

Stepping out into the wasteland had a significantly different feeling than stepping out into the Horizon world, especially now that we had a specific quest to complete. If the reward wasn't so potentially significant, the moment we stepped outside, I would have shaken my head, stepped back inside, and dropped the quest. Would that have been spineless? Sure, but this wasn't some fairy tale, where bravery and plot armor saves the day. Every threat was dangerous, and in Fallout, there was a new threat around every corner.

At least in the Horizon world, most of the threats were forced to follow specific, exploitable programming. Setting up ambushes would be easy for almost all of the zoomorphs, not to mention that they had the stealth capabilities you'd expect from massive metal animals.

Ignoring the visions of deathclaws dancing in my head, I stepped away from the HQ entrance, stopping to scan the area.

"So, we have a few options," I stated, my two soldiers stepping in behind me. After a moment, I pointed north, before adjusting slightly to the west. "According to my memory and our map, the Bethesda Ruins are to the north-northwest of here. It *should* be filled with ghouls and raiders. The only problem is that that's as deep as my memory goes for that area. I know there are plenty of buildings, I know there are some ghouls and some raiders, but behind that, we would be going in blind. On the other hand...."

I turn and point down the road that follows the previously cleared office buildings to the east, before cutting west down a gentle hill.

"That way, far in the distance, maybe a twenty-minute walk, is the Super-Duper Mart. It's a chain of grocery stores, but this one seems even bigger than I remember," I said, pulling out my monocular, Carlos and Joseph following suit. "It's filled with raiders, probably more than the twenty we need. But it's going to be all at once, one big group, with minimal opportunity to plan and pick off smaller groups first."

"Will we have that at Bethesda Ruins?" Carlos asked, looking down the monocular at the corner of the massive store.

"I don't know," I admitted with a frown. "The Bethesda Ruins... I seem to remember a couple of different groups... but that's all I got. I remember the game version of Super-Duper Mart better than the back of my own hand."

"Better the threat we know than the threat we don't," Joseph pointed out, Carlos nodding in agreement. "Knowing even a general layout will make setting up an ambush much easier."

"Well, alright. That means we head to the Mart," I responded, tucking my monocular into my pocket. "As a bonus, we can finally see how much locations line up with what I remember. We haven't explored anywhere that is a landmark from the game."

We took a minute to triple-check we had everything we needed before finally heading down the road, passing by the cleared offices. All three of us kept our eyes peeled and our ears open, desperate to hear or see any incoming threats before they could surprise us. I was keenly

aware that this was a real world, trying to predict it by using game mechanics, such as avoiding random encounter locations and the natural pathways of traveling NPCs, did not work here. At any time, a wandering deathclaw or pod of radscorpions could pop up out of nowhere.

At first, we followed a broken asphalt road, walking beside it as it was easier than navigating the potholes and chunks of craggy black material. We passed a few buildings and nearly a dozen broken-down cars. Another road rose up beside the one we were following, eventually turning and continuing to rise as we walked down the shallow hill. Soon, while we continued down, it rose up until it became a full-blown overpass, eventually crossing the Potomac in broken pieces.

Meanwhile, our road took a right turn, and while we followed it for about a minute, we ultimately stepped away from it, carefully walking down a much steeper hill until we reached another road. This road was a little more intact, and after a few minutes of following it, we reached a simple, two-lane bridge that crossed the almost stagnant water below.

Well, technically, it ran over a patch of land between two pools of almost stagnant water. I couldn't tell if there was any connecting flow between them, but it seemed like there was, potentially through some drainage pipes.

Across that bridge was more road, a few trees, more wrecks, a large bus that I remembered liked to explode and kill you in the game, and then the absolutely massive Super-Duper Mart. It looked like a large [Walmart](#), and the decorations hanging from the front overhang told me it was very much occupied.

"Okay. So it's about as big as I was worried it would be," I said with a frown. "Good news, any concern that there wouldn't be enough raiders is well and truly squashed. I'm sure you guys can imagine the bad news."

"I think you're thinking a bit too linearly, Sir," Carlos said, pointing to the back end of the large mega store. "What if we do a little recon first? What are the chances there's a working ladder to the roof?"

