

As a kid, reading dime novels of the adventures of the cowboys, being on a ride was all Charlie wanted. Now, it seemed, he was living it. Out on a ride, facing off against outlaws. Meting out frontier justice. Though he had no official capacity in law enforcement, capturing Leland with Grisom, and Doris, had made his year. He had a smile on his face that couldn't be erased.

Six months ago, Charlie had left his the family farm determined to 'make his way' in the world. He was determined to find adventure and not become a farmer like his father or grandfather had been. Not that he begrudged either of them for being farmers and not that they were pressuring him into the vocation, in fact, they were happy to see him spread his wings. As long as he kept in touch.

On the day he left the farm, Doris made it clear she was coming with him. No matter how loudly Charlie protested, Doris would not leave the saddle bag. Finally, it was Charlie's grandfather who said, "Son, I reckon she's going with you. Sure seems like a good idea since she'll listen to you better than anyone else. I figure it's the right thing to do seeing as she's smart enough to keep ya from doin' something stupid."

So it was decided. Doris would come with Charlie. After a week or so of traveling he found work as a ranch hand on a cattle ranch outside of Peoria, Illinois. He was a good worker and, being the low man on the ladder, didn't mind the work he was given. The hardest part of the job was keeping Doris a secret from the rest of the ranch workers. Not an easy task when they all shared one large room of the bunkhouse as living quarters.

One afternoon, Mr. Templin, the ranch owner, sent Charlie into Peroria to meet the train. Some new supplies were arriving from back east and Charlie was to secure them and bring them back to the ranch.

Charlie sat in the cart near the depot, feeding Doris slices of apple through the flap of the saddlebag, when he suddenly heard loud gunfire from Main Street, behind him.

Turning, he saw a man running down the street with two men chasing after, getting off shot after shot on him. The man locked eyes with Charlie and yelled, "Start moving that cart kid."

Charlie, was confused, but obeyed, clicking the horses into action with his

tongue and a flip of the reins the cart lurched forward along the train tracks. The man running down the street slid into the back of cart as it pulled out. For the first time Charlie noticed that the man was carrying a small bundle wrapped in brown burlap. Once the man was on the cart he pulled out a gun and began opening fire on his pursuers. The two followers scattered in the street, then doubled back for their horses.

Charlie kept the horses running, but turned to look at the man in the back of his cart, "Mister, I don't need any trouble. Are you a bank robber or something?"

The man kept an eye behind them, but yelled forward, "No I ain't. I just have something they want."

"That the Sherriff and deputies shooting at you?"

"No. Pinkertons."

Charlie swallowed hard. "Pinkertons! Look Mister, I don't need any trouble. I don't want to mess with the Pinketons."

"Son you know what Pinkertons are?"

"The Law."

"No. They ain't. They're glorified bounty hunters. Working for whomever will pay them. Don't matter if the job is right or wrong, as long as the money is good, the Pinkertons will do it." Charlie could barely hear the man over the roar of the cart as it rumbled down the road.

"Where you want me to take you? I ain't taking you back to the ranch I'm working at."

"You know the road that leads north into the foothills?"

"Sure."

"That's what we want. Head there."

Charlie steered the cart towards the road in question. He was nervous but his heart was pounding with excitement. He had no clue if the man in the back of his cart was someone he could trust, but it felt as if he was. He was a tall man, with rugged look to him. His brown hat pulled down near over his eyes. He had two day stubble and his eyes were such a dark brown that when, combined with the

shade the brim of his hat made, almost made them look completely black. His vest, shirt and pants had a layer of trail dust miles thick. Two silver pistols hung in holsters at his waist. He looked like a man you would cross the street to avoid. There was something about him, however, that put Charlie at ease and made him trustworthy.

As the cart sped towards the foothills at a breakneck pace, the man in the back kept a careful watch on the road behind them. Charlie divided his attention between the road in front, the man in the back and the saddle bag on the bench next to him. In the excitement, he'd almost forgot about keeping Doris' presence unknown. As they drove he reached a hand down to slide the bag closer to him.

The man in the back saw this movement out of the corner of his eye. He instinctively reached for one of his pistols.

"No need to go for your gun kid. I don't mean to harm you."

It took a second for Charlie to realize what he'd meant. He chuckled nervously, "Uh, no sir. I wasn't reaching for a gun. I was just making sure my bag didn't bounce out of the seat."

"Well, I ain't aiming to take whatever's in your bag either."

