

With my first idea acting as a solid foundation, the plan came together pretty quickly. Eventually, after some back and forth and when the general outline was complete, Jessica and I both agreed to give it a shot. We then spent about an hour climbing over the truck, making our plan a reality, or at least the first step. We even raided two other nearby garages for parts and materials. When we were done, we reviewed the plan again for another thirty minutes. If we were going to risk our lives, I wanted every aspect of the plan discussed and foolproof. Once we were as certain as we could be, we carefully got into position, starting with getting the garage open.

After struggling with the emergency latch for the garage door for a few minutes, I finally managed to drag the heavy metal barrier up and out of the way, letting Barry pull the truck out and around the corner, looking for his spot. After he was set, Jessica and I headed off to find ours.

"So... Do you think this will actually work?" Jessica asked as we walked.

"I wouldn't have agreed to try it if I didn't," I pointed out, guiding my bike over a bump.

"I know, same here... but..." She trailed off for a moment before continuing. "It's a fucking dragon!"

"I... Think Barry is a little crazy to be so excited, but he had a good point," I admitted, looking down the road towards where our target was, despite a few houses and a good bit of forest hiding it from sight. "If we can't push ourselves to take on stuff like this... even with all the rewards in the world, we won't be able to survive. So I guess... I think the plan *will* work, but I also think the plan *needs* to work."

After a moment, Jessica nodded in understanding. After another minute or so of walking, she wordlessly got into position, hiding behind a thick tree growing by a four-way intersection. Rather than drag it with me, I passed her my spear, which she happily took. I gave her a quick check to make sure she was sufficiently hidden behind the tree before giving Barry a wave. He waved back, arm out the truck's side window, and I focused back on the road. After taking a long, steadying breath, I shook myself and hopped onto my bike.

I slowly pedaled my way down the street, making my way closer and closer to the dragon and his nest, trying to stay as quiet as possible as I did. I was taking my time, partly because I was still pretty sure I was pedaling to my death, and partly because I would need every bit of stamina I could muster. I was surprised to notice a few houses we had missed that showed obvious signs of damage, with walls torn half open, roofs shoved to the side, windows smashed, and doors ripped from their frames.

Despite going slow, I eventually turned down into the empty street that led to Abe's house. I kept my eyes locked on the still-resting dragon, riding even slower as I approached. I made it shockingly far until I finally lost my nerve and couldn't go any further, only about two

hundred feet from the large, dangerous-looking lizard. It showed no signs of stirring despite how close I was, its head along its side as it lay in its nest. It truly was a massive monster.

Slowly, I turned in a circle, getting my bike oriented back down the street and just generally making sure I was ready to take off as quickly as possible, ready to go as fast as I could. Once I was ready, I reached down and unclipped my holster, slowly drawing my pistol. There was absolutely no way that the pistol would be enough to really hurt the large, intimidating lizard, but it would almost certainly get its attention.

I raised my pistol, pointing it at the dragon, sighting my shot in as best I could with my body twisted on my bike. It was a bit of an awkward shot, with my back twisting around to aim at the dragon while my legs were still facing forward. Idly, I wondered if the massive lizard's eyes were protected enough to stop a 9mm. Then I realized there was absolutely no way I could hit that small a target with how far away I was. Still, I might as well...

After taking in and releasing another long breath, I finally squeezed the trigger. The gunshot echoed down the street, and the dragon jerked its head up, letting out a roar that seemed to shake the street. I could actually see three or four scales that were gouged and damaged along its cheek. Not a bad shot, especially considering the distance and positioning.

When the dragon whipped its head around and locked its eyes on me, I immediately turned and slid my pistol into its holster. Before I was even done with that, I was already pedaling as hard as I could, the bike moving with surprising speed as I pushed my peak body to its limits.

Another roar echoed from behind me, the ground shaking as it jumped out of its nest. I could feel a lizard as it chased me, the ground reverberating in time with what I was sure was an impressive gait. I turned to see for myself and saw the dragon running at an odd bastardization of a gallop, its wings opening slightly as if to drive it forward faster. It was also a lot closer than I had been expecting.

