

Once we had managed to clear the rubble from on top of the hatch, it became a lot easier to hear the voices coming from inside.

"Help! Is anyone there! We are stuck!" The muffled male voice said. "The dragon, you need to hurry!"

Another voice layered in on top of the first, softer but just as desperate, repeating more or less the same information. Barry, who was leaning over the hatch beside me, tried to get the door open, yanking and pulling at the handles. The hatch refused to budge, the gouges and slashes into the metal, deforming the door enough that it was firmly stuck in place. The young adult stopped trying after a few attempts and took in a deep breath to shout back, but I clapped my hand over my mouth before he could.

"I know you weren't about to scream your head off and attract everyone's attention within several blocks," I said, giving him a harsh look.

"But the dragon-"

"Probably kept a lot of the area cleared of threats, assuming it attacks anything but humans, but I'm not willing to bet our lives and the lives of whoever is stuck down there on it."

He let out his breath, and I pulled away, reaching for a chunk of brick from the cleared pile and kneeling down by the hatch. I rapped on the thick metal, knocking out the seemingly ubiquitous setup pattern that most people recognized, even if they had no idea of its origin. The five quick raps were followed by silence, the shouts cutting out almost immediately, so after a few seconds, I repeated the pattern, then repeated it again after a few more seconds. Finally, after the third time, I got the appropriate double-knock response.

"Well, it's people, at least," I said, nodding happily.

"What else could it have been?" Jessica asked, looking confused.

"Mimic," Barry answered for me, and I pointed at him. "It could always be a mimic. Fuck I'm going to have nightmares now. How did I not consider *mimics*?"

"To be fair, I hadn't either until we killed a fantasy-style dragon," I admitted. "All we had seen so far were seemingly random monsters, not things from stories. It doesn't matter now. Let's try and get these people free."

We dug around a bit more before finally managing to find a crowbar and a pointed rod of metal that I think was for prying things out of the ground. Whatever it was, it was a solid bar of metal, and we used to crack and pry at the hatch. Eventually, after about fifteen minutes of work, we pried the hatch past its stuck point, letting us wrench it open.

As we looked down into the hatch, we saw a stairway that led downward into what was clearly some sort of bunker. It only went down twenty or thirty feet, but it was still pretty impressive. Before any of us could even think about what to do next, a man appeared at the bottom of the ladder. He immediately started climbing up, prompting us three to step back. When he finally climbed out, he stood, looking at each of us warily. Behind him, we could hear at least one more person on the ladders, and before long, a young boy, maybe around Molly's age, climbed out.

"Hello," I said, raising my hands with my palms up to show I was unarmed. "We aren't going to do anything bad, we... well we are here because of the man who lives here, he has a reputation for preparing for the worst..."

"...Yeah, Abe was on the paranoid side... Saved our lives, though," The man said before standing and looking up and around. "We need to run, though! There was a dragon-"

"We killed it," I said, cutting him off and gesturing to my friend. "Barry here rammed it with a truck."

"Wh-what? How... I don't believe you," He said, his eyes wide, looking more than a little manic. "We need to move!"

"Jessica, go get something from the cart..." I said, the young woman nodding and jogging off, returning a few moments later with one of the dragon's teeth, bloody gums still attached to its base.

"I... Well, I'll be damned..."

The man collapsed to his knees, the younger kid coming up behind him as he breathed heavily. It took a few minutes for him to recover, after which we moved to the street, all three of them sitting down on the edge of the sidewalk. Jessica kept watch around us as they explained what had led the two of them to be stuck in Abe's bunker.

"I was sheltering in place, like the news said, when people started exploding into dust," the older man explained. "My wife... Jason's parents and most of the people on the street went up. I started taking care of Jason after that, making sure he was fed. One night, the dragon came through and started tearing apart the place, looking for people, food, both? I knew Abe had a bunker and that it was probably the safest place around, so we moved down into it. Then the overgrown lizard crushed the garage down around us and built a nest!"

He put his head in his hands, going quiet for a long moment before shaking his head and looking back up at me.

"Thank you for getting us out," He said, shaking his head. "If everything was working fine, it would be the perfect place to live, but the water pump broke on the first day. Eventually, pretty quickly really, we would have run out of bottled water."

"I'm glad we could help. We have a place nearby... well, it's nearby when you're on a bike. Running water, power, secure against smaller monsters. We even have a nurse there. Everything we need to survive and, if we are lucky, maybe even thrive. You're welcome to join us."

"I... I don't know," he responded, looking over at Jason, who was turning over the dragon tooth in his hand. "This is a pretty good spot already... We could fix the water... I think it's just the pump..."

"Sir, please. We need to stick together," Barry said, catching the older man's eye. "If we are going to survive this, we need all the help we can get. Alone... no one can handle this alone, there's too much going on, so much we don't know. But if we can work together, we might just have a chance of making it through this."

"I... alright, yeah," He agreed after a long pause and a look back at the garage rubble. "If I'm honest, I'm not sure I could even climb back down that ladder if I wanted to..."

"I certainly don't blame you for that," I said, shaking my head and holding out my hand. "My name is Aiden. It's good to meet you."

"George. It's good to meet you as well."

The older man stood, reaching out and taking my hand in his and shaking it. His hand was bigger than mine and was rough with calluses. I had noticed before, as we had helped both of them out of the nest and to the curb, that the man was rather large, built like a bunker, squat and solid. He had black hair and thick stubble along his face. Jason had blonde hair cut short, the sides shaved down low.

Once we were all properly introduced and we had confirmed we would be leaving together, we focused on our current predicament. We now had two extra people and only two carts. How were we supposed to get them, the dragon bits and the supplies that we had come all this way for, back to the bastion. Jessica, Barry, and I discussed our options not far from George and Jason.

