

I woke to a flurry of gunshots, and the roar of angry monsters.

By the time my eyes opened Shasa was already sitting up, and looking around with a worried expression. Jenny, who was draped against my other side, made a cute little sound of complaint when I moved.

“Action girl mode, Jenny,” I said.

She froze for a moment. Then she was throwing the sheets off and rolling out of bed, frantically looking around for her weapons. I sat up, and followed her at a more measured pace.

“Gear up, girls,” I said. “Whatever’s going on out there sounds serious. I’m going to take a look.”

Whatever was happening, it was bigger than just an attack on the building. There were gunshots coming from multiple directions, and most of them were at least a block or two away. The animal noises didn’t sound like anything I recognized, and there were other sounds mixed in as well. Screams, shouts, roaring engines and what might have been a car crash. What the hell?

I stood beside the nearest window and peeked out, trying not to make a target of myself.

The cluster of stores and restaurants between the hotel and the highway was in chaos. A whole herd of giant quadrupeds with burning horns had invaded the area, smashing storefronts and attacking people. A couple of buildings were already on fire, and a few people who’d been caught outdoors were being run down by the beasts. As I watched one of them lowered its horns at an SUV full of people, and pawed the ground for a moment before charging.

Wait, I’d seen animals do that before. Were those cows?

Great. As if the wild animals weren’t bad enough, now we have to worry about herds of cattle mutating into bloodthirsty monsters.

It looked like a large group of the creatures had come down from the north, and started attacking people over by the highway. The herd was fragmenting as different parts of it fixated on different prey, or just took different routes between the buildings. But they were headed in this direction, and the nearest ones were already pretty close.

I turned away from the window, and started to dress. Jenny had already thrown on shorts and a t-shirt, and was donning her bracers.

“What are we dealing with?” She asked.

“Looks like a herd of mutated cattle,” I said. “They’re smashing things and killing people, and I think they have some kind of fire attack. Going out there right now would be suicide, but we can’t let them set the hotel on fire.”

Jenny nodded, and strapped on her pistol belt. “What’s the plan, then?”

I pushed the curtain aside, and took a closer look at the window. Yes! Thank God for small-town building codes. It was actually made to open.

“We’ve got two windows that face the action, and two rifles. Let’s see what we can do to thin the herd.”

Jenny grinned. “Can do, boss. Come on, Shasa. I’ll teach you how to fetch ammo.”

“Fetch? I’m good at fetch!”

I took a moment to dress before grabbing my rifle and a stack of loaded magazines, and returning to the window. Once it was open I had a clear field of fire covering a good chunk of the area, and there were plenty of targets to service.

Just across the street, a black beast the size of an SUV was chasing a guy who’d bailed out of a wrecked pickup truck. My first shot missed, and neither of them even noticed. The guy hit the back door of one of the stores in a shopping strip, flung it open and ran inside just as the beast slammed into the

wall behind him. The wall crumpled like it had been hit by a car. The beast stopped, took a step back, and shook its head.

I kept firing, trying to get into a steady rhythm as I worked on my aim. My next round skipped off the pavement beyond my target. A little lower? Aha, a hit! It just made the thing mad, but my next couple of shots distracted it from breaking into the building.

Then a bullet tore the side of the monster's head open, and splattered its brains all over the parking lot.

"Was that you, Jenny?" I called.

"Action girl pest control, at your service," she shouted back from the next room. "If you can't hit their heads, go for the front of the body. The heart and lungs should be in there, right?"

"Probably," I agreed.

I found another target, a brown beast that was standing in a parking lot placidly chewing on a severed arm. This time I missed three times before I finally scored a hit.

Okay, I clearly needed to improve my marksmanship. Could I do something about that? I had one mental point left, so I could just buy the skill. But was it worth it?

A pair of terrified waitresses ran out the back door of a restaurant that had caught fire, and immediately drew the attention of several monster cows.

Damn it. Fine. I spent the point, and took aim at the lead cow.

The difference was like night and day. Hitting a target that big at this kind of range was easy. I lined up on the lead beast's forequarters, and started pumping rounds into it. I wasn't going to be making any fancy headshots at this level, but at least most of my rounds were on target now.

It wasn't enough to save the waitresses.

But I kept shooting, wounding monsters and occasionally dropping one, and I wasn't alone. Jenny methodically blew away target after target, like a curvy little Rambo. Soon another rifle opened up, firing from somewhere above us, and then a couple more off to our left. In minutes there must have been twenty people firing from the hotel's windows.

