

High Noon at Raptor Falls: Part 2

"You ever hunt a Rex?"

"Nope," Henry said, adjusting in the sidecar. After a fairly quiet evening under the stars, Henry and Xavier had taken Triplet and Spike out, following a trail that the T-Rex had left. It wasn't easy to spot, but with the knowledge of a bigger predator, Henry knew what to look for. Sure enough, the signs he did see, led straight to the Gorge. The Gorge was full of raptors and other small predators, making it a death trap for most travelers. However, a fully-grown, vicious T-Rex would have no difficulty becoming king of the chasm.

"I heard their eyesight isn't very good," Xavier said. "They're more like scavengers than hunters."

"With that many teeth?" Henry said. "I think it wouldn't care where the food comes from. It may not be a hunter, but you'll have a hell of a time killing it."

"I heard they're big enough to squash a man. Get real fast too."

"You hear an awful lot," Henry chuckled.

"I listen," Xavier grinned. "You should try it sometime."

Henry chuckled and glanced over at the younger deputy. "Well, once your badge dulls a little more," he said. "Once you find a bit more fight in that Trike of yours? We'll see how much you listen to what others say. Experience. Best teacher in the world."

"Not this again," Xavier groaned, adjusting on Triplet's saddle. "When are you going to admit that maybe, I could be ready?"

"You're ready when I say you're ready. Raptor Falls needs defenders...not greenhorns."

"Well, Triplet's ivories are coming in quite well, you'll see."

"Just keep your eyes up and your head alert. Read the situation and react. No amount of 'listening' will take down a T-Rex. Eyes open now..."

The Gorge spread before them like an open maw, the sides towering up over either of their mounts. Henry pulled out his rifle while Xavier checked the ammunition in his revolver. The small pistol would scare off smaller predators, but the men would be relying on their mounts to do most of the heavy fighting against the rex. A young Trike like Triplet would struggle through a fight, but Henry figured that Spike would pick up the slack.

"Hold up, Spike, whoa..." Henry said, hopping off the Stegosaurus. Up ahead, the remains of a meal was scattered along the canyon floor. Several, smaller creatures had been eaten and torn to pieces, their remains left out in the sun. The bones were bleached white from the noonday sun. The remaining flesh was a tempting target for smaller avian beasts, snapping their teeth at one another if they got too close.

"Well," Xavier said, leading Triplet by her reins, "At least we don't have to worry about raptors."

Henry looked up, following the trail of carcasses to the canyon's edge. At least one had been brought back, a bloody trail leading back to the T-Rex's lair. A few bones were mashed in deeper into the dirt, firmly pressed into the T-Rex prints. The trail was easy to follow, leading into an opening in the face of the rock.

"So," Xavier said, "are you gonna lead the way into the dark and scary cave? Or are we going to draw straws?"

"I don't think we'll need to," Henry said, cocking his rifle. He looked to Xavier and back to the two dinosaurs, making sure all of them were paying attention before he fired a shot into the dark tunnel.

A roar echoed in the tunnel, the sound shaking Henry's bones and making his legs quiver. The ground trembled, making Henry and Xavier run for cover. Spike, the fighter, stood firm and prepared to attack. The much younger Triplet took a few cautious steps away but kept her head low and ready for a charge. The shaking became clear footsteps. *Boom, boom, boom*, Thundering closer as the giant rushed out of the cave.

Standing over a dozen feet tall at the hip, the T-Rex pounded through the mouth of the cave. Dull colored feathers laid flat against its neck, the streaks of red and yellow flaring around the predator's throat. The short, stubby forearms were covered in smaller feathers, crumpled and useless. The long tail swung over Xavier's head as the T-Rex turned and started to circle the two dinosaurs.

Henry rushed out first, pumping his rifle and firing a few rounds into the T-Rex's thick hide. The dinosaur reared, an angry bellow filling the canyon. The T-Rex charged forward, but Spike's tail struck the flank hard, giving Henry a chance to move to a new source of cover. Xavier's guns fired next, three shots in quick succession that got lucky enough to strike the T-Rex's left leg and spilling blood. The dinosaur reared, snarling as it turned toward Xavier.

