



A TWENTY-THIRD-CENTURY MAN
FINDS LOVE AND ADVENTURE IN THE LATE
CRETACEOUS. BUT DOES HE HAVE
THE COURAGE TO BET HIS FUTURE ON A ROMANCE
IN THE AGE OF DINOSAURS?
ILLUSTRATIONS BY BRALDT BRALDS

Twenty minutes into the voyage nothing more startling than a dragonfly the size of a hawk has come into view, fluttering for an eye-blink moment in front of the timemobile window and darting away, and Mallory decides it's time to exercise Option Two: Abandon the secure cozy comforts of the timemobile capsule, take his chances on foot out there in the steamy mists, a futuristic pygmy roaming virtually unprotected among the dinosaurs of this fragrant Late Cretaceous forest. That has been his plan all along—to offer himself up to the available dangers of this place, to experience the thrill of the hunt without ever quite being sure whether he was the hunter or the hunted.

Option One is to sit tight inside the timemobile capsule for the full duration of the trip—he has signed up for twelve hours—and watch the passing show, if any, through the invulnerable window. Very safe, yes. But self-defeating, also, if you have come here for the sake of tasting a little excitement for once in your life. Option Three, the one nobody ever talks about except in whispers and which perhaps despite all rumors to the contrary no one has actually ever elected, is self-defeating in a different way: Simply walk off into the forest and never look back. After a prearranged period, usually twelve hours, never more than twenty-four, the capsule will return to its starting point in the twenty-third

HUNTERS IN THE FOREST

FICTION BY ROBERT SILVERBERG

century whether or not you're aboard. But Mallory isn't out to do himself in, not really. All he wants is a little endocrine action, a hit of adrenaline to rev things up, the unfamiliar sensation of honest fear contracting his auricles and chilling his bowels: all that good old chancy stuff, damned well unattainable down the line in the modern era where risk is just about extinct. Back here in the Mesozoic, risk aplenty is available enough for those who can put up the price of admission. All he has to do is go outside and look for it. And so it's Option Two for him, then, a lively little walkabout and back to the capsule in plenty of time for the return trip.

With him he carries a laser rifle, a backpack medical kit, and lunch. He jacks a

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ALL BUT

and carbon dioxide is different from what he's accustomed to, he suspects, and certainly none of the impurities that six centuries of industrial development have poured into the atmosphere are present. There's something else, too, a strange subtext of an odor that seems both sweet and pungent: It must be the aroma of dinosaur farts, Mallory decides. Uncountable hordes of stupendous beasts simultaneously releasing vast roaring boomers for a hundred million years surely will have filled the prehistoric air with complex hydrocarbons that won't break down until the Oligocene at the earliest.

Scaly tree trunks thick as the columns of the Parthenon shoot heavenward all around him. At their summits, far overhead,



thinko into his waistband and clips a drinko to his shoulder. But no helmet, no potted air supply. He'll boldly expose his naked nostrils to the Cretaceous atmosphere. Nor does he avail himself of the one-size-fits-all body armor that the capsule is willing to provide. That's the true spirit of Option Two, all right: Go forth unshielded into the Mesozoic dawn.

Open the hatch, now. Down the steps, hop skip jump. Booted feet bouncing on the spongy primordial forest floor. There's a hovering dankness but a surprisingly pleasant breeze is blowing. Things feel tropical but not uncomfortably torrid. The air has an unusual smell. The mix of nitrogen

**GONE IN
THE MODERN ERA,
WHERE RISK
IS JUST ABOUT
EXTINCT.**

whorls of stiff long leaves jut tensely outward. Smaller trees that look like palms but probably aren't fill in the spaces between them, and at ground level there are dense growths of awkward angular bushes. Some of them are in bloom, small furry pale-yellowish blossoms, very diffident looking, as though they were so newly evolved that they were embarrassed to find themselves on display like this. All the vegetation, big and little, has a battered, shopworn look, trunks leaning this way and that, huge leafstalks bent and dangling, gnawed boughs hanging like broken arms. It is as though an army of enormous tanks passes through this forest every few days. In fact that isn't far from the truth, Mallory realizes.

