

As we watched, hiding in the shallow point of a pile of rubble and stone, Raiders poured out from the Super-Duper Mart, ten, twenty, thirty. Eventually, I lost count, and it became clear that this was not a battle we could win head-on. Or maybe at all.

"We need to pull back," I whispered, both of my soldiers nodding repeatedly, clearly agreeing. "Before they get close."

"We need cover, break them up," Joseph pointed out, the raiders already starting to spread out. "We can't outcrawl them."

I cursed, peaking out from behind our cover. There were so many, maybe forty in total. Even if only half of them were armed with guns, we would still be overwhelmed. I scanned the area, looking for a path, for a gap in the growing mob, before finally spotting our way out.

"The bus, get a grenade by the front end of that bus," I said, nudging Carlos, who looked at me strangely.

"What? What?"

"Cars explode, and that bus is a bomb waiting to happen," I whispered. "Now, before they spread out too much!"

With a not-so-confident expression, Carlos nonetheless followed my order, pulling out his grenade. He twisted and pulled the pin, holding the spoon closed as he judged the distance. Rather than stand up and reveal his position, once he had a decent idea of his range, he rolled onto his back, let the spoon pop out from the handheld explosive, before hurling it up and over our cover. I glimpsed it just long enough to see the explosive roll and bounce off one of the bus's tires, before ducking back into cover. Seeing both of my soldiers peaking, I grabbed them and dragged them down too, knowing what was about to happen.

The grenade detonated, sending shrapnel whistling across the parking lot, the explosion enough to rock the bus back slightly. Immediately, a secondary explosion happened, a burst of fire puffing out from under the large vehicle. The raiders, familiar with what was about to happen, as most natives would be, screamed and shouted to run, but it was already too late. Another explosion kicked off a second after the first, followed by a nuclear detonation that was strong enough to tear the bus to pieces.

Chunks of metal and rubber were hurled across the parking lot, crushing and pasting several raiders. The explosion itself burned and obliterated anyone standing too close, while the ensuing shrapnel and debris reached a bit further. The radioactive fireball that rose into the sky was only just starting to fade when another car, only a dozen or so feet away, had a miniature explosion as well, fire pouring from its hood and wheel wells.

A second later, it detonated again, followed by another large nuclear explosion. Two more cars were caught up, all the while, raiders were screaming, both in pain and panic. As another car detonated, I made a decision and slid up from our cover, giving me the perfect

vantage point of the parking lot. I carefully sighted in one of the surviving raiders and pulled the trigger, taking out their leg and dropping them to the ground.

Joseph and Carlos immediately joined me, sliding up our cover and opening fire. This was not the near panicked spray we had used just seconds before to take down the surprised raider group. This was a slow and steady execution of the rattled, burned, and stunned raiders as they tried to stumble or crawl away.

We took our time, lying there, observing the burning, gore-filled parking lot. After about five minutes of no shooting, we carefully stood from our position.

"Sir, I apologize for doubting you," Carlos said, Joseph nodding in agreement. "That bus was basically a bomb."

"Now you know why I was so eager to get away from it when the raiders got close," I pointed out, both of the soldiers wincing. "Well... now we have a new question... Do we try to raid the store, or do we take the easy way and head home?"

"What are the chances that there are more inside?"

"Near certain," I responded with a look around, watching the several doors into the building. "Not everyone would rush out to see what was going on."

"We must have cut down nearly forty of them at this point," Carlos pointed out. "It would be a waste of the resources we already spent not to see what's inside."

"... Okay, but let's clear the parking lot first. Joseph, I want you watching the front for movement," I ordered, the soldier nodding. "Find somewhere with a good view. Carlos, you're with me. Pay attention to your Geiger counter, those car explosions would have thrown radioactive materials around."

We waited for Joseph to find a good spot, a half-broken planter with the stub of a dead bush still inside it. Once he was in position, Carlos and I moved up, carefully looting the raiders one by one. Our first priority was ammo, since it was easy to carry and worth plenty of caps. On top of that, any .45 or 5.56 rounds could be used in our weapons. We also set aside an [Assault Rifle](#) of questionable quality, a [.32 pistol](#), two [10mm pistols](#), two rad away, three stimpacks, and a few more recreational drugs. I was tempted to smash those under my boot, but I ended up keeping them. They would sell well, and I wasn't about to preach to people looking to escape or self-medicate through this hellworld.

That said, there was no way any of my soldiers were ever touching any of the non-medical drugs. Psycho might have been helpful in the game in a pinch, but I was *not* willing to put myself or my soldiers through it, especially not while risking addiction.

A lot of the corpses were within an area we couldn't go, our Geiger counters ticking and clicking as we approached an area around the many burning cars. A considerable area around the bus, along with several other spots, covering maybe two dozen corpses, were inaccessible,

which was unfortunate but unavoidable, considering how close we were to being overrun by the raiders in the first place.

