

FLASHBACK DAWN

by

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A Serialized Novel

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VI | Throw Wide the Gates of Hell

Charlotte saw Naaygi half-running, half-limping toward them before the cage even touched down—and had hardly had a chance to react (to her startling nudity, for one) when Red appeared not fifty feet away, brandishing a firearm. *Red, what in God's name?*

“Naaygi, wait, please!” he shouted, before skidding to a halt (having apprehended the situation in the elevator) and pointing his rifle directly at Dieter. “Whoa, whoa—what is this?”

Dieter didn't respond, only pressed the Glock tighter against Charlotte's temple. “What is his name?”

Charlotte hesitated. “Red ... His name is Red.”

“Good. Keep cooperating and this ‘Red’ might survive the day.” To Red he said: “This is your new leadership, Mr. Red. Please, let there be no more bloodshed. We are here to assert control over the Cove, that is all.” The weapons of the other Nazis clicked and clinked. “There are many rifles trained upon you even as we speak, Mr. Red. Please. Lay down your weapon and no harm will come to the girl. Nor anyone else. You have my word.”

Naaygi, meanwhile, had reached the other elevator and was frantically studying its controls.

“Tell me, Valkyrie,” said Dieter. “What is that thing and what does it want?”

Charlotte glanced at Red. *Oh, Red, tell me this is not what it appears to be; just, dear God ...* “She's a woman, as I'm sure you've noticed. And she clearly just wants to get away.” She watched as the primitive girl pressed buttons haphazardly and finally beat her fists upon the panel. “But that elevator doesn't work.”

“Then she can have this one. We can't use her.” And to everyone else he said: “We are going to move forward ... slowly. Uwe, if you would be so kind as to show the creature how to operate the lift.”

“I'm warning you,” snapped Red, and tightened his grip on his firearm. “There are others ... just because you can't see them—”

He was interrupted by a volley of gunfire from the area in which the cat was attacking the fence. Corbin, of course. The sound was followed by angry growls and a roar.

Dieter only laughed. “No,” he said, “there is no one. No one who isn’t already preoccupied. I won’t play this game with you any longer. Lay down your weapon and neither you or the girl will be harmed. You have approximately thirty seconds.”

Red hesitated as the group cleared the cage and Uwe and Naaygi stepped in. At last he held up a hand to indicate his intentions and slowly lowered his rifle to the ground.

“There we are, much better,” said Dieter. “Uwe, if you would send the creature upon her way ... she is of no consequence.”

And with that Uwe hit the button and the cage doors rattled shut, and the platform began to rise.

“Now,” said Dieter, having never taken his eyes off Red, “kill that man.”

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IT WAS NO USE, CORBIN quickly realized, the cat was coming on too fast, too powerfully; indeed, it had collapsed the fence almost entirely when he turned and ran for the safety of the service buildings—having it in his mind to ascend the ladder behind the Gingerbread House and fire at the thing from the relative safety of its roof—but even that seemed too much to hope as the great beast bore down upon him, its padded paws thudding against the pavement, its hot breath painting his backside, its jagged growls seeming to split the air like thunder.

But he *did* make it, although he might not have, had one of the Sisters not emerged from the infirmary building at the precise instant the cat was passing—only to be snatched up in its jaws and shook like a ragdoll until the animal pinned her beneath its forepaws and began to feed.

He was about to open fire on its backside (although the Sister was dead already, surely) when the sound of the elevator going up drew his attention to the main foyer, where he saw Red standing with his rifle at his feet and a large group of people facing opposite him, some of them bound with zip ties and still others heavily armed, and realized in an instant what Charlotte had meant when she’d said they had trouble, real trouble. He examined the scene through his scope and quickly deduced that the man holding the gun to Charlotte’s head must be the leader—and zeroed in upon him. But he was no fool, whoever he was, he was no Red, for he kept weaving slightly and altering his position, seemingly aware that

there was a chance he was being sighted and causing Charlotte's head to block his view every time he thought he had a clear shot.

Still, he couldn't very well do nothing, especially when the cat stopped growling long enough for him to hear (or think he heard, such was the distance) the leader say, faintly, "Now ... kill that man."

His finger sweated against the trigger. Or could he? Do nothing, that was. After all, the armed men (and one woman) and the prisoners were interspersed so densely that it would virtually ensure collateral damage once the shooting started; why not let them off the S.O.B.? Let them off him and then let the cat do the rest ...

A thin voice startled him: "Do you have a clear shot? Why don't you fire?" It was Chairman Dean, weaponless, of course; he'd crawled upon his elbows to lay next to him on the Gingerbread House's peaked roof. "Jesus, they're going to kill Red."

