

FLASHBACK DAWN

by

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A Serialized Novel

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II | The Devil's Shambhala

Red watched the primitive girl closely as they passed beneath the great arch at the entrance to the parking lot, an arch which read “Welcome to Bluebeard’s Cove—The World’s Largest Underground Theme Park.” She seemed to be in a sort of trance now, and he couldn’t help but to wonder what she was thinking as those huge, brown eyes rolled up to gaze at the signage, at least so much of it as would be visible to her, nor could he help to wonder, again, what the strange color was that lingered just behind her pupils.

“Doc, this is Charlotte. Incoming, with two wounded.” The radio hissed as she released the switch.

Red gripped the handle above his door as the Jeep lurched to a stop on the east side of the reception building, next to the security keypad, while Charlotte lowered her window. “What’s the code?” she snapped.

“1984,” said Red.

The radio squawked as she keyed in the numbers and a voice came through which was barely audible. “Red and Corbin *both*? What the hell happened out there?”

“Red’s fine.” She glanced at him in the rearview mirror. “As always.”

He stared back at her blankly.

“It’s Corbin, and ... a guest,” she said into the mic. “Just get your gear; we’ve got a broken leg and a raptor wound, upper shoulder.”

“A guest? What kind of—”

She turned off the radio as the service door beeped and began rattling upward, and they lurched forward into the caged freight elevator. “Red ...”

He was already out his door and pressing the switch.

A moment later they were descending, the mesh door rattling closed behind them, and the primitive girl grunted in alarm as Red climbed back in and darkness engulfed the cab. “Naaygi, Naaygi!” she exclaimed, wrestling with her seatbelt.

Charlotte keyed the radio back on. “And Doc, we’re going to need a sedative. A strong one.”

Metal creaked and groaned as they continued to lower until at last the light returned and the world exploded into view again—not the world of the sun and

moon and clouds and a thousand prehistoric terrors, which they had abandoned, but an entirely manmade one full of dazzling light and color; too much light and color, for everything was turned on just as it had been when they'd first sought refuge there.

"What the hell is MacGyver doing?" said Red. "Jesus, doesn't he understand that all those lights—"

He stopped talking as he noticed the primitive girl's reaction to the spectacular light show, which was one of stunned silence and awe, even, it seemed to him, outright reverence. He tried to imagine it through her eyes, the vast atrium of artificial light with its carnival rides and fanciful structures, its concession stands and lamplit boardwalks, and its manmade river which wound through everything. For it was a place designed to make precisely such an impression. Less obvious, beyond all the glittering lights and flashing signboards, were the 15-foot tall security fences with their tangles of concertina wire and glowing electrification indicators, as well as the moats of muddy water which in time would become clogged with human waste—once the power and the plumbing failed. Once the Flashback had taken its full and inevitable toll. And beyond all those things, in the now semi darkened catacombs of what had formerly been the Havana Flats salt mine, stood a sole cavern raptor—blue-gray skin painted in horizontal shadows from the fence, sickle claws glinting by the light of the carnival rides, its round, white eyes blinking. And as Red squinted, it was joined by another. And another.

Indeed, it was precisely this contrast between what lay within and what lay without that had given rise to the place's nickname: *The Devil's Shambhala*.

Red got out again and rushed toward Corbin's door even as the elevator touched down. To his surprise, only Doc Gardner was on hand to greet them. "Greetings and salutations to our intrepid away-team," the doctor said with exaggerated grandiloquence, gesturing expansively as he approached, and added, "Bring me your tired, your poor, your former police officers mauled by raptors."

"Where is everyone?" Red snapped. "And why in bloody hell are all the lights on?"

"There's already velociraptors massing on the south perimeter," said Charlotte. "I—I saw them from the lift."

"Ah, well, yes. They've undoubtedly noticed our flashing 'Free Buffet' sign," said Gardner. He chuckled wanly. "Better get used to it, I'm afraid. They're

stuck—the lights, that is—or *something*. There's an emergency ad hoc committee meeting going on right now, at the mural. And I'd hurry up, Big Blue is presiding in your absence." Red and Charlotte glanced at each other. "I'll take care of—" He paused, staring at the primitive girl. "What in God's name is this?"

"Victim of Red's driving," said Corbin, gripping his shoulder with a blood-soaked hand. "Do you mind?"

Gardner took his eyes off the girl long enough to give him a once over. "We need to stop that bleeding. Can you walk?"

The primitive girl beat her fists against the window suddenly and Gardner flinched. "Naaygi! Naaygi!"