Finally there came a moment when I looked around, and didn't immediately see another target. Smoke from the burning buildings obscured my view, and I couldn't tell if the remaining monsters had fled or just withdrawn to a safer distance. But there were at least twenty huge bodies on the ground, surrounded by smashed cars and damaged buildings.

We were safe from the monsters, but I wasn't sure about the fires. There were two parking lots and a small street between the hotel and the nearest burning building, but there was a fair amount of landscaping too. If the grass and bushes carried the fire over here there wasn't a thing I could do about it.

I eyed the bodies, and the balls of mist that were forming over them. Some were green, but most of them were the same purple as the hypno-bush had produced. Did that mean they gave magic points?

"Get your shoes on, girls," I called, as I moved to do the same. "We're going out there."

"What? Why?" Jenny protested.

"Enhancement points," I said. "These things give magic, and I might need it if the fires spread."

"Fuck. Well, okay, but we'd better keep a close eye out for monsters. There are still a lot of those things out there, and I can't tell if they left or just pulled back to regroup."

"Don't worry, guys. I'll protect you!" Shasa declared confidently.

The halls of the hotel were full of worried guests arguing with each other about what to do. I ignored them, leading my girls down the stairwell to the lobby. There we found immediate evidence that the defense hadn't gone as well as I might have hoped. The big windows that made up the front wall were

full of bullet holes, and one of the monster cattle had tried to ram its way through. The front doors were smashed off their mountings, but the reinforcement of rebar and steel plate I'd added to the walls around it had held.

Three men with rifles were hiding behind the front desk, surrounded by a litter of empty brass.

"Everything under control here?" I asked.

"The doors are blocked but they aren't getting in," one of them replied.

"We need more ammo," another one said, sounding rattled.

"Let Beth know," I said. "I'm sure she can hook you up. It looks like they've pulled back, but there's a lot of buildings on fire out there. We're going to poke our heads out and reconnoiter."

"Are you crazy? You'll be killed!" The scared one protested.

"We're not scrubs," Jenny drawled.

"I'll smack those stupid cows right upside the head!" Shasa declared.

"Your funeral," the guard who seemed to be in charge decided.

I'd left a small vision slit in the steel plates covering the back door, but it didn't offer a lot of visibility. I debated our options for a moment, before deciding to send Shasa out first. She was the tanky one, after all.

Nothing jumped her as she exited. Jenny slipped out right after her, with a spear in her hands and a pistol on each hip. I followed them with my rifle in my hands, and a force bolt ready to cast.

The parking lot at the back of the hotel was full of cars, but there were no people around.

We made our way quickly down the sidewalk, trying to look in every direction at once. Nothing bothered us as we approached a dead monster at the edge of the parking lot, surrounded by wrecked vehicles. Jenny ran lightly up the side of the body, scooped up the ball of mist that was hovering there and slipped back down to me like a frickin Tolkien elf.

"Here you go," she said, handing it to me with a grin.

Sure enough, it gave a mix of magic and physical enhancement points. It was worth a lot more than the monsters we'd fought yesterday, too. But considering how hard these things were to kill that shouldn't be a surprise. The monsters were getting tougher as the adventure zone matured, just as I'd expected.

We harvested a second monster in the street, and a third next to a burning building. I was getting half a magic point from each of them, and I was just considering whether we should pull back when Shasa pointed out something I hadn't considered.

"Guys? We want all the glowy stuff, right? What about that?"

She pointed her mace at a wrecked van a couple of the cow monsters had torn apart. It had been full of people, and I was trying not to look too closely at the bodies. The monsters had managed to set it on fire, so there was no one left to save in there.

But as I followed Shasa's gesture, I realized that the body lying over the hood had a ball of mist floating above it.

I stared.

"Fuck," Jenny breathed. "People give points too? Of course we do. Can't be a proper death game unless you reward murder and backstabbing. Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"What's wrong?" Shasa asked innocently. "They're not using their magic anymore, so shouldn't we take it?"

"Humans aren't all one big happy pack," I tried to explain. "There are going to be assholes out there who decide that murdering other people for points is easier than fighting monsters."

“But... but that would be bad,” Shasa protested.

Jenny patted her on the back. “You’re a good girl, Shasa. But some people aren’t so good. Why didn’t we notice this before?”

I wondered that myself.

“Someone must have harvested Dave’s body, back at the house,” I realized.

