

The prisoner melted against the oak wall of the tumbleweed wagon. His shoulders bounced and heaved with the trot of the wheels against the uneven dried earth but his eyes remained lazily locked to the dust-frosted toes of his boot. Atop his beaten horse Charles' would glance through the steel bars to the man laid chained to the floor of his darkened tomb. The prisoner struck him with an unease he could not shake. And across the miles and miles of Texas dirt, his eyes were enchanted back to the wagon time and again despite this nausea.

The convoy moved towards Fort Worth in a professional silence. There the prisoner was to be hung for the rape of a 14-year-old girl and the murder of her father. He had made it as far south as San Antonio before a peddler, having also arrived recently from Fort Worth, recognized the wanted man in a saloon. By the time the peddler returned with Charles' father and two other local deputies, the fugitive could hardly peel himself off the bar to face them in his drunken stupor.

In the excitement of catching such an infamous man, Charles' father vowed to hand deliver the guilty to the good people of Fort Worth. "You'll be coming too, son," He'd said, fitting his saddle to his horse. He'd turned to look his son up and down. "We'll make a man out of you yet."

Two deputies and four local volunteers with an itch for an adventure joined them. The men knew little else of the prisoner besides his supposed crime. As the days faded to midnights, Charles just watched him sit quietly. Even patiently. He struggled over this distinction often through their journey.

Now the sun hung west. The shadows of the men began to stretch further, dancing over the withered shrubs and golden grasses. Their horses bore ribs powdered with dust, marked for the closing days of a long journey. The men slouched atop their saddles, faces burned crimson by the days and lips whipped dry by the wind. Charles' father, the lieutenant, truted proudly in the lead of the group, studying the plains ahead. He whistled and raised the heads of his companions. "See that rock?" His finger aimed towards an escarpment, likely an hour's ride away. "I think I spot a lake at the base of it. We'll stop there for the night." Murmurs of affirmation rolled through the group.

Charles saw the shimmering sliver in the distance and breathed a sigh of relief. His gaze fell back to the wagon. The prisoner remained despondent. He wondered what this ride must feel to him. A slow march to death at the noose. He couldn't help but feel pity for the prisoner. Even in these modern times people still served an eye for an eye. Was true justice only called upon the taking of another life? He'd made the mistake of questioning his father about the practice once before. A torrential berating shut the matter for good. He looked to the west as he considered the question once more, just in time to see a jouncing silhouette crest the hill.

He cupped his hand to shield the sun and peered closer. Two more silhouettes crested the hill to the right. Then another. Then six more. His hand fell in horror. A murderous chorus of whoops and hollers echoed through the desolate plains. "Dear god," a man behind Charles gasped. "Indians! Rifles ready!" His father shouted, already taking aim at the horde. Charles' heartbeat pulsed in his ears as he fumbled to pull his rifle from the horn loop in front of him. With a furious tug, the rifle came free and Charles lost balance, dropping the weapon to the dirt. Panicked, he looked up. The prisoner sat intently, staring at the boy with steely blue eyes. He glanced at the approaching horde, then turned back to the boy.

Gunfire rang out amidst the devilish whoops and Charles cowered with his hands thrown haphazardly over his head. A volley of arrows shortly followed. Some stuck to the wagon. One sailed through the neck of a deputy, who grasped at it desperately with a gloved hand as his hat kicked back into the dirt. The deputy shortly followed. The warriors bounded towards them with unadulterated vengeance, faces stained with the blood of those slain before them and eyes striped with the mark of the reaper. Death followed their horde in a violent wave that accelerated across the plain bearing no remorse and needing no

reason. The return volley dropped one, maybe two, but the ghastly surf merely closed its ranks. Riders slung themselves to the sides of their horses to dodge the fire, breaking no stride, and fired back with a jumble of gunshots and arrows. A round caught Charles' horse. It jerked upwards with a guttural neigh before collapsing to the right, hurling him into the dirt. Cheek pressed to the cold ground, Charles grasped his ears to cut out the agonizing cries and the whistling of arrows and the trampling of panicked hooves and the calls for order and all the whoops and shrieks and gnashing of war. He snapped his eyes closed and gritted his teeth and prayed to god for silence.

“Hey! Kid.”

Charles glanced up. A shadow cast down the prisoner's face. “You'd be best to let me out of here.” He nodded towards the now-still deputy. A large ring was attached to his belt, bolstering a pair of keys that laid limply on the ground. Another cascade of shots strafed through the dust that churned over the halted convoy, sending Charles scrambling to curl against his fallen horse. “Otherwise we're all about to be dead or captured. And trust me son, if you'd seen those Cherokee camps you'd take the scalping in a heartbeat.”

“I- I-” Charles stuttered. The raiders had closed to within 50 yards. One of the warriors led aggressively at the front, striding ahead of his war party. A large onyx-black feather galloped atop his head as he tilted forward with brutal determination, tomahawk brandished in his right hand. Four of the convoy still held to their saddles, hurling rifle fire down range as quickly as their shaky hands could shovel rounds back into their chambers.

“Dammit boy! Free me or put that rifle to use, I won't die like a dog!”

