

FLASHBACK DAWN

by

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A Serialized Novel

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As it never had before the Flashback, the supermarket slept, mostly. Although its exterior was covered with creeper vines and mossy growths, its interior remained remarkably unchanged—even its power continued to hum. Still, the long lights that hung suspended over its aisles had largely gone dead; and of those that remained live, many had begun to flicker and fail. No humans walked the once-polished floors of the Ozark Food and Drug Supercenter, nor did they crowd the expansive front lot where they had once competed—sometimes violently—for parking space. And yet, from the markings on the signboards and multitudes of packages to the Christmas music drifting like fog up and down the aisles, their presence remained.

It was a presence unremarked upon by the place's new dominant species—compsognathus—who scavenged the shelves this night as they had any other, as oblivious to the music and the dead languages of their forbearers as they were the lights in the sky that had presaged the Flashback (or rather, for them, the flash-forward). And yet there *was something* that garnered their attention—a grinding hum, a sound outside of nature, outside the store, which drew inexorably closer as they raised their little heads and cocked moist, round eyes; as they fidgeted about like so many scaly, featherless chickens. And then the glass doors at the front of the store shattered inward and the face of a monster emerged, hard-edged and not of this world, utterly alien, its teeth meshed so tight as to resemble a grin, its eyes on fire so that they cut the dark like sickle-claws. And they scattered as it roared up the aisle and passed them by, even as a popping was heard, a booming, really, which coincided with the packages all around them exploding like volcanoes.

“Not the compies, not the compies,” snapped Charlotte from the backseat. “For Christ’s sake, save the ammo. Remember what we’re here for.”

Corbin ignored her, training his sites on one of the compsognathuses fleeing in the headlights. “We need the meat,” he said, simply, and squeezed off a round. The compsognathus exploded like a watermelon. Red reached across the cab and snatched the muzzle of the weapon, jerked it back through the window—even as the Jeep Wrangler skewed to the left and its fender grazed the shelves.

"She's right, goddammit. Save the ammo. We don't know what all is in here. All that thing is going to do is blow everything to pieces."

Corbin levelled his gaze at him—as ruthless and serpentine as any dinosaur. "Don't ever do that again, Red." Then he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and whipped the gun back out the window, and fired—not a single shot this time but an entire volley. Jars of tomato sauce exploded and dripped as they blew past.

Red glanced at Charlotte in the rearview mirror, who splayed her hands and widened her eyes as if to say, *Well, do something!* "Where to, boss? Quickly," he merely said.

"Cans, we need cans—tuna, mackerel, anything with protein. Should be the next aisle over."

He brought the Jeep to a screeching halt at the end of the aisle, reversed quickly, and whipped the hood around into the adjacent section. The signboard above them read: SOUP / CANNED VEGETABLES / CANNED PREPARED. Red geared down and proceeded slowly. "Okay, everyone, keep your eyes open."

"There!" said Charlotte.

Red maneuvered them close to the shelf and put it into neutral, ratcheted the emergency brake. Corbin placed the semi-automatic rifle between his knees and shook his hand at Charlotte. She quickly handed him a basket and he began scooping cans of mackerel into it sloppily. "Come on, hurry, hurry," said Red.

Corbin exchanged the basket for a new one and cleaned off the rest of the shelf. "Tuna's on the bottom," he said. "Come on! Back her up and I'll cover."

Red glanced in the mirror at Charlotte, who nodded affirmatively. He released the brake and backed up, ratcheted it back on.

They all scrambled out.

"You got this?" said Red to Charlotte. "May as well scour the entire aisle." And to Corbin: "I'll take this end." He grabbed his rifle and jogged toward the nearest endcap.

Corbin eyed the far endcap dubiously, even fearfully. "You piece of shit, Red." Then he hurried down the aisle in a state of high alert, pointing his assault rifle this way and that.

Charlotte popped the hatch and grabbed a couple baskets, began filling them with tuna. A cry sounded from somewhere near the back of the store which

Red recognized instantly. Charlotte and he exchanged glances. “You hear that, Corbin?” he shouted.

Corbin was but a tiny figure at the end of the aisle. “Yeah, asshole. I heard it. Let’s go.”

“What’s the matter, Supercop? Afraid of something that might fight you back? Give her a minute.”

Charlotte exchanged her baskets for empty ones and rushed down the aisle.

The call sounded again and yet another responded, this one from the front of the store. “Those are fucking raptors, Michelangelo. She’s got about sixty seconds before I come down there and take that Jeep with or without you.”

