

Sitting down with Carlos had a dual purpose. For one, it allowed us to fill him in on what we were doing, what our primary goals were, and some of what we were hoping would come up in the HQ quest system. Thankfully, he seemed to have some background info about the location, insofar as that the Fallout world was post-apocalyptic in a standard way, while the Horizon world was post-apocalyptic in a much more unique direction. Only I seemed to have the full knowledge of both worlds.

It also let us get a feel for the newly spawned soldier, which was an interesting experience. He seemed to come alive before our eyes, going from a simple caricature to an actual human personality as we chatted. He started joking and laughing by the end, showing a less severe persona than Joseph.

I had a feeling that there was some entity-sponsored chicanery involved, letting a fully formed man, one without past experiences or memories to lean on, develop such a complete personality. On top of that, the way Joseph and Carlos both accepted such a strange and dangerous existence was also suspect.

I didn't exactly feel guilty about the process. After all, a single lifetime of service didn't seem like a bad deal when compared to an eternity of torment, but I still wasn't happy about it. And yet, I really had no choice but to use the summoning system. Joseph had literally been a lifesaver, and I was almost positive I would not have made it the last few days without him. Considering the threats I knew were out there... I had no choice but to accept the situation and take solace in the fact that, overall, I was helping them.

Eventually, after dinner, as the outside world started to get darker, we turned in for the night. Again, until we could establish proper defenses, we would be stuck following the sun to avoid attracting unwanted attention.

The next morning, I was happy to find that the timer for our equipment renewal had ticked over, meaning our ammo and stimpaks had restocked. Not having to clean our guns, knowing that they would self-clean and repair even the issues we didn't see, was surprisingly comforting. Especially with how crap weapons could be in this world, knowing ours were always in tip-top shape was a huge load off my mind.

I grabbed my newly cleaned and restocked equipment and made my way out to the main hall, knocking on Carlos' and Joseph's doors as I walked by. I was just finishing strapping on my pistol when they arrived, carrying their own gear. Joseph seemed to be deep in thought as he placed his bag on one of the tables.

"What's on your mind?" I asked, spotting his look.

"Nothing I... It's just... Well, you noticed our gear refreshed, right?" He asked, continuing when I nodded. "It's crazy how it just appears. I can't help but think there must be some way for us to take advantage of it."

"You mean like stock up on things by separating out stuff that will regenerate?" I asked. "I can't imagine the entities would just hand us an easy resource like that. Maxwell?"

The suit-wearing member, who had just been laying out our already known quests, looked up from the counter.

"I'm afraid that would not work. Or at least, not if you were looking to do more business with that merchant," He explained with a vaguely pained expression. "Anything from a soldier's kit not used is refreshed, meaning the bullets would disappear from their inventory."

Joseph cursed, while Carlos nodded as if he had expected it. Meanwhile, I glanced over at the stimpak hooked against my armor for easy access.

"I do know some way we could use the stimpaks to our advantage, though I'm not sure how great the benefit would be," I responded after a moment of thinking. "It's kind of a classic loophole or munchkinery trope involving regenerative healing versus return to previous state healing."

"What do you mean, Sir?" Joseph asked, his head tilted slightly.

"Well... the stimpaks use regeneration, meaning your body heals itself like normal, just a lot faster," I explained, multitasking as I fit on my chest piece. "What process uses slow healing from internal damage to come back better than before?"

"You mean working out our muscles?" Carlos asked, flexing his arm. "Would that work?"

"Technically? Yeah. I'm just not sure how useful it would be," I repeated. "The classic idea is to work out until you collapse, use your rapid regenerating item to encourage your muscles to heal quickly and stronger than before. Then you just rinse and repeat. If done correctly, it would allow you to get days, maybe even weeks, of exercise in a very short period. Like going from this to Olympic levels in a month, maybe less."

"But at best we would get two sessions in, right before the restock turnover," Joseph filled in, having spotted where the trope stopped working for us. "I see what you mean about not being super useful."

"Not to mention the time," I added. "This is usually done during months of downtime, not exactly something we have."

"But there's no harm in trying it, at least a few times, Sir," Carlos pointed out. "We could each focus on different muscles. That way, the results will be obvious. Then we can do things like cardio or something."

