

I was more than a little annoyed to find myself spending scarce resources on anti-backstabbing contingencies, but at least it was cheap. I suppose mental influence must be inherently difficult to pull off under the System's rules, because a single point of improved willpower made me basically immune to my own hypnotism ability.

Jenny was more amused than worried when I told her about the incident.

"I saw that one coming a mile away," she said as she packed up her laptop. "Did you notice how everyone carefully didn't bring up the subject of what they spent their points on? I bet Beth bought something like that too."

"It wouldn't surprise me," I admitted. "You'd better buy yourself some defense while you have the chance."

She shook her head. "Sorry, I blew all my points turning myself into action girl. Which I'm thinking was a mistake now, because having a monster right in your face is scary as shit. I really wish I'd gone healer, so someone else could have that job. But anyway, I'm all out of mental points. Guess you'll have to keep me away from the others until you can brainwash me properly."

"You say that so casually."

"Hey, I know what I like. Besides, you're doing pretty good on showing me I can trust you. Do you think it would actually work?"

"Giving you orders to ignore anyone else's influence? I'm not sure. It would probably help, but I don't know how many points they've spent on whatever abilities they bought. You really spent all of your points?"

"I kept one universal point as an emergency reserve, in case we run into a problem I didn't think of and I need to buy a new ability to survive. But I'm not blowing it on something that would screw up my favorite fetish."

"I suppose that's fair," I allowed.

"Darn right it is. If you're really worried about someone else moving in on me then you'd better guard your territory. Now, are we sharing a ride?"

"Isn't your car a rental?" I asked.

"Yeah, but does that matter? I was never that into disaster stories, but it sounds like you've put some thought into it. What are the odds my credit rating is going to matter in a week?"

"Oh. Hm."

I had to think about that one for a minute. Giant animals were a problem, but they weren't going to cause the end of civilization. Not in a country with as many guns in civilian hands as America. A lot of people would die, all the monsters would get shot and life would go on.

But it sounded like the monsters would get tougher over time. What if they got tough enough to shrug off small arms fire? Alternatively, what would happen when the System ran out of animals to mutate? Would it switch to plant monsters? They'd be a lot more resistant to bullets. Or insect swarms? Or could it just conjure up monsters out of thin air if it needed to?

Even if it could, that would take time.

"We don't know enough yet to answer that," I finally said. "But even in the worst case, it will take time for things to fall apart. Credit cards will keep working as long as the telecom system is up, and it's a lot more rugged than most people realize. Big companies aren't going to just give up and fall apart, either. They'll try to find some way to stay in business. Even if Earl is right, realistically it would take weeks for civilization to collapse."

“So even in the middle of an apocalypse I still need to worry about bills and credit card balances? That figures.” She pulled out her phone, and started tapping away on it.

I zipped up my suitcase, and started packing my own laptop. “Looking for a rental place?”

“Yeah. Seven people in seven cars is a dumb way to travel. I’d rather ride shotgun with you, preferably with an actual shotgun. Ugh. The closest lot is in Huntsville.”

“I’m not surprised. Well, look, if the roads are clear we’ll be there before lunch, and we can both drop off our little econobox rental cars and find something more suited for a Mad Max road trip.”

“A tank sounds good. And if the roads are full of monsters?”

“Then everyone will have more urgent things to worry about than rental car returns. Ready to go?”

Getting to our cars was a nerve-wracking evolution. Earl and I were the only people in the group who could really defend ourselves, and there were a million directions an attack could come from. We had to take a flight of stairs down the hillside to the parking area, passing right next to a dense tangle of trees and underbrush along the way.

The normal sounds of the outdoors were a lot more menacing than usual today. Every creak of the trees sounded like another giant animal creeping up to attack us. I kept my eyes moving as I reached the parking area, and started for my car.

“Was that a gunshot?” Jenny asked.

I listened, and a flurry of sharp cracks echoed across the valley.

“I think so,” I said. “But they’re miles away, and I’m not even sure what direction they’re coming from. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“I wasn’t saying we should,” Jenny corrected. “We’ve got our own problems. Okay, this is me.”

Jenny started loading suitcases into her rental car, and I paused to cover her back. Earl and Sara passed me on their way to his pickup truck, and sure enough the moment the cab was open he pulled a rifle off the gun rack. Then he climbed up into the truck bed.

