

We both started, and jumped to our feet. Someone screamed, and there was an animal snarl.

"Damn it, we're out of time," I said.

I was half expecting Jenny to panic again, but either she was made of sterner stuff than I thought or my earlier suggestions were still holding. She grabbed up a tall standing lamp, smacking the lampshade off the top and unplugging it with quick, efficient motions.

"This won't do much damage, but I can block with it," she said. "Can you shoot past me?"

"Yeah, I've got two flavors of magic missile. You're going out there naked?"

"The door won't stop monsters, and someone's dying out there." She opened the door, and paused only a moment before stepping out into the hall. "Just make sure you kill whatever this is quick."

"I'll do my best," I assured her, following her out the door.

When Beth arranged this meetup she'd rented a big vacation house in the woods, on the theory that the privacy would let us all freely indulge in our secret fetishes without having to worry about normie witnesses. The place had three bedrooms and a game room upstairs, as well as the master bedroom and various public spaces downstairs. Plenty of room for eight especially kinky people to pair off and indulge themselves, or for small groups to have scenes without getting in each other's way.

Only one door opened as we passed, and the terrified girl who looked out clearly wasn't going to be much help.

"What's going on?" She said. "What's this thing in my face? Did someone scream?"

"Animal attack," I barked. "Stay safe."

There was a crash that sounded like something heavy smashing furniture, and a crack like a whip. The girl ducked back into her room and locked the door, but I ignored that in favor of watching the stairs.

Jenny darted down the steps with amazing grace, and immediately rushed out into the living room. "Shit! Dave! Get off him!"

I reached the bottom just in time to see her smack a bear-sized mountain of fur with the lamp. It reared back, making a weird rumbling growl. There was a smashed window behind it, and a guy on the ground covered in blood.

Wait, was that a possum? The thing had to weigh six hundred pounds, but it certainly looked like a giant version of the weird little trash can thieves.

Jenny poked at its face with the lamp. The giant possum swiped at it, but missed as she pulled back suddenly.

"Any day now, Tom!"

I suddenly remembered I was supposed to be fighting this thing. Right, spells, hit it with something. Throwing fire inside a wooden house sound like a bad idea, so I went with a force missile instead. How was this supposed to work, again?

A glowing ball of ghostly blue energy formed in my hand, and leaped out to miss the giant possum by several inches. It punched through the wall behind it, making a hole the size of my fist.

Beth stepped out of the door to the master bedroom in all her naked glory, and lashed out with a whip. It struck with a loud crack, but didn't seem to do anything but make the monster mad. Which anyone with an ounce of sense would have expected, since a whip is a lousy excuse for a weapon outside of fetish fantasy stories. But I'd give her some slack since I wasn't exactly firing on all cylinders myself.

I threw another force missile, and this time it blew a big, bloody crater in the giant possum's side.

It hissed furiously, and tried to rush me. Jenny smashed the broken light bulb on the end of the lamp into its face, interrupting its charge, and I powered up a third spell. The moment Jenny stepped back from the wildly thrashing beast I threw it, making a great bloody wound in its chest.

But that didn't stop it. It rushed towards me, intent on finishing me off, and I stumbled back onto the stairs. The only thing that saved me was the fact that it was too big to fit in the narrow space. I hit it again, and again, and finally it backed off and went for someone else.

This wasn't working. My spells weren't penetrating far enough to hit anything vital, and it would take forever for an animal that big to bleed out.

Jenny screamed, and my heart froze.

I rushed back down the stairs, frantically adjusting the parameters of my spell. More energy, higher velocity, a more compact projectile... done.

Jenny was on the ground, trying to hold the beast at bay with the twisted remains of the lamp while blood gushed from a bloody wound on her arm. I rushed closer, pumping even more energy into my spell, and unleashed it at point blank range.

A brilliant lance of blue energy punched a fist-sized hole all the way through the monster, and kept on going to blast through the wall behind it. The beast staggered, finally looking seriously injured, and turned towards me.

