

After transferring everyone over to the HQ, since I had no plans to upgrade the barracks within the next few days, we settled in to give my new soldiers an in-depth briefing. It took about an hour to get them filled in, during which I began to notice just how simple and incomplete they were. They talked, but there was no uniqueness in their voices, at least not yet. I knew they would develop more over the next few days, but their... emptiness was much more obvious this time around, now that there were three of them and I could directly compare them to both Carlos and Joseph.

It was more than a bit off-putting, especially since, if I wasn't careful, I could see it leading me to some bad habits concerning their personhood and rights as sentient beings.

Once our new recruits were filled in, we took them out for what was essentially light duty, a warm-up for more intense work later. First up was a quick trip to the Horizon world, both to let them see it for themselves and so I could check out what the HQ system was like on the other side.

After we arrived, walking through the familiar dark connecting tunnel, Joseph took the three new soldiers for a walk. First, he took them towards the clearing, before doubling back and taking them towards the river. Meanwhile, Carlos stayed behind to watch my back while I messed around with the system.

The tablet was located just inside the connecting cave. With a pull, I disconnected it, stepped out of the tunnel, and sat on the slight hill to tap the tablet on.

"Huh..." I said with a frown. "Well... that's disappointing."

"Slim pickings?" Carlos asked, standing about ten feet away, scanning the forest for zoomorphs.

"You could say that," I responded. "There is only one option, which is to clear and prepare the area for two hundred caps."

The image of the purchase showed a mostly flattened, cleared space in the forest, with a diameter of perhaps fifty meters. I tried to back out and access other options, but there were none.

"Not a fan of this RTS-type tech tree," I muttered, shaking my head. "On some level, I can wrap my brain around needing to keep things fair by purchasing them. Call it cosmic karma or something. But forcing me to purchase or upgrade one thing to unlock others is a pain."

"Not sure we should be complaining, Sir," Carlos said, looking back over his shoulder. "The reward system might have given out a few cool things like the Medbay, but making progress was like trying to predict winning the lottery."

"Yeah, fair," I admitted, looking up from the tablet, trying to visualize what the purchase would look like in real life. "The only question is, should I do it now, or later?"

"Personally, I would do it now," Carlos volunteered, walking around the vague perimeter to check on other areas of the forest. "Both this and the construction yard back home. If we are making another trip to sell to Megaton, knowing what we are working towards might come in handy."

I frowned, nodding in understanding, but not necessarily agreement. Buying both the clearing and the construction site would leave me with five hundred caps, which was enough to purchase many of the items we had seen so far. Between that and our planned trip to Megaton, we did potentially have enough and then some. Plus, knowing our options would help us plan, something that was becoming increasingly important.

"Yeah... You might be right," I admitted after thinking it through. "Let's see if Joseph or the newbies can see something we can't. If not, I'll start by buying the clearing."

Carlos shrugged, and we set down to wait, only sitting for a few minutes before Joseph returned from showing the newbies the river at the end of the back path. I explained the situation, and after a moment of consideration, no one could see anything worth waiting for. We stepped back from the general area, and I spent the two hundred caps.

As I pressed the confirm button on the tablet, I idly realized that this would be the first time we actively witnessed any of the large, constructive changes that the HQ system imposed on reality. Before I could even consider what exactly that might mean, the large, rusted, broken structure that marked the "back" of the connection area ceased to exist. It was like popping a bubble, or trying to watch a crack in glass, it was way too fast for your eyes to comprehend what was happening.

All six of us recoiled, the unnaturalness of it catching us all off guard, and sending a shiver down my spine and a twist of disgust into my stomach. Before anything else could happen, I made a snap judgment.

"Look away!" I shouted, turning quickly. "Close your eyes and look away!"

Just before I closed my own eyes, I could see everyone else turning away as well, before I screwed my eyes shut. We stood there, facing away from the connecting area, eyes closed tightly.

"Don't look yet, but is everyone okay?" I asked, keeping my eyes shut. When everyone confirmed they were fine, I continued. "You guys felt that, right?"

"Like I was being held at gunpoint by Cthulhu?" Carlos asked, sounding on edge. "Yeah, I felt that."

"I hate how accurate that is," Joseph added. "But yes, I felt it as well."

"I feel unerved," Madison admitted simply, her two compatriots agreeing with her statement.

"Okay, new rule, nobody looks at or stands near things being added or cleared away," I said. "Consider it a standing order, only to be broken in life or death situations."

"Yes, Sir," they responded simply, with absolutely no arguments.

We stood there, silently standing with our eyes closed, for a good thirty seconds before Carlos spoke up.

"So... how long do we wait before turning around?" he asked curiously. "I mean, it was happening pretty quickly..."

"Give it another minute," I responded, though I was pretty sure it probably happened near instantly. "Then one of us can check."

I counted down from sixty, and before anyone could volunteer, Carlos took the initiative, turning around and looking, before giving us the all clear. The rest of us turned to find the area had been flattened and cleared, the treeline pushed back considerably, and all the scrap and debris removed. The connection point was now set into a much tighter mound, looking significantly more artificial than before, as if someone had specifically built a tight, small mound to serve as the entrance to something underground. It was also smack dab in the center of the clearing.

"Huh... well, there is plenty of room," Carlos said diplomatically. "And Maxwell did say nothing can come through the connection points uninvited, so it's not like we have to worry about people finding it."

"The zoomorphs aren't smart enough to identify that as an artificial construct," Joseph added. "Just need to worry about tribals. Any change on the tablet?"

I looked back down at the tablet, and sure enough, the options had expanded. The first was an area upgrade, the next step after clearing the area. Not only would it add a perimeter wall for another two hundred caps, but it would also upgrade the area to level two, which I assumed would give me more things to purchase. It was cheap, but from what I could see, it was just a simple palisade, with straight, clean logs embedded into the ground and sticking up about four meters.

