

The Great Divide

by Jeff Dillon

The hard packed dirt gave way to a shallow depression. Its steep bank led down a meager excuse for a creek. Jonas urged his mount forward. Both man and rider were thirsty. Both covered in many miles worth of dust.

Behind him, a thickly accented voice, spoke.

"It's water, yes?"

Jonas nodded. The discovery had come at the perfect time. The day had been hot and Jonas was concerned that they might be getting lost. This was all new territory, after all. They were following a new route from Mexico, through Texas, up into the Montana territories. This creek was on the map at least. He was sure they were still in Mexico. They hadn't crossed the Rio yet, but he thought that they should have by now. Scouting for the Thompson River Company was just a job and it wasn't his position to question the boss. He read the maps, knew the dangers and was good at what he did.

The rider finally pulled astride Jonas and his horse. A big man, Alexei Volkov, made even the largest of horses seem small. How the Russian ended up in West Texas, Jonas never knew, nor wanted to. Ever since bailing the affable Slav out of jail after a half remembered, mostly painful, night of drinking, the two had been fast friends.

"It's good to be Scout, now we rest while the others catch up to us. Yes?"

"Yep, it's good." Jonas replied, sliding off his horse.

Jonas tied off Roscoe on a fallen tree that had been deposited there from one of the frequent flash floods that had plagued the area a season back.

Jonas scanned the area, looking for a bit of shade, wary of rattlers wanting to share that precious commodity. Alexei, finished tying off Peanut, the only horse Jonas knew who loved to eat peanuts, found

the closet bit of shade and flopped down, regardless of rattlesnakes, scorpions, or any other creature that could seriously injure you.

The small cloud of dust brought a slight grin to Jonas. Damn dust.

"The herd and the rest of the crew should be here in a couple of hours." Jonas said, scanning the horizon.

"I reckon it's about 3:00 and Mr. Thompson will want to start setting up camp by 5:00."

Alexei grunted in agreement. His large hat already pulled low over his brow.

Jonas walked to the edge of the creek, removed his hat, and crouched down to splash water across his face and neck. Running his fingers through his wet hair, Jonas paused. A strange clicking noise was coming from the far side of the gulch. Jonas slowly unfastened the straps on his twin Colt 45's; still staying low. The sound repeated again, closer to the edge of the ravine. He pivoted slightly, following the noise along the ledge.

"Alexei." Jonas whispered.

"Da."

The big man was already beside his horse, drawing his enormous buffalo rifle.

With the sun behind them, both men backed towards the wall of the ravine, keeping constant vigilance on the far side, their shadows stretching far in front of them.

"Dear God" Alexei, exhaled.

On the ridge in front of them, appeared a creature, neither man had ever seen before, standing taller than their horses, the strange beast walked on two powerful legs, it's long tail stretched out, stiffly behind it. On the end of its long neck was a slender head with a large mouth filled with razor sharp teeth. On the end of the monsters feet were two claws, curved daggers that struck the ground with an eerie clicking sound. The velociraptor roared. The horses reared, broke the restraints and bolted down the river bed.

Alexei aimed and fired his immense Winchester. The blast struck the beast in the side. It staggered sideways a few steps. Shaking itself, the beast turned, running towards the edge of the ravine. Its

powerful rear legs propelled it a dozen feet, into the middle of the shallow river bed.

Fast as lightning, Jonas drew his pistols and fired. With pinpoint accuracy, his bullets struck the velociraptor in its oblong head. Again the beast, staggered back a few feet. Shaking its body, the velociraptor sprayed viscous blood in every direction. Alexei fired again. The cannon-like rifles blast struck the beast dead center. The velociraptor tried to roar, its voice choked by the blood running from its many wounds. It swayed for a moment. Then fell with a thud and a splash into the water. The only sounds that could be heard were that of the two men's ragged breathing.

Then the clicking began again. This time it came from in front of them and behind. Jonas emptied the spent shells and reloaded as fast as he could. Alexei slammed a few more shells into his rifle. The two men exchanged a knowing glance. They'd been in tight spots before, but this was different. This was worse. Without warning, two velociraptors leapt from the far side of the ravine. Alexei aimed and fired at the two creatures. Then a shadow fell across Jonas' face. A third velociraptor appeared on the ledge in front of him. Jonas fired. The next few minutes were an exchange of bullets, claws and teeth. No one in the history of man had ever witnessed the brutality seen that afternoon.

The two men had dragged themselves to the long shadow of the ravine wall. Alexei was bleeding from a large bite wound on his upper leg. Jonas' chest and arms were covered with large cuts and gashes. Around them the carcasses of the three velociraptors laid bleeding into the sand.

"What the hell!?" A voice yelled from the top of the ridge. Men from the Thompson River Company had finally showed up. Several of the Company raced down the wall to attend to the two wounded men.

Later, after camp had been settled, Mr. Thompson, found Jonas and Alexei, propped up against their saddles, bandaged and bruised, but alive, sitting around a fire. The Company men had heard the

story and repeated countless times already. The examination of the bodies of the velociraptor was keeping the men fascinated now.

Mr. Thompson, crouched by the fire, stirring the embers. The warm light, cast harsh shadows across his worn face.

"I've seen you've found the entrance to the valley." Thompson smiled.

Then a roar, a thousand times louder than the velociraptors, broke the stillness of the night.

Plot: Daniel Rubenstein

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