A gunshot rang out, and the side of the possum's face came apart in a bloody ruin. Three more shots hit the same area, faster than I'd thought anyone could shoot, and it finally collapsed.

I glanced back, and found a big guy in gym shorts holding a pistol in a two-handed shooting stance. Was that Earl? He was a lot bigger than the last time I'd seen him, but the face was right. Where did he get a gun?

He lowered the weapon, and nodded to me. "I reckon I can tell who's a light sleeper, here."

"Apparently so. Good shooting."

"I practice. Didn't realize wizard stuff was on offer, though."

"I'm full of surprises," I said, and hurried to Jenny's side. She was trying to put pressure on the wound with her good hand, and not having much luck.

"Let me try healing that," I said, and focused on my one non-combat spell. It wasn't as simple as healing in a game. Instead of just bathing the target in 'healing energy' or some such bullshit I had to actually know what was wrong with my patient, and configure the spell to fix it. But this kind of injury was exactly what it was made for.

Her arm started to glow with a soft golden light, and the bleeding stopped. Then the torn flesh started to knit back together.

"Thanks," Jenny said. "I was afraid I might not make it for a minute there. That's a lot of blood."

"I think you'd better drop another point or two on your defense aura when you get a chance," I observed. "Apparently the default level isn't up to fending off giant animals."

"Guess not. Is that you, Earl?"

"Sure is. Jennifer, right? You're lookin mighty fine this morning."

She shot him a pleased grin. "Got to look hot for my master, right?"

"What about Dave?" Beth put in. "Can you heal him, too? Oh god, I don't think he's breathing."

"I'm getting low on mana," I admitted.

"Let me look," Earl said, moving to the body with a professional air. That's right, wasn't he an EMT or something?

"Aw, hell," he said after a moment. "It's too late for this poor feller. He's missing half his throat, and I can't find a heartbeat."

"Damn." Dave was kind of an obnoxious little shit, but he didn't deserve to go like that.

Earl eyed the expansive windows that covered most of the living room's wall space, and grimaced. "Can't see a darn thing out there. Looks to me like Dave got too close to a window, and the thing jumped right through it to get at him."

"Sounds like we'd better stay away from windows until after sunrise," I said. "We all need to talk, but maybe we should do it upstairs?"

"Good idea," Earl agreed. "I'll get dressed, and get Sara. Upstairs game room?"

"Yes, that will work," Beth put in, trying to pretend she wasn't terrified half out of her mind. "Could one of you stay here while I get my clothes? Apparently I need a better weapon."

"Sure," I agreed. "You ready to try moving, Jenny?"

The wound on her arm was just about gone now. She nodded, and carefully stood up.

"I'm a little woozy, but it's not too bad," she said. "Blood loss, maybe?"

"Probably. I'll give you a little shot of blood regeneration, then I'd better stop. I don't want to run out of mana."

"Yeah, no going OOM when you're our only healer and a main DPS," she agreed. "What's your regen like, anyway?"

"Slow enough that I have to keep an eye on it," I said. "At the rate it's recovering it'll be a couple of hours before I'm back to full."

Jenny leaned on me as we carefully made our way around the giant bloodstain that was spreading from the dead possum. We were maybe halfway to the door of the master bedroom when she suddenly stopped to stare at the body.

I followed her gaze, and realized there was a glowing ball of green mist forming above it. It looked like little streamers of green vapor were seeping out of the dead creature's flesh, and coalescing into a dimly glowing ball that floated in the air above it.

"What on Earth is that?" Beth asked.

"It looks sort of like one of those games where dead enemies leave XP drops," Jenny pointed out. "Want me to touch it, and see what happens?"

"You're brave this morning," I observed.

"You ordered me to be strong. It really helps. Besides, you're the healer. We can't have you taking chances with unknown stuff."

"We should stay away from it," Beth objected. "It could be anything. For all we know it might kill you, or turn you into a monster."