But where are they? Twenty-five minutes gone already and he still hasn't seen a single dinosaur, and he's ready for some.

"All right," Mallory calls out. "Where are you, you big dopes?"

As though on cue the forest hurls a symphony of sounds back at him: strident honks and rumbling snorts and a myriad blatting snuffling wheezing skreeing noises. It's like a chorus of crocodiles getting warmed up for Handel's *Messiah*.

Mallory laughs. "Yes, I hear you, I hear you!"

He cocks his laser rifle. Steps forward, looking eagerly to right and left. This period is supposed to be the golden age of dinosaurs, the grand tumultuous climactic epoch just before the end, when bizarre new species popped out constantly with glorious evolutionary profligacy, and all manner of grotesque Goliaths roamed the earth. The thinko has shown him pictures of them, spectacularly decadent in size and appearance, long-snouted duck-billed monsters as big as a house and huge lumbering ceratopsians with frilly baroque bony crests and toothy things with knobby horns on their elongated skulls and others with rows of bristling spikes along their high-ridged backs.

He aches to see them. He wants them to scare him practically to death. Let them loom; let them glower; let their great jaws yawn. Through all his untroubled days in the orderly and carefully regulated world of the twenty-third century, Mallory has never shivered with fear as much as once, never known a moment of terror or even real uneasiness, is not even sure he understands the concept; and he has paid a small fortune for the privilege of experiencing it now.

Forward. Forward.

Come on, you oversized bastards, get your asses out of the swamp and show yourselves!

There. Oh, yes, yes, *there!*

He sees the little spheroid of a head first, rising above the treetops like a grinning football attached to a long thick hose. Behind it is an enormous humped back, unthinkable high. He hears the pile driver sound of the behemoth's footfall and the crackle of huge tree trunks breaking as it smashes its way serenely toward him.

He doesn't need the murmured prompting of his thinko to know that this is a giant sauropod making its majestic passage through the forest—"One of the titanosaurs or perhaps an ultrasaur," the quiet voice says, admit-

ting with just a hint of chagrin in its tone that it can't identify the particular species—but Mallory isn't really concerned with detail on that level. He is after the thrill of size. And he's getting size, all right. The thing is implausibly colossal. It emerges into the clearing where he stands and he is given the full view, and gasps. He can't even guess how big it is. Twenty meters high? Thirty? Its ponderous corrugated legs are thick as sequoias. Giraffes on tiptoe could go skittering between them without grazing the underside of its massive belly. Elephants would look like house cats beside it. Its tail, held out stiffly to the rear, decapitates sturdy trees with its slow steady lashing. A hundred million years of saurian evolution have produced this thing, Darwinism gone crazy, excess building remorselessly on excess, irrepressible chromosomes gleefully reprogramming themselves through the millennia to engender thicker bones, longer legs, ever bulkier bodies, and the end result is this walking mountain, this absurdly overstated monument to reptilian hyperbole.

"Hey!" Mallory cries. "Look here! Can you see this far down? There's a human down here. *Homo sapiens*. I'm a mammal. Do you know what a mammal is? Do you know what my ancestors are going to do to your descendants?" He is practically alongside it, no more than a hundred meters away. Its musky stink makes him choke and cough. Its ancient leathery brown hide, as rigid as cast iron, is pocked with parasitic growths, scarlet and yellow and ultramarine, and crisscrossed with the gullies and ravines of century-old wounds deep enough for him to hide in. With each step it takes, Mallory feels an earthquake. He is nothing next to it, a flea, a gnat. It could crush him with a casual stride and never even know.

And yet he feels no fear. The sauropod is so big he can't make sense out of it, let alone be threatened by it.

Can you fear the Amazon River? The planet Jupiter? The pyramid of Cheops?

No, what he feels is anger, not terror. The sheer preposterous bulk of the monster infuriates him. The pointless superabundance of it inspires him with wrath.

"My name is Mallory," he yells. "I've come from the twenty-third century to bring you your doom, you great stupid mass of meat. I'm personally going to make you extinct, do you hear me?"

