

Once I finally decided I wanted to purchase the market building before the grow house, I quickly added the structure to the tablet interface's cart. The fact that I was buying these things like I would something from Amazon was endlessly surreal, especially when moments later, Maxwell held out a small metal box, just like all of the buildings I had to place so far.

After handing me the small, representative model, Maxwell pulled up the infrastructure map so I could place the building. Eventually, after a short conversation about where it should go, I ended up picking a spot alongside the [Headquarters, on the opposite side of the Medbay](#), to the east. In order to do so, I needed to clear the building that was already there.

Thankfully, despite having several floors intact, the building had collapsed enough that it was considered rubble rather than a structure. This meant it only cost fifty caps to clear, rather than the one hundred and fifty it would cost for a more intact structure.

It made me think that in the future, we might be able to save some caps by partially demoing buildings before clearing them with the system. It all depended on where the cutoff was between rubble and structure.

After purchasing the rubble clearing, the building to our east vanished off the map, and I had no doubt that it was also gone from reality as well. Without even a slight vibration, I had disappeared an entire crumbling building. It was both convenient and disconcerting in equal measures. What sort of power was being focused on me that, with a single purchase and a tap on a map, reality could be tied in knots and snipped with scissors?

With the building gone, I quickly placed the market building, making sure to leave a wide enough space between its upgraded outline and the HQ. When I was certain that was the best place, I nodded to Maxwell, who finalized the location. A quick walk around the HQ showed that not only had the collapsing building been completely cleared, leaving nothing but smooth, leveled gravel, but the market building had been placed. At its current state, it was little more than a concrete-and-cinderblock shed, just over half the size of the medbay.

After checking inside, stepping through a surprisingly robust door, revealing nothing more than a few shelves and cabinets. A quick look around revealed its control console was behind the door. I pulled it from the wall, scanning its upgrades, pausing to read several as I went. The second-level upgrade cost a full five hundred caps, and would bump up the five percent bonus to a full ten. I also had access to a variety of smaller changes I could purchase, like a merchant's stall, display tables, and more. None of it did anything, but considering none of them were above thirty caps, just doing a better job of showing off our goods was enough. Some of them would even come in handy if we ever set up a sort of trade hub.

With my purchases made and our caps almost gone, it was time to get back to work. Not only did we need more caps to purchase the grow hut, but I also wanted to upgrade the barracks, in preparation for upgrading it to level three. I also wanted to upgrade the construction yard as well, so I could at least see what was on the table, building-wise. Part of me was also pretty sure there was some sort of synergy between the salvage hut and any other building that turned resources into useful things. It kind of seemed like it was set up to be the resource

generator, like a logging hut or quarry in an RTS. After all, the whole system seemed to be modeled after those types of games, so it only made sense to see patterns like that elsewhere.

Basically, I had a whole lot of things I wanted to buy, and not nearly enough caps. We needed a place to make some money, and we needed it soon.

Rather than heading out in a random direction, since we had basically finished clearing the immediately adjacent and neighboring buildings, we needed to come up with a new direction, a new scavenging pattern. This was doubly important since we had three new people, as they would allow us to tackle larger buildings. I finally felt at least a bit more confident in leaving the general area of the HQ, so it was time to figure out just where we would go.

Technically, I could have continued clearing the residential area, since we had only scratched the surface of the many nearby neighborhoods, but given that we really wanted medical supplies, it was best to look elsewhere. There was only so much we could find in those homes, after all.

Eventually, after wracking my brain for a better idea, I finally settled on leading the group to the north west, where the [Bethesda ruins](#) would be waiting. While it had been a long time since I played the game, and I didn't really consistently make it to that particular location, I was pretty sure that the ruins were inhabited by raiders, which could be a double-edged sword. On one hand, while the presence of people meant it was unlikely that a ghoul horde was waiting behind every closed door, it also meant that a lot of resources were likely already taken. Now we were looking for resources most people wouldn't be, as even junk could be fed into the medbay for resource points, but it was still likely that a raider-infested location would have fewer medical resources than I would like.

Of course, it's also possible that they may have more recreational drugs, some of which could be fed into the medbay for resources. It was a toss-up, and we really wouldn't know until we had cleared the place and searched it thoroughly.

Either way, after a quick water and equipment check, we headed out of the HQ, moving due north west. Once we had crossed out of our local cluster of buildings, we had about a five-minute walk along a broken, car wreck-covered road, curving around the line of the Potomac. Eventually, the more open road transitioned to a more built-up area, a sort of business park that was nearly all asphalt and concrete. This was Bethesda ruins, much larger and more populated than I remembered from the games, which wasn't all that surprising at this point.

The ruins comprised nearly two dozen buildings, arranged around a central area of intersecting roads. As we slowly moved closer to the center intersection, we were greeted by a wall of debris and junk, including concrete, metal, and stacked, burnt-out cars. As we approached, I motioned for everyone to stay down, crouched and hidden behind a large pile of rubble, one building away from the walls.

We paused there for a long moment, maybe thirty to forty feet from a stacked row of crumbled chunks of concrete. There was no entrance on this side, no lookout points, and no

way for them to peek over their own walls and spot me. It was a rather poorly defended base, which I was not about to complain about.

"Okay, Joseph, you're with me," I said softly. "I want a better look at what's inside. Everyone else, settle in, keep an eye out. No shooting unless they see you, in which case you cover us until we can follow you out."

I got a bunch of nods before Joseph and I broke off from the group, both of us practically crawling towards the line of barely structured rubble. When we finally reached the cobbled-together wall, I carefully located a gap and peered through to the other side.

