

FLASHBACK DAWN

by

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A Serialized Novel

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Based upon "Flashback," first published by Books in Motion/Classic Ventures, 1993. Reprinted by Hobb's End Books, 2017.

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III | The Red-Eye Shift

Red heard the gunshots first—not just any gunshots but Corbin’s AR-15, specifically—followed by others, and his first thought was, *Jesus Christ, he’s finally snapped*. But then he heard screaming as well as the unmistakable bark of a cavern raptor—which was instantly recognized by another, and another, and another still—and knew the perimeter had been breached. He turned instantly and began running toward the meeting area, then halted, suddenly, for he had no ammo beyond that which was already in his Scout rifle. He reversed direction and bolted for his dwelling, entering the lagoon area, where he keyed in the code to the bungalow and banged open the door so that Ryx burst into startled flight. There was a cartridge bandolier slung over the chair of his drafting table; he snatched it up and ejected his clip, then slapped in a new one and hurried for the meeting area.

He hadn’t run far when he came across the first body as well as the first raptor (the body laying slit open from throat to crotch while the raptor devoured its unspooled intestines), and Red squeezed off a round, blowing a hole in its head which shot a stream of dark blood no less than six feet before the beast dropped like a sandbag and Red circled around to find the others—but mostly to find Charlotte.

He heard her shout over the engine of one of the rides. “Red! I’m over here! The Scrambler!”

He scanned the amusements quickly and saw her long, brown hair blowing from one of the ride’s carriages: she had activated the thing and sought refuge on it, and was now being swung and whipped about dizzyingly even as a trio of cavern raptors tried to attack. He ran to the fence which encircled the attraction and quickly chambered a round, but found it difficult to target any animals as they scrambled to dodge the carriages, darting this way and that with frantic precision even as they persisted in the assault.

“No ammo!” she shouted, the ride bringing her close and then whisking her away again.

At last he squeezed off a shot, and missed completely. Corbin called from the top of the Gingerbread House: “You’re no good down there! Find some high ground and pick them off!” He shot several times in rapid succession and one

of the raptors jolted, spraying blood. Red chambered another round and trained his sites—*krack!*—but missed yet again. He was answered by another volley from Corbin, which missed its target too but managed to blow holes in several of the carriages, one of which had been passing directly beside Charlotte. “Cease your fucking fire!” Red shouted furiously. He fired again and hit one of the animals in its haunches, dropping it instantly (although it continued to snap at the spinning carriages and Charlotte’s in particular from where it lay), then sighted the remaining raptor as it seemed to fall into synch with the ride’s rhythm and began to simply hold its position, ducking as the empty carriages whisked over its head and crouching to attack, its foreclaws splayed, the sickle-claws on its feet tapping. “Now, Corbin!” Red barked, beginning to squeeze his trigger—and paused, for the raptor was staring directly back at him, cocking its head, its white eyes blinking, even as Corbin responded, “Cease fucking fire, asshole. That’s what you said. I’m covering Dean.” And red fired.

But the raptor dodged left and scrambled behind the ride’s central hub—shielding itself—and Red thought, with dawning horror, *My God, it understands. It understands that we can kill it from a distance.* He jogged sideways along the fence to get a clean shot but the raptor only advanced further around the hub, maintaining the barrier. He held up the rifle even as Charlotte swung close and was yanked away by the ride once more.

“I’m going to throw you the gun!” he shouted, and focused on her intently, attempting to track her despite the chaotic movement of the coaches.

“Is that a good idea?” she exclaimed.

“No,” he hollered back. “But it’s all we got. Now get ready!”

She spun close once again and he almost threw it—but thought better of it at the last minute and waited, even as the raptor stepped out and rose its head, seeming to calculate its chances of success if it were to leap at her as she cycled back. “Watch it!” snapped Red. He aimed his rifle and the creature retreated behind the hub.

