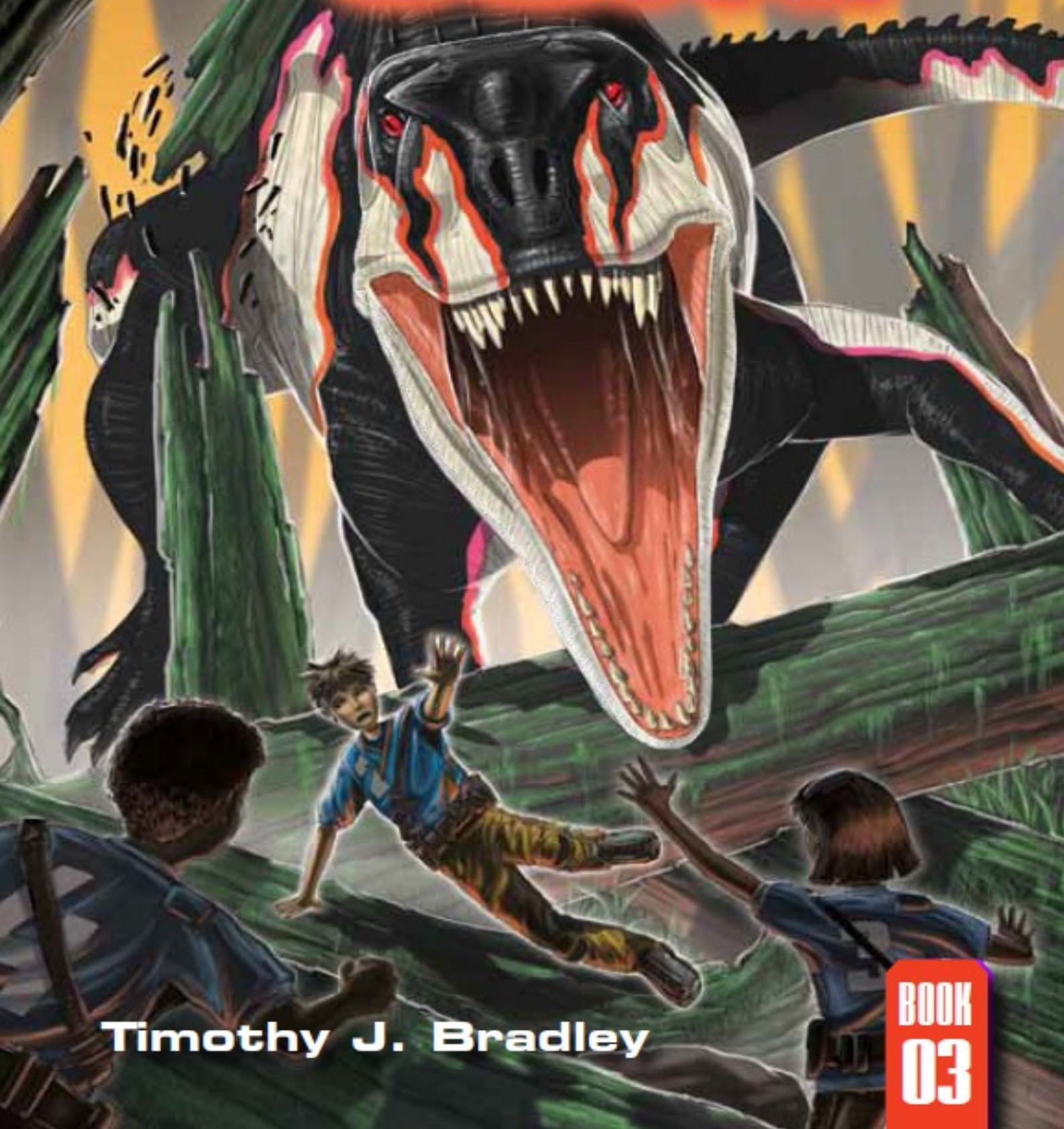


The logo for the Sci-Fi series, featuring the word "SCI-FI" in a stylized, red, blocky font with a white outline. The letters are set against a dark, circular background with a white, gear-like or star-like shape in the center.

TIME JUMP



Timothy J. Bradley

BOOK
03

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

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CHAPTER 1

“Fighters ready!” a voice called over Sidney Jamison’s headphones. He quickly adjusted the headset over his curly, brown hair. “The Nanobot Death Match will begin in five seconds.”

Sid’s VR goggles lit up, and he could see what his nanobot saw: a canyon surrounded by a vast, rugged terrain. Through his nanobot’s eyes, the canyon looked immense. But in reality, the canyon was just the size of a pinhead.