Corbin nodded as Charlotte circled the truck. "All the commotion is exciting her," she said, adding, "Do you have—" She glanced down at the syringe in Gardner's hand, and nodded briskly. "We'll hold her. Red!"

"Jesus H. Christ," cursed Corbin.

Red gripped the door handle and paused, glancing at Charlotte. "Try to grab her fists," he said. "While I pin her legs. You ready, Doc? Doc?"

Gardner just stared at the girl as if transfixed. He came out of it suddenly and nodded.

"Make it quick," Red told him, and added, "She's quite a handful." He looked at Charlotte, who also nodded. "Okay, then," he said, and exhaled. "On three. One ... two ... *three!*"

It was obvious things had gotten out of hand the moment Red yanked open the door to the foyer. Big Blue had whipped the crowd into a veritable frenzy, or at least her most dedicated converts, and the women were shouting and shaking their fists, chanting, "This is what Patriarchy looks like! This is what Patriarchy looks like!"

Chairman Dean, meanwhile, stood helplessly upon Red's painting scaffold—almost dead center with his likeness as depicted in the mural—and moved his outspread hands up and down, as though he were trying to say, amidst the cacophony, *Down, down, please, your questions will be answered.*

Charlotte pushed her way through the mob toward the front, emboldened by the fact that she wouldn't have to face Blue's acolytes alone, that Red was right behind her—but wasn't really surprised when she whipped around to face the crowd and saw him standing off to one side, striking a match on the heel of his boot, lighting a cigar, just as cool and nonchalant and *uninvolved* as could be.

"I'll do it," she hissed to herself but really to him, then shouted authoritatively, "Enough! Silence! Let the Chairman speak!"

Big Blue wasted no time: "The Dancer is no friend to women, we already know this! She knew of the plan—does anyone here not believe she knew of the plan?" The women around her hollered in mutual outrage. "She's been in the loop with the men every step of the way—hasn't she always? *One* vote! Remember that, sisters. We lost the election by *one* vote! Who's vote do you think that was?"

Charlotte could only scrunch up her face and look at her dumbfoundedly. At last she said, "There *was* no plan," and craned her neck to look at Chairman Dean, who shook his head slowly, confirming as much. "But we won't know anything until you let the Chairman speak!" She mouthed to Dean: 'Where's Mac-Gyver?'

He only stared at her, and all in a rush, Charlotte remembered: They'd been trying to restore electrification to the damaged section of the east perimeter when she and Red and Corbin had headed out that morning ... had something happened? She shook her head once, refusing to believe it, but Dean's expression only fueled her fears. Then, as though tapping some previously unknown strength, Dean stepped forward, and said to all gathered, suddenly and with perfect clarity, "Mac is dead."

At this the great open space fell silent almost immediately, and Charlotte noted Red looking up sharply through a cloud of smoke. Dean gripped the edge of the scaffolding and leaned forward as the gathering settled. At length he said, "We were trying to fix the east fence, which, as you all know, was damaged by the smilodon several days back. Mac, God bless him, well, he tried something—"

"He tried something without our approval!" shouted Blue, and her dyed hair shown like an indigo fire beneath the hanging chandeliers even as her supporters hollered in agreement.

"He tried what was talked about at the last committee meeting, and there was nothing preventing you, or *anyone of you,*" his voice had raised sharply, "from attending that meeting. Now, I don't pretend to have an aptitude for this sort of thing anymore than you or anyone else in this hall. But we've all agreed, again and again, that when it comes to engineering, what Mac says goes. And Mac, well, he determined that, in order to restore electrification to that section of fence, all the non-auxiliary power would need to be rebooted. And that's what

you see here,” he gestured at the chandeliers and the neon piping everywhere, “that’s what this place is, in case you’ve forgotten. And, well. Something went wrong. And Mac was killed in the process. Fortunately, no one else was hurt ...”

“Everyone’s going to feel the hurt now that we’re lit up like a Christmas tree!” shouted Ebenweiser, a man who claimed to have been a wealthy philanthropist before the Flashback, but was now essentially the town drunk.

“That’s not true!” said Charlotte. “The rest of the electrified fence remains intact. We can deal with the other lights on a case by case basis—by unscrewing the bulbs, if necessary. The cavern raptors can jump, we know that, but they’re *not* supernatural, they can’t just fly in here like ghosts, for Christ’s sake. The cat’s another story, it’s true, because it’s possible, however unlikely, that’ll he’ll—”

“You don’t know it’s a ‘he,’” said Blue—an attempt at levity, Charlotte presumed—causing everyone around her to laugh.

