

It was pitch black when the train came to a sudden, lurching stop, sending the occupants of the passenger cars tumbling forward. Charlie instinctively grabbed the saddle bag as he woke, making sure it was secure. He stood and looked at Grison who was picking himself up off the ground. "What's going on?"

"I don't know," replied Grison. "Something's wrong. Train's don't make unscheduled stops in the middle of the night. But get your gun ready."

Charlie's saddle bag shifted. A whistle fluttered out. Charlie's hand quickly grabbed the side of the bag. "Easy Doris. Easy."

Grisom looked towards the back of the car, "Let's step outside and see what we can see." He then nodded towards the bag, "Keep her quiet."

Charlie reached into the bag and stroked the soft fur of the creature that huddled inside of it as he followed Grison down the train's aisle towards the back of the car. Passengers were busy standing, readjusting luggage and wondering what had happened. They peered out of the windows and into the darkness as Grison and Charlie passed them and chattered amongst themselves, throwing out possible theories for the train's sudden stop.

Charlie and Grison went out the door at the back of the car and Grison motioned towards the ladder leading to the roof of the freight car behind the car they'd come out of. They ascended and once on the roof, they crept along the top, keeping low so they couldn't be seen by anyone of the ground. They could see torches lighting the area around the door of the freight car on the left side of the train. On their bellies now, they slid forward just enough to see over the edge of the roof.

Three men on horses with torches and bandanas around their faces waited near the freight car door.

Charlie whispered, "Are those Jane's men?"

Grisom shrugged, indicating he didn't know. Just then, from one of the passenger cars further up the train, came some shouting. Grison and Charlie looked to their right and saw a fourth bandit on horseback forcing another man to walk towards the freight car. As the two figures came closer, Charlie and Grison could see it was Mr. Brandle. His mouth was running non stop.

"—The truth! There's no gold on this train." Brandle pleaded.

The man on horseback kicked him further along the side of the train. "Be quiet and keep walking. We know there is gold on this here train. Our man in Yankton says so. Also says that you, Mr. Brandle, have the only key that can release the trunk with the gold from the special slot on the train floor."

Brandle was a bundle of stuttering now. "Ab-ab-ab-surd! Why the thought of it is outrageous. I have told you that there is no gold, why are you so reluctant to not believe me." They were now standing at the door of the freight car.

In one quick motion, the man on the horse leaned down and knocked Brandle out cold with the butt of his revolver. Brandle fell with a splat in the dirt next to the train. "Jimmy, search this fat jasper for any keys he's got on him." The man on horseback barked.

Jimmy hopped down of his horse and turned Brandle over. His pockets were rifled through and the bandit came out with a set of keys on a ring. He held them up for the leader to see.

"Buck, help Jimmy get that door open and get in there. It ain't gonna be long before one of the passengers gets the fool notion to try and take us on. We don't need blood spilled tonight. Let's just get the gold and git."

"Right Leland," one of the other men said as he hopped down from his horse to help Jimmy open the freight car doors. The leader slipped his hand under his bandana and gave two short, sharp whistles. As the whistles echoed in the darkness, Doris began shifting uneasily in the saddle bag to Charlie's left.

Charlie reached a hand down into the bag and whispered, "Shhhhh. Easy girl."

Suddenly a creaking could be heard approaching the train in the darkness. Charlie and Grison strained to see just what was going on. Below them they felt the door of the freight car rumble open and heard Jimmy and Buck clanking about inside. After a minute, a horse drawn cart entered the flickering ring of light the torches were casting on the prairie floor.

The man driving brought the cart around in a wide circle so that the bed of the cart was even with the floor of the freight cart. As he did, Grison and Charlie heard Buck and Jimmy straining as they lifted the gold chest across the freight car floor and into the back of the wagon.

Leland looked around. "Okay, now let's get to riding. This has taken way too

long.”

“Leland?” came Jimmy’s voice from inside the freight car.

“What is it Jimmy? I said let’s get moving.”

“You gotta see this.”

Grisom shifted uneasily next to Charlie. “The trunk.” He whispered softly.

“What the hell are you flapping on about?” said Leland as he brought his horse closer to the door of the freight car.

“This trunk. Look at all the fancy markings on it. Looks expensive. Old, but expensive.”

Leland held his torch in through the door of the freight car and peered inside. After regarding the trunk for a moment, he pulled his horse back. “Bring it. We’ll open it later.”

Charlie turned towards Grisom, “What do we do?”

“What can we do? We can’t let them take the trunk.” Grisom slid back from the edge of the car quietly, Charlie followed his lead. Grisom had his guns out checking to see that they were loaded. “Charlie, you slide off the other side of the car here and go at them from underneath. I’ll distract them until you get down there. We gotta be fast, if they take off we’ll lose them in the dark.”

“But, what should we—”

Grisom cut him off. “No time. Go!” Then Grisom stood up on top of the car and walked to the edge with his guns drawn. “All right, hold it!”

Charlie scrambled off the far side of the car as he heard the men shout in confusion at Grisom’s words.

Leland looked up at Grisom, “Listen old man, we don’t want any trouble. We’re just going to take these things and be on our way.”

“You can take the gold. Leave that other trunk.”

There was a moment of silence.