And it was at precisely that instant that Corbin saw an opening—just the back of the leader's head; he wasn't sure if he could hit it—and fired.

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IN TRUTH, IT WASN'T until the man—the Nazi—next to Charlotte's captor dropped like a sack of potatoes and began oozing blood and brains onto the concrete that Red realized it hadn't been himself who'd been shot. He looked at his own body briefly, his hands at his chest, as if to be sure, then dove for his rifle and rolled once, targeting Dieter even as Charlotte fled and hastily squeezing off a round which grazed the man's thigh and dropped him to the ground. After that, everything happened at once: the muzzle flashes from the top of the Gingerbread House were answered by muzzle flashes from the armed intruders, who crouched as they fired, and the prisoners spread in every direction, even as the saber-toothed cat lumbered into the clearing and pounced upon someone—Red wasn't sure who—holding them fast until they stopped moving and then circling in place before stalking toward the Nazis, who retreated while returning fire (one of them assisting Dieter) until they'd taken cover behind various carnival rides. And yet even amongst all that noise and confusion Red heard the unmistakable sound of the elevator descending and wondered who else could possibly be coming—before Charlotte cried out his name and he looked back to see her hiding

in the door of the infirmary (along with Blue and several others), after which he scrambled to his feet and bolted toward them.

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NAAYGI FOUND THEM WAITING for her—as she somehow knew they would be—as the cage doors opened, their forward-facing eyes glinting the same hue as the lights in the sky and their dark, storm-colored bodies held absolutely still (even as another animal joined them and brought their number to four). She even knew somehow what they were; that they were a breed of carnosaur the “evolved” humans had called nanotyrannosaurs, the “Pygmy Tyrants,” and that one of them, the one with the brand upon its tail, the leader, even had a name—Napoleon, for he had been bounced forward and back in time via another alien species well before the Flashback and still bore the scars of his sojourn among the humans. She didn’t know how she knew these things, no more than she knew just where, within herself, Naaygi ended—and they, the lights in the sky, began. She just did; just as she knew that the Nano-Ts represented a queer offshoot of the dinosaur population that was altogether fleeter and deadlier and cannier than anything that had come before it.

And thus she bowed to them, her avengers, her killers—their killers, the lights in the sky—the rain running in rivulets down her body as she dropped to her knees and touched her forehead to the pavement, a pavement which ran red with blood and was strewn with the dismembered, disemboweled corpses of at least fifty men and women.

And then she whispered to them in a language older than words, *Follow me.*

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BLUE WAS THE FIRST to see them—having been dubious enough of Charlotte’s suggestion that they make a break for the descending elevator to examine it more closely—witnessing, when she did, something her mind wasn’t fully prepared to comprehend: for it was being ridden back down by Naaygi herself, as well as the very predators who had decimated the Nazis. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” she said, and backed away from the group—far enough that she tripped over Gardner’s bullet-riddled corpse and fell hard upon her ass in a pool of blood. And it was at that very moment, while floundering amidst the gore with

her hands zip tied behind her back, that something just snapped—something which had been stretched taut since well before the Flashback, since well before her adulthood, even. Something which had driven almost everything she'd ever done, feeding her will to hate, fueling her desire to be unattractive, growing within her like a tumor with each passing year. She looked at her hands: Blood. The blood of a man she'd despised (Gardner) and never quite trusted, the man she'd advised her Sisters to avoid at all costs even if it meant jeopardizing their own health. Blood like that on the sheets when she was thirteen years old. Blood like that she would spill before she relinquished the Shambhala to anyone: not Naaygi, nor her dinosaurs, nor the Nazis, nor Corbin or Red or Charlotte—that prancing bitch!—*no one. One fucking vote*, she thought, even as she began slapping the zip ties against her ample buttocks violently. *We lost by one fucking vote*. She slapped them against her protesting flesh again and again and again—until they snapped like the cheap excuses for real zip ties, police zip ties, that they were ... and she was free.

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FOR A MOMENT, AT LEAST, the firing stopped—followed by an eerie silence as the elevator touched down and its barred doors rattled open. Even the cat hesitated. *My God*, thought Red, watching as Naaygi stepped out and seemed to look directly at him, her eyes gleaming and flickering as he had seen clear marbles do when illuminated by a laser pointer. *They've reached a verdict*.