“I’ll keep watch while everyone gets ready to go,” he announced. “Sara, put all our stuff in the back seat.”

“Thanks, Earl,” I said. “Stay safe, Jenny.”

I kissed her cheek, and hurried over to my own car. I’d been one of the last to arrive, and the lot wasn’t very big, so I’d ended up parked behind Amanda’s car. I loaded my suitcases in the trunk, then got in and turned the key.

I’ll admit, I gave a little sigh of relief when the engine started. I’ve read so many disaster stories where the author uses some lame excuse to make technology magically stop working, I was half-expecting a problem no matter how nonsensical it was.

I put the car in gear, and did a three-point turn to face the entrance. It wasn’t until I finished that I realized we’d never had any discussion about how to organize this expedition, and there wasn’t much room for rearranging cars. Especially when Amanda immediately pulled up behind me.

“Guess we’re doing random order,” I grumbled. “Well, might as well get this over with.”

This part of northern Alabama was pretty serious hill country, covered in ridge lines that ran up into the Appalachian Mountains to the northeast. I kept my speed down as I negotiated the steep gravel road, with its sharp switchbacks every few hundred yards. At one point I saw a squirrel the size of a bobcat watching me from the trees. At another the shadow of some impossibly huge bird passed over my car. But nothing attacked me, and soon I was pulling out onto the two-lane blacktop road that ran up and down the valley.

A winding road through dense forest was only a minor improvement over the driveway, but at least I could drive a little faster. I kept an eye on the rear-view mirror until the whole group appeared behind me, and then accelerated to thirty miles per hour. Slow enough to react if something big wandered out onto the road, but fast enough to get us where we were going in decent time.

The road was deserted. Every now and then we'd pass a driveway leading off into the woods, to other vacation homes or the houses of local residents. But there was enough underbrush that I only caught occasional glimpses of buildings.

It was eerie, not seeing any people. Surely they weren't already dead? Well, it was barely seven a.m. Maybe the early risers were all watching the news and playing with their status screens, trying to figure out what was going on?

I was still pondering that when a naked catgirl ran into the road in front of me, waving her arms frantically. I slammed on the brakes, and she rushed to my window.

"Help! Mom needs help! She fell down and she can't get up!"

I hit the door unlock button. "Get in."

Instead of reaching for the door behind me she did an acrobatic forward roll across the hood of my car, and went for the front passenger door. Then she frowned, fumbling for a moment like she didn't know how to work a car door. I was about to say something when she finally found the catch, and the door opened.

"Aha! Hands are awesome!" She said, sliding into the car. "How do I make it stay closed?"

"Just grab the handle and pull hard," I said. "As long as it's moving fast when it shuts it'll stick."

She slammed the door shut with both hands, and pointed at a driveway just ahead. "That way! You can fix her, right?"

"I can try," I said, carefully turning off onto the driveway. "She just fell over? Can she still talk?"

"Yeah. She was really surprised when she poured breakfast, and Bitsy and I came running out on two feet. I'm Mitsi, by the way. What's your name?"

"Tom," I replied. "So, let me guess. You were a house cat yesterday, weren't you?"

"Uh huh! But I told the voice I want to take care of mommy, not eat her, and then I woke up like this!"

I glanced at the rearview mirror, and confirmed that the rest of the group was following me up the driveway. Then I stole a better look at my passenger.

She was tiny. Maybe three and a half feet tall, and if she'd been dressed I could easily have mistaken her for a child. But there was nothing childlike about those hips, or the perky little breasts rising from her chest. She had the classic cat ears and tail of an anime catgirl, but she also had a light coat of fur that covered most of her body. Grey and black stripes were visible on her sides and back, while her belly and chest were white. Her face, breasts and hands all showed pale skin instead of fur, and she had claws instead of fingernails. Weirdly enough, her hair was the same calico pattern as her fur, with a white streak down the middle and a mix of grey and black to both sides.

"Well, I'm sure she'll be happy about that," I said. "Once she realizes that you're still Mitsi."

"Yeah, we'll keep those stupid dogs away. Hey, did the voice talk to humans, too?"

"Yes," I told her. "But it gave us so many things to choose from that most people will need some time to figure out what to do."

"That's lame. Why are humans always so slow? Oh, that's home!"

