

Amanda was pretty quick with her phone, and it only took her a minute to find the announcement. Sure enough, the government had panicked and ordered a 'temporary' shutdown of all inter-city travel. Apparently there were hundreds of reports coming in of cars being attacked on the roads, and several planes had crashed for reasons that were currently unclear.

"See?" The girl in armor said. "They're in panic mode. That's why I joined up with these dweebs."

"Hey!" Dale objected. "Be nice, or we'll send you back to your dad."

She rolled her eyes. "How far do you think you're going to get without me to handle the deputies? Half your crew is going to get sent home to mommy if anyone stops to question what you're doing. Anyway, I'm Sheryl Teak. You guys must be loaded if you're buying that whole stack of gear at once."

We made introductions, and I shrugged. "I'm not rich-rich, but being a single engineer who doesn't have any college debt makes it easy to pile up savings. This looks like a good time to spend some of it."

"Same here," Jenny said. "Although I'm in computers, not engineering. You guys have some guts, going out looking for trouble on purpose. But I think it's the right move. If we're stuck in an adventure zone we need to level up fast before things get worse."

"I've had the same thought," I said. "But there's no way the police will be enforcing that travel ban for any length of time. Manning a roadblock on the edge of town is just asking to get attacked. Besides, they'll have to let the trucks roll or everyone will starve."

"I'll know more about that in a couple of hours," Sheryl said. "Last I heard the city cops were still running around like chickens with their heads cut off."

"We're not going to try anything too ambitious right now," Dale put in. "We're going to start with just a sweep along the edge of town, to see if anything dangerous is lurking around."

"Did any of you take magic?" Jenny asked.

Both of the teenagers in street clothes raised their hands.

"I can do some healing," said the girl.

"I've got lightning magic," said Jason.

"Not bad," I said. "I've got healing and some basic attack spells. You know, we should keep in touch. We need to finish shopping, meet up with the rest of our group and figure out what we're doing, but I think Jenny's got a good point. We may want to coordinate our efforts later on."

"Let me give you my phone number," Dale said.

"Mine too," Sheryl added. "If the phones go out Pete here can tell you where to find us."

We exchanged numbers, and went back to our shopping. The kids haggled a bit over a couple of cheap rifles, and picked up a few hundred rounds of ammo before heading out. Amanda watched them go, and wrung her hands. Once they were safely out of earshot she turned to me.

"Don't you think someone should stop them? They're going to get themselves killed."

I shrugged. "They're old enough to make their own decisions, and Dale seems to have a good head on his shoulders."

"Someone has to find out what the monsters are like," Bob put in. "Better them than me."

"They should leave that to the professionals," Amanda objected.

"No one is a professional at hunting monsters," I replied.

"Actually, I think most of them are in a gaming group together," Jenny said. "Wouldn't that make them at least amateur monster hunters?"

"The real world ain't no fantasy, miss," Pete said. "Odds are some of them boys won't be walking through my door again. But that's life. Now, it seems to me you two are in need of some web gear."

I'd dropped eight grand on equipment before we were done, and Jenny had more or less matched me. But we were both set up with helmets, several sets of rugged camo-pattern clothing, rifles, pistols, combat knives and the assorted harness needed to carry it all, plus a good load of spare magazines and plenty of pockets and attachment points for other gear. Unfortunately Pete didn't have any body armor in stock, so we were still glass canons. But I was feeling at least somewhat prepared for danger.

Bob contented himself with his rifle, which was apparently some crazy .50-caliber super-gun, and a few spare magazines. Amanda dithered and fretted and made excuses, but eventually broke down and bought a little 9mm pistol. Unlike Jenny she hadn't put any enhancement points into strength, and didn't feel confident of handling a heavier weapon.

By the time we'd rung up all our purchases more customers were trickling in, and Pete was starting to get busy. We hauled our new gear out to the cars, and crossed the street to the parking lot in front of the restaurant. Amanda and Bob immediately went inside, leaving their new weapons in their cars.

I paused in the parking lot, studying the trees at the back of the lot. The view was blocked by greenery, but my map showed that we were basically on the edge of town here. There was a residential street off to the right with a bunch of houses on it, and a block of businesses down the road to my left. But there was a finger of undeveloped land reaching in from the city limit to the back of the lot the restaurant was built on.

"That makes me nervous," I mused.

Jenny followed my gaze, and frowned. "Yeah, good point. Hang on a sec."

