

Negotiations took around an hour, and by the end, I was almost certain Elder Lyons was using the opportunity to test me. He was determined to go over and negotiate every little thing he was buying, rather than the lot as a whole. It was frustrating, but I put on my fake smile of a service industry worker and did my best to keep up.

That said, despite him testing my patience, I was also pretty sure he was taking it easy on me. I wasn't exactly a floor mat, but he had decades of experience on me, especially in bartering and negotiation. If he had been so inclined, he could have likely nickel-and-dimed me plenty for every little thing he noticed, but instead, he seemed to hold back, eventually accepting a deal for three bags of our supplies, focused mostly on emergency treatment materials. That was around half the medical supplies we were carrying, and he paid four thousand caps for them.

By my estimate, that was likely a full thousand caps over what I would have considered a good value, and probably double what he could have actually gotten the price down to if he had been so inclined.

I could only assume that he was trying to build a positive connection with us, to win our favor for future business with the Brotherhood of Steel. I was happy to accept the extra caps, they would go a long way to pushing the HQ to new heights. I was even happier to get the extra caps for something I was already trying to do myself. A positive connection with the BOS was something I wanted as well, as they could be an extremely valuable asset.

Once we settled on a price, the conversation shifted as some of the soldiers headed back to the Citadel to get our money.

"So, Paladin Walters reported that you are looking to get to Rivet City," Elder Lyons stated, shifting on the crate he had claimed as a seat.

"Yes, we are hoping to cross the bridge and make our way along the coastline until we reach the ship," I explained.

"While it is true, the bridge here would take you across, I would caution against using it," he responded with a frown.

"Damnmit. Let me guess, super mutants own the other side," I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"They control the area just after the bridge, all the way to the Jefferson Memorial," he confirmed with a nod. "They patrol the area consistently and have several spots they set up ambushes at. While your forces are impressive, I don't believe you would be able to force yourself through. Not without relying on luck."

I frowned, trying to consider the alternatives. This was the last bridge that crossed the river, at least from the game, and considering that there was a massive aircraft carrier just downriver, I doubted there would be any intact bridges after it. Before I could even start to figure anything out, the Elder spoke up again.

"We do have an alternative route, however. One that we cleared quite some time ago," he explained. "A subway tunnel that travels under the river. We see occasional ghouls coming down from one side of the track, but the other side has collapsed, sealing it off."

"That... sounds like a much better alternative," I admitted, curious about the idea but cautious about what it would cost us. "Would you be willing to show us the location?"

"I believe that could be arranged, but the DC metro was known for being confusing even before the Great War," he admitted. "I could direct you to it, but how would you feel about an escort? Certainly, some added muscle and an experienced guide would be welcome?"

From anyone else, those words would have likely sounded like a trap, but Elder Lyons did sound worried that we would get ourselves into trouble. I considered the offer for a long moment before eyeing him carefully.

"No strings attached?"

"Beyond asking that you consider their advice well, so you don't lead them into danger?" He asked, and when I nodded, he shook his head. "Then no, there are no strings. Consider this a gesture to show how interested we are in future trade and cooperation."

"Where is this metro entrance exactly, and where does it emerge?"

"The entrance on this side of the river is down around the next bend in the river," he revealed. "The exit emerges through a service tunnel even further down the river. It does add distance, but avoiding the mutants who are between here and the memorial is worth the time, in my opinion."

"Who would be escorting us?" I asked, eyes drifting back to some of the power-armored soldiers outside. "I wouldn't want to deprive you of your fighters."

In truth, I was not comfortable being "escorted" by a force that could unilaterally squash us without even trying very hard. One or two people in power armor, or a few normal soldiers was one thing, but if he tried to send us out with a half dozen paladins and twenty soldiers, I would deny his offer and try to find the tunnel myself.

I would likely fail, but I would try anyway.

"It would only be a pair... Oh, I suppose that would work nicely," he said as if just having an interesting idea. "Sentinel Lyons and Paladin Walters will be your escort. Both know the way and have plenty of experience traversing the city. You would be in good hands."

When the older leader volunteered both his daughter and Paladin Walters, they both shifted slightly, just barely noticeable, but still there. If I had to make a guess, neither of them knew that they would be given orders to follow and guide us.

"They will guide you to Rivet City and return with you as well," he said. "Strength in numbers, after all."

And that pretty much cleared up any chances of him waiting to wipe us out, though I didn't really think that was something he would do, I was mostly just being paranoid. Either way, he wouldn't send just two people to do that, especially not his daughter. Even if they were in power armor, we could still beat them with numbers.

It would likely wipe out a good portion of us, but we could do it.

No, this was definitely a way for them to ingratiate themselves and integrate with us, either to learn more about us or to lay the groundwork for friendships between our two groups. That concept I had nothing against, and would happily agree to.

"That sounds like a great plan," I said with a nod. "It would slow down our speed, but we should have enough supplies to reach there and back."

At this point, we were already several days ahead of schedule, simply because we had underestimated how fast the camels would be able to move on open ground. That meant that slowing down for a four-day portion, two days there and two days back, would likely be fine. We would probably have to buy and hunt for some food to increase our stores, but even with the slowdown, we were still most likely going to trim a few days off our projected time.

"Very well," Elder Lyons said with a nod. "I believe it would be better to settle for the night and continue early tomorrow morning. Sentinel Lyons?"

"...I agree, sir," she responded, speaking for the first time after a moment's pause.

I couldn't be certain because of the electronic filter, but it sounded an awful lot like she wasn't entirely happy about her new assignment. From what I remember, the character from the games had been decent enough, if a little... off around the natives. She wasn't cruel or anything horrible, just vaguely dismissive of their capabilities. I could only hope that the real version was going to be as reasonable.

