

As we left the cover of the connection tunnel behind, all three of us pulled off our helmets and took a long, deep breath. A combination of the shining sun and deep, crisp, fresh air was invigorating in a way that was hard to put into words. The Solar Powered perk might also have been in play as well, filling us with refreshing waves of vitality.

"You know..." Carlos started, as we stood there for a moment, looking out into the forest. "Setting up a small fort around this side might be smart. Cut down some trees, stack them up to form walls... maybe even a simple swinging door to let people in or out."

"What's the point?" I asked with a frown. "People can't cross without my permission, and I really don't feel like hauling around logs."

"I don't mean right this minute," Carlos explained, shaking his head. "I mean, when we get a bunch more people. Having a place we can retreat to... or hang out in... I mean, being cooped up inside all day in the HQ sounds terrible, but the outside in the Fallout world sucks."

His point was hard to argue against. Anyone cramped back home would get a little antsy, and compared to here, the outside Fallout world did suck. Not only did it stink, the scent of unnatural rot and death underlining every breath, but it also just *felt* more oppressive. Having a fort on this side where people could go, hang out, and still be relatively safe, both between any walls we could build and the forest itself, which did seem to be a no-go zone for larger groups of zoomorphs, would probably do wonders for morale.

"Okay, I can see your point," I agreed. "It's something to consider as the group grows. Maybe we could bribe or pay the natives to build something for us. I can't imagine we would have anywhere close to the skill they do building things like that."

"How would we pay them back?" Joseph asked, scanning the treeline behind us, out past the rusted-out structure. "Only our gear transfers back and forth, so we can't trade Fallout loot, and beyond that, what do we have of worth?"

"Beyond the fact that that may change eventually?" I asked after considering the idea for a moment, "We could agree to kill a dangerous zoomorph that's threatening them, or something similar."

"...What if they have human enemies?" Carlos asked, raising an eyebrow.

"It would depend on why they are enemies. Fighting over rights to a fresh water spring, then I'm not getting involved," I assure him, the soldier sagging a bit in relief. "But an enemy that tends to pillage, murder, and more, that I would consider helping them."

"Sounds fair to me," Carlso said with a nod. "Live by the sword, die by the sword, after all."

"Not disagreeing with the second part, but we wouldn't exactly be attacking them with swords," Joseph pointed out with a shrug. "If we settled in to attack a human group, in likelihood it would be an execution, not a fight."

"I think you're underestimating the people here," I responded. "But I see your point."

We stood there for a few more minutes, enjoying the scenery, before it was eventually time for us to go. We had wasted enough of the day just standing around, enjoying the sunshine and pleasant weather. As usual, we followed the now familiar path around the rusted structure, then through the forest, before eventually arriving at the river. After a quick look around to confirm we weren't immediately walking into a herd of zoomorphs, we started our long hike up along the river.

It was hard to judge time without a watch, but we made good progress, arriving at the bridge across the river after about an hour. There we stopped to take a break. Joseph and I were sitting on a fallen log, sipping from our water while Carlos walked towards the woods to relieve himself. A few minutes later, he called out to us in a hushed urgency.

"Guys! Come check this out."

Joseph and I shared a look, grabbed our rifles, and rushed towards his voice, finding him along the edge of the treeline. He was working his hands through a bush, plucking something out of it. As we got closer, he held out his hand, showing off a half dozen red berries. It only took a moment for me to identify them.

"[Raspberries](#)?" I asked, picking up one of the delicate red berries, looking at it from all angles. "That's... surprising. I didn't think normal plants made it... I was under the impression most of the plantlife was modified to help heal the planet..."

"And support new human life, right?" Joseph pointed out, plucking a berry from the bush. "Assuming these are actual raspberries and not just a lookalike."

"You think it's safe?" Carlos asked, gesturing to the bushes behind him. "There's a hell of a lot of them. It would be a bummer if we couldn't have some."

Sure enough, there was a massive patch of the berry-laden bush, growing around the forest, going a dozen or so meters deep into the treeline, with just the tip along the edge.

