

FLASHBACK DAWN

by

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A Serialized Novel

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V | The Children's Reich

Red's eyes never left Corbin's as he gripped the sweaty stock of his automatic rifle, maintaining the standoff, even as the growls and snarls closed in. The cavern raptors were very close now, possibly as close as a hundred feet. "What's it gonna be, Corbin?"

Corbin ground his weapon's sights mercilessly. "Who's to say I can't plug you full of holes before I waste every one of those stinking mothers? Who's to say I can't waste *everything in this tunnel* before returning to the Shambhala without you and without your smart aleck mouth? Do you have anything to say about that?"

But then the raptors were upon them and Red was firing into their midst—Corbin quickly following suit—and their crisscrossed muzzle flashes lit up the tunnel like fireworks as the animals danced as though electrified and their blood sprayed in all directions. *Skree! Skree! Skree!*

They fell in twitching, jerking, hemorrhaging piles as the two men continued to fire ... until every one of them lay dead upon the pavement—all that is save one, which turned and fled, slipping once in the rapidly spreading blood, before clicking away down the tunnel even as Corbin tried to sight it.

"Forget it," said Red, exhaling. He braced himself with a hand on his knee. "Save the ammo."

But Corbin ignored him, continuing to site the fleeing animal, adjusting his aim by what seemed only millimeters as the raptor weaved, first to the left, then to the right, until a *crack!* rang out and his rifle bucked, and the thing fell—squirting a stream of blood from its head.

"That's the difference between you and I," said Corbin coolly, still looking on, and lowered his rifle. "I don't pass the buck. I don't avoid responsibility and make messes for others to have to clean up." He turned back toward the rockfall. "That's it. In case you were wonder—"

They both saw it at the same time: a cavern raptor leaping directly at him from the top of the rockfall, its legs kicked up in the air, its sickle-claws catching the light of his helmet, its tail whipping about frenziedly—until Red squeezed off a volley and its body simply exploded. And yet there were more, which leapt helter-skelter from the barrier as though they were on some kind of reptilian

suicide mission, some of which were shattered by the men's bullets while others landed awkwardly around and between them—only to ignore them completely and flee scattering down the corridor.

Corbin began mowing them down as they ran but had to pause to change clips. "What the hell, man? What kind of attack was that? And why didn't Lonny radio a warning?"

Red stared at the daylight shining over the top of the rockfall, wondering those same things, and wondering, too, why the earth itself was vibrating, why loose sediment was being shaken loose from the stones to create little clouds of dust and to patter against the concrete. And that's when he realized that the co-called attack had been nothing of the sort, that the velociraptors had in fact been flee—

His radio squelched suddenly and loudly. "Red, this is Lonny! Sorry, I—they ran right over the top of the Jeep!—I'm okay but you guys need to take cover, *now!* It's the—Holy shit ..."

Then an animal's cry rang out, a cry as distinct from a dinosaur's as two sounds could possibly be, a sharp-edged sound which began with a great, high-pitched rasping and ended with a throaty, rattling grumble.

And Red knew that the cat had come home to its den.

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IT HAD ABOUT IT THE quality of a dream, this waiting in the service elevator as the Nazis prepared their scaffold and unfurled their banners—as the sky began to darken in the west and the first pellets of rain slanted between the bars; as Charlotte tried not to break down, the sadness and incomprehensibility of the Flashback threatening to take full possession of her at last. He'd said something about a ritual—Dieter was his name; she'd heard someone call him General Dieter—which was to take place just before the arrival of the stormfront. Whatever it was, their preparation for it must have been almost complete, for they began to assemble in rows as Dieter ascended the platform and tapped the microphone, saying, simply, "Testing ... testing"—which echoed throughout the parking lot and bounced off the hulls of the RVs even as the earlier commotion died down and the only sound became that of torches crackling in the drizzle and flags snapping in the wind.

At last Dieter said, “And here we are again, my Aryan friends ... Gathered before the storm, as is fitting.” He scanned the assembled crowd, his eyes sparkling with pride (it was easy to see because they’d set up a camera and a pair of flat screens to telegraph his performance). “Look at you. Seems like just yesterday, doesn’t it? When, alone in our enclaves, we awakened to this new dawn? Aye, one that was finally worthy of our cause. A world where there could be no more degenerates ... for the degenerate has not been born who can survive it. Manfred, scan the jungle ...”