Sid drew in a deep breath. *It’s battle time!*

The nanobot tournament was born when Sid realized the tiny machines used at Goddard Island might be good for something other than fabricating materials and conducting research on microsize devices. They could be modified and customized into outlandish configurations by bolting, welding, or sticking on destructive bits and pieces. Microsize mayhem was way more fun than delving into some boring assignment about ancient piles of dirt and bones.

When something sparked Sid’s burning streak of curiosity, he worked through the night to find the answers to his questions. But he immediately dismissed anything that didn’t trigger his curiosity as dull, dull, dull. The idea for the Nanobot Death Match came to Sid as he was procrastinating, looking for something—anything—to put off his Postmodern Paleontology project. *A bunch of stuff died*, he thought, *and that’s basically it. What’s the big deal? It’s done and gone.* Sidney had always been more interested in the future than the past. He couldn’t wait to find out what happened next, whether it was with technology, a scientific discovery, or lunch.

He had been killing time by setting up thousands of nanobots (too small to see without using a microscopic camera), in curving patterns on his desk, and then knocking them down like dominos. They all went down in sequence. Sid

had spent hours that way.

But today, the line of knocked-over bots gave him a shot of inspiration. An idea exploded in his mind: *robot battles!* He turned suddenly in his chair. “Hey, Hari! Are you busy right now?”

Hari Gupta, Sid’s roommate and friend, replied without turning around, “What do you think, Sid? I’ve been sitting here for hours trying to program a group of drill scanners so I don’t wipe out traces of a meteor in 65-million-year-old rock.”

“So, you’re saying you’re busy?”

Hari turned, annoyed. “Yes, Sid. I’m busy, and you should be, too. This project is a lot more work than I thought it would be. If you haven’t started it, you’d better get to it.”

Sid waved a hand dismissively. “I know, I know, but I just had a lethal idea. Check it out: nanobot battles! Wouldn’t that be great?”

Sid watched as Hari tried not to smile. “It’s not a bad idea. But I have to finish this project,” he said. Hari turned back to his project.

Sid waited. He knew Hari wouldn’t be able to resist.

A few seconds later Hari sighed and threw up his hands, “Aw, whatever. Let’s do it!”

Sid and Hari spread the word through the Tesla dorm and beyond, and within a couple of hours, nearly every Sci Hi student had dropped his or her schoolwork and started preparing nanobots for battle. By dinnertime, Sid had set up a bracket system that pitted the four dorms against each other in a series of one-on-one battles.

Penny Day, Sid’s other best friend, chided him in her clipped British accent, “I hope you realize what you’ve done. Not only are you procrastinating from working on your assignments, you’ve now convinced every other student to put off their work as well.”

“Awesome, huh?” Sid grinned. “Hey, I’m not twisting anyone’s arm. You don’t have to take part in the tournament if you’d rather study, Penny.”

Her dark eyes flashed. “Are you kidding? Pass up the chance to kick your butt—robotically speaking, of course? I wouldn’t miss it.”

The first battles were scheduled for the next day, after classes let out.

The Sci Hi staff knew something was up when they received an 800 percent increase in nanobot fabrication requests, but they made no attempt to stop the runaway bot production. *I never would have been able to pull this off at Bleaker High*, Sid marveled. *It’s like they want us to mess up.*

Even Talos, an AI built by the scientists on Goddard Island, got in on the action. Talos was humanoid in shape, with a single blue eye lens on his face. Massive arms and legs were connected to his body with thick cables and shock absorbers. Even though he was a big, heavy machine, Talos moved precisely, giving him the appearance of a trained athlete. With his bulky body, Sid always thought of Talos as a “he.” He had been programmed with a malesounding voice, but lately the robotics department had been experimenting with accents, animal sounds, and even weird sound effects, like jet engines and thunder rumbles, to give the AI more personality. Sid had a soft spot for the intelligent machine. Talos had piloted the aircraft that brought Sid to Goddard Island, and he was the first to help Sid feel at home at Sci Hi.

“Hello, Sidney,” Talos said in Sid’s headphones. “Thank you very much for inviting me to be the announcer for the Nanobot Death Match. Yeeeeeeeeee!” Sid jumped as a high-pitched screech flooded his ears. “That was a howler monkey call,” Talos said.

That was *something*, Sid thought, but he simply said, “You’re welcome, Talos” through gritted teeth. He unbuckled the antique watch that used to belong to his father and slipped it into his pocket so it wouldn’t get damaged if he flung his arms around during the nanobot fight. “You might want to lower the volume when you’re going to add a sound effect,” Sid said. “Or at

least warn everyone.”

“I will,” Talos said. “Are you ready to begin the match?”