He raises the laser rifle and centers its sight on the distant tiny head. The rifle hums its computations and modifications and the rainbow beam jumps skyward. For an instant the sauropod's



head is engulfed in a dazzling fluorescent nimbus. Then the light dies away, and the animal moves on as though nothing has happened.

No brain up there? Mallory wonders. Too dumb to die?

He moves up closer and fires again, carving a bright track along one hypertrophied haunch. Again, no effect. The sauropod moves along untroubled, munching on treetops as it goes. A third shot, too hasty, goes astray and cuts off the crown of a tree in the forest canopy. A fourth zings into the sauropod's gut but the dinosaur doesn't seem to care. Mallory is furious now at the unkillability of the thing. His thinko quietly reminds him that these giants supposedly had had their main nerve centers at the base of their spines. Mallory runs around behind the creature and stares up at the galactic expanse of its rump, wondering where best to place his shot. Just then the great tail swings upward and to the left and a torrent of immense steaming green turds as big as boulders comes cascading down, striking the ground all around Mallory with thunderous impact. He leaps out of the way barely in time to keep from being entombed, and goes scrambling frantically away to avoid the choking fetor that rises from the sauropod's vast mound of excreta. In his haste he stumbles over a vine, loses his footing in the slippery mud, falls to hands and knees. Something that looks like a small blue dog with a scaly skin and a ring of sharp spines around its neck jumps up out of the muck, bouncing up and down and hissing and screeching and snapping at him. Its teeth are deadly-looking yellow fangs. There isn't room to fire the laser rifle. Mallory desperately rolls to one side and bashes the thing with the butt instead, hard, and it runs away growling. When he has a chance finally to catch his breath and look up again, he sees the great sauropod vanishing in the distance.

He gets up and takes a few limping steps further away from the reeking pile of ordure.

He has learned at last what it's like to have a brush with death. Two brushes, in fact, within the span of ten seconds. But where's the vaunted thrill of danger narrowly averted, the hot satisfaction of the *frisson*? He feels no pleasure, none of the hoped-for rush of keen endocrine delight.

Of course not. A pile of falling turds, a yapping little lizard with big teeth: what humiliating perils! During the frantic moments when he was defending himself against them he was too busy to notice what he was feeling, and now, muddily all over, his knee aching, his dig-

nity dented, he is left merely with a residue of annoyance, frustration, and perhaps a little ironic self-deprecation, when what he had wanted was the white ecstasy of genuine terror followed by the postorgasmic delight of successful escape recollected in tranquillity.

Well, he still has plenty of time. He goes onward, deeper into the forest.

Now he is no longer able to see the timemobile capsule. That feels good, that sudden new sense of being cut off from the one zone of safety he has in this fierce environment. He tries to divert himself with fantasies of jeopardy. It isn't easy. His mind doesn't work that way; nobody's does, really, in the nice, tidy, menace-free society he lives in. But he works at it. Suppose, he thinks, I lose my way in the forest and can't get back to—no, no hope of that, the capsule sends out constant directional pulses that his thinko picks up by micro-

◀ A thing
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wave transmission. What if the thinko breaks down, then? But they never do. If I take it off and toss it into a swamp? That's Option Three, though, self-damaging behavior designed to maroon him here. He doesn't do such things. He can barely even fantasize them.

Well, then, the sauropod comes back and steps on the capsule, crushing it beyond use...

Impossible. The capsule is strong enough to withstand submersion to thirty-atmosphere pressures.

The sauropod pushes it into quicksand, and it sinks out of sight?

Mallory is pleased with himself for coming up with that one. It's good for a moment or two of interesting uneasiness. He imagines himself standing at the edge of some swamp, staring down forlornly as the final minutes tick away and the timemobile, functional as ever even though it's fifty fathoms down in gunk, sets out for home without him. But no, no good: The capsule moves just as effectively through space as through time, and it would sim-

ply activate its powerful engine and climb up onto terra firma again in plenty of time for his return trip.

What if, he thinks, a band of malevolent *intelligent* dinosaurs appears on the scene and forcibly prevents me from getting back into the capsule?

