

High Noon at Raptor Falls

"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 was 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 that." 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, the biggest only came up to about 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."

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"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 stegosaurus 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.