“Fuck. You’re right,” Jenny said. “It must have been Earl, while we were in Beth’s room talking with her. But he didn’t mention it to anyone.”

“That doesn’t give me a great feeling,” I said. “But he might have decided to keep quiet about it for the same reason we’re going to. Jenny, harvest one of these cows and see if you can get fire resistance with the magic. Then scoop up what you can get at in the van. We can’t hide this forever, but the longer it takes for word to get around the better.”

She frowned at me. “You’re thinking the evil bastards will keep it quiet so they can take advantage, and the rest of us aren’t going to be in a hurry to give them ideas? I guess I’ll buy that, but someone’s going to talk. As long as the internet is still up it’s impossible to keep it secret for long. We can maybe buy a day or two before everyone in town knows.”

“That might be enough. People who aren’t psychopaths have to really work themselves up to commit murder for the first time. They’re a lot less likely to do it if the town has had time to get defenses organized, and they feel like they can survive without going that far.”

“I hope you’re right.”

She harvested the monster I’d pointed her to, and fiddled with her status screen. I glanced at the burning building, and noted that it was getting worse. Great. What was the best way to put out fires with magic, anyway?

There was a spell for conjuring water, but the volume was way too small. Maybe something for snuffing out flames? But a burning building would just re-ignite when the spell wore off, wouldn’t it? I’d have to cool all the flammables below their ignition point, which would take some kind of cold magic.

“Look out!”

I turned around at Shasa’s shout, and found a huge dark shape looming out of the smoke. I stumbled back, fumbling for a spell as I looked around for cover, and the loyal dog girl planted herself in its path.

Flaming horns struck metal with a resounding crash, and for one heart-stopping moment I thought she was going to be killed. But instead she somehow kept her feet, skidding backwards under the impact of several tons of angry demon steer. Her mace rose and fell, slamming into the beast’s skull with a loud crunch.

The beast stepped back, shaking its head and glaring at her. Its eyes glowed with malice, and the flames that ran along its horns flared up. Undaunted, Shasa transformed and unleashed a howl right in its face.

The beast flinched, and she smacked it on the nose with her mace. It snarled, too angry to be discouraged by the minor injury, and slammed into her again. This time the flames on its horns grew, spilling over Shasa’s shield and up her arm. But she just growled, and hit it again.

Her mace was hurting it, cracking bones and drawing blood, but she wasn’t going to kill it any time soon. Fortunately, she didn’t need to. I used the time she bought me to circle right, looking for a clear shot at the beast while I charged up a spell. At the same time Jenny came bounding down off the van and circled left, drawing pistols in both hands.

We opened fire at the same moment. I couldn't tell what effect Jenny's bullets had, since she was on the opposite side of the beast. But it didn't matter, because the high-powered force bolt I'd thrown penetrated the thing's skull and detonated inside.

A shower of gore erupted from its open mouth and eye sockets, splattering all three of us. Then it collapsed, and the fire on its horns went out.

Jenny giggled. "Good shootin', Tex."

"Yay, it's dead!" Shasa exclaimed. "Wait, I'm on fire! Help, what do I do? Someone put it out!"

Jenny rushed over to try to pat out the flames that had taken hold of Shasa's shirt and fur. I went ahead and bought the fire extinguishing spell I'd been looking at, and cast it. The fire went out, just like they were supposed to.

"Is it gone? Did you put it out? I think it's gone," Shasa babbled.

"Yeah, you're good now," Jenny assured her. "Looks like you're okay, you just got a little singed. Damn, girl, that was impressive. How strong are you?"

"Really strong!" Shasa replied, letting her werewolf form lapse. "Did I do good? I tried to help."

"You did great, Shasa," I told her. "You saved me from getting trampled by that thing."

Jenny did a quick scan of our surroundings before coming over to punch me in the shoulder. "You need to stay alert, Tom. How do you let a cow the size of a pickup truck sneak up on you?"

"The smoke and noise from the burning buildings makes it easy to miss them? No, you're right, I was thinking too much. That almost turned into a disaster. Sounds like help might be on the way, though."

I could hear sirens in the distance, from somewhere in the general direction of the highway. Police and fire trucks both, it sounded like. Then there was a flurry of gunshots from the same direction.

"Sounds like they ran into trouble," Jenny observed. "If the herd went that way they'll have to fight their way through. Do we pull back to the hotel, or keep harvesting? These things are worth a ton of points, but that won't help us if we're dead."

