

Joseph and Leon walked on either side of me as we left the confines of the HQ, traveling down a now familiar path. Having made two trips to Megaton at this point meant that we had traveled this path four times, and that wasn't even counting the fact that half the trip was also how you got to the Super-Duper Mart.

With experience came confidence, which meant we moved more quickly along the roads, cutting across wrecked buildings and empty areas, making quick time down to the river. I was still wary of the bridges in the Wasteland, as even in a normal setting, they served as perfect ambush points, never mind that many bridges around here crossed over radioactive water. This one didn't, but it had its own risks, as I was pretty sure multiple people had called the space under it home at different points in time.

As we usually did, we crossed beside the bridge, walking over the dried-out rocks and river bed, making sure to be careful of any occupants of the crude structure underneath.

After making it past the bridge, we took our time approaching the massive SuperDuper Mart, preparing to trek up the large hill beside it, the water tower already in clear view. Even from this distance, it was clear it was different from what I remembered from the game. It was the same basic construction, but significantly taller, with a larger water container on top. It was also farther up the hill than I seemed to remember, but there was no real way for me to know for sure. As we passed the mart, Joseph did a quick check to see if the area around the parking lot was still partially radioactive from the exploding bus and cars. He approached the area slowly, holding out the Geiger counter built into our gauntlets.

As he got deeper and deeper into the space that had been absolutely radioactive before, the counter remained silent.

"Sir... the radiation seems to have faded to ambient levels," he stated, sounding just as mystified as I was feeling.

"Well... that pretty much confirms that radiation is not the same here," I said with a frown. "Pretty sure it wouldn't just fade away like that in a week back where I'm from at least."

"I'm reasonably certain it is safe to loot at the dozen or so corpses we left behind," He admitted as he walked back to Leon and me. "Though I'm not looking forward to it if we do..."

"God, I wish we didn't have to," I said, already feeling a bit sick at just the thought. "But the last few raiders we killed so far had a *ton* of drugs and medical supplies on them. We can't so no to that."

"Our helmets have pretty good filters," Leon said, tapping the front of his own. "As long as they are on tight, we should be safe. Won't do much for the smell, though."

After another minute surveying the grim scene, we started the trek up the hill, focused on reaching the [water tower](#). Once we did, we had to walk around a small fenced-off area before climbing over a collapsed portion, finally moving under the tower.

"What do you guys think?" I asked, reaching out to grab onto the tower. "Sturdy enough?"

"It... certainly looks like it," Joseph said, running his hand along the thick I-beam legs, before kicking the concrete it was embedded in. "It doesn't seem to have rusted through."

"The rivets seem to be mostly intact," Leon added, examining one of the thick metal beams.

"Alright," I said, looking up one more time before reaching out to grab one of the rungs. "I-"

"Sir, I believe I should go up first," Joseph said, shaking his head and approaching the ladder. "I'll take a look, make sure it's stable, and make sure there is enough cover."

"I need to see the town if I'm going to plan out how to clear it," I pointed out, raising my eyebrow.

"I am aware, Sir. Allow me to make sure it's safe first," he explained. "Stay down here with Leon for now."

I let out a long breath before nodding in agreement and stepping away from the ladder. When I had, I gestured for Joseph to go ahead, who stepped forward to the ladder. At this point, I had more or less accepted my status as a VIP, but stepping back and letting them take risks for me chafed. My soldiers knew that I was a lynchpin to this whole concept, and I knew they were right. But I refused to not work alongside them, not to fight alongside them. I wouldn't send my people off to fight and possibly die while hiding away like some cowardly Emperor.

Leon and I watched as Joseph left his rifle leaning against one of the tower's metal struts before beginning to climb up the ladder. As he did, he tested each rung before putting his weight on it. This slowed down his progress considerably, but within five minutes he had reached the top. Once there, he walked along his hands and knees, testing the floor carefully. He found a spot that was mostly in cover and pulled out his monocular, adjusting it into focus before settling in to watch the town, scanning back and forth.

"So, how many soldiers are you looking to get, Sir?" Leon asked, still looking up at Joseph.

"As many as I can afford," I responded, scanning the area. I remembered some feral dogs or mole rats appearing around this location occasionally, and I didn't want to get ambushed by them. "I don't want to spend all of our money necessarily, but a good chunk of what we make from Adam is likely going to go into expanding our numbers."

"What else are you planning on getting?"

"I don't know what I will be able to afford, but I was considering upgrading the armory," I answered, happy to engage in small talk. "Once our numbers are up, I am *really* looking for the ability to upgrade our loadouts. We need some variety, for greater range or firepower."

Leon nodded in agreement before we both looked up, as the sound of Joseph slowly making his way back down reached us. When he reached the ground, his face was tight.

"There is a significant amount of raiders occupying the town," he said. "I think more than what we fought at the camp in Bethesda, but it was hard to tell. The school is clearly their hub, but they are spread out through the whole town."

I cursed, moving past him to the ladder, only pausing to hand him my rifle before I quickly started climbing. Of course, I slowed down almost immediately when I realized that spots of rust along each rung had separated the paint from the metal, making it come off in a way that could absolutely make me slip. Once I slowed down, I was considerably more careful about where I grabbed and placed my feet.

Once I got to the top, I quickly settled into the same position that Joseph had been, tucking myself against the water tank and a bent piece of the walkway. When I was sure I was in cover, I pulled out my own monocular and zeroed in on the town.

As I had suspected from my previous short look, the town and school were both substantially bigger than I remembered. In the game, Springvale had maybe ten buildings, most of them collapsed or burnt out. In this reality, there were at least fifty burnt-out husks spread out in the low area on the other side of the ridge. I could see a central road with several semi-intact shops, and more than a dozen homes that were still standing.