And then she was on the way back, her hands help up, and when she had rotated close enough to him he tossed her the gun and she caught it in both hands. “All right, all right, all right!” Red cheered—then paused, suddenly, for the raptor had poked its head out from behind the hub and was looking back and forth between them: calculating, its head cocking, its little mohawk of black feathers rising and falling. And then it looked directly at him and there was a little

moment between man and dinosaur—for they both realized how vulnerable he was—before it abandoned its focus on Charlotte completely and charged at him, weaving between the carriages.

He heard Charlotte squeeze off some rounds as he bolted for—he didn’t know—the diner, yes, the diner! He could see them now, some of them, at least, on the other side of the glass: Doc Gardner and Frank Miller, Big Blue, the primitive girl—alas, he was never going to win a footrace with a velociraptor. “Corbin! Corbin! I’ve got a situation down here!”

“What’s that?” Corbin hollered back, even as the raptor vaulted over the Scrambler’s fence and pursued. “Cease fire, you say?”

Red heard gunshots—not Corbin’s AR-15—it was Charlotte, trying hopelessly to hit the raptor from the spinning carriage. “Corbin!” someone screamed, but Red couldn’t tell if it was Charlotte or himself.

“What’s that? I can’t hear you over all the cease fire!”

Red ran, hearing the animal’s sickle-claws tapping against the pavement, hearing its labored breathing, feeling its closer proximity with each thudding heartbeat, smelling its gamey odor, and as he did so he remembered the look in the cop’s eyes in the window of the supermarket’s office, a look that said, *I could leave you hear right now, asshole. Because seconds count ... and it might just come down to you or me.*

And then a volley of shots rang out which he instantly recognized as coming from Corbin’s AR-15, and he heard the raptor whelp and collapse to the ground. And he jogged to a halt near the door to the diner and supported himself on his knees, gasping for breath, as a silence set in, one in which he dared to hope that it was, in fact, over—that they had survived. Again. Somehow.

Not everyone, he reprimanded himself.

“Is that it?” someone called out at last—Harley Jackson, the auto mechanic. He was on the enormous Ferris wheel, which Red hadn’t even noticed was turning. “Is that all of them?”

Nobody said anything. Red moved back out into the open slowly, scanning the area thoroughly. “Everyone stay where you are. Just in case.”

He approached the fallen raptor cautiously.

“Red!” shouted Charlotte from the Scrambler.

“That’s probably not a good idea,” said Corbin.

Red raised his hand and patted at the air: *It’s okay.*

He crouched near the dying beast, whose dark blood spread slowly across the floor, and watched as it inhaled and exhaled laboriously. Strangely enough, he felt an odd sort of connection to the animal; it was similar to the connection he had with Ryx, his archaeopteryx—similar, he supposed, to the connection he felt with all animals. He recalled Corbin's words during the ad hoc committee meeting: *If there's one thing we learned ... is that these things are not animals. They're weapons.*

A moist, white eye rolled to regard him coolly, and he looked into it, seeing his own reflection. *They have purpose. Intent. They've been infused with it somehow.*

But he saw no intent in the creature's eyes, or, if he did, it was fading, fading along with a highlight of color he could not define, a color he could not compare to any he had ever seen, except the primitive girl. Except Naaygi.

And then the raptor's entire body constricted, it just shrunk as if something had left it, a vapor, a mist, a soul, who could say? And he reached out slowly and closed its eyelid. Then he looked back at the diner to find its door propped open and Gardner and the others starting to gather upon its sidewalk, among them Naaygi herself, who stared at him from her wheelchair as though in great curiosity, her head cocked at an angle, the neon catching her eyes so that the unpronounceable color twinkled and gleamed.

Charlotte shook the tin can one more time for good measure, then it was time to draw. She passed the can to Frank Miller first, who took it somewhat gingerly and looked at the others in the circle for what seemed a long time before finally reaching in and pulling out a ticket. Relief flooded his face and he exhaled before turning its reverse side to face the others. "Off-duty," he said, and placed the ticket on the table.