I took a quick look around, trying to weigh our options. These things were worth two or three points each, which was a lot more than anything else we'd seen. A good haul here could easily make the difference between survival and death for us, especially if the town ended up falling. But taking down just one of these things had taken a coordinated effort, and good chunk of my mana. If we ran into a group of them we were in serious trouble.

The distant gunfire continued, and that was what decided me.

"We press on," I decided. "This is a chance to get ahead of the power curve, and it sounds like someone is keeping the herd busy. But from now on we'll take turns harvesting, and when it's your turn spend some of the points when you get them. We might just need the power-up."

We crossed a small street, and reached the parking lot where those poor waitresses had died. We each got a beast from the group that had killed them, and been gunned down in turn by angry defenders in the hotel. When we reached the corpses it was my turn, and I scooped up both balls of mist.

Maybe a half-point in each category, from each of them? But no universal points, even though everyone started with some of those. Assuming they'd both slept through the initial warning period and lost their bonus points, that would mean they had around eight points each when they died. So harvesting a body got you around a fourth of its points?

What happened to the rest of them? Did they just evaporate? Or were they still locked up in the body, waiting to pass on to whatever ate it? We might just need to start cremating bodies instead of burying them.

Something to investigate more in the future, if someone else didn't beat me to it and publish the results. I spent a couple of points on my defense aura, and took a moment to look for a way to get some kind of alertness or combat reflexes ability. The System's suggestions on that were too complex to evaluate quickly, so I closed the window and went back to watching for trouble.

There was still shooting in the distance, and some familiar bellowing. Good, they were keeping the herd busy.

The restaurant the waitresses had come out of was a charnel house. Mangled bodies littered the floor, soaked in the spray from an automatic sprinkler system. There had been a dozen or so customers present when the monsters smashed their way inside, breaking down the front doors and at least two windows.

A lot of them had been armed, and they didn't go down easily. A giant corpse sprawled over the ruins of a cluster of tables in the middle of the floor, and another had apparently gotten stuck in one of the windows. Both were riddled with bullet holes, and surrounded by spreading pools of blood.

"Shit, this is bad," Jenny said. "Anyone alive in here? Make a noise if you can, we'll get you out."

There was no response. Just the crackle of flames eating at the roof.

"Those poor people," Shasa said.

"Yeah. Shasa, stand guard and watch for monsters. Jenny and I will check the bodies. Move quick, the fire on the roof seems to be spreading."

I felt bad for the people who had died here. They'd been in a big group, in town, in broad daylight, and most of them had carried a knife or pistol. But none of that had saved them.

I felt a moment of hope when I found a couple that didn't have balls of mist floating over them. But on closer inspection they'd both been half-eaten, and they certainly didn't have a pulse. Some monster must have already harvested them.

How many cattle were there in this area? I had a feeling it was a big number.

"Eep! Monsters!" Shasa hissed. She ducked behind the wreckage of a booth, and motioned us down. "There's a whole herd coming."

I took cover under a table, and carefully peered out one of the broken windows. Yeah, there was a whole herd of cattle gathering beside a burning building on the side of the highway. There must have been thirty of the things, but they were behaving oddly. Instead of wandering at random they were gathering up in a tight group, and they seemed to be waiting for something.

Oddly, there was a bird with dark feathers sitting on the largest of the cattle monsters. A crow, maybe?

Jenny silently crept up beside me, and frowned at the scene. "Is it just me, or are they setting an ambush?"

"I think you're right."

The sounds of gunfire and sirens were approaching from somewhere off to our left. It sounded like they were using the highway, but that meant there was a building between them and this fresh herd. They wouldn't see it until it was close enough to charge them.

"What are we going to do?" Jenny asked.

I didn't have an answer. Even if I dumped everything I could into improved combat magic, I wasn't going to put much of a dent in that group before my mana ran out. If they noticed us they'd be on us in seconds, and this building obviously wasn't much protection. Trying to warn the approaching people would just get us noticed and killed. We could probably back out of the building and circle around without

being seen, but that would take too long. From the sound of things we only had a couple of minutes before this ambush would be sprung.

They say you learn a lot about yourself in a crisis. That morning I learned that I'm not some selfless hero who lays down his life for strangers. I'm not a tactical genius with a perfect plan for every situation, or an action movie star who can fight his way through anything. I'm just a guy trying to survive in a world gone mad. Jenny was giving me that trusting look of hers, like she expected me to have all the answers. But the only plan I could think of was to sneak back the way we'd come while the herd was distracted, and try to get back to the hotel.