“That *it* will try to scale the fence again. But it still won’t be able to withstand the electrical charge.” She turned toward Dean seeking moral support, but instead found him looking down at her with something like pity. “Dean ...” He seemed to take a deep breath as she stepped closer. “The rest of the fence ... it is still electrified, isn’t it?” She deflated like a balloon as she studied his face. “Jesus Christ.” Her arms dropped to her sides as she moved away from the scaffold. “That’s ... just great. That’s really fucking beautiful.”

“The fences are no longer electrified,” hollered someone near the front, passing it along through the crowd, and the hall erupted into chaos as Charlotte paced to the left then returned to the center, where she stopped dead in her tracks, rubbing her temples, glaring at her feet. “*Red*,” she growled, loudly, “I need your help. *Now*.” She shot him a fiery glance.

He simply stared at her. She honestly couldn’t tell if he was about to stride toward her or simply turn and walk away. At last he stepped forward.

“All right, all right, all right!” he belted out over the din, and the turmoil subsided—if for no other reason than here was an entirely new foil for everyone’s fear and frustration. “That’s enough!”

“Stick to your painting, Michelangelo.”

“In the rear, with the gear. That’s what you’ve been good for!”

He looked at them as if to say, ‘Just, wow,’ but remained calm. “Just listen to me for a minute!”

At last the hall became quiet enough for him to talk. "Look, I know this is an unfortunate turn of events—believe me, I know. And I know that you're all just scared and confused and wondering where we go from here." He took another step forward, shock of red-brown hair catching the light. "I know ... because I'm scared, too. Let's face it, we lost more than simply a friend to so many of us today; we lost the only man in the Cove with the knowledge and skill to keep this place running." He scanned the crowd, attempting eye contact with as many people as possible. "And that's what this is really all about, isn't it? Because, whether you admit it or not, you know how lucky you've been to ride this thing out down here so far. You know how different our experience has been than, well, the people *up there*. And now you're afraid that that's all coming to an end." He moved toward Charlotte slowly. "And you know what? *It is*. But it's not coming to an end tonight. It's not—" He was interrupted by the sound of electricity, which popped and sizzled loudly somewhere along the south perimeter and was followed by the shrieks of several cavern raptors. "It's not going away just like *that* ... like so many of your loved ones have. It's not going to simply vanish."

"How can you know that?" shouted someone from the back. "How do you know the fence won't simply disappear at any minute, or that one of those things won't just materialize right here and now?"

Red dropped his cigar and rubbed it out with his boot. "I don't. But we do know the Flashback has slowed. We know it's not as deadly as it was before. Has anyone of us simply vanished? Have any prehistoric trees appeared out of nowhere, or, as the gentleman said, has a T. Rex simply manifested amongst us and gone on a feeding frenzy?"

"What are you getting at?"

"What I'm getting at is that there's time. Not an unlimited supply of it, but ... time. Time to implement what we've all known would be necessary since we first came together here and settled in."

"Jesus, Gods, he's talking about the Wagon Train," said Blue, exasperated.

"A wagon train!" someone shouted.

"Where in the hell *to*?"

"A wagon train of RVs," said Blue incredulously, even as the hall reignited into chaos. "What are we going to fuel them with? Toxic masculinity?"

Charlotte threw up her arms in defeat as the hall became a bedlam.

Red shouted over the din, “If anyone has any better ideas I’d pay good money to hear them!”

But the bedlam only intensified, doubling and redoubling, until it was shattered irrevocably by a volley of gunshots, which echoed throughout the atrium like a string of dynamite, causing Red to fall upon Charlotte in an effort to shield her; and when all those gathered had picked themselves up off the floor and turned their attention to the back of the hall, they saw Lieutenant Corbin standing there with his AR-15 in one hand and his other in a sling.

Charlotte was the first to speak up, thanking Red quietly before standing up and brushing herself off and saying, furiously, “Have you gone *mad*, Corbin?”

“Maybe,” he said at last, and slung his rifle over his shoulder. “And maybe not. But I *do* have a better idea.”

The atrium fell silent as everyone focused on him. “And you assholes are going to hear it.”

“Now, wait just—who in the hell do you think you are?” said Dean. “By what right do you come in here—”

Corbin snatched the rifle off his shoulder in a flash and everyone ducked—but he was pointing it at the ceiling, not the Chairman. “Shhh,” he said, and cocked his head. “Just listen.”