"They look normal enough," I admitted. "Not much you could mistake for a raspberry, at least not that I know of... They look like raspberries, but-."

"That's good enough for me," Carlos said, tossing the berries in his hand, into his mouth, chewing them eagerly before letting out a groan. "Holy hell, those are good."

"Really?" Joseph asked, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. "Just going to stuff them in your face?"

"What? They look like raspberries, they grow on raspberry bushes, and now I know they taste like raspberries," Carlos pointed out. "What else could you ask for?"

"Maybe checking with the natives first?" Joseph suggested. "They would know if it was safe to eat. This world had gone through so many biome changes... who knows if they are still safe."

"Sir?" Carlos asked, looking at me, with another handful of berries in his hand.

"Well, it looks like you volunteered to be our test dummy," I responded, shaking my head. "Joseph, we will hold back until later. If there is anything dangerous in them, he's gonna feel it pretty quickly. If he is fine by the time we get back... we can pick some for ourselves."

"And if he does start showing side effects?"

"Then we drag his ass to the natives and ask them to help, if they can," I responded, before giving Carlos a strong look. "And for forcing me to engage with them before I was ready and from a position of weakness, if Carlos survives, I'll have him dig latrines by the connection point, just to give him something to dig out clean."

Joseph nodded, while Carlos responded by stuffing another handful of berries into his mouth, before grabbing one more and following behind us as we headed back to where we had left most of our stuff.

Once we had grabbed our things, our trip continued, following along the river for another hour or so. Eventually, we reached a cliff face, and the [waterfall that fed the river](#) we had been following. It was a wide falls, set into a tall mesa that was just as Toando described. The upper level was at least thirty or forty meters up, and as far as we could see, the rise extended quite far in both directions, with a large mountain to the west and a more sheer cliff face towards the east, on our side. The face disappeared into the forest, but you could see that it continued on for quite some ways, more than enough to divide the area above from the level we were on.

"Well... we found it," Carlos said, looking up along the cliff. "What now?"

"Now we need to find a way up there," I said with a frown. "I'm not risking that the quest won't be considered complete without us going up there and exploring a bit."

They both agreed, and soon we were walking along the edge of the cliff face, following it into the forest. We traveled for a good thirty minutes before I stopped us, shaking my head.

"That's far enough, I think," I said, looking up at the cliff, the edge just above the tallest trees in the area. "I'm not willing to add that much time to each trip just for a slightly easier way up the cliff."

"The other side of the river seemed a bit easier to climb," Joseph pointed out. "Should we try to forge the river?"

"...There was a bend back about ten minutes before the falls," I said after some thought. "The water seemed pretty slow there, and the opposite side looked easy to climb out of. We'll try there."

My soldiers nodded, and we headed back the way we came, eventually reaching the river, before following that back to the slow bend. There, after a few minutes of planning, we decided to try and cross.

I wasn't overly worried about the prospect. As far as I knew, there were no zoomorphs that hung out in moving water, and while the river wasn't moving fast enough to be dangerous, it certainly wasn't a lake or pond. Additionally, both Joseph and Carlos claimed to be strong swimmers, and although I was far from a competitive level, I had spent my summers swimming in lakes and oceans. I knew how to swim well enough that I wasn't concerned.

We walked back up the river, so that the flow would bring us back to the bend and help us reach the other side as we swam. Then, one by one, we slid down the rocky side of the embankment and into the water. We swam across, not fighting the current, just forging our way across. Somehow, we managed to time it perfectly, so that as the river carried us downstream, we reached the other side just as we entered the bend. We crawled up the gravelly, stony bank until we were on solid ground.

"That wasn't too bad," Carlos said, shaking the water out of his boots. "Nice and refreshing."

Once we were across, we followed the river *again*, this time to the side we hadn't yet explored. It didn't take us long to find a path upwards, following along the mountain that seemed to curl around the side of the waterfall. It was a pretty sketchy path, and I would *not* want to have to cross it while running from something or someone, but it was possible, as long as we took our time.

