

### High Noon at Raptor Falls: Part 1

"Easy, Spike, whoa," Henry ordered from the sidecar. The Stegosaurus slowed to a halt. Spike was pushing forty years old. Ancient for a Predator Defense mount, but Sheriff Henry Ward was no spring chicken either. His hair had long passed the point of grey into a stark white, the beard and mustache covering his mouth with bristly whiskers. His long, skinny limbs ached and popped when he moved them, reminders of long broken bones and dislocated joints from a lifetime defending Raptor Falls.

Dropping out of the sidecar, Henry ran his hand along Spike's side, rubbing between the plates on his neck. Spike wasn't much better off than Henry was. He had a crack in his left shoulder plate from an attack and more scratches along the leathery hide than Henry had cared to count. They were veterans, to be fair, and the town hadn't had a raptor attack in seven years. They were skittish around the town, between Henry's rifle and Spike's sharp tail spurs. Henry had no plans of retirement, but looking over Spike made Henry reconsider letting the new deputy take over defending the town. Herbivores had to be tough, but the ones that never stopped fighting lived far shorter lives.

Spike turned his small head, making sure to catch Henry in his eye. Henry shrugged and took the Stegosaurus's lead, tying him to the post at the Slice of Heaven Ranch. Long stretches of grassland surrounded the farmhouse, fenced in with large wooden posts the size of trees. The Slice of Heaven Ranch was one of three Hadrosaur ranches in the area and the beasts were so loud, Henry could hear them almost all hours of the day.

Clark Greene marched up the dirt path. He was wearing suspenders and his nightshirt, still in disarray. The rancher was fidgety as Henry approached, kicking dust with his boots as he walked.

"Sheriff." Clark said. "It's good of you to come."

"Well," Henry grumbled, adjusting his belt. "Your brother made it pretty clear I come as soon as possible."

"Daniel was the only one in any sorts to get ya." Clark said, running his hand over his forehead. "I barely had my wits enough to get the rest of herd sealed away."

"They're tucked back?"

"Mhmm," Clark nodded. "They're in the big pasture. The one I want you to see was Marta. She's...well, you should just see."

Henry was familiar with Clark's prize-winning Trumpeter. Marta was a big beast, almost as long as Spike with a long, fleshy tube on her forehead that her breed would use to call out to the rest of her herd. Trumpeters would stand on two legs, balance with their long tail and get a running speed to rival most predators. They were fairly docile, preferring to alert the rest of the herd and run from predators, usually outrunning them with long strides from their powerful legs.

"Clark, I'm sure this is just a raptor attack," Henry said. "A few slipped through the fence and took her down in the night, nice and quiet. She'd probably be sleeping when they—"

"Beg your pardon, Sheriff," Clark said, unlocking a paddock. "But if this is a raptor attack, we got bigger problems than a hole in the fence."

The smell hit Henry first. Trumpeters smelled bad on their worst day, but this pen stunk of rot. Left out in the sun, Marta hadn't had much to protect her from the elements. Smaller avian carnivores had settled on her hide, spooked off when Clark swung an arm at them. Henry knelt down and examined the body, covering his mouth with a cloth. A large chunk had been taken out of her belly, broken ribs and organs missing from the chasm.

"Never seen an attack like it." Clark said. "We've had raptors come in before, take little bites out of the shoulder to bring down one of the sick ones. But Marta? She didn't even make a noise. Whatever attacked her, it bit so hard, her neck broke before she could scream."

"When did it happen?"

"Daniel thought he heard something late last night or early this morning. Either way, the sun wasn't up at the time."

Henry looked over the bite on Marta's neck, tracing it with his fingertips. It was big. Bigger than any raptor he'd seen the wild and those only came up to his hip. An adult Trumpeter would tower over Henry, but whatever had done this had been big enough not only to get the drop on Marta but also clamp down on her entire throat before she could make a noise.

"Predator this big?" Clark said. "We'd never seen anything like it. Thought maybe you had."

"Not recently and certainly not out here." Henry rubbed his face. He straightened and looked over the fence. "Fence ain't nearly as tall here."

"We like showing Marta off." Clark confessed. "It was high enough to keep the raptors out and people could still see. She'd pop her head up over the fence and watch people passing by. Folks liked it, especially the kids. That's how we knew something was wrong; she didn't come when we whistled, see?"

"I see." Henry nodded looking around. There was blood all over the floor of the corral, signs of a messy, desperate eater. It also explained why Marta was the only one attacked. Attacking a lone, docile beast was less of a risk than trying to chase an entire herd.

"It's probably non-local." Henry rubbed his beard. "Certainly not a raptor."

"Sheriff!" A voice called. Looking behind him, Henry saw the new deputy coming down the road. Xavier was riding on Triplet, letting the much younger Daniel sit on the triceratops's back. When Triplet plodded to a stop, Xavier hopped off and helped the boy down, walking into the paddock.

Xavier was young, but not arrogant, which Henry liked. He had coarse, dark hair that was trimmed close to his scalp. He still shaved fairly regularly, making his slim face look even younger. He was a bit foolish at times but knew more about the science of dinosaurs than Henry did. His first night, Henry and Xavier had argued for three hours on experience against expertise. To neither man's recollection, they hadn't been able to come to a precise agreement, despite the number of glasses they had left on the table.

"Deputy," Henry nodded, "this is Clark Greene. He and Daniel own the ranch. Clark, this is Deputy Xavier Hand."

Xavier greeted the farmer, his attention fixed on the gash in the Trumpeter's side.

"Something did this last night?"

"Broke the neck." Henry pointed near the head. "It was quick."

"I'll say." Xavier said, looking at the ground. "Any prints?"

"Not yet, but take a look around." Henry said. He turned back to Clark and Daniel. "We'll take a guard shift here tonight. I don't know if the predator will come back, but I know you'll sleep better knowing we're close by."

Clark nodded, pulling Daniel back into the house before he could pester the Sheriff with questions.

"Henry." Xavier called, waving the Sheriff over. Marching through the paddock, Henry swung at a returning scavenger before stopping by where Xavier was looking.

"Bet you a shiny penny that this is our culprit."

"Shit," Henry cursed, looking at the massive print in the dirt. Three large toes, the sharpest points pushed deep into the dirt. He'd never seen one in person, but he had seen more than enough prints to know what it was.

"Rex?"

"Yeah," Xavier said, deflating, "I was hoping you'd say I was wrong. I thought rexes didn't come this far East? Arizona and New Mexico, maybe, but Kansas?"

"Usually, no," Henry grumbled. "But if one wandered far enough, got hungry enough and got ambitious enough—"

"He'd go for the weakest and the alone one. Which way would he go?"

"Somewhere warm...somewhere quiet...somewhere we shouldn't see him."

"The Gorge?"

"Your local geography has improved already."