

Crossing directly from outside the HQ, through the halls and straight through to the Horizon world really hammered home just how much better the environment was there, and how terrible it was on the other side. The Fallout world, at least outside of the HQ, had an underlying smell of something being... off. Whether it was the scent of contaminated water, old sewage creeping up from underground, or decaying organics like food or people, I didn't know. I just knew that it was everywhere, just in the background of every breath you took.

The Horizon world, on the other hand, smelled almost perfectly like nature. Every once in a while, you got the scent of ozone, a hint of rust or oil, or a chemical smell that was probably coming from the Zoomorphs, but those were only occasional notes against the pleasant aroma of pine trees, flowers, and the forest.

"Do you think, if we just sealed up the HQ doors with concrete, that we could just spend all our time here?" Joseph asked with a frown, eyes on the forest as we stood at the connection point's entrance.

"And piss off whoever put us there?" I asked, giving him a look. "They already have a way of nudging us there when we ignore it for too long. I really don't want to know what they would do if we stopped going there altogether."

Joseph winced and nodded in understanding, before we both stepped out of cover. The forest was still a bit damp from the day before, but thankfully, the rain had passed, and the air was a bit warmer. I led the way around the ruins above the connection point until I found the path that led through the forest to the river, and we set off.

It didn't take long to reach the river, at which point we stopped and scanned the opposite side. The opposite bank was much more shallow and sandy than ours, and the trees were significantly more sparse. The lack of dense trees would explain why there were zoomorphs over there and not on our side, as they seemed to really dislike dense forests.

Or, perhaps their programming forbid them from interfering with such a dense area of regrowth, at least en masse.

We scanned with our monoculars for about five minutes, hoping to catch sight of something we could harvest chillwater from, but all we could find were lesser zoomorphs. After nothing showed up for ten minutes, we began walking, staying inside the forest line to keep out of sight, as usual. Every ten minutes or so, we would stop and scan the opposite side some more, just to make sure we weren't missing anything.

The two-mile walk was relatively simple, with only a pair of watchers forcing us to stop for about five minutes. We considered just taking them down, but firing off our guns when we could just wait seemed like a waste.

We continued to move, eating up the two miles pretty easily, but choosing to go a bit further than was probably necessary, just to make sure. I can't imagine how stupid and annoying it would be to get back to the HQ, only to learn that we hadn't actually gone the two miles.

Just before we stopped, I spotted something just up past a cluster of trees. For a moment, I thought it was just a tree that had fallen across the river, but as we got closer, it was clearly much more intentional than that.

A single large tree had been cut down across the river, secured on both sides by strapping it to rocks and another perpendicular log. Two other logs had been driven into the ground beside it, with woven cables running across to act as handholds, secured to the crossing log with shorter braided cables. It looked stable and well maintained, but it was clearly a less used, more utilitarian crossing point.

"Well... I guess we know the general area of where these people live," I said, looking around, suddenly nervous about being watched. "Assuming they build the better bridge closer to their home..."

"Assuming we didn't stumble into the outskirts of a second tribe," Joseph pointed out.

I tensed for a moment as he pointed that out, as he was absolutely correct. The difference in styles could be due to being made by different groups, which was not something I was happy to learn.

"Right, yes, exactly what I wanted to be worried about," I said, letting out a long breath. "A second group of natives who may or may not want us dead the second they see us."

Despite Joseph's unfortunately valid point, I quickly pulled out my monocular and scanned the other side of the bridge, specifically the area around it. If this was some sort of hunting bridge, it stood to reason that there was a reason to hunt at this location.

It didn't take long for me to spot what I was looking for, with Joseph, who had also brought his monoculars, spotting them only a second after I did. There, on the distant side of the thin trees, were around a half dozen [lancehorns](#). They were slowly walking along a series of large boulders that marked the start of a rocky incline, occasionally stopping to drill into the ground with their horns.

Where grazers and striders would chew and gather plants to formulate blaze, lancehorns gathered dirt and stone, which was filled with the remnants of humanities buildings, vehicles, and more. They then refined the dirt into usable elements, which eventually made it back to the Crucibles, the forges that formed the zoomorphs.