She jogged over to the entrance, and darted inside for a moment. When she came back she was smiling.

"The manager says it's fine if we want to carry," she announced. "It's probably against some company policy, but she's feeling kind of nervous too. All the farms around here are getting attacked by monsters, and no one knows if the town is safe."

"Excellent. In that case keep your pistol on your belt, and I'll do the same."

"Okay. But I don't actually have any bullets in this gun yet."

"Me neither," I said. "Grab some magazines and a box of ammo, and I'll show you how to load them while we wait."

Amanda's reaction when I sat down at the table and casually set a box of .45 ACP in front of me was hilarious. Bob got a wide-eyed look as well, and started sweating and looking around like he was afraid the SWAT team would burst in at any moment. But our waitress, a middle-aged black woman with a thick southern accent, didn't bat an eye.

After we'd placed our orders I pulled an empty magazine out of my pocket, and showed Jenny how to feed rounds into it one by one. It was a tedious process with high-capacity magazines, but obviously necessary. She watched for a moment, and then started working on one of her own magazines.

"What are you doing?" Bob hissed.

"Loading magazines," I said calmly. "It's going to take a while considering how many of them we bought, but until the first few are done those guns are just awkwardly-shaped clubs."

"You're going to get us in trouble," he insisted.

"We got permission," Jenny interjected.

"We'll be fine as long as we don't cause trouble," I said. "This is Alabama, not New York. In case you haven't noticed, we aren't the only people here carrying. Besides, the local sheriff seems to be the sort who encourages self-defense."

Bob frowned. "How would you know that? You've never been here before, have you?"

“Duh. Sheryl’s obviously his daughter, and he’s letting her hang out with a bunch of gun-toting friends instead of making her hide in the station,” Jenny said.

“It’s probably safer,” I pointed out. “Or it would be if they weren’t planning to go out looking for trouble. A town this size won’t have all that many police, and the sheriff’s office would be even smaller. If they’re getting run ragged the station house may be down to just a dispatcher and a clerk or two.”

Amanda scoffed. “Who cares about any of that? We need to get out of here while we still can! How are we going to get around this travel ban?”

“That sounds like a topic for the whole group,” I said. “Why don’t we hold off on the brainstorming for a few minutes until the others catch up with us?”

“I hope they’re alright,” Amanda fretted.

“They’ll be fine,” Bob confidently assured her. “Earl is pretty tough, and those catgirls were badass.”

“Catgirls. That’s so stupid. What next, elves and dwarves?”

“As long as there aren’t any dragons,” Bob replied.

I ignored their bickering, and pulled up my System interface. The town looked about the same as the last time I’d checked, but the surrounding territory was getting more dangerous at an intimidating rate. There was a big area up at the north end of the valley that was marked as level three now.

There were small farms and isolated houses all over this area, but the way things were going I’d bet most of their owners would be dead by sundown. Even a level one monster hadn’t had any trouble breaking into a house. How well would the town hold up?

A few thousand rednecks with guns is a substantial amount of firepower. Unless these monsters could become bullet proof they weren’t going to overrun the place with brute force anytime soon. But modern settlements aren’t built to be defensible. We were probably looking at an extended battle of attrition, as monsters infiltrated the outlying parts of the town and picked people off one by one. If the locals tried to carry on as usual they wouldn’t last more than a few days.

But if they tried to fortify the town? Build barricades and obstacles, clear ground to provide better fields of fire, and form a militia to stand guard? That might actually work, at least for a while. Eventually they’d run low on food and bullets, but that could take weeks.

No, this was Alabama. The average family around here would have enough ammo to last for months, considering that monsters don’t take cover. The survivalist types would be set for years. As for food, as long as they had ammo they could always eat the monsters.

Okay, so a town that acted quickly just might turn into a viable fortress.

The arrival of Earl, Beth and Sara interrupted my musings, and then the waitress brought my food out. For a few minutes everyone was distracted with greetings, ordering and eating, but it wasn’t long before the conversation turned to the obvious topics.

“How bad is the hospital?” Jenny asked.

Earl grimaced. “Busy, and getting worse. They’ve only got two ambulances, but those poor suckers are working their butts off this morning. The way things are going they’ll have to start triaging before sunset.”

“The old woman’s name is Pamela Green,” Beth added. “She was conscious when we left, and they expect that she’ll be fine. She’s still rather confused about the situation, but there seem to be a lot of good resources gathering at the hospital. The local minister is making the rounds, and there are a couple of teenagers helping people make sense of their status screens. Children of one of the staff, I think, but I didn’t get the details.”