He passed the can to Harley Jackson. Everyone deemed competent with a firearm (or was willing to learn) had gathered by the lagoon outside Red's residence to draw straws for the night-watch. Corbin had gladly volunteered, of course, but he couldn't patrol the entire 15-acre complex alone, and even he would have to sleep sometime. And while others had expressed a willingness to step up—Charlotte, and, to her surprise, Red, Chairman Dean, who seemed to be chair of nothing since the attack, Big Blue; to her credit, for she had never fired a gun before, Taher, and little Don Martin—it was felt a drawing would suit the democratic spirit of the earlier meeting best. And the need for a night-watch

was clear, for it had now been established that the raptors had gotten in not by leaping the fence but by burrowing underneath (something previously thought impossible, for the fence was grounded in a foot-and-a-half of concrete), not where what must have been a prolonged effort over many weeks would have been visible but out by the children's play area, where no one ever went, because there were no children in the compound— something Red had always been grateful for, as he was grateful for the construction equipment left behind by the park expansion crew—and was especially so now.

Harley reached into the can without hesitation and withdrew a ticket, which he turned to show the others. 'OFF,' it read in bold, black Magic Marker. Then he laid the ticket on the table and moved to leave, saying, somewhat apologetically, "I'm, ah, going to bulldoze more dirt against that fence line. I'll try to drop some rocks or chunks of cement there, too. And ... I'll get the backhoe started."

No one said anything; everyone knew what he meant. "I'll find a nice piece of masonry. Was it, ah, 'Shawn' ... or 'Sean?' Oh, here." He handed the can to Charlotte.

"'Sean,' I think," she said softly. "Thank you, Harley. Be careful."

She studied the contents of the can absently, and Red placed a hand on her shoulder. She and Sean had been friends. At last she reached into the can and pulled out a ticket. "*Hm*," she mumbled, and smiled wanly. "Guess I'll just catch up on my Netflix." There was, of course, no Netflix, nor any internet at all anymore. The Flashback had taken care of that. She laid the ticket reverse-side up on the table and passed the can to Red.

He reached into it and to virtually no one's surprise drew out an "ON"—it was time. He laid it on the table so everyone could see it. "Well," he began, and looked at Corbin. "Eight to ten hours together. How bad could it be?"

"Pretty fucking bad," said Corbin. "Let's just get this over with." He took the can from him and handed it to Blue, but kept his grip on it. "I'm not going to spend more than 30 minutes making sure you don't blow your blue head off, understand?" She jerked the can away from him and stuck her hand in, or tried to.

"Don't anyone breath," joked little Don Martin.

"Hey, *fuck you*," she snapped, shaking the can in a beefy hand, bringing its contents closer to the rim. "You think I'm triggered that fucking easily?" She shot him a smoldering look. "Well, do you?" She fished out a ticket and flipped it over, her eyes souring behind her plastic-framed glasses. "Okay, I'm fucking triggered."

She slapped the ticket onto the counter. "So, what's red and blue and black all over?" She glanced up and down Corbin's police uniform.

"Is that a fucking joke?" said Corbin. "Is that some kind of, like, feminazi humor?" His voice oozed disdain.

"All right, knock it off," said Red. "We've got a job to do. I'm sure we can get through one night without biting each other's heads off." He glanced around the room, not just at Corbin and Blue. "Until then I'd suggest everyone get some sleep, and I mean everyone. Tomorrow it might be your turn."

"I'm not sleeping a wink so long as all those lights are on and attracting every critter that's ever wandered the caverns," said Lonny, who at 16 was the closest thing to a child in the entire Shambhala.

"You better," said Red, "because our days of just lounging around between supply runs are over. Tomorrow we start hotwiring motor homes and staging them in the parking lot up top." He glanced at Corbin. "And scouring pawnshops, police stations, general stores, and anywhere else we can break into for weapons and ammunition."

"Right the fuck on," said Lonny, reaching for Red's shouldered rifle.

"Right the fuck nothing," said Corbin, slapping his hand away. "Because you're not going to be armed." He turned to the others. "Right?"

