

By the time we had finished sitting down, trading gifts, shaking hands, and sharing drinks, it was starting to get a bit late in the afternoon. The sun was beginning to sink, and it was about the time I was forced to consider whether it was time to go or time to start asking for a bed. Apparently, our hosts had a pretty good idea about where our base was, something I wasn't sure how I felt about, as they quickly offered us the option to stay the night, rather than trudge back through the forest in the dark.

It would have been doable, we had the flashlights after all, but between the loss of our Solar Powered perk, the added risk of poor visibility, the ever-present threat of the zoomorphs, and every other risk between here and home, it was better to simply stay. They had already fed us, and we were all carrying supplies for at least the night, which we would split between a half-meal for dinner and a snack the following morning.

So, after some thought, I decided to stay the night. I used our radio, which we had been using on and off to keep in touch with HQ, to let Maxwell and John know we would be returning the following morning. I was very thankful that the entities had decided to be nice, as Carlos, who was carrying the small secondary radio attachment required to contact HQ, had pointed out we had no idea the radio would work from the Horizon world. The only explanation was that the entities were responsible since, as all evidence pointed, we were in an entirely different reality.

As the sun continued to sink and darkness spread over the walled village, the fire pit at the center grew, casting a low light over the camp. I could see crude candles, mostly tallow in clay pots with fiber cord as a wick, being lit as well, though only by a few people. Most were satisfied in calling it a day when the light ran out, gathering around the town center and relaxing before it was time to sleep. Meals were prepared, shared, and cleared away, during which we opened up the MRE-like food packs we had brought with us.

The locals were interested in the prepackaged food, many asking and trading their own food to try some. Some of them liked it, but more often than not, they were happy to go back to their own meals. After all, while we had upgraded the taste, they were far from gourmet. That said, they were all *very* interested when I told them the prepackaged food could last for years before showing any signs of aging, but even then, it would be another few years before it was actually bad enough not to eat.

With the majority of the village gathered around, it was easy to do a rough head count. After a few attempts to get an accurate count, I could see that at least three hundred people lived here. That seemed a tad small, as I seem to remember the tribes from the games being much bigger. I racked my brains for some sort of definitive number, but could only remember a few scenes of crowds. Perhaps the significant size difference was due to the climate, or the availability of food. I knew that providing for a group got exponentially harder as it grew, so maybe that was what was normal for the area. I asked Elder Nuerak about how many nearby tribes there were in the area, and how they compared to Oakenrest, and he ran his hand through his beard.

"There are eleven tribes connected to the road you used to find us, all within a day's walk," He explained. "The smallest has fifty souls, while the largest has five hundred. The larger tribe, they are the ones I mentioned who have begun planting and harvesting from their fields. They would be very interested in the apples you have shown us."

"Huh... alright, I'll look into that," I said with a nod. "Who built the road?"

"We all did, together," he responded, sounding proud. "The idea was suggested by the closest tribe, our brothers and sisters in Riverward. They have many artisans and craftsmen who peddle their goods along the road, but it has been a benefit to us all. Even during the winter, when it is buried in the snow, the lack of trees makes moving from village to village easier."

I nodded in understanding, knowing that roads could more or less make or break a civilization. Rome was built on their roads, and the Silk Road helped China spread its influence all the way to Africa. Although they weren't without their risks, as anyone could use them, friend or foe.

I did notice, shockingly, that there were no beasts of burden. There were plenty of carts around, ranging from wheelbarrows to large ones pulled by what looked like two people, but there were no cows, oxen, or horses. Looking back, I couldn't think of a single time I saw something like that in the game, either. That would undoubtedly limit the groups significantly, especially since they wouldn't be able to use them for farming.

"There are other groups around, beyond just those along the road, but they are considerably harder to get to," He explained with a frown. "We do not get along with some of them as well, the road would have extended to them otherwise."

"Toando mentioned raiders," I responded with a frown. "Are they often a problem?"

"There are three raider groups. Pne of them has a camp along a ridge far to the north, so they do not come this far south," he explained. "The other two have only recently called a truce, having been fighting each other for nearly three months. Each felt the other was encroaching on their 'territory' and so they sought to push each other out. It will likely take some time for them to recover."

"If they are both small, now might be the time to eliminate them entirely," I pointed out. "You wouldn't have to wipe them out, only do enough damage that they spiral out on their own."

"We lack the hunters or fighters to combat them," the elder responded with a frown. "Our strength comes from our walls."

I nodded, holding back a comment on his statement. Between idly believing that a raider group would not come down far enough to harm you, just because they hadn't before, and relying so heavily on their walls, I couldn't help but think he was underestimating the danger of a group willing to kill and steal for survival. Unfortunately, we did not have even nearly a good enough relationship for me to point out how dangerous his line of thinking was.

It was definitely something I would work on in the future, even if I had to supply him with emergency weapons myself. A box or two of remotely detonated explosives would make a great deterrent from raiding parties.

When it was time to finally sleep, we were given space under an awning, which honestly was all we really needed with the current weather, not to mention our gear. We used our backpacks as pillows and quickly settled in for a night's sleep.

The following morning, we left early, following our friends Toanda and Yalna as they headed out to hunt. Apparently, when they weren't hunting zoomorphs, they hunted for meat and resources, mostly deer, since leather was always helpful.

As we walked along the road, letting the two more experienced hunters guide us home, I asked a question that had occurred to me the previous day, as I had been trying to fall asleep.

