

The following morning, we actually slept in by a few hours. Our primary mission was to *finally* get around to meeting the neighbors, and that was something better done at least around noon, not six in the morning. It was strange for us not to jump up with the sun, but I certainly enjoyed being able to roll over and go back to sleep after I first woke up.

"Note to self, institute days off as soon as possible," I muttered to myself as I drifted back to sleep.

Since I had arrived in this world, and since my soldiers first entered this world, we had been essentially moving around nonstop. While, at the moment, we didn't have enough time to sit around and take a day or two off, I knew that such a harsh working schedule was untenable. We would need to get proper time off soon, or things would start to get difficult.

Once we eventually got up, and after completing our morning ablutions, we put on our gear and made our way through the main hall, only stopping when we reached the dark door hall. I did a quick head count, nodding when I noted everyone was there and appeared ready. There were only eight of us going on this trip, with John volunteering to stay home. He would be doing some work, but since he was alone, his primary job was to stay alert and watch over the area. If he spotted something wrong, Maxwell would be able to reach out to us on our radio, which he was rapidly learning how to use.

The last thing we did before heading over to the Horizon world was to refill the connected box with goodies, our gifts to the Oakanrest, which they would hopefully like. While most of it was food, we did include a bunch of interesting things we bought while in Megaton. This transfer included five [decent-looking lighters](#), which I was pretty sure would work with blaze. The biofuel behaved a lot like gas when not under pressure, and I knew that those kinds of lighters worked with gas, though it wasn't as clean.

On top of the lighters, I included a pair of [lanterns](#), the same simple metal-capped, wire-frame-protected design that was scattered across the wasteland. Unless they were switched off, the lanterns never ran out of power, always glowing with a steady light, which told me they must have some sort of fusion system inside, maybe similar to what the [recharger rifles](#) had. They gave out a good amount of constant light, enough to light up a room well, significantly more than a candle or a decent fire could. As far as the person who sold them was concerned, along with the second shopkeeper I had take a look at them to make sure they were safe and in good condition, they would likely run for another few hundred years before finally dimming.

I was already planning on buying as many of these as I could, maybe even finding out the most common places to see them, so we could harvest them ourselves. They would be incredibly useful for lighting not just the HQ exterior, but also the connection point in the Horizon world.

The rest of the box was filled with food, stuffing in potatoes, corn, and apples, all wrapped in protective cloth. We weren't able to fit a huge amount, but I was happy to learn that the group in charge of the previous exchange filled in all the gaps around the bottles with carrots, which was why I didn't include any in the second load.

When we were done packing the box as best we could, trying two different orientations in the process, the group of eight crossed over to the other side. After passing through the dark tunnel and climbing out of the stairs of the fake basement, I had some of the team run a check around the perimeter. Meanwhile, the rest of us unloaded the box into two duffel bags and inspected the other two, which were already set up and waiting.

Rather than presenting old, worn, and ratty-looking bottles, or worse, one that was skunked or gone bad in some other way, the previous day's HQ team carefully opened several bottles of vodka and whiskey, pouring them into [amber glass bottles](#) we got from the medbay. Each of the new bottles could hold about half a liter, and their caps sealed very well. With some tape and hand-drawn labels, the liquor looked significantly better than it had before in their original containers. They were even wrapped in several sheets to keep them from breaking as we traveled.

"We kept the sheets intact, as we figured they would probably get a kick out of something so soft," Leon explained. "Worth a shot, right?"

"I don't know, but you're right, it is worth a shot," I said with a smile, patting his back, before turning to the rest of the group. "Alright, let's load up. Anyone not carrying anything goes in front, with one in back. We are going to skirt around the clearing so we don't have to deal with any zoomorphs."

"How will we know where to go?" Kelsey asked with a frown. "I was under the impression we hadn't seen their home yet."

"We haven't, but Joseph and I did stumble onto a well-traveled road and a sturdy bridge," I responded, carefully picking up the duffel with our bottle inside. "With the basic direction that Toando gave us, we should be able to find them... hopefully."

After double-checking that we had everything, we set out, leaving the protection of the log walls and following the path toward the large clearing, turning right into the woods once we were close. Carlos and Madison walked along ahead of us, while Joseph pulled up the rear, leaving the rest of us in the "middle" carrying carefully packed bags.

It was a pretty long walk, but we made good time, getting around about a third of the clearing before noon. After that, we slowed down, taking our time so that, if some sort of spotter or watcher noticed us, it didn't look like we were approaching aggressively. On top of that, we had to re-find the road, as I wasn't a hundred percent sure of where it would be.

Thankfully, it wasn't too hard to find, as at about two in the afternoon, we stumbled onto the road, about a fifteen-minute walk before the river. Once there, we stopped to take a break and adjust ourselves a bit.

"I can't imagine Toando didn't tell people about us, which means they likely know about our rifles," I pointed out, getting nods as everyone stopped. "From here on out, I want our rifles on our backs. Our goal is to appear non-threatening, but also not weak or meek."

The group adjusted their packs and straps, locking their rifles along their backs. After a few minutes' break, we started moving again, walking down the road, though this time we were following it away from the river.

We followed the road for about fifteen minutes before the forest suddenly fell away, revealing another clearing, though this one wasn't nearly as large as the one we had just walked around. The clearing was mainly filled with large swaths of grass, with few clusters of trees here and there, as well as a few large patches of the tall red grass that was all over the games. There were also plenty of gravel patches as well, on top of cleared areas with what looked like some purposely spread plants. It wasn't quite a farm, but it was close, either by accident or on purpose.

