

The sun began setting behind them as the day wore on. Charlie had woken and had been steering the cart for awhile, giving Grisom time to rest. Most of the afternoon had been spent listening to Leland try to get Grisom and Charlie to let him go by offering them the entire haul of gold.

“You can get away clean. They’ll think I have it all. Think of what you could do with all that gold.” He’d coaxed, unsuccessfully. After about an hour of this constant pleading, Charlie had Doris shut him up with a fireball that dissipated inches from his face. Leland had been close to silent since, muttering quietly now and then, but for the most part, silent. Doris was now curled up between Grisom and Charlie, fast asleep.

Grisom roused when it began to get cold. He scanned the horizon then took a deep breath. “We’d better start to thinking where we’ll bed down for the night. Better to sleep now and get an early start before dawn.”

Charlie nodded. “There’s a flat spot up ahead near that bluff.” Charlie pointed out.

“Head for it.” Grisom replied. “I think we’re going to have to keep a watch out tonight.” Grisom said, looking behind them.

“You think she’s behind us?”

“I know she’s behind us.” Grisom answered. “Just a matter of how far behind. And she doesn’t have a cart loaded down with gold slowing her any. We just can’t risk pressing on thorough the night and driving the cart into ditch that could put a wheel out. No, we’ll take turns watching. I’ll take the first shift since I’m fresh.”

“I’ll make us some supper with what we took from the cabin.”

Grisom nodded. “Good, but it’s gonna get cold. We can’t build a fire. We can’t tip our hand to where we are and have her ride up on us.”

Charlie nodded again and pulled back on the reigns, bringing the cart to a slow halt near the flat spot he’d seen. The horses, glad to stop, whinnied. This woke Leland up.

“You guys gotta let me take a leak!” Leland whined, twisting his prone body around so he could look up at Grisom and Charlie.

Grisom looked over at Charlie. “You wanna chaperone or me?”

Charlie took off his hat and wiped his brow with his sleeve. "I got an idea. Why don't we let Doris chaperone him?"

At the sound of her name, Doris raised her head groggily and gave Charlie a quizzical look. Charlie looked down at her, "What do you say girl? Can you chaperone Leland here to heed nature's call?"

Doris, understanding completely, made a dour face, her long tongue sticking out in disgust.

Charlie chuckled. "I'll make you a deal, if Leland here tries to run off, fashion himself a weapon out of a stick or something or even just looks at you funny, you have our permission to burn him to a crisp."

This perked Doris right up. She loved using the full extent of her fire powers at any chance she could, so though the thought of accompanying Leland disgusted her, the possibility of being able to use her full fire ball was too good to pass up. She agreed and Charlie and Grisom, who'd slid off the cart, dragged Leland down from the bed of the cart to the ground and undid his hands.

Charlie looked Leland in the eye, "She'll do it to. Go and come right back. One whistle from me and you'll be burning up."

Leland nodded and then looked down at Doris with a twinge of fear. Doris stared back up at him and motioned with her tail that he should get going. Leland sighed and trudged off away from where they'd stopped. Doris trotted behind him, almost like a guard escorting a prisoner to the gallows.

Charlie kept an eye on Leland and Doris as they walked away from the cart so Leland could do his business. Grisom began taking down three bedrolls he'd taken from the cabin and began lying them out.

"What are we going to do with him?" Charlie asked.

"Leland?" Grisom replied.

"Yeah."

"We're going to take him to the authorities in Yankton along with the gold."

"No, I mean what are we going to do with him on the way there. I can tell Doris has had her fill of him and it would seem that you are on the short end of

your tether with his gum flapping as well.”

Grisom stopped spreading out a bedroll and looked after them. “Well,” he said, “He continues his whining, I’ll just knock him out again. I have no qualms with him being comatose the rest of the way.”

Charlie nodded, then turned to get the food they’d taken from the cabin down out of the cart.

“That protection on the trunk was something else.” Charlie said.

“Mmmmm hmmm.” Grisom replied. “It’s a Keep Out. An ancient protection that prevents people from getting into what the person who casted it don’t want them to get into. They put it on it in New York.”

“Sure sent Leland flying across the ground.”

“Mmmmm hmmm. That Keep Out should hold us until Yankton and the Vault.”

