

## CHAPTER 5

### Consider the Time

“Why can’t you control those birds like you control, Plato?”

“But Plato *isn’t* being controlled.” Mr. Cross reminds him. “He is being trained and, I’m really still in the first stages of training dinos. Some beasts are trickier and smarter than others.”

“Right.”

“Plato isn’t one of the smartest, but he is very obedient and loyal.”

“Is he your pet or muscle around here?”

“Both.”

Levy scratches his head. A loose chunk of gunk falls out. “Where are we in time, exactly?”

Mr. Cross waves a carefully placed, somewhat dramatic hand. “We are at the Dawn of Time. The world is about a few hundred years old, not quite a millennium. It’s just an infant.”

“Not millions of years old?”

“That was a theory made by people who never actually visited the past.”

“I see.” Levy still can’t believe he’s asking, “And...you can travel anywhere in time?”

“Right.” Mr. Cross adjusts his hat and coat one more time. “After years of practice.”

The boy’s eyes are full of sparkle. “Some theories say that you can only go backwards.”

“Thanks to the discovery of Chronotons, we can travel backwards or forwards without a problem.” Mr. Cross smirks. “Maybe even sideways if need be. At least I believe we can.” He puts a finger to his lips. “*Sideways*. Is that a word?”

Levy tries to digest that statement. *Is he suggesting the existence of alternate timelines?*

“Crazy.” Levy holds his head. “When you say ‘sideways’ are you implying alternate realities?”

With a tilt of his head, Mr. Cross stares back at him. Levy’s mouth drops.

“In theory, anyway.”

“Right.”

“It’s quite a rush...being inside a time pod.” Mr. Cross pats the wall behind his head. “Of course, you, my dear boy, decided to freestyle a little unconventionally through an active time stream.”

“Ah...” Levy’s fingers find the lump on the back of his head.

“I love being adventurous,” Mr. Cross shoots his right hand over his head. “But kiddo, you set the bar a little high.”

Levy’s attention is somewhere else at that moment. *That means I can travel forward and see the future? Talk about getting my hands on some real future technology.* Levy licks his lips. *Even one little bit of future technology could get my family out of the hole we dug.* Levy knows he is breaking a rule by thinking this way. *I am desperate. Maybe this is just an opportunity in disguise?*

“Next stop...dah dah, dahhh...the place where dreams come true.” Mr. Cross spins his hands like a ringmaster at a circus. Nothing happens. He tries again. “Wait for it”

The space outside the tunnel fills with that watery aquamarine color. Then with a pop, the elevator zips on a cushion of air, descending rapidly towards a pre-set destination.

*Keep your eyes and ears open.* Levy's mind races.

"I see you are excited about the possibilities of time travel."

"Yeah, but it's hard to adjust to this as reality."

Mr. Cross reaches above his head and taps some wafer-thin buttons. "I like your enthusiasm. *Wonderbaar!* Marvelous! That's a common trait in every dreamer."

Levy smiles, a real smile this time, and takes the comment as a compliment.

"As King Sejong of Korea once said, 'The people are the roots of a nation, and the roots should be as strong as to create a peaceful nation.'" Mr. Cross stands a little taller. "He reminded my ancestors that it's the everyday people who make things happen. Don't forget that, Levy."

Mr. Cross winks. "It's the underdogs who make the best heroes."

"Okay." *They never make it into the history books, though.*

Their momentum shifts. The elevator slows. A whoosh of air, a smell of some metallic gas, and they begin to move again. After a smooth spin, about a 45 degree turn this time, they are being propelled forward instead of down.

"Whoa." Levy puts out a hand to steady himself. He notices something unusual about the surface of the elevator. "Hey is this thing, transparent?"

Mr. Cross nods.

"What? It's one big bubble?" The elevator walls vibrate under Levy's fingertips.

"Chronotons are naturally spherical. It seems to be the way their molecules stack. almost like a living lattice. We have tried many times to configure other shapes, but we stopped trying to fight it."

