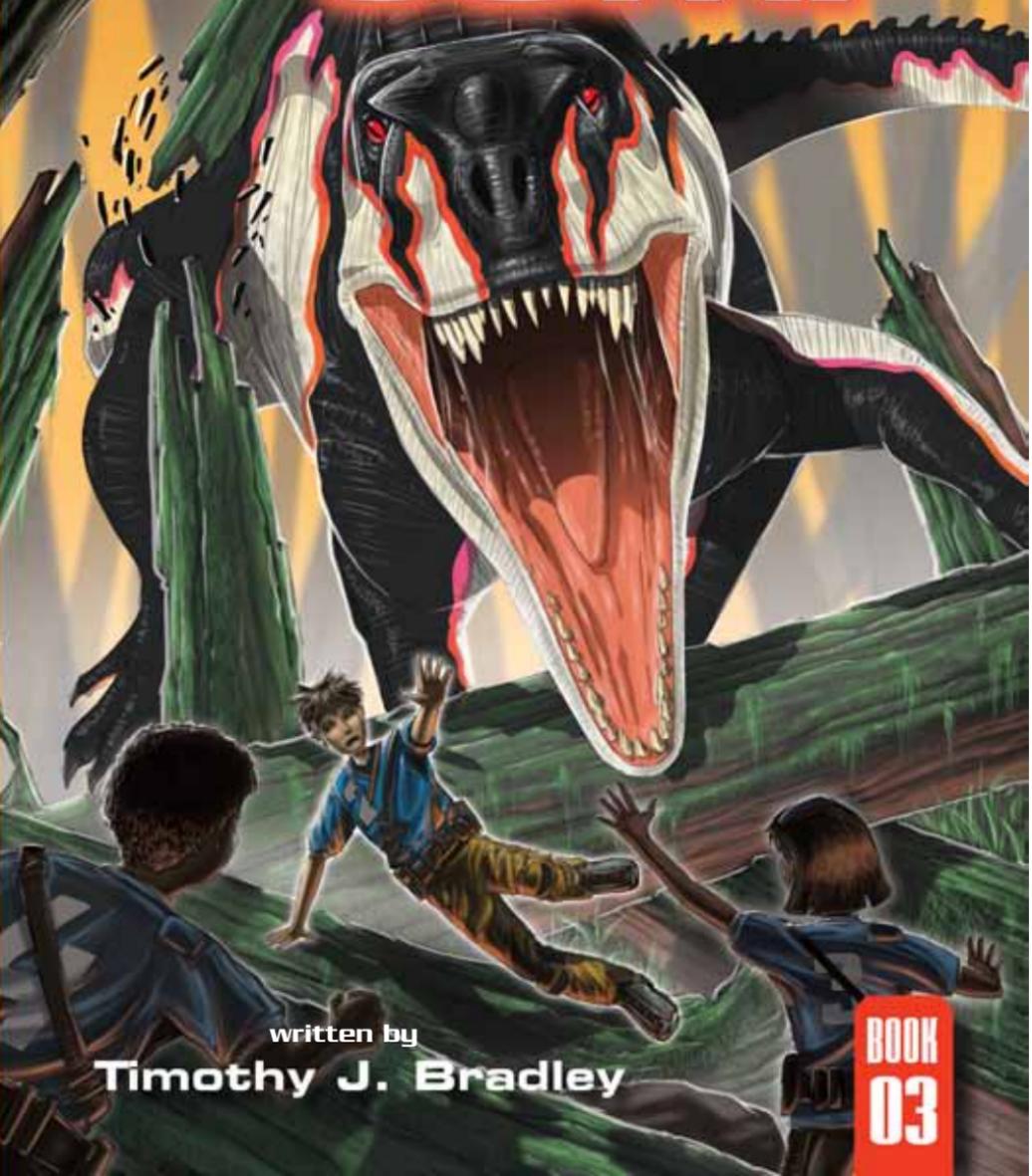


The logo for the publisher, SCTH, is located in the top left corner. It features the letters 'SCTH' in a stylized, red, blocky font with a white outline, set against a dark, jagged background that resembles a torn piece of paper or a cave entrance.

TIME → JUMP



written by

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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**TIME →
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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. 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 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, 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.

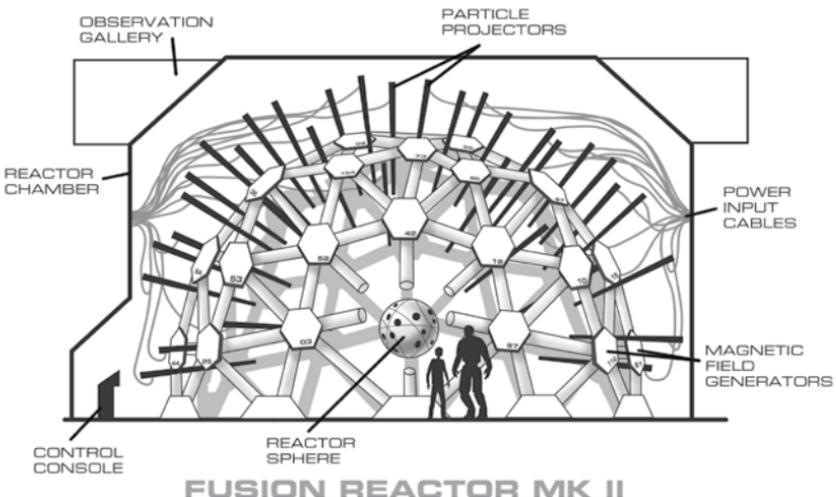
A hulking shadow stood close to the reactor. Sid held his breath. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. A familiar shape took form.

“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 that 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 reactor. A set of numbers flashed on the side: 2_59. And then, after a moment: 2_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 figure continued, “The destruction of this fusion reactor will permanently turn the public against the research being conducted here. 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 _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, denting the reactor sphere. The blast threw off the particle streams, destabilizing the reactor. Shafts of light shot out from the particle entry ports, and bolts of static 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 just too heavy for Sid to move alone.

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

He was despondent as he realized Talos might already have been badly damaged. There had to be a way to move him, some kind of emergency procedure. He noticed there was 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 7 seconds left. A halo of energy had formed around the reactor, twisting and looping like it was 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 crawling with ants. When he held his hand in front of his face, it was almost as if he were looking at an inverted image, like a photographic negative. Sounds were drawn out and echoed strangely, as if the shape of the chamber itself was being stretched and squashed. Then, waves of dizziness washed over him before his head hit the floor, unconscious.