Would she even listen to an order like that, when she was in action girl mode?

I never found out, because just then a new factor entered the picture. A little quadcopter drone flew overhead, and stopped to hover over the herd. The crow looked up at it, and gave an indignant squawk.

Then a burst of fire from something a lot heavier than rifle tore through the building and the monster cows behind it. A beast went down with a huge hole punched through its hindquarters. A massive head exploded in a spray of gore. The monsters bellowed, and the crow spread its wings and gave off a shrill cry.

Then the whole herd was charging around the building at the source of the fire. A flurry of smaller guns opened fire, rifles and pistols firing single shots. But a deeper sound cut through the din, firing a series of long bursts.

Was that a machine gun?

Jenny pulled her pistols, and started pouring her own fire into the rear of the herd as it thundered past. There was no use trying to hide after that, so I spun up a high-powered force missile and blew the last monster's head apart.

Shasa bounced up and down excitedly, and started to rush outside. I had to grab the back of her shirt to pull her back.

"Stay here!" I shouted over the din. "You'll get shot if you go out there."

"Oh, okay!" She shouted back, with a goofy grin on her face. "Look! They're getting those monsters."

She was right about that. I led my group around to the other side of the building, where we had a better vantage point. There I could see the clump of police cars, pickup trucks and fire engines that was inching up the highway and the grassy shoulders to either side. There must have been dozens of men with rifles, but the group's real firepower was something I'd only seen on TV.

In the middle of the group was a massive pickup truck with an upright post set in the middle of the bed. A heavy machine gun that looked fresh from the WWII movies I'd watched as a kid was mounted on the post, with a belt of ammunition hanging off one side. A man in military fatigues manned the gun, pouring fire into the densely packed monsters.

The huge, fifty-caliber bullets carved a bloody swath through the herd, mowing down the giant beasts with brutal ease. The ones in the rear stumbled over the bodies of the vanguard, arresting their thundering charge and throwing them into confusion. Some of them tried to press on, while others backed away or just circled in aimless confusion.

It was a slaughter.

They didn't need my help, but I added my fire to the din anyway. So did Jenny, and the herd quickly melted away. A few survivors tried to retreat past our position, and I took one of them down with

a high-powered force bolt. That left me on the last dregs of my mana, but I figured it was a good way to announce our presence to the oncoming group.

A police car rolled past the building. The technical followed it, the driver gunning the engine and then skidding to a stop in front of us.

“Ye-haw!” The guy on the machine gun shouted. “Now that’s what ol’ Pete calls a fine Sunday morning drive. You folks alright in there?”

I took a closer look. Sure enough, it was the old guy we’d bought our guns from just yesterday. I guess he didn’t sell us the good stuff.

I stepped out onto the porch, carefully keeping my rifle pointed at the sky. “We’re good, Pete. I’m just glad you folks had that drone out. I was racking my brain, trying to figure out some way to warn you about the ambush without getting killed.”

A teenager poked his head over the side of the pickup truck. “That was my idea! I told gramps it would come in handy.”

“Nothing like having your own arial recon,” Pete agreed.

“Where did you get a machine gun?” Jenny exclaimed.

The old man patted the weapon with a grin. “You mean Bessie here? Shoot, ma’am, I’ve had her in the basement ever since ‘Nam. Always knew she’d come in handy.”

“That was so cool!” Shasa enthused. “You wiped out those bad cows like it was nothing. Tom, can I get one of those?”

“I don’t think anyone who has one would be willing to sell it,” I pointed out. “Anyway, thanks for the rescue. We were holed up in the hotel back there when the first wave of monsters came through, and picked off a lot of them with rifle fire. So far we haven’t found any survivors over here, but we’ve only checked a few of the buildings.”

Another pickup truck full of armed men pulled up, and started to unload.

“The boys will take care of all that,” Pete assured me. “The fire department has EMTs, and there’s an ambulance or two coming up behind us.”

A radio squawked something incomprehensible, and the driver of the technical leaned his head out. “Sherriff wants us down the road a bit, Pete. There’s another bunch of them hell cows.”

“Let’s get on it, then,” Pete said. “Y’all take care, now.”

The truck pulled out, with the quadcopter speeding along ahead of it.

Jenny giggled. “Thank God for redneck gun nuts.”