The chillwater, which was tucked up under the material storage containers that held the useful materials that the lancehorn gathered, was likely an ingredient in that process. Luckily, from the few glimpses I could get, the containers of chillwater on these robots were nearly full.

"Sir, are we going for it?" Joseph asked, looking around, using his monocular to scan the area around the lancehorns. "I'm not seeing much in terms of other threats..."

"... I think we will," I said after a moment of thinking. "I don't want to lose track of them, or have them move on to another area. They *shouldn't* be too much more difficult than the grazers, in theory."

"Alright. What's our plan then?"

We discussed it for a few minutes, constantly watching the small group and the surrounding area, taking cover by the small copse of trees by the simple bridge. Once we had a plan, we moved, quickly crossing the wooden and wire bridge, before immediately taking a sharp right. The idea was to approach the small herd of lancehorns from the back, the opposite way that they were moving. This would drastically lower the chance that they would spot us coming, and hopefully give us some cover to attack them from.

It would also add thirty minutes to the task, but that was fine since we were close enough to keep an eye on the bots, which meant we could pick up the pace if they started to make moves. The overall goal was to get as close as possible. That would make shooting them accurately, without hitting the chillwater containers, significantly easier.

We stayed low, moving slowly across the lightly wooded area, making our way around and to the rocky incline, which we then used as cover. Joseph took the lead as we got closer, and I did my best to mimic him as he walked, staying away from loose clumps of stone or anything that might make noise.

Eventually, we were within range, the lancehorns drilling into the ground less than fifty meters away. Still, I wanted to get closer, as close as we could before they spotted us, so we kept pushing. The zoomorphs pulled slightly away from the rocks as we approached, which allowed us to use the boulders as cover. The gamble paid off, and we managed to get another twenty meters closer.

Unfortunately, our luck was up, and as we moved, a clump of rocks shifted, causing a few stones to tumble and roll down the incline. It made plenty of noise, and two of the closer robots swung their heads around to focus on us.

"Weapons free," I said, immediately standing and aiming down my sights. "Keep them from running!"

Joseph stood immediately, and together, we opened fire, managing to immediately drop one of the closer large robots, its head exploding in a shower of sparks. From there, the machines panicked, desperately turning to scan for the threat. Joseph managed to drop a second lancehorn, one of the further ones, the robot collapsing as he shot out its two back legs.

The herd, finally catching on that something was very, very wrong, started to move, and I stepped out of cover to track them. As I dumped another burst of bullets into a target, Joseph jumped up a pair of large rocks to get a better view, immediately continuing to fire at our targets.

Neither of us expected one of the skittish robots to turn, its lights flipping to red before it charged at me, its head lowered as it tried to skewer me with its horns. I dove out of the way at the last second, the zoomorph digging two parallel gouges along the ground when it missed.

"Sir!" Joseph shouted, scrambling to help.

"No! Keep the others from running!" I shouted, rolling over and dragging myself to my feet. "I got this!"

While we talked, the lancehorn had recovered from its attack, the sleek robot turning to face me again. As it prepared to charge, lowering its head, I pulled out my pistol and emptied the magazine into its head. A few of the bullets sparked off its horns before one of them nearly exploded off its head, allowing the final four rounds to slam directly into its head, dropping the robot quickly.

By the time I grabbed my rifle, Joseph had taken care of the remaining herd. One of them almost managed to escape but fell after Joseph blew out a pair of its knee joints. We quickly stepped further out of the cover, making our way to the various incapacitated robots. Joseph double-tapped all of them with his pistol, while I scanned the area for any incoming threats.

Silence settled over the area, a harsh contrast to the loud gunfire we had brought and unleashed. Still, we had completed the first part of our task. Now, we just needed to harvest what we were really looking for.

"Any idea how we are going to pry those little containers loose?" Joseph asked, watching as I kneeled beside the broken robot, tilting my head down to get a better look.

"Elbow grease and human ingenuity," I responded, pulling my combat knife free from my sheath. "Or luck, probably a lot of that."