Sure, almost two-thirds of the loot was inaccessible, but the exploding wrecks were likely the only reason we survived in the first place.

Once the parking lot was cleared, I called Joseph forward and we prepared to enter the Mart itself. It was slow going, but after busting into the front entrance, we cleared our way through the building. Three times we stumbled into raiders, but all three times we made quick work out of them, since only a few were armed with guns. Only one eve got close to us, a somewhat stealthy female raider who jumped out from behind a counter. She took a rather hefty swing at me with a crowbar, only to miss and be immediately put down by Carlos before she could try again.

Needless to say, I was not looking forward to fighting raider groups who were better armed or groups with proper armor, like Talon Company.

Sweeping through the large store showed that the loot was hit or miss. A shocking amount of goods were left in the home improvement sections, only some of which had rotted or gone moldy. The food was pretty scarce, with almost all that was left being rotted husks of what it once was. The same went for the gardening section, with only a few bags of chemical fertilizer and other solid goods left behind. The Halloween section was essentially useless, although amusing to see, while the clothing aisles were a mix of rotted-out trash and semi-intact outfits covered in water stains.

I was also right that the raiders had stashes hidden around the building, including ammo, drugs, a few weapons, food, and medical supplies. The pharmacy back door, which in the game was locked up tight, had been busted open with brute force, which was not exactly surprising. This was not exactly a military location, and expecting a crappy door to remain locked outside of a video game, especially when it might be blocking medical supplies, was unrealistic.

That didn't mean, however, that all was lost, as the raiders were clearly using it as a "secured" storage space. Inside was plenty of alcohol, more ammo and medical supplies, as well as a stash of recreational drugs. Again, I resisted the urge to destroy those, fighting my "modern" and old world sensibilities.

After nearly three hours in total, including the fight and clearing the building itself, we finally left the Super-Duper Mart. As I predicted, each of us had an ammo cannister hanging from each hand, as well as full backpacks and even a few extra bits strung around our chests.

In total, after grabbing our loot from the bridge as well, we walked away from the store with two magazines of 5.56, and around a dozen loose rounds, as well as around twenty loose .45 rounds. Beyond that, we had nearly a hundred other loose rounds, ranging from 10mm to various shotgun shells. We also grabbed several more weapons on top of what we found outside. Most of them would be sold to Adam Farli, the wandering trader we rescued from raiders. A few, however, had been of decent quality and worth keeping. Carlos now had a holster on his hip, opposite his 1911, where a surprisingly clean [sawed-off shotgun](#), loaded with

buckshot, was now holstered. His belt even had a row of cartridge slots, where a half dozen more shells were kept.

Not to be outdone, both Joseph and I now had .32 revolvers strapped to our legs, under our pants. Everything involved in the process would need a thorough cleaning before I was satisfied, especially the weapons themselves, but having a holdout weapon was a solid idea.

Out of all the weapons we found, the prize of our haul was a pair of laser pistols with several energy cells, each with enough energy for thirty shots. None of us had any idea how to maintain or even check the pistols for internal damage, which meant we couldn't even practice firing them.

Joseph desperately wanted to strap one to his hip as a secondary sidearm, but we didn't have a proper holster for it. With any luck, we would find one, or our merchant friend would have one. If we got even luckier, someone in Adam's group might be able to tell us if either of the pistols were about to explode if we used them.

Beyond weapons, we also secured eight stimpacks, four bottles of Rad-X, three RadAway, and a whole ammo box of combat and recreational drugs. We each now had a bottle of Rad-X for our loadout, as well as a backup stimpak. Joseph was carrying nearly two dozen bottles of liquor, while Carlos and I were packing tools from the home improvement section, along with boxes of nails, coils of braided cable, and any other items that might be useful.

The trek back to the HQ took noticeably longer, as we were hauling a not insignificant amount of stuff back with us. Part of me was already considering returning in the morning, since there were a few things we left behind that might come in handy, and plenty of things that would be worth caps.

When we finally returned, the first thing we did was drop off our stuff at the loot and storage corner Joseph and I had set up. Maxwell immediately started sorting through and organizing everything, while we headed to the showers to clean up from the day.

When we were clean and dressed again, we headed back out to the main hall. Maxwell was still working on organizing what we had brought back, turning to look at us as we entered.

"I took the liberty of separating the medical paraphernalia, as well as the 5.56 and the .45," He explained, wiping down a bottle of vodka and placing it inside a metal crate. "I figured those would be low on your list to sell, so I placed them behind the counter."

"Thanks," I said, simply sitting down at one of the tables, Carlos and Joseph joining me.

Maxwell nodded, finishing up the last bottle before making his way to the counter. As he did his work, presumably finding the completed quest, all three of us finally seemed to unclench.