"Not zero," I admitted, rocking my head side to side as I considered. "I'm not seeing any patrols... or windows on this side. If we move quietly, we could get around to the back and check."

"Worst case, we come back around and set up an ambush," Joseph pointed out, and I nodded in agreement.

"Good point. Okay, let's move... but not across the bridge, alongside it," I said, pointing along the dirt bridge that the bridge crossed. "There's always something interesting under them, and it will help cover our crossing."

They both nodded in agreement before we all moved, slowly making our way across and down alongside the bridge, along the opposite side from the store. Sure enough, as we passed the starting foundation, there was a small ramshackle structure just under the bridge. A quick

inspection showed a pair of Fallout-style [Frag Grenades](#) just sitting on a dirty table, a copy of [Duck and Cover](#), as well as two ammo boxes and some other junk. I immediately passed Carlos and Joseph each one of the grenades.

"You'll know better when to use these," I explained, both of them taking the explosives without complaint. "Now help me combine these two crates so we only have to carry one home."

"Well, Sir... Assuming the handle is still secure, you might want to keep them as they are and bring them all back," Joseph pointed out. "They can be handy containers as long as they aren't too rusted out."

I frowned and picked one up, testing the handle before putting it on the table and prying it open. It took a bit of force to get the mechanism unstuck, but once it was, it opened easily. Inside was a magazine of 5.56.

"What are the odds these fit our guns?" I asked jokingly, getting a snort from Carlos as I picked up the mag and examined it, before putting it back inside. "You're right, Joseph. I think the Mart will have plenty for us to borrow, though, so let's stuff this one with everything worth anything here, and then we can move on."

Joseph nodded, and soon we had a syringe of med-x, a box of mentats, a handful of .45, a full clip of 5.56, and the skill book shoved into one ammo box, which we then shoved under a bit of debris to hide. After confirming it was well hidden, we began making our way to the Super-Duper Mart, staying angled behind it as best we could, taking advantage of its lack of windows.

Approaching the store was incredibly nerve-wrecking. Yes, there were no windows, but there was also minimal cover, beyond several cars and a bus with such a hair trigger it was a fucking meme back home. Still, I followed my soldiers, sliding across the gaps in cover until we reached the side of the large brickwork structure, before then following it back.

Once we were entirely around the back, we could relax marginally. There was shockingly no back door along the expansive area, save for a series of shuttered and boarded-up loading bays along a cracked and trash-covered roadway that ran around the store. There were several dumpsters, all of which stunk to high heaven.

It was interesting to see the store up close, my brain automatically comparing it to the game version. If I had to describe it, seeing the "real" version was almost like getting to see the vision of the game creators, rather than the restricted implementation. This was a real, full-scale shopping center, with no cutbacks to make it a balanced location for loot or a reasonable space to explore. No graphical limitations or budget restrictions either. If our lives weren't on the line, it would have been absolutely fascinating.

Finally, we turned a corner and spotted what we were looking for, a surprisingly intact ladder to the roof of the building. One by one, we made our way up the ladder, carefully testing the roof's structural integrity before walking out. Thankfully, it was stable, with only a few

sagging points that we could easily avoid. We carefully walked across, heading to the closest skylight, all of us getting down on our hands and knees to look down into the shop.

We, of course, could see nothing, since the windows were completely opaque with dirt and grime. Thankfully, with a bit of water from one of our bottles and Joseph's sleeve, we were able to clean a few spots so we could look through them. We could only see so much from where we were, but after moving around a few times, we had a clear idea of what was happening inside the store.

Like what I knew from the game, the store was divided into sections. Various aisles of food and other products took up the center of the building, with shelves stacked and knocked over. There were still plenty of items strewn on shelves and on the floor, though most of them were rotten husks of what had once been food and other products. Around the outer sections of the building were several different types of products. Just as I remembered, there was a large pharmacy at the back, and a sizable customer service station was tucked into the far front corner.

There was also a large home improvement section, a gardening section, a section that appeared to be filled with Halloween decorations, as well as a clothing section. I could also see a few entrances to what appeared to be a back area, which I assumed was connected to the delivery stations we had passed along the back of the property. None of it looked particularly filled with loot, but I had a feeling there would be a few raider stashes spread throughout the entire space, rather than tucked into the pharmacy and customer service space alone.