That's more like it. A little shiver that time. Good! Cut off, stranded in the Mesozoic! Living by his wits, eating God knows what, exposing himself to extinct bacteria. Getting sick, blazing with fever, groaning in unfamiliar pain. Yes! Yes! He piles it on. It becomes easier as he gets into the swing of it. He will lead a life of constant menace. He imagines himself taking out his own appendix. Setting a broken leg. And the unending hazards, day and night. Toothy enemies lurking behind every bush. Baleful eyes glowing in the darkness. A life spent forever on the run, never a moment's ease. Cowering under fern fronds as the giant carnivores go lalloping by. Scorpions, snakes, gigantic venomous toads. Insects that sting. Everything that has been eliminated from life in the civilized world pursuing him here: and he flitting from one transitory hiding place to another, haggard, unshaven, bloodshot, brow shining with sweat, struggling unceasingly to survive, living a gallant life of desperate heroism in this nightmare world...

"Hello," he says suddenly. "Who the hell are you?"

In the midst of his imaginings a genuine horror has presented itself, emerging suddenly out of a grove of tree ferns. It is a towering bipedal creature with the powerful thighs and small dangling forearms of the familiar tyrannosaurus, but this one has an enormous bony crest like a warrior's helmet rising from its skull, with five diabolical horns radiating outward behind it and two horrendous incisors as long as tusks jutting from its cavernous mouth, and its huge lashing tail is equipped with a set of great spikes at the tip. Its mottled and furrowed skin is a bilious yellow and the huge crest on its head is fiery scarlet. It is everybody's bad dream of the reptilian killer-monster of the primeval dawn, the ghastly overspecialized end product of the long saurian reign, shouting its own lethality from every bony excrescence, every razor-keen weapon on its long body.

The thinko scans it and tells him that it is a representative of an unknown species belonging to the saurischian order and it is almost certainly predatory.

"Thank you very much," Mallory replies.

He is astonished to discover that even now, facing this embodiment of death, he is not at all afraid. Fascinat-

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

ed, yes, by the sheer deadliness of the creature, by its excessive horrorfulness. Amused, almost, by its grotesqueries of form. And coolly aware that in three bounds and a swipe of its little dangling paw it could end his life, depriving him of the sure century of minimum expectancy that remains to him. Despite that threat he remains calm. If he dies, he dies; but he can't actually bring himself to believe that he will. He is beginning to see that the capacity for fear, for any sort of significant psychological distress, has been bred out of him. He is simply too stable. It is an unexpected drawback of the perfection of human society.

The saurischian predator of unknown species slavers and roars and glares. Its narrow yellow eyes are like beacons. Mallory unslings his laser rifle and gets into firing position. Perhaps this one will be easier to kill than the colossal sauropod.

Then a woman walks out of the jungle behind it and says, "You aren't going to try to shoot it, are you?"

Mallory stares at her. She is young, only fifty or so unless she's on her second or third retreat, attractive, smiling. Long sleek legs, a fluffy burst of golden hair. She wears a stylish hunting outfit of black sprayon and carries no rifle, only a tiny laser pistol. A space of no more than a dozen meters separates her from the dinosaur's spiked tail, but that doesn't seem to trouble her.

He gestures with the rifle. "Step out of the way, will you?"

She doesn't move. "Shooting it isn't a smart idea."

"We're here to do a little hunting, aren't we?"

"Be sensible," she says. "This one's a real son of a bitch. You'll only annoy it if you try anything, and then we'll both be in a mess." She walks casually around the monster, which is standing quite still, studying them both in an odd perplexed way as though it actually wonders what they might be. Mallory has aimed the rifle now at the thing's left eye, but the woman coolly puts her hand to the barrel and pushes it aside.

"Let it be," she says. "It's just had its meal and now it's sleepy. I watched it gobble up something the size of a hippopotamus and then eat half of another one for dessert. You start sticking it with your little laser and you'll wake it up, and then it'll get nasty again. Mean-looking bastard, isn't it?" she says admiringly.

"Who are you?" Mallory asks in wonder. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing as you, I figure. Cretaceous Tours?"

"Yes. They said I wouldn't run into any other—"

"They told me that, too. Well, it sometimes happens. Jayne Hyland. New Chicago, 2281."

"Tom Mallory. New Chicago also. And also 2281."

