

We spent the next three days clearing out the Bethesda ruins, systematically checking every building in the entire complex, looting each one thoroughly. While it wasn't exactly like raiding a high-value, asset-rich target, it was profitable enough for me to be satisfied with the time we spent.

Surprisingly, the reason it was profitable came down to two major contributors. One, it seemed that nearly every office safe we found contained at least one firearm, which was almost always in fantastic condition. The likelihood that an office would have a safe was directly related to how high-ranking the person who used the office before the war was, which meant the higher you go in the building, or the bigger the office, the more likely it was to have one. Each building had at least four or five office safes, sometimes more, and each one was an opportunity to find a pristine weapon.

By the end of our three-day looting extravaganza, we had recovered just over a dozen 10mm pistols, eight [9mm pistols](#), and five [.32 pistols](#). We also found two [Chinese Pistols](#), both in secret compartments inside safes we cracked open. Most of these came with extra mags, clips, and ammo. Each of these weapons would likely sell for a good chunk of caps, as weapons of this quality were rare.

The profit would be limited by the size and caliber of the weapon, but I was willing to bet that the pistols would bring in at least a few thousand credits. Assuming we could find somewhere that could buy all of them at once.

In addition to the weapon-filled safes, we also found that almost every bathroom contained at least one first aid kit. Most of them were crap, filled with old bandages, broken or stained bottles, and the same kind of miscellaneous junk they liked to shove into cheap first aid kits to make them seem complete and worth the money. For us, though, that didn't matter, as all of it would feed directly into the resources for more stuff to sell. We ended up finding enough that I upped the level of stock we kept for personal use, ensuring we had more than enough to take care of any medical issues we may have, at least at the level of care we could provide.

Upgrading the medbay, which would take six hundred caps, was most definitely high on my list of things to do. It would increase the speed of resource generation, increase the size and quality of the facility, as well as increase the level of treatment. That, in turn, would increase the variety and scope of what we would be able to produce.

We also brought back anything we thought we could sell, mostly booze and other items that I noticed Adam, our merchant friend, had been interested in during his last visit. It wasn't exactly a long list, because while I found the idea of running out of staples to mean a trip to a nearby building to scavenge for more very novel and strange, that was standard practice here, meaning office supplies weren't exactly big-ticket items.

After three days of looting, it was finally time to consider making our way to Megaton. We had a large quantity of medical supplies to sell, as well as pristine weapons. We debated on bringing the booze or other items, but ultimately decided that they weren't worth the weight, nor were the crappy guns we recovered from the raider camp. The booze wasn't worth enough to

lug around, especially since they had a significant breaking risk, and the crap weapons weren't likely to get us enough caps to warrant lugging them around. Besides, we already had plenty to carry, and there was no real reason to overload ourselves.

After determining what we would bring, it was time to decide *who* we would bring.

"I'm wary of leaving this place undefended," I admitted with a frown, the morning we were planning to leave for Megaton. "I'm considering having Joseph and Madison behind."

"While I'm honored you would trust me to guard the HQ, Sir, doesn't that defeat the purpose of having waited until you could get more soldiers to venture out?" Joseph asked, raising an eyebrow. "Are you worried about raiders?"

"I'm not really worried about the actual base. If it gets hit, we have ways to repair any damage, and the dark doors are sealed," I responded. "I'm more concerned about leaving Maxwell alone for so long. There's a pretty solid chance this turns into an overnight trip."

"Why not bring him with us?" Carlos suggested. "He gets protection, we don't have to shrink the group, and Maxwell gets a little taste of our lives in the Wasteland. Seems like a win, win, win to me."

I opened my mouth to shoot down the idea, only to pause and reconsider. Maxwell did technically have a Standard Soldiers Kit, meaning we could put him in armor and have him at least carrying his weapon. We could keep an eye on him, and I would rather the HQ be empty than it be raided while Maxwell was on his own.

"Sir, while I appreciate your concern, you are forgetting something," Maxwell said, gesturing down the hall. "While not guaranteed to be safe, the connection point on the Horizon world is usually free of Zoomorphs. If I must, I can simply retreat through the Dark Door and stay inside the connection tunnel. As long as I am quiet, I will be safe there."

I let out a long breath, mentally trying to poke holes in his plan before eventually nodding.

"Fine, that's acceptable," I agreed with a reluctant nod. "Increasing the security of the HQ will have to go on the list of things to do... which at this point is getting pretty long."

In truth, I had a lot of things I wanted to do, but the list of things I needed to do was much more manageable. When we returned, I wanted to build the grow hut to see if we could improve the quality of our food. After that, I wanted to finally see about creating some protection around the base. What we did after that depended on how much money we made.

After concluding that Maxwell would be staying behind, we began packing everything up quickly. I ended up spending seventy-five caps to link the secure storage to both the market, the medbay, and the barracks, which allowed us to pack swiftly and prepare from the storage room. At the moment, there weren't too many places we needed to rush around to grab things, but my instincts told me that would change, so hooking everything up as we went just made sense.

Once we were packed and ready, we headed out, following the same path we had taken to the Super-Duper Mart. It began by heading west, then turning south along the Potomac River. Once we arrived at the now familiar bridge across the river, we traversed it quietly, keeping our eyes open. We hadn't really cleaned up after ourselves the first two times we had visited and looted the massive store, which means the many corpses, some of which were radioactive, had just been lying there in the open.

Sure enough, just as we crossed the bridge, a pack of dogs, about eight of them, came charging around the corner of the store, snarling and barking at us.

"Fuck, pistols folks!" I called out, pulling out my 1911. "No reason to waste the big stuff."