Charlotte did so, her ears still ringing. Slowly it became manifest: the sound of cavern raptors barking amidst the catacombs, barking and seeming to answer themselves, and something else, which answered them all. The Cat. The smilodon. The saber-toothed tiger which bore little in common with any of its modern-day ancestors nor any of its prehistoric ones, for it was the size of a small bus. And beyond *that* ... another. Something closer in tone to the raptors and yet altogether different. Something bigger, more robust. Something none of them had ever heard before.

“You all need to understand something,” he said finally, slowly re-slinging his gun, “and that is that before I found this place I was precinct commander of an entire police force dedicated to combating these ... *things*. And if there’s one thing we learned ...” He paused, smiling a little to himself. “‘We.’ He seemed to dismiss the thought. “If there’s one thing we learned before our unit was torn to pieces ... one thing they learned, my men, before being bitten in half, beheaded, slit open by sickle-claws so that their intestines unspooled across the city streets like sausage links ... is that these things are not animals.” He smiled to himself again

as though reliving a lifetime's worth of humbling nightmares. "No, an animal is something comprehensible, even relatable. An animal is something flesh and blood same as you or me, with the same needs, the same hunger, the same will to survive. But these things, these so-called dinosaurs and prehistoric cats, they're not animals, not the way we understand them. They're weapons. They have purpose. Intent. They've been infused with it somehow. Someone, something, has weaponized them against us." He nodded slowly, distantly. "Those lights in the sky, I think. And I can promise you this ... they will not go away." The haunting smile returned as he shook his head. "They won't give up, you understand. And they won't stop until every man, woman, and child in this compound has been torn apart and devoured."

The atrium moaned as a wind blew in from the caverns, and no one said anything.

At last Dean said, "And what ..." He paused to clear his throat. "What would you propose we do, Lieutenant?"

Corbin just looked at him—then he laughed, as though responding to a punchline only he could hear. He began limping toward the front of the hall, the crowd parting to let him through. "What would I propose? I propose we start stocking up on weapons instead of breakfast cereal and tuna cans. I propose we train every person here in the use and maintenance of those weapons, and that we start taking the fight to the enemy. I propose we start making excursions into the caverns instead of abandoned supermarkets; that we locate their eggs and their nests and destroy them, and that we find whatever ingress they're using and stop it up, cutting them off. And then I propose we kill them as mercilessly as they're going to kill us."

"And what about the power?" said Blue, "Are we going to simply attack that, too?"

"I haven't heard a single suggestion from you, lady," someone countered.

"Oh, we've made suggestions, they just haven't been listened to." She moved to the front of the room and turned to face the crowd. "All I've heard is a lot of mansplaining about power grids and wagon trains and killing and war! It's the thinking itself that is flawed. How do you think we got into this mess in the first place? Do any of you actually think this is a natural phenomenon?"

"It was the military! Project HAARP, at the North Pole. They've talked about it on Coast to Coast AM for years ..."

"It was the Hadron Collider ..."

"Of course it was the military," said Blue. "Isn't that more believable than aliens from Alpha Centauri?"

"The military's always been one big Sausage Fest," said one of her supporters.

"You just shut your trap," barked old Frank Miller. "I didn't serve in two bloody wars to hear that kind of—"

"Order, order!" shouted Dean.

Again, the room devolved into pandemonium, and Charlotte found herself looking at Red who looked squarely back, leaving her to wonder if he was thinking the same thing—that maybe it was time to just go, just leave the Devil's Shambhala behind.

"Ladies and gentleman, please! Please! We have a guest!"

Turning, Charlotte realized Doctor Gardner was pushing a wheelchair toward the crowd from the same door through which they'd entered—and that, in it, sat the primitive girl herself. She glanced back at Red and saw that he, too, had focused on them, although the rest of the crowd was still intent on yelling at Dean, or each other. Even the Sisters were arguing amongst themselves. Nonetheless, as Gardner began excusing and pardoning himself and the girl through the group, the clamor began to subside, and by the time he'd rolled her up next to Charlotte and gently turned her around, a silence had set in that rivalled that which had followed Corbin's gunfire.

"Well, then," Gardner said at last, giving everyone a polite little bow, first to the left, then to the right. "If you are done verbally molesting each other for a few breaths, I should like to introduce you to our newest, ah, citizen. Her name is Naaygi." He repeated his bows, this time to the away-team specifically—to Red and Charlotte directly beside him, and lastly to Corbin. "As you can see, I've, ah, taken the liberty of naming her—with your kind permissions, of course. Also, as I'm sure you've noticed, she has responded exceedingly well to the medications I have administered ... and is now completely docile." He plucked at her wild, unkempt hair delicately as if to prove so, and something about the gesture set Charlotte's own hair on end. "Moreover, what was thought to be a broken leg has turned out to be nothing of the sort, but rather a simple fracture, an isolated, mid-shaft, closed fibula fracture, to be precise, meaning it doesn't involve the tibia and no bone has broken the skin. It is, in fact, in a state of remarkable align-

ment. Hence, the lack of a cast, or even, as you can see, a splint. As for recovery time, I estimate approximately 5-6 weeks—”

“Excuse me, Doctor,” Dean interjected, “but, and I mean no disrespect, is there a point to all this?”

