

By the time we got back to the bastion, it was too late to head out to look for Crazy Abe's house. With the bikes, we would have definitely made it there and back before dark, but there was no way in hell I was going to rush a trip like that. This would be the furthest any of us had gone outside the town center since the apocalypse started. I wasn't about to rush us into danger. We would leave the following morning when we had plenty of time to skirt around anything dangerous and take our time.

We spent a few hours organizing everything we brought home. We debated for a minute or two before moving the bikes and carts to the storage room, including the one that Molly and Roger had finished putting together. We now had two carts and one kid carrier, which represented a sizable amount of loot-gathering ability.

Once our new rides were brought up into the storage room, Barry and I made a quick trip back out of the bastion. We had the time, so we decided to grab a few shelves from one of the buildings just outside of the domain. Using the same larger trailer we used to transport Roger and Amelia, we salvaged a few metal shelves, dragging them back to the bastion. With Jessica's help, we carried them up the first flight of stairs and into the storage room, quickly filling one of four metal shelves with all the bike parts and tools we had claimed.

By then, it was getting dark, so we retired to the living area. Barry whipped together a quick dinner for everyone while Jessica and I disassembled and cleaned all of our guns, including Alissa's revolver. As I finished cleaning out the cylinder, I looked up at Alissa.

"Do you mind lending it to Barry?" I asked after double-checking that the revolver was empty before checking its trigger pull. "You can keep the Glock since you're by yourself, but it would be nice if everyone leaving tomorrow had some sort of ranged weapon."

"Yeah, of course," Allissa said with a shrug. "They gave it to me when they left me behind at the station, so it's not like it's really mine. I'm more familiar with the Glock anyway."

"Uh... I've never shot a gun before," Barry admitted sheepishly. "My family was against that kind of stuff..."

"Damn it. Alright, I'll teach you the basics," I volunteered, passing him the empty revolver. "First rule: a weapon you haven't cleared yourself is always loaded. The second you break line of sight with that weapon, it's loaded again."

I spent the rest of the night teaching Barry the ins and outs of shooting, focusing mostly on pistols but lightly touching on rifles and shotguns, using Jessica's for the latter. It was interesting passing on what my grandfather had taught me many years ago, and Barry was a good student. Like most people his age, he played lots of video games and watched plenty of TV, and while plenty of those gave terrible examples of gun safety and shooting, it was a surprisingly decent primer. By the end of it, I trusted him not to accidentally shoot himself or

someone else in the foot. Actually, hitting what he was aiming at was a different matter entirely that would only come with practice.

The next morning, early enough that the sky was still on the darker side, Jessica, Barry, and I prepared for our trip out of the town center. We were relying on Barry to navigate us to our destination, since he was the only one who had actually seen the doomsday preppers house. My backpack, which was currently sitting in the bike cart, was half filled with parts and tools to fix our bikes should they break down. Everyone else was traveling light.

“Okay, we have everything,” Jessica confirmed. “It's time to go.”

I nodded and looked up at the bastion, spotting Molly and Alissa, both of them standing at the top of the step. I waved goodbye, and Molly waved back before almost scurrying back inside. Alissa shook her head, watching her daughter run, before looking back down at me and giving me a haphazard salute. Then she started limping up the stairs, leaning heavily on the stone railing. When the doors shut behind her, I turned back to my bike, kicking my stand up.

“Alright, I'll take the lead at first, then you're up, Barry,” I said, getting nods from the two younger survivors. “I know it's tempting to push and get there quickly, but tiring ourselves out completely is a death sentence if we get caught off guard. You both need to let me know if we need to slow down.”

After making sure they both understood how screwed we would be if we got ambushed while they were exhausted, I hopped onto my bike and pedaled away. I set a leisurely pace that easily trounced any speedy jog we could have done on foot. We made our way through the streets, passing over a few front yards and cutting through an alley before eventually breaking out from the more heavily populated portion of Danten. Slowly, the yards and houses got bigger, with more trees and foliage in and around the residential space.