"How many zoomorphs do you hunt on average a week?" I asked, walking beside the two natives, my soldiers behind us.

"One to two a week, depending on our needs," Yalna responded, her tone a bit less hostile than it had been the last two times we met. It seemed as if getting Elder Nuerak's approval and presenting those gifts had meant something to her.

"That's... a lot less than I would have thought," I admitted. "You must strip them down for everything they are worth."

"Of course. The machines are a part of the nature of our home, it's only respectful to use as much as we can," Toando explained, looking out along the road. "Depending on the 'zoomorph' as you say, you can get everything you might need from just one."

"Is that a normal amount for most tribes? Just two a week?"

"It varies, as some hunt more because they use more. Some hunt even less because they need less," Toando responded in a shrug.

I nodded in understanding and continued along the road. Eventually, the road curved, following along the clearing, though at a significant distance. The road followed the clearing on the opposite side of the path we had taken to the tribal village the previous day. However, even though we were going the long way around, the fact that we were walking on an open road, rather than trudging through the forest, meant we made excellent time, without any extra effort.

When we eventually left the road, Toando guided us easily through the forest, eventually dropping us off at the connection point, or at least one of the paths to it.

"I am glad our group's meeting went as well as it did," Toando said, shaking my hand with a firm grip. "My father can be... difficult at times. Thankfully, I think you made a good impression."

"I certainly hope so," I said with a nod. "We will likely be visiting again in a few days, this time with some trade goods. Until then, stay safe."

The native hunter nodded before he and his partner stepped back and faded into the brush, disappearing in just a few moments. I continued to stare out at the forest after they had vanished, before shaking my head and turning around.

"Alright, let's get back home," I said, leading my people the rest of the way inside, almost immediately heading back into the crossing point, stepping through into the HQ.

Despite being relatively safe the entire time, it was still a huge relief to finally be home, with the wall of the Headquarters.

After taking a moment, we made our way to the main hall, greeting John and Maxwell, who had been waiting for us to return. As we greeted them, we all sat down heavily at the combined table. Within a few minutes, we were enjoying a full breakfast of our recently improved food, explaining how the meeting went and what we learned.

When we were finally all done with our impromptu debriefing, I leaned back in my chair, shaking my head.

"I'm honestly a bit nervous about trading with them. We could probably make a good chunk of profit from each of them, especially since our only real cost is time," I pointed out, shaking my head. "But their coins are limited. Once we take them all, not only will it take a long time for them to get more, but if we trade with multiple tribes, we would eventually clear the whole area of their currency, which we then basically destroy by submitting to the HQ. That would suck for both of us, because they don't have any more currency, which means we can't trade them for any currency."

"Is that not a problem for the Fallout world?" Leon asked with a frown. "We've already destroyed thousands of caps."

"Yeah, but caps will replenish, through scavenging and through trade," I explained, still frowning. "Caravans and traders make their way along the east coast and in from the west, buying up scavenged supplies for caps. Plus, not only will people continue to find more, but you can actually make the bottle caps. More likely than not, the cap just goes up in value, though I have a feeling we have a long time until that becomes a problem. If it does, we will just have to expand to further markets, tapping into their resources while the ones here recover. But again, with how much we have seen people throw around, I'm confident we have quite some time before that becomes a problem."

"We could always make new coins and use them to buy things from the Horizon tribes," Joseph suggested, his brow furrowed as he voiced his idea. "They don't really have a way to test them, so while they would be worthless to us, they wouldn't be able to tell the difference. It would keep their currency flowing, without cutting into our profits."

"That... would work, assuming we could find the tools," I said, considering the idea, only to shake my head. "But we would be introducing coins into circulation that would be worthless for us, tainting our purchases."

"Eventually, sure," Joseph agreed with a shrug. "But that would take time, probably weeks, if not months. In the meantime, we would be able upgrade the HQ considerably, which is something more immediately important than having a long-term supply of coins from them."

"I suppose the Horizon was always going to be a limited market," I admitted, chewing my lip. "If I hadn't heard it from the emissary, I would have assumed we wouldn't be able to make any money from them at all."

I considered the plan for a moment before nodding to myself as I came to a decision.

"Alright, if we can do that, it will hopefully minimize our negative impact on the tribes, so let's call that plan A," I said, looking around the table. "We need to find, purchase, or hire the skills and equipment to reproduce the coins. Once that happens, we can start trading with the Horizon tribes."

With that decision reached, it was time to figure out exactly how much the tribal currency was actually worth compared to caps. I took the small leather pouch Toando had given me and headed down to the secure storage, grabbing the room's tablet as I passed it. At a glance, I saw we had eight hundred and thirteen caps at the moment, almost all of them coming from our quick trip to Megaton to sell the medical supplies. After checking the tablet, I took one of the coins and placed it in the safe, then rechecked the tablet to see how much the cap amount had changed.

When I saw the amount, I had to double-check the whole process. Apparently, each coin was worth twenty-five caps, which meant a large coin was likely worth two hundred and fifty, though I wouldn't know for sure until I traded for one. That was significantly more than I expected, and part of me wondered if the HQ was inflating their worth since they came from one of the dark worlds.

Either way, it meant we now had just over one thousand one hundred caps to spend, and I was looking forward even more to getting trade going between Oakenrest and us, as well as with the other tribes.

After finally finishing my experiment, I put the leather sack into the safe, heading out of the secure storage room. I had a thousand caps to spend, and I knew exactly where I was going to put them.