I nodded. "That's the culture in places like this. People tend to pull together when there's a crisis. I take it Mitsi and Bitsy are sticking with their 'mom'".

"For now," Beth replied. "I, ah, tried to make sure they'd see us as a friendly alternative, if something goes wrong. But they seem quite loyal to their owner."

"Good for them," Amanda said. "Now how do we get out of here? I'm sure you've heard about the lockdown by now."

"All we need to do is wait a few days," Earl said. "If things hold together they'll have to let the truckers go back to work, and maybe organize caravans for everyone else. Or if it all falls apart the cops will have more important things to worry about. They aren't going to bother with roadblocks when their buddies are getting eaten."

"If they keep the planes grounded we're looking at having to drive hundreds of miles through hostile territory," I pointed out. "We'd need something sturdier than a car for that. Maybe we could get our hands on a big rig of some kind, and refit it into a rolling fort. But that would be a big project."

"They can't really keep everything locked down for long, can they?" Amanda asked. "That's just stupid. I bet they'll at least let the airlines start running again, and then we can all fly home."

Jenny scoffed. "You're seriously in denial, Amanda. I've got a better idea. What if you dominant master types join forces, and take over the town?"

We all stared at her.

"What? Oh, don't try to tell me you haven't thought about it. How much safer would we be if you got everyone working together right from the start?"

Earl, Beth and I traded some uncomfortable looks.

"It isn't that easy," Beth said. "We didn't have that many points to spend, and after seeing that monster... well, suffice to say that my influence is limited."

"Same here," Earl admitted.

"I'm not interested in hypnotizing a bunch of men," I said. "Besides, I'd get caught. Just because you're an amazing subject doesn't mean it will work so easily on everyone else, Jenny."

"Oh. Darn. Maybe you could go monster hunting, and farm enough points to change that?"

I chuckled. "You really want to see me do the evil overlord thing, don't you?"

Jenny ducked her head. "Maybe. It would be really hot."

"Well, save the fetish play for when we're not in danger of getting eaten. I think we're better off focusing on keeping ourselves alive, and leaving the big picture to the people who are already in charge. But I do think you had a valid point earlier about the need to level up. It seems to me that we're going to be stuck in an adventure zone for the foreseeable future, and the threat levels out there are rising fast. We need to keep up, or we could find ourselves being too fragile to survive no matter what we do."

"Are you suggesting we go out looking for trouble, Tom?" Beth was clearly unhappy with the suggestion.

"You can arm up at the gun store across the street," I said. "That's where we got our weapons. I've got some ideas for improvised armor, too."

Sara shrunk into Earl's side. "I don't think I could fight."

"That's crazy," Amanda agreed. "I'm staying in town where it's safe."

Earl shook his head. "The town won't be safe for long, girls. But I'm not sold on this plan either. Going out into the woods looking for trouble is asking to get eaten. I'd rather set up on a roof with a good field of fire, and pick them off as they come."

Beth looked up from her phone. "There's a hotel not far from here that looks like a good place to wait out the travel ban. They have suites for long-term stays, and it's an enclosed building instead of one of those outdoor walkway designs. I suggest we get rooms for ourselves before they get overrun by refugees from the countryside, and stock up on groceries. None of this militaristic posturing will matter if we starve."

"If there's a safe place for you ladies to hole up then I might do a shift helping out at the hospital," Earl said. "It's a good place to make contacts."

"I can get behind that," Amanda agreed.

I sighed, and ran a hand through my hair. "Okay, fine. How about you guys do that, while Jennifer and I chase down some of my ideas for better combat options? We'll meet up with you at the hotel when we're done, and decide where to go from there."

"That seems fair," Beth said. "Should I get rooms for you and Jennifer?"

"Yes, we need to stick together," I said. "Better not rely on reservations, either, or we may find ourselves bumped by a crowd of refugees from nearby farms. If you'll take care of everything for now I'll get them to switch our rooms to my credit card when we get there."

By the time we'd worked out all the details Jenny and I had finished eating, and we were ready to go. So we headed out by ourselves, leaving the rest of the group behind.

"They aren't going to make it," Jenny said grimly as we exited the building.

"My optimism is diminishing," I admitted. "Did you bring up the mind control thing just to see what they'd admit to?"