"Wasn't afraid of that, sir. If I was really nervous I would have bailed miles back. Just making sure my bag was close."

The man nodded and turned his attention back down the road. Charlie looked back at him.

"Think we lost them?" Charlie asked.

"They know the direction we headed and it won't be long before they piece together where we went." The man replied. "I think we bought us some time, but that's about it."

Charlie was taken back a second. "Us?"

"Yeah." The man replied. "You're part of this now. At least for the time being. I'm going to need someone to help me get out of the area safely. You've just been volunteered."

Charlie shook his head as he spurred the horses on faster. It dawned on him

that instead of finding adventure, adventure had found him! Charlie took the turn to the road that led to the foothills. About two miles down it, the man in the back of the cart hollered, "There's a smaller side road coming up on your left, hard to see, take it."

Charlie nodded, "Didn't think there was much out this way. No people or places at any rate."

"There ain't." The man replied. "That's exactly why we want to head this way. There's an abandoned farm about a mile into the woods."

Charlie nodded and kept the horses moving. He made the left onto the smaller road. A few minutes later, an abandoned farmhouse came into view between the trees. The man climbed up over the back of the seat on the buckboard and sat next to Charlie. Charlie grabbed his saddle bag and moved it onto his lap as the man sat next to him.

The man looked at the saddlebag. "You sure are nervous about that bag, son. What do you have in there?"

Charlie gripped the bag tighter. He looked over at the small bundle wrapped in burlap in the man's lap,. "What do you have in there?"

The man looked down then back up at Charlie. He smiled, "Good point."

Charlie circled the buckboard around back of the farmhouse so it couldn't be seen from the road. As soon as they were parked, the man hopped off the front clutching his parcel to his chest. Charlie gathered his saddle bag and slung it over his shoulder.

"If you want to get out of town, shouldn't we keep going?" Charlie asked, watching the man climb the back steps to the farmhouse.

"I have to do something first." The man said peeking in through the windows of the run down farmhouse. "Hope the kitchen table is still in here. We're going to need it."

Charlie watched as the man tried to force open the back door with his shoulder. "I'm Charlie by the way."

The man lurched against the door, popping it open. He steadied himself and turned back to Charlie. He nodded toward Charlie, "Grisom. Pleased to make

your acquaintance. Follow me.” The man stepped over the threshold and into the kitchen.

Charlie began to follow him. There was a whistle from the saddlebag. Charlie whispered back to it, “Shhhhh, Doris. I’ll be careful. Let’s see what he’s up to.”

Charlie climbed the stairs of the back porch and into the kitchen.

When Charlie entered the kitchen, he found Grisom lifting the edge of the kitchen table to spill the remnants of a long forgotten meal onto the floor. Dishes fell with a clatter. When it was clear he let the table slam back to the ground. He gingerly placed the burlap wrapped package he was carrying onto the center of it. He looked over at Charlie. “Think that water pump out back still works?”

“I don’t know. I reckon so, unless the well’s run dry.” Charlie replied looking out the back door towards the pump.

Grisom crossed the kitchen and grabbed an old wooden bucket from near where the stove sat in the corner of the room. He stepped back and held it out to Charlie. “Go fill this with some water.”

Charlie looked confused. “Why?”

“You want to see what’s in here?” Grisom said, slowly undoing the burlap that was wrapped around the parcel..

Charlie looked at the package and nodded.

“Then fetch me some water, boy.” Grisom barked.

Charlie didn’t waste a moment. He grabbed the bucket and raced out the door, down the back steps and towards the pump. He placed the bucket below the spout and began pumping. After several seconds of pumping, just when he thought that the pump needed to be primed, water started pouring out and into the bucket. The saddlebag over his shoulder began to move slightly.

“Easy girl.” Charlie whispered.

A whistle emanated from the bag.

“I get it, you’re thirsty, I’ll get you some water, I just gotta do this first.” Charlie replied.

A disappointed whistle echoed back to him.

Once the bucket was three quarters full, Charlie stopped pumping and picked it up. He moved fast back towards the farmhouse, but not so fast water sloshed from the bucket. He leapt up the steps and into the kitchen. When he entered he saw that Grisom had unwrapped the burlap from the bundle and there, sitting in the middle of the wrapping, was a simple water pitcher. It looked as if was made of pewter. Perhaps iron. It was tarnished, grimy, dented. It had no decoration or writing on it. It just looked as if it was a simple water pitcher that had seen many better days.

