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Chasing the Dragon

At it again. It seems like it will never end. The turbo of our F-350 was humming as we sped up the highway towards Camp Williams. We'd been chasing the dragon all summer, and no matter how many times we got her under control, she always came back. It only takes one storm to blow in and send lightning dancing through the sky before she rises. It starts out as a mere smolder or some small flames, but then the wind decides to play, and before you know it thousands and thousands of acres of forest are encircled with flames that can only be described as hell on earth. Most of the world calls this phenomenon forest fire, but those of us who battle her know what she really is: the dragon. Fire is a strange creature. That means as a firefighter, one never knows what to expect.

The average day for a firefighter is pretty simple, a game of waiting. We wait for winter to end, so we have some landscape to work with. Then we wait to hear when we start work. When we finally get to work, we show up and do busy work, waiting for a fire call from the dispatch center. We hope these calls come soon, but this waiting game can take hours, days, weeks, and even months before they come. The fire calls will eventually come though. They always do.

When a firefighter is at home, local fires are the priority. Where I work, that consists of small, one-tree fires, usually started by lightning. We spend a day or two securing and eliminating all the flames and heat we find and collect all the overtime we can while we are on our own

district. Chasing smoke is our main task, and we do that until we get the call for a two-week tour of duty, where we can go on the “big boy” fires. That’s the gig, for the entire summer. We try and stay busy, we wait, and when we are needed, the call comes.

This time the call came from the State of Utah, to assist with the suppression of the Pinion Fire at Camp Williams Army base. As we came into the Salt Lake Valley, the sky had been painted grey. It seemed like it had been that way the entire summer. Due to the lack of moisture, fire has been ripping for months on end. First Arizona and New Mexico burned, then Colorado, and now it was Utah and Idaho’s turn.

The adrenaline started to fill my body. The Pinion fire was fairly large, three hundred acres and burning in grass and pinion-juniper trees. I shouldn’t have been nervous. I’ve been on much larger fires and fought them through grass and pinion many times, but this time it was a little different. As we drove through the security of the base, soldiers saluted us. We parked at base camp, and I immediately evacuated the vehicle, ready to climb to the highest mountain if necessary. I, instead, went to a table and sat down for a briefing of the incident. A firefighter, who seemed like he could've been fighting the dragon when the dinosaurs roamed the earth, sat down and began to tell us the details of the fire.

Lightning, no surprise there, started it; the Wasatch Front had just been plastered by over two hundred lightning strikes just days previous. It was burning exclusively on the base, which was good, and potentially disastrous. Good because it wasn’t threatening Herriman or Saratoga Springs, and potentially disastrous because it was moving towards an impact area on the base full of thousands of unexploded artillery that was used for training purposes. After the briefing concluded, “Watch where you step,” was the only advice the old man muttered to us. The adrenaline began surging in me even more than before.

The crew was rounded up, shoved backed into the vehicles, and began to move closer to the target. The drive in was pretty mild; all the fuels were nuked out black, completely burnt to the ground. As we followed the column of smoke, we ran into our division supervisor. He informed us that due to the efforts of the firefighters already there, along with assistance from helicopters and single engine air tanker (SEATS), the fire was nearly contained and winding down. There wouldn't be a lot of work to do, and we might be in charge of monitoring the fire for the duration of the incident. The adrenaline that had previously occupied every fiber of my being was quickly replaced with resentment and disappointment, as we now seemed destined to "babysit," or sit and watch a dead fire. My only thoughts were, *there goes our chance at exciting fire behavior and sixteen-hour days.*

We hiked up the hill towards the other crews. Armed with shovels, hoes, chainsaws, and pulaskis we engaged the fire line with the goal of securing it before the wind decided to change. I had a pulaski myself, an ax that has been fixed with a hoe opposite the blade of the ax. It destroyed any root that dared threaten the fire line. The work was almost pointless due to the fact that a bulldozer had just put a twelve foot fire line days before. With the assistance of some fire engines, we eliminated the three, and only, smokes we found.

A couple hours passed with no change, the line was secured, and we began to settle into our role as the babysitters. I decided to do a little recon hike, and ran into another crew. The crew boss and I began to shoot the breeze, but it was hard for me to pay attention because I kept thinking about how much he looked like Ralph Macchio from the Karate Kid. *Get your head in the game*, I screamed at myself in my mind, but it was no use. This was a dead fire, we're going to sit here for who knows how long, and I was starting to get a little hungry.

Just as my guard had nearly been laid down, a fifty-mile per hour wind shot up like a bat

out of hell. Forget that, it was more like a blue whale out of hell. I checked my balance and popped my hand to the top of my head to save my hard hat from becoming like a balloon that a four-year-old accidentally lets go and never sees again. The wind caused a green island of trees to torch out; good news was that this torching was fifty-plus feet away from the fire line. The wind left for about 30 seconds, and then it came back with a vengeance, this time at sixty miles per hour. Instead of gusts it was a constant flow of wind, forcing its will on those trees that began to surge orange and black with fire. The dragon had come back.

“Spot, it’s spotting over the line,” was all I could hear over the wind. Squeals over the radio began coming in great force. I looked toward the top of the mountain, but I couldn’t see the spot fire. The wind died down, and it seemed like the closest crew would be able to catch the fire before it got out of control. The dragon, however, she had different plans. She had been toying with us the whole time. The wind returned, and I watched as ten or more acres of trees were completely engulfed with the biggest flames I had ever seen. Then the fire grew legs and began to run; there was no catching her now.

We began to run as well, toward the vehicles. The fire had gobbled up more than five hundred acres in the ten minutes it took us to gather back up at the trucks. It was time to reevaluate the plan: so much for a dead fire. The other crews began to file in as well. We looked at our fellow fighters as they hiked in, wearing the same yellow shirts and green pants, caked in the same ash that we all knew would take hours in the shower to get rid of. The Copenhagen smiles began to show. Bewilderment was upon everyone. We waited and watched as hundreds, and then thousands of acres of forest were chewed up by a giant wall of flame.

We all knew what this meant: two weeks of sixteen-hour days, shoulders that would feel like they were just massaged with sand paper due to hauling our packs for that long, and of

course it meant we got our wish, no more dead fire. We got to fight the beast, for at least one more day. The night would be spent burning off a road with torches in hopes it would slow the dragon while the cooler air was available. Only time and the wind would tell if this tactic would work.

Sometimes, we are able to destroy the dragon, as in this case, we beat her into submission. Like I said earlier though, she always comes back. If there was a sure fire way to knock her down and keep her there, it would be implemented on every forest fire. However, the dragon is never the same, she has a mind of her own, and there is no guessing where or when she'll reappear. So as a firefighter I'll do what I do best, wait for her.