

I stared at the otherworldly being, a messenger for entities more powerful than anything I could ever imagine. He was clearly content to wait until I confirmed I was ready to continue, which was good because I needed a moment to collect myself.

I was perfectly aware that this situation, from how I arrived at the HQ to how HQ was set up and how it continued to function, was at the behest of these possibly eldritch entities. They controlled the horizontal and the vertical, and everything in between. I was already aware of that. But suddenly being confronted with living proof of that fact was something entirely different.

I took a long, deep breath and closed my eyes as I held it. Internally, I counted to ten before letting the breath out.

I could handle this. I could handle whatever the entities decided to throw at me. And if this was the start of some sort of horrific change in tone for this... adventure, I could handle that too.

"Alright, I'm ready, lay these changes on me," I finally said, leaning back in my chair, doing my best to lock eyes with the Emissary's glowing pits.

"Very well. The entities have observed that the quest system has been... holding you back," they explained, their body still flicking void stuff, like silent spitting flame. "Again, this is not your fault. You, Connor, have simply reacted to the situation presented to you. Unfortunately, the entities agree that you and your Headquarters will develop better without the quest system to constantly guide your every action."

"I thought we made good progress under the system," I responded with a frown. "The medical building is a significant leap forward."

"Perhaps, but it was all up to chance. You did not direct the system, the system directed you," the cosmic personification responded. "In fact, you even identified this problem early in your time here. You realized making long-term plans would be useless, as at any point the system could give you a quest that solved your problem, or presented a reward that would send you in a totally different direction. The entities have decided that this is not conducive to proper growth."

"So... what's the solution?"

"For one, the quest system is being reformatted," he responded. "Quests will still come, but they will be far and few in between. Expect two or three a month, rather than two a day. Completing these less frequent quests will still earn you rewards, but they will lean towards larger, more interesting concepts. No longer will you be rewarded with attachments for your weapons, or additions to your gear."

"What about the quest upgrade we earned?" I asked. "We wouldn't have done that if we had known this would be happening."

"The entities agree and empathize," he responded with a slow nod. "As such, they will allow you to select one of the current quests to be completed for free, to make up for the wasted time."

"... can I hold my choice until later?"

"Yes, you may, but not past this meeting."

"Okay. So if quests are going to be rarer, what's replacing the quest system?" I asked, mentally shelving the conundrum of which quest I would choose. "There needs to be something... right?"

"There is. A new system will be instituted that allows you more freedom and control, while simultaneously encouraging you to push boundaries, explore further, and step out into the worlds you have access to. Hopefully, without making things too complex."

The Emissary went quiet for a moment, and I silently waited for them to continue. Just when I was starting to wonder if his WiFi had cut out, he began again.

"The new system will work on a more market-driven path, in which caps or other currency, ranging from NCR dollars to solid gold bars, must be spent to unlock, build, or purchase items, buildings, or aspects of existing buildings."

As the Emissary talked, he waved his hand over the table, and a bag of coins, a pile of caps, and a stack of notes all appeared on the table.

"You will find the controls for this market built into various buildings. The market for the barracks is located in the barracks, the market for purchasing new buildings is in the Headquarters," he continued, waving his hand over the currency, which vanished and was replaced by a tablet, which had a setup similar to what I had seen at the medical building. "The prices for various purchases are weighted against rarity, usefulness, resellability, and more. Be warned that some prices may surprise you, as things you might expect to be cheap are scaled up to avoid infinite loops or easy cash-ins. Further, some equipment or weapons will only be purchasable after building certain structures."

"That's it? Just money?" I asked with a frown. "That seems easy. Too easy."

"I believe once you see how much some of these purchases cost, that opinion will change," The Emissary explained. "Beyond that, there is also another layer. Some upgrades, structures, locations, or other purchasable concepts require procurement of certain items."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for example, you will be able to purchase a single-use stimpak for caps," the Emissary responded. "But purchasing a second stimpak for the Standard Soldiers Kit would require you to find thirty stimpaks, as well as two hundred and fifty caps. Purchasing a third would include sixty stimpaks and five hundred caps."