She pointed at the dilapidated house at the end of the driveway, as if there might be some confusion. There was a big graveled area in front of the garage, and I pulled up to park next to an ancient

Ford sedan. When I opened my door to get out Mitsi dove right over me, scampered up the side of the parked car and ended up on top of it.

“Come on come on hurry!”

I climbed out of the car, took a quick look around and followed her towards the front door. Which, I noted, was hanging open.

Amanda’s car pulled up behind me, followed by Beth’s. The dominatrix poked her head out. “What’s happening?”

“Medical emergency,” I called. “Tell Earl we might need him.”

Mitsi led me inside, where a black-furred catgirl was crouched over an old woman in a bathrobe.

“I got help, Bitsy!” Mitsi announced.

“Good. Hurry, come fix her,” the other catgirl called.

I had to suppress a smile at their antics. Maybe this System thing wasn’t all bad. Although I hadn’t missed the part where they’d had a choice about whether to become catgirls or feral cat monsters. I had a feeling a lot of abusive pet owners were regretting their life choices this morning.

“Ma’am? Can you hear me?” I asked, kneeling next to her.

She was at least in her seventies, judging from the wrinkles and grey hair, with that shrunken look that old people get when their whole body is starting to fail.

“What?” Her eyes fluttered, and she looked up at me. “Are you really there, young man? I can hardly see through all these words.”

“If you read the messages they should go away,” I told her. “But yes, I’m really here, ma’am. It looks like you took a bad fall.”

“I had the strangest dream,” she said. “I thought Mitsi and Bitsy turned into little girls.”

“We did, mommy!” Bitsy said insistently. “That’s what I keep trying to tell you.”

“I must still be dreaming,” the woman said, her eyes vague and unfocused.

There was no blood, which meant my limited healing magic had no obvious target, and she obviously wasn’t all there mentally. What did that mean? A stroke? A heart attack? She’d certainly gotten a hell of a shock this morning.

Fortunately Earl came hustling in with his first aid kit about then, and started checking her vitals. I backed off to let him work.

“Should I call 911?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I’ve been listening to dispatch. They’re so backed up it could be hours before they get here, assuming nothing eats them. Can your spells do anything about a fractured hip?”

“No, I have to see what I’m working on. But I’ve got some points left, so maybe I can fix that. Give me a minute.”

I pulled up my status screen, and went digging through the magic options. There was a body sense spell for diagnosing medical problems, and it didn’t have any hard prerequisites. I took that, and gave it a try.

Then I frowned, and used it on myself and Tom in quick succession.

“You’re right about the hip, but there’s something else wrong too. Some kind of systemic thing, affecting her blood and one of her organs? I might have to learn medicine to interpret the feedback from this spell.”

“That might be enough of a clue,” Tom said. “Ma’am, are you diabetic?”

She mumbled something indistinct.

“Girls, does she poke herself with sharp things a lot?” I asked the catgirls.

They looked at each other, and nodded.

"Yeah, it's really weird," Bitsy said.

"She's always poking herself," Mitsi added. "Do you need her pokey stuff?"

Now Tom was fighting not to smile. "Yes, can you show me where she keeps it?"

"I'll get started on her hip," I said.

My healing spell was good enough to deal with broken bones, even major ones, as long as I could sense what I was doing. The diagnostic spell took care of that part, but the mana cost was huge. I took my time with it, making sure to get it right. It must have taken several minutes, because by the time I opened my eyes again Jenny was standing guard over me.

Bitsy was crouched next to me, anxiously wringing her hands. "Is she going to be okay now?"

The healing must have put some strain on the woman's system, because she'd passed out.

"I fixed her hip, so she'll be able to walk again when she wakes up. But I don't like the way she passed out so easily. Tom?"

"Her blood sugar is dangerously low, and I don't have any way to rig an IV. We need to get her to a hospital."

"No!" Mitsi protested. "Don't take mommy away!"

"You can come with her," I assured them. "Just put some clothes on."

"Clothes?" Mitsi asked.

"Like this?" Bitsy tugged at my shirt.

"Yes, like that," I agreed.

"But we don't have any clothes," they protested.

"I've got a couple of shirts you can borrow," I told them. "As small as you two are, they'll fit you like dresses."

The catgirls exchanged another of their looks.

