

A Tragic Time to Die

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“Thank you for coming back.” Massimo greeted me warmly with the traditional kiss on each cheek. “We very much enjoyed your seminar yesterday. Given your interest in historical astronomy, I think last night’s discovery will be of even more interest to you than whatever sightseeing plans you had for today.”

I was intrigued. We stepped through some caution tape and a foreman handed us each a hard hat.

“You see, we are doing some construction. It is so hard to expand in an ancient, confined city like this. One must renovate or build within what you already have. They were going to add some classrooms right here next to the old observatory tower.

“Last week a careless crane operator breached a wall, and we needed a structural engineer to assess the safety. It wasn’t until yesterday that we discovered a hidden room behind the staircase. We’re still investigating and studying the area, but given your expertise we thought you should see while you are still in town.”

We stooped to enter through a hole in the wall which had been temporarily reinforced by steel beams. Against the wall was most of a long, stone box, its corner broken with the wall. Portable spotlights shone on the remaining curved wall and the underside of stone steps. I had to catch my breath after seeing the hand-drawn diagram of the sun with eight planets—surely the whole known universe about two hundred years old, a date arrived at by the style of the drawings and the symbols identifying the planets.

He saw the look on my face and guessed the calculations going on in my head.

“1803,” is all he said.

I nodded in agreement. The presence of Ceres and lack of Neptune had told me it was 1801-1846 – another time we had eight planets in our solar system, but not the same eight.

“The date is from the last entry in a journal we found here, ” Massimo continued. “It also matches the date a promising but peculiar astronomer and alchemist disappeared just before the fall of the Republic of Venice. Apparently he was obsessed with the idea of time travel.”

“Time travel and alchemy – why not?” I shrugged, considering the funding of astronomy at the time. “But they already knew the Earth travelled around the sun. Without a stationary Earth, if you jump forward or back you’re most likely to land in empty space. Not so lucky for the time traveler.”

“No luck indeed. But our friend here considered the Earth’s motion. He realized that we are always traveling through space and time anyway, second by second. Gravity holds us here from one moment to the next and the passage of time does not mean the Earth leaves us behind. The time traveler just needs to be physically confined to a spot on the Earth as he travels continuously, albeit it speedily, through time. Quite a clever idea if you think of it. One merely needs a spot protected from disturbance from the time one begins the trip until the future moment one emerges. Hence this secret room and this container. Behold the time machine!”

With a small flourish he pointed to the stone box. I realized it was just bigger than a coffin.

“And the missing astronomer?” I asked warily.

“Oh, we found him all right. Poor chap had left instructions in his journal to open the box as long as one hundred years or more had passed. But he was only now disturbed by the tractor scoop.

“Poor chap died inside—dehydration or starvation, maybe, or just terror. There were bloody nail marks on the inside of the lid as if he had tried to claw his way out. His fingertips were shredded almost to the bones.”

I shuddered. “That’s an awful way to die. Stuck in a box hoping to travel through time. Well, here we are, two hundred years in the future. It’s kind of tragic in a way, that this is how his body has been traveling through time.”

“Time traveling indeed.” he replied. “I think you’ll find his story even more tragic than you are imagining.”

“How is that?”

“Well, as you said, he entered that box over two hundred years ago and has been moving forward through time ever since. But the scratch marks are still fresh, the body not decomposed, and the coroner put the time of death as no more than a few days ago.”

“You don’t mean . . .”

“Oh, but I do. Our time traveler outlived Napoleon and many popes, the unification of Italy as we now know it, and several world wars. Until last week he had safely traveled over two hundred years into the future, but in the end he was killed by campus construction and bureaucracy before he could reveal his secret.”