With every house that passed, the tension within the group ratcheted up another notch. Danten's town center was dangerous; we all knew that, but it was also familiar. Now, we were pushing past that into figurative unknown territory. It was strange knowing exactly where you were, knowing which street led where, but *still* being nervous about just what the next turn would bring, what threat we might face if we took a left or right turn.

Eventually, Barry took over and guided us through the backroads of Danten. Most of this area was familiar to me, but it had been a while since I had been anywhere other than my house, work, and a few friends' houses. Between COVID and general antisocial tendencies, the last four or five years had been pretty solitary. I was honestly surprised that being around people wasn't freaking me out.

I shook my head for a moment, shaking out the complicated and heavy thoughts, focusing on the road and keeping watch for anything dangerous. Several times we had to stop because of car accidents, fallen trees, or telephone poles. Thankfully, even the worst of all those

were easily navigated past with just a short trip through the woods or around a house. I did make a mental note of just where the more frustrating ones were since some of them would become a lot more difficult to pass once we were carrying our loot.

Eventually, after a few wrong turns and several minutes of backtracking, we arrived at our destination. Or rather, the street before our destination. Since we had no idea if Abe was still alive or if anyone had moved in if he wasn't, we decided that just rolling up unannounced was a bad idea.

We parked our bikes in the backyard of a random house, staying silent and relying on hand gestures and finger-pointing to direct each other. When our transportation was sufficiently hidden, we slowly made our way down the street, creeping closer to our target. Barry and I had our spears out and at the ready, while Jessica had her shotgun out, though it was aimed at the ground.

When we finally arrived at the right street, it was obvious which house was our target, and not because it was the only one. The house, a two-story brick structure that looked relatively normal, was surrounded by a sturdy metal fence, one clearly designed to keep people out. The whole setup didn't even look that strange. It just looked like someplace where someone who *really* valued their privacy lived.

Of course, my brain barely even registered any of that. What really got everyone's complete attention was the large creature that was sleeping on the crushed and broken remains of the house's garage. It was almost as big as a short bus and easily outsized the large, six-legged canines that we had seen a few times around the town but had yet to actually fight with. It was covered in scales, with spikes running down its back. As if showing off, it slowly shifted in its nest, its long neck and head coiling and lifting, revealing a large wing tucked up along its side.

"It's a dragon," Barry said, nearly silent in his disbelief "It's a *fucking dragon.*"

As if to prove Barry was right, the dragon stood, stretching its long neck into the air. For a tense moment, I thought that maybe it had already heard us, or maybe even smelled us. Then, after a few seconds of looking and walking around inside its nest built from the garage, a nearly flattened truck, and a few trees, it settled back down and resumed its rest.

The second its eyes were closed and its head was tucked back against his wing, I silently grabbed both of the younger survivors. As quickly and quietly as possible, I dragged them back around the house, not stopping or letting go until we were back at the house where we had stashed our bikes.

For a moment, all three of us stood there silently. Jessica was pale, her eyes wide as she opened and clenched her fists. I could only imagine I looked similar. I turned to look at Barry, only to find he had a tight gleam in his eyes.

“So...” he said, sounding *excited*. “What’s the plan?”

“Plan? *Plan?*” I hissed, looking at the younger man in dumbfounded shock. “The plan is to fucking *leave*.”

“What? No! We need to kill that thing!” He countered, shaking his head. “It’s a dragon! It’s practically a walking armory!”

I stopped, my brain completely blank for a moment as I tried to parse out what exactly he had meant. Jessica beat me to it, though, slapping the back of his head.

“What does that mean, Barry? Less nerd, more real stuff.”

“Every part of a dragon is useful! The thick scales make good armor, and the hide makes tough leather. The wings too! The claws, teeth, and spikes will make weapons and knives. The bones are probably stronger than steel,” He explained, rubbing the back of his head. He took a deep breath to continue, but I cut him off this time.