"Are you sure she has to go away?" Mitsi asked.

"She needs help we can't give her here," Tom said seriously. "She could die if she doesn't get it."

"I don't want mommy to die," Bitsy said.

"She's not going to die," Mitsi said firmly, putting a hand on Bitsy's shoulder. "These guys are going to take her to get help, and the people in funny clothes will fix everything just like when we get sick. What do we need to do?"

We ended up bundling her into the back seat of Beth's car, while Jenny dug out a couple of my tee shirts for the catgirls and helped them figure out how to put one on.

"I'll lead them to the hospital, and make sure they get her into treatment as soon as possible," Earl said. "But there's no reason for the rest of you to wait around for an hour while we're doing that."

"I remember seeing a Denny's right on the main road through town," Amanda offered. "We could meet up there."

"Sounds like a plan," Earl said. "See you soon."

They sped off, leaving a much-diminished group behind. Sara was apparently riding with Earl, so it was just Bob, Amanda, Jenny and I left.

I shook my head. "Catgirls. The world's anime fans are going to go nuts."

"They're a little high on the furry scale for most people," Jenny pointed out. "I mean, I'd do one, but I'm a complete pervert."

"Eww!" Amanda exclaimed. "Don't be gross."

"See?" Jenny said.

“There are a lot more furrries out there than you might think,” Bob put in. “I bet they’ll be pretty popular. But think about the big picture. Does the same thing happen with all pets? What about farm animals, or strays?”

“Yes, and how many points do they get?” I added. “Do they have the same starting total as us, or do they get buffed to the same level as the animals in the area? The way Mitsi was bouncing around was pretty impressive.”

“This is just too weird for me,” Amanda complained. “Can we get out of these woods before anything else goes wrong? With my luck the hillbillies are probably turning into mutant cannibals by now.”

“Look out, I think I hear banjos,” Bob joked.

I sighed, but decided there was nothing to be gained by pointing out their casual bigotry. “Right. Let’s get moving.”

I took point again, but this time Jenny managed to end up behind me. By now people were apparently starting to venture outdoors, and we passed the occasional truck or van on the road. At one point we even had to work our way around a cluster of tow trucks and police cars at an accident scene.

It almost seemed normal, until I realized I was looking at the results of a car running into a giant animal of some sort. The creature was thoroughly dead, but the impact had really done a number on the car. I couldn’t tell if there were any survivors or not.

After that I kept my speed down, but even so it wasn’t long before we reached the town I’d been aiming for. At first glance it looked like just a wide stretch of road with a few stores along it, but my map told me several of those side streets led off into neighborhoods dotted with clusters of businesses. There was even a Walmart off on the other side of town, next to another highway.

There was a bit more traffic here, so I sped up to a more normal speed and went looking for that Denny’s. I found it right where I expected to, a few blocks from the edge of town. The lights were on and there were cars in the parking lot, so it was apparently open for business. But when I glanced at what was across the street I suddenly lost all interest in breakfast.

I veered across the deserted highway, slowing as I crossed the painted median and turned into a parking lot. It was almost entirely empty, which was a lucky break for us. I had no doubt the place would be packed in an hour.

I parked at the front of the lot, near one of the ladders a couple of teenage boys were using to hang a paper sign above the door. I’d barely gotten out of the car when Amanda pulled up beside me with her window rolled down, and started shouting at me.

“What the hell, Tom? Have you gone crazy? We could have been killed!”

I glanced back at the street, where exactly two cars were visible aside from our own party. “Nobody said you had to follow me, Amanda. You can always go down to the next light and make a U-turn if you need to drive like a little old lady.”

Jenny hopped out of her car, and stared up at the sign. “Aw, yeah. That’s what I’m talking about. Good spot, Tom.”

Bob was right behind her. “What are we doing here, Tom? The restaurant is over there.”

I pointed at the signs.

"You're welcome to go get a table if you want," I said. "Me, I'm arming up while I've got the chance."

"Hell, yeah," Jenny agreed. "Fuck fighting giant monsters with lamps and kitchen knives. I want an Uzi!"

"That would be fun to watch," I said, smiling at her childish enthusiasm. "Come on, let's see what they have in stock."

I put an arm around Jenny's shoulders, and led her into the store.

