

Exclusive

"Why did I major in a dying profession? Why?" Jane Vicker mulls over the question for the millionth time, hoping her subconscious will give her a more satisfactory answer. No such luck, as the same reply comes once again. "You wanted to change the world."

Surrounded on either side by the crumbled remnants of storefronts, Jane carefully tips down the street, following a jagged crack along the pavement leading to a massive, foot-shaped indentation. She takes a deep breath, steadies her jittering arm, and raises her phone. "Remember, you're a professional," she scolds herself. She photographs the shattered remnants of an automobile, metal gnarled and twisted in surreal angles, the trunk utterly flattened, resting in a kiddie pool sized scoop in the pavement.

Normally, this level of risk was way out of her comfort zone. Fluff pieces were the bulk of her assignments, but the newsite had been hemorrhaging money and was desperate for clicks of any kind. Cutesy articles had ceased and only "home runs" were now accepted. Since Jane wanted to be taken seriously, a story on fearsome creatures attacking the town fit the bill perfectly. Even her colleagues weren't that brave. Or foolish.

Okay. Report time. Forgetting her brush, she half-heartedly flattens her hair with a hand. She hated this. Devastated budgets meant a crew of one. No makeup artist. No cameraman. No mic, no lights, no technical director, no countdown. Amateur hour. Even though her cohorts embraced the "viewers wanna see themselves on screen" attitude, Jane prided herself on the old-school professionalism of her idols. She conjures her classic warm-up; an odd, full body undulation while emitting a sound like an dying goose, clears her throat and presses record.

A dull, distant explosion shatters her thoughts. A muffled thud as if a boulder had struck the earth. The noise repeats, again and again, in a recognizable pattern, growing in strength and volume at a rising rate. The vibrations travel through the street into her body, rattling her ribcage. Primal panic stiffens her muscles and her brain is unable to gather a single rational thought.

A massive shadow falls upon her and instantly, her world goes black. Her feet leave the ground as she feels her body rapidly rise and stomach dropping. She is encased in a tomb of some fleshlike material, a hot, soft, meaty sleeping bag that hugs her features. Soft folds pinch at her leg and pin her arms to her sides. Suddenly, the pressure tightens, pressing into her face and pinching her nostrils shut. At this, her barely contained rising terror is released in a jagged, piercing scream.

At that very moment, the walls of her prison vanish, the pressure releases, and the

cool, crisp outside air washes over her. She finds herself lying across a meaty, hilly plane. As her eyes adjust to the light, the image that greets her strikes her speechless. A reptilian, parade float-sized face looms overhead. The tip of a muzzle the size of a car hood presses into her chest. The beast's eyes are a surprisingly pleasant blue, moist and gentle, emitting a sense of genuine concern. The mouth hung slightly open, revealing rows of ivory stalagmites. The bulbous blob of a tongue begins to contort as the creature speaks.

"Are you okay?! I didn't meant to scare you." Jane's face receives a furnace blast with every word. What is most shocking is not that the beast spoke, as many had acquired this ability, but its concern for her. Monsters don't care about their victim's comfort. "Its just...I've never seen one of you up close and you're hard to catch." There's a reason for that, Jane thought, the ol' Vicker wit returning after a fear induced hiatus.

"Ju..just wha..what are you going to do with me?" Her voice sounds like an electronic doll whose batteries were dying.

All the color drains from the dragon's face. In all the gleeful excitement of finding this his new toy, her question was a cold reminder of the violent history between the species and that his captor is likely scared out of its wits.

Out of the corner of her eye, a large chunky object began to lower. She looks and sees a thumb with a cycle sized claw and instinctively flinches. The thumb freezes and hovers a moment, before continuing, slowly, her shoulder sinking into its flesh. It began to move up and down in a feathery stroking pattern.

"I just want to talk," he says apologetically. "I think some things need to change."

Jane was again stuck speechless. Not with fright, but with the warmth of hope and optimism, of childlike wonder and possibility, a feeling she hadn't felt since she graduated, looking at the unwritten book laying before her. Not only was this creature friendly, but he wants to talk! Maybe others would see the article and want to speak. And he spoke of change; of healing the rift between dragons and humans, perhaps leading to a peaceful co-existence...all started with an interview.

Allright Jane, just get the recorder going, she scolds herself. Life and the industry had done its best to vanquish her spirit but it refused to go without a fight. After scrambling through her bag, now a sticky object salad thanks to a ruptured soft drink, she pulls out a now scratched up cellphone.

"You don't mind if I record you, do you?"

"No."

"Okay," she presses record. "Ready when you are."