And then, as the smilodon growled and the Nano-Ts followed Naaygi—slowly, assuredly, behaving nothing like animals—she raised her left arm and pointed a finger directly at the infirmary ... even as her right arm raised and pointed a finger at the carnival rides. And finally, as the cat snarled and moved toward her, she pointed at *it* (then simply stepped aside), and Red watched in disbelief as the animal he'd seen on the red-eye shift (for he could see its name, as before—Napoleon—branded clearly on its tail) faced off with the fanged mammal. And then the other Nano-Ts sprinted toward their targets and all hell broke loose as everyone resumed firing and the Shambhala exploded into chaos.

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CORBIN HAD TO LAUGH a little at the incongruity of it: Had she simply not seen him from his position atop the Gingerbread House? Or had she somehow decided to spare him, perhaps because he had killed her rapist? Either way, he knew the game had just changed ... and it had changed entirely in his favor. Now he alone would decide who lived and who died and what shape the Shambhala would take when it was all over. Indeed, he could nudge the conflict in whatever direction he desired simply by maintaining his position and assisting some while actively working against others—like the Nazis. Or Red. Or Big Blue, wherever she was.

And then there was a single *Crack!* which cut the air like a knife, and he sensed Chairman Dean stiffen suddenly beside him; and when he looked to see what had happened he saw that the man's forehead now had a neat hole in it about the size of a dime. But who—?

Crack! Crack! Crack!

The roofing exploded all around him and he shuffled lower, catching muzzle flashes out of the corner of his eye. That had come from the infirmary! Jesus ... someone was shooting at *him*, instead of the dinosaurs. And when he eased the barrel of his rifle over the peak of the roof and dared to squint through its telescope ... it all made sense. For it was not, as he'd expected, Red.

It was Blue. And she, like himself, had chosen the path of total war. A war not just against dinosaurs and Nazis but of *All Against All* ... the prize for which would be the soul of the Shambhala itself.

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THEY BEGAN RUNNING up the steps of the Super Slide like maniacs, Dieter (limping) and two others, Hannah and Horst, as one of the Ts separated from the others and bolted toward them. Horst was picked off almost instantly, the T having thundered halfway up the first rise and dipped its head over the railing—snatching him from the stairs by his head and shaking him viciously before hurtling him against the curved fiberglass with a sickening *smack!* and pinning him there beneath its tri-clawed foot, which it raked backward suddenly, gutting him like a fish. Then it was continuing its pursuit, ascending parallel to the upward-slanting staircase even as its feet began to slip on the slick fiberglass of the slides ... to the point that its bearing became increasingly unsteady and it had to

stop. Dieter laughed as he reached the platform at the top and squeezed off a few rounds, which seemed to have no effect on the animal at all other than to piss it off enough to try something else, which it did after standing still for a moment and cocking its head.

And what it tried was to leap back onto the ground and to re-ascend by latching its feet and foreclaws onto the steel mesh of the staircase's outer wall, so that it was able to continue stalking toward them only *sidewise*, its body held horizontal over the earth, its long tail whipping back and forth, its teeth gnashing in anticipation.

Dieter scanned the atrium of the great cave and gathered his wits, watching as the branded Nano-T and the saber-toothed cat circled one another—before the T feinted to the left and charged in from the right, clamping its jaws about one of the cat's legs and pulling the mammal toward itself with stunning violence—causing sparks to explode and rain down as they crashed against the elevator.

And it occurred to him then and there that everything and everyone was distracted, and it occurred to him, also, just what he would need to do to escape from the animal that was almost upon them.

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CHARLOTTE AND THE OTHERS had hardly had time to shuffle back from the door before the Nano-T's knife-like muzzle rammed through it and crashed to a halt, its nostrils snorting, its fetid breath blowing hot, its snarls filling the room. Then it retreated

"Jesus, the armory," shouted Red. "Everyone get to the armory!"

Old Frank Miller poked his head out the shattered doorframe. "It's circling the building," he said. "And, Christ, the elevator's on fire."

"What the ...?" gasped Harley as he tripped over Gardner's corpse.

Charlotte stared down at the body as they passed.

"I'll explain later," said Red. He snatched up a pair of scissors from Gardner's desk and began cutting everyone's bonds even as Charlotte started handing out weapons and ammo. "Maybe you better explain now," she said.

"I can't," he snapped, "at least not adequately. Suffice it to say that Gardner went crazy, and Corbin after him ..." He hurriedly snipped Taher's bonds.

“What about the girl,” said Charlotte. “What about—”

“*The girl*,” growled Red, “in case you haven’t noticed, isn’t what she appears to be.” He paused long enough to look her in the eyes. “I’m sorry. But if you want to survive this mess, you’re just going to have to trust me.”