“Yeah, go for it,” Sid said. “Really put your heart into it...well, you know what I mean.”

Talos’s voice boomed in Sid’s headphones. “*Ladieeeeees and gentlemen!* Welcome to the Sci Hi Microdome Stadium, on beautiful Goddard Island, where the scientific meets the spectacular!”

Sidney laughed. Talos’s latest voice implant made him sound less robotic, but he still didn’t sound quite like a real human announcer. Perfect for a nanobot showdown!

Talos continued, “Tonight’s bout features two combatants small in stature but *huuuuuge in heart!* In this corner, in blue and silver... TORRRRRRRNADOOOOO!” On the large image screen, a spotlight illuminated the nanobot. Cheers could be heard throughout the Tesla dorm. Tornado was thin and spindly, with rotor blades on its arms that could be used for hovering, defense, or all-out warfare. A student named Danny on the floor below had built it. Sid didn’t know him that well, but he knew Danny was a major robotics nerd—and that was saying something at Sci Hi.

“In this corner, in green and orange...THE CRUSHERRRRRRR!”

As the spotlight lit up Sid’s combatant, he flexed his hands in the VR gloves and raised his arms overhead. His nanobot matched his moves at the microscopic level. Penny cheered behind him, watching the action on the huge wallscreen.

Sid was proud of The Crusher. He had modified his bot with leftover parts from a microelectronics assignment and used some tiny piezoelectric actuators he had borrowed from Hari’s alarm clock. The design was based on a cartoon character he had liked as a kid, with a few additions. The Crusher had four short, stubby legs to give it stability. The bot’s arms were thick cylinders that held cannonball-tipped pistons that could dent, crunch, or

smash an opponent. Sid didn't have much of a competitive streak, but he was definitely interested in building a fighting robot, even one that was microscopic. The actual fighting part would just be added fun. To Sidney's surprise, he had won matches against his first three opponents, and he was feeling confident going into this match against Tornado. "*Rotor blades? Ha!*" he thought. All he needed to do was catch Tornado and smash it into micro-junk. Simple.

He chose a track from Echo Chamber's latest album, and the pounding goth-pop beat filled his ears. *Yeah*, he thought, "*Piledriver*" is the perfect song for this.

Sidney quickly scanned the nanobot's systems on his goggle display. All systems go. As he flexed his fingers in the VR gloves, he saw the pistons fire and retract.

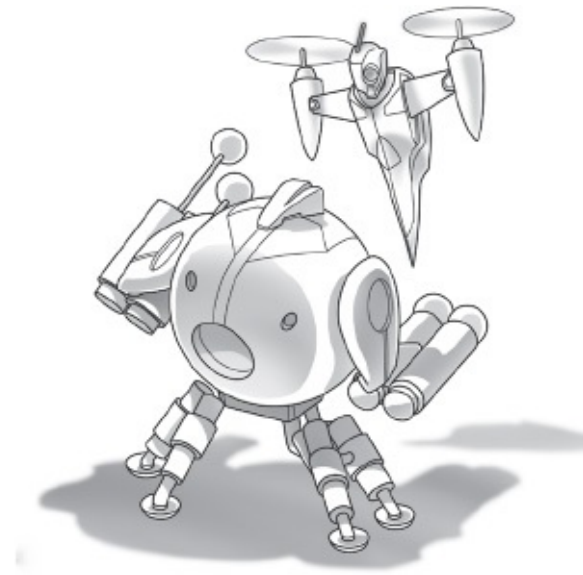
"Go get 'em, Sid!" Penny cried from behind him. Then, he heard Hari's footsteps approaching.

"Sorry I'm late," Hari said. "My alarm clock didn't go off, and it's seriously thrown off my schedule." Sid hunched down in his chair, hoping Hari wouldn't ask him about the missing actuators.

Shifting his focus back to the competition, Sid directed his bot into the canyon, switching to infrared so he could see into the shadows. If his nanobot were thrown outside the bright red circle surrounding it, he would lose the match. Suddenly, the view twisted crazily. Sidney found himself staring into the face of Tornado. The other nanobot had landed behind him and lifted The Crusher off the ground! Sidney stuck his arms out to the sides, rotating the bot's torso rapidly to escape. The Crusher's legs automatically telescoped outward as it fell, and Sid struggled to land it upright.

Maybe this wasn't going to be as easy as he had thought.

When Sid twisted the bot's torso, he spotted Tornado bearing down on him, rotor blades spinning. He brought The Crusher's arms up in defense, bending Tornado's rotor blades into useless scrap.