"You're forcing us to go out into the Fallout world," I pointed out, annoyance leaking into my voice. "We aren't ready to go revealing ourselves around the Capital Wasteland yet."

"This is not supposed to be easy, Connor," the Emissary pointed out. "The danger is what offsets the power of the Headquarters. To grow, you must take risks. That said, do not forget that soldiers are included among the items you can purchase. With caps or other currency, you will be able to increase your forces on your own terms, not wait for a random reward to do so."

I chewed my lip, slowly nodding at his explanation. His words were true, having control of what was being purchased and what was next was a solid advantage over the old system. I could focus on filling up the barracks, which would make trips around the Fallout world a lot less stressful. A full squad of six soldiers, one of whom was a medic, would make me feel a lot more comfortable. Not to mention finally saying hello to our Horizon world neighbors.

"Fine, that does actually make me feel better," I admitted. "Is there anything else you'd like to throw at me?"

"Yes, there is," the Emissary responded smoothly, causing me to rub my eyes, biting back a groan. "Though the options are highly restricted, you can now purchase certain things for the other side of the connection points. This will allow alternate world-specific upgrades, items, and buildings."

"A headquarters on the other side?" I asked, suddenly very interested. "That could make exploring that side easier, but... what's the point? There are no caps in the Horizon world. "

"But there is a currency," he assured me. "It's different from the West Coast tribes, but it is recognized by the system. Besides, there are other benefits for settling and securing bases in the dark worlds, ones you will uncover on your own."

I stared at him for a long moment before shaking my head.

"Alright, fine, I understand," I eventually said. "Is there anything else?"

"Just that your subordinate Maxwell will have a similar understanding of the new system as he did the old," The starry-skinned messenger responded.

That was certainly good news, as Maxwell had been pivotal to understanding and working with the original system. Having him as a source of reliable information, even just to confirm the occasion guess or question, was invaluable.

"You also need to select your replacement quest before I can depart," the Emmisary added after a short pause.

His words dragged me from my running thoughts, and I nodded. I rubbed my face as I ran over the options in my head, before finally leaning back and letting out a long sigh.

"Is increasing the quality of our food one of the things I can pay to upgrade?" I asked, giving the void creature sitting across from me an unhappy look.

"It is."

"Then I'll take the reinforced storage room under the HQ," I said, feeling a bit guilty. "The fact that the quest was to gather three thousand caps means that it was likely an expensive upgrade, and while I hate it, we can deal with crappy rations for a bit longer while we earn money."

"Well chosen," he responded with a nod. "The upgrade is already in place. Congratulations."

I silently stared back at the Emissary, not particularly in a celebratory mood. The change in how the HQ functions might technically be an improvement, and I would likely celebrate the change later. However, having the entities meddle with us on this scale was not something I was happy about.

"Well, it appears it is time for me to leave," the Emissary finally said. "Unless you have any questions?"

"None that you would actually answer," I respond coolly.

"Very well," he said, nodding slightly. "Good luck on your journey, Connor."

The Emissary stood, and after a long pause, began to make his way out of the HQ. Eventually, he disappeared around the corner toward the front entrance. I was tempted to go after him, but ultimately decided it was safer to just watch him leave. I heard the distant sound of the front entrance being opened, and a moment later, it was closed again.

I sat there for what felt like a few minutes, in the oppressive silence and stillness of the strange twilight, wondering exactly when I was supposed to wake up. I looked around, doing my best to ignore the fact that the windows now showed a nebula of colors that spun and twisted with a starry background, similar to the Emissary's body.

"Uhh... you guys gonna send me back or...?" I called out, listening to the silence, wondering if I would hear an answer.