"We desperately need to figure out how the System works, and that means trying things," I disagreed. "Go ahead, Jenny. Just be careful."

"Sure thing, Tom."

She stepped away from me, and studied the body carefully for a moment. Then she jumped over the pool of blood, landing lightly on a furry limb and scooping up the ball of glowing mist. Oddly enough it behaved just like a solid object, sticking to the palm of her hand and moving with it. Jenny continued to move, hopping onto the back of the corpse and then spinning to jump back to me in the blink of an eye.

"Here you go, Tom. One ball of mysterious stuff that makes my hand tingle. System, status."

"That looks pretty strange. Anything happening?" I asked.

"The bar for my physical enhancement points is going up," she replied. "It's really slow, but... wait, is it speeding up now? Yeah, it is. It looks like the longer I touch this thing the faster it goes."

"So it really is a ball of XP? That's interesting."

I gave it a poke, and my finger started to tingle. Yep, my status screen showed the same thing as hers.

"This is insane," Beth muttered. "I'm going to get dressed. Don't get yourselves killed."

By the time she vanished into her bedroom the misty energy ball was visibly smaller, and it only took a few more seconds to run out.

"I got almost half an enhancement point from that," I told Jenny.

"A little more than that here," she replied. "So we've got manual XP distribution, and I guess the System doesn't insist on using whole points for everything? Yeah, it let me put that into my defense aura without complaining, and it looks like it got a little stronger."

"Good to know. Although it's going to make for a lot of arguments about loot distribution," I said.

"I'll say. Any idea what the numbers on my defense aura mean? I know joules are a physics thing, but I was never good with that stuff."

I looked at my own status screen again. Sure enough, when I tried to dig down into the specifics of that protective aura the labels described its performance using human scientific units.

"A good punch is a bit over a hundred joules if I remember right," I said. "So my puny little default aura will stop maybe half that, and it can do it a couple dozen times before it gets saturated and collapses completely. How about yours?"

"Mine says it stops eighty joules per blow for blunt weapons, and it saturates at just over twenty-four hundred joules. So I guess the improvements mostly go into the saturation side of things by default, but it looks like I could pick and choose where to put my points. Yeah, it just let me spend a hundredth of a point on upping the per-attack damage reduction, not that it was enough to do much."

"Makes sense," I said, still studying the labels. "It looks like the less surface area an attack has the less impact your aura stops. So sharp objects will still give you cuts, they just won't penetrate as deep. I think a bullet would just punch right through it, though."

"So it's more like being an action hero than a D&D character? I'll keep that in mind," she assured me. "Well, bodyguard duty?"

"Right. Sorry, I get distracted by intellectual puzzles. Come on."

We found Beth in the master bedroom, dressed now in a pair of black panties and matching bra. Sam, the guy she'd paired up with for the evening, was wearing a heavy leather harness that left nothing to the imagination. He was also still chained to the bed.

"So this System business really does work like a video game," Beth said, reaching into the closet for a skimpy leather dress.

"Apparently," I agreed. "I don't want to cramp your style, but you might want to wear something practical. One of the messages said we're deep in an area where the animals are all turning into monsters. There's no telling what we might have to deal with."

She frowned at me, and defiantly started putting on the dress. "I didn't come here to be normal," she said dismissively. "Don't presume to give me orders, Tom."

I might have argued, but I could see that her hands were shaking. If she needed to costume up and play a role to keep it together, it would probably be a good idea to let her. So instead I just shrugged.

"You do you. Bob, you ready to be let out of that?"

The guy nodded frantically. Jenny smiled, and started towards him.

"Don't touch him," Beth said angrily. "He hasn't finished his penance yet."

That was a little too much for me. "Playtime is over, Beth. For all we know another monster could come through that window at any moment. You can do what you want with yourself, but you don't get to play games with other people's lives."

"I wasn't going to just leave him there!" She protested. "I had a scene planned! For god's sake, Tom, don't be so quick to assume I'm an idiot."