"That's as good a plan as any," I admitted, looking over at Maxwell. "Can you give me a warning when the equipment is about to refresh? By a full day at least?"

"I can, in fact, do that, Sir," Maxwell agreed with a smile. "Until then... might I suggest taking a look at today's quests?"

"Sure, set them up while we finish getting dressed."

Maxwell shuffled through his papers while Joseph, Carlos, and I finished putting on our armor. After checking everything was set, Joseph spoke up as we approached the front desk.

"Unless both quests are for something amazing, Sir, I would request we at least check the bots we killed the other day," he said. "It could be an easy quest, and I would really like to have access to grenades, even if it's only one every few days."

"I agreed, but let's see what we get first," I responded, leaning on the counter. "What's the news, Maxwell?"

"See for yourself, sir."

He placed two new quests on the table, gesturing for me to take them. I picked up one and read through it, wincing as I scanned through the task.

"Well, Sir, what is it?" Carlos asked impatiently. "Anything good?"

"Depends on what you consider good," I responded, annoyance leaking into my voice as I handed the mission parchment to Carlos. "It's another hunting mission, but it's specifically asking for us to hunt en masse, exactly where we just agreed not to. Kill eight of three different zoomorphs, all at the clearing."

"What's the reward?" Joseph asked, peeking over Carlos' shoulder.

"An extra magazine for all our weapons," I explained, shaking my head. "But it doesn't matter. The mission states they need to be done within the same few days, and killing all those at once will definitely attract more scrappers and other, rougher zoomorphs. We are already playing it pretty close with the watchers and grazers we have already killed."

"So what, we just drop it?" Joseph asked.

I considered the question for a long moment, weighing the options. While having more ammunition available for both our rifles and our sidearms would be incredible, I needed to consider the long-term consequences. We were very close to Toando's tribe, and starting off on a bad foot, such as making their lives more difficult and dangerous, was a steep price to pay for more ammo. On the other hand, having more ammo ready could save someone's life. I took a long breath and shook my head.

"Put it to the side. In all likelihood, I won't be taking it, unless we start to run into some serious ammo issues," I explained with an unhappy frown. "I hate it, but pissing off the natives is not worth it, especially not when we are so close."

Carlos nodded, putting the parchment on the table while I picked up the second option.

"Huh... got another Fallout side quest," I said with a frown. "For being 'rare,' two in less than a week is unfortunate."

"To be fair, double the quest options does mean double the chances," Maxwell pointed out. "What is the quest?"

"It's another kill quest," I said with a frown. "Not a simple one either..."

Rather than offering a clear-cut number, the quest broke it down into points. We had to reach forty in total, with slavers being worth three points, raiders being worth two, and feral ghouls being worth one. Not only was I a bit concerned that the entities saw slavers as a target I could run into at least relatively close to the HQ, but that was also a tall order. I explained the point system after I had parsed it out, and Carlos let out a whistle when I was done.

"That's... a lot of killing, Sir," he commented, running his hand through his hair. "What's the reward?"

"It's..."

A series of Vault Boy-style depictions sat at the bottom of the parchment, and it took me a second to realize what I was looking at. I quickly continued to read, finishing the whole thing in just a few seconds.

"Holy crap... It's giving me an option of three different perks," I explained, quickly adding some more details. "Like from the video game. The options are [Solar Powered](#), [Toughness](#), and [Strong Back](#)."

"What do they do?"

"Solar Powered increases strength during the day. I... I think that's different from the game, I seem to remember it only working outdoors and having a regeneration effect," I said with a frown, scratching my head. "Maybe they wanted to make it simpler? Either way, it should be a significant increase in strength, unless they nerfed that too. Toughness is a straight increase in damage resistance, but... I'm not sure how that would work in the real world. Would we be more durable? Is the amount of damage we take automatically reduced somehow...?"

"And Strong Back?" Carlos asked after I trailed off for a few moments, trying to puzzle out how something so nebulous as an increase to "Damage Resistance" would work.

"Strong Back just makes it so you can carry more," I explained after refocusing. "I would imagine it would make carrying our gear easier, and make it so that really stuffing our bags full of crap wouldn't hamper us as much. In the game, it was something around fifty bounds of extra carryweight, but I have no idea if that would carry over. But it does emphatically imply this is not an increase in strength, though."