"Huh."

"Like I said, you have to have an open mind around here."

"We must be traveling under the crater towards the hub. That's where I saw that spire-looking thing," he whispers. *I can't wait to get my hands on that technology.* Levy taps his fingertips together. His head and his heart are about to burst with excitement.

The darkness outside the elevator tube is broken by large boulders and layers upon layers of multicolored soils. They watch it all sail by the transparent walls. He rubs his fingers together. *Okay. Dinosaurs, medieval castles, geodesic domes, all in one convenient location.*

Mr. Cross is tinkering with his remote control. Using extremely deft fingers, he is rapidly shifting and sorting tiny holographic balls in a bluish green haze. Watching a man at his age working at that level of concentration made Levy a little jealous.

"So...what's the future really like?" The question burns to be asked. The elevator slows again. "What can you tell me?"

Mr. Cross slips his fingers along the remote, retracting the tiny holograms, each with a tiny pop. "That's a loaded question."

"It must be pretty advanced for you to accomplish all of this."

"We haven't regressed." Mr. Cross aims with a hand. "Always moving forward!"

"I am sure," Levy shrugs. "I guess I have seen too many post-apocalyptic movies and think the worst will happen."

"I guess that it will all depend on people's choices, won't it?" Mr. Cross replaces his remote in his pocket but pauses. "Let's just say the future has its own wildness that not everyone is ready to experience."

*That's not cryptic at all.* "That's scary."

Levy's hand grazes the surface of the elevator's internal wall. For the first time, he notices that the machine they are traveling in is not made of glass. It's some form of translucent material. He does a subtle sounding. The vibrations that come back to his fingertips suggest it is not stone, glass, or plastic. *It has the subtle ring of something watery yet solid, plasma-ish. The texture suggests that it is light and incredibly strong. My fingers want to know more.*

Mr. Cross is absorbed in his remote control. "You'll find out all about it when the time is right," he says dismissively.

*This is tech candy.* Levy touches his tongue and puts it quietly back in his mouth. *Levy, you know what happens when you are tempted.*

The craft slows dramatically as it enters a dark portion of the long tunnel.

Levy braces himself and holds tightly to a handle next him. He closes his eyes. Sometimes his fingers see things more clearly that way. *Weird. It feels more organic and plant-like than anything. It has an unusual texture. It's almost like skin with goosebumps.* He does notice a rounded network of Chronotons in a lattice formation running the length of the entire surface.

FWOOOOOOHHH!

Another swish of air propels them forward. They bounce up and forward, and in a matter of seconds they are traveling at their former velocity.

Mr. Cross turns to answer Levy's inquiry from earlier. "Let's just say, Levy, that the future is not a perfect place." The man appears to choose his words carefully. "One perk, though, is that it makes coming back to places like this possible."

"Yeah, I agree." Looking forward, Levy sees a pinprick of light far ahead.

Mr. Cross speaks again, but it seems only to himself. "After all we have learned and all we have discovered, it's easy to forget—or we remember and trample over—the simple things in this life." Mr. Cross opens his arms as if embracing the spectacle before them.

As if on cue, they burst through the ground into the warm sunlight. The untamed prehistoric realm opens to receive them.

"Holy crapola." Levy grips more tightly to the round handle. "Sorry, I have to watch my language."

"Young man, it still does it to me, too."

The momentary explosion of light makes Levy's eyes shift from the enthusiastic Mr. Cross to the breathtaking view unfolding before him. The elevator, as far as Levy can determine, runs on a shaft to the base of the crater. When it reaches the seal-level floor, the shaft comes up from underground like high-speed subway or train. They travel in an almost invisible tube with nothing to block the view.

"Now, I am in a dream." Levy raises his arms enjoying the ride.

The soft pink sky, cloudless and calm, is a background for the mountainous cliffs and lush terrain above the encircling crater. Along the floor of the crater there are more shades of red, orange, and yellow in the surrounding rock than Levy thought existed.