"Yes. Well, okay, I really do think it would be hot. But mostly I was fishing for info. I think whatever Earl has must take time and privacy, or maybe it's a sex thing, because I could tell he wasn't tempted. But Beth sure was. She's got something she can use on people in public without getting caught."

"As if we didn't have enough to worry about," I grumbled. "Okay, so we may need to make our own party, or join up with those kids temporarily. But first we've got some prep work to finish."

"If you can swing it I want some armor before I try to fight anything else," Jenny agreed. "We'll never accomplish anything if I get chewed up every time we get into a fight."

There was a gunshot in the distance. We both went silent, looking around carefully. A flurry of shots from several different weapons followed, and what might have been a scream. Then the noise stopped, as suddenly as it started.

I gave Jenny a tight look.

"Sounds like the clock is ticking. Follow me, then. We've got a couple of stops to make."

She nodded nervously, and started up her car.

A quick search on my phone revealed several options, so I headed for the closest one. Down the road, turn left at the next light and head south a few of blocks.

Everything looked so normal here. It was an old town, with picturesque brick buildings surrounded by tall trees. Even here in the middle of town there were plenty of empty lots, some with tangles of underbrush where danger could lurk. Squirrels and small birds watched us from the trees, and I found myself wondering just what the System's limits were. Could it turn those little flufballs into something big enough to be dangerous? Would we find the trees turning into plant monsters?

Anything could happen.

I pulled into the parking lot of the local vet clinic, and stepped out of the car. They were open, and Jenny caught up to me as I approached the door.

"What are we doing here?" She asked. "Looking for more catgirls?"

“Not exactly.”

I stepped inside, and looked around. The waiting area was empty, and there was a harried-looking young woman in scrubs at the reception desk.

“Can I help you?” She asked. “I’m sorry, but we’re only taking emergency appointments right now. Today has been crazy.”

“I can imagine,” I said. “I’m actually here about something different. I know vets sometimes have animals up for adoption, and from what I’ve seen so far that’s suddenly gotten a lot more complicated. So if you’ve got any dogs who need a home—”

Another woman in scrubs rushed out from the back office. “I’m a dog!” She declared excitedly. “I need a home! Do you have a home? I’m a good girl!”

The receptionist face palmed. The newcomer, who I realized had a tail, jumped up on the divider and sniffed at me. Up close her face seemed completely human, although the dog ears were kind of weird.

“My, you’re a big girl,” I said.

“Uh huh! I’m really strong. Is that good? I can carry stuff!”

“Shasa, please get off the counter,” the receptionist said.

“Oh, right. Okay.”

The dog-girl jumped down, and started bouncing on the balls of her feet. She was nearly my own height, which put her at maybe 5’11”, with brown eyes and sandy blonde hair. A pair of big, floppy ears rose from the top of her head, but her face was completely human. She seemed a lot less furry than the catgirls, with just a bit of fine down on her forearms.

“So, your name is Shasa?” I asked.

“Yes! I’m Shasa! What’s your name?” The girl was vibrating with barely-repressed excitement.

“I’m Tom, and this is Jenny. We’re looking for a brave dog who can help us stay safe from monsters. Can you do that, Shasa?”

She nodded her head rapidly. “Uh huh! I told the voice I want to be a good girl, and help people. Now I’m big and strong, and I have hands! See?”

She held out her hands proudly, like they were some kind of trophy.

Jenny giggled. “I like her.”

“Me too. What breed was she?” I asked the receptionist.

“A pit bull. She’s a rescue from a puppy mill that was shut down just a couple of weeks ago. She’s a sweet girl, just kind of excitable. So I take it you’d heard about domestic animals turning into people?”

I nodded. “Earlier this morning we got flagged down by a couple of catgirls trying to get medical attention for their... well, former owner, I guess, since I don’t think anyone wants to bring back slavery. Did all of the animals change?”

“No, it doesn’t seem to be that common. We had half a dozen animals in cages in the back, and only two of them changed. The doctor is examining the, um, catboy, I guess, right now.”

“Jasper’s a meenie,” Shasa declared. “You don’t want him, you want me. Dogs are better than cats, right?”

“Oh god, I bet he’s adorable,” Jenny said. “Is he, like, three feet tall?”

“Maybe four,” the receptionist said with a smile. “Yeah, he’s a little cutie. But Shasa is cute too, when she’s not getting worked up and breaking things. I don’t know what we’re going to do with her.”