Yes! Sid thought. “Double-punch!” he yelled. He triggered the four cannonball-tipped pistons and started pounding on Tornado. Sid was able to push Tornado against a stalagmite as he sent a piston into the bot’s large camera eyes, shattering both. He knocked the challenger to the ground, pinning it with the Crusher’s piston arms.

Suddenly, the arena turned red. “Match over,” Talos said. “Winner: The Crusher, piloted by Sidney Jamison!”

Sid pulled off his VR goggles and gloves as Hari and Penny clapped him on the back.

“Way to go, Sid!” Hari said.

“Well done, you!” Penny said. “But you know who your next match is with.” She flashed a wicked grin, her dark eyes glinting like chips of obsidian. Unlike Sid, Penny was competitive. She was also tough and very smart. Penny would fight to win.

“Yup,” Sid said nervously, strapping his dad’s watch back on. “You.”

“I hate to say it, but I think we need to put some time in on our Paleontology assignment,” Hari said, leading them back to their rooms.

“Oh, come on,” Sid groaned, shuffling after them. “There’re a couple of bouts over in the Darwin dorm that I really want to watch.”

“Hari’s right,” Penny chided, words and diagrams about the assignment scrolling on her dataglasses. “This is a big project, and we’re going to need as much time as we can get.”

“What’s with you guys?” Sid said.

“Sorry, Sid,” Hari said, sitting down at his desk. “We’ve goofed off enough for one day. Unlike you, we actually need to study to get good grades.”

Sid sighed. “What was it we’re supposed to be doing again? I tuned out when Dr. Petraglif was giving the assignment. Does she remind anyone else of a bird?”

“Don’t be dense. You know we’re studying mass extinctions,” Penny said, ignoring the comparison. “We have to figure out what caused them in the past and whether we’re going through one right now. What’s with *you*? Usually, you can’t wait to get geeky with us.”

“I just don’t get what the big deal is,” Sid grumbled. “Lots of things have died, and we’re here now, right? So what? I’ve got better things to do than study the past. There are robots to build and planets to explore.”

“The big deal,” Hari said patiently, “is that none of us would be here if it weren’t for the dinosaurs getting wiped out.”

“You’re crazy,” Sid said. “The dinosaurs were just too slow and stupid to get out of their own way, and then humans, with our awesome opposable thumbs, showed up and started building skyscrapers and space stations.”

“Sorry, but you’re the crazy one here,” Penny said. “If that mass extinction hadn’t happened and the dinosaurs hadn’t become extinct, we wouldn’t be here at all. With the dinos cleared away, there was room for new life to develop. Up until that point, mammals were just little furballs hiding from the larger predators. Once the dinosaurs were gone, mammals evolved into new forms and took over the planet.”

“Well then, how can we be going through a mass extinction right now?”

Sid argued. “Just look outside!” He turned on the image wall and located a channel that showed the view out over the ocean. “There are seagulls, pelicans, seals, dolphins, whales...all kinds of stuff! Plus, we haven’t been hit by an asteroid. Put a check in the ‘No Mass Extinction’ box. Project finished.”

“Wrong again, dope,” Hari said. “Mass extinctions happen over geological lengths of time, like millions of years. They don’t always need an asteroid, either.”

“Climate change, volcanoes, disease, and gamma-ray bursts have all caused mass extinctions,” Penny added. “Plants and animals are becoming extinct a thousand times faster than they did before humans existed! I’m actually focusing on that in my research.”

“All right, enough! Let’s just get this over with!” Sidney huffed as he pulled up the assignment on his voxpod.



When they entered the Postmodern Paleontology classroom the next day, Sidney, Penny, and Hari saw a large animal sitting on the laboratory table.

