

DEATHBEAST

David Gerrold



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Although this edition has had some minor editing by the author, the story remains essentially unchanged from the 1978 edition. The descriptions of dinosaurs in this book were based on *The Hot-Blooded Dinosaurs*, by Adrian J. Desmond, published by Dial Press/James Wade, 1976. Since the first publication of this story, our understanding of dinosaurs and the causes of their extinction has increased enormously. The reader is encouraged to investigate current theories about the behavior of dinosaurs.

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For Tom Swale, with love.

One

FLASHDOWN

One afternoon, late in the Cretaceous, something *unusual* happened. . . .

It began with a whine, high-pitched and electronic—a warble shimmering in the air like heat ripples off the salt flat—then, crackling and sparkling, a fountain of lightning poured out of a hole in the day—a starflake of brilliance, burning and scorching the air wherever it touched.

The whine became a shriek as the starflake grew. The whiteness turned incandescent—and beyond. The noise cycled higher and higher—a sensation, not a sound—the air was screaming as it died, its molecules shattering, its atoms flying into pieces, the plasma burning off like a fusion reaction—there was a sudden flicker of discontinuity and then all was silent.

The light faded into purple glare and began to dissipate. The air still crackled—like metal cooling in the dusk—and there were sparks around the edges, but fading fast—and there was a black disc ten meters across in the middle of a large scorched area. In the middle of the disc stood a set of wrapped and shielded packages. Spaced equidistantly around the circumference were eight helmeted figures. Tall. Menacing. Goggled and expressionless. Dressed in a variety of gear. Hunters. Five men, three women. Their goggle-plates lowered

against the glare of flashdown, their faces hidden and mysterious—but the poise of their bodies, the language of their positions, spoke of danger and suspicion. They held weapons: beamer—pistols and blazer-rifles. The largest was a Calvella Mark VII, augmented, B-Laser with super-charge capability. They had four of these and four of the smaller Mark IIIs, augmented, but without the super-charge option.

Ethab was the leader; the tallest and the strongest. He surveyed the rocky flats around the Nexus like a general planning his campaign. His goggle-plate glinted like ebony in the westerling light. He turned his head slowly, his rifle moving to echo his gaze. The air had begun cooling from the heat-blast of flashdown. The temperature was still above fifty degrees Celsius, but dropping rapidly. A light ash was floating hazily in the air just beyond the Nexus, the remains of something obliterated by their materialization. Beyond, there was salt flat and rocks, stretching surreally toward a crisp, impossibly close horizon—a hill, and a dip beyond? Or was the flat tilted slightly? It looked like the edge of the world.

Sounds were returning now—insects buzzing, something larger chirruping like a bird, something skittering across a rock with claws like tiny knives. The sky above was diamond-hard blue, almost black; the clouds were dusty pink, the flat was white—an uneasy mixture of sand and crusty salt, an inhospitable foothold for the scattered vegetation, thin and distant spikes of loneliness. The day was turning amber with the approach of twilight—all seemed shaded and frozen. Ethab took a breath—the first breath in this new world; it was hot, it rasped his throat. It smelled like ash and tasted of grit.

To his right was Megan, one of the two Time-Hunt guides required by law; she was already unsnapping the case of her scanner and activating its sensors. Turning slowly in her position through an 180-degree arc, then back again, she studied the meters and screens with

cautious but familiar ease. On the opposite side of the Nexus, Loevil, the other guide, was doing the same. The others around them waited patiently, watching the landscape with wary suspicion. Loevil's scanner was a different model than Megan's, its range of capabilities was not the same—the two units complemented each other, leaving no holes in the total scanning spectrum.

Ethab took a second breath—the air was not as harsh this time—and stepped off the Nexus. The scorched crust of the ground went crunch beneath his foot. He looked off to his right, then his left. This prehistoric world seemed impossibly barren—the flat was an impossible landscape of shining desolation underneath a yellowing glare. It was the nakedness of the black and rusty rocks, the barrenness of the ground, the wide patches of salt and sand, that created the effect—there were plants, only occasional ones, mostly green spiky things with yellow feathers at their tops. There was no grass anywhere, it hadn't evolved yet, and it was too dry here for moss or fern. Those few plants that did grow here grew in defiance of the terrain, not because of it. This was a younger world—four and a half billion years old, but still a hundred million years younger—a place both angry and idyllic, a world that functioned on a larger, more violent and ambitious scale than human beings were used to—a challenge to the manhood of a species.