“Is it going to prevent her from getting inside of it?”

“Possibly. Unless she has a breaker with her.”

Charlie looked over at Grisom. “A breaker?”

Grisom nodded. “Yeah. Those who can break witchery cast on an object.”

Charlie was silent for a second, taking this in. “Think she’s has one?”

“She might.” Grisom replied. “But that’s why I brought you along.”

“Me? I don’t know anything about breakers or witchery.”

“No but your a good shot. Breakers are just like the rest of us, bullets are their weakness.”

Just then they heard a low whistle and they both turned to see Doris leading Leland back towards camp. Doris shepherded him over towards Charlie who picked up the leather strap they’d used to bind his hands and made to rebind them.

“Is that really necessary?” Leland asked. “I mean, we’re in the middle of nowhere and you have this..” Leland stopped himself before insulting Doris again. He cleared his throat and smiled a smile that was far from genuine “You have

Doris watching over me. Where am I going to go?"

"Nowhere." Grisom answered. "And the reason you are going to go nowhere, is because you're going to have your feet and hands bound. Can't risk you slipping off on one of the horses in the night. And if you feel like complaining about it, we'll gladly gag you as well."

Leland didn't retort. He just sighed heavily and allowed his hands to be tied, looser than they were when he'd been in the back of the cart, but still tight enough to prevent escape. After he was bound, Charlie led him over to his bedroll and sat him down on it. He then returned to the food.

"We've got us three cans of beans here. But with no fire to warm them up, I guess it's just these biscuits." Charlie said.

"Well, maybe Doris could warm them up for us." Grisom replied. "It's not totally dark yet and a few blasts from her and those cans will be nice and warm."

Charlie looked at Doris who was sitting at full attention. "Whattya say girl? You in for helping us cook dinner?"

Doris nodded excitedly and turned a small circle.

Charlie found a flat rock and brought it over near the bed rolls. He opened each of the cans with his pocket knife and set them on the rock and took a step back. Doris was standing nearby eagerly panting, excited to use her fire breath.

Charlie looked down at her, "Okay, listen, you have to take it easy. Not too much fire or you'll burn them okay?"

Doris nodded, somewhat frustrated and stared transfixed at the cans. The hair along her spine stood stiff and her ears were twitching.

Charlie smiled then said, "Okay, go for it."

A low whistle escaped from Doris' mouth as she opened it. A small ball of blue flame appeared between her long incisors and quickly grew in size.

"Easy." Charlie coached. "Easy. We want to be able to eat this stuff."

Doris' eyes began glowing red and she made a sound much like a cough. In that moment, the blue ball of fire expanded to twice its size and hit the three cans of beans squarely and then dissipated.

From his bedroll, Leland laughed. "That's it? All that for...that tiny blue ball of flame? What in tarnation have I been worried about? The worst she could do is give me a mild burn. Lukewarm beans for dinner. It'll be just like being on a cattle drive." He cackled again. Doris spun and growled loudly at him.

"Doris." Charlie barked. "No. Down." Doris settled uneasily on her haunches. Charlie put on a riding glove and reached down and picked up one can. He brought it over to Leland. "Here's your beans."

Leland smirked and took the can from Charlie. Instantly he knew he'd made a mistake. The can immediately blistered both his hands. Screaming, he threw the can forward and the beans inside spilled out onto the prairie floor, bubbling and steaming as they hit the cold night air. "What the hell you trying to do to me?"

Charlie laughed, "Oh, I'm sorry, I thought they were lukewarm. My mistake. That's all you get tonight though, Leland. Better eat them before the prairie critters do."

Doris whistled in merriment at Leland's discomfort. He had sore hands and the realization that his dinner was now cooling on the dirt floor of the prairie.

Grisom and Charlie tucked into their respective cans while Doris was allowed time to go hunting for her food, coming back with two prairie dogs she sloppily ate near Leland, just because she knew it would thoroughly disgust him and it did. Between not eating much, the blisters throbbing on his hands and the sight of Doris slurping down prairie dog intestines, Leland was feeling uneasy and lied down to try and sleep.

Grisom took the first watch while Charlie laid back on his bedroll with Doris curled up next to his left hip. She snored peacefully next to him as he gazed up at the stars and smiled.