“The government will have to come up with some kind of adoption process,” Jenny said. “But who knows how long that will take? With everything else that’s happening, they’re going to have their

hands full. Maybe we should just do the normal adoption paperwork, and leave our contact information in case social services wants to follow up?"

Right, like social services would even exist in a week. The world where the government had the time and resources to worry about every little detail of people's lives died this morning. We'd be lucky if they could keep essential infrastructure running, and muster enough troops to defend the factories we need to keep turning out weapons. But I suppose it's going to take time for people to adjust to their new reality.

"Um, let me check with the vet," the receptionist said, getting up from her desk. "Just a minute, please."

I gave in to temptation, and scratched Shasa's ears. She made an adorable squeak, and leaned into me. "Oh! Oh, that feels good. Don't stop, Tom."

I chuckled. "You're cute. So you want a home, Shasa?"

"Yes! I'm a dog. I need a pack. Can I be in your pack, Tom?"

"Yes, Sasha. You can join my pack."

"Awesome!" Shasa threw her arms around me, and... started licking my face? Well, at least she didn't have dog breath. I sputtered, laughed and rubbed her ears a bit before pushing her away.

"Okay, that's enough of that," I said. "We'll celebrate later, okay?"

"Celebrate?" She said, looking perplexed. Then her face lit up like a little kid hearing it was her birthday. "Celebrate! Yes, do fun stuff together. This is great! This is so great! Best day ever!"

The receptionist returned about then, looking oddly red-faced and embarrassed.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"She gets kind of enthusiastic," I said. "I just told her I want to give her a home."

"I have a pack!" Shasa said proudly.

"We'll take good care of her," Jenny put in. "But did I just hear what I think I heard?"

The receptionist blushed brighter. She rubbed her face with her hand. "I can't believe this is happening."

"What did I miss?" I asked.

Jenny grinned. "It sounds like the vet's having a great time with that catboy back in the exam room. If she gets much louder everyone who walks in will be able to hear."

I shook my head. "Some people. I guess now we know why she got into this business, hmm?"

"She's usually not like that! Look, I can't just, just shrug and let a couple of strangers walk off with Shasa. We don't have any procedures for something like this. For all I know you could be child predators or something. I mean, she's like a little girl in an adult body!"

I thought about pointing out that she'd been an adult dog before the change, and her human form looked to be about twenty. Or that the mere fact that she'd been in the clinic when she changed didn't give the vet's office any particular legal or moral authority to determine her fate. Or that I was looking for a survival companion, not a sex object. Jesus fuck, she was literally a dog a few hours ago. What kind of person immediately jumps to thoughts of sexing her up?

Apparently the kind of person who catches her boss banging the catboy, and politely doesn't interrupt them. Half the retorts running through my head would just convince her I was a secret dog girl fetishist, and the other half would get us into a long argument with no clear outcome. Which I couldn't afford, because I was still half convinced the whole town was going to be overrun by angry minotaurs or something before sunset. We needed to be geared up and ready for action as soon as possible.

So I really didn't have time for a long argument with the receptionist. I also didn't want to find out what would happen if I blew her off. For all I knew she might be friends with the local police chief, or she might convince Shasa that I was a bad person she shouldn't trust. But it occurred to me that there might be a better option.

I stepped closer to the counter, caught the receptionist's gaze, and pushed.

"What's your name?" I asked.

She swallowed nervously, staring into my eyes. "L-linda. I don't mean to be—"

"Shhhh. It's okay, Linda," I said calmly.

"It... it's okay?" She repeated.

"That's right, Linda. Everything is okay. No need to worry. Just relax."

"Relax," she sighed. Her expression went slack, and she swayed slightly.

Behind me Shasa started to say something, but Jenny covered her mouth. "Just watch for a minute," Jenny said quietly. "This is really cool."

"Look at me, Linda," I said, drawing her attention away from the distraction. "You're talking to me. You should look at someone when you have a conversation, right?"

"Look at. Right."

"Look into my eyes, Linda. Listen to the sound of my voice."

"Voice," she sighed. Her eyes were glassy and blank now.

"That's right, Linda. No need to talk, just listen. No need to think, just listen. Listen to my voice, telling you things that you need to know."

"Listen. Need to know."

"That's right, Linda. Now tell me, Linda, what do you do when someone drops off a stray animal?"

"Give them a checkup. Find someone to adopt them."

"That's right, Linda. You find someone to adopt them. Now, is Shasa a cat or a dog?"

"Dog."

"That's right, Shasa's a dog. What do you do when someone wants to adopt a dog?"