Charlotte watched as the cameraman did so, tilting down from the scaffold and panning across the prehistoric jungle slowly, which lay dense and wet beyond the fence, like something from *The Little Golden Book of Dinosaurs*. “Look at it, my Aryan friends. A world as pure and brutal as anything we, or even our great Fuhrer, could have imagined. A world in which only the strong survive—while the weak and the diseased, the impure, the degenerate offspring of tainted genetic stock, are summarily killed.” Charlotte squinted as something moved amidst the dense foliage: almost as if a mid-sized dinosaur had been peeking between the fronds but suddenly retreated. “A world in need of only one thing, and that is a master race—a race of supermen, and women, too—to govern it. A race of people as pure and brutal as the land itself. Manfred ...”

The camera whipped back to focus on Dieter, behind whom the strange sky-lights moved, bleeding in and out of each other, like globs of wax in a lava lamp. “Alas, even our master race can, at times, produce ... aberrations. A man or woman of perfect Aryan descent who, nonetheless ... fails to display the proper traits.” He gestured with his hand as if to say, *Bring him, quickly*. “And such a man will be offered in homage today, my friends; to placate the beasts that are the sub-masters of this new world, and to introduce our new allies to how it is that we—the new Nephilim—do things.” He nodded slowly as a man was forced writhing and struggling up to the main gate. “How it is that we have survived, even thrived, amidst a world that has killed so many. And the level of cruelty we expect from any and all who would join us.”

Jesus, gods, he’s talking about a sacrifice, thought Charlotte, even as another movement caught the corner of her eye. She focused on where she’d noticed it and saw what appeared to be a tail—like a great, green dagger—before it disappeared behind a stand of cypress trees. So, too, did something move on the opposite side of the lot, causing the trees to sway. *It’s like we’re being triangulated*, she

thought—even as the man was thrown to the muddy ground outside the fence and the gate swung quickly shut.

“Manfred, if you would, the ‘Horst Wessel Song ...’”

And no sooner had the man named Manfred run to the audio truck and started the music than the Nazis raised their hands in salute and started singing, “The flag is high, our ranks are closed / The S.A. marches with silent solid steps ...”

And so loud was the chorus, and such was the focus on the man outside the gate, that no one except Charlotte even noticed that a great saurian visage had entered the crowd from the left—closing its jaws about one of the guard’s heads and swinging away with his body even as another did the same at the opposite end of the crowd. And then all was screaming and gunfire and confusion as the Nazis found themselves at war inside the very gates of the parking lot and Charlotte found herself wondering how Red’s day could possibly top this.

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IN THE MIDST OF A DREAM Naaygi became lucid, aware somehow not only of who she was but of *what* she was, as if the healing of her body—which, while incomplete, was proceeding rapidly—had at last facilitated the healing of her mind. For she remembered now just who she had been before the light had carried her into the sky (and redeposited her here on the earth), and that she had become a nomad both before and after the Flashback but had then become something else—an amalgamation of Naaygi and *them*: a physical being, yes, but also a vessel, a vehicle, eyes and ears and fingers, essentially, for something which could neither see nor hear nor feel. And she remembered, too, as she awakened in her wheelchair in the common room near the infirmary (where she’d fallen asleep while watching the man they called Frank Miller and a group of women they called the Sisters play a game called Monopoly), that she had a purpose, and that that purpose was to *see*, and to listen. To observe. And that after she had observed she was to render a verdict—whose jurisdiction would be nothing less than the fate of all mankind.

For, as powerful as they were, they—the lights in the sky—continued to be conflicted as to whether they’d acted rightly or wrongly in attempting to reboot the earth; or, for that matter, if their Flashback had even been particularly suc-

cessful. They already knew that they'd inadvertently conflated different eras into a single chaotic mix—so that primitive humans shared the planet with animals of at least three different time periods, for example—and that many of the evolved humans had survived their intended eradication. What remained to be seen now was if their survival should be allowed to stand—and the Flashback even reversed—or if their annihilation should be completed, as originally intended.