Charlie smirked as he set the bucket down on the table. "The Pinkerton's are after you because of a water pitcher? Did it belong to someone's Grandmother or something?"

"No." Said Grisom. He took out his handkerchief and dipped it in the bucket of water. He wrung out the excess and then, gently, began clearing the dirt from the the sides of the pitcher. His strokes were very delicate, as if he thought the thing would crumble under his touch.

"I'm not quite sure that I want to have the Pinkerton's after me because of some old water pitcher." Charlie said.

"This ain't just some old water pitcher." Grisom replied shortly.

Charlie took the cue and stopped with his questions. He watched Grisom clean the sides of the pitcher. The dirt came away, but the water did very little to brighten the dingy metal it was made of. Grisom worked for a minute more, making sure dirt and grime was cleared from the sides and bottom. Charlie noticed he never scrubbed the insides.

"You know your revolutionary war history kid?" Grisom asked, finally breaking the silence.

"Some." Charlie replied.

"You ever hear of Molly Pitcher?" Grisom asked.

"No, sir."

"She was at Valley Forge with her husband who was in the artillery. She was what's called a 'water girl.' She ran pitchers of water back and forth to the infantry

and artillerymen. The water was used to cool down the barrels of cannons after they were fired so they didn't split."

Charlie nodded, listening intently.

"Later she was involved in the Battle of Monmouth. This time she was running water back and forth to the men under British fire. Her husband was killed in that battle and Molly took up his position at the cannon and kept up the barrage. We won that battle and after, George Washington gave her a commendation and the nickname 'Sergeant Molly.' What most people don't know though is that Molly made sure they won the battle by bringing water to all those cannons in her pitcher."

Charlie raised an eyebrow. "How'd she manage that?"

"Witchery." Grisom replied.

"Witchery? This Molly Pitcher was a witch?" Charlie scoffed.

"No. She wasn't a witch." Grisom replied. "Well not as you're thinking. You see there are certain items in this world that have inherent powers woven into them when they are made. These powers come from the earth, not from any evil spirits or devils, just from the earth. The Indians have been using them for years. We have only begun to harness them. The secret of how to infuse an object with witchery is a shrouded secret and rarely used, but these objects do exist and they have been fundamental in protecting this country of ours."

Charlie scratched his head for a minute then looked at the pitcher. "And this, is Molly Pitcher's pitcher?"

Grisom nodded.

"And it's got some witchery in it?"

"That it does." Grisom replied. "Remember how I told you the water Molly brought to the artillerymen was used to cool down the cannons?"

Charlie nodded.

"The witchery in this pitcher enchanted the iron of the cannons. It made it so that the cannonballs always hit their mark, thus helping us win that battle and several others as well."

“Well, I’ll be...” Charlie said in astonishment. He crossed to the table and placed his saddle bag down on it, staring transfixed at the pitcher. “How’s it work?”

“Simple.” Grisom replied. “You just fill it with water then pour the water from the pitcher over the barrel of the cannon.” To illustrate, Grisom picked up the bucket and poured water into the pitcher. Charlie watched in rapt attention. As the water filled the pitcher, Charlie saw a bright flash of green ripple through the water. “Give me your gun.”

“What?” Charlie questioned.

“Give me your gun.” Grisom said, his hand outstretched.

Charlie unholstered his gun and handed it to Grisom. Grisom lifted the pitcher and poured a little water over the barrel of Charlie’s gun. The same green ripple Charlie had seen in the water appeared to ripple across this gun barrel. Grisom set the pitcher back down and handed Charlie back his gun. Charlie stared at the barrel.

Grisom looked out the kitchen door towards the backyard. “See that cow skull hung over the door of the barn?”

Charlie looked over his shoulder and scanned the backyard. His eyes wandered towards the barn and then to the weathered skull that hung above the door about 200 yards from where they sat in the kitchen. Charlie nodded.

“Shoot it.”

Charlie looked back at Grisom. “Shoot it?”

Grisom nodded.

Charlie stood and began crossing towards the door.

Grisom grabbed his shoulder. “No. Shoot it, from here.”

Charlie turned and looked at Grisom as if he was nutty. “I can’t hit that thing from here. It’s far too far away for me to hit.”

“Try it. Shoot from where you stand.” Grisom ordered.

Charlie snickered and raised the gun in front of him. “If you say so.”

Charlie looked down the barrel and aimed at the skull. He snickered to himself,

hating to have to prove this guy wrong, but he aimed best he could at a target so far away and then squeezed the trigger.