I opened my mouth, closed it again, and sighed.

"Sorry, Beth. I'm just really on edge here."

"You're not the only one," she admitted. "But we can't afford to fight each other, and that's exactly what's going to happen if you and Earl and I all start trying to take charge. So unless it's an urgent matter of life or death, I'm going to have to insist that we respect one another's boundaries and consult politely on major decisions."

"That's fair," I conceded.

"So, am I letting Bob out or not?" Jenny asked.

"Go ahead," Beth said. "I'm sorry, Bob, but we'll have to come back to things later. Tom is right that we may still be in danger. Would you mind zipping me up, Tom?"

She turned her back to me, and I obligingly zipped up her dress. It was tight enough to fit like a second skin, with a low-cut neckline and a very short skirt. Nice.

Jenny pulled Bob's gag off, and he immediately joined the conversation. "What happened? Did someone die? What's going on with these messages?"

We explained what we could as we got him untied, and escorted them both upstairs after they were dressed. Then Jenny and I retreated to our own room, and took a quick shower together to wash off the blood.

"Beth's really hung up on her whole dominant persona thing, isn't she?" Jenny said as she stepped into the shower.

"Yeah. I'm not sure if she's just that into it, or if she's terrified and holding onto the role to keep from breaking down."

"Think she'll cause trouble?"

"If this group stays together for any length of time? Probably. But I'm thinking posturing and arguments, not violence."

"Maybe. I don't know, I get weird vibes from her. Think you could take her?"

"She's not exactly a martial arts master," I pointed out.

"No, I mean hypnotize her. Make her your little bitch. Wouldn't it be hot to turn a neurotic dom like her into your happy little submissive slut?"

I chuckled. "You know, you're acting kind of fixated on her. Looking for a slave sister?"

Jenny flushed. "Maybe. I did tell you I'm bi, right? But I guess it's a bad idea."

"Yes, Jenny, turning a hypno fetish meetup into a mind control competition would be a very bad idea. Not to mention the moral issues. I only do that kind of thing to people who want it."

Jenny bit her lip, but didn't say anything else.

We both dressed in practical blue jeans and tee shirts, and made our way over to the game room. The other five members of the group were already there, but it sounded like half of them were still coming to grips with the situation. I paused in the entrance to study them for a moment.

Beth had added black combat boots and glossy black gloves to her ensemble, and cinched an equipment belt around her waist. The whip and handcuffs hanging from her belt weren't likely to be good

for much, but the taser showed that she was at least trying. Pity she'd come prepared for problematic guests and not monsters.

Bob knelt on the carpet next to Beth's chair, and she kept a proprietary hand on his shoulder. I suppose he didn't hold it against her that she'd left him tied up when there was a fight going on? I didn't know much about him, just that he was into bondage and masochism on top of being hypnotized. He was kind of overweight too, and in last night's conversation he'd come off as pretty nerdy and insecure. One of those guys who constantly tries to kiss up to every woman in sight, and is too terrified of what they might think to ever dare stand up for himself.

Earl could barely fit into his clothes with all the muscle he'd put on. He was wearing cowboy boots, blue jeans and a flannel shirt, with that pistol in a holster on his belt, and looking imperturbable as always. He had a definite good-old-boy vibe, and he'd apparently driven here instead catching a plane like the rest of us. I suddenly wondered if he had a gun rack in his battered old pickup truck.

Sara, the cute redhead who'd paired up with him for the night, was sitting in his lap looking scared and stressed. I noted with some interest that while she'd put on normal clothes she still wore a leather collar. Last night she'd said she was still in college, studying for some liberal arts degree while working as a waitress part-time. I wasn't sure where she'd even gotten the money for this trip, and I wasn't expecting much from her.