"Right," said Red.

"Right," said Blue.

And for once, virtually everyone else in the room agreed, too.

As he had in the Jeep, Red dreamed, and again he dreamed that he was a being of pure light.

But that wasn't quite it, not really. Rather, he dreamed that he *had* been a being of pure light—but was now imprisoned. Worse, he had the sense that he'd been forgotten, not just by his own kind—other beings, other forms of light—but by himself. He sensed there had been a reason for his imprisonment, a profound one, even; nor did he feel that he had been subjected to it against his will, but rather had given of himself freely. So, too, did he have the sense that a great wrong had been committed, or perhaps a great right (they, his own kind, didn't know for certain, that was the difficulty), and that he had, somehow, sacrificed himself ... so that they might know at last.

But the influence of the flesh had been strong, so strong that it had taken him over, overwritten him, consumed him, at least for a time. But now he sensed that

was changing, and that his original being was reawakening, not to be reborn as it was but rather as something new, a blending somehow of both the light and the flesh—a hybrid. And that this hybrid’s purpose was to *see*, and by seeing, render judgement.

And then amidst this very dream (although it wasn’t so much a dream as it was an eavesdropping upon another lifeform ... for he had a sudden epiphany that the being of light was not and never had been *him* but something and someone else entirely), there came a voice, not his own, nor that of the being of pure light, nor of the hybrid who was somehow both the observer and the observed, nor any of these things (and yet all these things), and it asked, simply, *What do you see when you look upon them?* And the answer came so suddenly and so viscerally and was so overpowering in its beauty and horror and confiction and paradox, that he—Red—awoke with a gasp, startling Ryx into flight and falling to the floor of the corridor while breaking the fall with his hands, and dropping the AR-15 Corbin had lent him with a resounding clatter.

And a sound came, a deep, resonant, growling sound, which he at first took to be the cat—the smilodon—but quickly realized was no such thing. No, this was something different, more like a raptor, but bigger, louder, more guttural. Jesus, how long had he been out? He looked at his watch: it was 1 am. He stood abruptly and dusted himself off, then snatched up the rifle and re-shouldered it. The sound had come from just down the tubular corridor, which ended abruptly with a heavy-duty cyclone gate (but not heavy-duty enough, it was feared) and had once, before the Flashback, been intended as the entrance to a new section of the park. Nor was it the only sound, for as he stood listening he thought he heard footfalls—yes, there ... and there ... squelching moistly, heavily, which told him two things (but only two things): whatever it was had crossed the moat—not itself surprising since the raptors swam it routinely and the cat merely jumped it—and it was bigger than a raptor by a considerable measure, but not, by the sound of it, so large as a T. Rex.

He unshouldered his rifle and moved forward slowly, closing to within about fifteen feet of the gate, where he lowered upon one knee and waited, the stock of the AR-15 feeling slippery against his palm, the weapon’s butt pressed tightly against his shoulder. He knew he should radio Corbin and Blue—at least Corbin—but didn’t want to take his hands off the rifle long enough to que the mic. That and the fact that whatever it was, it was big enough to pose a real threat

to the non-electrified gate if agitated or enflamed in any way. Ryx alighted upon his upper back as he waited and his finger tightening upon the trigger reflexively, but he didn't move to shake him off. The truth was he was too scared to move, too scared even to breath, too scared to do anything but grind the rifle against his shoulder and wait.

The first thing he saw was the tail and one hindquarter of a cavern raptor, guts and gristle dangling, being carried in the mouth of something whose snout was much longer than a T. Rex, which stepped into view fully before pausing abruptly and freezing absolutely still. Slowly, it lowered its sleek head closer to the ground and dropped its prey, then it straightened, acting for all the world as though he wasn't even there, until, finally, it turned to face him—calmly, smoothly—its body remaining face forward.