"We could make separate trips," Jessica suggested. "One today, maybe another tomorrow?"

"We could borrow another truck," Barry pointed out, getting a look from the both of us. "What? We could bring back everything and the kitchen sink that way. And we could use it until it runs out of gas."

"Navigating the town would be impossible," I pointed out. "There is way too much shit on the roads."

"Uh... Abe had one of those beefy golf carts," Jason said from beside us, getting our attention. "My mom-"

He stopped for a moment, looking down at his feet and covering his face. He was silent for a whole minute before sniffing and looking back at us, rubbing his face, his eyes damp.

"My mom used to complain about it all the time cause he would come flying around the neighborhood in it, complaining about us playing or something. She said he wasn't nearly sober enough to be riding around that fast," He continued, shaking his head. "Will that fit through the roads?"

"Yeah... yeah, it would," I said, looking around the rubble of the garage-turned-nest. "Do you know if he kept it in the garage? Cause if he did, it's currently a pancake."

A quick look around the outside of the house revealed the golf cart was stored in a small carport in the backyard. We pushed it out of the carport and gave the muddy vehicle a once-over. Despite being obviously used for more than just cruising around the neighborhood, it was in decent condition. This particular model was not only clearly intended for more rough terrain than just asphalt, but it was also fully electric. After looking around for a few minutes, I found the recharger, a device smaller than a foot-wide cube. With any luck, it would recharge with the bastion's newest upgrade.

"Well... now we just need the keys."

With that, all of us moved inside, including George and Jason, who sat down in the living room. George assured us they were okay, the bunker had plenty of food, and they hadn't run out of water yet, though it was close. Jason just needed time to mentally recover, and he wasn't letting the kid out of his sight.

With our two new friends recovering, Barry, Jessica, and I started going through the house, room by room, moving anything we found that we wanted to take to the kitchen. By the time we were done, we had a sizable stack of survival gear, including some harsh weather coats and jackets that were useless now but would come in handy when it started getting colder in winter. We also found four guns: an AR-15 with a suppressor on the end, a pump action shotgun similar to Jessica's but more modern, an M40 bolt action rifle with a nice long-distance scope on it, and two 1911 pistols. All of the weapons came with appropriate cases and holsters, and there was plenty of ammo, with the lowest amount for the M40.

It wouldn't last us forever, but it would definitely help us along for the near future.

Once we cleared the house, we moved everything out to the carts, filling another one completely. Luckily, we also found the keys to the golf cart, so we had a bit more room for what we found in the shelter. While Barry drove the golf cart to the front, I made my way down into the shelter, slowly climbing down the steel ladder.

The interior of the shelter was messy, with trash stuffed into a few places and more than a few broken things tossed to the side. I wasn't entirely surprised, considering they had been trapped down here for more than a week. As I explored, I found the bunker was divided into three sections. One was the living space, which was kind of like a living room, kitchen, and bedroom, all squashed into one space, about seven or eight meters wide and twice that long. The other space was sort of an infrastructure area. There was a pump, what looked like power storage, and a whole bunch of other stuff crammed into a room about half the size of the living space. The final area was the storage area, which was about the same size as the infrastructure room but was crammed full of shelves, crates, and lockers, almost all of them chock full.

For obvious reasons, I was most interested in the storage area.

After just a few minutes of going over everything in the storage room, it was very apparent that even with the golf cart, this would take multiple trips. There was food in the form of hundreds of MREs and cans, medical supplies, tools and equipment, and even a pair of hazardous environment suits with matching gas masks. Every box, crate or locker I opened was another thing I wanted to bring home. Unfortunately, while I did find two full gun maintenance kits tucked away on one of the shelves and a few more containers of bullets, I did not find any more guns lying around. When I finally reached the back of the room, I realized why. There were two large gun safes, looking shiny and impervious, with an electronic pin pad on each of them.

"Do you think we could crack them open?" Jessica asked when she came down and found me fiddling with the large metal boxes.

"Maybe? I mean, we have a bunch of tools here... but it's gonna take a while. These feel well built, and I'm no locksmith," I admitted, frowning and stepping back. "I'm worried that fucking with them will activate like a permanent lock or something. I don't even know if that's a real thing for gun safes."

"The ones we found inside the house must have been his home defense weapons," Jessica said after a minute of us just staring at the safes. "These safes must be his survival, end of the world stockpile."

"Makes sense," I agreed before shaking my head. "I need to think about this. I have a feeling that with enough time, we could smash through these, but that it would be rough for us and our tools. The guns we found inside are good enough for now, so let's just focus on getting all of this back to the bastion."

We spent two hours loading up the bike cart, the kid carrier, and the golf cart, with most of that time spent slowly carrying things up and down the ladders using bags and rope we found in the storage area, most of which we packed away to bring back with us. On this trip, we focused mostly on tools and equipment since we were still using the fresh food that Sally had created when she first made the bastion. That wouldn't last long now that we were going to be up to nine people already, but it was plenty for today and tomorrow morning.

When we were finally done loading everything out of the house and shelter and onto the carts, we spent about ten minutes re-burying the hatch. I didn't want anyone or anything getting into it while we were gone, especially not with all the food still tucked away inside. When we were done with that, we gathered up by the street, Jason and George climbing into the golf cart.

"Alright. George, stick by us and keep your eyes open for anything stalking or watching us," I said. "We take it slow and steady and get back before it starts getting dark. Ready?"

Both he and Jason nodded, the former reaching down to the cart's console and turning the key, the electric motor spinning up. I nodded to Jessica and Barry, all three of us climbing onto our bikes and pedaling away.