And yet the composite creature that was Naaygi had observed much that was of worth in the species: from the way the one called Red had respectfully closed the velociraptor's eyes, to the manner in which such seemingly bitter enemies as Frank Miller and the Sisters could find camaraderie in a game—it seemed they had at least as much capacity for forgiveness as they had for conflict and destruction, and that was something the architects of the Flashback appreciated above all else ... perhaps because they shared so little in it themselves.

So, too, did a *selflessness* shine through many of them, a desire to serve and to heal—the one they called Doctor Gardner, for example. Speaking of whom, where had he been? She had not seen him since the morning meal, at which he'd appeared only briefly and had seemed ... *off*, somehow, as though he were ill. She decided to check on him, muscling her wheelchair as he had taught her to do toward the collection of rooms they called the infirmary.

When she got there, however, she found that most the lights were off, and the place was in a state of disarray—there were pill bottles of the kind he'd often fed her from scattered everywhere, for one—and, stranger still, the device they called “the main radio” had been destroyed and now lay in ruins on the long table near the elevator shaft. But of Gardner himself there was no sign—until she turned the wheelchair around and saw him closing the door through which she'd come. And immediately she could tell there was something terribly wrong with him, for he was twirling a syringe in the half-light of the messy room and was looking at her strangely; worse, it was a look she recognized instantly as being that of a man who was desirous of her, who sought to mate with her. And because she was still under the influence (of whatever it was he'd fed her that morning, from one of the bottles, of course), and because she was still trapped within the chair—or believed herself to be—she found that she could only back away in terror as he approached.

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IT COULD HAVE BEEN different. Had Corbin's gun not jammed, nor Red been at the end of his clip, or even had it been anything other than the oversized cat that was so rapidly closing in upon them, they might have stood their ground. As it was, they'd turned and ran like madmen for the Shambhala, where they were fortunate enough to arrive at the very section of fence previously damaged by the smilodon—and thus did not have to contend with the concertina wire which would otherwise have made passage impossible. And yet one thing was clear as they shouldered their rifles and began to ascend—and that was that the cat was coming. It was coming *fast*. Nor were the sounds of its footfalls and heavy breathing the only evidence of its approach, for as Red crested the fence—losing his rifle in the process—and started down the other side (so that he was facing away from the Shambhala and into the caverns), he saw it bounding toward them at a remarkable clip, its shoulders and haunches rising and falling, its tail curling and uncurling, its fangs catching the lights of the amusements so that they gleamed a ghostly yellow.

This time, Red knew, it would either leap the fence entirely or tear at it until it gave way, for something, clearly, had pissed the thing off, whether it was the fact that they'd come too close to its den or something else entirely. Either way, the two men were clearly on the same page as they dropped the rest of the way to the ground and sprinted for the armory, which lay in a backroom of the infirmary—even as the smilodon collided with the fence and began to attack it mercilessly.

"Keep your eyes open," Red shouted as he ran, adding, "Remember Charlotte's transmission!"

Corbin ignored him as they entered the area where the service buildings stood and pushed on to the infirmary—where they were both surprised to find a locked door.

"Gardner! You in there?" Red pounded on the wood with his fist. "We need weapons, *fast*!"

"Get out of the way," snapped Corbin, and took a step back. He smashed the door open with a single, explosive kick.

Red was the first one in—although it took him a moment to process just what it was he was seeing. And what he saw first was Naaygi curled up nude in the

corner, her wheelchair spilled over upon its side, and her face a mask of such utter terror and bewilderment that he would have rushed to her and tried to comfort her had Corbin not blocked him with an outstretched arm. Gardner, meanwhile, was busy trying to stuff his cock back into his scrubs.

“What the *fuck* is this?” hissed Corbin, and moved forward at last, kicking aside a pill bottle.

“Easy does it,” Red urged, holding up a hand. To Gardner he said: “What the hell is going on here, Gardner? What the hell *has* gone on here?”

“It’s obvious what has gone on here,” said Corbin, shouldering past Red toward the armory. “Meanwhile there’s a cat the size of a cargo van about to infiltrate the compound.” He disappeared into the back as Red hurried forward to comfort Naaygi but was greeted only by savage kicks and punches which forced him back against the wall.