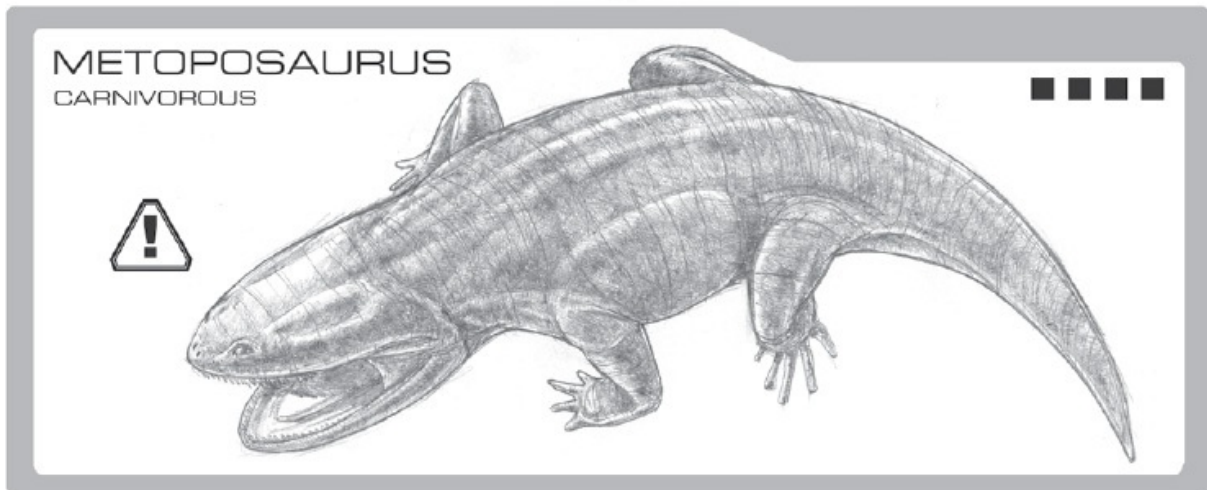
“Wow, nice!” Sid exclaimed. His friends nodded their agreement. The creature was nearly six feet long, with tiny arms and legs poking out from its sides, almost like a crocodile. Its head was wide and flat, with small eyes on top near the front of its snout. It was nearly submerged in a tank of water. Its skin was smooth and slick. When Sid bent closer to look at its small, dark eyes, one of them blinked.

Penny grabbed the back of Sidney’s shirt and pulled him away as the animal began to open its huge mouth, revealing rows of small, sharp teeth as it hissed. With a shiver, Sid, Penny, and Hari quickly took their seats.

“I see you’ve met Fluffy,” said Dr. Petraglif, their instructor, with a wink. She was small and thin, with spiky brown hair and bright green eyes. “He’s a clone of *Metoposaurus*, a large amphibian that lived 220 million years ago, until a serious dry spell in what is now Poland produced a mass extinction. When amphibians like this big guy died out, other creatures, like modern-day

alligators and crocodiles, were able to evolve to take over its ecological niche. We can see that progression through the fossil record.

“Fossils are like slices of time. When you add up all those slices, you learn a surprising amount of information about the creatures and their environment.



“Hmph,” Sidney said, shaking his head.

Dr. Petraglif’s head cocked slightly, and one sparkling eye fixed on him. “Did you have a comment, Sidney?”

Sidney cleared his throat nervously. “Well, I don’t really get why those people spent so much time digging up old bones.”

“Aren’t you curious about the past? Just think about your own family. There’s so much we can learn from our parents, grandparents, and all the generations that came before us. Following our curiosity to its natural conclusion leads us to embark on excavations like this. Fossils don’t just tell us about extinct life forms. They tell us about the tree of life on Earth, and that includes humans. Fossils help us understand where our own species came from,” Dr. Petraglif replied.

Sid knew something about the power of curiosity, but there was no way he could think about his own family tree without thinking about the big gap where his father should have been. Everything he knew about his dad was based on pictures and stories—tantalizing but mysterious razor-thin slices of

time that told him about as much as some dusty old fossils might.

“With each fossil we uncover,” Dr. Petraglif said with animation, “we learn more about our own past. Which brings me to our class project!” She directed the class’s attention to the huge image wall at the front of the room. It was a satellite view of a hilly, arid-looking landscape. “So far, we’ve been investigating what may have caused each of the five mass extinctions that decimated our planet in the past. Some more fringe scientists have suggested anaerobic bacteria may have produced large quantities of hydrogen sulfide, which would have been toxic to a wide variety of species and damaged the ozone layer. Others have suggested the rise of Pangea, the supercontinent, may have produced such dramatic changes in the weather and geography that species were not able to adapt in time. Perhaps the most popular proposal is the idea that a large asteroid caused the Permian-Triassic extinction. The impact of such a large chunk of rock colliding with Earth would have thrown tons of dust into the atmosphere, and tsunamis and firestorms may have damaged the land. The Earth’s climate would have been altered for decades. But so far, no crater has been found. Without any hard evidence, it’s hard to know which theory is correct.

“You’ve been assigned to test this theory and support it with historical evidence. Look for any signs in your investigating that could be tied to the possible sixth extinction that appears to be underway today. Now, it’s time to get your hands dirty and start digging so you can test these hypotheses, at least virtually. I’ve secured time in the VR station for our class. Anyone who is interested can participate in a dig that’s currently in progress in Mongolia. Who would like to sign up for a shift?”

Hari stared expectantly at Sidney until his hand joined the other students’ in the air.

Sidney sighed. *Why didn’t I sign up for Interplanetary Terraforming instead?* he wondered.