"For being such a massive meteorite that destroyed so much upon impact," Mr. Cross explains, "it left a wealth of natural beauty in its wake."

"Yeah, Dad would be wiping his lips if he got a chance to see this firsthand. That's his kind of candy." Levy imagines his dad wanting to explore the cracks and caverns, the clay and sand plateaus.

"Seeing is believing, right?"

"Yeah."

However, within minutes, the landscape does another about-face. Someone had begun a massive construction project in the middle of nowhere. The circular aquamarine tiles that Levy had seen from above began to zip by, row after endless row.

They cover the floor of the crater but end about three or four hundred yards from the dome in the center. Here and there vegetation grows. Like lone sentinels, huge conifers and pines zip past them. There isn't any particular order or design. Life appears to have sprouted up amidst the technology that uprooted or covered it.

*Nature is always fighting human invasion. I wonder who will win in this battle?* That reminds Levy of the color of the sky. "Did something happen?" His voice grows timid of the subject. "Was it the meteor that changed everything?" He digs his thumb down into his hand. "Is that why the sky is pink?"

"No." Mr. Cross gently nudges him. "Don't you know about the *first* Earth?"

Levy passes a hand over his head. "No clue."

"Before Noah's flood, ah, you do know about that, right?"

"Yes, c'mon, everyone knows about that." Levy then inquires, "But what did it do?"

"Before the great flood that devastated the entire face of the planet, Earth was a much different place." Mr. Cross adjusts his hat. "We could refer to it as Earth One."

"Mr. G.Q did say something about the at one time the whole planet had one temperature." Levy knits his brow, "So, does that mean there are no ice caps or deserts?"

"As far as we can tell, it's all pretty uniform planet-wide." Mr. Cross shakes his remote. "My Chesters are still investigating, though."

"I think I have heard something about Earth 'One' having had two atmospheres. It was similar to how the planet Venus has a vapor cloud."

"Okay, right... except ours is obviously breathable and habitable to life as we know it." Mr. Cross waves him on, "what would cause the sky to look differently, professor?"

Levy ponders that. "I feel like I am in school"

Mr. Cross puts his hand on Levy's shoulder. "Seeing things first-hand is the best learning there is."

"Is the pink caused from the refraction of light off the atmosphere?"

"Light reflects differently off a vapor cloud, causing the sky to have this pink hue."

Mr. Cross interjects with a well-placed finger, "Sort of like a thick mist above the atmosphere."

Levy rubs his fingertips. "Ah."

"You have to think like a time traveler would, Levy."

"More information please."

"The earth we are standing on *now* has two atmospheres." Mr. Cross becomes very animated. "That was why things were bigger."

"Gotcha."

"When the atmosphere changes, it changes everything."

Levy arches an eyebrow. "Hey, wait." He holds up his hand, "Is that why people a long time ago lived longer lives?"

"Bingo." Mr. Cross puffs out his chest. "Don't you see what this could mean for old-timers like myself? I don't know about you, but I feel great."

The light bulb clicks on. "Whoa. Are you saying that if someone stayed around here long enough—?"

"—They might be healthier, possibly live longer, who knows?" Mr. Cross grins from ear-to-ear.

“How long have you been living here?”

Mr. Cross purses his lips. “Three years next month.”

Levy raises his eyebrows. “Do you feel any different?”

Mr. Cross side steps the question. “You might very well be staying around long enough to see for yourself.”

“What?” Levy processes that. “So, anyone traveling back here in time will experience a slower aging process?”

“Essentially.” He pauses. “If given enough outside exposure.”

“Holy...” Levy tries to watch his language. “cow.”

Mr. Cross lifts a finger. “Talk about getting more time to accomplish things.”

*Yeah, that sounds just what I need. More time.* Levy furrows his brow. *Wait, what did he say about being here for a while?*

“That’s why I am out of that confining lab as much as possible.”

