

It took Grison and Charlie a bit of time to find out exactly which way Leland and his men had gone as the spooked horse pulling the cart had run wildly for about half a mile. They were finally able to find where the bandits had regrouped and moved on. About an hour into the ride Doris began fidgeting in the saddle bag. Charlie clicked his tongue three times and Doris sprung out and climbed up onto his shoulder. She looked at him sheepishly in the lantern light.

“You’re fine.” Charlie said to her with a grin. “You were just trying to make sure he didn’t get away. You’re not in trouble.”

Doris let out a whistle of relief and scampered to Charlie’s other shoulder. Charlie looked sideways at her, “Let us know if we’re getting close to anyone.” Doris gave a little salute and nodded. She then lifted her nose into the air and began sniffing.

Doris was what the indians called a ‘prairie fire.’ A breed of fur covered dragon that was native to North America. Even in their most bountiful times, hundreds of years ago, they were very rare. Most indians only spoke of them in legends. The prairie fire feared any sort of contact with humans and, with their amazing digging ability, would dive underground at the first sight of one.

Indians passed down stories of those days when ancestors said that at night balls of fire would rise in the dark on the prairie, especially during the summer months. This was the prime mating season for the creatures. No one ever witnessed this event, however. How Doris came to be with Charlie was a tale so mixed in legend, no one could be sure what was true or not.

The story goes that about sixty years ago there’d been a terrible drought on the prairie. Herds of buffalo were wiped out, colonies of prairie dogs were decimated. Every living creature was starved for water. A rider named Thurman Rawlings had been crossing a particularly dry patch of the prairie when he came across a huge hole dug deep into the ground. As he rode up to it, a patch of dirt in the center began to move and a skinny, weakened ‘prairie fire’ crawled out of the hole towards him. Thurman was frightened, until he realized this creature, whatever it was, trying to communicate with him. He cautiously got off his horse and knelt in the dirt and the creature limped it’s way towards him.

Seeing the that creature was obviously dying of thirst, he began to unscrew his canteen. He held it out and the creature hesitated. Thurman drank a little from the

canteen to show that it was okay, and held it back out to the prairie fire. The creature shook it's head and pushed the canteen aside with it's weakened paw. Thurman then watched as the creature reached into a pouch, much like a kangaroo has, and produced a tiny, gray egg. Looking down at the egg, the mother tenderly stroked it and then, looking up at Thurman, held it out to him with outstretched paws.

Thurman gingerly reached forward and the mother gently placed the egg in his hands. She stroked it one more time and looked up at Thurman. Thurman nodded. The creature nodded in return and took a few steps back. Thurman brought the egg close and looked at it, then looked back at the mother. She had collapsed on the prairie floor. Dead. Thurman went to reach out to her and her body slowly turned to ash before his eyes, and blew away in the wind. Thurman looked down at the egg in his hand and gingerly placed it into the saddle bag over his shoulder. The same saddle bag that Charlie now carried with him. Thurman was Charlie's great-grandfather.

Thurman had taken the egg with him and cared for it best he could, but kept it a sworn secret, only letting his wife know about it. They'd hatched the small creature, naming it Doris after Thurman's mother and tried to raise it. Several times after the drought, Thurman returned to the spot in the prairie where he'd first received the egg, with the hopes of returning Doris to the wild. He'd never found another sign of the creatures anywhere and even in talking to the local indians, they believed the 'prairie fire' was merely a legend. So Doris became the family secret. The family's secret pet.

Charlie had known Doris for as long as he'd been alive. They'd become inseparable as soon as Charlie could walk. They had a bond that transcended other human animal bonds. Almost as if they could communicate without a word.

As Charlie and Grisom continued into the night, Charlie tilted his head to the side, bumping into Doris' who chirped softly and pressed her head back against his.

Grisom and Charlie had followed the trail through the early morning hours. The lantern gave out about an half hour before the sun began to rise, but the trail had been easy to follow as the bandits had followed a river for several miles.

Not too long after, the river flowed into a deep valley. Grisom stopped near the

entrance and waited for Charlie and Doris to ride up.

“My guess is they are holed up in there.” Grisom said, indicating the valley. Charlie looked ahead, but couldn’t see anything except lush green trees on either side of the river. Grisom continued, “Perfect place to hide out, they can watch either end of the valley and see anyone entering it from either side.”

Charlie nodded. “What do we do?”

Grisom looked around. “Let’s leave the horses tied up here and climb up the side there to see if we can look down into the valley and spot them. Plan out a way to get down. Seems the safest way.”

Charlie nodded again. He clicked his tongue three times and looked at Doris. Doris gave Charlie a sad look and let out a whine. Charlie clicked his tongue again three times, but this time a little more forcefully. Doris sighed and slipped across Charlie’s shoulders and slide down his arm and, reluctantly, crawled into the saddle bag.

Grisom watched her slide into the bag and then looked up at Charlie. “Keep her under control this time. We don’t need any outbursts like before.”

Charlie nodded.

“Though.” Grisom said, scratching his chin. “It’s possible that we may need her services if things get hairy. Let’s get a move on before those bandits get too curious about that trunk.”