“First, you’re getting all of that from video games. Just cause that’s how Skyrim dragons work does not mean that’s how *these* dragons work,” I pointed out, holding up my hand when he started to respond. “Second, everything you just said are reasons we *shouldn’t* attack it. Its scales are probably bulletproof, its claws are probably like razors, and its jaws could shred us like tissue paper. Oh yeah, and it can *fucking fly!*”

“It won’t fly if we stay on the ground,” He pointed out. “Hard to kill something when you fly away.”

“Not if it can breathe fire!”

I shook my head and turned to my bike, preparing to leave, tossing my pack back into the cart. Before I could climb onto my bike, Barry spoke up again.

“Aiden... you keep saying that the key to us thriving is to keep doing your jumps until we get lucky, and either you or the bastion gets something that lets us compete with the monsters popping up all over the planet. But this... this is another way. Beating monsters like these could be the key to becoming better. Taking what makes the monsters strong and improving it, making it our own. But more important than that... even if we get lucky with your rewards, what chance do we have if we never strive and try to beat the odds? I get the feeling that there will always be something out there that can stomp us flat, no matter how powerful we are. Are we going to just roll over and die every time something big and scary stumbles on us?”

I stopped, leaning against the bike. I closed my eyes and let out a long breath, his words hitting a lot closer than I would have liked. I knew, of course, that there was a difference

between going out and attacking something dangerous and fighting off something dangerous that came to you, but his words still rang true.

“And what if all the things you said aren't true?” I asked. “And it's just another useless, dangerous monster?”

“Well... then it should be a lot easier to kill then,” He pointed out with a shrug.

“And if it's all true and we can't take it?” I asked. “It kills all of us?”

“Then we die. A lot of that is happening these days,” He said. “What's three more?”

I frowned, and after a moment, I looked at Jessica. She was staring at Barry with wide eyes, color returning to her cheeks as she openly gaped at the determined young adult.

“Jessica? What do you think?” I asked, getting her attention.

“I... Think that with the right plan, anything is possible,” She said with a shrug. “So whether or not I agree comes down to what kind of plan we can come up with.”

“That... fair enough. Okay, Barry, if we can come up with a way to take that thing down, we can give it a shot.”

Barry pumped his fist before whirling around and inspecting the yard we were hiding in, as if he would discover the solution just sitting there. After a moment, he spotted the house's large garage and pointed at it.

“Let's start looking around a bit. Maybe something will come to us while we do.”

“Alright, lead the way,” I said with a slight mocking tone before gesturing for him forward.

He nodded, ignoring my teasing, and started to look for a way to get into the garage, first trying the door and finding it was locked before eventually finding an unlatched window. As he and Jessica climbed inside, I cast one more look around. Honestly, I was looking for an excuse to return to the bastion, anything that would constitute a reason to call off the already small opportunity I had given Barry.

Inside the garage was surprisingly open, with a large truck filling one bay, the other one empty. The truck itself was impressive. It was relatively clean and unmarked, with a large ladder rack on top and a bull bar protecting the front end.

The rest of the garage looked just about like an average garage, with tools and a workbench along one wall and several metal shelves holding random garage stuff along the other. As Barry peaked into boxes and went through drawers, I walked around the large room,

stopping by the locked door. I unlocked it just in case before looking at the wall next to it. There was a key rack, which was empty save a single pair, one bearing the same logo the large truck was.

As I stared at the keys, an idea started to form in my head, and I started cursing under my breath. I had been hoping that I could dismiss any ideas that Barry had as unrealistic, but my idea... I liked the odds.

"Dammit, Barry, come here. I have an idea."

I couldn't help but scowl at him when his face lit up, and he dropped a wrench back down to the workbench he had been going through. He made his way to me, and I pulled the keys off the wall, tossing them at him, the young man catching them with a confused look.

"You can drive, right?"