There was no time to protest. As he leapt for the keys, the whoops cut into his brain. His fingers moved mindlessly, unfastening the ring before he could realize he was holding his breath. He jammed the key in the lock of the wagon door and twisted so violently he was surprised the key didn't snap. The door swung open and Charles heaved the ring to the prisoner. The shackles shortly clanged to the oak, and the prisoner jumped out, throwing the boy back to the dirt. As Charles collected himself, the prisoner already had the rifle in hand, moving with a precision the boy had never witnessed before. In nearly a single motion, he would squeeze the trigger and rock the lever forward, firing another shot the moment the lever returned. The barrel locked towards one rider then immediately found another at the strike of the hammer. Every motion was clean, scrupulous. Still the wave crashed down upon them. The warriors each shot at point-blank range before swiftly cutting to the flanks of their prey, encircling the men. Blood sprayed, riders fell, whoops turned to squeals, clouds of dust thickened to a darkened brown wall.

The Indians galloped around like ravenous wolves, biting at the weak spots in the formation. A man tore one off his horse and began wrestling on the ground, fighting for the upper hand. The remaining men whirled around firing in every direction. Charles stayed low with his back supported by the wagon, left with nothing to defend himself. The prisoner's shots never ceased, broken only by the occasional rushed reload. Charles watched as a shot maimed the horse of the warrior with the feather. As the horse thrashed to the ground, the Indian leader vaulted towards the prisoner, rolling forward and bounding into a full charge. The prisoner was undeterred. He thrust the rifle upwards to catch the tomahawk and charged his boot into the warrior's shin, jabbing the hard butt into the side of his skull with a sickening thud. As the Indian reeled, he wrestled the tomahawk away from his hand. The leader barely knew what had happened before the prisoner had rested the man's own tomahawk neatly between surprised eyes. As he slumped to the ground, the feather finally rested.

Suddenly the whoops changed tune. As swiftly as the storm had overtaken them, the native riders dropped away one by one, tearing back to the lands of the West from which they had come. They galloped

through the wake of bodies of their companions without looking back, dropping out of sight past the fiery horizon. Bewildered, Charles looked around at what was left of the convoy. Nearly every man had been killed or left mortally wounded, rolling in the dirt cursing and pleading to god. The dust began to settle, and Charles spotted his father out past the wagon. Somehow he still sat atop his horse, but an arrow protruded from his thigh. His tired eyes found Charles. "Son.. Thank God. Were you hit? Are you okay?"

Charles opened his mouth to speak but stopped as he watched the lieutenant's eyes drown. A single gunshot broke the feeble silence, and the lieutenant's hands flew to the air as his horse crumbled from underneath him. The prisoner threw down the rifle and started towards the downed man. He grabbed at the legs of one of the expired volunteers and withdrew a Bowie knife, continuing with savage murmurs and curses. His father struggled to free himself but his leg was caught underneath the fallen animal.

Realizing what was happening, Charles yelled helplessly in terror. "Wait! Stop! We still need each other!"

The prisoner stood over his powerless father, studying him for a moment. "Some hero, huh?" He whispered through clenched teeth as he slowly knelt. "Capture a man when he's too drunk to stand." As he got to work with the knife, Charles continued to plead through the screams of his father. He suddenly eyed the rifle that had been dropped by the prisoner, picking it up with trembling hands. He shakily pointed the barrel towards the prisoner's back. "St-Stop!"

The prisoner's hands worked for a few seconds more and the screams fell flat. Slowly he rose back to his feet, turning to face the boy. Splatters of crimson painted his tattered shirt and pants. "It's okay. I'm done anyhow." He took a step towards the boy, prompting him to raise the rifle firmer to his cheek. Another step. "You know, boy, no man has ever aimed a gun at me and lived. You'd better not miss this." Another step. Charles' heart raced and he thought the rifle would slip in the sweat on his palms. He shut his eyes for a moment and willed himself to pull the trigger. He opened, half ready for the shot, but it was too late. The prisoner jerked the barrel forward with both hands and slammed the stock back into his nose. Charles landed back on his rear, nose bloodied. The prisoner took aim at the boy's head. "Oh god no please!"

In that fleeting moment, Charles was taken back to his home at a different time. Back to the gentle burbling of the creek shaded by the elms and the billowing emerald black willows. Rays of golden sunlight pierced into the woods. Charles and his friend hopped merrily across to each exposed root, wobbling and fighting to not be the first to fall. They moved with such intent and joy that, even in San Antonio's July heat, they forgot the beads of sweat rolling down their foreheads and the taste of warm salt on their lips. Soon they would gather their crude bamboo poles and fish along the banks of the pool, catching nothing, not minding.

Charles opened his eyes to see the rifle lowered. Something hid in the prisoner's eyes, but he could not recognize it. He opened his mouth as if to say something, but stopped. He looked to the ground, spit, and began walking back towards the wagon. Still panting, Charles eyed him as he unfastened the last standing horse from the wagon and hopped on. He reared the animal back towards Charles and his heart dropped. But the prisoner never looked back at the boy. With the kick of his heel, the stallion clomped his hooves to the ground and set off back to the south, shooting dust onto Charles as he rode away. For the longest time, the boy could do nothing but blink. Time moved on as the last light faded around him and the departed.