By process of elimination the last woman must be Amanda, but her appearance had changed dramatically. Last night she'd been a thirtysomething office worker with stringy brown hair and an extra forty pounds around the middle. Now she had a pleasantly curvy figure, and a long mane of wavy blonde hair that nearly reached her waist. Unlike the rest of the group she was still dressed in a nightshirt and shorts, and she looked completely lost. She'd also been crying recently, which made sense considering she'd paired off with Dave last night.

Earl, Beth and I were all doms. Amanda had introduced herself as a switch, while Jenny, Sara and Bob were all submissives. The group dynamics here were potentially fraught, but it could be worse. At least the would-be doms didn't outnumber the subs, as happened all too often at this sort of gathering. But whether we could get along in a high-stress situation remained to be seen.

"Did we miss anything?" I asked as I entered with Jenny on my arm, and claimed the remaining love seat. Jenny eyed Bob and Sara for a moment, and elected to sit next to me like a normal girlfriend. Was there supposed to be some kind of statement in that? Status games between submissives can get weird, and hard to read from the outside. But the way she'd chosen a t-shirt that could barely contain her new breasts and a short skirt that showed off her sculpted legs definitely sent a message.

"We were just comparing notes on the System," Earl said. "It looks like we're all seeing the same screens."

"What are we going to do?" Amanda said, looking up from the phone in her hands. "The news is all talking about the System, but no one seems to know what's happening. And there are already reports of people being attacked."

"We obviously can't stay here," Beth put in. "There are more animals in the woods."

That was an understatement. The vacation home Beth had rented for this meeting was up in the hill country of northern Alabama. The scenery was nice, but now all those tall hills and forested valleys would be a deadly trap. This whole area was teeming with wildlife, and the handful of vacationers, hunters and farmers living nearby weren't going to hold out for long. Not if that giant possum was just the tip of the iceberg.

“We should drive out as soon as there’s enough light,” I agreed. “But the nearest town is barely a wide spot in the road. I suppose we could press on to someplace big enough to have an airport, and try to get flights home. But that’ll be at least a hundred miles, and there’s no telling whether planes will even be flying.”

“The last place you want to be in a crisis is the middle of a city,” Earl declared. “The minute the power goes out you’re surrounded by a mob. But what really concerns me is this adventure zone business. Be real ironic if we high-tail it out of here, and end up someplace worse.”

“Oh! There’s a System map!” Jenny exclaimed. “It shows... whoa. These adventure zones are huge.”
“System, map.”

Sure enough, the obvious command opened a map of the surrounding area, overlaid with a System message.

Map Service Activated

Since your civilization has already developed the technology to make accurate, interactive maps universally available, the System is pleased to offer a simple overlay showing Adventure Zones, Points of Interest and other special features. Please note that the geographic data shown in this view is drawn from your phone’s default map provider, and will not be updated if your Internet access fails. Local data providers should consult the System API for further integration options.

“The System offers Google Maps integration?” I said incredulously.

“Doesn’t everything?” Jenny joked.

“I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. If the System can integrate with our brains, figuring out our computers probably isn’t much of a stretch. But it’s still kind of surreal.”

I closed the notice, and turned my attention to the map. Okay, how bad was this?

The screen showed a perfectly normal-looking road map, only there were a couple of extra buttons to toggle different overlays. Hitting one that said ‘Show Adventure Zones’ overlaid the map of the immediate area with amber lines that bore little numbers, like the contour lines on a topographical map.

I zoomed out, and frowned. An enormous blob labeled Deep South Safari Zone stretched from Charleston in the East to Shreveport in the West, and extended as far north as Nashville. The southern fringe didn’t quite reach the Gulf Coast, but there was only about thirty miles of clearance.

That would have been bad enough, but it wasn’t the only one in sight. Another blob labeled Great Rocky Mountain Zone extended from El Paso to well north of the Canadian border, engulfing the majority of eight states. Smaller blobs with labels like Big Sky Contact Zone, Great Lakes Aquatic Zone and Blazing Barrens Survival Zone covered most of the rest of the continent, and more of them decorated the surrounding oceans. Only a few of the most heavily populated areas were left blank, along with a few coastal regions and some narrow strips of space wedged in between adventure zones.