Triplet snorted, dragging her feet in the dirt before rushing into a charge. The T-Rex snarled at her, but Triplet rushed beneath it and caught the weak ankle with one of her horns. The T-Rex staggered but managed to keep its footing as Triplet ran beneath it.

Henry took his turn in the rotation, firing several rounds from his rifle. One of the rounds dug deep into the T-Rex's shoulder, causing it to shift back.

"Left shoulder!" Henry called.

"I see it!" Xavier said, firing a few quick rounds at the rex. Enraged, the T-Rex rushed forward and roared. Spike's sharp tail, reared up, piercing the giant's throat with a long, sharp point.

The T-Rex shrieked, rushing back and trying to pull free of the Stego's attack. Spike moved with the T-Rex to keep the sharp points in its throat as long as possible. Triplet rushed forward, going on the attack and knocking the T-Rex's legs out from underneath it.

Henry watched the giant collapse on the ground, the spikes slipping out of the T-Rex's neck. With a final heave, the T-Rex lunged forward, biting firmly into Spike's neck. The stegosaurs wailed, pulling against the sharp teeth as the T-Rex tore through the flesh. Spike thrashed, striking the giant with his tail.

"Spike!" Henry yelled, cocking the rifle and firing. His shot hit the T-Rex in the eye, blood splattering from the wound. The titan seized and as the jaw loosened, Spike fell to the ground.

"Shit!" Henry said, running from his hiding spot. He cocked the rifle again, firing into the T-Rex's head again and again. The predator had stopped moving as the bullets hit the lifeless skull.

"Henry, Henry!" Xavier ran over, putting a hand on the old sheriff's arm as the gun clicked through empty rounds. "It's over."

Spike moaned, limp on his side. Henry dropped his empty rifle and rushed over to the wounded Stego. Triplet was there almost instantly, nuzzling her companion as it panted in the dirt. Xavier touched the bloody spot on the Stegosaurus's neck, causing Spike to groan and shirk away.

"It's deep," Xavier said. "If we get him back, we could stitch him up."

"We don't have the manpower to get him back there," Henry shook his head. He fell to his knees by Spike's head, cradling the reptilian face in his hands. Spike tried to raise his neck, but Henry shushed him, stroking his neck.

"Xavier," Henry said. "Get Triplet to the mouth of the Gorge. I'll meet you both there."

"Sheriff?"

"This is something I should take care of," Henry said, running his fingers over Spike's rough skin. "We both know he's not making it back."

"I think he could still make it," Xavier said. "Get a fast doctor out here and—"

"I didn't mean you and me," Henry grumbled. Xavier nodded, but Henry stopped him from walking away. "I'm gonna need your knife. I left mine behind."

"I—sure, Henry," Xavier said, pulling his blade and giving Henry the handle. Henry thanked him as Xavier led Triplet out of the gorge, giving the T-Rex a firm kick as he passed by, spitting on the body for good measure. A few moments passed before Henry could no longer hear the dinosaur's heavy footfalls. The gorge was quiet, only a few stray stones scattering across the rock face.

Henry rubbed Spike's face, consoling the large behemoth with gentle words. "You've done well. Forty years. That's longer than most...and you've done more than most could ever claim. You fought hordes of raptors and stood your ground against a T-Rex. There aren't enough men who could claim as much. You were born a fighter."

Pushing the blade up, Henry felt the stegosaurus tense for a moment. Spike exhaled, slowly closing his eyes and creating a puff of dirt with his last breath.

"And you died a fighter," Henry whispered, cleaning the blood off with a handkerchief. He stood and touched Spike's rough hide once more, feeling the stiff plates on his shoulder.

Triplet had proved herself today, in Henry's opinion. Maybe it was time for the town to have a new Predator Defender.