Spread through the entire shop, doing everything from shooting up, smoking, and even beating the shit out of each other in some sort of fight ring, were at least thirty raiders, probably more, since we couldn't see inside most of the pharmacy or the bathrooms, which were where they had set up their sleeping quarters.

"That's a lot of raiders," Carlos said quietly. "A lot more than the twenty we need."

"Most of them aren't armed with guns," Joseph pointed out, most likely playing devil's advocate. "With the right spot, more than half of them are nothing but target practice."

"No, with the right position, more than half of them are *meat shields* for the ones who can shoot at us," I corrected, Joseph wincing in response, offering no counter. "I don't necessarily disagree with you, Joseph, but it's important to frame it right."

"If I had any faith in this roof stopping bullets, I'd say we should take potshots from here," Carlos said, chewing his lip. "We could have run from window to window, picking them off one by one."

"Not really helping," I pointed out, looking at him with a raised eyebrow.

I crawled away from the window, making my way slowly to the front of the store, looking around to see our options. After a minute or so of contemplating strategies, I frowned and shook my head.

"Right, sorry, I'm calling this," I said quietly, gesturing back to the ladder. "We need to get out of here before we get spotted. We do not have enough people or equipment to lay siege to a place like this."

"Are you going to give up the quest?" Carlos asked as we slowly made our way back to the ladder.

"No. We can go back to the HQ, regroup, then push back to the residential area," I explained. "We can clear those houses of ghouls one by one, and as long as we are smart, we won't be overwhelmed."

"Safe and smart, sounds like the better option," Joseph agreed, following me down the ladder.

Perhaps I was being a coward, but between the number of raiders and how few people I had to work with, I just couldn't warrant attacking the raider base. Sure, going door to door in the residential area would likely take a few days, but it was considerably safer. I was not about to gamble with our lives, not when there were alternatives.

Once we had reached the bottom of the ladder, we made our way back around the large shopping center, once again taking advantage of the fact that no windows were facing the direction we were sneaking. We had made it about a hundred feet, just passing the dangerously explosive bus, Carlos grabbed the strap of my armor and yanked me down to the ground. By some miracle, I managed not to yelp as he did, staying silent as all three of us crawled and rolled, hiding behind a row of large boulders, or perhaps rubble from some sort of long, broken structure.

Immediately, I could hear what we had just dove away from. I could hear voices, unapologetically loud, shouting and cursing, growing louder and louder as they got closer and closer. A quick peek revealed a large group of raiders, most of whom were obscured, making their way down the street from the hill behind the shopping center.

We huddled down, trying to hide as best we could, but the voices continued to approach. I had a decision to make. Double down and risk getting spotted on our bellies, stand while we had the chance, and maybe catch them by surprise. I glanced at Joseph, who had been the last to see their position, and he shook his head. I cursed silently, before shaking my head and holding up my hand, lowering one finger, then another, then another. Following the beat I established, all three of us prepared to move, before finally standing up out of cover.

Sure enough, just a half dozen feet away, heading right for us, were the raiders. About half of them spotted us as we stood, but none of them had enough time to act as we opened fire.

The first to drop were the ones openly carrying rifles and pistols, their crappy, cobbled-together armor doing nothing against our bullets. Seven raiders dropped before any of them could act, followed by another four as they turned and charged. One of them pulled a pistol, hidden on their hip, but they were killed by Carlos before they could even aim.

The rest of the raiders didn't stand a chance, as they ran at us with melee weapons. The closest of them managed to get within swinging distance of his machete, raising his weapon high, only for Joseph to stab him with his combat knife before he could finish his exaggerated attack.

In total, there were about fourteen new corpses decorating the parking lot and road, but that was only the beginning.

"Move!" I called out, pointing to a cluster of rocks. "Put some distance and regroup!"

Together we ran, sprinting full tilt further from the parking lot, crossing the road before climbing up and over another collapsed bit of masonry. Together, we slid into cover just before more screaming and shouting echoed across the parking lot, the many raiders inside the shopping center coming out to investigate.