"That could have gone a lot worse," I pointed out, both of my soldiers nodding.

"I have a new respect and fear for the wrecks around the HQ," Joseph admitted. "Why are they on such a hair trigger?"

"I have no idea, but it was the same way in the game," I responded, shaking my head. "Either way, we can't get that close to getting overrun again. I should have seen that coming when I first saw the size of the store. I should have called it right then and there, but I wanted to prove my extra knowledge was useful."

"To be fair, Sir, your... extra knowledge is what saved us," Carlos pointed out. "As far as I'm concerned, you broke even."

"I swear I will do better next time," I said, looking them both in the eye. "No more rushing in gung ho. We should have never gotten as close as we did before I decided to pull out."

"Sir... Neither of us saw issues with it either," Carlos pointed out. "We bit off more than we could chew, and we got lucky when trying to spit it out. Try not to let it get you down."

I nodded in understanding, considering his words. Before I could respond, Maxwell returned with the quest parchment, passing it to me. With the quest complete, the parchment had changed, the description and details of the quest now replaced by a simple "Quest complete!" with the rest of the space filled with a more detailed explanation of our possible rewards. As before, I had three options to choose from: [Solar Powered](#), [Toughness](#), and [Strong Back](#). Now, however, I had more than vague feelings and memories to go off of.

Immediately, I decided Strong Back was out. While being able to carry more would be helpful, the new description I had was very specific in saying that it only applied to our packs. Meaning it would not help us carry heavier armor or weapons, just what we shoved into our packs.

Meanwhile, Solar Power was a straight strength increase during the day, and not a small one. It followed the classic perk, meaning that if ten was the highest possible level of strength a human could achieve, we would receive a two-point boost. It obviously wasn't that restricted or simple, but it was clearly a massive boost.

On top of that, the Solar Power perk would give us a mild restorative effect when we were in direct sunlight. It wasn't quite regeneration, more of a general vitality effect. Part of me would have rather had a full restorative effect, but beggars can't be choosers.

Toughness was perhaps the most polarizing out of the three. It would absolutely decrease the amount of damage we would take by approximately ten percent, which was not an insignificant amount. However, this effect was skin-tight and only skin-deep. It was, in a way, like wearing a thin protective body suit. It would protect us, yes, and reduce the impact of things, but our insides were still just as squishy as before, so anything that punched through it, and at only ten percent, plenty would, they would hurt just as much.

It did play well with armor, since it added a layer of protection, and that was how you stopped things like bullets, with layers, but ten percent wasn't nearly enough to stop anything.

But it was still a ten percent reduction in damage. It could be the difference between a dangerous wound and a lethal one.

As I read the descriptions out loud, we discussed the options while Maxwell served us our rations. Carlos and Joseph immediately agreed that Strong Back was out. If it had helped carry all loads, it would have been a contender, but as it was, none of us were interested.

Unfortunately, while it was easy to dismiss Strong Back, my soldiers proved less immediately useful in tossing out the other two options, as Joseph wanted Toughness and Carlos wanted Solar Power.

"Above anything else, increasing our survivability should be paramount," Joseph said, tapping the table, chewing on a bit of protein bar. "Toughness would do that."

"So would being stronger. Listen, being tougher would be nice," Carlos easily admitted. "But we can increase our durability by wearing better armor. They even have it here, ballistic weaves in jumpsuits that we can wear under our other armor, right?"

Carlos looked at me for confirmation, and I had to nod. Ballistic weaves existed, and there were various armors we could get our hands on that we could wear under our armor plates. And doing so would be easy with a "two-point" increase to our strength.

"Solar Power has a fatal flaw, it only works during the day," Joseph pointed out. "Toughness would be with us constantly. Even when we take off our armor."

"But would it even do anything? Ten percent reduction to a cut throat is still near instant death," Carlos pointed out, shaking his head. "Ten percent of a bullet hole is still a bullet hole. Increasing our strength is something that can't be repeated by ordinary means. Even if it's something that doesn't last twenty-four seven, it's an advantage we can predict and consistently use to our advantage. More armor, more weapons, a clear advantage in all CQC. Not to mention a less consistent but still available increase in vitality."

I chewed on my lip for a long moment, before nodding in agreement.

"Carlos has a point. Even if it's not available during the night, having an army of soldiers who are constantly above average in strength is a serious advantage, as is the added vitality bonus. The toughness... It would be useful, but it's too nebulous and not a high enough percentage. We can make finding a way to increase our survivability a serious objective, but for now..."

I used my finger to circle the Solar Powered icon before passing the parchment to Maxwell, who up to this point had been mostly silent. He nodded and made his way to the front desk, ready to submit the quest. Unfortunately, even as he worked, I realized we would likely have to wait until the following morning to test out our new perk.