I cursed and pedaled harder, needing more distance if I wanted to survive. Faster and faster I moved, and as we approached the first turn to my target, I took a risk and turned off the road, cutting through a backyard. I ducked under an awning, smashed through a rough bush, and managed to cross the backyard easily, popping back up onto the paved road, somehow managing not to slip, fall, or get stuck as I rode. I turned back to see the dragon smashing through the small gap I had slipped through, having to break through the corner of a house and the awning, both of them slowing it down. It was still hot on my heels, but now I could at least breathe.

I leaned forward on the bike, trying to make myself as small as possible, pumping my feet until my legs burned. The road flew by under me, only turning slightly to avoid a pothole. The dragon was still chasing, still determined to catch me, roaring and snapping, the ground shaking, nearly throwing me off the bike.

I suddenly blew past the tree Jessica was hiding behind, then through the intersection. I had just enough time to look to the right and spot Barry, driving the large truck we had modified, going quite a bit faster than we had agreed upon. On the top of the truck was a cobbled-together battering ram spike, which was essentially a large wooden plank strapped to the truck's ladder rack, one end sharpened to a point.

As I whipped past the intersection, the dragon followed, and I could hear the truck's tires squealing as Barry turned to adjust his aim. Every part of my body wanted to turn and witness the collision, but I was going way too fast to just carelessly slam on the brakes and stop. Instead, I was forced to listen to the sound of an overbuilt truck slamming into the side of a lizard the size of a short bus, the sound of crushing metal, breaking glass, cracking bone, and a pained and broken roar.

After a few seconds of softly hitting the brakes, I finally came to a stop and turned, getting my first look at the damage. The dragon was bleeding heavily, impaled on the massive wooden spike, blood pouring from the wound. The spike had hit forward, slamming into its body just behind its front legs. Its chest was also caved in, enough that it was impossible for it to not have some serious internal damage.

The front of the truck was arguably in worse shape. The window was busted, the front end was crumpled, and I could see steam pouring out from under the hood. Thick, dark red blood was splattered all over the front end of the truck, dripping from the bumper. The truck shifted and moved as the dragon struggled against it, its movements growing weaker but still enough to move the multiton vehicle.

I quickly pedaled to the collision, the dragon squirming and shifting as it tried to move, to stand and attack, despite the massive spear of wood impaling its chest. I was getting off my bike, well out of range of its jaws, when Jessica came around from where she had been taking cover and drove my spear into its neck, catching the giant lizard off guard. It roared and tried to snap at her, but something in its body was too broken to turn around enough, so she just shifted away and continued to stab at it. Finally, the jabs either broke through or found a gap in its thick scales because the spear sank a foot and a half into its neck, the younger woman ruthlessly carving into the monster's flesh a dozen or so times until the entire giant creature went still.

As Jessica finished off the monstrous lizard, I rode around to the other side of the truck, hopping off my bike and letting it fall to the wayside as I quickly tried to open the driver-side door. It took some force as the door was bent and buckled, but I managed to crack it open with a couple of hard pulls. Smoke and dust spewed out from the interior, and Barry coughed and groaned, trying to push back the airbags that had protected him. I quickly pulled out my knife and started hacking at his seatbelt and the handful of deployed airbags, finally helping him free after a few minutes of cutting.

“How do you feel?” I asked, helping him to the ground and away from the crash. “Any pain in your neck? Anything bad?”

He coughed and shook his head, which made him wince.

“Shoulder hurts, arms and chest,” He managed to cough out, prompting me to quickly check him over.

The near high school graduate was covered in burns from the airbag, though luckily, none of them were bad or anywhere dangerous, as far as I could tell. His shoulder was bruised, as was his chest, also from the airbags. I passed him some water from my backpack, letting him rinse his mouth out. He spit out the now slightly red liquid before drinking deeply. When he was finished, he passed the bottle back to me.

“I think I’m okay,” He assured me, moving around experimentally, testing his body. “The burns sting like hell, but I think I’m okay. Don’t even feel like I have a concussion.”

“You got experience with those?”

“Yeah, twice,” He responded. “Don’t feel slow, no headache, no nausea, and I can look up at the sun without feeling like it’s a spike in my brain.”