Charlie couldn't be certain, but he thought he saw that same flash of green ripple along the gun barrel as the gun fired. A millisecond later, the skull above the barn shattered. Charlie stared in disbelief. He looked at the gun in his hands then back at Grisom.

"How...?" Charlie asked.

"Witchery."

Charlie smiled and looked back down at his gun.

"Don't get too excited kid." Grisom said. "It's temporary. Only lasts for one shot. That's why Molly Pitcher had to keep running back and forth. Helped us with the war though."

"So the Pinkertons want it because..."

"Because imagine if you could find out how it works and then raised up an militia that always hit their target? The world would be yours." Grisom replied. "I'm taking this to Yankton to a place called The Vault. A secret place where witchery items are kept away from those who'd use them wrong."

"Like the Pinkertons."

"Yep." Grisom replied. "You should come with me."

"Come with you?"

"Yeah. What else are you doing here? Working on a ranch? The way you drove that wagon, I could use some help." Gisom replied. "Besides, you have some experience with mystical things yourself."

"I do?" Charlie asked quizzically. "What do you mean?"

"I mean her." Grisom replied, pointing to the table. Charlie looked and there stood Doris. She'd crept out of the shoulder bag and was frozen, like a child who had just been caught red handed. She stood stock still, her tongue out. She'd been, lapping up water from the water bucket as Charlie and Grisom had talked. "A prairie fire. Read about them. Never seen one. How long have you had her?"

Charlie was furious at Doris and Doris knew it. She sheepishly pulled her tongue back into her mouth and crept backwards, slinking back into the saddle bag. Once inside she turned around so both Grisom and Charlie could see her eyes. Then her tail snuck out and reached for the flap of the bag and pulled it closed.

Charlie sighed heavily and told Grisom the story of how his Grandfather had come across her mother on the prairie and how Doris had become the family pet. Grisom listened quietly, nodding occasionally.

When Charlie was done relating the tale, he crossed to the table and lifted the flap. "C'mon out here." He said, smiling. Doris barreled out of the saddle bag and sprinted across the table to look up at Grisom. A huge smile appeared on her face. For the first time since Charlie had met him, Grisom smiled. He crouched down so he was eye to eye with Doris as she sat on the edge of the table. He reached out a hand and like a cat, Doris immediately began rubbing her head against it. She whistled contently as she did.

"Does she breathe fire yet?" Grisom asked.

Charlie smiled, "Oh yeah. One of her favorite past time was belching fire down in the gopher holes in Grandma's corn field to root out the varmints. Most of the time though, she'd wind up setting the field on fire."

Doris left Grisom's hand as he stood back up. She crossed over to the bucket and resumed drinking from it.

"You've done well to keep her outta sight. There's many who'd love to get their hands on a prairie fire. Same folks who want to get their hands on this pitcher." Grisom replied.

"Why?" Charlie asked.

"Because men are greedy," Grisom replied. "All they can see is power. Figure out how to breed more of them to use to their own devices. Or figure out how to harness her fire belches for no good reasons."

Charlie nodded. "Well, my Grandpa trained her pretty well to keep hidden. She knows to stay still in the bag when we're out in public. But I reckon she sensed we could trust you."

Grisom nodded then looked back towards Doris who'd again frozen drinking water. She was staring outside the kitchen window.

Grisom followed her gaze, "What is it girl?"

Suddenly a shot crashed what was left of the glass in the window pane. Charlie and Grisom leapt to the floor, Doris skittered back into the saddle bag which began to roll due to her momentum and it tumbled off the table. Charlie saw it happen and caught it before it hit the ground.

From outside the house, a deep voice yelled, "Grisom! We know you're in there. We just want the pitcher. Give it to us and we'll let you go."

Grisom had a gun out and cocked it. He scooted across to the table and slid the pitcher off it. Looking into it, he saw there was still some water left. He looked over at Charlie, "This is going to end in a shootout kid. You up for it?"

Charlie, nervous but game, nodded. "Yeah."

"Good." Grisom replied. "Hold out your gun."

Charlie held out his gun next to where Grisom had his held out. Then, using his other hand, Grisom poured the remaining water in the pitcher out over the barrels of both guns.

"Now," Grisom instructed, "You'll hit your target, but you still have to aim. These ain't magic bullets, the witchery just uses where your mental focus is aiming and helps the bullet along."

Charlie nodded.

"The good news is there's only two of them and there's two of us. But they cannot get their hands on this pitcher. And we can't let them know about Doris." Grisom said.