Of its body Red could only have said this: it was about three times the size of a cavern raptor and a little less than half the size of a fully-grown T. Rex, but unlike T. Rex it had fully developed arms and hands and a gracile symmetry which belied its well-proportioned bulk. He could have said that and little more, other than the fact that it had clearly changed color to match its surroundings, including the dimly lit, tubular corridor, so that it shown black as coal in the intense darkness and bore circular stripes that seemed precisely the same shade of white as the lights.

But of its head and eyes he could say much, although he would choose not to, for as it turned its snout to face him he saw that, though deep in profile, it became an almost beak-like wolf's muzzle when viewed head-on, like a great, black knife in the dark, and its white eyes (which had changed to suit its surroundings, presumably) pointed forward rather than gazing sideways, so that when it looked at him it did so with an almost human intimacy that chilled him to the bone. So, too, did they have the glint, the strange highlight of an alien color, but in this case the shades were mismatched so that it seemed for all the world like a saurian David Bowie were staring at him through the dark and the cyclone mesh.

Red's heart thudded against his breast as the thing seemed to examine the gate, coolly, dispassionately, studying its edges, pushing against its mesh with its snout, even gripping it briefly with a strangely human hand and appearing to test its give. Then it noticed something immediately to its right and reoriented itself to examine it more closely, and Red realized with mounting horror that it was studying the gates access pad. It literally pecked at it a couple of times, causing it

to light up and to paint the thing's face blue, after which it cocked its head and wiggled its talons and pecked it yet again.

Then it lost interest and snatched up the corpse in its mouth and proceeded to plod away, and before its great dagger of a tail had passed from view Red saw that it had been branded, like a laboratory animal, with an alphanumeric identifier, one that was as simple as it was strange.

It read: SDTB 01 – NAPOLEON.

She wasn't sure how long he'd been standing there, and, indeed, he only came out of it when she touched his shoulder gently and said, softly, "Hey, Red ..."—which caused him to jump almost violently and to whip around, cursing at her vehemently.

"Red ... what in the hell?" She held up a paper sack. "I brought you some lunch."

He only stared at her, his mouth hung wide, and shook his head once. At last he exhaled powerfully and ran a hand through his hair, then stared at her indecipherably as he had done so many times before, appearing as though he would either take her into his arms and kiss her or turn and stride away as fast as he possibly could.

He shouldered his rifle and then took her into his arms and kissed her. And such was the conviction of it—such was its passion and earnestness and honesty and spontaneity—that she gave into it completely, not understanding what had brought it on and not caring, but kissing him back as passionately as she had ever kissed anyone.

Big Blue, who's real name was Sharma Whiteman, watched from the carousel as they embraced, feeling every positive thought leave her as the two capered and laughed in the glow of the kiss's aftermath. Something about what had just happened had hit her like a slap across the face; nor could she have explained it to herself or to anyone else if she'd tried. It wasn't just the suddenness and the forcefulness of it—she would have expected that much from any man, from her stepfather on up to the present, much less a man such as Red, who had supposedly shunned women but whom Blue knew for a fact had only used that as a ploy.

No, she didn't really care about him one way or the other. It was *her*, Charlotte, the dancer, the stripper, the whore. For no one believed her story about being a legitimate dance instructor—Red most of all. Why would he? She laughed to herself. Why, indeed, when a stripper was so much more fun to dream about,

so much more fun to wank to in your bungalow after another day spent avoiding responsibility and working on your shitty mural, the mural you liked to claim was for the morale of the group but which you really just used to court Charlotte indirectly, like every other sniveling little creative type she'd ever known.

One vote. That's what her group had lost by in the November election. One vote ... Charlotte's vote ... by definition ...else the number of women to men in the Shambhala would have carried the day.

And everything would have been different.

She examined Red's Scout rifle, which he had lent her for the night, and found she liked the feel of it in her hands—liked its sureness and rigidity, its penetrative power, its simplicity and utility, like a hard cock but actually good for something, and decided right then and there that everything might still work out the way she'd envisioned.

If she was just patient.

If she just waited a little longer.

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To be continued in ...
FLASHBACK DAWN:
"CHARLOTTE"