“Where did they come from?” said Charlotte, piling cans into her baskets.

“Probably filed in after us,” said Red, or slipped through a back door we missed.”

“They can appear out of nowhere, asshole,” hollered Corbin. “I’ve seen one materialize right where a man was standing.” Another call echoed throughout the store and he aimed his rifle into the dark. “Want to know what happened?”

“No!” shouted Charlotte. She scrambled for the Jeep with her baskets laden with cans.

Corbin began backing toward them. “It fused with the poor bastard—became sort of a man-dinosaur hybrid, just a jumbled mess of flesh with eyeballs in all the wrong places and their organs mixed together, like a casserole. Fortunately, it didn’t live very—”

There was a tumult of cascading cans and jars which clattered and broke against the floor as a velociraptor leapt atop the shelves between them, and he instantly raised his gun and opened fire. Blood flew off the creature as it danced wildly and its body fell into the adjacent aisle, but was quickly replaced by two more, which pranced along the tops of the shelves, snarling and gnashing their teeth. Corbin bolted for the Jeep.

They had just enough time to close the hatch and pile into the vehicle before the raptors fell upon it and were joined by others, who besieged it no differently than they would a large plant-eating dinosaur, latching onto it with their clawed hands and sickled talons even as Red crunched it into gear and they chirped forward.

"We lost a lot of good men that day," said Corbin, pursuing the subject as though nothing were going on at all, "while you civilians scrambled to save your own hides. We—"

"Jesus, Corbin, your window!" shrieked Charlotte—too late—as one of the beasts' heads darted deep into the cab and began thrashing about violently. The Jeep careened against the shelves as Red lost control, first to the left, then to the right, causing groceries to cascade down the windshield and to roll off the hood, as Charlotte slid the pistol from her holster and opened fire on the velociraptor, which bucked and leapt, banging its head against the ceiling, before reversing itself back through the window and falling away.

Corbin cranked up his window and looked at her over his shoulder as Red regained control, and said, albeit begrudgingly, "Thank you."

But Charlotte was no longer looking at his face; instead she had focused on his shoulder—which had been laid open by the raptor's flashing teeth and now bled profusely over his policeman's uniform and down the side of his seat, causing Red to reach behind himself awkwardly and fish around for something even as he accelerated for the front doors of the supermarket.

"There's a First-Aid kit behind my seat," he said, and Charlotte quickly joined in the search even as Red added, "It's right here," and took his eyes off the wheel just long enough for Corbin to shout, "*Red!*"

He'd scarcely had time to refocus on the wheel before he noticed a lithe figure awash in the headlights, a figure shorter than the average person and swathed in what appeared to be animal hides, holding a spear, who turned its head to face them and regarded them briefly as its—*her*—eyes flashed with terror and the Jeeps push bar collided with her body.

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"IT'S HUMAN, *oh my god*, it's human," said Charlotte as the Jeep idled and the raptors clawed and bit at the cab.

"No, it's not," said Corbin. "I—I saw it clearly before we hit it. It's ... it's some kind of ... *ape-thing*."

"But the spear, look at the spear!"

"It's alive, whatever it is," said Red. He tore his eyes away from the writhing form now laying some twenty feet from the Jeep and regarded them. "And I'm responsible."

Corbin's eyes lit up with realization. "Now wait just a damn minute ..."

"He's right, Red," said Charlotte. "You can't go out there."

Red turned and looked beyond her, through the back window. A glowing green exit sign could be seen at the far end of the aisle. Charlotte followed his gaze. "You better not be thinking what I think you're thinking," she said.

"I can make it," he said, examining the distance, "if you two can get her into the truck. I'll go through the door and you can pick me up outside."

Metal buckled as one of the raptors landed on the hood and began gnawing around the windshield, tearing the wipers off. Another joined it, looking in at them with its cold, round eyes, cocking its head. Corbin gazed at them mesmerized before managing, "The kit ... I'm like, fucking bleeding all over the place, if you haven't noticed."

"Give me your gun," said Red.

"Hey, *fuck you*, I'm bleeding to death here. Look at me!"

Red snatched it from him in one swift stroke. "You'll survive. She won't—not when those raptors catch a whiff of her. Charlotte, can you drive this thing?"

She stared at him intensely before saying, at last, "I can drive it."

He placed a hand on his door handle. "Corbin, give me a fresh clip."

The ex-police officer just glared at him. "If I could move my arm, I just might."

Charlotte reached into Corbin's coat pocket and grabbed one as Red ejected the old clip, then snapped it into place for him. "Locked and loaded," she said, and smiled tepidly. "You know, it's not very MIGOW of you, risking your life for a woman like this."