Beyond the upgrade, there was also a storage area, a small growing space, and a simple shelter, though it specifically mentioned not having any beds, just a room with basic furniture and storage. All of it was crude wooden log construction, around the same level of quality you might expect from a log cabin made before most modern technology. I could see that the gaps in the shelter walls were stuffed with moss and clay, rather than any modern solution.

On one hand, it made a certain amount of sense. We already stood out with our armor and weapons. If we suddenly dropped a modern structure nearby, it would likely set off a lot of red flags for the native groups. Not to mention the Zoomorphs would likely react poorly to it, seeing as their job was to slowly erase all remnants of old humanity in the world. Either way, there wasn't anything I desperately wanted, though the growing space did mention it would

rapidly and repeatedly grow anything planted there, which sounded like a great way to produce certain healing potions from the game. I had no idea how effective they would be compared to stimpaks, but in the game, they worked pretty damn well.

"I'm tempted to get the palisade to keep people out and see what's next," I said, frowning after a moment. "Especially since it's so cheap. But I don't want to throw caps at this place just yet, not when there is so much to do at the original HQ."

"Do you plan on doing anything here?" Carlos asked. "Doesn't seem like much of a point."

"The Emissary was very clear that cultivating headquarters branches on the dark worlds would have unique benefits," I responded, closing down the tablet. "Not to mention the fact that the tribes around this part of the world also have a currency, meaning if we start making money here, we can start using that money to push ourselves forward in other areas."

"Do you know what kind of unique benefits?" Madison asked simply.

"No, which is why I'm so hesitant to dump money into it," I admitted. "I'll probably need to do it at least once, to satisfy my curiosity and see what scale the unique benefits work at."

"Makes sense, but only when you have a surplus of currency," Joseph said, nodding along. "Taking that all under consideration, what's next?"

"For now, we leave this how it is," I explained, looking across the cleared area. "But depending on how much money we make and spend back home after we come back from Megaton, I may invest more money here as well. I'm a bit concerned about trying to grow both sides at once, but I also don't want to ignore this side completely only to find out what we really needed was here all along, hiding behind a level three area upgrade or something."

The group agreed with my judgment, and after looking around a bit more, we headed back through the connecting tunnel, making our way back to the main hall. When we arrived, I purchased the construction yard, which, unlike our previous purchase, needed to be placed down on the [map like the barracks and medbay](#).

Maxwell set up the map, and after a brief conversation, we decided it was best to put it further away, behind the barracks. For one thing, while at the start it was just a bit over the size of the barracks, [it had a huge floor plan to grow into](#). I did not want something that large taking up room so close to the central cluster. On top of that, as far as we could tell, the construction yard didn't do anything other than unlock new buildings to build. It might eventually have a function, but for now, it simply represented the ability to create things more advanced than stacking rubble and tapping scrap together to make walls and shelter.

Once the building was placed, I took a peek out of the HQ doors, not even caring enough to make my way over. As shown in the image provided by the system, the area was now cleared and mostly flattened, with a few pallets of materials, including a stack of cinderblocks, rebar, a wheelbarrow, and a covered pallet resembling unmixed concrete. Content

with knowing it was just as simple as explained, I headed back inside, snagging the tablet again before sitting back down.

"It is as advertised," I reported to the rest of the group, before scrolling through the new structure's options. "Just some construction supplies."

Under the same tab as before, now above the dozen or so basic options I could purchase previously, were several new options. First was a salvage hut, a small wooden structure that, at its first level, could collect simple types of scrap over time. Without the medbay, I would have considered this nearly useless, but if medical scrap could be turned into fresh, brand new medical supplies, then chances were other types of scrap could do the same for different things. Still, at the first level, it didn't do much, and it was hard to swallow the two-hundred-cap price tag, just to get the opportunity to upgrade it so it might be able to collect something else.

After that was a market building, which at the first level not only provided a secure place to keep the stuff we planned on selling, but also promised a slight increase in profit, funded by the system rather than actually affecting the people we were trading with. That alone made the structure worth it, since getting more caps would likely pay for itself eventually. Even better, since the bonus came from the system, we wouldn't have to worry about the negative repercussions you would usually risk when convincing people to pay you more than they wanted to. It was three hundred and fifty caps for the small cinderblock structure, smaller even than the medbay, but it boasted that it was stronger than it looked and a safe place to store stuff.

"That... might be worth getting before we go to Megaton," Joseph pointed out. "Assuming the bonus carries to deals we make while we are away from HQ, at least."

"It does. It's a five percent bonus on sales and purchases. It is rather handily delivered to the secure storage safe," Maxwell answered. "Just more proof that you chose the correct upgrade, Sir."

"Yeah... Hard to argue with free caps, even if it's just five percent to start," I agreed. "Depending on what we find over the next few days, I'll probably get it."

The final structure was, unexpectedly, a small grow house. At the first level, it was about the same size as the barracks and would allow us to grow food in a place where it wouldn't be immediately stolen or eaten by animals. It could be converted to a greenhouse for the winter at no extra charge, but at the first level, it could only grow wasteland food, including the small dose of rads that came with it.

Most importantly, this was also the building that would allow us to start improving our MREs, which made it one of the most essential buildings we had unlocked so far.

I had to stop myself from immediately purchasing the grow house, as doing so would mean I didn't have enough money for the market house. Despite my desperate desire for better food, both for my own benefit and my soldiers, the market house had to be my first priority before leaving for Megaton.

After discussing it with everyone, they agreed that free caps were free caps, and we could purchase the grow house when we returned from our trip to Megaton.