A slight wind tugged at their clothing, whistling and whispering across the barrens. It swept the still-drifting ash away before it and the last of the heat of flashdown too.

“I hate flashdown.” That was Nusa; she said it matter of fact and almost under her breath, but in the silent air it could have been a shout.

Ethab glanced over at her. The flat black goggle-plate of his helmet covered his face, made his expression seem even more dark and malevolent, and every gesture ominous.

Nusa shut up.

Ethab turned forward again with a hand signal. Excepting Megan and Loevil, the rest of them stepped off the Nexus then, testing each step as they took it, as if unsure of the ground's ability to hold their weight. They held their weapons high.

Ethab's partner, Kalen, stood at his left flank. The two of them each took two steps forward and paused, then another two steps.

To their left, Tril and Eese cautiously echoed Ethab's advance.

"It's . . . eerie, isn't it?" Eese whispered to her.

Tril was puzzled. "I thought it was supposed to be a jungle—"

"Not all of it. Not all the time."

Tril shuddered.

"Hey, it'll be fun—you'll see." Eese reached over and touched her shoulder.

Kalen said, without looking around, "Shut up, Eese." He was studying something through his goggles. He lifted a hand to a control on the side of his helmet and made an adjustment. The logic-scan augmented image, projected from the faceplate through the image-generating goggles, was focused directly on the wearer's retinas and gave him a viewscape derived from a variety of light-sensitive, heat-sensitive, and radar-scanning elements mounted within and around the faceplate, all data processed to present a coherent image in any kind of condition, from coal mine to hurricane, from fog bank to blizzard—even underwater, if necessary. The faceplate-goggle combinations were also necessary protection against the heat and glare of flashdown.

Through the goggles—with augmentation switched in—the landscape was a glare of purple and blue, highlighted by patches of hot red, and limned with scanning lines.

Superimposed across the landscape was a correlated, and seemingly stationary, grid of range-finding data; the logic circuits' contribution to the image: the grid of yellow lines helped to establish a sense of perspective—were those rocks fifty or five hundred meters distant? Check the grid. How tall was that outcrop? Check the grid. At the bottom of the image was a line of continually updating alphanumeric symbols. The bright blue letters and numbers told of range and temperature and image magnification; they told of power in the rifle and the size of the target—even indicating the ratio of available heat energy to target mass, translating that into kill ratios and probabilities for success.

The image of a distant outcrop swelled in Ethab's goggles as he increased the magnification, then shrank again as he rejected it—no, there hadn't been anything there. Just a trick of the light, or of the scanning circuit. Satisfied, he waved his people out. They widened their circle slowly, each covering an arc of the landscape like a warrior. Megan and Loevil still stood on the Nexus, still scanning. They circled slowly, switching positions, and began to duplicate each other's first sweep.

Ethab switched on his communicator and asked, "What have we got?" His voice came filtered through the earpieces in their helmets.

"Full null," came back Loevil. "Clean scan, three hundred meters, arc two-seventy. Some interference west by southwest, strong magnetic characteristic." He added with an unseen grin, "A lot of iron in those rocks."

Reading off her scanner, Megan noted drily, "Beta three four five, Gamma three four six. Delta zero seven seven." For Ethab, she added, "Nothing, line of sight. But I suggest we move away from—"

—a guttural shriek interrupted her—it came from the rocks she was pointing at—

Loevil turned, startled; the others too—as a small, flashing creature leapt up onto the top of the outcrop. Its cry was the rasp of metal shattering slate. . . .

—it was orange and lizardlike, tall as a man, striped with red, two or three meters tall—it was hard to tell; it was bobbing so—its lashing tail was equally long. Its mouth was a jabbing maw, all teeth and scream—it stood semi-erect on two muscular legs, shifting its weight back and forth as if standing in one place were uncomfortable for it; it used its tail for balance. Its head jerked from side to side—its eyes were piercing black, seemingly lidless, but not; orange membranes flicked nervously across them every few seconds. The creature lacked binocular vision; its eyes were on the sides of its head and it had to turn back and forth to see its prey. Its claws jerked rapidly, its arms were long and thin—it kept making hungry grabbing gestures. The creature—a Deinonychus—had leapt up onto the top of the rocks from behind, and now it was studying the group of hunters like a menu. This was unfamiliar prey to it—prey that didn't look like it was built for running. The creature's jaw worked eagerly. . . .