"Small geological epoch, isn't it? What month did you leave from?"

"August."

"I'm September."

"Imagine that."

The dinosaur, far above them, utters a soft snorting sound and begins to drift away.

"We're boring it," she says.

"And it's boring us, too. Isn't that the truth? These enormous terrifying monsters crashing through the forest all

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throat is dry; his
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this
before in his life. ☹

around us and we're as blasé as if we're home watching the whole thing on the polyvid." Mallory raises his rifle again. The scarlet-frilled killer is almost out of sight. "I'm tempted to take a shot at it just to get some excitement going."

"Don't," she says. "Unless you're feeling suicidal. Are you?"

"Not at all."

"Then don't annoy it, okay? I know where there's a bunch of ankylosaurs wallowing around. That's one really weird critter, believe me. Are you interested in having a peek?"

"Sure," says Mallory.

He finds himself very much taken by her brisk no-nonsense manner, her confident air. When we get back to New Chicago, he thinks, maybe I'll look her up. The September tour, she said. So he'll have to wait a while after his own return. I'll give her a call around the end of the month, he tells himself.

She leads the way unhesitatingly, through the tree-fern grove and around a stand of giant horsetails and across a swampy meadow of small plastic-

looking plants with ugly little mud-colored daisyish flowers. On the far side they zig around a great pile of bloodied bones and zag around a treacherous bog with a sinisterly quivering surface. A couple of giant dragonflies whiz by, droning like airborne missiles. A crimson frog as big as a rabbit grins at them from a pond. They have been walking for close to an hour now and Mallory no longer has any idea where he is in relation to his timemobile capsule. But the thinko will find the way back for him eventually, he assumes.

"The ankylosaurs are only about a hundred meters further on," she says, as if reading his mind. She looks back and gives him a bright smile. "I saw a pack of troodons the day before yesterday out this way. You know what they are? Little agile guys, no bigger than you or me, smart as whips. Teeth like saw blades, funny knobs on their heads. I thought for a minute they were going to attack, but I stood my ground and finally they backed off. You want to shoot something, shoot one of those."

"The day before yesterday?" Mallory asks, after a moment. "How long have you been here?"

"About a week. Maybe two. I've lost count, really. Look, there are those ankylosaurs I was telling you about."

He ignores her pointing hand. "Wait a second. The longest available time tour lasts only—"

"I'm Option Three," she says.

He gapes at her as though she has just sprouted a scarlet bony crust with five spikes behind it.

"Are you serious?" he asks.

"As serious as anybody you ever met in the middle of the Cretaceous forest. I'm here for keeps, friend. I stood right next to my capsule when the twelve hours were up and watched it go sailing off into the ineffable future. And I've been having the time of my life ever since."

A tingle of awe spreads through him. It is the strongest emotion he has ever felt, he realizes.

She is actually living that gallant life of desperate heroism that he had fantasized. Avoiding the myriad menaces of this incomprehensible place for a whole week or possibly even two, managing to stay fed and healthy, in fact looking as trim and elegant as if she had just stepped out of her capsule a couple of hours ago. And never to go back to the nice safe orderly world of 2281. Never. Never. She will remain here until she dies—a month from now, a year, five years, whenever. Must remain. Must. By her own choice. An incredible adventure.

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is gone from it. "How soon before your capsule leaves?"

He glances at his wrist. "Eight, nine more hours."

"Plenty of time to make up your mind."

"Yes. Yes."

Relief washes over him. She has dizzied him with the overpowering force of her revelation and the passionate frenzy of her invitation to join her in her escape from the world they have left behind. He isn't used to such things. He needs time now, time to absorb, to digest, to ponder. To decide. That he would even consider such a thing astonishes him. He has known her how long—an hour, an hour and a half?—and here he is thinking of giving up everything for her. Unbelievable. Unbelievable.

Shakily he turns away from her and stares at the ankylosaurs wallowing in the mud hole just in front of them.