We poked and prodded at the connection for a full ten minutes before I stumbled on a seam that I could pry apart with my knife, making just enough room for me to jam Joseph's knife in. With a twist, I used my soldier's knife to cut a final connection point. From there, we could twist the chillwater free, pulling it out of its housing.

And, unfortunately, disconnecting a hose in the process. This released a spray of chillwater all over my glove-covered hands. Thankfully, the container itself was sealed, so all that leaked out was what was in the hose. Even so, it was still enough to freeze my gloves solid like I had soaked them in water and thrown them out into a sub-zero blizzard.

"Holy fuck!" I cursed, dropping the thankfully durable container of chillwater to the ground. "Fuck, that is so fucking cold!"

Joseph, on the ball as ever, quickly reached out and yanked my gloves off. The hardened materials scratched my skin, but it was far better than the frostbite I would have probably gotten if they had stayed on. I shook my hands, rubbing and breathing on them to warm them up, which they thankfully started to do after a few seconds.

"Holy shit... yeah... keep the cryogenically potent liquid off of you," I commented, looking down at the frozen ground where the rest of the chillwater had leaked. "Probably should have seen that coming."

"What is that? Liquid nitrogen or something?" Joseph asked, toeing at my gloves with his boot.

"No, I would have had more time with liquid nitrogen," I said, shaking my head. "That was something else, maybe something specifically engineered to bypass the [Leidenfrost effect](#)? I don't really know."

"Well... let's just be careful. Getting that directly on your hands would suck."

"Ya think?"

With a method found, we got to work, carefully removing seven more of the chillwater containers. To keep the hose from spewing dangerous cryogenic coolant onto us, we carefully found and cut the hose first, letting the liquid leak out before attempting anything. Once we had all eight containers, we carefully put them into our bags. Then we pulled them all out again because I really didn't like how they were grinding against each other. So, we carefully cut down some nearby bushes and used them to cushion the interior of the bag, as well as stuffing them between the containers.

As we were packing, I glanced over at the several lancehorn bodies that lay across the ground, various bits broken, the occasion spark still spitting from inside them.

"I know they aren't alive... But I still kinda don't like killing them and just leaving the whole body unused," I commented, sliding a container of chillwater into a pack that Joseph was holding open. "Kind of like killing a deer and only taking the horns."

"If you have no use for them, then may we harvest them?"

Both Joseph and I whirled around, pulling our pistols out, stopping just short of aiming them at where the voice came from. Stepping out from a large patch of tall grass, a pair of natives approached, one carrying a bow, the other a spear. The one with a spear, a tough-looking man, was closest, his outfit a combination of leather, cloth, and armored plates, with the latter intricately woven into the outfit. The cloth was dyed a deep burgundy, while the plates were painted black. The other native, a smaller woman, had fewer armored plates but a full quiver with several different types of arrows, all fletched with different colored feathers. She had an arrow nocked, but not drawn back, though her eyes were clearly sharp, ready to fight at the drop of a hat. I glanced at Joseph, and after a pause, I nodded and lowered my pistol, my soldier doing the same.

"Hello, my name is Connor," I said, holstering my weapon. "Sorry for the aggressive welcome. We hadn't heard you coming."

"I'm surprised you could hear anything, with the sound your weapons make," The woman in the back said, still eyeing us harshly. "My ears are still ringing."

"Maybe, but it is hard to argue with results," I pointed out, gesturing to the broken robots. "But yes, if you can find use from them, please do. The waste would have bothered me, even though there is no way for us to haul anything else."

"Thank you. I am Toando, and this is my hunting partner, Yalna," the man, Toando explained. "And thank you for sharing. This is more than we could bring down on our own in two days."

For a moment, neither of us moved, before I carefully handed Joseph the last canister. After he slid it into the pack, I lifted one, and he lifted the other, slinging them over our backs. We then took several steps back, giving them a wide berth.

"In exchange for this," I said, gesturing to the parts. "Perhaps we could talk? We are new to the area, and have much to learn."

"... Would you be willing to answer questions as well?" Toando asked, raising an eyebrow at my request.

"It's only fair."

"Then yes, there is no harm in talking while we work."