He looked at her a moment and his eyes flicked up and down her face, and something passed between them which had passed between them before, a thousand times before, in fact. It wasn't quite attraction, and yet ... "That's MGTOW," he said, "and we don't *hate* women." He opened his door less than an inch. "We just don't trust, deal with, or like them very much. Get the door."

She'd barely had time to react much less to stretch between the seats when he threw open the door and began running toward the exit, hooting and hollering

to get the raptors' attention. The creatures leapt from the truck immediately and pursued.

"What the hell does *MGTOW* mean?" asked Corbin as she slid behind the wheel.

She jammed the truck into gear. "Men Going Their Own Way," she said, and rolled her eyes. "You know, like you. But by choice."

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RED RAN, RAKING A HAND along the shelves, knocking jars and cans and boxes onto the floor, hoping it would trip the raptors up, hoping they might slip on the spilled contents. He ran until he could hear their breathing only several feet behind him, then swiveled at last and opened fire. Two of them danced wildly, throwing off blood, and fell, thrashing about, but the others continued the pursuit. Worse, they had gained on him, and were now merely a few yards away. Worse still, when he refocused forward he saw that yet another velociraptor had circled around the aisle and now blocked his path to the exit. *Good lord*, he thought, *does it know that's a door? Could it possibly know that?* Then he zigged sideways and, without even thinking, dashed into the corridor that led to the back stock-room. There was a glassed-in office immediately to his right, and he gripped the knob.

It was open. No sooner had he squeezed through and pulled the door shut behind him than the raptors collided against it, scratching and biting. He turned around and looked at them through the glass inset: at their moist, yellow eyes and cracked, scaly hides, at their mohawks of dark, ruffled feathers which, when combined with their frenzied and erratic movements, reminded Red, insanely, of the Zuni Fetish Doll from a TV movie he had seen as a kid—*Trilogy of Terror*, as he recalled. Nor had he gotten used to the idea of being so low on the food chain; indeed, he'd be the first to admit that the notion still woke him in the middle of the night, sweating and trembling uncontrollably, as it had from the first day of the Flashback.

But the glass was thin and time was short. And so he searched the office for a point of egress and, finding no door, blew out the small window near the manager's desk.

He was clearing the shards from the sill, wondering where the primitive-looking girl had come from, marveling at how she'd seemed to materialize out of thin air, when he noticed the eerie, flickering glow of the television monitors—an entire bank of them—in the far corner of the room. And it struck him immediately that the collision had undoubtedly been caught on tape. He stuck his head out the shattered window briefly, just long enough to determine that Charlotte and Corbin weren't already on their way, then hurried to the security council.

It didn't take him long to find the footage of their entry into the supermarket, and yet, despite the vantage of no less than fourteen television cameras, no trace of the primitive girl could be found, either before or after their arrival (although the mystery of the raptors had been solved, for they had, indeed, filed in through the busted doors). That left only the collision itself, which he caught in passing as he jogged the video forward—before stopping the tape abruptly, and reversing to the moment just before they'd struck her. And here was the damndest thing: because, despite Corbin's lecture, Red *had* seen things materialize out of nowhere since the Flashback; not a raptor directly into a man, that much was true, but a cycad tree where before there had only been empty space. And so he knew what these manifestations looked like, and what he saw on the video, *was not that*. For those were instant replacements, not so much as though something had suddenly appeared but as though one had just noticed something which had always been there. No, for while the girl had appeared out of nowhere, all right, she had appeared in a flash of light. A *shaft* of light, rather, only instants before they'd struck her.

Glass shattered suddenly and shards flew everywhere, nicking his cheeks, and before he'd even realized that the sheer volume of sound and fury was more than what the door itself, if compromised, could have provided, one of the beasts was upon him, having leapt feet-first through the glass wall that looked out upon the stock room.

He squeezed off a few rounds which went wildly astray before the gun was knocked from his hands and sent skittering across the floor. And then he had only his hands, which he clasped about the predator's jaws in what he knew would be a vain attempt to keep its teeth from sinking into his neck. And it struck him that what filled his mind in what he was convinced were his last moments were but two things: the mural he'd been working on in the great reception hall

of their compound—a mural which would now remain unfinished—and Charlotte. What happened next happened very fast, although for Red it seemed like hours—hours spent twisting and thrashing like a madman in order to thwart the beasts’ attempts to clamp their jaws about a limb, or to exploit an opening in his abdominal area (for he could see the deadly sickle-claws on their feet flashing by the light of the monitors). But in fact only seconds had passed before the top of his primary attacker’s head simply exploded—splattering him with blood and bits of brain—leaving only its lower mandible to continue biting at dead air, and Red realized, craning his neck to look up at the window he’d shot out, that Corbin was crouched in its frame, picking the animals off with militarily precise headshots.