"Adoption form. And, check for... weird vibes."

"That's right. You're not getting any weird vibes, Linda. We're just a responsible, trustworthy couple who want a dog."

"Responsible."

"Yes, responsible people. We like Shasa, and she likes us, so we're going to adopt her. That's a good thing."

"Good thing," Linda repeated blankly. Then a slight frown developed. "But... not normal..."

"Not normal is not your problem, Linda," I said firmly. "You don't have to worry about it."

"I don't?" She asked, sounding hopeful.

"No, you don't have to worry about it. You just need to do your normal job, and everything will be fine. No one will blame you for anything."

"No blame?"

"No blame, Linda. Everything will be just fine. You'll have one less problem to figure out, and Shasa will be happy in her new home. It's all good."

"It's all... good?"

"Yes, Linda. If Shasa wants to go with us, then everything is fine."

"Fine."



“Now, when I snap my fingers you’re going to wake up, thinking you just zoned out for a moment. You won’t worry about anything that happened while you were focused on my voice. You’ll just take care of the paperwork, and everything will be fine.”

I snapped my fingers.

Linda blinked, and shook her head.

“Sorry, what? I kind of zoned out for a minute there. What was I saying?”

“You were asking Shasa if she wants to go with us.”

“Oh, right! Shasa, I know you want a home, but we don’t know anything about these people. Are you sure you want to go with them?”

Shasa stared at her for a moment, turned to me, looked at Jenny, and then turned back to Linda. “Wow. You’re right, Jenny. That was cool! Um, yeah, I’m sure Linda. I like you and the doc, but you said you can’t be my pack, and I need a pack. I like Tom and Jenny. They smell good, and they’re nice to me, and I can tell Tom is a good pack leader. That’s okay, right?”

The receptionist sighed. “I suppose it’s the best we can do. Promise me you’ll take care of her?”

“Of course,” I said firmly. “I’ll treat her like my own family.”

“Alright. Just fill this out, please. It’s our usual adoption paperwork.”

It was a single-page form, basically just asking for our contact information and a little bit of background about us. Jenny filled it out quickly, and collected a business card for the vet clinic in return. Shasa was vibrating with excitement the whole time, and she kept pressing her sides against me just like a dog. Her tail was whipping back and forth so fast I was afraid she’d hurt herself.

When we were done Shasa jumped on the receptionist and licked her face to say goodbye, and then we left. Shasa paused a few steps from the front door, looking around with big eyes.

“Everything looks so different,” she said.

“Can you see better now than you did before?” I asked.

She nodded. “Yeah! There are lots more colors now, and I can see stuff way far away! But it’s hard to smell the ground from so high up.”

“I bet,” Jenny said, looking up at the taller girl. “Can you still tell people apart by their scent?”

Shasa gave her an odd look. “Yeah, of course. Can’t you?”

“Not really. Dogs have a much better sense of smell than humans do,” Jenny said. “I was just making sure you didn’t lose that when you changed.”

“Oh. Huh. I think it’s still the same.” She leaned in, and sniffed Jenny’s hair. Then her neck. Then she started to work her way down.

Jenny giggled. “Hey! What are you doing?”

“Getting to know you? You have lots of interesting smells. Wow, you really liked mating with Tom, huh? Are humans always in season? Is he the only guy in the pack? Oh, the people that rescued me had metal things like that! Are you with them?”

I put an arm around Shasa, and pulled her away before she got to the crotch-sniffing stage. “We can talk about all of that later, Shasa. Right now we’re getting ready to fight. The same thing that changed you is turning all the animals in the woods into monsters that want to eat people.”

Shasa turned a concerned look my way. “It is? Why would the voice do that? Wait, is that why everyone is so worried?”

“Yes, Shasa. No one knows why it’s happening or where the voice came from, so they’re all confused and not sure what to do. But humans can be really good at fighting. So Jenny and I are getting ready to handle whatever happens. You’ll help us, right?”

“Of course! Just tell me what to do. But, um, even though I have hands, I can’t do all the awesome magic stuff humans do.”

“That’s okay, Shasa. All you need to do is be brave and strong, and follow directions.”

“I can do that!” She said enthusiastically. “Now that I understand talking I can follow directions real good!”

“Are you thinking she can tank for us?” Jenny asked.

“Exactly. But that will only work if I can make us some armor, so our next stop is the local Home Depot. Hopefully they have sheet metal in stock.”