Leland looked at the trunk then back up at Grisom, “Well now, old timer, your

protectiveness of the trunk makes me very curious as to what could be inside.”

“A writing desk. Some papers. I’ll open it and show it to you if you’d like.”
Came Grison’s reply. Charlie was now under the train by one of the sets of wheels. He was near Leland, but realized he didn’t have a clear shot unless he broke cover. In the saddle bag, Doris was shifting nervously with the tension she felt in the air.

“Something tells me there’s more to what’s inside that trunk than just a writing desk and some papers. So I think we’ll take it along with us.”

“I’d hate to see you do that, because then I’d have to kill you.”

Another moment of silence and then Leland and his men busted out laughing.

“Kill me? You do realize you are seriously outgunned at the moment?”

“I may be. Or I may not be. I may have you surrounded. You can’t be sure.”

Leland pulled the reigns of his horse back, starting the animal in walking backwards, while keeping a gun on Grison.

“You can’t be sure that we don’t have this entire train surrounded.” Leland said, still slowly backing up. He reached a hand under his bandana again and gave a long sharp whistle.

Suddenly from out in the darkness came the sound of a shotgun firing. Grison heard pellets hit the back of the train car behind him. He fell flat to the floor. Under the car, Charlie spun around to try to see where in the darkness the shot had come from. As he did, his saddle bag shifted and Doris came tumbling out.

Doris was a small creature similar to a koala bear. Gray, fuzzy, but with huge black eyes taking up the sides of her head. She had a long prehensile tail that she curled around her like a ball as she tumbled from the bag. She landed on all fours with her back arched like a cat, ready to attack. Her long incisors glistening in the torch light. Her long claws digging into the wooden railroad tie she landed near. A low whistle coming from her mouth. Being so small none of the men noticed her. Charlie realized she was out and was just about to whisper for her to return to the bag when the horse that was pulling the cart caught wind of her and reared back with a loud whinny. Doris replied with a small puff of fire from her mouth that frightened the horse even more and made it bolt. The man at the reigns of the cart, completely unawares of what had happened, held on for dear life as the cart sped

off, full tilt, into the darkness.

Buck, who had been standing on the back of the cart when it began moving tumbled to the ground and landed next to Brandle's, still unmoving, body. The other bandits panicked in the commotion, and began to take off, firing wildly in the direction of Grisom and the train.

"Let's go! Follow the cart!" Leland barked as he turned his horse. Buck had scrambled to get up and chased after the cart as it rumbled away. He reached it just as it disappeared into the darkness and hauled himself up onto the flatbed back.

Jimmy, seeing his partner's flight, scrambled out of the freight car and dashed for his horse. Doris saw this and leapt forward, sinking her teeth into Jimmy's calf. Jimmy tumbled to the ground instantly paralyzed.

Charlie, scrambled out from under the train car, "Doris! Bag!"

Doris looked towards Charlie, her teeth still firmly in Jimmy's leg.

"Doris, bag NOW!" said Charlie sharply.

With a sad chirp, Doris released her bite hold Jimmy's leg and scrambled off, across the dusty prairie floor, towards Charlie. She gracefully climbed up Charlie's leg and scurried into the saddlebag. Charlie walked towards where Jimmy was lying down on the ground, still breathing. His eyes were still able to move and he was awake, but he was completely paralyzed. Charlie knelt next to him.

"Don't worry, you'll be fine in about an hour's time." Said Charlie to the, obviously, panicked Jimmy. Charlie looked back toward the car and saw Grisom climbing down off of it and walking his way. He also saw the conductor and others were now making their way to the scene of the action. One person was helping Brandle up off the ground.

"She got out when the shots fired from behind us," said Charlie, indicating the bag. "Spooked their horse."

"We're going to have to go after them. They have the trunk." Grisom replied, shaking his head, clearly frustrated.

The Conductor made his way up to them. His lantern spilling light every which way. "Is that one of them?" he asked.

Grisom nodded as he stood.

"He dead?" the conductor queried.

"No." Grisom replied. "Bit in the leg by a rattler."

The conductor peered down at the fallen bandit. He saw the puncture wounds in the leg. "Looks too wide to be a rattler."

"Well it was," Grisom replied. "I saw it slither off."

"Hmmm. Well you two best get back on the train. Engineer wants to move out as soon as possible."

"We aren't going back. Those men made off with our trunk and we aim to get it back." Grisom looked back at the train and the folks gathered around the freight car. "We'll take their horses." Grisom said, indicating Buck and Jimmy's steeds that were left behind after the skirmish. He looked down at Jimmy, "Can you hold him on the train and turn him in at Yankton?"

The Conductor nodded. "Not sure there's a doctor on the train for his bite though."

Grisom looked down and locked eyes with Jimmy. "He'll be fine. I was able to get most of the poison out. He'll be right as rain in about an hour I imagine."

The Conductor nodded again and whistled for two other train employees to come help him get Jimmy back to the train. Grisom and Charlie walked to gather the horses.

"How we gonna know which way to go? It's pretty dark." Charlie said.

"The wagon tracks should be pretty easy to follow." Grisom replied. "Hoping we can borrow a lantern from the train staff to light our way." Grisom stopped and turned to Charlie. "We gotta get to them and get that trunk before they try to open it."

Charlie nodded, "Or before they run into Jane."