He squeezed out from under the dead velociraptor with what strength he had left and scrambled for the window, but had scarcely begun to reach for Corbin when the ex-cop snapped, “My gun, asshole.”

Red looked about the room, still disorientated. Spying it, he rushed toward it and snatched it up, even as Charlotte called, “Let’s hurry it up, we’ve got company!”

Red handed Corbin the weapon and they exchanged uneasy glances; it was an exchange that set Red’s hair on end, for the cop’s eyes said one thing very clearly: *I could leave you here right now, asshole. Because seconds count ... and it might just come down to you or me.*

Then he set his weapon aside and extended his hand for Red to take, and they just managed to clear the window and climb into the Jeep before the pair of allosaurs—not quite as large as their cousin T. Rex but quicker and more gracile—descended upon them from the mists, and the group narrowly missed being caught in a pincer movement only by Charlotte’s assured driving and a heady dose of pure, undiluted luck.

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THE FIRST ASPECT OF the primitive girl Red became acquainted with was the tip of her spear, which jabbed him in the ribs as he climbed into the backseat of the truck.

“You brought her spear?” he said incredulously, shifting the weapon aside, even as one of the allosaurs brushed its massive head against the chassis, causing the Jeep to lift off two wheels briefly and to nearly lose its footing.

“She’s in shock, but she wouldn’t be separated from it,” said Charlotte. “Hang on!”

Red grabbed the back of her seat as the Jeep rocked violently and accelerated, sparing a glance at the primitive girl as he did so. She was only semiconscious and her right leg was clearly broken, plus they’d buckled her in; nevertheless, he gripped the short spear stealthily as she turned her head against the window and eased it into the rear storage area.

The vehicle jolted again as the allosaur on the passenger side butted it with its head, and Red shouted, “Jesus, Corbin, give us some cover!”

The ex-cop was already working on it, and an instant later Red saw a repeating, crisscrossed muzzle flash erupt from the side of the truck, the rounds of which blasted away a chunk of the animal’s snout and the sound of which startled the primitive girl awake. “Naaygi!” she cried suddenly. “*Naaygi!*”

She reached for her spear instinctively, and, finding it nowhere, began thrashing about wildly in her seat, grunting and growling.

“I think we got a situation back here,” said Red—even as she lunged at the sound of his voice.

Corbin continued to fire. “In case you haven’t noticed, asshole, we’ve got a situation *out there*.”

Red shrunk against his door as the girl clawed at him, batting away her hands, which were large, like a man’s, but the seatbelt held her in place, mostly. Still, when she twisted amidst its entrapment and started kicking him with her good leg, he knew something had to be done.

“Handle it,” snapped Charlotte.

“Yeah, handle it, asshole,” shouted Corbin—a mistake, for at the sound of his voice she lunged for *him*, reaching around his seat with her filthy, sinewy arms and locking her hands viciously about his neck—causing his rifle to swing inward and several rounds to punch through the windshield, the muzzle flash turning the cab white, the spent shells flying haphazardly, clouds of cordite turning the small space into a toxic stew.

“Handle it, Red!” repeated Charlotte, even as the wounded allosaur jammed the tip of its snout into Corbin’s window.

Again the truck rocked and again Red looked at the primitive girl, seeing the fire in her large, dark eyes, realizing she would kill the ex-cop before she ever let go, and without a moment's more hesitation he cocked back his fist and struck her as hard as he had ever struck anyone in his life, cringing inside as his knuckles met the flesh of her face and her head bounced off the window hard enough to crack the glass.

And then she was out, she just turned off, slumping in her seat, and the allosaurs had been eluded, and they gained the freeway at last, which, despite the numerous derelict vehicles and potholes and creeper vines, remained in surprisingly good shape. And, somehow, amazingly, as they sped away toward the compound, Red slept—during which he dreamed that he was no longer human but a being of pure light. And when he awakened he did so to the primitive girl staring at him with her head laid back against the seat and her huge, brown eyes full of curiosity—yet strangely impartial—while in them danced a light the color of which he had never seen.

To be continued in ...

FLASHBACK DAWN:

“THE DEVIL’S SHAMBHALA”