“So, uh... I guess we’d better do some serious power leveling?” Jenny suggested.

“The cities are fucked,” Earl said. “Pardon my French. But everyone who sees this is going to run there, and the supplies won’t last long. Not with all the farmland in the country overrun with monsters.”

“It can’t be that bad, can it?” Amanda protested. “I mean, the army has guns and stuff. They can fight, can’t they?”

I considered that. “Depends on how fast the monsters repopulate, I think. I have trouble imagining a giant animal that’s any threat to tanks, but they only have so much ammunition. It takes a lot of industrial power to keep a modern military machine running, and no one was prepared for this kind of crisis. If this is a one-time change and then the monsters have to breed normally it won’t be too bad. But if they respawn like in a video game the army will run out of parts and ammo in a few weeks.”

“Earl, I don’t suppose you have an end of the world bunker?” Beth asked.

The burly man chuckled. “Not so quick to poke fun now, are you? Well, I know the sheriff and the local militia boys, and there’s a few preppers in my neck of the woods. I reckon I could swing an invite for a few guests if we can get there. But that’s a three-hundred-mile drive.”

“Anyone have a better idea?” I asked. “I live in Dallas, so that’s no good.”

“Why do we want to go further into flyover country?” Amanda objected. “Won’t that just get us killed? Look, the whole area from Washington to Boston is clear. My dad has a penthouse in New York, and I’m sure he’ll be hiring guards and buying supplies as soon as he sees what’s happening. We could just run down to Huntsville and catch a plane back to civilization before everything goes crazy.”

“Would your father really take in the whole group?” Beth asked skeptically.

Amanda shrugged. “Does he need to? I mean, I can probably talk him into it. We got all those extra points, and the people in the big cities didn’t, right? But there’s no reason we all have to stick together.”

“Weren’t you listening, woman?” Earl said. “The cities are death traps. Once the power goes out—”

“Why would the power go out?” Amanda interrupted. “Do you think bears and wolves are going to climb up utility poles to bite the power lines? Power plants already have fences. They’ll just send soldiers out to guard them.”

“How are they going to ship in food if the roads are overrun with monsters?” Earl countered. “Where are they going to put all the refugees?”

“Will there really be a lot of refugees?” Beth asked. “It looks like all the big cities are outside of the adventure zones, and I’m sure most of those country rednecks will be too stubborn to leave.”

“Hey, now. Just because they live in the country doesn’t make them stupid,” Jenny objected.

I tuned out the growing argument, and studied my map. It zoomed in just like it would on a computer, and I quickly found I-79 and followed it up to the area of the vacation home. We were at the top of a ridge line, which gave the place a spectacular view but also meant the access road was a dangerously steep maze of switchbacks.

There was a contour line marked “2” that encompassed most of the ridge, but there were a few little ovals marked “3” scattered around the area. It was hard to be sure with just a quick glance, but it sure looked like they were concentrated in the most isolated parts of the countryside. They were definitely growing, too. As I watched two of them merged into a larger blob, and then a new one appeared.

Scrolling south, I found a town I remembered seeing a few miles down I-79. Sure enough, the numbers were lower there. A contour line marked “1” barely encroached on the buildings, with a “0” line a couple of blocks further in. Inside that boundary, the heart of the town still had a white background instead of yellow.

For now. All of the lines were moving, slowly but surely. The System wanted this to be a level ten zone, and there were plenty of animals in the woods that it could warp into monsters to meet that standard. Was the low danger level in town because there were fewer animals there? Or because the locals were already organizing, and working to kill off the dangerous creatures? In a place like this everyone has a gun.

Whatever the case, we needed to take advantage of the situation while we still could. So I let Earl finish making some point about the limited supply of replacement transformers, waited for Amanda to reply with a snide swipe about paranoid gun nuts, and interrupted.