CHAPTER 2

Sid would never admit it, but the Mongolian fossil dig was pretty lethal. Reclining in one of the virtual reality labs in Sci Hi with powerful VR rigs over their heads and hands, the students were plugged into golf-cart-size dozerbots at a promising fossil site in Ulaanbaatar. The bots were easy to maneuver, and Sid was trying to do the tightest circles he could, raising clouds of dust with the dozer's spinning tires.

"Stop fooling around and help, please!" Penny said. "Hari and I are almost done planting our drillscanners. Hurry up, will you?"

"Yeah, Sid, let's go. Dr. Petraglif said the satellite is almost out of range, and they want to get the scans done in the next couple of hours," Hari chimed in. "You're holding everything up."

"Okay, okay!" Sid said. "Geez, you two are bossy. You remind me of my Housemate. That thing was always barking orders at me."

"You probably crashed the poor thing's chips," Penny replied.

Sid followed the coordinates that were overlaid on the image of the fossil site, and placed the drillscanners. Once he started them, they quickly sank into the ground as the laser cutters bit into the dirt and rock. A geyser of dust shot from the end as the drillscanners burrowed.

"Okay, done," Sid said. "What happens next with these things?"

"They'll scan the fossils underground and print out replicas with a 3-D printer," Hari said.

After a few hours spent digging for fossils in the VR lab, Sidney, Hari, and Penny were done with classes for the day.

"Did you see that rock I found with the feather in it?" Hari crowed.

“I still don’t want to be a paleontologist,” Sidney replied. “But I have to admit, that was pretty cool. There are millions of years of stuff trapped inside those rocks, and no one knows what it is until they uncover it. Drilling through the layers was like looking through a album of photographs—except the oldest pictures are at the back of the book instead of at the front. It’s actually kind of like time travel.”

“I guess that’s one way to think about paleontology,” Hari mused. “I never thought of it like that.”

“It’s hard to imagine all those creatures living millions of years ago, but if we could travel to the past, we could actually test our mass-extinction hypotheses and see what really killed them,” Sidney said. “That’d be a pretty lethal field trip.”

“Yeah, but the past isn’t a place that exists somewhere,” Penny said. “You can’t just go to the past by walking through the right doorway. The things we use to measure time, like time zones, are human ideas that help us make sense of the world we live in.”

As they walked back to the Tesla dorm for dinner, Sid continued to speculate. “So, Penny, you really don’t think time travel is possible?”

“I won’t say it’s impossible,” she said. “I’m just not sure how it could work. There’s no road to travel along to get to the past or the future. We experience time because of the way our brains are wired. Time helps us order events that happen to us, so we don’t go nuts trying to live our lives. The kind of time travel you’re talking about only happens in books and movies.”

“I’ll just come out and say it,” Hari chimed in. “I think real time travel is impossible.”

“You guys have no imagination.” Sid said. “I thought scientists were supposed to keep an open mind.”

Penny grinned, “If it were possible, maybe you could go back in time and design a better nanobot. I’m going to destroy the one you’re using now.”

“I’ve seen your bot, Penny. We’ll see who destroys who,” Sid said, laughing a little more loudly than usual. He was actually pretty worried about going up against Penny.

“And then I get to face the winner,” Hari said, his face looked eerily calm.

“How come we haven’t seen your nanobot design, Hari?” Penny asked.

“You’ll see it soon enough,” Hari replied with a serene grin.

That night, Sid couldn’t sleep. His mind was whirling at the idea of time travel. What if it *were* possible to travel through time—not just back in time, but forward! Seeing into the future? That would be lethal! No question.

He picked up the old-fashioned watch his mom had sent for his birthday. It had been his dad’s, and Sidney often found himself watching the second hand run smoothly around the dial, marking time that would never be experienced again. Sidney had a vague memory of watching his dad take the watch apart and put the pieces back together. Now, the watch was the only trace of his father left after the fusion reactor accident that caused his disappearance. It had been a gift from his mom to his dad, on one of their anniversaries. The case was dented and scratched in the explosion. The leather strap had been ripped apart, requiring Sid to fabricate a new one on a 3D printer. Bits of dirt and leaves were ground into the watch, and there was a hairline crack in the domed crystal protecting the dial. There were even bits of leaf *inside* the watch, as if they had been pushed right through the titanium outer casing. But somehow, the watch was still keeping perfect time. His mom said she thought the force of the explosion must have ripped the watch from his father’s arm, but Sidney thought there must be more to it. Aboard the undersea WAVElab, Sid’s uncle Mitch had said that traveling across dimensions resulted in some kind of “residue” snapping back to the original dimension, like an elastic band stretched tight and then released. *Maybe the watch has some kind of residue from the explosion on it*, Sidney thought. He had run every kind of test he could think of on it. *Except for carbon dating*. There was something important about the watch’s condition that was

prodding his brain, but the answer danced just out of reach. But all this talk of the past had him wondering.