“This is amazing.” A shadow falls across their path, and Levy looks up to see its source. *It’s the spire.* He watches the elegant shape move effortlessly. *It’s slowly turning as if being positioned for a task.* Its shadow reminds Levy of the second hand on the face of the most enormous clock he has ever seen. He swallows. “The giant clock is everywhere.”

“Hmm,” Mr. Cross stares at the object along with Levy. “I thought it was still under repair. What are they up to?” He realizes he was speaking out loud and replaces his frown with his genial grin.

The elevator pod effortlessly speeds over its glassy expressway. Their course curves up slightly towards the massive edifice. It glides in for a soft landing on an unseen landing pad. A whine and a few other distinct sounds tell Levy that his magical ride has come to an end.

He rubs his hands together in great anticipation. *One small step for me...* Levy takes a nervous swallow. *It’s like getting to the front of the line for an amusement ride that I’ve been waiting hours to ride. I just don’t know what’s coming down the track.*

Mr. Cross straightens his coat and resets his fedora at an angle. “I think you’ll like this. I am pretty sure you will, Levy.”

“Great.” Levy looks down and notices, to his embarrassment, that he has left a circle of lime-colored mud on the otherwise pristine floor. *Really classy, messy dork.*

Mr. Cross rests his hand above the door pad. In a quiet movement, he traces the pad, hesitating for some reason in anticipation for whatever is next.

*My palms itch. Something is up.* Levy’s fingers are ready to learn and analyze. “I wouldn’t have believed it an hour ago, but since I can’t figure all of this any other way...” Levy trails off and the door peels back, receding into the circular door frame. It all happens so fast that Levy isn’t sure that the elevator has come to a complete stop.

“It was a fluke! A lightning bolt right out of a clear blue sky, utterly preposterous! I still don’t believe it!” exclaims a chunky thirty-something- year-old bald-headed man. He practically falls into the round chamber, jabbering the moment the elevator door opens.

Even though something was obviously messed up, Levy can’t help but snicker. *I love his very proper English accent. It just makes someone seem smarter for some reason.*

“Mr. Buckley.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it before, Mr. Cross! There was no way anyone could have foreseen it.”

Mr. Cross holds up his hand a number of times in a motion of silence. “Mr. Buckley.” *Somebody is upset.*

“Yes, Sir?”

Mr. Cross places three deft fingers on the short man’s thick shoulder. “Take a breath, my dear friend: one, two, and three.”

The portly man does so. “Ho, ho, hooo.” His chunky face wobbles as he exhales.

“Now, are you relaxed, Edwin?” He places a large thin hand on the larger man’s chest.

“Yes, better.” The man wipes his sweaty brow with a damp well-used handkerchief. Mr. Buckley nods his head slightly.

Mr. Cross wafts the air around them. “Breathing is good. It calms the nerves and the soul.”

“Yes, sir” Mr. Buckley exhales. “I will try my best.”

“Good?”

“Good.”

“I have a bit of a surprise for you, old friend.” Mr. Cross claps his hands together.

“Good news would be...*good* right about now.”

“That’s what I am the bearer of,” Mr. Cross announces calmly to the rotund man. He steps out of the lift and motions for Levy to follow. Mr. Buckley pulls a pair of round gold-rimmed glasses from his shirt pocket and places them on his round, rubbery nose.

“Our next guest has arrived.”

“Oh, thank God. He appears uninjured.” Mr. Buckley taps his forehead and extends his hand. “We have not lost a traveler yet.” He whispers out of the side of his mouth. “This one might have been the first.”

Levy takes his hand firmly.

“It is a pleasure, eh, an honor to make your acquaintance, ah...is it Master or Great Prophet or just plain Moses?” He side-glances at Mr. Cross. “Would you do the pleasure of translating my greeting?” He seems to ignore Levy’s muddy and smelly appearance.

*Why does everyone insist on using my middle name?*

Mr. Cross then begins to speak in that odd language he used earlier.

Mr. Buckley begins asking Levy a number of questions but it’s the same weird tongue.

