poles – hundreds of meters thick in places – contained most of the planet's other water. The large central ocean was a lot like the Pacific, except that it was landlocked, mostly shallow, and fresh. A multiverse of life-forms teemed in the *Landlocked Ocean*, which was fed by freshwater rivers all around it. *Braking dolphins* – which were perhaps the most visible and well-known of Deanna's sea-life – swam in shoals of hundreds in the warm shallow ocean. The odd, quirky little dolphin-like creatures were air breathers, and because they were marsupials, this tended to cause problems which the local evolutionary process clearly hadn't accounted for. The pouches,

which were used to house their young after first birth, tended to generate a little too much hydrodynamic drag which slowed them down, hence their name. Braking dolphins had no natural predators on Deanna, but they could sometimes almost starve to death while trying to catch faster prey! Braking dolphins thrived on Deanna, and darted peacefully in and out of the serene and beautiful coral reefs in the shallower parts of the *Greater Equatorial Fishbowl*, which accounted for the larger part of the *Landlocked Ocean*.

The planet orbited an ordinary medium-sized star listed as *Ramalama* on the Imperial star charts – system 6327B2B. Deanna was smack in the middle of the Goldilocks zone – that is, being near enough to its star to not be too cold, and not too close to be too hot – and which otherwise had sod-all to do with porridge, soup, or any number of bears. It had two small moons in fairly close orbit, and by *small*, I mean virtually asteroid-sized. When the first Human settlers arrived on Deanna several decades ago, they bravely stepped out onto the untamed surface of their prospective new home. Looking up at the night sky, they named these two moons, well, *Ding...* and... er, *Dong*. Seriously. This had been something of a local joke for many years, and at first, the updated entries sent to the *Encyclopedia Galactica* by the Founders tended to be returned to confirm that it wasn't a mistake, before publication.

Legend and urban myth had it, that this had been some misguided attempt at humor on the part of the Founders of the colony, to make light of the fact that when they arrived on Deanna, they found very little at all to laugh at. Yes, *ha-ha* birds were accident-prone and just hilarious until they crashed through your bedroom window at three AM, and *obsidian crows* seemed harmless until you rode over one with your jeepo and didn't have a spare tire – and crabby-grass might seem very funny indeed, unless you're barefoot and standing on it!

The larger moon, which was *Dong*, lay further away from Deanna, and was around a kilometer in diameter. *Dong* consisted of plain, boring space rock, which had zero commercial value. In contrast, *Ding*, which was much smaller in size – being only fifty feet in diameter, was made up entirely of pure titanium. While the orbits of both small moons around Deanna – and each other – could only be described as somewhat eccentric, *Ding* could normally be found in a much closer orbit around Deanna. Whenever *Ding* became suddenly and mysteriously absent from the night skies – which was a regular occurrence, believe it or not – *Ding* could typically be located by looking in the newest crater somewhere on the surface of the planet.

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