Charlie nodded, holding the shoulder bag close. Grisom held out the, now empty pitcher.

"Put this in the bag with her and put the bag on that shelf there." Grisom ordered. Charlie did as he was told, placing the bag, with Doris and the pitcher on the back of a shelf near where they were crouched. Grisom made his way, on hands and knees, towards the door.

"Jarrett. It's Grisom." He shouted.

The deep voice bellowed from outside, "I know who it is you damn fool. Throw out the pitcher and we ride away."

"Well, you see, that's the problem. I ain't got the pitcher."

Several more shots fired in through the window of the kitchen. They were followed by several through the kitchen door.

"You're a horrible liar Grisom." Jarrett replied. "Now look, you give us the pitcher and we leave you. Or we burn down this heap of kindle you're hiding out in, kill you, your new friend in there and then sift through the ashes and get the pitcher. Either way, we're leaving here with that pitcher. Just there's only one way you live."

Grisom looked over at Charlie. "I think Jarrett's out that way." He pointed towards where the window had shattered and where Jarrett's voice had come from. "Not sure where the other one is but I would imagine he is got his gun trained on the door."

Charlie nodded.

"Now look," Grisom continued, handing Charlie his gun. "I'll go out the door and keep them distracted. I'll walk over by the window and try and get Jarrett to come out of cover. When I do you take him out from the window there."

"What about the other guy?" Charlie asked, rubbing his hand along his pants. He was sweating a bit now. This was his first shootout.

"I'll try and draw him out. After you shoot Jarrett, toss me my pistol through the window and pick him off. No matter what, you stay in here. If they get the better of me, just give them the pitcher. They'll leave you alone. Once they have it, they'll leave. But you can not let them know about your friend. You understand?"

Charlie nodded again. He began crawling in the direction of the kitchen window. Grisom edged his way towards the kitchen door.

"Jarrett. I'm coming out." Grisom yelled out the doorway. "I'm coming out unarmed."

Charlie watched nervously, gripping the end of his pistol tight, as Grisom stood

and dusted himself off. He took a step out the door. Hands raised, looking in the direction of where Jarrett's voice was coming from.

"Where's the kid you were with?" Jarrett yelled.

"He's not part of this." Grisom yelled back. "This is between us."

"He became part of it when he helped you escape." Jarrett yelled.

Charlie had his back against the wall, under the window. He could see Grisom standing outside the door. Charlie slowly began raising himself up the wall, to get into position to take a shot at Jarrett, when he saw something move out in the yard past Grisom. The other Pinkerton agent stood from behind the cart and took aim at Grisom.

Charlie acted in a flash. He fired a shot at the agent. The bullet whizzed behind Grisom who took a step forward in surprise. The bullet hit the agent square in heart, knocking him back to the ground. Charlie spun and cocked his gun again pointing it out the window, in the side yard where Jarrett stood. Jarrett aimed his gun at where Grisom was and before he could cock it, Charlie fired again. Jarrett spun wildly and dropped to his knees. Seconds later he was face down in the dust.

Charlie's heart was pounding. He could barely catch his breath. He looked out the window as Grisom came around the side of the house. Grisom took a look and saw Jarrett on the ground. He then looked back up at Charlie in the window.

"Kid, you have nerves of steel." Grisom laughed. "Nerves of steel. That second agent had the drop on me. If I would have been alone, I would be dead. Say, you want a job?"

Charlie was just barely able to string a few words together. "A job? What kind of job?"

"The people I work for, The Coalition, are always looking for men and women brave enough to seek out artifacts like the pitcher and bring them to The Vault. They're called Agents. See, we get a badge and everything." Grisom folded open a leather flap he'd taken out of his pocket. A dull, golden badge shone in the sunlight. "I reckon you and your friend there in the bag, would fit in with The Coalition just fine." Grisom replied.

Charlie turned and looked over to the shelf where his saddle bag was. He could

see Doris' eye peeking out from under the flap. He thought about the dime novels he read as a kid. He thought about what had just happened moments ago. He'd just taken out two Pinketton Agents. Going back to work as a ranch hand, just didn't seem like a possibility anymore.

"Mr. Grison." Charlie said with a smile. "I'm in."

In the months that followed, Charlie had been on several missions with Grison, locating historical artifacts and returning them to the various Vault locations across the country. This current mission, returning the writing desk was going to take them to the Vault in Yankton, the biggest in the network, where Charlie would be able to official apply as an Agent of the Vault.