"Howdy, folks," came a cheerful call from deeper inside as we entered. "Welcome to Ol' Pete's Apocalypse Sale."

"You're open early," Jenny said, heading for the counter in the back. A heavysset, balding man was sitting there, dressed in camo with a very big gun laid across the counter. "What's the sale?"

"Today only, all items are double list price," he said. "Seeing as how there's no telling if I'll ever get another shipment. But there's no background checks, no paperwork and no pesky waiting period. Just cash up front, and the weapon of your choice in your hands when you walk out the door."

"Sounds like a good deal to me," I said. "Are you taking debit cards? It looks like the banking system is still running for now."

"Cash, debit and gold are all fine, but no credit cards or checks," he said cheerfully. "What can I do you for?"

I looked over the racks of guns on display. He had a lot of inventory for a small-town gun store.

"I'm thinking something in 7.62 with a good magazine capacity," I said thoughtfully. "Considering how big that possum we ran into was, I don't even want to think about what the bears and wolves must look like now."

"I want an Uzi," Jenny repeated. "Or maybe a sniper rifle, so I can shoot things without getting close to them."

Pete chuckled. "I'm afraid I don't carry automatic weapons, little lady. What kind of shooting experience do you have?"

"None," she admitted. "But I put a point into marksmanship this morning, so I'm not completely hopeless. I guess I should stick to something easy?"

"That would be my suggestion, ma'am. I'm guessing a little recoil ain't no concern?"

She grinned, and made a muscle. "What gave it away? Nah, I could arm wrestle a weightlifter now."

Pete nodded thoughtfully, and stepped out from behind the counter to pull a rifle off the wall. "I can offer a few suggestions, then. Most of my customers are after hunting rifles or Barbie guns, but 7.62 is popular enough that I keep some in stock. If you're interest in an AK-style weapon the Galil SAR here is a good choice. Thirty-round mag, rugged as all heck, nice and handy for tight spaces. Or if you want a more traditional layout there's the Ruger Mini-Thirty. It's a solid weapon and this one's scoped for hunting."

The jingling of the bells on the door distracted him from his spiel. Amanda and Bob crept into the store like a couple of soccer moms venturing into a biker bar, nervously trying to look in every direction at once.

"Morning, folks," Pete called. "I'll be right with you."

"We're with them," Bob said, nodding to me. "Wow, that's a lot of hardware. Do have any machine guns?"

Pete didn't actually roll his eyes, but I could tell it was an effort. "No, I don't carry weapons that are illegal to sell even to law enforcement. It's hard to run a business from a jail cell."

Amanda crept down the middle of the widest aisle in the store, eyeing the racked guns like they might jump off the shelf and attack her at any moment. “Do we really need to be here?”

Jenny took the Galil, a sleek black weapon that looked like an AK-47’s high-tech cousin, and struck a pose while pointing it at the ceiling. “You can wait in the car if the scary assault weapons are too much for you, Amanda. Me, I’m not leaving without some serious hardware.”

“Do you have multiples of either of these?” I asked. “It occurs to me that some standardization might be smart.”

Jenny and I tested the weight and feel of several different rifles, but we both ended up going with the Galil. It had a collapsible stock that made it easier to use in close quarters than a more traditional rifle, and we weren’t likely to be doing any long-range sharpshooting anyway. I added a couple of cleaning kits, a stack of thirty-round magazines and two big cases of ammo to the pile, and then we started looking at pistols.

Meanwhile Bob was having a field day. He kept babbling misused gun terminology in a way that made it obvious even to me that he had no idea what he was talking about, and ignored Pete’s obvious attempts to steer him towards a reasonable weapon. Instead he gravitated towards the biggest guns in the store, and then got some serious sticker shock when he was how expensive they were.

Jenny shook her head at his antics, and turned her attention back to the pistols.

“What do you think, Tom? Maybe I should get two of these?”

“The Hollywood two-gun thing doesn’t work in real life,” I warned her. “Your brain can only aim one gun at a time, and having a single weapon you point at each target is actually faster than trying to juggle two of them. Or at least, that’s the explanation I’ve read. But if you spent your points the way I think you did, a pair of combat knives seems like a good last-ditch option.”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’d really like a good spear, but I can’t imagine where we’d get one.”

“Why would you want a spear?” Amanda interrupted. “That sounds really primitive.”