Beyond all of that was a massive palisade, at least five times the size of the one that protected the connection point. It was built from great, enormous tree trunks, sealed with mud and moss, and generally lashed together with thick cables and rope. I could see people standing just behind and slightly above the tops of the palisade, which told me that they had platforms behind it for a lookout.

Of course, despite how impressive the village was, what immediately caught my eye was the giant chunk of rubble behind it. Like a massive wall, it jutted from the ground, as if someone had hurled it away and it had impaled itself there. It was worn, tilted back slightly, partially crumbled, and covered in vines and lichen, but with enough angular edges that it was impossible not to see it as a huge concrete wall. There were no real discerning features to identify what it might have been, maybe a bridge or the side of a now-gone building, but the entire back end of the village was pressed against it, using it to fortify their home.

The moment we stepped out of the clearing, it was obvious that they knew we were there and had already prepared for us. The front gate, built from the same large trees as the palisade, was already open, with half a dozen people waiting for us, all of them armed.

"Alright... let's not keep them waiting."

I stepped forward, moving past the leads so that I was in front, leading my soldiers closer to the village. I passed off my duffel to Carlos, who accepted it without a word as I walked by. As we got closer, I could start to tell the people apart. Most of them, the ones I could see at least, were armed and ready, with everything from bows to casters, though nobody had actually pointed anything at us yet. In the center of the greeting party was an older man, and Toando, who stood straight just a step behind him.

The closer we got, the more tension I could feel. Maybe it was the utter silence, the lack of kids playing or people working. Or perhaps it was the dozen or so people with bows and other weapons that could likely punch through armor plating, all ready to shoot at us. Finally, when we were standing a respectable distance away, and I slowed to a stop, my soldiers behind me.

"Greetings," I said simply, my hands out to show my palms were empty. "As I'm sure Toando has told you, my name is Connor, leader of these people. We are new to the area, and

wish to greet our neighbors so that we may come to an understanding and hopefully become friends."

"Greetings, I am Nuerak, Elder of the Oakanrest," the older man standing next to Toando said, scanning my men before focusing on me. "My son did mention meeting you, though he did not mention that you were so many."

"When we met, there were only three of us here," I explained. "Our numbers grew once we found a place to stay. Do not worry, we will not hunt machines or food near your home, your... son has already warned us of the issue."

"That is good, overhunting either can be dangerous, though I wonder where you hail from if you do not know that."

"We do in fact come from a land far from here," I explained with a nod. "Far enough that a great many things are different. But please, stories of home can wait for later. I would like to present you a gift, a peace offering."

I gestured first to Carlos, who was carrying the bag I was carrying, then to Kelsey, Madison, and Stewart.

"For you and your people to enjoy, we gift you food, a few trinkets, and examples of our special drinks, strong alcohol for those who imbibe."

I saw a few members of the greeting art perk up at the mention of alcohol, a few heads peeking up from deeper inside the village like meerkats. Nuerak stared for a long moment, studying me with sharp eyes, before the tension seemed to leave him all at once.

"Very well, we invite you into our home," he said, nodding to one of the men standing nearby, holding a ready bow. "Come, take shelter in our walls, share in our food. We welcome you."

Most of the people stepped to the side, allowing us to approach slowly. I stopped in front of Nuerak and offered my hand. He grabbed my forearm in a warrior's handshake, gripping it tight.

"We accept your invitation, and the safety of your walls."

Once the handshake was over, we were led deeper into the village. Log buildings, ranging from simple huts to legitimate log cabins, dotted the interior. Along the concrete wall, far on the other side, were several large structures, and judging by the activity around it, they were some sort of long house where many members of the village slept. As we walked, more people stepped out of hiding, including children and teenagers, all dressed in hides and woven cloth, many of them including bits of zoomorphs into their design.

Most of the men had shaved heads, while women, especially the younger ones, had beads or slivers of metal woven into their hair.

It was a surprising number of people, and many of them quickly stepped out of the village walls, heading out to whatever tasks they had been assigned before we were spotted. Everyone, even those who were leaving, were clearly interested in us.

Once we reached the general center of the village, I spotted our destination. A great fire pit, currently only holding a small fire, sat in the middle, with many seats and tables around it, all of it carved from wood or built from stone. Nuerak led us to one of the larger tables and gestured for us to sit as he, Toando, and several other people sat along one side, with the elder in the middle.

"Please, sit," Nuerak said, nodding as I sat across from him. "First, food and water. You are our guests, and you have traveled to see us, it is only right that we feed you."

A few large clay pots of water were brought out, along with a few cuts of cooked meat, venison by the looks of things, as well as a few bowls of savory cooked grain, like a barley stew. We were shown to cut the venison and scoop up the grain to eat together, and despite its simple appearance, it was good. The grain was surprisingly well seasoned, while the venison had a pleasant heat that went well with the grain.

It was certainly a lot more complex and subtle than what I expected from a group cooking over an open fire.

Once we were done eating, the tables were cleared, and our cups were drained of water, Nuerak nodded and smiled.

"Perhaps I may be being greedy, but I find myself wondering what you have brought to us as gifts," he asked, gesturing to the bags. "Perhaps you might show us, so we may hear about them in your words?"

"Of course, I would be happy to show off what we brought," I said with a smile, gesturing for my soldiers to lift their bags and place them on the table. I stood a moment later, ready to show off our gifts.