We stood there for a few minutes, going over what we had been offered in our heads. Any one of the perks would be extremely useful, assuming that Toughness isn't some weird application that is somehow only useful in specific circumstances. Unfortunately, we could only pick one, and it was going to be one hell of a challenge to complete the required quest in the first place.

"Okay. So, any one of these is good. But it's a risk going out hunting around here before we have a bigger group," I pointed out. "That said... I think we should risk it. I'm not sure which one I will pick, but any one of them would be good and... passing it by would be stupid. But hunting that many people or ghouls is going to be intense. I say we start the day by heading to the Horizon world and getting that blaze. With any luck, we can head into this kill quest with a few explosive backup options."

Joseph and Carlos both nodded in agreement, so we quickly double-checked our gear. Once we were set and ready, I accepted the blaze gathering quest before saying goodbye to Maxwell. It only took us a few minutes to head through HQ and make our way through the dark door into the other version of Earth. We stopped just outside the connecting hallway, letting Carlos get his first taste of fresh Horizon air.

"Damn, that's good," he said after taking a deep breath. "You think we could prop open that creepy door, maybe get a breeze rolling through? The smell of fresh pines is a lot better than the smell of radioactive rubble."

"No, I think that would be a bad idea," I said with a chuckle. "As for radioactivity, thankfully, we don't have to worry about that directly around the HQ. Just pay attention to your gieger counter when we go out today."

Our armor did, thankfully, come with a small Geiger counter, which was tucked in under a panel on our gauntlets. Somehow, I had managed to miss it during my original examination of the armor. It was also a military variant, and would remain silent until we reached dangerous levels of radiation, in order to prevent the clicking from alerting people when I got too close to a light switch or a red plate.

After another minute of appreciating the smell and sight of an actual living world, we stepped out and away from the connection point and into the wilderness. At first, we followed the familiar trail before eventually peeling off and heading to the site of our previous "hunt."

Thankfully, as we arrived, it became apparent that the scrappers hadn't gotten to the group to grind them down yet. The robots were mostly intact, meaning we could start carefully removing the containers of the nearly glowing green liquid. We made sure to be extra careful to avoid a repeat of the chillwater spill.

Since we had originally been pretty weapons-free during this hunt, there were a lot fewer undamaged containers of blaze, but after about thirty minutes of work, we just barely had enough. Together we carried the containers home in our bags, making quick time back to the connection point. After dropping the blaze off in the provided container, we headed back through, immediately passing through the connection point. As we made our way back to the front desk at HQ, Joseph spoke up.

"I don't know what perk you're leaning towards, Sir," He said. "But it occurred to me that the Solar Power perk at least does a conditional version of Strong Back. It would only be during the day, but increasing our strength by that much would make carrying things a lot easier. It might not be a flat fifty pounds, but it would be more useful as well."

I slowed to a stop as I considered his words, nodding in agreement when I realized he was right.

"That's a good point," I admitted easily, patting his shoulder. "I wasn't really considering Strong Back that much anyway, but it does make Solar Powered look more tempting. A perk and a half for the price of one."

It didn't take long for us to return to the main desk and turn in the quest. As we waited, Joseph headed to our rooms, returning with a grenade for each of us. Each one was olive green and marked with yellow lettering as an M67 Fragmentation Grenade. Mine fit cleanly in my hand, about the size of a baseball. I stared at it for a second, then looked up at Joseph.

"How the hell do I carry this without it coming loose and blowing me into chunks?" I asked, turning the explosive over in my hands. "I mean, I know it's not going to bite me, but..."

"You're fine, these have confidence clips, a little hook around the pin to keep them from pulling free accidentally," Carlos explained, pointing out the metal loop. "In order to use them, you need to twist and pull, then throw. The grenade doesn't start counting until the spoon pops out, then you have five seconds. Just keep them in a covered pocket and you'll be fine."

Joseph showed me a pocket around my hip that would work perfectly, and I carefully put the grenade inside.

"Right, guess I'm just going to have to get used to that weight," I said, the small explosive device feeling like a lead weight at my hip. "Let's get moving, we have a heck of a lot of things to kill."