"Good," the elder confirmed with a nod. "In that case, we will drop off some supplies to make up for the delay, and you can continue your journey tomorrow."

Seeming ready to end the meeting, the elder man stood, brushing off his robes. I stood as well, accepting handshakes from him and the other two. After saying goodbye and good luck, they headed out, their escort following after them, though not before our caps were dropped off and their newly purchased medical goods were taken away. As we watched them go, my people pulled in closer, curious about what had occurred during the meeting. Once the Brotherhood of Steel was out of sight, I turned to address everyone.

"Well, that went just about as good as it could have gone," I admitted. "Might have even saved us from trying to push through mutant territory."

I went over the general details about the meeting, including what they had offered. When I was done, Carlos was the first to speak up.

"How screwed did we almost get?" he asked. "Think we could have pushed through the mutants?"

"I think so," I said with a nod. "The BOS tend to seriously underestimate anyone not approaching the same level they are at, and we've proven we can take on the mutants. It might be messy, and we would have likely had to get clever, but I think we could have done it."

"You recognize the subway they are talking about?" Johnson asked, working on opening and lighting a cigar.

"No, not specifically," I admitted with a frown. "The game didn't let you go to that area, on either side of the river, if I remember correctly."

"Can we trust them?" one of my soldiers asked, watching out past the garage entrance. "It's... disconcerting standing near all that armor, knowing they could crush you without barely trying."

A few of my soldiers nodded in agreement, and I honestly couldn't deny that they were right. For the most part, I wasn't afraid of the BOS of this area, but that didn't mean they couldn't be an issue. It also didn't mean that a part of your brain didn't identify them as a big, bad threat, even knowing they were generally the good guys. Eight feet of hydraulics and steel standing right next to you didn't stop being intimidating just because you knew the driver was cool

"Then it's a good thing that we will hopefully have some of our own soon," I responded, everyone's eyes lighting up. "The fact that we just got paid four thousand caps means the next round of soldiers and upgrades to the barracks are all but confirmed. Anything we have left over is going to get invested in a few things, one of those being getting us some heavy weapons and power armor."

"Why that specifically?" Carlos asked with a curious look.

"I do not like how hard it was to take down the supermutants," I admitted with a frown. "Having something to level the playing field would make me much happier about the idea of making frequent runs between the HQ and any other towns. Beyond that... At this point... honestly, I'm sort of giving up on making money from the Horizon world. It's a great resource, and getting the camels is a great benefit... but gathering money from them would have been an incredible amount of effort. Much better to focus on spreading a wider net around the wasteland, trading with more and more settlements."

"Any idea when we will unlock a new location?" Kelsey, one of our medics, asked.

For a long moment, the group was silent. A few people, mostly soldiers from my squad, looked surprised, while the rest, including Johnson, looked at me in confusion.

"That's a thing?" Johnson asked. "The hell didn't you say that? Why the hell haven't you unlocked more?"

"I... I forgot that was a thing..." I admitted, rubbing my face. "We've just been so focused on the two worlds we have, and I haven't seen any way to buy more..."

I focused for a moment, searching my memories, trying to find a point where we had gone over the dark door room for a control panel. I knew the options for the HQ building and the HQ in general, but I never looked through the dark door room, not that I could remember, at least.

"...I don't think we ever checked the dark door room for upgrade tablets," I continued, shaking my head in disappointment. "We haven't even looked around it much, not since we could select and buy our own upgrades."

"How the hell did you get them before?" Johnson asked, looking surprised.

"We did quests, it was sort of random," I explained, feeling frustrated and annoyed with myself, but keeping it under the surface. "The entities didn't like it, said it was going too slow, and it was removing our ability to push further creatively... Or something like that at least."

I sort of trailed off for a moment, I organizing my thoughts. Having missed and forgotten something so important had left me reeling, and it took a minute or two for me to kick-start my brain back into spinning.

"Okay, new plan, we get back and do a proper examination of the dark door room, see if there isn't an option to buy new worlds," I said, keeping my face straight. "If there is, that becomes another priority. With any luck, it's someplace we can make more money."

"Maybe time to do another full review," Johnson suggested. "Don't underestimate how important taking stock like that can be. Might find something else you're missing. Might find nothing too, won't know until you do it."

"Yeah... fair," I said with a nod, agreeing with the idea. "It doesn't matter right now, though, so we need to focus on what's going on here. Carlos, take a few people and do a perimeter sweep. Don't go too far, the area around the Citadel should be pretty well cleared. I just don't want anyone sneaking up on us."

Carlos nodded, snagging three soldiers and heading out without a word. I turned to a few others and continued.

"Get the camels into the second garage bay. Make sure they can get out easily, otherwise stack them in close," I explained. "I want them in cover with the door shut, same as this bay, assuming they aren't fused closed."

I gestured to the garage doors above us, and the other soldiers nodded, heading out toward the front of the fuel station, already calling orders to the robot animals. I ordered the rest of my soldiers to keep a lookout and walk the exterior, looking for anything we might have missed or that could be concerning. Once they were gone, Johnson finally spoke up.

"Always sucks to eat dirty in front of the troops," He said, patting my shoulder. "Lord knows I did my fair share. I remember getting tripped up on a training course and eating shit into a climbing wall. Thirteen stitches, and I had to run the marines for two days before they got it in them to take my shit seriously again."

"Should I make them run laps?" I asked, though not seriously.

"No. They respect you, and they know you're new to this," he pointed out. "I'd say you're doing pretty good, all things considered. Just learn from it, General, then move on and do better."

I nodded, shaking my head one last time before grabbing my rifle and checking it over, before heading over to help with the camels, eager to do anything to keep myself busy.