Then, to my gradual right was the Springvale Elementary School. Again, as I remembered from my brief look before, the school was much more spread out, with a three-story building at the center and three wings extending from it, one of which was at the back and led to an obvious gymnasium. Springvale must have extended around the surrounding hills, because the school was significantly larger than necessary, even though the parts of the town I could see were much bigger.

Of course, all of that information fell to the wayside as I started counting the number of raiders walking around. Joseph had clearly been right, as there were noticeably more here than in Bethesda.

"How the hell are there so many?" I asked myself quietly, using my monocular to try to peer into the school. Unfortunately, most of the windows were blocked off with boards, plywood, and sheet metal.

Rather than try to count all of the raiders, a useless endeavor as there was way too much movement happening, I simply cut the town into quarters, counted all of the raiders in one of the quarters as quickly as possible, and multiplied it by four. It was a wild estimate, but even knowing there were around forty raiders outside in the town was worth the effort.

I kept an eye on the town for a full ten minutes, trying my best to gather as much data as I could during that time. As I did, I wrote down anything I noticed in one of the medical notebooks we all carried these days for paper. When I was finally satisfied I had learned all I could, I slowly crawled back down the ladder, accepting my rifle back from Joseph.

"You weren't kidding, Joseph," I said, shaking my head. "That's a lot of raiders to kill."

"Do you think it is beyond us?" He asked, scanning the hill beyond us.

"Not if we have more people," I responded, making a few more notes on my notepad. "Some better gear would be helpful, too. It comes down to how much money Adam plans on spending with us."

Joseph nodded in understanding, and after a moment or two, we headed back down the hillside, heading vaguely to the Super-Duper Mart. Joseph and I were carrying mostly empty backpacks, so we would likely be able to carry any ammo or medical supplies we found on the previously irradiated raiders.

We would likely feed all of the ammo into the armory to immediately repurpose it to 5.56. We already had enough generated bullets to buy the magazine upgrade, but I wanted to get it up at least one more after that. Currently, we have four mags of spare ammunition, and I wanted six so I could eventually give my soldiers the option of having two mags of armor-piercing ammo on hand in case of armored or robotic enemies.

Once we arrived at the supermarket parking lot, we paused at the edge, I none of us wanting to do the grim work ahead of us. Instead, we walked around the side of the large store and sat down on a few benches, taking a quick break procrastinating just a bit longer.

Eventually, however, we couldn't put it off any longer, and we returned to the broken asphalt expanse. After we all made sure our helmets were on tightly, we stepped into the parking lot to loot the rotting corpses.

At this point, some of the corpses were starting to dry out, and a few of them had been partially eaten by the wasteland wildlife. Most of them, however, were too horrific to properly describe. We managed to find quite a few bullets and magazines, as well as a variety of drugs, which were just about all we could fit. Mentally praising the fact that the HQ seemed to clean most of our clothing items automatically, we stuffed everything into our bags, leaving everything else behind.

The trip back to the HQ was thankfully uneventful, and as soon as we returned, we fed the loot from the old raiders into the medbay and armory. I also immediately purchased the fifth magazine upgrade for the Standard Soldiers Kit, since it was only a hundred caps and about half of the ammunition the armory had naturally generated so far. The next upgrade would cost a hundred and fifty caps, as well as two hundred rounds. I would get it eventually, but for now, I needed to save for more soldiers when Adam came through.

I didn't realize it until later, when the team was heading in for the night, that the upgrade also purchased another magazine for our pistols, bringing that count to three spares. I was shocked that it had been so cheap, as the armory basically generated its own currency, but I wasn't about to question its generosity. The extra pistol magazine was just another layer of assurances that we would have plenty of ammo for our tasks.

About two hours after we returned, the rest of my soldiers did as well, packs full of goods to throw into the material chutes and to store in the secure storage. There wasn't anything really of note, save a few more bottles of liquor and two high-quality pistols from a safe. When everything was stored, we enjoyed our dinner and headed to bed for the night, settling in as the sun set.

Technically, we could have likely stayed up later, as the whole reason we had been crashing with the setting sun was that I was concerned about the lights would catch unwanted attention. Now, with the upgraded walls and doors surrounding us, I was a little more confident that people would stay away, or at least that we would notice when something went wrong.

For now, however, there wasn't much reason for us to be up that late, so to bed we went.

For the next two days, we spent most of our time clearing buildings, though it was a much slower process than it normally was. I did not want Adam getting ambushed outside our walls because we had a long trip home, but I also didn't want Maxwell opening up and letting him in when he was all alone. That meant sticking close to home as much as we could, so that we could make our way back quickly.

Thankfully, that turned out to not be a problem, as on the third day, we were just preparing to leave on another scavenging trip when we heard people approaching. A quick check showed that it was Adam's trade caravan, looking noticeably lighter on their return trip from Megaton.

With Joseph and a few others with me, I headed down to the eastern entrance, opening the thick metal doors to let our business friend in. After shaking hands with the eager merchant, we guided him to the temporary housing building.

I could tell that Adam was eager to do business, but he refrained, probably wanting to get his people squared away before the bartering began. About thirty minutes after they entered the empty, cleared-out structure we had designated temporary housing, Adam Reed and a few others emerged, heading straight for me. I was waiting for them, my men and I having spent the last twenty moving everything for sale out onto a few tables.

"Fantastic, this all looks fantastic," Adam said with a smile as he approached. "Let's do business, shall we?"