I was already planning to add pitons, ropes, and maybe some logs to make the broken and dangerous climb up more manageable by the time we reached the top of the mesa. The river up there was much wider and flowed considerably slower than the second stage because of it. The falls clearly concentrated the flow of water, creating a much faster-moving river after it.

Almost immediately, as we were exploring the second level, we found a pod of grazers and watchers. Not long after that, a large herd of lancehorns crossed the shallow river, drinking from it with artificially natural-looking movements. It wasn't until we finally saw a [tallneck](#), lumbering across the river, then around in the start of a massive loop around the area, that we decided enough was enough, and that we had fully completed the quest.

The return trip was long, but we trudged on. The boost to vitality that the sun brought, as well as our straight boost to strength, helped carry us through the last two-thirds, as we started to get tired. Rather than swim across the river, we walked along the opposite side, only crossing when we finally arrived back at the hunting bridge. There we took another break, and filled Carlos's helmet with raspberries, eating quite a few of them as well. We left most of the crop behind, since I didn't want to deprive locals of a potential food source, but I couldn't resist giving my people a treat.

From there, we continued on to home, eventually stopping outside the connection tunnel. I went through to accept the quest rewards, three EOTech clones with red sights. Once I grabbed them from our rooms, I went back out to the main hall, grabbing Maxwell's attention.

"Hey, c'mon," I said, nodding toward the hall intersection. "Got a treat waiting for you on the other side."

"Oh? That's intriguing," He stated, a curious smile on his face as he stepped out from behind the counter. "Any hints?"

"No, you wouldn't even have enough time to guess."

I led him through the connection point, stepping out into the clear, clean, crisp air of the Horizon world. The suit-wearing member of my team stopped as he stepped out of the connection tunnel, the slowly setting sun casting warm light over us, even through the trees. Instinctively, he took a long, deep breath, closing his eyes and enjoying every second.

"I have to admit... You mentioned this before, and I assumed you were overstating it," he said, after taking a few more breaths. "It really is an invigorating experience..."

"Part of that is the perk," I explained. "But it was nice even before that. C'mon, the boys should be sitting over here."

I led him to my other two soldiers, passing them each their optics after Carlos placed the helmet full of berries in Maxwell's lap. The man looked down with a frown, reaching in to pull out a berry.

"Truly? Raspberries?" He asked, giving me a look. "That is unexpected."

"You can thank Carlos," I said, watching Joseph as he attached his optic, following his example to attach my own. "He found and tested them for us."

Maxwell gave Carlos an appreciative nod before happily chowing down on his portion of the berries. Carlos, Joseph, and I worked on our rifles. When the optics were firmly in place, we each took a few shots to zero them in, each of us opting for a mid-range zeroing, as that was where the optic would be most useful.

As the sun was finally setting, and Maxwell was done with his snack, we stepped back through the connection and into the HQ, sealing the door behind us. We quickly ate our MRE meals, each of us polishing them off while barely tasting them, which, as far as I was concerned, was the best way to eat them. When we were done and the outside world was getting dark, we quickly headed to bed.

I spent at least an hour lying there in my bed, trying to crack the puzzle of how I would eventually introduce ourselves to Toando and Yalna's tribe. It wasn't something we would be doing in the next few days, but considering how determined the entities were in making it happen, I knew I needed a plan sooner rather than later.

My best bet, at least that I had in my head so far, was to spend some time gathering worthwhile things in the Horizon world, healing herbs, choice parts of Zoomorphs, maybe even some food, and bring that as a gift to the tribe, something to set the tone. To do that properly, part of me was considering spending a day or two just waiting for Toando or Yalna to return to the hunting area, as having a few questions answered, like if there were any animals they considered sacred, or if there was something they needed a lot of, would go a long way towards improving our gifts.

As good a plan as a gift or multiple gifts may be, I still planned on waiting for at *least* one more soldier, as well as one more... thing. What that thing was, I wasn't sure, but I would know when we got it. We needed an edge, something that would set us apart and make it clear that we were not just another tribe. I was sure that, eventually, there would be a quest reward like that. We just needed to be patient.

Eventually, I drifted off into fitful rest, visions about what the entities might throw at us next keeping me awake.