Even before he was finished being startled, Ethab was moving, Kalen too: stepping professionally to either side and bracing themselves for a shot at the animal. Nusa was moving sideways to get a better vantage. Eese yanked Tril out of the way toward a nearby jumble of rocks. Only Dorik was panicked—he had been facing the opposite direction and was confused by the attack coming from behind him. He whirled, nearly dropping his rifle, and saw the orange demon skittering down the rocks toward him. An avalanche of pebbles marked its hasty progress, every footstep skidded down the slope; its jaws and claws worked with ragged excitement. Dorik jumped backward, turned and ran—

The creature paused for half a heartbeat, just long enough to get a range on Dorik—it

shrieked the dinosaur word for “Lunch!” and came on running, screaming, and leaping down the last of the rocks, bounding across the flat, crusty plain, scattering salt and yellow-white sand with every step.

Loevil and Megan had no time to unshoulder their weapons—their scanners still beeping in their hands, they scattered off the disc of the Nexus. They jumped in opposite directions, Megan ducking behind one rock, Loevil skidding around another.

Ethab had already flattened out, rolling to one side so the creature wouldn’t see him, already aiming his rifle. Kalen and Nusa, too, were taking aim—but too late; the creature was already past them. They scrambled around to shoot after it.

The shrieking predator had taken a half leap, bounding across and onto the Nexus, onto the pile of equipment in the center of it—crunching and smashing while it floundered for footing—packages scattered in all directions, and then the red and orange horror found purchase and was moving again, its body and tail writhing sinuously as it ran, loping and flying across the landscape with hoarse and guttural cries. It dashed past Tril and Eese, ignoring them as if they weren’t there. All its attention was focused on Dorik, panicked Dorik—

Ethab’s first shot zipped past the creature then, a flicker-line of bright light, blue-white glare, cycling into a red and purple afterglow; its sound was a sharp electronic *zzzzooooop-wheep!* Static crackled as the blazer-bolt dissipated. Frenzied with the chase, the whooping dinosaur didn’t even notice. Dorik was just scrambling onto a jagged boulder, taming toward his adversary, fumbling with his weapon—the dinosaur’s scales glinted in the afternoon sun; it skidded and stumbled once in the sand, then came plunging on. Another blazer-bolt missed it, leaving an ultraviolet afterglow in the air and a high piercing sensation

in the ears—the flat triangular head jerked forward, jabbing and grabbing; the eyes were birdlike and expressionless. It darted in at Dorik, thrusting its head out for the bite. Dorik swung his rifle as a club—*KLAAAMMBB!!*—smacking the startled creature across the side of the head and snout. Angry, puzzled, it took a half step back, shifting its weight and throwing its arms and shoulders back, opening its mouth to give a cry of anguish—

—and three blazer-bolts zipped into it from behind, one right after the other, *zip, zap, zoop!* The bolts were blue-white, turning red even before the image finished registering on the retina; they left deep purple auras hanging in the air to mark their passage, and matching afterimages on the unprotected eye—

—the orange horror stiffened, became a creature dying—stabbed upright and rigid, as if struck by a hundred thousand volts; it uttered a last startled sound, more a grunt than a scream—and then charred. It blackened as it burned and cooked internally—the char spread outward on its skin from each point of blazer impact, the leathery scales smoking and peeling outward—it was suddenly small and pitiful—one last galvanic writhe and twitch, and then it toppled forward across the rock, still continuing to char and burn. Smoke began to curl from its edges; its hide split in three places and acrid steam poured forth, a pungent burning scent. In only a moment, this red and orange demon had become a black and stiffened skeleton of bone and hardened ash. The flesh of the head and tail took the longest to roast—the eyes stared lifelessly upward. The remains crackled as they cooked. Heat rose from the body like a furnace.

The air was silent now, but the echoes of the blazer-bolts still rang in their ears. The excitement of the moment continued to vibrate in all of them.