Sidney's brain refused to slow down and rest. He knew he had a better chance of sleeping if he just got up and did something for a little while to take his mind off all his crazy ideas. He pulled on some jeans, sneakers, and a sweatshirt, strapped on the watch, and walked outside the dorm into the cool night breeze coming in off the ocean.

Thinking back to his conversation with Hari and Penny, Sid felt his feelings about the past start to shift slightly. Maybe the reason he was so disinterested in the past was that his own past was so painful to look at. He held that thought at arm's length and wistfully studied it. He had been so young when he lost his dad, and he couldn't remember much about him anymore. His memories were blurry no matter how hard he tried to keep them clear and in focus. It was the everyday stuff with his dad he missed the most, and he knew his mom felt the same. *I just wish I could eat one awesome tuna-salad sandwich with him—and ask him every question in the world.* There had to be a way to understand what had happened to his dad.

Sidney looked up at the stars. There were thousands and thousands of them that he could see, and millions more he couldn't. He was still haunted by the glimpse he had caught of his dad in the alternate universe that had appeared while he was trapped on WAVElab. Sid had seen into a universe where his father was still alive and well, at home with Sid and his mom. For a few seconds, Sidney had thought of entering that universe, but he knew his real mom would be devastated. Showing up in the alterna-Sid's universe would have unhinged that family, and who knows what might have been different? It might be a universe where Sid's dad became an accountant instead of a scientist. Maybe Sid himself would be different, and that Sid might never take things apart or wonder about the universe.

Even though he knew it was the right decision, Sidney still felt a huge sense of loss that he hadn't before. It was one thing to barely remember his dad. It was another to have seen him alive and feel that loss again, fresh and

raw.

Looking around, Sidney was startled to find himself in front of the fusion lab. With all the thoughts of his dad spinning around and around in his mind, he had wandered to the last place his dad had been seen. His father had been one of the Goddard Island scientists who had pioneered fusion power—until the reactor accident.

Sidney stared into the ID scanner as it verified the blood-vessel pattern in his eyes and confirmed his identity. After a moment, the outer door slid aside, rumbling softly. Sid walked to the huge windows of the observation gallery, and looked down into the chamber beyond. There it was: the nuclear reactor. Strange, the room was dark. *What's going on?* Sidney wondered. Usually, the reactor glowed with safety lights that warned of radiation and intense gravitational forces. Those lights were never turned off when the reactor was operating. A chill ran down his neck.

Something wasn't right.

Sid took the stairs down to the reactor level and walked through the inner door into a dark, cavernous space. The reactor sphere was suspended in the center of the room, about eight feet off the ground and tethered with steel cables. When the reactor was operational, the cables were detached, and magnetic fields kept the meter-wide sphere floating off the ground. It usually made Sid feel like he was standing inside an atom. Tonight, dim spotlights lit the area around the reactor, but the rest of the chamber was dark.

A hulking shadow stood close to the reactor. Sid held his breath. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. A familiar shape took form.

“Talos!” Sid called out to his favorite AI. “Hey, I think this is the first time I've seen you standing still for more than five seconds.”

The robot didn't respond.

As Sid walked towards Talos, his concern grew. The AI's status lights were dark, and the ever-present soft glow from his eye shield was missing.

The robot had been completely shut down. Talos never would have done that willingly.

Talos's right arm was frozen in position, as if he had been reaching for the reactor.

What are you doing, big guy? Sidney took a few steps around Talos before discovering the AI hadn't been reaching for the reactor itself. He had been trying to reach an object *on* the reactor. A small, black, rectangular box was affixed to the sphere. A set of numbers flashed on the side: 00:02:59. And then, after a moment: 00:02:58. Sid had a horrible realization. The box was a timer.

This does not look good.



Sidney heard a soft sound in the darkness. “Hey! Who’s in here?” he called, his voice trembling slightly.

Someone was at the reactor control panel. Sidney reached to call Dr. Macron but realized he had left his voxpod in his room. He turned to run to the staging area, but the door closed before he could reach it.

He was trapped.

“What are you...what are you doing to the reactor?” he asked the figure in the darkness.

“Destroying it,” a raspy voice replied.

“Why? Why would you do that?” Sidney asked, his eyes darting back and forth between Talos and the dark corner of the room where the voice was coming from. He heard the figure move towards him.