Levy nods, not understanding one word.

The man reaches forward and touches the fabric on Levy's fatigue-patterned pajama top. Most of the mud has dried, but he is green and brown all over.

“Hmmm, the Egyptians were even more advanced than we were led to believe,” he mumbles under his breath. “This fabric is remarkably knit, almost as if it was made by machine.” Mr. Buckley looks shocked.

“The Egyptians did perform brain surgery and designed the pyramids, after all,” Mr. Cross reminds him. “Their ingenuity was renown.” He suppresses a snicker with his hand.

*I don't know what language they are speaking, but they are talking about me, I am sure of it.*

Mr. Buckley sticks out his lip. “It’s not unlike how clothing was fabricated before the early 21st century. Remarkable, completely remarkable.”

“Remarkable indeed,” Mr. Cross guffaws.

“What?” Mr. Buckley’s head bobs from Levy to the smirking Mr. Cross, without getting the clue. With a disapproving eye, Mr. Buckley squints. “Sir, is there some other inside joke that you aren't sharing with me?”

“Do I pull that many pranks on you, old friend?”

“More than I would care to mention.” Mr. Buckley pulls on the lapels of his wrinkled lab coat with a smart snap.

“Well, why don't you ask the young traveler where he got his clothing? I think that's a good enough place to begin.”

“Ah, forgive my next question as it may sound rather...” Mr. Buckley stops in mid-sentence, “odd.”

“Odd is normal around here, Edwin. Go with it.”

*Mr. Cross loves to drag out a story.*

Mr. Buckley continues. “But where, might I ask, did you secure your rather beautiful clothing?” Mr. Cross translates.

*Why is Mr. Buckley staring so intently at the patterns on my pajamas? Levy goes to scratch his head but remembers how dirty he is. And Mr. Cross babbles on with such flair. He makes language seem so easy.*

Both men stare at him. They wait for a response. Mr. Buckley turns back to Mr. Cross. “When they said Moses stuttered in the Bible, did that also mean he was hard of hearing?” Mr. Buckley does an aside with closed teeth. His eyes grow wide. “Oh my, did...his trip, his landing, affect his hearing?”

“No, Edwin.” Mr. Cross ignores Mr. Buckley's concern and speaks to Levy in English.

“Son, tell Mr. Buckley where you got your clothes from.”

“Uh.” *That's a weird and random question, but what the heck.* “My mom got them at Target, I think.”

“Uh.” Mr. Buckley's mouth tries to form words, but he just mumbles in shock. It causes his jowls to shake like gelatin.

“Not only did your time machine catapult our young friend outside the safety zone...” He nods toward Levy, “but in addition, you obviously got the *wrong* traveler.” Mr. Cross folds his arms. “How is that even possible?”

“What?” Mr. Buckley asks shakily. “We accounted for any and every variable that could disrupt the Time-Space continuum.”

“Does that include freak lightning bolts tearing up our time pod?”

“Yes, I—”

“On top of that, the Chronostruct encoder is scrambled.” The list of issues adds up. “So, if our targeting program is non-operational, our work is going to be harder than usual.”

Mr. Buckley's silence is drenched with shame. “That might be the reason we retrieved the wrong traveler.” He spins his finger. “Tampering with time might cause the effect before the cause.”

Mr. Cross removes his hat and runs his finger along the brim. “This whole venture has come to a screeching halt. What will your team do about this whole debacle?”

“I will investigate that.” Mr. Buckley taps his eyeglasses and blinks his eyes a few times.

*Is he taking notes on his glasses? It sure looks like it.*

“Chalk one up for the 'impossible side'.” Mr. Cross draws a check mark in the air.

“Moses? Is he not *him*?”

Mr. Cross releases a whistle. “Wrong Moses and wrong time.”

“Then,” Mr. Buckley wipes his face. “Who is this?”

“Try *Mozes*.” Mr. Cross elongates the “Z” to make his point.

“Mozes?”