Dorik still stood on the rock above the blazer-savaged creature, still holding his rifle

like a club, still poised for a second swing—there was a stunned manner to his pose. Did I do *that*? I only hit it once and it collapsed like this—??!

Ethab and Kalen were just standing; Nusa took a couple of swipes to brush the dust from her knees. Kalen recalibrated his rifle and took a position where he could cover the Nexus again. Nusa noticed and moved professionally toward the other side.

Megan and Loevil came out from behind their respective rocks, already reactivating their scanners. Loevil looked across to Megan: “You were saying something. . . ?” Tril and Eese came out with their rifles ready. Ethab stamped across the Nexus and the disarrayed gear, toward Dorik and the dead dinosaur. Tril and Eese followed at a cautious distance, curious about the creature but still startled.

Dorik sank into a sitting position, clutching at his heart and panting heavily. He raised his goggle-plate as Ethab came up. His face was pasty and stained with sweat, his flesh seemed to sag. He was as white as a scream, his eyes were weak and watery. His beard was a stringy mat across a papery jowl. His breath wheezed through fluttering cheeks. He ventured a smile, a signal meant to be conciliatory, to turn away a growling wrath—

It didn't work. Ethab remained impassive behind his goggle-plate, breathing deliberately, fast and hard. He stood over Dorik like a tower, waiting. His bright, hardened uniform glinted and struck sparks in the air. His long legs and broad shoulders made him seem a monument, his weaponry and gear made him a battle. His helmet was crisp and insect-looking; the eyes seemed jutting, the antennae dispassionate and judging.

Dorik swallowed hard and looked at Ethab—*tried* to look; he jerked his eyes away from all that fierceness as if it burned his retinas; then tried to look again, blinking. He was uncomfortable like this—he dropped his gaze to Ethab's middle—why didn't the other say

something? Ethab continued to wait.

Finally, Dorik managed to gasp out, “I—I didn’t mean to—run—like that—”

Ethab didn’t answer. He just looked at Dorik, studying him. Disappointed? Angry? Dorik couldn’t tell.

“I’m sorry!” Dorik said plaintively.

Ethab still didn’t react. Dorik didn’t know what else to say. “What more do you want—?” he demanded.

Ethab shook his head curtly. As if to say, “Nothing.” He didn’t want anything from Dorik anymore. He exhaled once and turned away.

“*Ppppppppttt . . .*” Dorik made a razzberry of self-recrimination. He shook his head like a sigh. It could have happened to anyone. The thing had to pick a target—whoever it picked would have run. There was no way he could have gotten it with his rifle—and besides—“I’m getting too old for this. . . .”

Megan had resumed scanning; she had moved to the top of an outcrop where she had a wider range—but her scanner was silent now. There were no other predators about. Nusa came up the rocks to stand beside her.

Tril and Eese, not wanting to approach while Ethab had been confronting Dorik, now went over and began to examine the corpse of the dinosaur; they didn’t look at Dorik, embarrassed for him and his shame. Kalen and Loevil were back on the Nexus, sorting the damaged gear; they had raised their goggle-plates off their eyes.

Kalen looked up as Ethab approached. “Not good,” he reported. “But we can manage. We lost the spare superchargers.”

Ethab was strictly professional. “We’ll parallel the semis then.” He turned and

surveyed the terrain. “Loevil? Megan?”

Loevil stood up with the fuel cell he had been checking. His scanner was hanging at his side; he brought it forward as he stood. “Just a fluke . . . I think.” Checking the screen, he said, “I don’t think there are any more of them around.”

From her vantage point, Megan added, “Delta is now one oh eight; magnetic interference counterphased.”

Ethab nodded. He turned to Eese and Tril, who stood with their goggle-plates tentatively raised. “Stand guard, there and there. Nusa, Megan, hold where you are. Kalen, Loevil, see what you can salvage.” He glanced back and Pointed. “Eese, the notch. Tril, down there.” With Nusa on the outcrop, he had placed them in an equilateral triangle around the disc of the Nexus.

Timidly, Dorik came up to him, holding his rifle more like a shield than a weapon. “What can I do?” he asked. It was as if he were asking, “Let me be a part of the team again, please—” He repeated, a little more plaintive, “What can I do?”

Ethab hardly noticed him. “Keep out of the way,” he said, and brushed past.