“Naaygi!” she cried, her voice raw, her eyes rimmed in red. “Naaygi-naragoot!” She struggled to her feet, bracing herself the counter. “Naaygi-naragoot ...”

“Naaygi,” began Red—before catching himself, for he had no way of knowing what the word even meant. He swiped a sheet off the elevated bed and stepped toward her gingerly, but she only snatched it from his hands and began twisting it into a kind of weapon. “Naaygi-naragoot,” she repeated. “Naragoot, *na-namo-la*.”

And it was at precisely that moment and none before that Red realized how much her eyes had changed—that they had now been overtaken almost completely by the gleaming alien colors, and he realized, too, just who the composite being he had dreamed of was, and what her purpose had been all along, and, looking at Gardner in a kind of horrified stupor, recalled the voice from his dream, the voice that had asked him, simply: *What do you see when you look upon them?*

“Hey, *psst*, Gardner,” he heard Corbin say, and looked up to see the ex-cop levelling an AR-15 directly at the terrified doctor. “I need your help with something.”

And then he opened fire, rapidly squeezing off round after round into Gardner’s dancing body, causing blood to squirt and to spray and to spatter the walls as Red jumped and Naaygi screamed.

“Works good,” he said after he’d finished, although by then Naaygi had already fled, limping, and Red had begun rushing for the armory.

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HAD THE NAZI GUARD—IN spite of the ensuing chaos—not stayed at his post by the service elevator’s interior control panel, Charlotte would have made a go at it (with her head, if need be) and lowered them into the Shambhala. As it was she could only look on in horror as the new species of carnosaur—three of them, she was pretty sure there were three of them—waded into the crowd, their tails held aloft like cats and their teeth and foreclaws (invisible amidst the crush of people) undoubtedly tearing through flesh.

And yet, so desensitized to violence and mayhem had she become since the outset of the Flashback, she found it almost comical when the bodies started to fly, flipping like ragdolls into the air or even dummies in a low-budget movie, many missing arms and legs, even heads, as they twirled like acrobats and threw off blood, only to fall right back into the meatgrinder.

Still, when the gutted body of a boy landed not ten feet away, she knew she would have to look away—even if it meant missing an opportunity to trigger the elevator. And that’s when a volley of automatic gunfire erupted from somewhere in the crowd—which swept across the cage and caused everyone to duck (except the guard, who pressed himself against the wall and was also missed), and it was only in its aftermath that Charlotte realized how the animals had gotten in, for she could see through the blasted panel wall (the only wall of the lift that was, or had been, solid rather than barred, and thus not see-through) that they’d bitten through the fence at the southwest corner of the lot.

And then Dieter’s Glock (for she recognized its kiss from before) was up against her head again, and the man was snapping at the guard to close the barred door and to lower the cage, quickly. And this he did, even as Manfred approached, too late, and gripped the bars in his bloody hands, saying, breathlessly, “Dieter ... Dieter, please, God. Let me in ...”

But Dieter only looked beyond him at the mid-sized carnosaur which had emerged from the screaming, scattering crowd ... before taking a step back and offering him a Nazi salute.

And then the beast was upon him, grabbing Manfred’s torso in its agile, human-like hands and holding him fast—even as it closed its jaws about his head and reared its neck back: pulling his throat apart like mozzarella cheese and severing his spinal cord so that dark, red blood bubbled up from the hole and green

bile spat from what had once been his esophagus ... a sight at which Charlotte would surely have fainted had Dieter not leaned close and, rendering the moment even more horrific, whispered into her ear: "He was not pure enough, my Valkyrie, none of them were. But you and I ... we shall create the New Man. Look, see?" He gestured at the Shambhala as it came into view. "Our underworld. The kingdom from which we will repopulate the world. Aye, better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heaven, yes? In time, my Valkyrie. In time."

And Charlotte could only shudder as she thought about Red and wondered if her were safe ... and wondered, too, if he had received her message of warning and might even now be planning something, anything, that might help them.

To be continued in ...

FLASHBACK DAWN:

“THROW WIDE THE GATES OF HELL”