

The rattlesnake had slithered up next to the still glowing embers of the fire for warmth a few minutes ago. It was just about lulled to sleep by the warmth when it was startled awake by the approach of horses. The snake began shaking its rattle of a tail as the lead rider dismounted and crossed to the fire. It rattled louder now as the wiry woman crouched down by the still crackling remnants of the fire. Her long brown leather coat pooled around her on the ground. She tipped back the hat she wore as the heat from the fire reached her face. Her eyes squinted as she looked over the coals. Behind her, the three men on horseback looked on anxiously.

“This fire is only about an hour old. They can’t have gone too far ahead of us.” She said just loud enough for the men to hear her over the continued rattling of the snake.

“You think they rode north to Yankton?” Agent Brenner asked.

“Either that or south towards Tombstone. Both have a Vault.” Came her sharp reply. She stood suddenly from her crouched position and turned to her men. The snake, taking this as aggression, lunged at her boot. The rattler bit the side of her boot hard, driving its teeth into the leather. She didn’t look down as she continued barking order to her agents. “Spread out on foot, carefully. Follow any tracks moving away from the fire. Use torches. I want to know which direction they headed off in, in less than five minutes.”

The men were off their horses before she’d finished her sentence. The snake struggled to remove it’s fangs from the leather of her boot. She ignored it and looked out as far as she could in the darkness. Prairie as far as the eyes could see in the moonlight. “Which way did you go old man?” she whispered to herself. She thought of how long she had tracked him and his kind, but Grisom had always escaped her. The noose was tightening this time.

The tugging at her boot shook her from her thoughts. She looked down at the rattler, writhing to free itself. In a flash, her six shooter was out of it’s holster and she fired a single, unaimed, shot that severed the snake’s head cleanly from its body at the neck. The report echoed loudly across the open land.

The four horses whinnied nervously. The three agents froze and turned to her as the prairie was engulfed in silence once more. She holstered her weapon and turned fiercely toward the agents staring, gape mouthed at her. “You are standing

around, which means you are not looking.”

The three men resumed their search without a word.

They two men had hopped the train at the station in Kingsley. It had been a struggle getting the large trunk aboard the freight car and making sure it was handled carefully by the porters. The two men were now safely seated as the train lurched forward beginning their journey.

The older man sighed. He was gray haired and scraggly but his appearance gave onlookers the distinct impression that he should not be messed with. His clothes were not new and well worn, probably months, perhaps years since their last washing. He had a gun on either hip and both looked, much like his clothes, as if they were well worn as well. He took a few deep breaths and scanned the faces of the people on the platform outside the window as the train slowly started rumbling forward. Confident that they hadn't been followed, he finally relaxed back in his seat when the train had cleared the station. The younger man sitting next to him looked over at him nervously. "You okay Grisom?"

"Yes, Charlie, I'm fine. I'm just getting less and less comfortable running so much for so long." Grisom replied with a small chuckle.

"We gonna be safe in Yankton?" Charlie asked unfolding a pocket knife to cut the apple sitting in his lap.

"I reckon so." Grisom drawled. "I sent word up on ahead to Doc so he could prepare for our arrival, but we can only hope the message arrived." Grisom paused and coughed. "That trunk needs to get into Yankton and get into the Vault. It is of historical importance." He looked at the young man riding beside him. "It was good of you to agree to come Charlie. I'm mighty grateful for your company and glad to have your gun along."

Charlie smiled nervously. Grisom settled back in the seat and tipped his hat down over his eyes. Charlie looked out the window as the buildings of Kingsley thinned out and the train found its speed. Charlie was twenty two and what some would call 'fresh faced.' He cut an appearance slightly less ragged than his traveling companion but there were some signs of wear here and there. He was also armed, two pistols on either side and carried a large saddle bag had been attached a large strap to so it could be worn over his shoulder. His longer brown hair was blown around in the wind entering the car from the window they had taken a seat by.

Charlie's eyes drifted from the passing landscape to the apple in his lap. Picking

up the apple, he cut off a slice. He slid the piece into his mouth and chewed for a minute. After swallowing he looked back down at the apple and cut another slice, this one a little smaller than the first. He slowly lowered the hand with the apple slice towards the saddle bag at his side. When the apple was about three inches from the side of the pouch, the bagged shifted a little and a small, grey, furry arm with claws at the tips of the fingers, slipped out and grabbed the slice from him. The hand withdrew into the pouch quicker than it had appeared. A low whistle emanated from the bag.

Charlie patted the side of the bag, looking around to see if anyone had heard. "Shhh, girl." The bag shifted slightly again and it seemed to settle down with the rocking of the train. The adrenaline of trying to make the train was finally ebbing as the plains opened up around the train car. Charlie felt his eyes begin to droop. He forced himself to keep them open just long enough to hand their tickets to the conductor. As the conductor passed, Charlie leaned back against the hard wooden seat. He made a quick glance over at Grisom who was deep in slumber. Charlie turned back to look out the window and the clear blue sky above the Kansas plain was the last thing he remembered seeing before drifting off to sleep.