“Because this place is dangerous,” the voice hissed. “None of you understand what you’re meddling with. You think you can control the very fires of the universe with nothing more than the minds of humans? To capture and control the power of the atom, we must call on other universes, other realities, and other beings that have gathered the wisdom used to create the universe itself.”

With a start, Sidney spied a small emblem tattooed on the figure’s neck that glowed faintly in the dark chamber. It was the symbol of the Alchemists. He had to get out of there.



“The destruction of this fusion reactor will permanently turn the public against the research being conducted here,” the figure continued. “The Alchemists will take control of handing out scientific advances and information to civilizations around the world. *We* will become the rightful

holders of the torch of knowledge!”

“That’s...that’s crazy!” Sid said, fear entering his voice. “You could kill someone!”

“Change is always painful,” the figure said. “If some are lost in the process, it will be worth it to bring the human race onto the path we are blazing to the future,” the figure shouted.

Slowly, the figure backed away, disappearing into the darkness. Sid heard some metallic noises as the intruder escaped through the network of air ducts that ran along the ceiling. After a moment, Sid ran over to the ladder rungs attached to the wall of the reactor chamber and climbed up. When he reached the top, he saw the access door to the air duct had been welded shut. He couldn’t get out that way. He quickly climbed back down and ran back over to the timer. It read 00:00:59.

I’m not going to make it out of here, Sid realized.

His mind went blank with terror. Destroying the fusion reactor might flood Goddard Island and the surrounding coastline with radiation, not to mention the damage it would cause if the reactor reached critical mass and detonated. Somehow, Sid had to get out and take Talos with him, but his feet felt as if they were glued to the floor.

Just then, the particle projectors came to life. They moved slightly as they automatically adjusted their focus on the reactor sphere. The cables holding the sphere rattled as the magnetic fields buoyed it. A glowing red circle appeared on the floor around the reactor, indicating the danger zone of radiation and magnetic forces. Sid saw with horror that Talos was standing just inside the circle. He knew the radiation and gravitational effects from the micro-black hole would severely damage Talos’s neural web, disrupting the delicate pathways that were every bit as complex as those in a human brain. If he were exposed to too much radiation, Talos would be the robot version of dead.

I can’t let that happen, Sid thought. Talos had brought him to Sci Hi, and

Sidney had discovered that, in his own way, the AI had as much personality as any of Sid's human friends. Leaving him here would be like leaving Penny or Hari behind.

Without thinking, Sidney ran at Talos's unmoving bulk and jumped, ramming into the robot's upper body. Talos teetered for a second, finally tilting back like a giant redwood tree. He hit the ground with a metallic thud. Sid saw Talos's head had cleared the danger zone.

Just then, the reactor powered up to full. The particle projectors fired their streams of hydrogen atoms into the reactor sphere, where the black hole would speed them up, and they would collide, producing huge amounts of energy. Sid watched, horrified, as the reactor started to glow. There was no way he could escape from the chamber. He needed to find a way to survive, but he couldn't look away.

The device attached to the sphere detonated. The blast threw off the particle streams, destabilizing the reactor. Shafts of light shot out from the particle entry ports, and bolts of electricity arced from the sphere to the particle projectors. Sid could only see flickers of the reactor chamber as the strobe light illuminated the room.

Sid grabbed one of Talos's metal arms and tried to pull him. He could feel the tendons in his neck go taut as he attempted to move the robot toward the door, but Talos wouldn't budge. He was too heavy for Sid to move alone.

"Talos, wake up!" Sid screamed into the AI's face. "You've got to move!"

There had to be a way to move him, some kind of emergency procedure. Just then, he noticed a glowing exclamation point spinning in the air beside Talos's head. Sidney touched it, and glowing letters appeared: POWER FAILURE. RESTART? YES/NO. He jabbed the YES icon several times. "Come on, *COME ON!*" he shouted.

Suddenly, the robot creaked. Talos was trying to move! One of his legs straightened slightly. A dim blue glow emanated from the lens of his eye.

Sidney caught a glimpse of the timer. He had seven seconds left. A halo of energy had formed around the reactor, twisting and looping as if it were made of glowing string. The halo was getting larger, spreading out. One of Talos's arms reached hesitantly for Sid, grasping his shoulder. Talos pulled him to the floor and rolled over Sid to protect him. Sidney watched in horror as the seconds counted down and Talos powered off again.

The energy halo around the reactor blasted outward, like a miniature Big Bang.

Sid couldn't see anything clearly, but his stomach groaned as if it had been turned inside out. His skin felt like it was covered in ants. His hand looked like an inverted image, like the old photographic negatives. The shape of the chamber itself appeared to be stretched and squashed. Then, waves of dizziness washed over him before he fell unconscious and his head hit the floor.

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