She looked up at him, a hundred different emotions racing through her mind, then suddenly relented. Because the truth of it was: she *did* trust him. Trusted him, and loved him, too. “I do,” she said.

He crouched next to Frank Miller in the doorway, and she joined them.

The Nano-T and the cat were locked up in furious combat now, each of them as battered and bloody as the other, tumbling and rolling, biting and clawing, their fight to the death having moved amongst the carnival rides, smashing some of the smaller ones to pieces, starting more fires. Meanwhile Nazis were running everywhere, pursued by the other Nano-Ts, while someone on the roof of the infirmary and someone on the roof of the Gingerbread house were engaged in a ferocious firefight. “If you got a plan, Red, they’ll never be a better time,” said Charlotte.

“All right everyone, listen up!” shouted Red. “The fence between the lagoon and the diner has been knocked down. Beyond it lies a service tunnel which leads directly out of the Shambhala. Now on my mark we’re going to make a run for it— keep your eyes on me, understand? I’ve ran this marathon before. And whatever you do, don’t look back.” He glanced at his mural which had begun to take on a red red-orange sheen by the light of the fires, at Chairman Dean’s smiling face and Charlotte looking like a movie star, at a giant version of Ryx spreading his multicolored wings to take flight, and wondered briefly where the little saurian bird might be. Then he pushed it all from his mind— as he had pushed his life before the Flashback from his mind; as he had pushed *her* from his mind. As he had pushed everything he had ever known from his mind ... a long time ago. “Just ... don’t look back,” he repeated, and then barked, “Now let’s move it, *go, go, go!*”

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THE BEAST WAS ALMOST upon them as Dieter held out his hand to Hannah, who had fallen in her haste to reach the platform, and said, “Come on, just a little bit further. Take my hand, Valkyrie, and we shall escape down the slide together. Look, see, the beasts of prey are all distracted.”

She groaned, feeling for her ankle, which she had twisted in the fall, then reached for his hand and took it suddenly and firmly—even as the Nano-T crested the top of the staircase wall and began to reorient itself for the kill. Then he pulled her the rest of the way up suddenly and turned her to face the beast, whose snout was only a few feet away, and said, “Look, see how they are distracted. Look!”

And he pushed her into its maw, which closed about her head and shoulders and lifted her kicking and struggling off the platform even as he snatched a burlap sack from the top of a nearby stack and sat down upon it at the edge of the slide, pushing himself off without delay as blood and innards and chunks of flesh fell all around him and the wind of his motion caught his blonde hair and lifted it aloft.

And then he was sliding down, down, levelling off briefly, then down again, and he couldn’t help but notice that the people he had planned to rule were fleeing now, and that the Nano-T had broken off its engagement with the tiger long enough to snap at them and give chase, and that in its absence the great feline had turned its mighty head to face the bottom of the slide and opened its maw, which was mottled pink and black, and that he was helpless to do anything but continue sliding toward it—until his kicking feet and legs were trapped between its terrible, curved fangs and its central incisors bit mercilessly into his abdomen (which crunched and splattered and was ripped in two as his bowels exploded outward and his heart and lungs and spleen steamed on contact with the air) and blood erupted from his mouth only to gurgle back inside and choke him. And then the darkness engulfed him completely and he felt himself slithering between its throat muscles and down its gullet—into the burning blackness of its stomach, where he saw by a brief and inexplicable light the dead face of the man the cat had eaten earlier in the day, and knew at last that he walked the earth no more.

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RED SENSED THAT THEY were being pursued even before he heard the footfalls and knew that he’d led them astray. For an animal was coming—*the* animal, he knew, Napoleon—and it was coming on fast. True, they could turn and fire and hope that the thing dropped before it had killed every last one of them, but almost no one in the group save himself and Frank Miller were experienced

with firearms, and he knew such an action would only lead to a greater loss of life. Better to be picked off one by one as they ran (so that at least someone would make it) than that—and yet there was another option he was almost too terrified to consider ... but he did consider it, and the longer he considered it the more real it became in his mind.

The question was, would Charlotte allow it? Would anyone allow it? For if any one person decided to join him, it would lead to a moment of doubt and confusion and lost time that he felt certain they could not survive. And so he would have to be certain of his own conviction most of all, and after that he would have to be certain that no one would even notice he was gone—until it was too late. Until there was nothing any of them could do but use the time he had given them to keep running and to survive. To link up with Lonny outside the service tunnel—if he was still alive—and make tracks for the Wagon Train.

To ensure, it was his hope, that his sacrifice would not end up being in vain.

To be concluded in ...
FLASHBACK DAWN:
“GENERATION ZERO”