Gardner froze as if someone had struck him across the face. It was an expression Charlotte had observed on him before—countless times before—almost as if he were experiencing a kind of dissociative fugue.

“No,” he said at last, clearly disorientated. It was as though the question were the strangest one he had ever heard. “I’m merely providing a status report on the condition of this patient. And introducing her, of course.”

“So, ‘no,’” said Corbin, and several people laughed.

“Actually, there could be,” said Red, and stepped forward. “Which is that this girl, this woman, has clearly survived to the age of ...” He paused, studying her. “Say, nineteen ... with nothing but the hides on her back and a Folsom point spear. Now, I don’t know what era she’s come here from and I don’t particularly care; she’s a Neanderthal, I presume. But I do know she’s managed to survive for close to twenty years, and without the help of electricity, canned food, or semi-automatic weapons.” He scanned the crowd. “Surely we can do better? We, who have several million years of evolution on our side? Whoever she is, she hasn’t existed in a vacuum, no more than anyone of us have. Somewhere, somewhen, she belonged to a group, a clan. And I doubt they wasted precious hours arguing the way we are doing now. So I’m going to go on record right now as saying that I think both plans, both the wagon train and the offensive, are worthy of consideration. If you ask me, I think they should both be implemented, and quickly.” He looked up at Chairman Dean. “I move that a committee be formed to study the logistics of both flight and fight, or other options, if any, and that this committee should be comprised entirely of volunteers, ideally people who,” He glanced at Big Blue, “represent the varying factions of our ... union.”

Everyone looked at each other.

“I think we can all agree that this seems the best way forward,” said Dean. “Do I hear any descension?” For now, at least, there was none. “Then I move for a committee of volunteers to step forward.”

“I’ll lead the committee for the offensive,” said Corbin immediately.

“And I’ll oversee the exploration of other options,” said Blue.

It seemed as though everyone focused on Red—Charlotte, in particular. He looked around the hall, his light blue eyes appearing to see, and appreciate, everyone present. At last he looked at Charlotte, who felt an odd sense of pride, as though she in some way had helped finally to bring him into the fold, away from his stubborn independence and his mural which would never be finished; yes, *into the fold*, where he was desperately needed. Then he turned and walked away, north toward the home he had made in the clubhouse of the Lagoon, the home he shared with no one but his Archaeopteryx, calling over his shoulder, “If anyone needs me, I’ll be in my hooch. Heading the committee for public art.”

And then there was silence save for the barking of the cavern raptors and the occasional testing of the fence, which popped and sizzled, and Dean said, “And the Wagon Train committee? Anyone?”

Charlotte watched as Red continued on his way, his rifle slung over his shoulder, a cloud of blue smoke trailing. “I’ll—I’ll do it,” she said, and swallowed, even as Red vanished into the dark.

“Naaygi,” said the primitive girl, watching him go, and Charlotte crouched by her chair, studying her, feeling an odd connection with her all of a sudden, as though they were together somehow in their loneliness, and she nearly reached out to touch her, to lay her pale, slender hand over the primitive girl’s own, which was robust and the back of which was hairy, but thought better of it, mainly because the eerie light in her big, brown eyes seemed brighter than before, more colorful, more inexplicable, and frankly, it frightened her.

And that’s when Naaygi looked at her suddenly, startling her, and it seemed the entire, alien, post-Flashback sky was contained in those eyes—its mysterious lights included—and she cocked her head as though listening before jerking it to face away and shouting, “*Naaygi, naayook, naaygunta-gunta!*”

And then the alarms sounded, echoing terrifyingly throughout the atrium, and Charlotte saw a lithe, bluish-gray shape dash between two structures just beyond them ... which was followed by another, and another, and another still. And then everyone was screaming, as she reached for her pistol and realized she’d left it in the truck, and the power flickered on and off—not just a few lights here and there but all of it, reminding everyone just how black the caverns could be—and everyone began to scatter as a raptor cried out and another answered, and Charlotte knew the fence had been breached.

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To be continued in
FLASHBACK DAWN:
“THE RED-EYE SHIFT”