

Nanoflakes by James S. Dorr

His name was Dino and he hated school. Nevertheless he got up early, scrubbed his face, and put on his clothes without being told. He came downstairs and went into the back yard, noting that the city dome was set for sunshine. In Dino's world, rain only came at night.

"Ready for breakfast?" his mother asked.

Dino nodded. "Yes, Mom," he said. There, on the grass, stood a huge bowl and a package of cereal, his favorite kind, the one with the dinosaur on the carton. Other kids might prefer Wolfmen, or Frankenstein Monsters, or one of the others, but he liked Dinos best. After all, his *own* name was Dino.

He picked up the package and read the label. *NANOFLAKES*, the letters said, while, underneath, smaller letters listed the product's nutrients. Dino ignored that. He ripped the box open and poured out its contents, then splashed milk over it and, as the box's directions commanded, he stirred the resulting green mix with his spoon.

"Dino," his mother called from the kitchen, "you've got a half hour. Okay?"

"Sure, Mom," he called back.

He stirred a final time, listening for the telltale crackling sound the cereal made when it was ready. Then he lifted a single spoonful into his mouth.

The crackling was louder as Nanoflakes coursed down into his stomach and into his bloodstream, already replicating themselves, just as the ones in the bowl were too. He blinked his eyes, eyes already larger and looking out sideways instead of in front, as the replication spread out from the flakes to his own body's molecules. This was the neat part, Dino thought, as he blinked again. Because every serving of flakes was different.

He swung his head, taking in a view of the back yard. The trees, the house, seemed smaller and flatter, but everywhere there was a riot of colors. He looked at tree branches, knowing instinctively that some were soft and easily eaten while others, spiny, were hard to digest. But best of all, at his feet he saw the bowl-like depression of Nanoflake marsh, already steaming in the morning sun.

He raised his head, expelling air through a complex network of bony passages into a satisfying "HONK!" Then he looked down again, concentrating on the swamp.

He waded in -- one of the best things about Nanoflakes was that you *had* to play with your food. He wallowed in milk turned to algae-rich scum. He buried his beak-like nose into the mass, then lifted his head up, his flat jaws filled with tender shoots and aquatic plants.

He stood, ruminating, watching the pond calm. Part of his saurian mind concentrated on what he was doing, but part also busily identified the reflection that formed in the water. Green, duck-billed, nearly three meters high -- he was, after all, still only a boy no matter what form the flakes turned him into -- the shape that peered back was that of a hadrosaur, most likely one of the Kritosauri. He honked again in recognition -- one of the few good parts of school was it sometimes taught useful things, like knowing which dinosaur was which. Then, hearing an answering honk -- other hadrosaurs lived in the swamp too! -- he buried his head again in the nourishing, soup-like muck.

When he lifted it once more, he heard the name "Dino" far in the distance. Part of his mind still remembered the name and knew it was his mother calling, warning him he had to hurry before the

Nanoflakes started their second timed transformation. He started to dip down again, but stopped. He saw a shadow fall over the swamp.

Raptor! His saurian mind took over. He honked a warning, then turned and waddled onto the dry bank.

Part of his mind realized what he was doing. "Bird-hipped," slim as dinosaurs went, if he could reach the trees, he could weave between them, almost dancer-like, getting away while the broader, lizard-hipped carnosaur wasted time crashing through them.

He felt his pursuer's hot breath on his back, catching a glimpse of its long, narrow head, its needle-like teeth. *Albertosaurus* -- not as much fun as a Tyrannosaurus, but dangerous enough to a herbivore like him. He felt the raptor's claws rake his hindquarters. He felt himself falling. . . .

He felt himself changing. . . .

Nanoflakes went inert, dying themselves in their second and final phase, but not before starting to turn his own body cells back to a human's. DNA switched back to patterns it had before. Bone shrank and changed shape. . . .

"Dino," his mother called, "how was your breakfast? Better get ready, the school bus is almost here."

"It was okay, Mom," Dino answered. And it was, although he liked it even better when his mother gave him the kind that turned *him* into a raptor, like when she served bacon. But she was right that he had to hurry. He collected his school things, then let her quickly kiss his cheek as he rushed out the door, not wanting to be late.

He still hated school, of course, but, he thought, it was mostly his teacher he really hated. And even she couldn't ruin today. Today was Tuesday.

Tuesday was science day.

And Dino realized not all school was bad. One did learn *some* useful things like, today, when they were scheduled to learn about basic nanotechnology. How Nanoflakes worked.

He scowled at his teacher as he took his seat and he saw her jaws clench. Jaws like a duck's bill, sliding from side to side. He saw her waddle, bird-hipped, butt swaying, up to the blackboard to start the day's class, but he thought about breakfast. His favorite meal.

He thought about how, if he could learn how the Nanoflakes' internal programming functioned, the next time his mom served the raptor kind he could fix it so he didn't turn back.