“Alright. Well, sit here for a minute or so and collect yourself,” I said, patting his shoulder, the one not burned and bruised. “I’m going to make sure Jessica didn’t slip and fall into this thing’s mouth or something.”

He nodded, and I left to walk around the dragon, taking a moment to examine the grievous wound Barry had inflicted. It was a pretty horrible sight, with organs bigger than my arm hanging out of the puncture point, which, despite coming from something mounted to the *top* of an already large truck, was punching through the side of the dragon’s chest. I shook my head, continuing to make my way to Jessica, who was now poking around the dragon’s mouth, my spear still impaled into its head from behind.

“He was right,” She said after spotting me, only looking away for a moment. “Come take a look.”

I got closer and found Jessica holding a thick stick, poking at the dragon’s teeth. She slid her stick along one of the larger teeth, and the sharp instrument of mastication cleanly and smoothly shaved a curl of wood off the branch.

“How hard are you pressing on that?”

“Hardly at all,” She responded immediately. “Feel for yourself.”

She handed me the stick, and I ran it along the tooth, trying my best to ignore the absolute rancid smell coming from the overgrown lizard's mouth. Sure enough, with barely any pressure, the tooth cut into the stick.

"That... that is nonsensically sharp," I said, a little stunned by how easily it cut, my brain confused and struggling to comprehend what I was seeing. "That is... that is ridiculous."

Once we moved past how insanely easy the tooth carved into the piece of wood, we spent a few minutes looking over the dragon, Barry joining us after a while. He was clearly sore and nursing a few bruises and burns, but his excitement was pushing through that. While we were trying to figure out what we would take back with us, Jessica ferried our carts over, and we decided that we would fill one cart with dragon parts, save the rest for what we found in the Crazy Abe's home. If we didn't find a lot, we would stop on the way back and top up with dragon parts.

Over the next two hours, the three of us worked hard to remove anything useful from the dragon. It was sweaty, bloody, gorey work, but the fact that we, three humans, came up with a way to kill this monster on our own kept smiles on all three of our faces. The first thing we grabbed was all of the dragon's teeth, since using them to make dagger, spears, and knives would be easy and effective. We also took all of its claws after Barry tested them and found that they were just as disgustingly sharp as its teeth. Its spines were not nearly as sharp, but Barry cut off a few anyway.

Once any of the decent-sized teeth and claws were removed, we slowly and carefully cut out large swaths of the hide. We ended up with a singular meter-wide strip that was nearly two and a half meters long, as well as a few more strips that were much smaller but would still probably be useful. After that, we grabbed dozens and dozens of thick, hard scales, ranging from the size of my hand if I spread my finger out, all the way up to just over twice that in width and length. There weren't a lot of scales that large, but we took all of the biggest. They were surprisingly light, and most of them were too tough to cut with a knife and took significant force to penetrate with one of the dragon's own teeth.

When we were done, we filled the rest of the space with meat. We had no way of knowing it was safe to eat, but Barry desperately wanted to find out, and I didn't have the heart to tell him no, not when he had stepped up to kill it.

With the dragon looking quite a bit lighter and less threatening but much more gross, we moved on to our next target, the real reason we were out here. It was a short ride back to the dragon's nest, though it took a bit longer now that I wasn't pedaling for my life. We stopped just outside the crushed flat front gate, all four of us going on foot, entering the property.

"What are the chances there are dragon eggs somewhere?" Barry asked, trying to look inside the pile of rubble that the dragon had made into its nest.

“Hopefully zero, because I don’t feel like dealing with a second dragon. One was-” I responded before cutting myself off as I heard something. “... what was that?”

All three of us froze, straining to listen for what I had heard to repeat itself. After a few moments, Jessica frowned and opened her mouth to comment, only to snap it shut when a very faint sound reached our ears. Someone was shouting, screaming even, but it was muffled and barely audible. We all looked around, trying to locate the sound. Jessica moved and started to dig through one corner of the “nest.” After about fifteen minutes of digging and shifting the rubble, we finally got down to the base floor of the garage.

There, covered in gouges and claw marks, was a thick, heavy-duty hatch.