When no answer came, I started to stand, leaning forward on the table, only for it to vanish. Only for everything to vanish, the floor, the walls, the ceiling, all of it gone. I fell through the void, pitch black nothingness consuming me for a long, terrifying moment.

Only to slam into the floor next to my bed, my feet tangled in my blankets, my body covered in sweat, and my heart thundering roughly in my chest. It took me a solid minute to calm down enough to peel the damp blankets off me.

"Holy... holy hell... holy..."

I laid there on the wooden floor, catching my breath, staring at the ceiling. Light was filtering in from outside, and when I finally stood, I was happy to see the outside looked like the normal broken wasteland, not the twisting, star-filled void of space.

It took me a few minutes to get ready and dressed, spotting that it was a bit earlier than I usually got up, but since there was no way in hell I was going back to sleep, I took a quick shower, got dressed, slid my pistol into my hip holster, and headed out into the main hall.

I probably should have expected it, but I was surprised to see Maxwell already up, dressed in his crisp suit. He wasn't behind the counter, but rather sitting at one of the tables, drinking a cup of steaming tea, another cup across from him. As I entered the room, he spotted me immediately and gestured to the other seat and waiting drink.

"I woke to the rather interesting sensation of new information being downloaded into my head," He said, shaking his head in annoyance. "But from what I hear, your night was considerably more interesting."

"Morning, Maxwell," I said, wincing at his words. "Yeah, interesting is what I would call it."

I sat down across from him, sipping the tea he had poured for me. After a few minutes, we started comparing notes, with him explaining some of the new knowledge he had acquired, and with me explaining the absolutely wild dream, hallucination, or out-of-body experience. Whatever it had actually been.

"The dynamic for future progress has certainly shifted," Maxwell pointed out, and I nodded in agreement. "Any idea what our next move is?"

"Well.... First, I want to check out our new secure storage," I said, looking around with a slight frown. "Wherever it ended up. Then, when the boys are awake, we can start talking about what's next. I have ideas... but they could use some refinement."

"In that case, allow me to show you to our new storage facility," Maxwell suggested, putting down his cup of tea and leading me out of the main hall.

We didn't have to go far, as a large staircase leading downward was just around the corner, against the wall towards the exit. At the bottom was a thick, sturdy-looking door, reinforced with iron plating and thick, hammered bolts. As we reached it, Maxwell stood to the side.

"At the moment, Sir, you are the only one who can open it," He explained, gesturing to the simple-looking handles. "The HQ keeps it sealed from anyone who you haven't given permission to."

"I give you permission, Maxwell," I said, still stepping forward, the double-wide doors pushing open without a sound.

On the other side was a large open room, filled with heavy-duty shelving, the resilient-looking storage solutions even lining the wall. On the opposite side of the room was a

large safe, a foot or so taller than me and as wide as my wingspan, built firmly into the wall. It was open, showing off several storage options inside.

"The shelving is self-explanatory, but I believe other buildings can be upgraded to send their various products here. Like the medical supplies from our newest addition," Maxwell explained as we both walked down the center aisle. "The safe is connected directly to the system. Meaning any currency kept here can be used to purchase things directly, without hauling it around to different buildings."

"Handy," I commented, tapping the thick safe door.

As I pushed and pulled on the safe door to gauge its weight, I spotted a computer screen built into the wall. I tapped it, and it lit up, pushing forward and tilting slightly so it was easier to use. When it was done showing off, I started looking through the various tabs and options.

Sure enough, it was showcasing the upgrades available for the safe and storage room. The variety was quite impressive, featuring everything from auto-sorting capabilities to adaptive storage methods. Both the room and the safe could also be upgraded in size as well, all for cold hard caps and whatever other currency we could find.

After inspecting the new space for a few minutes and spending some more time exploring the available purchases, Maxwell and I eventually headed back up to the main hall. Maxwell pulled the HQ's computer access from his desk, literally pulling it from the desk's surface, and passed it to me.

We reviewed the many options the HQ presented while waiting for my soldiers to wake up.