Strange, strange, strange. Gigantic low-slung tubby things, squat as tanks, covered everywhere by armor. Vaguely triangular, expanding vastly toward the rear, terminating in armored tails with massive bony excrescences at the tips, like deadly clubs. Slowly snuffling forward in the muck, tiny heads down, busily grubbing away at soft green weeds. Jayne jumps down among them and dances across their armored backs, leaping from one to another. They don't even seem to notice. She laughs and calls to him. "Come on," she says, prancing like a she-devil.

They dance among the ankylosaurs until the game grows stale. Then she takes him by the hand and they run onward, through a field of scarlet mosses, down to a small clear lake fed by a swift-flowing stream. They strip and plunge in, heedless of risk. Afterward they embrace on the grassy bank. Some vast creature passes by, momentarily darkening the sky. Mallory doesn't bother even to look up.

Then it is on, on to spy on something with a long neck and a comic knobby head, and then to watch a pair of angry ceratopsians butting heads in slow motion, and then to applaud the elegant migration of a herd of towering duck-bills across the horizon. There are dinosaurs everywhere, everywhere, everywhere, an astounding zoo of them. And the time ticks away.

It's fantastic beyond all comprehension. But even so—

Give up everything for this? he wonders.

The chalet in Gstaad, the weekend retreat aboard the L-5 satellite, the hunting lodge in the veld? The island home

in the Seychelles, the plantation in New Caledonia, the pied-à-terre in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower?

For this? For a forest full of nightmare monsters, and a life of daily peril?

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

He glances toward her. She knows what's on his mind, and she gives him a sizzling look. *Come live with me and be my love, and we will all the pleasures prove.* Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

A beeper goes off on his wrist and his thinko says, "It is time to return to the capsule. Shall I guide you?"

And suddenly it all collapses into a pile of ashes, the whole shimmering fantasy perishing in an instant.

"Where are you going?" she calls.

"Back," he says. He whispers the word hoarsely—croaks it, in fact.

"Tom!"

"Please. Please."

He can't bear to look at her. His defeat is total; his shame is cosmic. But he isn't going to stay here. He isn't. He isn't. He simply isn't. He slinks away, feeling her burning contemptuous glare drilling holes in his shoulder blades. The quiet voice of the thinko steadily instructs him, leading him around pitfalls and obstacles. After a time he looks back and can no longer see her.

On the way back to the capsule he

passes a pair of sauropods mating, a tyrannosaur in full slather, another thing with talons like scythes, and half a dozen others. The thinko obligingly provides him with their names, but Mallory doesn't even give them a glance. The brutal fact of his own inescapable cowardice is the only thing that occupies his mind. *She* has had the courage to turn her back on the stagnant overperfect world where they live, regardless of all danger, whereas he—he—

"There is the capsule, sir," the thinko says triumphantly.

Last chance, Mallory.

No. No. No. He can't do it.

He climbs in. Waits.

Something ghastly appears outside, all teeth and claws, and peers balefully at him through the window. Mallory peers back at it, nose to nose, hardly caring what happens to him now. The creature takes an experimental nibble at the capsule. The impervious metal resists. The dinosaur shrugs and waddles away.

A chime goes off. The Late Cretaceous turns blurry and disappears.

In mid-October, seven weeks after his return, he is telling the somewhat edited version of his adventure at a party for the fifteenth time that month when a

woman to his left says, "There's someone in the other room who's just come back from the dinosaur tour, too."

"Really," says Mallory, without enthusiasm.

"You and she would love to compare notes, I'll bet. Wait and I'll get her. Jayne! Jayne, come in here for a moment!"

Mallory gasps. Color floods his face. His mind swirls in bewilderment and chagrin. Her eyes are as sparkling and alert as ever, her hair is a golden cloud.

"But you told me—"

"Yes," she says. "I did, didn't I?"

"Your capsule—you said it had gone back—"

"It was just on the far side of the ankylosaurs, behind the horsetails. I got to the Cretaceous about eight hours before you did. I had signed up for a twenty-four-hour tour."

"And you let me believe—"

"Yes. So I did." She grins at him and says softly, "It was a lovely fantasy, don't you think?"

He comes close to her and gives her a cold, hard stare. "What would you have done if I had let my capsule go back and stranded myself there for the sake of your lovely fantasy?"

"I don't know," she tells him. "I just don't know." And she laughs. ☐☐