The intersection was surrounded by several large offices and what appeared to be a large store of some kind. All of the buildings had entrances into the area that was walled off with the same combination of junk and rubble as the wall Joseph and I were huddled behind. I could even see the remnants of a playground shoved and bent into one corner, blocking off a staircase.

In the open area inside the walls, several cobbled-together shelters and [one truck](#) with a [large trailer](#) were visible. I couldn't imagine any of the structures being actual living spaces, as none of them looked good enough to keep water out, beyond the trailer, so I assumed they were more for shade and shelter from bullets. Any doubt that this was a raider camp was put to rest as well, as at least one of the shelters was decorated by a strung-up corpse, and I could see two more hanging down from streetlamps.

We watched the area for several minutes, spotting nearly a dozen different raiders moving around, coming in and out of buildings. About fifty percent of them were armed with some sort of firearm, while the rest of them were carrying cobbled-together melee weapons.

One bastard was walking around, lugging a [flamer](#), a pair of tanks on his back, as he just casually walked around the raider base. It looked like it weighed a ton, but clearly, he cared more about showing off than being reasonable.

After watching for a while, I finally came to the conclusion that there was really no way to come up with a reasonable count since I had no idea how many of the strung-out bastards were hanging out inside. Several of them had already come and gone from a few of the different buildings, making me a bit nervous.

Joseph and I slowly made our way back to the group, where my soldiers had shifted positions to account for every avenue of approach. As we settled in among them, I explained what we saw.

"Raiders have set up a pretty decent area," I explained quietly. "We could push into one of the attached buildings for a good view down, but there's no way to predict if we will run into someone and blow our cover."

"What about there?" Madison said, pointing up and over the wall, at a taller building on the other side of the blocked-off area. "Could we get in there?"

I frowned, examining the building. Its top floor was several stories above the wall, meaning we could easily shoot down into the open area. Even better, from what I could see, it was not connected to the walled-off section of the business park, making it unlikely that anyone was inside.

"I... think that's a good place to start," I said with a nod. "Let's stay low, make our way around. Follow me, the main gate is the other way around."

It took us about twenty minutes to slowly circle the raider camp, pausing several times when we mistook shouting and cursing as them spotting us. Instead, they just seemed to be fighting each other. I did note the sound of at least two dogs, and while I doubt they were trained enough to be proper hunting dogs, it was still something we needed to keep an eye on.

When we arrived at the building, rather than busting through the front door, we found a side entrance, which Joseph cracked into without making too much noise. Once the door was clear, we slipped inside one by one, clicking on our flashlights to cut through the darkness.

"Careful looking through the front windows," Carlos pointed out as we quickly explored the bottom floor. "They might see your flashlight."

Floor by floor, we cleared the building, the only issue being several small radroaches on the second floor, which we managed to kill with a few well-placed stomps. Once we were on the top floor, we started looking around again, quickly locating which windows overlooked the camp. After examining them, we found a few that were broken enough to see through, since the glass was covered in enough grime to turn them brown.

"Okay... this is a good enough position, I think," I said, looking out the gap in a broken window. "We can take out everyone outside, then anyone who comes looking. After that, we can enter the camp to clean up. Any thoughts?"

"We need someone downstairs, covering the front entrance and back door," Carlos stated. "If any of them manage to get in the building, it's an ambush waiting to happen."

"Fair, let's have you and Leon-"

"No, the medic stays with you," Joseph said, cutting me off. "Plus, he should stay with the larger group anyway."

I closed my eyes and let out a long, harsh breath before nodding in reluctant agreement. I hated it, but I was the key to this operation, so keeping me alive was important.

"Fine, John can go with you," I said, both of the soldiers nodding. "Set up a trap near the back door, so you don't have to split up."

"What kind of trap?" John asked, before Carlos shook his head.

"We can use your paracord and a grenade," He explained, before guiding the newer soldier towards the stairs. "I'll show you how."

"Carlos, you have about ten minutes," I said, the soldier giving me a thumbs up without turning around, before taking the lead down the stairs.

"As for the rest of us, pick a window, get comfortable, get ready," I explained, already looking for mine. "I'll start us off. And shoot carefully, we have no idea how many raiders are waiting for us."

We split up slightly, each of us finding a window we could shoot out of. I grabbed a chair and carried it to my window, giving me a comfortable place to sit while I shoot. I also carefully removed a few shards of glass from the corner of the window. This gave me just enough room to aim and shoot through, while also giving me the most cover. I took one spare mag and placed it on a table beside the window, within easy grabbing distance.

When I was all set up, I let out a long breath, looking out over the raider camp, watching our targets walk around. After several minutes had passed, I spotted the guy walking around with a flamer, heading towards one of the scrap structures. I couldn't help but smirk as I leaned forward, peering down my sight, focusing on steadying myself as I sighted him in.

I waited another few minutes, watching the raider walk, sit, and take a break, before standing and moving around the camp. As he turned to head back to one of the buildings, I finally pulled the trigger. My rifle barked, and within seconds, my soldiers fired as well, bullets whipping down range. I probably should have called my target, but I was ultimately glad that I didn't, as all three of us fired on the man holding the flamer.

The first shot, mine, punched into his hip, causing him to stumble and fall forward. Before he could get far, the rest of the shots hit. One punched through his pack, causing the fuel, which was clearly under pressure, to spray out in a five-foot arc, only to burst into flame as another shot sparked off the weapon itself.

Barely ten seconds had passed, and we had already lit one of the structures and a raider on fire.

Now we just needed to take down the rest.