“Because animals aren’t afraid of pistols,” Jenny pointed out. “If you shove a pointy stick in something’s face it will shy away from it, so you can hold it off while someone else kills it. If you point a pistol at the same monster you’ll put a couple of bullets into it while it jumps on you, and then it claws the shit out of you before it bleeds to death.”

“That’s a good point,” I agreed. “Some of these knives look like they’re meant for use as bayonets, or improvised spear points. I’ll add a couple to the pile, and see what I can find to use as a spear shaft.”

A pistol was just a backup weapon for me, in case I needed to defend myself when I was out of mana. So I kept things simple and went with the Glock 21, a reliable .45 caliber weapon with a 13-round magazine. Jenny originally gravitated towards the exotic high-powered handguns with massive bullets, but found to her frustration that her hands were too small to hold them comfortably. She was still mulling over the choice between .45 ACP and 10mm when the door opened, and a bunch of cosplayers trooped in.

The group was led by a couple of beefy guys dressed in chain mail and football padding, both carrying plywood shields. Behind them were a couple more big guys in camo-patterned hunting gear, a guy and girl in street clothes, and another girl in an outfit that reminded me of police riot gear. All of them were armed with a motley assortment of knives, spears, clubs, pistols and hunting rifles.

They looked awfully young to be out looking for trouble. I wasn’t sure if they were high school seniors or college freshmen, but I’d be surprised if any of them were old enough to drink. They were also a bit more multi-ethnic than I would have expected in a town like this – one of the big guys was Black, another looked Hispanic and the girl in street clothes was Asian.



"Hey, Pete!" The lead guy called. "Glad you're open. Can you hook us up with a couple of cheap rifles? The Dragonslayers are going to have a busy day today."

The proprietor looked up from showing Bob where to find magazines for the giant rifle he'd settled on. "Dale? What's all this about?"

"We're getting ready to head out and do some leveling," Dale declared confidently. "This is one launch day we're not going to miss."

Pete frowned. "Now Dale, this isn't like one of your games."

"We have character sheets, Mr. Dorner," the boy in normal clothes said. "There's got to be a way to advance."

"There is," I put in. "My group got attacked by a giant possum this morning, and when we killed it the body spawned a ball of enhancement points. But it wasn't worth much, and we lost a man doing it."

The group's leader turned to me. "You've already been fighting? I guess we need to get it in gear, then. I'm Dale Carver."

I shook his hand. "Tom Wilson. This is my girlfriend, Jennifer Sowel."

"Is that SCA gear?" Jenny asked. "The armor is nice, but you're going to need better shields. The big animals are strong enough to break wood pretty easily."

"It's on my list," Dale assured her.

"You've gotten XP?" The other boy put in. "How much? Which type of enhancement point did it convert to? How did you collect it?"

"This is Jason. He gets kind of worked up," Dale added.

"We've only seen it happen once, but we didn't do anything special," Jenny told him. "You just have to wait a few minutes, and glowing mist starts seeping out of the body and collects into a ball. Anyone who touches the ball starts absorbing enhancement points from it, but it takes some time. So you can't speed clear an area, and giving out equal XP shares is going to be a pain."

"That does sound like a hassle. How big was this thing? All we've seen in town is a couple of giant squirrels, and the deputies took care of them."

"It was huge," Bob put in. "It must have weighed a ton."

"Maybe six hundred pounds," I corrected, holding a hand out at shoulder height. "About this tall at the shoulder, so think really big bear. It was pretty aggressive, too. It saw someone through a window, and smashed right through it to get at him. It took half a dozen force missiles and about as many bullets to take it down."

"Sounds nasty," Dale said. "We need to get out ahead of this thing while the threat level is low, or we'll be up the creek without a paddle when the really bad stuff spawns. Are you folks going to be out hunting, too? Maybe we can work together."

"What? No, that's crazy," Amanda objected. "There is no way I'm going back out into those woods. As soon as these gun nuts are through spending all their money we're meeting back up with the rest of the group, and heading for Huntsville. I want to be on a plane home before dark."

The girl in the riot gear had drifted closer during the conversation, and now she finally spoke up.

"Haven't you heard? The government issued a shelter in place order half an hour ago. All flights are cancelled, and the highways are closed. We're supposed to hide in our homes until we get eaten."