"Hey! Enough already. We don't need to agree on any of that, we just need to get out of the woods in one piece. Look, there's a town a little ways down the road that seems to be clear of monsters so far. Why don't we all drive down there together, get breakfast and check out the news. By then the government should be making whatever emergency announcements they're going to, and we can find out how bad things are in the rest of the area."

"What about getting to the airport?" Amanda said suspiciously.

"Anyone who wants to go with Earl will need to go through Huntsville anyway," I pointed out. "Check your map, you'll see it's the safest route to get to a major freeway. Once we get there anyone who wants to get on a plane can head to the airport, and the rest of us can keep driving."

"That mean you're taking me up on the offer, Tom?" Earl said.

"Yes, unless I think of a better idea in the next few hours. Jenny, what do you say?"

"I'm sticking with you, Tom," she assured me. "I want to call my family in a bit, and see how they're doing. But I'm not trying to get to Los Angeles with all this going on."

"Bob and I will need to discuss things," Beth said. "But we're with you at least as far as Huntsville. What about you, Sara?"

The younger girl started, and shrank back against Earl's chest. "I'm staying with Earl," she insisted.

"Sounds like a plan," Earl said.

"Finally," Jenny said. "It's almost dawn. Should we all get packed up?"

"We'll be ready in ten," Earl said confidently.

"I'm going to need a little longer than that," Amanda protested. "Oh! Um, what are we going to do about, you know, the body?"

"We'll report it when we get to town," Beth said. "I'm sure they'll take care of it."

Earl and I shared an uncomfortable look, but neither of us said anything. I felt bad for the guy, but there wasn't much we could do for him. I don't think there was even a shovel in the house. I had my doubts about whether the local government would have the resources to recover every corpse in these woods, but I didn't see anything to be done about it right now.

"Oh. Okay," Amanda said, happy for an excuse not to think about it any further.

Amanda and Jenny hurried off to their rooms, and Beth and Bob only hesitated a moment before deciding to risk going back downstairs. I was about to follow Jenny when Earl sent Sara off, and waved me over.

"Could I have a quick word, Tom?" He asked.

"Sure. What's up?"

He lowered his voice a bit. "Just wanted to see if you're calling dibs on anyone. No need to get into unnecessary conflict."

I blinked, completely confused for a moment, before I realized what he must be talking about.

"Just Jenny," I said. "She looks like a keeper."

"That she does," Earl agreed. "Sara's cuter, but not as useful."

"Well, I'm honestly a lot more concerned about surviving the next week than anything else. If you want to make a play for them I'm not going to get in your way. Crazy leftist chicks aren't my type anyway."

"Yeah, they'd be a handful," Earl admitted. "Amanda's just gonna run off to daddy and die when New York goes under, unless she gets herself a minder with some sense. But I'd bet dollars to doughnuts

Beth will be trying to get us to fight over who gets her in a couple of days. That girl wants it, she just doesn't want to admit it."

Oh. So he was one of those guys, huh?

"I suppose it could happen," I conceded. "You can tell she's having trouble keeping it together. Jenny is already trying to set us up, but I'm not really interested. If I pick up another girl on this trip it's going to be some farm-raised tomboy who knows how to shoot."

Earl chuckled. "I hear you. Plenty of those in my neck of the woods, too. Keep up that wizard doc thing and you'll have them all over you. Say, what does it take to get into that, anyway?"

"It's three points to learn your first spell, and have the power to cast it a few times," I told him. "Just ask the System for a spell that does what you're interested in, and check the prerequisites. But if you want more than a holdout weapon or a couple of utility spells it gets really expensive. I sunk half of my points into magic, and I'm still not sure it's better than a gun."

"I'm pretty sure I remember seeing a gun store on the drive in," Earl said. "We'll get you armed up, and then you can keep the magic for an ace in the hole."

"Sounds good," I agreed.

He clapped me on the shoulder, and headed off to his room.

I watched him go, and silently shook my head.

System, how do I buy a defense against mind control?