We had been lucky in that our kits had been replenished a single night before, after a hard day of looting. We had used quite a bit to clear out the raider camp, and two days of clearing buildings had made that even worse. Now, however, I just wanted to make sure we had plenty of high-power protection in case something big showed up.

Despite their disquieting appearance, with mange, sores, and bald spots, we made quick work of the eight dogs. They might have been more of a threat if they had snuck up on us, or if there weren't six of us, but as it was, they had too much ground to cover, giving plenty of time to line up our shots.

Once the supermarket parking lot was nominally cleared, we started making our way west, with a slight leaning towards the south. This world was considerably more spread out than the game I was familiar with, but I knew that Megaton would be hard to miss once we crested the large hill behind the Super-Duper Mart. I also knew there were a few threats around the area I should be concerned about, though what they were exactly was a lot less easy to recall. And besides, I wasn't sure if that info would hold true. While a video game might have a solid, definable line between the safe city and the dangerous wilderness, most real cities or towns would not be happy about having real dangerous stuff just hanging around the outskirts of where they lived.

As we finally crested the hill, all of us leaning heavily into our Solar Powered perk in order to lug all of our stuff around, we paused to take in the surroundings. The area was quite rocky, and I could already make out some familiar landmarks. To the north was a large, half-collapsed building, the Springvale School, which marked the back corner of a small, mostly burnt-out town, otherwise known as Springvale. Just to the East was a water tower, and off to the southwest was Megaton in all its scrapyard glory.

"That... how is that all standing?" Carlos asked. "It looks like a bad game of trash Jenga..."

He wasn't far off either. The main center of the city was familiar, if not quite a bit larger. A large wall, built from massive sheets of scrap metal, encircled the heart of the town, protecting the ramshackle buildings inside. I could just see over some of the lower portions of the wall, spotting a few signs, a billboard angled the wrong way and spray-painted with different

advertisements, as well as hundreds of strung-up lights. I could also just barely make our "SUPPLY" written in large metal letters, which stirred a sense of nostalgia deep in my soul.

Around this city heart, which again was considerably larger than I remembered, were two concentric rings of buildings that encapsulated the walled-off heart. These structures were open to the air, and with none of the protections that the heart of the city had. Instead, I could see at least two dozen people pacing around on top of the buildings, walkways, or standing in sniper towers built specifically for that purpose. They were all armed and looking out, watching the rocks and hills for any incoming threats.

Many of the outer buildings, the ones that were homes, at least, were surrounded by growing areas of various sizes, ranging from small home gardens to large, profit-producing farms. These growing areas were producing the usual wasteland food, things like [tatos](#), [mutfruit](#), and [razor grain](#), as well as [melons](#), and as well as some crops that I didn't recognize.

"Alright, everyone, let's keep the weapons slung on our backs, keep cool, and look non-threatening," I said, putting my stuff down for a moment. "Not exactly sure how this is going to go down, but as long as we don't start threatening people, we should be fine."

I pulled off my helmet and clipped it onto my hip before pulling on my backpack and picking up my bags. After everything was secure, I led the way, cutting west to drop down into a little road so that we could approach from a more standard avenue, rather than popping up along someone's house.

As we approached, following a gravel road that seemed to come up from Springvale, leading all the way to the front entrance, people stopped to watch us pass. I wasn't exactly surprised. We did stand out after all, especially since our weapons and armor were not standard for the area, or this world, for that matter. I nodded to those who were staring particularly hard, before continuing to walk up the road.

Eventually, we were stopped at the front entrance, which I was disappointed to find was considerably different from the game. There were no massive, jet engine-powered wing gates, but rather a much more standard raising and lowering style doorway, which was currently open. Across the entrance was a huge slab of reinforced metal, held aloft with chains and cranks, which I had no doubt could slam shut pretty quickly.

As we approached, a rough and tumble-looking woman, dressed in a rough but serviceable-looking set of combat armor, stepped forward, an assault rifle held along her chest, pointed thankfully at the ground.

"Hold on there, what's all this?" she asked, holding out her hand flat as if to block us. "I don't recognize this look. Who are you?"

"We are just a small mercenary group, and we are bringing trade goods, mostly medical supplies, some scavenged small firearms," I responded. "And I'm not surprised you don't recognize us, we are pretty new to the area."

"Fancy armor for a bunch of traders..." she pointed out, her scarred and worn face pinching as she raised an eyebrow. "You sure that's all you're hear for?"

"Well, as I said, we are a mercenary company," I explained. "Most of our goods are from our central base. So we aren't exactly merchants, just selling the goods our bosses give us."

She frowned and, after a long moment, nodded.

"Alright, but if I hear you've started stirring up trouble, all your goods are forfeit," she explained, shaking her head. "Cause a big enough problem and your lives will be too. We have a very strict policy involving outsiders trying to rob our people, so keep it clean and fair."

I nodded seriously before waiting for the woman to step out of the way. Once she waved us through, I led the group forward as we made our way through the gate. As we did, it became apparent that the few armed guards were not the only defense at the entrance. On the other side of the barrier, there were nearly a dozen robots, ranging from four [Protectrons](#) to a single [Sentry Bot](#), all standing there silently, waiting to intervene should someone cause problems.

"How come we don't have some of those?" Carlos asked as we passed.

"Do you know how to maintain them?" I asked, giving him a look. "Besides, I have no idea where we would get them... besides maybe the Mechanist up at Canterbury Commons..."

I trialed off for a moment, considering the idea before shaking my head free of it, slotting it away for later. For now, I needed to focus on finding people to buy our goods, so that we could get back to building up the HQ.

Between the gate, covering, and the thick scrap wall barrier, it was like walking through a tunnel, complete with glowing light at the end. We walk through, stepping out into our first taste of civilization since I arrived in this world.